

R. S. Thomas: The Infinite Quest for Welsh Identity

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Abstract— *R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) abounded with antinomies: a passionate advocate of Welsh nationalism he wrote in English; a man of devout faith who all his life experienced the elusiveness of God; an undemonstrative man he composed the most tender elegies for his wife; a poet who hardly ever left the narrow confines of north Wales but who at his death was hailed as a major European poet. He is known for his strong nationalism, his strong dislike for the English “colonizing” Wales, and his intense desire for Wales to have an independent national identity.*

Objective— *The main objective of this research paper is to evaluate the unexplored, less known and sometimes unpredictable poet R S Thomas termed as “one of the major English language and European poets of the 20th century”. The most appropriate perspective for the study of Thomas’s works may perhaps be to view him as an Anglo-Welsh writer.*

Keywords— *R. S. Thomas, poems, Anglo-Welsh writer.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Before we start discussing his work and evaluating his style, it would be appropriate or rather inevitable to go through a brief biographical account of his life. R.S. Thomas, the only child of Thomas Hubert and Margaret, was born in Cardiff in 1913. His family shifted to Holyhead where he attended the country school between 1925 and 1931. Thomas was brought up in an English-speaking family, and learnt Welsh when he was thirty, a major reason of regret as he didn't feel fluent enough to write poetry in his mother tongue. From Holyhead, he went to the University College of North Wales from where he gained an Honors Degree in Classics. After graduation, he spent a year at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, training to enter the Anglican church. In 1936, he became curate of St. Mary's, Chirk, near Wrexham. There he met Mildred Eldridge, an art teacher at Oswestry School for Girls. They were married in 1940 and the same year moved to Hanmer in the eastern corner of Flint. In 1942 Thomas and his wife moved to the rectory in Manafon, near Newtown in Mid-Wales. In 1954 they shifted to Eglwysfach, a village twelve miles north of Aberystwyth

where they remained for thirteen years. In 1967 he moved to Aberdaron, and lived there till his retirement in 1978 position in the church. After his retirement from church in 1978, they relocated to Y Rhew, a small village in Gwynedd in Wales. Free from the constraints of the church he was able to become more political and active in the campaigns that were important to him. He became a fierce advocate of Welsh nationalism. In 1964 he won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and in 1996 Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 2000 suffering heart trouble at the age of 87.

II. MAJOR THEMES

A strong bonding for his land, its people and culture, majorly contributed by his upbringing and education, is reflected in his literary work as well. Thomas wrote over 1,500 poems in his life and although there was growth in subject and style - from the early poems anchored in the physical realities of place to the more abstract and metaphysical investigations of his later work - his poetry was consistent in its seriousness of purpose. **James F. Knapp** of *Twentieth Century Literature* explains that "the poetic world which emerges from the verse of R. S. Thomas is a world of lonely Welsh farms and of the farmers who endure the harshness of their hill country. The vision is realistic and merciless." Despite the often grim nature of his subject matter, Thomas's poems are ultimately life-affirming.

In R.S. Thomas's poetical works, Iago Prytherch has been present from the very beginning. His name figure in the first volume of Thomas's, *The Stones of the Field*, and it continues to recur in each successive volume of Thomas's Poetry till the publication of *Ffela* in 1966. Prytherch is a kind of archetypal rural Welshman, standing as a symbol for his people.

With the appearance of more and more "Iago Prytherch" poems in Thomas's successive volume there gradually emerged before his readers the image of a middle-aged peasant leading a life of hard struggle against the inclemency of natural elements in some remote hill farm of

Wales. Stupid, ugly and dull, but at the same time patient and enduring, this man gradually came to occupy a significant place amongst Thomas's poetical works.

Facts, however, increasingly resisted Thomas's attempts to see romantic qualities in Prytherch. A number of poems in *The Stones of the Field*, *An Acre of Land* and *Song at the Year's Turning* express the poet's annoyance at Prytherch's stupidity and dullness. What irks him most is the farmer's insensitivity to the beauty of nature scattered all around him.

It is really the poet's looking at Prytherch in this historical context that sometimes fills him with doubt about his stand regarding this peasant's future.

The blend of certain roughness with real poetic magnificence – or perhaps austerity expressed through the splendor of words – portrays the sketch of this character close to life. Lines such as

*Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed,
Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,*

Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud. ('A Peasant') reveals the sparseness, the sparseness of the setting; and yet penning sheep 'in a gap of cloud' manages to both convey this sense of a harsh life within constricted limits and also advocate something transcendent, splendid.

In the course of his poetic journey, Thomas has advanced from his early doubts and ambivalent attitudes towards God to an acceptance of the present day scientific world. In Thomas's view, the contemporary world with its technological amenities was a perilous distraction from our spiritual life. In the course of this progress he has stripped his poetry of the more conventional imagery, language and religious orientations.

The most characteristic tones in his later works are those of the painful seeking for an elusive God, a seeking which involves the abnegation of all pleasure, all beauty, even of all positives and assurances. But while are like spiritual cases in this arid journey of later years. 'Suddenly', a poem in the anthology *Laboratories of the Spirit* can be cited as an example of the poet's experience of the moments of sudden illumination and of his perfecting his language of negativity in order to express the presence of God who cannot be apprehended in ordinary linguistic terms. As one reads the following lines one can see how different in language, style, imagery and emotions they are from his other poem.

*I looked at him, not with the eye only,
but with the whole of my being,
overflowing with him
as a chalice would with the sea.*

It would be appropriate to cite excerpts from two of his poems which reveal Thomas's ambivalent relationship towards Wales. On the one hand, a political extremist who refused to support Plaid Cymru because they recognized the English Parliament, Thomas could also be coruscating in his criticism of the Welsh people and what he saw as their abandonment of their own culture. In *The Ancients of the World*, Thomas's echoing litany of the beasts of Welsh folklore looks back to Bardic custom, but the language he uses, advocates a cold and deathly bequest.

*The salmon lying in the depths of Llyn Lliffon
Secretly as a thought in a dark mind,
Is not so old as the owl of Cwm Cowlyd
Who tells her sorrow nightly on the wind.*

A *Welsh Testament* witnesses Thomas on more clearly political structure talking in despicable tenors to those English tourists who desire to change his nation into a "museum".

*I saw them stare from their long cars,
as I passed knee-deep in ewes and wither.*

*I saw them stand by the thorn hedges,
watching me string; (Ln 23-26)*

You are Welsh, they said;

*Speak to us so; keep your fields free
Of the smell of petrol, the loud roar
Of hot tractors; we must have peace
And quietness. (Ln 29-33)*

Is a museum Peace?

I asked. Am I the keeper

Of the heart's relics, blowing the dust

In my own eyes? (Ln 34-37)

III. CONCLUSION

As suggested in the introduction to this paper, Thomas can neither be easily classed with the Movement poets nor can his poetry be properly evaluated in the light of the general development of British poetry since World War II. The only suitable perspective for the study of his work is perhaps by regarding him as a typical Anglo-Welsh poet. In any case as the voice of a Welsh bard singing of humanity's future and the modern unease due to the erosion of faith and traditional values his poetry has that element of universality which can take it not only across Wales or the English-speaking world but far, far beyond it.

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