

THE FAR SIDE OF THE CROSS

The Spirituality of R S Thomas

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John Wesley's chair is not something that its holder finds himself sitting in very often. The Presidency of the Conference is a non-stop whirl, a frenetic rush from one schedule of engagements to another. I did a great deal of my travelling by train and plane and, mercifully, got through a great deal of reading in the course of the year. How could I have survived otherwise? But it was all done under pressure. I knew that when the year was over I'd need some time on my own and some space for reflection. And so, for a few precious days at the beginning of what was to prove a long, hot summer, I went home again to Wales in search of solitude and depth. Accompanied by a friend and armed with the works of my favourite Anglo-Welsh poets, I roamed the length and breadth of the Principality. We hunted out the places which had formed a context for bards and read their lines out loud for our mutual delectation. I was amazed to rediscover just how important are the landscapes, psychological as well as topographical, which surround a poet in his times of writing. People and places contribute far more than a mere background for creative writing; their own resonances intrude, so often they become part of the finished work.

Our literary pilgrimage took us to St Beuno's and the Vale of Clwyd where we engaged with the mind and the rejuvenated spirit of Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is where he took up his writing again after years of self-imposed silence and what he wrote here is shot through with the colours of wonder, love and praise. Then on to Brecon where a short visit allowed us to dip into some early seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, the strong lines and tender thoughts of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan that conveyed the still-fresh message of a changeless God in a changing world. Our way then led us to Swansea and Laugharne which provided the picturesque background for our reading of the verse and prose of Dylan Thomas. With an audience of cormorants and gulls, I gave full voice to *Fern Hill* and remembered the green and golden years of my youth before *And Death shall have no Dominion* steadied my nerve for eternity. As we turned our backs on a fallen hero, we somehow felt sure his soul was resting in peace, confident as was the Rev Eli Jenkins, that ours is a loving God:

We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side not our worst.

To find the places and to meet the people that have filled the mind and taxed the

energies of R S Thomas, you have to go as far to the west of Wales as you can without falling off the edge. This octogenarian Anglican priest has been battering the world with his rugged and relentless verse since the mid-1940s. I used to meet him from time to time when I lectured at St David's College, Lampeter in the 1960s. He and Geoffrey Beaumont were occasional visitors to the high table and no greater contrast can be imagined. Beaumont, whose hymn tunes we used to think modern, was the life and soul of the party, always ready to jolly up an evening with his anecdotes and piano-playing. Thomas, on the other hand, then serving the Cardiganshire parish of Eglwysfach, was already the 'bad-tempered old bugger' described in a *Church Times* article several years later.

Although I'd taken the two volumes of *Selected Poems* and *Later Poems* that offered the best of his work from 1946-1982 (just for old time's sake), my real hope was to spend time with a slim volume called *A Mass for Hard Times* which had been published in 1992. I found it challenging. And it was within the pages of this little collection of poems that I met the image which forms the title for this evening's lecture.

It's a volume that opens with a sweep of poems which, like stepping stones across a swirling stream, pick their way through the key moments in the liturgy of the mass. They move from *Kyrie* and *Gloria* via *Credo* and *Sanctus* right through to *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei*. At the very end of the *Benedictus* appears an almost gnomic utterance:

Blessed be the far side of the Cross and the back
of the mirror, that they are concealed from us.

I was instantly hooked by these images that have played with me ever since, drawing me, hauling me, flapping and thrashing, on to the shore of a dark and deep mystery. Let me try to explain.

The lines that so engrossed me linked the notion of 'the far side of the Cross' to 'the back of the mirror.' What, I wondered, did they have in common? A mirror reflects life; what you see is but another version of what is already all around you. You never get past its surface; in that sense it remains inscrutable.

Once I'd been grabbed by this use of the 'mirror' metaphor, I began to notice just how frequently Thomas used it in a number of other poems. It's a bit like the way I'd never heard of frozen shoulders until I had one. Then every person I bumped into winced in pain because, it seemed, he/she had one too. Now I kept on noticing the way Thomas played with what was clearly a potent image, what the metaphysical poets would have called a 'conceit.' Take, for example, a little poem from his collection called *Counterpoint*.

Who can read God's mind?
Was it two mirrors echoing
one another? And was the Holy
Spirit the breath clouding them
unable to discover
precedence in derivation
from the origin and the image,
perplexities of Nicaea ?

What is the virginity
of mirrors? Are they surfaces
of fathoms which mind

clouds when examining itself
too closely? Eden in the dream
of when it was alone.

Thomas wants us to know that reading God's mind is not like looking into a mirror even though so much theology, even the high, 'classical' theology that produced our Creeds, has been done at a merely superficial level. The complicated Christological formulation of Nicaea was just like reading one set of divine attributes off a mirror image of another. They had to match each other exactly so that neither could be considered deficient. But the Spirit confused all this tidiness, leaving some important questions unresolved, questions that were finally to divide the church. Truly the Spirit was a 'breath clouding' the mirrors. All mirrors are virginal. They have not been (cannot be) penetrated. They remain mere surfaces even though they pretend to contain depths, fathoms. And theological utterance often has just the same propensity, pretending it can offer depth even when it merely scratches at the surface in its attempts to explain the mystery of God.

In another poem (*Counterpoint* p11), we are told that we must not attribute the Fall to the serpent if by 'serpent' we mean some external agency. 'The tree's fruit was a mirror,' the poet declares, something in which human beings saw themselves reflected. That's the temptation that undid us, the look on our own faces. Then he goes on:

There is no Trinity
in a glass. The self looks at the self
only and tenders its tribute.

God is beyond the dimension of the reflected self, deeper than the mirror's polished surface. In a later poem called *Reflexions* in the 1995 collection *No Truce with the Furies*, it is not God but 'the Furies' (avenging spirits who ravage and tear at the human carcass) that 'are at home in the mirror; it is their address.' They are in some way the reflexions of our human urges and ills; whilst we err, they go on roaming, never at rest. 'A mirror's temperature is always at zero,' says the poet. Cold comfort indeed. The deepest realities are not to be found in what is reflected by the polished surface of a mirror but, somehow, in the inscrutable darkness that lurks beyond it.

The mention of this far side of the mirror is, as often as not, closely bound up to the hint of a quest or a pilgrimage. But what kind of a journey is it that takes us to 'the far side of the Cross,' or to the 'back of the mirror'? Once again, I discovered myself in the presence of what I can only describe as a controlling metaphor. The picture which would be most readily conjured up by mention of 'the far side' would, of course, be the moon. And this fits well with the thinking about mirrors. For just as a mirror reflects the life we live and the world we live in, so the moon reflects the sun's warmth and also its light. Its far side, like the back of a mirror, remains dark and a mystery. Thomas frequently uses the 'far side' idea in close conjunction with the image of a journey into space. Take, for example, his poem *The New Mariner*. It begins with a reference to 'the God-space into which I send out my probes,' a need to investigate 'the void over my head and the distance within' for some hint of a meaning for the life we live. But my search offers a mixed blessing:

... astronaut
on impossible journeys
to the far side of the self

I return with messages
I cannot decipher.

The mysterious 'far side' does not yield its secrets easily. Yet it continues to haunt the poet with the possibility of deep truth and understanding. In *Counterpoint* (p57) we read that in confusing times some people have withdrawn, 'hand on heart, to [the moon's] far side of sanity and darkness.' The implicit contrast offered by this picture suggests that the world we live in, ablaze with light, remains nonetheless a vale of tears, a madhouse. This paradox is further explored a few pages further on (p61) with a word of hope offered to 'the poor of the world'. They too can dream, the poet declares, 'Tell them,' he says, that

there is nothing to pay, no distance
to travel; that they are invited
to the marriage of here and now;
that the crystal in which they look,

grey with foreboding as the moon
with earth's shadow, has this
as its far side, turning necessarily towards
us with the reversal of our values.

It is in the darkness beyond the moon's light that we find 'proof of the whiteness darkness can bring forth.' These are indeed tidings of good news for the disinherited of the earth.

The third element in this compelling metaphor is that of the Cross. As the sun's light is reflected by the moon, so too God's love is reflected by the Cross. And just as the furies are at home in mirrors which reflect the strutting and fretting of sinful human beings, so too the cruelty and barbarity of the Cross are a reflection of those 'tears at the heart of things' referred to by the Latin poet Virgil. So contemplation of the Cross can fill us with a sense of the enormity of God's love and also the depth of human sin. But beyond such thoughts lies the awesome mystery of God's own being. For the Cross is not simply a matter of what we see reflected either of God's love or our own wickedness. Behind it, at its far side, in the stillness, absence, silence, darkness, under the cloud of our unknowing, is the realm of ultimate and boundless mystery. And that too is worth thinking about. In *Counterpoint* (p36) all this is brought together in an amazing way:

Today
there is only this one option
before me. Remembering,
as one goes out into space,
on the way to the sun,
how dark it will grow,
I stare up into the darkness

of his countenance, knowing it
a reflection of the three days and nights
at the back of love's looking-
glass even a god must spend.

Not the empty tomb
but the uninhabited
cross. Look long enough

and you will see the arms
put on leaves. Not a crown
of thorns, but a crown of flowers
haloing it, with a bird singing
as though perched on paradise's threshold.

The Cross offers not only a focus for our contemplation of the place where love and sorrow find their trysting place. It also provides a gateway that takes us deep into the darkness, the silence and the stillness of God's own being. Just let some words from *Counterpoint* (p40) make the point:

They set up their decoy
in the Hebrew sunlight. What
for? Did they expect
death to come sooner
to disprove his claim
to be God's son? Who
can shoot down God?
Darkness arrived at
midday, the shadow
of whose wing? The blood
ticked from the cross, but it was not
their time it kept. It was no
time at all, but the accompaniment
to a face staring,
as over twenty centuries
it has stared, from unfathomable
darkness into unfathomable light.

Others have written of the darkness (and the silence, stillness, feeling of absence) which has to be entered if one is to encounter the sense of God's presence. I want us now to plunge into that darkness at the far side of the cross with Thomas as our guide. My categorisation of the different boundless elements that constitute the mysterious otherness of God's nature and being will, of course, seem artificial. But together they might appear to make an imposing whole.

Darkness

There are references to darkness scattered throughout Thomas's verse. In the poem *Threshold* we read:

I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul

I was leading upward towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,
what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What
to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

Whenever Thomas introduces the notion of darkness, it is usually with a hint of the possibility of meaning or hope to be found at its heart. Indeed, it is only by committing oneself to the darkness that one can begin to search its profundity for any evidence that it is possessed of sustaining (rather than annihilating) qualities. It threatens to consume; but will it necessarily destroy? The 'reciprocating touch' of a hand held out in the dark can only be felt by risking the dark. In another poem, gazing out into an impenetrable night, the poet declares that 'the darkness is the deepening shadow of your presence; the silence a process in the metabolism of the being of love' (*Alive*). Elsewhere, he describes human beings as wanderers 'in the darkness that was never a long way off from his presence' (*Silence*). 'The darkness of his countenance' (*Counterpoint* p36) is set alongside 'the luminosity of his shadow' (*ibid.* p48). In *Citizen*, he describes the human predicament that seems to necessitate taking

one step forward and one
back on the shining tightrope
between dark and dark.

The pilgrim's way may well be strung between a long-observed point of departure and a not-yet-in-view place of arrival. The 'fixed points' (Where do I come from? and Where am I going?) are shrouded in darkness. It is in the travelling alone that hope continues to shine.

I close my eyes,
The darkness implies your presence,
the shadow of your steep mind
on my world. I shiver in it.
It is not your light that
can blind us; it is the splendour
of your darkness. (*Shadows*)

Again and again, Thomas makes it clear that darkness is somehow invested with the light of God's presence. It's a stark paradox. But the poet goads us into re-interpreting the 'darkness behind the mirrors' (*The Lost*) and to see that, far from being a cloak for nothingness, meaninglessness, the annihilation of the self, it turns out to be charged with intimations of the mysterious presence of the living God.

Silence

Thomas jots down a little poem (*Correspondence*) to a friend to explain why he hasn't written to him for so long. He realises how pathetic his excuses are:

... These nail-parings
bore you? They explain my silence.
I wish there were as simple
an explanation for the silence of God.

It is 'silence that is [God's] chosen medium of communication' (*The New Mariner*) and, as we have already noted, 'silence [is] a process in the metabolism of the being of love.' This is frustrating for all of us who have to resort to using words and speech to convey our feelings and insights. But, just as silence is at the heart of God's own being, so too we have to discover its pregnant possibilities at the deep centre of our own selves.

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?

(*Counterpoint* p50)

The notion that the most profound interchange between God and human beings is to be thought of as silence is picked up by Thomas and played with again and again. There are so many echoes here of the philosopher Wittgenstein who believed passionately that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about. As he wrote to one of his Viennese contemporaries:

I believe that where many others today are just gassing, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.

Which is just another way of spelling out his well-known dictum: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should remain silent.'

Conversation with God, the activity we call prayer, is also (again a bold paradox) best understood around the central concept of silence. 'I pray and incur silence,' he writes at one point (*The Presence*). 'Some take that silence for refusal. I feel the power . . .'

Prayer raises all kinds of questions in Thomas's mind:

... The difficulty
with prayer is the exchange
of places between I and thou,
with silence as the answer
to an imagined request.

And yet, for all the intellectual problems raised in his mind by prayer, there is no poet alive today who has so wrestled with the devotional life, none who has thrown himself so consistently on his knees in the ineffable presence of that searching otherness he

calls God. Again and again, we perceive that such intimations of immortality, glimpses of glory, sensings of the luminous, numinous, otherness of God that Thomas receives, are somehow enfolded within the profundity of all-engulfing silence. Towards the end of his volume *No Truce with the Furies* he devotes a whole poem to the subject.

The relation between us was
silence; that and the feeling
of each one being watched
by the other...

... It had begun
by my talking all of the time
repeating the worn formulae
of the churches in the belief
that was prayer. Why does silence
suggest disapproval? The prattling
ceased, not suddenly but,
as flowers die off in a frost
my requests thinned. I contented
myself I was answering
his deafness with dumbness. My tongue
lolloped, clapper of a disused
bell that would never again
pound on him.

What are the emotions
of God? There was no admiring
of my restraint, no suggestion even
of a recompense for my patience.
If he had allowed himself but one
word: his name, for instance, spoken
ever so obliquely; my own that,
for all his majesty, acknowledged
my existence.

But, of course, there is no such cheap consolation. The life of prayer is part of the life of faith. 'What makes you God,' the poet writes (*Counterpoint* p51) is the way, when we have shouted at you, 'bellowed our defiance,' you 'let silence ensue so deliberately as to be taken for an Amen.'

Stillness

I don't have very much to say about stillness. It fades and shades into what I've already said about silence and darkness. But it does also link arms with the notion of waiting and, therefore, it deserved a special mention. One of Thomas's finest early poems, *Kneeling*, is heavily charged with this idea.

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase

For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close thron
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

'Be still and know that I am God,' said the Psalmist. And this calm, expectant, openness is a vital attitude on the part of the person who would know God. A few years later, Thomas wrote a poem called *Waiting* which he concluded with these words:

Young
I pronounced you. Older
I still do, but seldomer
now, leaning far out
over an immense depth, letting
your name go and waiting,
somewhere between faith and doubt,
for the echoes of its arrival.

And a final pellucid example of Thomas's advocacy for being still in the presence of the Lord is found in his latest volume, *No Truce with the Furies*. It's from a poem called *Wrong?* He begins by wondering where might be an appropriate place to find the silence and peace necessary for contemplation and prayer. He ends with the discovery that it's not so much a place as a state of being that affords such possibilities.

... I feel...
you are at our shoulder, whispering
of the still pool we could sit down
by; of the tree of quietness
that is at hand; cautioning us
to prepare not for the breathless journeys
into confusion, but for the stepping
aside through the invisible
veil that is about us into a state
not place of innocence and delight.

Stillness and waiting form another strand of whatever it is that constitutes the mystery at the far side of the Cross.

Absence

The philosopher D Z Phillips wrote a book about R S Thomas just over ten years ago. It was sub-titled: *Poet of the Hidden God*. And if there is one quality strongly suggested by those regions at the back of the mirror, the far side of the Cross, it is

surely the notion of the hidden-ness, even the absence of God. And Thomas, in hinting at such possibilities, is touching base with a central concept in so much mystical writing, the idea of *deus absconditus*, the absent God. In *The Prisoner*, he refers directly to this idea, suggesting that when ‘we ransack the heavens, the distance between stars,’ we find only that God is not there. In his poem *Adjustments*, Thomas goes further. ‘Never known as anything but an absence,’ he writes, ‘I dare not name him as God.’ In *The Possession*, a religious man looks around with worried eyes ‘at the emptiness.’ He looks out at the city lights. ‘All that brightness, he thinks, and nobody there!’ And then he concludes in typical style:

... All I have is a piece
of the universal mind that reflects
infinite darkness between points of light.

Darkness hides the face of God. We have to live with the fact of this hidden-ness. But it is not in a state of hopelessness that we confront such a fact. Thomas’s *deus absconditus* seems somehow different from the divine being of those mystics who trod the *via negativa*. His God, though absent, seems still close at hand. How else do we understand the opening lines of a poem called, intriguingly, *The Absence*?

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. It is a room I enter
from which someone has just
gone.

Sometimes, argues the poet, we find ourselves poised on the edge of a moment of discovery and, losing our footing, we fall ‘into a presence illimitable as its absence, descending motionlessly in space-time, not into darkness but into the luminosity of his shadow’ (*Counterpoint* p48). It’s all so frustrating that absence should suggest presence yet exclude us from grasping at anything recognizable. Such a God leaves us hanging on to a distant view of his coat tails, rarely blessed with much more than the merest hint of his presence. No wonder it all leaves us either filled with a sense of awe, or else empty of any sense at all of God’s being.

... How can I
find God? Out there?
He is absent. In here?
He is dumb. Everywhere
There is confetti,
but there are no vows
kept.

(*Counterpoint* p58)

Thomas conveys the frustration he feels but it never dips into despair. For even though God may seem not to be there when we turn, yet he is somehow there ‘in the turning.’ Thomas’s poetry is filled with pictures of the reaching out of faith to God, something done in the spirit of hoping against hope, with arms stretched out towards the darkness. It is bleak, spare, stuff. It has little of the bland or the sugary. It speaks to the spiritual condition of so many modern (and post-modern) people. We live in a century where the brutality of human beings has inflicted untold pain and suffering on millions; where the greed of human beings has raped the fair earth and left her

violated body poised between life and death. God has been pushed to the margins, dispossessed of his own home. The absence of God is a very real experience for so many. And Thomas somehow keeps alive the possibility of presence-in-absence. This counterpoint is exquisitely conveyed in his *Via Negativa*.

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

Here all our themes come together – the darkness and the silence, the absence and the waiting for signs of God’s love. Our exploration of the regions at the far side of the Cross, at the back of the mirror, have shown us, I trust, how deep is the mystery of God, how easy it is to trivialise him with our piety. The immensity of that darkness, the profundity of the silence, the desolation of the absence, the awesomeness of the stillness – all conspire to make us feel just how little we are, how pathetic our attempts in liturgy, prayer, or devotion to get anywhere near the Great Mystery who is God. But Thomas doesn’t leave us simply with this sense of the ungraspability of God. For central to all his understanding is the Cross. Whatever may be at the far side of the Cross, it is what happened on the Cross that gives us any hope of access to it. The enormity of all that is to be found on the far side of the Cross becomes encompassable because of the Cross. Again and again, Thomas pictures the Cross with its arms spread open, to embrace us all, the perfect emblem of God’s love and the very gateway to eternal life.

The two poems with which I want to end, bring all these strands of thinking together. The first is a very early one. It’s called *In Church*.

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume

Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

And, finally, with words fitting for this meeting of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, the final few lines of a poem from the astringent little volume called *Counterpoint* (p36). They read thus:

We have over-furnished
our faith. Our churches
are as limousines in the procession
towards heaven. But the verities
remain: a de-nuclearised
cross, uncontaminated
by our coinage; the chalice's
ichor; and one crumb of bread
on the tongue for the bird-like
intelligence to be made tame by.

Whatever waits to be explored at the far side of the Cross, at the back of the mirror, it can only be approached by gazing at the front side of the Cross with its supreme evidence of Gods triumphant (yet gentle) love. And there is no more potent way of appropriating what was won for us on the Cross than the taking of bread and wine.