Poet of the hidden God: R. S. Thomas: 1913-2000

by Peggy Rosenthal in the January 17, 2001 issue

"The finest Christian poet alive today is the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. Our century has produced some magnificent Christian poetry, but R. S. Thomas has written the most convincing." So commented poet Mark Jarman in a 1998 interview from the *Writer's Chronicle*. We can no longer claim Thomas as a major living poet: he died on September 25 at the age of 87. But we can pay tribute to the extraordinary Christian poetry that he left us.

It is not a cozy, pious poetry. Thomas is often called the "poet of the hidden God." Poem after poem finds him kneeling in a dark empty church, waiting for a God who refuses to appear or speak. "To one kneeling down no word came," begins the poem "In a Country Church"; "Only the wind's song, . . . /Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,/ bats not angels, in the high roof." In a poem called "In Church," he sees the stone church walls as " the hard ribs/ Of a body that our prayers have failed/ To animate," and asks: "Is this where God hides/ From my searching?" God remains hidden in "The Empty Church" where, even though we have "laid this stone trap/ for him, enticing him with candles/ as though he would come like some huge moth,/ out of the darkness to beat there"—no, "he will not come any more."

When God does seem to have come, it is likely to be as the shadow of an unseen presence or "like a presence" that "is a room I enter/ from which someone has just/ gone" ("Absence"). The poem "Via Negativa" offers a litany of images for this paradoxically absent presence of God: "He keeps the interstices/ In our knowledge/ His are the echoes/ We follow, the footprints he has just/ Left." Echoes, reflections, shadows, footprints, questions: these are the "main characters" in Thomas's work.

Thomas's persistent sense of God's absence isn't personal confession—as if he himself can't manage to see a God who is easily visible to others. Nor is it critique of institutional religion—as if church hypocrisy or narrow dogma were keeping out the living God. Rather, it is a metaphysical and theological insight, consistent with the

vision of major 20th-century thinkers like Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Simone Weil.

Barth's God is wholly Other, refusing to be domesticated as a cozy feeling or a consoling projection of our imagination. Rahner's God exists eternally beyond the horizon of our reach, beyond the grasp of our minds and our language. Weil's God, having created the world as an act of self-emptying, remains absent from a creation that waits longingly for reconnection with the source of its meaning. Similarly, Thomas's God relates to humankind, but not in the comforting ways we might wish. With Barth and Weil, Thomas is wary of our propensity to cast God in the image and likeness of our desires. With Rahner, Thomas shares the postmodern awareness of the limits of human language, the consciousness that no words—not even the poet's—can ever adequately name God.

People who know R. S. Thomas personally say that his preoccupation with God's hiddenness came less from reading theology than from serving, all his adult working life, as pastor in the stark Welsh countryside. Ordained an Anglican priest, he did keep up with his era's intellectual currents. But what formed his poetic imagination was the grim rural culture he was thrust into from the time of his first parish assignment.

"I came out of a kind of bourgeois environment which is protected," he explained in a 1972 BBC film made about him, so "this muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life was, of course, a shock to begin with, and one felt that this was something not quite part of the order of things." The oppressively hard life of the peasants in his congregation, who struggled mutely to endure on the barren land, made him wonder where God was in this apparently godforsaken place and what his own role as priest there could possibly be. Writing poetry was his way of pondering these questions with unflinching honesty.

"God, reality, whatever it is, is not going to be forced," he mused in the film interview. "It works in its own time. I suppose one projected this image of oneself kneeling, either entering a moorland, a lonely bare moorland, or entering the village church and just waiting: waiting but nothing happening. And out of this, of course, comes the feeling that perhaps this is all one is required to do. It's the Milton idea, isn't it, that they also serve who only stand and wait?"

It's the Milton idea, yes, but it's also very much a contemporary spiritual stance: waiting, longing for the God who we trust is there somewhere but who doesn't

simply come at our beck and call. Thomas's poetry strikes readers powerfully because it articulates a current religious sensibility—found even among committed, practicing Christians—that geniune spiritual life is a *search*, so that (as the poem "Kneeling" puts it) "the meaning is in the waiting." This waiting is not at all a matter of passivity or indifference. It's a waiting with all the spiritual senses "standing" (in Milton's metaphor) on alert: eyes wide open, breath held, ears cocked. In Thomas's poem "Waiting," he pictures himself addressing God from this Miltonic stance: "leaning far out/ over an immense depth, letting/ your name go and waiting,/ somewhere between faith and doubt,/ for the echoes of its arrival."

When I use Thomas's poems in courses and retreats on spiritual poetry, participants are drawn to his compelling images for the seeking that is their own form of religious experience. They're moved too by the ways he has reenvisioned core Christian symbols to dramatize the mystery of a God whose presence can be known in absence. The cross (in the poem "Pietà," for instance) is shockingly "untenanted," yet "aching" for the Body that belongs there. The wound in Christ's side swells (in "Via Negativa") to a cosmic dark hope that "we put our hands in . . . /hoping to find/ It warm."

And because Thomas isn't afraid of the dark, his glimpses of light strike us as utterly authentic. This is what makes his poetry "convincing," as Mark Jarman attests. One of these glimmers of hope comes in the opening words of the poem "The Answer": "Not darkness but twilight." (Only for Thomas would twilight be an image of hope rather than of fading and loss!) The poet's own "questions" become, typically, the poem's main character; but here, for once, they are laid to rest in a marvelous reappropriation of the gospel scene of the empty tomb: "There have been times/ when, after long on my knees/ in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled/ from my mind, and I have looked/ in and seen the old questions lie/ folded and in a place/ by themselves, like the piled/ graveclothes of love's risen body."

Thomas's most famous glimpse of light is in his deservedly popular poem "The Bright Field." In one rare moment, as the poem recollects it, the poet had "seen the sun break through."

But he had let the moment pass without recognizing until later its absolute value: this was God brilliantly shining as in the burning bush. So God had come out from hiding; but the poet (like most of us, alas) had walked by, going "my way." Still, "the miracle/ of the lit bush" always remains, the poem asserts, if we'll only turn aside to

it as Moses did. For once, instead of himself waiting endlessly for God, Thomas finds eternity waiting for him, for us all: awaiting our turning to attend to its “brightness.”

Other themes and images occur in the large body of R. S. Thomas’s work, which consists of more than 20 volumes of poetry composed over nearly half a century. Wales is a frequent subject: the hard life of its people, the harsh fate of its history. Many poems are philosophical reflections: on the cosmic sweep of time, on human and natural history, on science and the press of technology (imaged as “the machine”). Some poems engage in dialogue with poets like Yeats or Donne. Others reflect on paintings: the Impressionists especially interested Thomas. Water, in large expanses, is a recurrent image. So is the tree: green-leaved as Edenic knowledge, or starkly bare as the cross, and often transmuting between these poles.

Still, waiting for the God who seemed to stay hidden is the predominant motif of Thomas’s poetic career. I sometimes wonder what it was like for him to remain active as a pastor while writing poetry boldly confronting his overwhelming sense of God’s silence. How did he manage to preside at Holy Eucharist year after year, voicing the church’s prayers to a God who gave no sign of hearing them? Someone with Thomas’s depth of integrity could only have persisted if part of him truly trusted that God does, mysteriously, care.

In a late poem called “Prayer,” the poet is musing about the metaphorical location of his own grave. His hope is that it will be found “somewhere within sight/ of the tree of poetry/ that is eternity wearing/ the green leaves of time.”

I’d say he can rest assured that this is indeed where he remains.