

## PURITY OF INTENT

R.S. THOMAS, *Collected Later Poems: 1988-- 2000* (Bloodaxe) £9.95

*Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R.S. Thomas*, edited by Damian Walford Davies (University of Wales Press) £19.99

Reading R.S. Thomas's poems at length recently, I was haunted by an indefinable sense of familiarity. Where else had I met that curmudgeonly purity of intent, that readiness to say, and to confront, over and over again, the uncomfortable and unpopular? That sense of poems unstoppably written, of a daily productivity so copious that even the huge number published could be only a selection from a greater flow? That lithe syntax twisting and sliding through a lightly-steered free verse that endlessly tempted one on to unexpected, slantwise conclusions? That curiously flat tone, somehow rendering the reading of the poems peculiarly addictive ('I'll just read one more, and then I'll close the book... Oh, what the hell, all right, just a few more...')?

When the answer dawned on me, I nearly laughed aloud at the implied incongruity, for I realised that something in Thomas was reminding me of Charles Bukowski -- disreputable, drunken, foulmouthed, whoring, misogynistic, proto-Beat-Poet Bukowski, no less. And something about the analogy would not let go. It may seem a long way from

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.

to

I stood at my window on the 3rd floor  
and I saw a beautiful blonde girl  
embrace a young man there and kiss him  
with what seemed hunger and I stood and watched...  
I took my alarm clock  
to bed with me and  
fucked it until the hands dropped off.  
Then I went out and walked the streets until my feet blistered.  
When I got back I walked to the window  
and looked down and across the way  
and the light in their kitchen was  
out.

But the gap is not unbridgeable, and among the things which the two poets share -- besides those listed above -- are a determination to endure in the face of the worst without losing hope, and a most un-English sense of verse movement.

The point here is not to make a systematic comparison of Thomas and Bukowski, but

rather to suggest how anomalous Thomas is as a 'British' poet. The American ingredient, which critics have only recently started to emphasise (by way of connections with Wallace Stevens, with whom he has really little in common), is perhaps not entirely surprising, given Thomas's biography. From his home town of Holyhead (most Irish of British mainland towns) by way of Dublin to New York is a matter of joining up a very few dots. Thomas may not have made the journey, but cultural influences certainly did. But there is something more: an individualistic strangeness, a dogged refusal of intellectual closure, that is almost unique in recent British poetry.

Given Thomas's huge output of poems, the complexity of his small but intricate prose output in English and Welsh, and the extreme tensions which he fostered in his writing -- as if it was the strain of being torn apart that nourished his creativity -- it is not surprising that since his death in 2000 he has come to seem more and more enigmatic. There is a vast territory of thought to be mapped here. None of the simple labels once deemed useful ('Poet-priest', 'Welsh Nationalist', 'Christian') seems to fit any more. The essays in Damian Walford Davies's volume mostly admit as much, attempting no summation but rather trying to take provisional sightings of a territory still too close and too daunting to get into overall perspective.

Patrick Crotty, in a safe but sensible move, analyses the eighteen poems concerned with Iago Prytherch, the Welsh smallholder who is a central symbol in Thomas's earlier poems. The essay is interesting in showing how inconsistent, change-able and even self-contradictory Prytherch becomes when we juxtapose the poems. Clearly Thomas was less interested in constructing a 'convincing' typical character than in nagging away at something he could never quite define or get into focus.

Geoffrey Hill, in a brief but suggestive essay, aligns Thomas with other writers of or about Wales -- John Cowper Powys, Alun Lewis, the James Hanley of *Grey Children* (a 1937 study of depressed mining communities) -- finding certain poems 'emotionally or philosophically right' (high praise from Hill) but also accusing Thomas of, amongst other things, 'sacra-mental nihilism', 'postures, affectations... *faux-naif* tone' and a 'needless, derivative intrusion of middle-class anxieties', concluding that Thomas is 'a politicised aesthete', a category into which he also puts himself.

As is perhaps evident from what has been said so far, the real question which seems to be coming to the fore is 'What is the poetry of R.S. Thomas actually *about*?' Two of the contribu-tors, John Barnie and John Pikoulis, take a somewhat similar starting point with very different results. John Barnie, in the crassly titled 'Was R.S. Thomas an Atheist Manqué?' argues (with all the fervour of the non-scientist) for the atheistic impli-cations of modern science, seemingly unaware that there are people whose do not require their religious positions to be supported by 'evidence' of a scientific kind.

Indeed, one wonders whether the greatest future obstacle to an understanding of Thomas's poems may not be a simple igno-rance of Christianity. Patrick Crotty solemnly ponders why Thomas should suggest in an early poem that Prytherch, 'whom the ignorant people thought/The last of your kind', might also be potentially 'the first man of the new community'. What kind of 'radically different' community could Thomas possibly have in mind, Crotty wonders. Is he, perhaps, imag-ining the

aftermath of a nuclear holocaust? Crotty seems not to notice Thomas's play on Matthew 19:30 ('Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first'). Then there is John Pikoulis, who asks, apropos of Thomas's 'Raptor' and Hopkins's 'The Windhover', 'who ever thought a bird of prey swooping on its victim was a suitable image for the operations of grace?' Well, one is inclined to answer, how long have you got? St Paul? St John of the Cross? St Theresa? Francis Thompson? George Herbert? Richard Crashaw? John Donne? Not all of them use the same image but the symptoms are recognisable. What sheltered lives critics lead! A re-reading of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* seems in order.

To be fair, Pikoulis's essay ('R.S. Thomas and the Scientific Revolution') is otherwise brilliant, charting the way in which 'the curious stars', which enter almost as an afterthought into the last line of the first Prytherch poem, gradually come to displace Prytherch entirely, as Thomas becomes obsessed with science and technology and gradually makes them the central theme of his poems, as they spread

like a virus through the verse: germs, chromosomes, elec-trons,  
molecules, spermatozoa, surds and equations, missiles, scalpels,  
becquerels, decibels, cells, filaments, acid rain, cordite, Valium,  
leptons, quarks, thermometers, barometers, pulsars, quasars, calculus,  
radiation, the Doppler effect...

Pikoulis avoids any simplistic judgement on Thomas's religion, implying that the metaphysical vertigo induced by contem-plating science and technology in counterpoise to his religious commitment was perhaps in itself a spiritual experience for Thomas.

Some insight into this paradox, which is certainly going to exercise future critics of Thomas's work, is offered by Rowan Williams's 'R.S. Thomas and Kierkegaard'. In his readiness to offend, to suffer, and to pit the aesthetic against the ethical the Danish writer has a great deal in common with Thomas, a kinship which goes far beyond mere literary influence, though that is certainly present.

After all this, it hardly seems possible to say more of Thomas's *Collected Later Poems* than that it is an essential coun-terpart to his *Collected Poems 1945-- 1990*, and that Thomas himself, despite (and because of) the enigmatic nature of his work, is an essential poet of our time, one with whom we have to come to terms, and who will change us in unforeseeable ways as we attempt to do so.

GREVEL LINDOP