



Turn Aside

The Poetic Vision of R. S. Thomas

R. S. THOMAS (1913–2000) WAS AN ANGLO-WELSH POET and Anglican priest who lived in Wales and served in small rural parishes with his wife, the artist Mildred “Elsi” Eldridge (1909-1991). Thomas’s poems bear witness to the Welsh landscape, its rural inhabitants, and the changes wrought by war, mechanization, and English tourists. They also articulate a deep longing for a God who usually remains silent. His poetry is a bracing guide to living well in an ugly age, an age flattened by efficiency, an all-out quest for profits, and the globalizing machine. His verse is subversive in the best sense, ploughing the packed soil of our hearts, turning over desiccated imaginations, and preparing our souls to bear fruit.

This praise for Thomas may strike some as inconsistent with the tone of his poetry. He is often seen as a nostalgic misanthrope, obsessing over a Welsh countryside that was a hard place to live in, and is now, thankfully, being modernized. But a deeper read reveals an honest love and empathy for his Welsh parishioners and neighbours who are caught within forces about which they can do little. And it’s true that a powerful sense of *hiraeth* pervades his work, but this Welsh word, meaning homesickness or nostalgia, does not refer to a simple fondness for some idyllic past that never was. In Thomas’s hands, *hiraeth* conveys a longing for our eternal home, whose beauty he glimpses in the sea breaking over a rocky Welsh coast or a kite winging its way northwards.

Take his poem “A Bright Field.” An irregular sonnet in some respects, its volta or turning point, as in a traditional Petrarchan sonnet, highlights the crux of the poem. Our besetting sin is to *hurry*, and the remedy is to turn aside:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.

Life is not hurrying

St Mary’s
Parish

Serving
the
Community

Serving
the
Family

Serving
the
City

on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past. It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Beauty, ephemeral as the sunlight breaking over a field, points to the eternal realities that stand aside from so much of our human striving. For many of us, the standard by which we should measure our lives lies in the future, a future where new technologies, political policies, or promotions will enable us to realize our heart's longings. For others (and Thomas was tempted in this direction), this standard lies in an imagined past: before nominalism, before the Industrial Revolution, before tractors, before smart phones, before some personal loss. We imagine that back then life was sweet, and we measure our present grief by this lost ideal. Yet Thomas insists that life is found when we, like Moses, turn aside from our habitual strivings, take off our shoes, and stand before a miracle that lies outside our expectations.

This gesture of turning aside appears in many of Thomas's poems and reveals much about his poetic vision. There are three elements to this motif of turning: The first is that turning aside brings us "within listening distance" of the ineffable, whether that be the landscape, other people, or God himself. Second, as in "A Bright Field," turning aside becomes an alternative both to mechanistic progress and to simplistic nostalgia. Finally, though Thomas may not see God "when I turn," he finds him "in the turning" itself; the practice of Christian faith entails precisely this turning aside to "the eternity that awaits." If we follow Thomas, we may learn to see beauty in an age dominated by the machine. Our situation may seem bleak, but hope lies in the eternity that awaits if we would stop hurrying on and instead turn aside.

From Jeffrey Bilbro, Turn Aside: The Poetic Vision of R. S. Thomas, *The Plough*, August 25 2020 to be continued)

Assuring the Upkeep of Our Parish

For the moment there will be no Church Collections at any of our masses. However, we have place donation boxes in the church for anybody who wishes to make a contribution to the upkeep of our parish. We are complete reliant on your generosity for this.

THANK YOU

Food Heritage Memories and Gatherings Project

Pembroke Road Association Announcement

In this initiative of the Pembroke Road Association, we hope to make a book of all the memories and thoughts that surface from conversations that can happen in the coming months.

As lockdown continues for many, we hope to collect stories about:

- * childhood memories of food
 - * family recipes for traditional foods
 - * new recipes that were discovered in lock down
 - * memories of last going out and about just before lockdown
 - * memories of family get togethers in former times
- We hope to foster community with this initiative and to learn about each other's experiences of nurturing and sharing through publishing the results in due course. It will be a way of documenting this point in time for the community of the Pembroke district and a way of talking with so many who are feeling deprived of community connection now.

We hope that it will be a way to connect us together. If you could put this information in the newsletter we would appreciate it. The contact email for the Association is: <pembrokeroadassociation@gmail.com>

IN MEMORIAM

Sunday 11am

John and Mary Campbell

Sunday 6 September, 11 am

Donal Shine

Parish Life

All masses have now resumed as normal

Weekdays 10am, 12.40

Rosary after 10am Mass

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament

Wednesday 10.30-12.40

Sundays

Saturday Night Vigil Mass 6pm, Sunday 9.30am, 11am, 5pm, Croatian Mass 6.30pm

Contacts: Fr Fachtna McCarthy, Administrator, Fr Patrick Claffey C.C. Fr Josip Levaković C.C. Tel 01-6600075

Streaming and Website www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie email: info@stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie

Child Protection: <http://www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie/ministries/child-protection/> also www.csp.dublindiocese.ie

Streaming also at www.churchservices.tv/haddingtonroad

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