



The “Listening Distance”

The Poetic Vision of R. S. Thomas

Jeffrey Bilbro

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, the poet and priest R.S.Thomas recalls playing on a beach outside Liverpool one afternoon when his father pointed across the water and told him, “That’s Wales.” Wales, it seems, can only be named from a certain distance. In this case, in the English language and from the English coast. As someone who grew up with English as his native tongue and didn’t learn to speak Welsh until he was thirty, Thomas felt this distance acutely. Yet it also granted him a certain perspective, enabling him, he felt, to perceive the tensions of Wales “more clearly than the Welsh themselves.” In his life and poetry, Thomas sought the “listening distance” that would enable him to articulate fraught truths. We can see the fruits of this carefully cultivated stance in Thomas’s poems about Iago Prytherch, the Welsh peasant figure that recurs in his early poems. “There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind,” Thomas writes in the first such poem. And yet he warns readers not to dismiss Prytherch as a mindless oaf:

Don’t be taken in
By stinking garments or an aimless grin;
He also is human, and the same small star,
That lights you homeward, has inflamed his mind
With the old hunger, born of his kind.

His failings are human and so are his longings; those who stand too far off might find this farmer’s life idyllic, and those who come too near might smell only the stench of his sweat, but Thomas invites readers to recognize both. After all, is Prytherch any more backward than those who live in so-called “developed” regions? Plenty of comfortable suburbanites have similarly vacant minds, numbed by the digital and pharmaceutical opiates so many turn to in order to survive the inhuman world we have made for ourselves. The clatter of the machine and the drone of the computer can drown out thought just as effectively as the monotonous plod of a horse’s hooves. And yet these people too burn with the old hunger, yearn for the same small star that lights us homeward.

In “Aside,” another Prytherch poem, Thomas concludes that this farmer models an exemplary patience:

Between better
And worse is no bad place
For a labourer, whose lot is to seem
Stationary in traffic so fast.
Turn aside, I said; do not turn back.
There is no forward and no back
In the fields, only the year’s two
Solstices, and patience between.

It is this patience that enables him to cultivate life in a harsh place. There is no bucolic escapism here; the beauty he finds grows in the midst of difficulty and ugliness and hardship. Among both dirt-poor peasants and suburban consumers, among both rich and poor, among both rural and urban, can be found people who craft beautiful lives from the intractable matter of their circumstances. Such art is always a miracle, an irruption of grace, a bush on fire. In “A Priest to His People,” Thomas acknowledges the gap between his own literary aspirations and his parishioners’ culture, but he also recognizes its hard-won beauty:

I have taxed your ignorance of rhyme and sonnet,
Your want of deference to the painter’s skill,
But I know as I listen, that your speech has in it
The source of all poetry, clear as a rill
Bubbling from your lips; and what brushwork could equal
The artistry of your dwelling on the bare hill?
What might feed the “old hunger” that can inspire normal people to achieve such humble artistry?
Thomas points to the ache for a beauty we can sense but cannot fully experience, indicting our modern tendency toward skepticism and irony. Being jaded isn’t a sign of sophistication. It’s a mark of what the machine has done to us:
Men, who in their day
went down acknowledging
defeat, what would they say



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now, where no superlatives have meaning? What was failure to them, our abandonment of an ideal has turned into high art.

We need an ideal to aspire to, a standard of beauty against which to measure our lives. We may be debarred from Eden, but we must not forget the shalom for which we were created. We can't give up on Wales or on beauty or on God just because they seem distant and elusive. The saving paradox is that the loss of such beauty may only intensify our perception of and longing for it: "An absence is how we become surer of what we want."

Thomas was an Anglican priest in a modern age of disbelief. He was an Anglo-Welsh poet, doomed by his birth to write in the colonizing tongue. Yet these dislocations taught him to know and love "the silence we call God".

(Extract from Jeffrey Bilbro 'Turn Aside: The Poetic Vision of R. S. Thomas', *The Plough*, August 2020, to be concluded)

St Julien and the Leper

Though all ran from him, he did not
Run, but awaited
Him with his arms
Out, his ears stopped
To his bell, his alarmed
Crying. He lay down
With him there, sharing his sores'
Stench, the quarantine
Of his soul; contaminating
himself with a kiss,
With the love that
Our science has disinfected.

-R.S. Thomas (1913-2000)

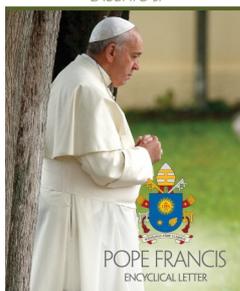


Assuring the Upkeep of Our Parish

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.

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COMMON HOME
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Pope Francis: Conversion of humanity necessary to heal the earth

By Vatican News

"There will be no new relationship with nature without a new human being, and it is by healing the human heart that one can hope to heal the world from its social and environmental unrest."

Those were Pope Francis' prepared remarks to ecological experts gathered on Thursday, who are collaborating with the Bishops of France on the theme of *Laudato Si'*.

The Pope emphasized that we are all part of a single human family, living in a common home which is experiencing "disturbing degradation." In off the cuff remarks to the group, he said, "one thing about ecological conversion is that it makes us see the general harmony, the correlation of everything: everything is connected, everything is related."

Pope Francis also noted that "when a people loses the sense of its roots, it loses its identity. But no! We are modern. Let's go and think about our grandparents, our great-grandparents... But there is another thing that is history: there is belonging to a tradition, to a humanity, to a way of life... That is why it is very important today to take care of this, to take care of the roots of where we belong, so that the fruits are good."

In his scripted words, he pointed out that at the present time, "the health crisis that humanity is currently experiencing reminds us of our fragility. We understand to what extent we are linked to one another, part of a world we share, and that mistreating it can only have serious consequences, not only environmental, but also social and human."

IN MEMORIAM

Recently deceased

Frances Blake

6pm Vigil, Riobard McGórun, Anniversay

11am, Donal Shine, Anniversay

Masses on 12-13 September

6pm Vigil mass, Sean Hanaphey

11am, Bernie Guerin

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

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