

THE SEVERN FORUM

'R.S. Thomas and the Hiddenness of God'

by

Canon Mark Oakley

Chancellor, St Paul's Cathedral, London

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University of Gloucestershire, Park campus, Cheltenham

'If I knew where poems came from, I'd go and live there'
Michael Longley

THEY SAY THAT THE DEFINITION of a politician is someone who, when he or she sees light at the end of the tunnel, orders more tunnel. They may not be alone. Of commentary, analysis, sermons and scholarship on the priest and poet R.S.Thomas there seems to be no end – always more to dig and develop. And this is surely because he is one of the finest Welsh poets of the last century, as well as one of the finest religious poets, and that his subject matter is often evocative and enigmatic in equal measure. This, coupled with an expanding mythology regarding the contradictions of his personality as much as any perceived in his thinking, and we find a poet and a body of work that invites an engagement from a whole variety of readers across the board.

What I want to try and do this evening is not to give you a talk that tries to elucidate Thomas' understanding of the nature of God, interesting though that would be as an exercise, but rather to dare to be a little more personal – always remembering Auden's comment that a poem should always be more interesting that anything you can see about it. I would like to unravel with you for the first time, something of a three-fold relationship of about 20 years standing. That three-fold relationship or conversation is that between me, God and RS Thomas. Let me explain.

I first came across the work of RS Thomas at Kings College London as I was finishing my theology degree, an important discovery at a time when what I was learning was beginning to uproot some of my personal beliefs and I wasn't sure how to connect. Two years later I was training for ministry and had, in the middle of my time there, a period of extreme doubt about God and anger at the Church. All romance in my spirituality dried up and, hardened and sceptical, I decided to leave training. I packed a bag and went to see a friend who was working in India. With not much room in that bag I only packed one book, quite heavy, that of the poems of RS Thomas. Two things happened to me in those six weeks in India. I suddenly realised how big the world is and how laughable it is to imagine that anyone or any group can somehow claim the monopoly on truth when so much is as yet unknown, unexplored. Becoming a visitor in a totally different culture also makes you into something of a stranger to yourself, and I became aware of that vast unexplored territory inside that I was calling me. At the same time, the poems I carried around with me – getting brushed with spices, sweat and bashed about next to chickens on the bus – those poems were teaching me something about the breadth and depth of God, should there be such, in relation to this huge world and hidden self. The poems had a magnetism of mystery to them and somehow seemed to place a compass back in my hand which said, start again, start afresh. Looking back, I see now that so much was having to be learned in order to live, contours being pushed wider, habits of thought unpicked – growing pains. Thanks to a patient principal, I returned to college to see whether God and I had a future. RS Thomas came too. New poems were devoured. Trips were made to go and hear him – just once, I met and talked with him.

Jumping ahead, I finished training and was ordained in 1993. I have been fortunate to serve in fascinating ministries – as a curate in NW London, as a bishop's chaplain, as the Rector of the Actors' church in Covent Garden, as an Archdeacon living abroad in Denmark, and in posh Mayfair - before taking up my current post at St Paul's. Time is short but suffice it to say that the doubts have often returned and still do, in different guises and sometimes very dark and helpless, and the anger at the Church, as institution, comes and goes as regularly as clockwork. I have got older, read more, thought more, loved and lost - as we all have. And two things have stayed constant: God and RS Thomas. For no matter how much I have fought with God, dismissed him, thought him cruel – the relationship with him has always been there. I can't shake him off. And no matter how much I have scratched my head over his poems, some days thought him too romantic, some days too bleak – my relationship with the work of RS Thomas has never diminished for every time I read him I feel that compass somehow placed back in my hand. So, what other title could I give tonight than RS Thomas and the Hiddenness of God?

Well, that's a bit of a personal preamble to why this topic fires me up. So, let me now think for a moment about the context in which I have tried to live out my ordained life. For what takes place on the outside affects the inside, as we know. So as a priest and pastor what has been the air that I breathe? And I want to answer this in a slightly odd way. Instead of giving a sociological commentary on the cultural trends of daily life I thought, as I am in a university with one of the leading ancient history and classical culture departments, I would imagine that the Greek gods are still alive and that four of them are especially powerful today. By

looking at these gods we might begin to see the influence that they are having on many of us and, then, how this might begin to shape our language and thinking in a God-search and why Thomas is important at such a time.

So, the first God alive and well today is **Gloss**, the goddess of beauty and surfaces – a fickle being, incarnated in paper and adverts, a god so big she makes us all feel small and ugly. We are drawn by her siren voice but her perfection is impossible even for those who anoint themselves with her many sensuous creams and labels. She is cunning too – she makes humans confuse their wants for their needs and this leads to many tears. She teaches that life is survival of the fittest. Fit for what she never reveals. She makes objects into people and people into objects so in her adverts you can never work out if the man is having an affair with the woman or with the car. Any church under the spell of Gloss will always be in danger of becoming a swimming pool – with all the noise coming from the shallow end. In society it will mean we will tend to fall for anything rather than stand for something.

Obese is the god of gathering, of acquiring, who is never satisfied: happiness for him is having what you want not wanting what you have. And he always wants more even when bloated. Although people say he is seen on earth at the moment in the form of British children, in fact he is found in the hearts of parents and grandparents just as much over much of the world. He is related to that great god who makes us buy things we don't need called Ikea (mainly worshipped on a Saturday). Together they magic us into spending money we don't have on things we don't want in order to impress people we don't like.

Instantaneous is the goddess of now. She cannot wait. She must have fast cars, fast food, fast money, fast death. She is blind, never having the time to stop and see anything. She often gets into a mess too because she never has the patience to listen to anyone either. She beckons people to live full lives but strangely leaves them feeling empty. She is afraid of people meeting face to face in case they discover the joys of wasting time together, and so she invents screens and devices that trick us into thinking we are communicating but which actually add to our loneliness. She seduces with quick clarity and easy answers, and hates ambiguity, poetry, faith. She invented what RS Thomas often called The Machine – but she doesn't know this because she would never waste time on him.

And finally there is **Punch**, the god of violence and division. If hate can be escalated he'll have a go – if they don't agree with you, lash out. If they're different, slap them down. If they're not in the majority, don't invite them. When in doubt, just punch them. Now obviously Punch is the creator of some computer games, street gangs, film directors and state leaders. Religious leaders are often drawn to his clarifying power too. But also, Punch can be a subtle god and can hide in the consensus of the middle classes, and his punch can be made, not of a fist but of plausible, respectable, articulate words. Punch can be very charming as he drives around in his bandwagon. He can make you feel better. And he loves to play a little trick – he likes to make people yawn whenever the conversation turns to human rights and responsibilities, refugees, the poor, the environment, equality – in fact, anything that Christians believe are close to God's heart. And Punch is powerful at the moment. I can hear him every time I see that if you're not at the table you are probably on the menu. Now, as I have grown up and tried to become adult, with mixed results, these four gods have had me and many of my colleagues and friends under their power. Moments have come along in our lives, however, when we have seen it and caught ourselves in the mirror and regretted what we have become. We recognize that we have quite a lot to live with but not a great deal to live for. The Maggie Smith character in a recent play noted that the obituary of our generation will be, "we left no loft unconverted".

You may know Adrienne Rich's poem *To the Days* in which she refers to our:

*Fog in the mornings, hunger for clarity,
coffee and bread with sour plum jam.
Numbness of soul in placid neighbourhoods.
Lives ticking on as if.*

Seeing ourselves, it is then that some have fled to the countryside to be distilled. Others have given more time to children or to love. Some have sought out opportunities for doing good or reading or being creative or meditating. And some have asked questions about God, about whether reality is ultimately trustworthy and how we might, if so, begin to let our roots which are so thirsty drink from deeper pools. RS Thomas once wrote in the TLS: "is this not also a mechanized and impersonal age, an analytic and clinical one; an age in which under the hard gloss of affluence there can be detected the murmuring of the starved heart and the uneasy spirit?" All this has led to so many of my generation telling me as a priest that they are spiritual, but not religious. Some

will go further, they say that they are atheist but value spirituality. And what they find intriguing or frustrating or disappointing is that as people who believe they value the dignity of the human soul, the Church is not on their map of spiritual adventure. It is an irony. A spiritual people finds the Church too secular, too caught up in all those things they wish to escape from. Seamus Heaney has written:

*At the altar rail I knelt and learnt almost
not to admit the let-down to myself.*

As an ambassador for the Church I often feel that people are looking at me to somehow raise their low expectations or I can often sense their resentment towards me as someone who appears to peddle Spring-like fantasies in a wintry world. Or maybe worse – am I just the bland leading the bland?

And what matters to me, then, as a priest is the language of our conversations, the language with which we begin to try and dive, avoiding the tyranny of cliché, the seduction of quick clarity and easy answers. How do we ask people to be patient with language, as they might with a painting. Waiting to let it change you rather than use it for one's own agenda. My task as a priest today is to seek a language that is not relevant, but resonant. A language that broods and sits on the nest, as it were, slowly nurturing new perspectives that only come when our shells crack for, as TS Eliot asks: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

As you know, clergy never stop talking: like broken fax machines always on transmit. But as I seek a way to find that language for today's soul, for my soul, for a people for whom so much of the grammar of Christian faith is just not there anymore, I have turned to Thomas. For here is someone who has given voice to the difficulties of the God-search, who has exposed both the richness and poverty our words, a man whose own distillation seems quite progressed – as Seamus Heaney said of Thomas, he appears as "a loner taking on the universe, a kind of Clint Eastwood of the spirit". As I review the longings but questionings of my generation and as I review my own flickering communion with God, with the romance long past and the relationship underway but faltering, and as I review what it is that a priest might be doing in this age, I find that Thomas' poems speak honestly, in collage-like integrity unafraid of paradox, silence.

The Empty Church:
They 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.
Ah, he had burned himself
before in the human flame
and escaped, leaving the reason
torn. He will not come any more
to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still
striking my prayers on a stone
heart? Is it in hope one
of them will ignite yet and throw
on its illuminated walls the shadow
of someone greater than I can understand?

What is very important to me is that the one who offers me a poetry in which to explore the relationship to God also is unflinchingly up-front about his own rebellion and reverence, about his devotion but also the overwhelming derelictions of pursuing God. I remember interviewing a woman offering herself for ordination. Why? I asked. "I suppose I want to help people have that relationship with God that I only wish I had myself" she replied. This is how it feels but the task is as urgent as it was when the French worker priest in the 60s was asked why he had got ordained in a time of secular fundamentalism and totalitarian commercialism. "I was ordained", he said, "in order to stop the rumour of God disappearing from the face of the earth". These two responses, to use a Thomas word, form the counterpoint of a priestly ministry for me today.

But enough of me now and my life-decision to try and make sense of an ordained life. Why is it that Thomas relentlessly encourages me?

Well, first, his insights on our situation as regards belief. Much of what I have described as the erosion of faith and the paralysis of doubt you will have realized is not new. The reasons may have changed somewhat,

but we can still read a poem like Arnold's *Dover Beach* and understand. You'll remember that Arnold reflects on the ebb of the sea and this leads him to think that "The Sea of Faith/ was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. /But now I only hear/ its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / retreating, to the breath/ of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear/ and naked shingles of the world". Arnold wants us, in his words, to "witness the discouragement".

RS Thomas wrote a poem indebted to *Dover Beach* called *Tidal*:

The waves run up the shore
and fall back. I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back. The breakers return
reaching a little further,
gnawing away at the mainland.
They have done this thousands
of years, exposing little by little
the rock under the soil's face.
I must imitate them only
in my return to the assault,
not in their violence. Dashing
my prayers at him will achieve
little other than the exposure
of the rock under his surface.
My returns must be made
on my knees. Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercy
where trust may take root and grow.

In Thomas' poem there is both ebb **and** flow. Thomas metaphorically compares his relationship to God to tidal rhythm and a fitful, fleeting contact with him. This poem does not have the same definitive, pervasive dependency of Arnold's for we hear the words, "spring", "brim" and "surprise" and reference to a discovering of "deposits of mercy". There is erosion but there may be discovery in the rock face yet. Such a positioning is important for we have a diminished way in which we try and speak of God at the moment. - either as a Dawkins dismitter or in the other corner a believer in an inerrant religious authority, be it person or text. We are so often being asked to side with one of two fundamentalisms. But many of us are poised somewhere in the balance – uncomfortable, difficult to articulate but the place of integrity for us. Unafraid to reason, unashamed to adore. Thinking critically, trying to live faithfully. Thomas allows us to roam freely in this space and, by so doing, gives us a fresher air to breathe and clears an approach often far too hidden today.

We find this space offered us too in Thomas' *The Other*, where listening to the sea's swell rising and falling "the thought comes of that other being who is awake too" on whom prayers break for days, years and eternity, and also in *The Moon in Lleyn* where we read:

"The tide laps at the Bible; the bell fetches no people to the brittle miracle of the bread. The sand is waiting for the running back of the grains in the wall into its blond glass. Religion is over, and what will emerge from the body of the new moon, no one can say. But a voice sounds in my ear: why so fast, mortal? These very seas are baptized. The parish has a saints name time cannot unfrock. In cities that have outgrown their promise people are becoming pilgrims again, if not to this place, then to the recreation of it in their own spirits. You must remain kneeling. Even as this moon making its way through the earth's cumbersome shadow, prayer, too, has its phases."

The sense one receives from these and many other poems is that our ignorance, though blunt, is a kind of knowledge and that we do not know what it is or how to interpret it but that, to use his words, the meaning is in the waiting.

So, Thomas opens up a space in which our doubt, scepticism, ignorance are allowed to break on a shore, somehow, and to reveal another form of comprehension that reaches beyond the usual categories of right and wrong, real and unreal, true and false. It is a space that is both comfort and challenge. It is a place where meaning is forged in mystery, where, in words of Thomas, "we are grasped by that for which we wait". He is

engaged, in his phrases, in an interrogation of silence, an experimenting with an Amen, a nailing of his questions one by one to an untenanted cross. Thomas writes of what he knows and never asks for pity. God is often silent in Thomas' work. Silence is God's last resort against our idolatry. There is a promising darkness in his poems, a reminder that on the spiritual journey difficulty is very important.

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.

In 63BC the Romans stormed the Jerusalem Temple and were astonished, we are told, to find the Holy of Holies empty, with no statues and no object of worship. No gods, not even Glass. This shock of absence is worth thinking about – and you are made to by Thomas time and time again. Endless mystics and holy teachers have advised we do. The eastern tradition of apophysis means leaping towards the mystery, not just empty theology but the opening up of an encounter, a revelation which is unthinkable, unseeable. This is God giving us just enough to seek him and never enough to fully find him. To do more would inhibit our freedom and limit his holiness. "*The sensation of silence*", wrote John Updike, "*cannot be helped: a loud and evident God would be a bully, an insecure tyrant, an all-crushing datum instead of, as he is, a bottomless encouragement to our faltering and frightened being*"¹. It is true that as we try to articulate God we discover his elusiveness, his receding before us. As Thomas, says "language falsifies".

We relate to God only in the context of nearness and distance for if we ever think we possess him we will stop desiring him. "*Such a fast God*", says Thomas, "*always before us and leaving as we arrive*". It is as if we know there is a God because he keeps disappearing. Our longing is the necessary constant. Desire is the heartbeat of faith. Faith is a love of the hidden, a pursuit in relationship, a search for the visibility of the invisible. "*We want God's voice to be clear but it is not. It is as deep as night, with a dark clarity, like an x-ray. It reaches our bones*"². And so when revelation comes it is, as Eckhart says, as if God is hiding in the dark and coughs, giving himself away. Waiting for God is a theme Thomas is known for:

Kneeling:

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 rôle. And the audiences
still; all that close throng
of spirits waiting, as I,
for the message.
Prompt me, God;
but not yet. When I speak,
though it be you who speak

¹ John Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, Knopf, 1989, p.229

² Ernesto Cardenal quoted in Michael Paul Gallagher, *Dive Deeper: The Human Poetry of Faith*, DLT, 2001, p.77

through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Our concern to *resolve* the Mystery of God is corrected into a desire to *deepen* it. People of faith should be unapologetically poetic, poetic in the will to capture truth but to resist closure. Theology, like a poem, is never finished, it can only be abandoned.

But this absence is different from that felt by the many searchers I have been referring to. Their sense of absence of God is more likely to have arrived because of the disenchantment of the world by scientific explanation and by a culture that carries on as if God isn't; or it might have come about because of a failure to understand what it might mean to say God acts in this world - ok, he may exist but what does he do all day, and if he can act, why doesn't he intervene at times of evil and pointless suffering?

So, there is an absence for those who have begun to love the divine and understand the pains of relationship, the necessity of presence and absence in such a dynamic; and there is the absence of God felt by those who aren't sure about all the talk about God. Their sense of absence is more akin to that of loss, bereavement, perhaps. It is interesting to ask whether there are those for whom there has never been any sense of religious awareness ever, people for whom the word absent cannot be compared with any understanding of presence at all.

For Thomas, shadows point the way. He tries to articulate God only to discover God's elusiveness, his receding before the poet. In his collection *Frequencies*, it is the eel-like God who slips out of your hands into the dark depths that Thomas attempts to express. Poem after poem is marked with a passage about this divine absence - "God not there where he could have been, or was a little while before, or who might come if we are patient, or who has left just a small sign of his presence but one which gives no further assurance he will ever be apprehended again" ¹. We never catch him at work, he writes elsewhere, but can only say, coming suddenly upon an amendment, that here he has been.

The person of faith who seeks to relate to his or her God discovers, as at home perhaps, that a mature relationship is neither totally dependent nor totally independent, but carries within it a developing assurance that absence is not the same as indifference or neglect...it depends on faith in the one felt but not seen. Often more can be communicated in silence.

Pascal once stated that if there were no obscurity we would not be sensible of our corruption and if there were no light we would not hope for a remedy, thus God, in fairness and to our advantage, remains partly hidden and partly revealed.

The Combat:

You have no name.
We have wrestled with you all
day, and now night approaches,
the darkness from which we emerged
seeking; and anonymous
you withdraw, leaving us nursing
our bruises, our dislocations.

For the failure of language
there is no redress. The physicists
tell us your size, the chemists
the ingredients of your
thinking. But who you are
does not appear, nor why
on the innocent marches
of vocabulary you should choose
to engage us, belabouring us
with your silence. We die, we die
with the knowledge that your resistance
is endless at the frontier of the great poem.

But what of revelation? Are we condemned into saying God is and is absent, and that's it? Or can we move towards a revelation of presence rather than propositions? Thomas' later poems tease us with recognitions and

echoes and mirrors and shadows. A whisper is louder than a shout. As the sculptor recognises within the hard rock the form of the image being chiselled out so the poet sees divine image in the hard beauty of the world, in throwing prayers like gravel at the sky's window and thinking he once saw the movement of a curtain, and in the person of Christ who is presented in some of the poems as if he were the body-language of God.

Tell Us:

We have had names for you:
The Thunderer, the Almighty
Hunter, Lord of the snowflake
and the sabre-toothed tiger.
One name we have held back
unable to reconcile it
with the mosquito, the tidal-wave,
the black hole into which
time will fall. You have answered
us with the image of yourself
on a hewn tree, suffering
injustice, pardoning it;
pointing as though in either
direction; horrifying us
with the possibility of dislocation.
Ah, love, with your arms out
wide, tell us how much more
they must still be stretched
to embrace a universe drawing
away from us at the speed of light.

Thomas needs another range of metaphors, mostly drawn from Christ's crucifixion, to describe what can be known, hinted at in that earlier quotation of putting our hands in his side, hoping to find it warm. There are poems that unveil the cost to God of the world. In his famous poem that begins with the Cardiff recital in which the poet watches the violinist Kreisler play, seeing the discipline and concentration and the pulse playing in his cheek, Thomas sees also something of God who so beautifully suffered for each of us upon his instrument:

So it must have been on Calvary
in the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
the hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
making such music as lives still...
It was himself that he played.

Many of you will know that Thomas' poems often show a callous God or a God who has limits in his omnipotence, a God unable to make tragedy and pain disappear, a God found in a crucifixion – what he refers at one point to a long-bow drawn against love. Thomas places the odd back into God and stops our snoring through a half-dead existence. Such a God does not confirm our prejudices, fight on our side or pander to our whims. As CS Lewis saw, we shall probably spend eternity thanking God for the prayers he didn't answer. Instead, discovery, epiphany, revelation occur not when we plough our way through the wrong questions but when we lay them aside, when we do not seek a God able to justify our emotional or mental state of play. We are in God, said Origen, as a net is in the sea, contained but not containing. And so we also find Thomas writing like this in *The Answer*.

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.

and this, in *Waiting*:

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.

Donald Allchin has noted that Thomas developed the "realization that man is not always ever against God, battering at him from outside", but that God is in and around us, "I grow old", Thomas writes, "bending to enter the promised land that was here all the time". And, as I said, the figure of Christ enters the poems too, as here in *Nuclear*:

It is not that he can't speak;
who created languages
but God? Nor that he won't;
to say that is to imply
malice. It is just that
he doesn't, or does so at times
when we are not listening, in
ways we have yet to recognise
as speech. We call him the dumb
God with an effrontery beyond
pardon. Whose silence so eloquent
as his? What word so explosive
as that one Palestinian
word with the endlessness of its fallout?

Thomas develops poetry, often around the image of Christ, in which effort gives way to grace, a perception of receiving. It is when we acknowledge that we don't have the answers, and when we stop driving in a proud gear, that sight is granted. The more opinions you have, the less you see:

I think that maybe
I will be a little surer
of being a little nearer
that's all. Eternity
is in the understanding
that that little is more than enough.

Conclusion

I have talked enough. Let me conclude then by saying that poetry tries to find the music in the words that describe an intuition. It is the language that sounds better and means more. For Thomas it was that which makes its way to the intellect by way of the heart. Poetry captures, not explains, as statements of faith refer rather than describe. I am of the mind that the Church needs to be more unapologetically poetic, able to let her words mean as most as possible rather than the least; to nurture people who wish to deepen the Mystery of God as much as those who want to resolve it; to tackle head on the great curse of literalism that prowls around and to show that truth is not the same thing as eliminating ambiguity, that ritual and liturgy are poetry in motion and do not work when spelled out, that we worship a God who does not reveal propositionally but in collage, and that we are called to reflect this God, resisting closure, raising expectations, opening up a generosity of spirit not a meanness of pious restriction.

What we long for eludes us. If we ever think we possess God we will stop desiring him. There will always be graceful irritants placed in us to stop complacency and proud self-congratulation. We know information can be got at the press of a key, but we know too that truth is hard won, flinty and sharply digested in a lifetime's search. God is always revising our understanding of God as well as who we are: his gift to us is being, our gift to him is becoming and, as Thomas knew, that becoming is distilled, quietened, remoulded in the deeper meaning of waiting. Without that fashionable despair of language that empties it of communicable meaning, he knows the inadequacies of words but uses them, as it were, like setting a trap for clarity and for his God. He levels the ground of faith with honesty.

Some have wondered whether he was an atheist manqué. For me, however, he was someone who knew, especially in the world of belief and the spirit, of the deathly nature of the full stop and who, in his understanding of waiting and absence, turned that full stop into a comma, a poised place for something more,

presence, meaning. And at a time when many would argue that religious conviction is only really proved in commitment to fundamentalist or buoyantly enthusiastic, and wholly unbelievable, dogmas and styles of worship, he reminds us that faith is not the same thing as certainty, and that faith has an integrity of its own. Thomas reminds me that fundamentalism is to Christianity what paint by numbers is to art.

Raptor:

You have made God small
setting him astride
a pipette or a retort
studying the bubbles
absorbed in an experiment
that will come to nothing.

I think of him rather
as an enormous owl
abroad in the shadows
brushing me sometimes
with his wing so the blood
in my veins freezes, able
to find his way from one
soul to another because
he can see in the dark.
I have heard him crooning
to himself, so that almost
I could believe in angels
those feathered overtones
in love's rafters, I have heard
him scream, too, fastening
his talons in his great adversary,
or in some lesser
denizen, maybe, like you or me.

RS Thomas is a poet of counterpoint, a poet in which sounds of two possible readings meet, where two distinct melodies create a texture. The readings are those of God's absence and his presence, his silence and his resonance, his shadow and his brightness, the texture is that of a faith that may just be sustainable in our twenty first century. His poems rub up against each other and that uneasy collision of voices reciprocates in the turmoil of the reader as they face the pleasant lies and burnt-out words that have eaten into us as well as the gnawing feeling that we don't quite believe our unbelief. Thomas undresses the mind in his simple, sometimes harsh unsentimental clarity. I have argued that we are far from being an atheist culture, indeed that there is a hunger for the sacred that persists, even intensifies, in an era when knowledge is exploding. This hunger I believe is rooted in something more fundamental than intellectual confusion. Regardless of religious orthodoxies, it seems that people cannot brush aside the sense that there are things that matter and that this mattering is not a mere question of knowledge and social convention. It implies an orientation of one's life towards what lies outside it, a recognition of values which transcend the individual and even the culture, a sense as if one was being invited to respond and to receive. It is for me a profound sense, a humbling but glorious sense that I shall always be grateful to RS Thomas for, from early days together in India to now, that God is in this world as poetry is in the poem.

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ⁱ John Powell Ward, *The Poetry of RS Thomas*, Seren Books, 2000, p.113