



INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY AND SCIENCE ON THE POEMS OF R.S. THOMAS

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Objective

The main objective of this research paper is to evaluate the Christian and scientific influence on the creation poems of R S Thomas, who was considered to be the most eligible poet for the Nobel Prize. The Christian influence drives mainly from his long association with church and the scientific influence comes from his non-traditional, logical and unique approach towards everything in life.

Abstract

R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) was a priest by profession and an Anglo-Welsh poet by his heart. He was one of the major figures in contemporary British poetry. Thomas was a major Christian poet, though not an orthodox one. He was a man of devout faith, who all his life experienced the elusiveness of God. He witnessed the slow marginalization of religion and God in the Western world, which has been accompanied and partly caused by the advancement of science. Thomas pursues an intense personal search for understanding of the human condition, for knowledge and experience of God, and for the meaning of his vocation, during which he reinterprets, extends, and renews the traditions of Christianity and English Christian poetry.

The Christian Influence

A number of Thomas's creation poems present a God coloured by Christian insights and details. The nails in "The Hand," the stitch in "Rough," and the thorn in God's side in "The Woman" are hints of the Christian view of God but other poems are more direct. "Making" (H) offers the story of Creation told by an anthropomorphic God in a monologue.

The Creator somewhat childlike in his innocent simple pleasure in his own creativity, has "built" the Earth as a home and now embarks on a little interior decorating. He proudly claims "I thought up the flowers / Then birds. I found the bacteria" The animals exist "to divert me." In Milton, Adam dreams during the creation of Eve; in this poem, God dreams

"Of a likeness" which, upon awakening he carefully fashions to music. His relationship with it, he says, is love. He is "in love with it / For itself, giving it freedom / To love me; risking the disappointment." The poem proclaims selfless love as a divine attribute, an insight central to Christianity. The concept of free will so important to a theodicy like **Paradise Lost** is recast here: freedom to choose to do God's will become freedom to love God. In the end, the two are the same, but the emphasis on love, rather than will in this poem, makes God not a judge but a lover, even a parent, who is, unlike Yahweh, neither possessive nor demanding, but respectful of the freedom of the one loved.

Out of such love and disappointment come, in Christian myth and theology, the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and Thomas works these explicitly into the conception of God in several poems, including "The Tool," with its shadowy Creator and a vulnerable character named God, who, like Adam and Eve, "knew he was naked and withdrew himself." "God" can be seen as God the Son, or perhaps the God who identifies with mankind and becomes incarnate, as opposed to the God who creates. This interpretation is strengthened by allusions to the Incarnation and Crucifixion that appear in the culmination of the poem. In mediaeval depictions of the tree, the serpent coils around the trunk and its woman's head speaks from the branches. God takes the place of the serpent here, but, unlike the serpent with its partial knowledge, he speaks to the man from complete knowledge, and so "out of the tree's wholeness." God's identification

with the tree also suggests the Crucifixion, God's death on that other tree, which in Christian tradition was fashioned from the wood of the first tree and set up in its place. In fact, a mediaeval Italian fresco depicts Christ crucified on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Foiled by evil in his attempts to communicate with a dangerous mankind, God responds in a way that suggests both the Incarnation and Crucifixion: he comes to the man in his own vulnerability and allows the man to wound him with the tool. "Came forth / in his nakedness" describes both God's movement to meet the man in the poem and the Incarnation, the birth of God as a helpless naked infant. "His" in "his nakedness" can refer both to God and to the human creature, whose nakedness God appropriates -- a fruitful ambiguity. "Suffering the tool's / insolence in his own body" refers to the Crucifixion; "suffering," which means both "allowing" and "feeling pain, concisely conveys his acceptance of this death.

God's words to the man, "forgive me," suggest why he becomes incarnate, but the reason for God's sense of guilt is not obvious. There is, however, a suggestion to be found in the creation of the man: "Pain," said / the voice, and the creature stood up, its mind folded / on darkness." Pain and the darkness of ignorance and misery define the human condition by divine decree from the beginning. There is no paradisaal Eden, no prelapsarian bliss, and no fall. Weakness and pain are inherent in "God" as in mankind and the nature of things. "Forgive me" recalls in reverse from Jesus' words on the cross,

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The ambiguity in the depiction of God in "The Tool" is paralleled by ambiguity on the question of human culpability. The man is created with a dark mind, which suggests at once ignorance (possibly mere innocence in a newly-created being) and evil. The creature puts out a hand, like Adam in Michelangelo's fresco of the creation of man, "as though to implore / wisdom," but "as though" leaves the motive for its action uncertain. It may desire wisdom or it may be acting deceitfully. The tool appears almost by magic in the man's hand, whether with or against his will one does not know. Nor is one told who creates the tool; it could well be the voice, which created the dark mind. As in "The Hand," God hears some responsibility for the tool. The poem certainly seems to implicate the Creator in the existence of evil and the misery of the human condition.

The Scientific Influence

Thomas's depiction of God and his act of creation is also influenced by science. "Rough" borrows its model of the universe from Newton and Darwin. "The Tool," with its swarming germs, hints at a long process of creation, while in "Once" and "Dialogue" (148), Thomas is more direct about method. In the other creation poems, God creates with a word or a look a thought, an intention an action, even a wave of "his slow wand" ("Female" [H]). The desired result is instantly there. In "Once" and "Dialogue," Thomas describes a process of creation that blends evolution

with the idea of a creator God. The attempt is not new, of course, and continues today," but Thomas approaches the problem as a poet, not as a scientist. "Once," for example, preserves the order of creation given by J in Genesis 2, but modifies that biblical framework by borrowing from geology its conception of the starting situation. Rather than a cool Earth watered by mist, Thomas's Adam sees a smoking Earth and a hot sea, details geologically accurate for a young Earth before life developed. It is only when the earth cools enough for dew to form that life can appear: "the mingled chorus / Of weeds and flowers" and the embryonic forms on the tree bark: "the many faces / Of life, forms hungry for birth, / Mouthing at me." These two vivid images skillfully and concisely suggest the profusion of life. In this poem, God creates but, unlike Yahweh, he remains very much in the background, and one gets the sense of a process initiated and then watched over by a hidden creator.

A more striking and original poem is "The Gap" (F), one of Thomas's best mythic narratives. A fruitful marriage of theology, myth, and science, "The Gap" explores the relationship between language, knowledge and God. The poem features a tongue-in-cheek portrait of an anthropomorphic God drawn from Yahwist and other primitive sources who suddenly reveals himself as the mystery at the heart of the cosmos, a mystery that frustrates the human search for knowledge.

In this poem, God is like Yahweh in one important respect, his overwhelming concern for boundaries, his desire to

maintain a distance, the "gap" of the title, between humanity and himself. In the poem, as in this passage from Exodus, the gap is metaphysical distance represented as physical distance.

On the other side of the gap is humanity and its "tower of speech," a concrete symbol for the voracious human quest for **scientia** or knowledge pursued through language, and for the power such knowledge, such naming brings. In Thomas's myth, language is again connected with power, but this time through knowledge. The tower is built of words instead of bricks; words themselves, "vocabulary," are the weapons used in the contest with the world and ultimately with God (the idea of a contest is implicit in the word "triumphed" in line 8). As mentioned earlier, for ancient peoples, words conquer by naming and defining. To know the name of a thing is to have power over it.

This state of affairs God cannot abide. In the human search to discover the nature of God, a search represented by the tower, God declines to be discovered. He leans over "the dictionary / they used" and "the darkness / that is a god's blood swelled / in him."

The darkness of God's blood suggests mystery as the essence of the divine nature, and this mystery is God's definition of himself for human consumption: a "sign," yet not a word--words are human. The sign is to be found at the heart of all things. It is enigmatic, unexpected, and paradoxical, and it frustrates human attempts to encompass all knowledge and explain all phenomena within a single,

consistent, complete theory. It is the insoluble equation, the problem that in principle cannot be solved, what some scientists call "the X factor." These lines suggest that the universe is deeply informed with the nature of God, the mark or "sign" of God, which cannot be neatly encompassed by human reason. Since God is reflected in the very heart of things, the universe is both meaningful and unified. God's efforts to protect himself are successful: the narrow gap is preserved. God's sleep is reasserted at the end of the poem: "the eternal / silence that is the repose of God " calm, peaceful, at rest, a silence that gives nothing away.

Conclusion

This study of Thomas's mythic poems especially the creation poems reveals both the poet's deep roots in Christian tradition and his original exploitation of that tradition. Thomas keeps the premises of the biblical creation stories, though he seldom tries to reproduce biblical rhythms or language. He never provides merely verse paraphrases of biblical stories and seldom produces an orthodox poem. God's humanness is emphasised and sometimes interpreted in a Christian way and his human emotions are exaggerated. Thomas fulfills his role as traditional poet reinterpreting the myths for his age. Finally, Thomas's mythology preserves an element of ambiguity in the presentation of technology, allowing for the possibility of its redemption and repossession as an instrument of the divine in a harmonious world.

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