

[L]ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

[R]THE INNOCENCE OF R. S. THOMAS

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WHEN R. S. THOMAS'S SON was asked how his father liked to occupy himself outside of his ministerial duties, he recalled his father's capacity for being busy 'in the ways that boys manage to be busy'.¹ Such a remark certainly complicates any perception of Thomas as a man locked within a permanent state of gloom. Yet as his son pointed out, while

there was this rather dour exterior, as people thought, rather unfriendly and rather unloving, and possibly acerbic, inside he was obviously *seething*, seething with love and seething with emotion and seething with sensibility, and seething with his search for the good lord. So it was very strange, [like] a very strong box, with a very vigorous interior, which couldn't get out, but did come out of course in terms of the poetry.²

Gwydion Thomas made several cutting remarks about his father, but none was more acute than this. For Thomas was a man with ascetic tendencies who could nevertheless denounce Protestantism as 'the adroit castrator / Of art; the bitter negation / Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy'.³ Likewise, his frustration with the stony silence of the hill farmer Iago Prytherch springs from the thought that,

could he speak, would not the glib tongue boast
A lore denied our neoteric sense,
Being handed down from the age of innocence?⁴

Thomas often wrote about children, a neglected dimension of his work that evolved from his early immersion in Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, poets he first encountered as a schoolboy via his voracious reading of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*.⁵ But the fact that, on 29 August 1945, Thomas himself became a father is also relevant. Part of the radicalism of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and other poems stemmed from their readiness to explore the extraordinary power of parental love, and it is within the context of Romantic fatherhood that 'Song for Gwydion' – the finest poem that Thomas wrote about his son – should be set. The tender manner in which Thomas evokes the fragile beauty of his son's body is particularly indebted to Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight':

When I was a child and the soft flesh was forming
Quietly as snow on the bare boughs of bone,
My father brought me trout from the green river
From whose chill lips the water song had flown.

Dull grew their eyes, the beautiful, blithe garland
Of stipples faded, as light shocked the brain;
They were the first sweet sacrifice I tasted,
A young god, ignorant of the blood's stain.

(CP, p. 23)

The closing allusion to humanity's fallen state leads M. Wynn Thomas to see father and son 'united in a moment of sad communion, partners in sin', prompting him to suggest that 'Thomas is always ready to see signs of the criminal cupidity of mankind in the gross appetitiveness of young children'.⁶ The problem with such a reading is that it completely ignores the air of divinity that Thomas ascribes to his son: Gwydion is a 'young god' untainted by knowledge of sin, innocent despite his consumption of the fish.⁷ It is his father, the adult narrator, who is conscious of the way the trout's colour starts to fade and the theological significance of the blood's stain (with its rhyme on 'Cain'), and projects his awareness of sin onto the child. What 'Song for Gwydion' shows is that, for Thomas, children represented the incarnation of an ideal, a mythical ideal of pure spirit and physical beauty, of life before the Fall. So it is fitting that, when Gwydion was asked what it was like to grow up in the heart of Montgomeryshire during the 1950s, he said that it was akin to the Garden of Eden.⁸

Thomas himself thought in such terms. At the end of 'The Mountains', a strange topographical narrative set amid the wild landscape of Snowdonia, he writes that 'to live near mountains is to be in touch with Eden, with lost childhood'.⁹ It is a sentiment that he subsequently reinforced, declaring that man 'in thought, in reality, [is] seeking for something unnameable, a lost Eden, a lost childhood; for fulfilment, for escape, for refuge, for conquest of themselves, for peace, for adventure'.¹⁰ These searching statements express a longing that had bubbled away beneath the surface of Thomas's writing from the moment he first put pen to paper, founded on memories of his earliest years. When, in May 1967, he left his post at Eglwys-fach near Aberystwyth and moved into the vicarage at Aberdaron, on the windswept tip of the Llŷn peninsula, it represented a form of homecoming. Writing in his autobiography, *Neb*, he recalls how, 'standing on the summit of *Mynydd Mawr* on a fine day, he could see Holyhead in the north and imagine himself as a child forty years before, playing on the beach there'.¹¹ These memories of his Anglesey childhood remained strong. Interviewed in a programme for BBC2 in 1995 following his nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature, by which time he was in his eighties and back living on the island, he said:

I first came to live here just after the First World War, just [after] my sixth birthday. I'd been, I suppose, a delicate child ... I wasn't sent to school for the first year or two. I was able to roam, discover the delights of fishing in pools and bathing ... things like that.

Effectively, Thomas didn't attend school until the age of 7 or even 8. During this time his education was overseen by his mother, while his father worked on the ferries that shuttled back and forth between Dublin and Holyhead.¹² Despite what Thomas took to be her 'nervous and anxious nature',¹³ she seems to have granted him a remarkable degree of freedom, enabling him to explore every nook and cranny of the island once he had stepped outside the family home, sometimes even at night. As Thomas grew older, these stolen hours of indolence and adventure came to represent his own personal 'golden age', and they were integral to the formation of his character, setting the tone for both his lifelong love of the open air and his antipathy towards school. He was, in other words, a natural truant. His first book, *The Stones of the Field*, bears the mark, since it sees him praise the hill farmers of mid-

of meaning.

The vertiginous image of the abyss cuts two ways: it is suggestive of the void of sheer meaninglessness, yet it also carries the implication that, as you grow older, there is simply too much to comprehend when looking into the past, confronted by the abyss of yourself. Either way, the narrator confesses that, no matter what he does,

there is that crying
within of the young child
who has fallen and will not
pick itself up and is
unconsoled, knowing there
is nobody for it to run to.

The chilling coda recognises that the voice of the child can be neither silenced nor ignored: the narrator knows that, whatever his outward circumstances may be, internally he will remain inconsolable. That the child is identified as a boy raises the possibility of reading ‘The Orphan’ as an oblique self-portrait, especially as it was probably written not long after the death of Thomas’s mother, so the poet was now an orphan himself.¹⁹ However, the presence of collective pronouns suggests that the fate of the child is actually indicative of a shared condition, akin to that which Terry Eagleton once identified in the novels of Dickens and the Brontës, where solitude is ‘ironically, the situation of all men and women in a brutally individualist society which abandons them to their own devices ... To be alive in this social order is to be an orphan’.²⁰ ‘The Orphan’ communicates the anguish of an idealist trapped in an imperfect world, a vein of feeling which was one of the primary sources of Thomas’s art, and a fertile ground for his poetry.

The Fall narrative also moulded Thomas’s view of history, at the heart of which was his sense of the Industrial Revolution as a ‘disaster’ from which Wales was still struggling to recover.²¹ Towards the end of his autobiography, Thomas admits that, no matter how hard he might try to see evidence of progress, ‘The tendency was always in him to look back and to see the past as superior’²² – superior aesthetically, since the landscape of Britain had not yet been transformed by industry, but equally because, in Thomas’s eyes, people lived lives that were steeped in tradition and less in thrall to materialism, sentiments which also form part of his Romantic inheritance. Roderick McGillis points out that

In *Some Versions of Pastoral* William Empson noted that the child took on the values of a disappearing pastoral in the late eighteenth century and after. Like an untouched landscape, the child is that which represents the adult’s lost state of joy. ... This longing is nostalgia. As often as not, the child elicits nostalgia that keeps us turned to the past, longing for a return to that which will never come back. Wordsworth and Blake, however, provide a forward-looking nostalgia, a nostalgia that looks to fashion a stronger present and hence a strong future. The nostalgia apparent in Blake’s *Songs* or in Wordsworth’s poems that deal with childhood communicates an ironic child, and in doing so this nostalgia argues for a longing that is richly aware of the constructed nature of memory, of the falsifications of an easy and sentimental gaze on the past.²³

Abercuawg, Thomas's vision of a Wales wiped clean of the blots of industry, is less a call to return to the past than a vision of a potential future. The connection between Thomas's view of Wales and his representation of children is central to his work. In 'A Line from St David's' (*CP*, p. 123) the narrator's epistle – wryly characterised as 'Something for neo-Edwardians / Of a test-tube age to grow glum about' – begins by eulogising the beauty of the Welsh countryside:

As I came here by way of Plwmp,
 There were hawkweeds in the hedges;
 Nature had invested all her gold
 In the industry of the soil.
 There were larks, too, like a fresh chorus
 Of dew, and I thought, remembering Dewi
 The water-drinker, the way back
 Is not so far as the way forward.

The journey to St David's is a form of pilgrimage, taking the speaker deep into the historic and spiritual heart of Wales. The narrator is most struck, as he moves through the landscape, by the way in which the capacity of the natural world to renew itself reflects the mutability of the human spirit as embodied in the monastic life of Wales's patron saint. It is only in the coda, though, that Thomas is able to identify what he has really been trying to communicate:

what I wanted to say
 Was that the day has a blue lining
 Partly of sky, partly of sea;
 That the old currents are in the grass,
 Though rust has becalmed the plough.
 Somewhere a man sharpens a scythe;
 A child watches him from the brink
 Of his own speech, and this is of more
 Importance than all the visitors keeping
 A spry saint asleep in his tomb.

In marked contrast to the tourists gathered at the cathedral, the boy who is brought into view in the closing lines inherits a spiritual energy from the landscape, connecting him with St David, who is cast, not as some relic from the past, but as a vital living presence. The child stands as a symbol of individuality and – paradoxically – community, in a climax which sees questions of nationality rendered irrelevant: the boy is on the verge of making his own music and articulating what only he can, like a poet.

If childhood is often portrayed tenderly as a paradise lost in Thomas, then it is also true that so much of the anger that drove his poetry stemmed from the knowledge of that loss, of potential that would go to waste. 'Were you ever young, Prytherch[?]' asks Thomas in his 'Lament for Prytherch', sensing that the farmer's heart has become 'dry as a dead leaf' (*CP*, p. 58). Life as it was lived among the uplands of mid-Wales during the 1940s confronted Thomas with social realities that shocked him to the core, forcing him to re-evaluate the Romantic ideals he had brought to Manafon:²⁴ he once described his first parish as 'a sociologist's nightmare'.²⁵ Obviously, the idea of childhood as a state of grace is directly

opposed to the sociological view of childhood as something constructed, with the child's personality and fate determined by the nature of the environment within which he or she has been raised.²⁶

There are a number of early poems in which Thomas adopts what might be called a sociological perspective on the fate of children growing up within the same dilapidated rural culture that he writes about at greater length in his essay 'The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country'.²⁷ The long narrative poem 'The Airy Tomb', for instance, starts off by entertaining Wordsworthian notions of unity between children and the natural world. The protagonist Twm or 'Tomos' finds 'a new peace / Tracing the poems, which the rooks wrote in the sky' (*CP*, p. 18), in a manner redolent of the 'Feelings and emanations' which flow from Michael's son Luke when he accompanies his father into the hills, in Wordsworth's great poem of rural parenthood ('Michael', l. 201).²⁸ Luke is ruined by leaving Grasmere for the city, but the remainder of 'The Airy Tomb' solemnly charts the way in which Twm's imagination is eroded and ultimately extinguished by staying put and facing the demands of running the family smallholding. As an adult, Twm's fate is to work the land alone until, whether through pure exhaustion or in an act of self-annihilation, he is consumed by the elements, his festering corpse found 'entombed in the lucid weather' (*CP*, p. 20). Such a poem acts as a counterpoint to those works in which Thomas casts childhood as heavenly, reminding the reader of the threats and trials to which innocence is eventually subject. In 'Country Child', for example, rather than arriving in the world 'trailing clouds of glory', a baby is 'Dropped without joy from the gaunt womb' (*CP*, p. 5). Doomed to repeat the same narrow cycle of life as his parents, 'the days will drift into months and the months to years, / Moulding his mouth to silence, his hand to the plough'. The same pattern of defeat forms Thomas's subject in 'Walter Llywarch', written after the poet had left the hill country of Montgomeryshire for Eglwys-fach. This time Thomas assumes the voice of the luckless protagonist:

Walter Llywarch – the words were a name
 On a lost letter that never came
 For one who waited in the long queue
 Of life that wound through a Welsh valley.
 I took instead, as others had done
 Before, a wife from the back pews
 In chapel, rather to share the rain
 Of winter evenings, than to intrude
 On her pale body; and yet we lay
 For warmth together and laughed to hear
 Each new child's cry of despair.

(*CP*, pp. 98-9)

Those final lines deliver a sting which the reader, accustomed to Llywarch's weary air of resignation, has not been primed to expect: the grim conclusion shows signs of a Hardy-esque determinism typical of the poetry written at Eglwys-fach.²⁹ For Thomas, the child is an instinctively spiritual being: in 'The Unborn Daughter' he suggests that, even amidst the darkness of the womb, 'The subtle fabric of her being, / Hair hands and eyes, the body's texture', is 'Shot with the glory of the soul' (*CP*, p. 35). But in 'Walter Llywarch' there is no

discernible outlet for the soul. An instructive parallel can be drawn with Blake's 'Infant Sorrow' in this regard, where a baby is constrained almost from the moment of birth:

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

(*'Infant Sorrow'*, ll. 5-8)³⁰

Here the instinctive warmth of the child is under threat from the emotional temperature of the home into which it is born. As M. Wynn Thomas says, far from being free, the infant is 'precociously aware of being an actor in a tense, emotionally violent family drama: it has to learn early to assume the wiles of disguise, and thus its impulses are, as it were, corrupted at source'.³¹

At no stage does R. S. Thomas suggest that such a fate is inevitable though, and in 'The Evacuee' (*CP*, p. 26) he shows how a change in environment can release children from the psychological confines of home. The protagonist is a young girl, part of the large-scale evacuation of children from Britain's cities during the Second World War. At first, she finds the sights and sounds of the countryside utterly alien: 'wearily she lay, / Waiting for the syren, slow to trust / Nature's deceptive peace'. Yet she is slowly liberated from this state of inertia by the warmth of the family with whom she stays – the sound of their voices is compared to 'a rough sheet / Waiting to catch her' – and the poem charts her steady recovery from having had to live in the shadow of war:

so she grew, a shy bird in the nest
Of welcome that was built about her,
Home now after so long away
In the flowerless streets of the drab town.
The men watched her busy with the hens,
The soft flesh ripening warm as corn
On the sticks of limbs, the grey eyes clear,
Rinsed with dew of their long dread.
The men watched her, and, nodding, smiled
With earth's charity, patient and strong.

Geographically, this girl is far from home, but she is now at one with her environment in a more meaningful sense than she has ever been before, brought back into contact with the life force that brought her into being in the first place. Her regeneration is expressed through images of growth and cleansing drawn from the landscape she now inhabits: she has become a 'farm child', akin to the boy Thomas depicts in the poem of that name, whose 'head is stuffed / With all the nests he knows, his pockets with flowers, / Snail-shells and bits of glass, the fruit of hours / Spent in the fields by thorn and thistle tuft' (*CP*, p. 41). The paternal gaze of the men who work on the farm alludes to 'Michael'; Michael's love for Luke was such that:

Old Michael, while he was a babe in arms,
Had done him female service, not alone

For pastime and delight, as is the use
 Of fathers, but with patient mind enforced
 To acts of tenderness; and he had rocked
 His cradle, as with a woman's gentle hand.

(‘Michael’, ll. 153-8)

The shepherd takes on the female role of nurturer in relation to his son, and his feelings for Grasmere grow deeper through their association with the boy.

‘The Evacuee’ has its genesis in the fact that, at Manafon, Thomas and his wife, Elsi, accommodated female evacuees seeking shelter from London and Liverpool during the Blitz.³² It endorses Pat Pinsent’s claim that:

Among the many side-effects of World War II were changes in the representation of childhood in British literature. ... As more information came out of continental Europe about the horrors of the concentration camps, and relief agencies sought to alleviate the hardship resulting from the devastation of so many cities, there was a universal resolve that carnage like this, which had claimed so many innocent victims, especially young children, must never happen again. ... there needed to be a new spirit. Where else could this be engendered but in the child?³³

That children might stand as beacons of hope is pivotal to *The Dance of Life*, the remarkable mural that Elsi was commissioned to paint at the start of the 1950s by the trustees of Gobowen orthopaedic hospital in nearby Oswestry. The mural comprises six panels and took years to complete, eventually finished in 1955, not long after Thomas and Elsi moved from Manafon to Eglwys-fach.³⁴ It takes the form of a post-war pastoral, reflecting western society’s growing alienation from the natural world, and, as Byron Rogers suggests, its major themes reflect those of Thomas’s poetry:

The first [panel] celebrates innocence and the lost natural traditions of mankind, with young women at harvest singing to the bees. The mural then moves on to the experience of lurking mortality, to loss of innocence and the destruction wrought by society and science as mankind and machines show what they have made of this world, and, finally, to the need to repair this destruction.³⁵

Elsi shared her husband’s belief in the sanctity of childhood. A note written to accompany the sixth and final panel – a coastal scene showing children immersed in play while isolated adults languish in metal cages – reads simply: ‘Children play in a world of their own, oblivious of man and his machines, treating the animals as friends’.³⁶ She is echoing the opening line of ‘Children’s Song’ (*CP*, p. 56) – a poem written at the same time that Elsi was working on the mural. ‘We live in our own world’, writes Thomas,

A world that is too small
 For you to stoop and enter
 Even on hands and knees,
 The adult subterfuge.

Ostensibly the voice is that of a child. Yet the vocabulary and wistful tone are patently those of an adult, someone painfully aware of the distance separating him from the children's world. There is a dual perspective, an oscillation between innocence and experience, as Thomas, in a typically provocative gesture, proceeds to align the reader with those unfortunate enough to have lost touch with the magic of childhood:

And though you probe and pry
 With analytic eye,
 And eavesdrop all our talk
 With an amused look,
 You cannot find the centre
 Where we dance, where we play,
 Where life is still asleep
 Under the closed flower,
 Under the smooth shell
 Of eggs in the cupped nest
 That mock the faded blue
 Of your remoter heaven.

Here the introduction of scientific terms such as 'probe' and 'analytic' brings a sense of unwanted encroachment, strengthening the impression that the poem is written by someone who identifies less with his adult counterparts than with the children, whose innocence is manifest in flowers that have yet to bloom and fragile eggs yet to hatch. The twin presences of Eliot and Yeats can be felt in these lines, with children seen to live 'At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless' ('Burnt Norton', II. 16),³⁷ and to stand as the 'self-born mockers of man's enterprise',³⁸ just as they do within the symbolism of Elsi's mural. Thomas would return to the central motif of his wife's masterpiece when writing 'The Dance', published in *Pietà* (1966). The poem takes the form of an internal dialogue inspired by a chance encounter with a member of the opposite sex:

She is young. Have I the right
 Even to name her? Child,
 It is not love I offer
 Your quick limbs, your eyes;
 Only the barren homage
 Of an old man whom time
 Crucifies.

(CP, p. 176)

The question that bridges the opening lines is provoked by the self-consciousness of the narrator in the girl's presence, and shows him to be aware of the dangers of imposition that are inherent in relations between children and adults. Following Blake, Thomas suggests that to name something can be – consciously or otherwise – an attempt to assert control over that thing, symptomatic of a culture founded on the imperative to 'grow up' and assume one's allotted place in society.

The opening lines of Blake's 'Infant Joy', written from the child's perspective, are 'I have no name. / I am but two days old', and Thomas echoes those sentiments in the exquisite 'Madam', where the female child appears without taint:

And if you ask her
She has no name;
But her eyes say,
Water is cold.

She is three years old
And willing to kiss;
But her lips say,
Apples are sour.

(CP, p. 240)

As in Blake's poem, the absence of a name is a mark of divinity. Yet just as striking is the way in which the purity of the optical image somehow manages to convey the innocence of the child (since there is no fire in those eyes) while at the same time registering the pull of innocence from the perspective of someone who is *not* innocent. Such marked ambiguity is in keeping with the way the closing allusion to the Eden myth reflects back onto the poem's title, so that it simultaneously evokes both the playful term 'little Madam' and the theological resonance of *Madam*; anticipating the fall from innocence that the child will eventually experience. For Thomas, though, the girl's beauty is enhanced by the fact that she does not yet carry the burden of carnal knowledge, raising a further point of connection with 'The Dance', where the speaker's outstretched hand speaks of a desire to transcend his own sexualised, time-bound existence:

Take my hand
A moment in the dance,
Ignoring its sly pressure,
The dry rut of age,
And lead me under the boughs
Of innocence.

(CP, p. 176)

Even as the narrator acknowledges the presence of physical attraction, his tone conveys regret that it is there: in his eyes, the girl is at peace in a way that he can never be.

In the coda to one of his later poems – 'Wrong?' – Thomas describes coming into contact with the divine as akin to entering 'a state ... of innocence and delight'.³⁹ And what poems like 'Madam' and 'The Dance' show is that, while he often portrayed childhood as an Eden-like state from which adults have been permanently exiled, there is an equally persistent metaphysical current running through his work that has its roots in the idea of the child as a kind of medium: a 'lantern' capable of illuminating the divine and reconnecting adults with childhood. Here Thomas is tapping once more into a rich cultural seam that stems from the Romantic veneration of the child, but a belief in the precociousness of children endured well beyond the nineteenth century. Notably, 'The Dance' is based around a conceit – the dance of

life – that implicates not just the scenes of innocence and community depicted in Elsi’s mural, but also two magisterial poems by Yeats: ‘To a Child Dancing in the Wind’ and, especially, ‘Among School Children’.⁴⁰ The latter was inspired by a visit Yeats paid to a school as a member of the Irish Senate:

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
 The children learn to cipher and to sing,
 To study reading-books and histories,
 To cut and sew, be neat in everything
 In the best modern way – the children’s eyes
 In momentary wonder stare upon
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

As he walks through the school Yeats is reawakened to the profundity of Blake’s insight that the body is a medium of spirit,⁴¹ a thought which leads to the coda, where Yeats summons those

Presences

That passion, piety or affection knows,
 And that all heavenly glory symbolise –
 O self-born mockers of man’s enterprise;

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Here the dance symbolises the way in which the different spheres of life are bound together, enabling Yeats to apprehend them simultaneously. And he makes it plain that this moment of insight would not be possible were he not ‘among school children’, since their presence fuels those realms of feeling that he associates with visionary power.

Like Yeats, Thomas’s interest in childhood experience extended to literary forms closely associated with it. When he moved to the hill country of Montgomeryshire in 1942, Thomas was, by his own admission, a relative innocent ‘full of romantic ideas about the moorlands to the west and the Welsh speakers who lived there’.⁴² That youthful sense of the Welsh hills as the gateway to ‘a land of romance and danger’⁴³ had been shaped by the art of the Celtic Twilight – the early work of Yeats and the novels of Fiona Macleod – as well as Wordsworth’s transformation of the pastoral mode.⁴⁴ But long before Thomas encountered any of those writers, his imagination had already been furnished by the Gothic atmosphere of the fairy-tales he had loved as a boy. In *Neb*, he recalls:

His mother would read to him in bed. Princes and princesses became part of his

imagination, along with dragons and giants. How a giant can snore! He would wake in the middle of the night to the sound of a giant snoring until the house was full of it. And it was in this way that the nightmares started. One night when he was older, a gorilla came to his bedroom. As it came through the door the boy jumped out of bed, screaming. His parents found him on the floor.⁴⁵

Memories of the fairy tales that provoked these night-time terrors resurface in the poetry Thomas wrote as an adult. Scattered amongst the extensive body of work that he produced at Manafon are poems in which the hills of mid-Wales resemble ‘a fairy-tale land where “wild woods” beckon and mysterious shaggy creatures roam’. In ‘The Last of Peasantry’, for example, the narrator surveys a lone figure in the valley below and asks:

What does he know? moving through the fields
And the wood’s echoing cloisters
With a beast’s gait ...

(CP, p. 66)

This macabre creature – half-human, half-animal – would not be out of place in a Gothic novel, and the same is true of the figure who emerges from ‘The shadow of the mountain’ in ‘Out of the Hills’, whose ‘scaly eye / Sloughs its cold care and glitters’ (CP, p. 1). These protagonists are in keeping with the eerie atmosphere of some of these early poems. In ‘Country Child’ the protagonist’s fate is sealed by his inheritance of ‘The crumbling house, and the whisperers on the stairs’ (CP, p. 5), while in ‘Depopulation of the Hills’ an isolated family, under siege from the elements, can sense ‘the dank hand / Of age ... busy on the walls / Scrawling in blurred characters / Messages of hate and fear’ (CP, p. 28).

In his influential book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that one of the reasons why the fairy tale remains such a popular literary form is that those stories provide a symbolic language which relates ‘to the way a child thinks and experiences the world’.⁴⁶ Narratives in which children succeed in overcoming fearsome giants, for example, can act as ‘therapeutic tools’, helping them contend with the presence of those gigantic figures who inhabit their day-to-day lives – adults. Furthermore,

Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one’s reach despite adversity – but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search, benevolent powers will come to his aid, and he will succeed.⁴⁷

Bettelheim’s theory offers a significant clue as to why the fairy tale proved to be such a resource for R. S. Thomas, since those stories provided him with a symbolic framework through which he could express his battle to come to terms with the loss of innocence that accompanied his tenure at Manafon. This is evident from the various allusions Thomas makes to that classic work of English folklore *The Babes in the Wood*, a Gothic tale which sees two young orphans, a boy and a girl, abandoned within a forest. The first sign of Thomas’s

fascination with this story surfaces in a poem from his first collection, 'A Priest to his People', where the priest, infuriated by the indifference of his parishioners, lambasts them for their inability to detect 'My true heart wandering in a wood of lies' (*CP*, p. 13). That Romantic image of a figure of lonely integrity struggling to find his way through the woods recurs in 'Song at the Year's Turning', the title poem of Thomas's third book, where it is married to a shockingly visceral metaphor. Disgusted by the compromises of adulthood, the narrator reflects on his life in the third person (as Thomas would later do in his autobiography) stating bluntly:

Love deceived him; what is there to say
 The mind brought you by a better way
 To this despair? Lost in the world's wood
 You cannot stanch the bright menstrual blood.

(*CP*, p. 59)

The narrator's angst, associated with the onset of puberty, stems from the same inability to reconcile himself to the Fall that would later find such devastating expression in poems such as 'The Orphan'.

Thus, Thomas adopts that vulnerable persona of an innocent cut adrift within a threatening adult environment, occupying a metaphysical realm akin to that of the deserted children in *The Babes in the Wood* – a guise he would continue to adopt in the poetry he wrote at his next parish, Eglwys-fach, where he often looked back on his experiences at Manafon with the power of hindsight. 'On the Farm' (*CP*, p. 149) starts off as a deceptively prosaic fable concerning the unrelenting drudgery of agricultural life and the endemic failure of the male line of the Puw family. Allocated a stanza each, the three brothers are presented as grotesque figures whose lives are devoid of meaning:

There was Dai Puw. He was no good.
 They put him in the fields to dock swedes,
 And took the knife from him, when he came home
 At late evening with a grin
 Like the slash of a knife on his face.

There was Llew Puw, and he was no good.
 Every evening after the ploughing
 With the big tractor he would sit in his chair,
 And stare into the tangled fire garden,
 Opening his slow lips like a snail.

There would appear to be no end to this grim pattern of defeat. That is, until the coda, where the Gothic connotations of the hearth suddenly ignite and the reader is hit with the mythic force of one of the classic fairy tales:

And lastly there was the girl:
 Beauty under some spell of the beast.
 Her pale face was the lantern

By which they read in life's dark book
The shrill sentence: God is love.

The girl is the one glimpse of light among the otherwise total darkness of life 'on the farm'. With her wan face, she has an otherworldly presence and, in the eyes of the narrator, a beauty he is amazed to find 'shining alone in such murkiness of the spirit'.⁴⁸ The allusion to *Beauty and the Beast* is entirely apt therefore since, like de Villeneuve's fairy tale, Thomas's poem testifies to the ability of beauty to shift our sense of reality onto a different plane. In that sense, the girl is capable of restoring lost vision. At the same time, one notes how the nod to poetry's origins in chant and spell is amplified by the wonderfully macabre metaphor 'life's dark book', which brings with it connotations of black magic that render the narrator's final statement deeply ambiguous. *Beauty and the Beast* may be a story about the triumph of love, but there is little ostensible evidence to suggest that the girl is somehow capable of redeeming these seemingly futile lives. Rather, she stands as the embodiment of the mysterious message which Thomas, as a priest, was charged with communicating, even as he registers the hostility of the world to which that message is submitted.

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NOTES

¹ BBC Wales, *R. S. Thomas: The Man Who Went into the West*. Gwydion Thomas also said that his father 'could be very boyish and funny'. See Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went into the West: The Life of R. S. Thomas* (2006), p. 44.

² BBC Wales, *The Man Who Went into the West*.

³ *The Minister: Collected Poems 1945-1990* (1993), p. 54 (hereafter *CP*). All material by R. S. Thomas © Elodie Thomas.

⁴ 'Enigma', in R. S. Thomas, *An Acre of Land* (Newtown, 1952), p. 31.

⁵ See S. J. Perry, *Chameleon Poet: R. S. Thomas and the Literary Tradition* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 20-1.

⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff, 2013), p. 133.

⁷ This notion of a 'young god' is also present in a remarkable essay Thomas published in 1948, 'Dau Gapel' ('Two Chapels'). There, he describes his experience of visiting an old chapel perched high above the Wye valley and the intensity of the vision to which it gave birth: 'The world was recreated before my eyes. The dew of creation was on everything, and I fell to my knees and praised God – a young man worshipping a young God, for surely, that is what our God is'. *Selected Prose* (Bridgend, 1995), pp. 36-7.

⁸ BBC Wales, *The Man Who Went into the West*. See the exchange between Gwydion Thomas and Rogers when the former returns to his childhood home – the rectory at Manafon.

⁹ R. S. Thomas, 'The Mountains' (1968), in *Selected Prose*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies* (1998), p. 77; Thomas refers to himself in the third person

throughout.

- ¹² In *Neb*, Thomas recalls that ‘He wasn’t able to go to school because of some unidentified illness ... but he was left alone by the authorities because of his mother’s promise that she would see to his education!’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 29).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ¹⁴ Wordsworth, ‘The Two Part *Prelude*’, ll. 17-20, 26, in *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 41, 42.
- ¹⁵ See Perry, *Chameleon Poet*, p. 12.
- ¹⁶ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* (Hexham, 2004), 30. As M. Wynn Thomas has noted, the passage witnesses an inversion of the movement from darkness to light that Coleridge enacts in ‘Frost at Midnight’ (*Serial Obsessive*, p. 132).
- ¹⁷ *Collected Later Poems*, p. 31.
- ¹⁸ R. S. Thomas, *Uncollected Poems*, ed. Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies (Tarsset, 2013); quotations here are from p. 177.
- ¹⁹ ‘The Orphan’ is undated, but Tony Brown, one of the editors of the *Uncollected Poems*, has observed that it must have been published after 1971, since it appears in a magazine which makes reference to decimal currency. A letter Thomas wrote to Raymond Garlick on 15 August 1973 tells him: ‘My aged mother has just died’ (*Letters to Raymond Garlick, 1951-1999*, ed. Jason Walford Davies (Llandysul, 2009), p. 92). Margaret Thomas had herself been an orphan from an early age.
- ²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), p. 126.
- ²¹ In *Neb*, Thomas says that he ‘always saw the industrial revolution as Wales’s main disaster’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 98).
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Roderick McGillis, ‘Irony and Performance: The Romantic Child’, in Adrienne E. Gavin (ed.), *The Child in British Literature: Literary Constructions of Childhood, Medieval to Contemporary* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 101-15: 109-10.
- ²⁴ See Perry, *Chameleon Poet*, pp. 101-10.
- ²⁵ ‘R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet’, *Poetry Wales*, 7/4 (1972), 47-57: 49. This article includes a transcript of a short film on Thomas that John Ormond made for the BBC. It was broadcast in April 1972.
- ²⁶ See Gerald Handel, Spencer Cahill, and Frederick Elkin (eds.), *Children and Society: The Sociology of Children and Childhood Socialization* (New York, 2007). This sociological view of childhood tends to dominate academic debates surrounding children’s literature, as can be seen from the essays collected in Gavin (ed.), *The Child in British Literature*.
- ²⁷ ‘The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country’ (1945), in *Selected Prose*, pp. 17-23.
- ²⁸ Quotations are from Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* (1950).
- ²⁹ See Perry, *Chameleon Poet*, pp. 136-8.
- ³⁰ Quotations are from Blake, *The Complete Poems*.
- ³¹ Wynn Thomas, *Serial Obsessive*, p. 121.

- ³² In his autobiography, Thomas describes these visitors as ‘even more barbaric than the accursed enemy’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 87).
- ³³ Pat Pinsent, ‘The Post-War Child: Childhood in British Literature in the Wake of World War II’, in Gavin (ed.), *The Child in British Literature*, pp. 212-24: 212.
- ³⁴ Writing in *Neb*, Thomas recalled that, when they moved to Eglwys-fach in October 1954, ‘His poor wife was in the middle of making a mural for the hospital in Gobowen’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 62).
- ³⁵ Rogers, *The Man Who Went into the West*, p. 142.
- ³⁶ The note is reproduced at the beginning of *The Man Who Went into the West*.
- ³⁷ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (1969), p. 173.
- ³⁸ W. B. Yeats, ‘Among School Children’; quotations are from *Collected Poems*, 2nd edn. (1950).
- ³⁹ R. S. Thomas, *Selected Poems* (2003), p. 287.
- ⁴⁰ Speaking in a late interview, Thomas said that ‘All forms of formal dancing appeal to me, ballet and genuine folk dancing. It is the attraction of another mode of expression than speech, the patterns in folk dancing, the gestures in ballet with the underlying reference to the dance of life against the void’s backdrop’. Quoted in ‘Probings: An Interview with R.S. Thomas’, in William V. Davis (ed.), *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1993), p. 46.
- ⁴¹ ‘Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age’ (Blake, *Complete Poems*, p. 181).
- ⁴² Quoted in Davis (ed.), *Miraculous Simplicity*, p. 32.
- ⁴³ ‘Y Llwybrau Gynt 2’ (‘The Paths Gone By’) (1972), in *Selected Prose*, pp. 100-13: 106.
- ⁴⁴ Perry, *Chameleon Poet*, p. 85.
- ⁴⁵ *Autobiographies*, p. 28.
- ⁴⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 45.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁴⁸ Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, p. 24.