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R. S. THOMAS, SIÔN CENT, AND 'THE BUGGERATION OF IT'¹

M. Wynn Thomas

Abstract

In a 1996 radio broadcast for the popular Radio Cymru series *Beti a'i Phobol*, R. S. Thomas declared his great admiration for a late-medieval *cywydd* by Siôn Cent, a lacerating attack on the vanity of all things human. By bringing the little that is known about Siôn Cent to bear on his great poem, this article makes it clear why Siôn Cent meant so much to Thomas, and suggests why Thomas came to recognize in Siôn Cent an alter ego. It concludes by suggesting that, for Thomas, Siôn Cent was a forerunner of the 'warrior poets' of Wales, to whose company Thomas himself aspired to belong.

Keywords: R. S Thomas, Siôn Cent, Wales

In 1996, R. S. Thomas, newly nominated by the Academi Gymreig/Welsh Academi for a Nobel Prize in Literature, was the guest on the popular Radio Cymru series *Beti a'i Phobol*.² The established format was for guests to choose four of their favourite records to punctuate their conversation with the presenter. Normally an hour-long slot, in Thomas's case it was extended to two, which allowed him to choose eight records in total. Well apprised of her guest's formidable reputation as a difficult interviewee, Beti George, a skilled and experienced professional broadcaster, duly deployed a number of strategies to put him at his ease, and she succeeded in charming and disarming him sufficiently for the programmes to proceed in a relaxed manner. Thomas even teased her at one point by professing a weakness for girls speaking in the accent of her own native region of rural west Wales. Listening to the programmes now, what strikes one most however are the disconcertingly long silences as Thomas slowly and carefully ponders his replies. He is not to be rushed.

As for the interviews themselves, it turned out that he had little new he was prepared to disclose. He was first questioned about his early life, his relations with his parents (his mother predictably cast as the figure whose smothering attentions had deformed his personality; his father portrayed as an absent, aloof figure – unavoidably so, given his responsibilities as a captain on the Holyhead-Dublin route – who had failed to provide him with a counterbalancing model of strong masculinity) and his choice of vocation. Here again, it was his mother, cared for as an orphan by a clerical relative, who was cited as the dominant influence. Admitting his dislike of his baptismal name of Ronald – far too English for his liking – Thomas pointed once more in his mother’s direction when explaining that the later decision to add ‘Stuart’ had partly reflected her wish to remember a relative of that name.

Thomas rehearsed the familiar story of his experiences as rector, first at Manafon (where he had found his parishioners primitive but not unattractive), then at Eglwys-fach (which he had come to loathe partly because of the feuds between factions but mostly because of the retired military and colonial types he could not stand). Only at Aberdaron, he explained, had he at last felt relatively at home. He had, he confessed, always found it very difficult to unbend with people, and continued to feel that the lack of palpable affection between his parents and the resultant coldness of the domestic hearth had left him permanently unable to commit to a fully loving relationship. When it came to matters of religious faith, he reaffirmed his certainty of the existence of God while emphasising his complete uncertainty as to His nature.

His political opinions were as predictably entrenched and bigoted as ever, and the cunning disingenuousness (or curious self-deception) that permeated several of his responses was never more apparent than when he insisted that he did not at all hate the English, even as he railed repeatedly against their aggressive arrogance and proprietorial airs. He even lacked the grace to admit his discomfiture when invited by Beti George to come up with a single positive feature he saw in the English character: he failed to think of any. Only after considerable hesitation did he grudgingly acknowledge that they were probably a fair-minded people. That same wilful disingenuousness was again strikingly evident when asked whether his son, Gwydion, was able to speak Welsh. No, Thomas shamelessly replied, because he had never had occasion or opportunity to do so – as if he himself had had nothing whatsoever to do with this unfortunate lack. Asked about the care he had shown

for his first wife during her long, lingering final illness, he callously explained that she had remained sufficiently self-reliant to the end for him to be able to continue his daily perambulations. Emphasising that, unlike Yeats, he most certainly was not prepared to live this life again, Thomas added that, despite such happiness as had occasionally come his way, it seemed to him in retrospect that his existence had amounted to very little. Brusquely dismissing any suggestion that he had accomplished anything of any worth during his long lifetime, he confessed to looking forward to the annihilation of selfhood that was to come, and gruffly dismissed any belief in a Day of Judgement.

As Beti George herself pointed out, contrasting with his portrait of himself as somewhat cold and unfeeling was his choice of records. It clearly favoured the Romantic and emotionally-charged, while demonstrating both his genuine passion for music and the acuteness and subtlety of his ear. Of the six pieces he chose, two were by Schubert (the lieder 'Der Leiermann', and the Quartet in C Major, D956), one was an Irish Gaelic folk air, another was Saint Saëns's 'Capriccioso Rondo', and two more were on religious themes (the Credo of the Russian Orthodox Church sung by the Russian Metropolitan Church Choir and Verdi's 'Day of Judgement'). But the most intriguing of his choices, and the one that concerns us here, was an extract from Siôn Cent's *cywydd* 'I Wagedd ac Oferedd y Byd,' sung by the noted Welsh penillion singer Aled Lloyd Davies. So, who exactly was Siôn Cent, why did Thomas choose his *cywydd*, and what bearing does that have on his poetry?³

Even to scholars of his period, Siôn Cent remains a rather elusive, mysterious, and intriguing figure. His *floruit*, the scholar Gilbert Ruddock has noted in an important essay, 'is usually given as 1400–30. There is, however, more than a little doubt who exactly the poet was, or even whether such a man ever existed.'⁴ The paucity of facts in the case has, of course, facilitated the multiplication of what might be termed semi-fictional biographies. These have been both convergent and divergent in their conclusions, and have been constructed primarily on the basis of 'evidence' internal to the poetry itself. One of the fullest, most confident, and characteristically authoritative of these is that published by Saunders Lewis in 1979, towards the very end of his long life, and this may well have influenced R. S. Thomas's view of his medieval 'predecessor.'⁵ Particular attention will accordingly be paid to it later. First, though, it will be useful to survey the scholarly consensus that has cautiously formed on the subject over the last few years.

The many suggestive parallels with Thomas's own case should quickly become apparent.

* * *

There is general agreement that Siôn Cent was born at the end of the fourteenth century and active during the first half of the fifteenth, a period described by Ruddock as 'probably the most troubled and violent of the whole of the Middle Ages' (*GWL*, 153).⁶ The Black Death had been followed by the beginning of the Hundred Years War, while Glyndŵr's rebellion, straddling as it did both centuries, had created social chaos and devastation at home. It is a background ominously well suited to the work of a poet who has become known primarily for the savagely dark vision of the world he cuttingly recorded in one of the greatest poems in what was at that time the relatively new form of the *cywydd*. Whatever the truth about his early years – and a period of youthful abandon and debauchery has been imagined on slight but enticing evidence⁷ – in his prime Siôn Cent unmistakably matured into the incomparable Savonarola of Wales; a fierce satirist of all the sins of lust and greed and vanity to which feeble human flesh is, according to the grim doctrine of Original Sin, inescapably heir.⁸ So fearsomely powerful are his diatribes on the subject that most scholars incline to the view that he had undergone a religious conversion and may even have enrolled as a lay brother in one of the two Orders of the Preaching Friars (*Ordinis Praedicatorum*) – the Franciscans (Greyfriars) and Dominicans (Black Friars) – who wandered the countryside urging the population at large to repent and reform. Receiving no stipend, they were totally dependent on alms for support. As Ruddock has interestingly pointed out, it is unlikely that ordinary parishioners would at this time ever have heard a Welsh sermon preached from a Welsh pulpit. In supplying such sermons in a poetry that could have only been shared orally by a tiny privileged circle, Siôn Cent was therefore not only eviscerating elite members of his society's ruling class, used only to being obsequiously praised by their sycophantic and indebted poets, but also eyeing the great mass of the unwashed and illiterate, open to being reached by the declaimed word, just as, incapable of actually reading Scripture, they were all agog for the simple illustrations that liberally adorned the walls of the churches in that period. Moreover, he was unsparing in his attacks on the clerisy of his day. No lover of the official

machinery of the church, and contemptuous of its priesthood, he was anticlerical to the marrow and a puritan *avant la lettre*. As a devoutly committed believer, he was a natural dissenter, and a signed-up member of the awkward squad.

Siôn Cent was, then, a maverick poet, an outcast from the reverend and revered brotherhood of bards, a loner and an outsider. As a poet who had ‘gone ape’, he had, as we shall see, in effect declared war on his fellow poets and their closed shop, as well as on their indulged patrons, who included not only the *uchelwyr*, or minor land-owners of the period, but also the Cistercians. Scorning to produce poems in the staple, profitable, genres of the day – love poems, panegyrics to patrons, effusive celebrations of largesse and hospitality, and other such secular trifles – he confined himself almost exclusively to religious poetry; and when he did condescend to exchange words with his poetic contemporaries, the encounter was more akin to a verbal brawl than to any elaborate, choreographed exchange of courtesies. Whereas others had merely playfully and ritually jostled, thereby simply reinforcing professional male camaraderie and reaffirming monopoly, Siôn Cent went straight for the jugular. No wonder the combative and abrasive R. S. Thomas warmed to such an arresting figure and came to see him as a kind of medieval avatar of himself.

The most celebrated of Siôn Cent’s outspoken exchanges was the one with Rhys Goch Eryri (*CIG*, 181–6). It concerns the unease that was already abroad amongst the bards about the nature and status of their tradition of praise. This is evident from the striking opening lines of a *cywydd* by Gruffydd Llwyd, a learned poet and a slightly older contemporary of Siôn Cent: ‘O Dduw, ai pechod i ddyn / Er mawl gymryd aur melyn’ (‘Oh God, is a man sinful / To take gold in return for praise?’).⁹ His discomfiture is, however, brief, as he sets about his defence, first drawing a distinction between his own distinguished and learned practice and that of the fly-by-night poets, the versifying cowboys of the day, and then claiming that his Muse is a divine gift: ‘The hand of God, from true grace, / Gives the muse to his servant: / Wise for a bard, fluent praise, / To compose song that’s fitting’ (*MWP*, 262). From there on, the *cywydd* takes flight, developing into a full-throated hymn of praise to his two patrons, Hywel and Meurig of Nannau, near Dolgellau (*CIG*, 119), both paragons of hospitality according to the poet’s account. It has therefore become evident that those opening lines were no more than an artful rhetorical strategy (to begin by modestly belittling one’s

own gifts was one of the oldest tricks in a poet's handbook) intended merely to provide a strong foundation for the elaborate artifice of praise that duly followed.

Siôn Cent clearly has this kind of graceful, evasive and self-serving ploy in his sights from the very beginning of his uncompromising attack on Rhys Goch Eryri, which is, by contrast, in deadly earnest. 'A false, bad, bold criterion, / A fool's path Welshmen go on, / Why that old man's lovely word / And shaping of a chiefbard?'¹⁰ He distinguishes sharply between two 'kinds of inspiration': 'One to the true way will bring / You, is of Christ's inspiring,' he asserts, but while 'full of grace' it is reserved for 'prophets, masters of praise' – who no doubt would include the authors of the Psalms (WV, 195). 'The other,' he caustically adds, 'inspires an outcry, / Many trusting its foul lie.' It is a 'Muse of impudent wits, / The false pomp of Welsh poets.' Then, having concluded his challenging opening salvo, he begins his sarcastic portraiture of the devices and conventions of the praise tradition.

When seeking to gull a patron proud of his military record, the poet's offering will be

A poem of lies on hire,
Saying there's brave wine and bragget
Where thin whey is all you'll get; (WV, 195)

The praise-singer follows this up with an outrageous fantasy about the enemies defeated and castles taken, proving himself to be nothing but a practised conman who understands that

The fool loves being flattered,
Trusts it as a sacred word.
O my God, who has less wits –
Him, or his best of poets.

Siôn Cent next subjects love-poetry to the same reductive treatment, scoffing at the hyperboles routinely employed by praise poets before savagely concluding that 'it's futile, mere burlesquing / That this muse-praise is a king.' In truth, he adds, the preening bard is nothing but

A cur, belly and claw,
Wrinkled with scab and tatter,

Nothing alive howls to loudly,
Never a dog worse than he!

(*WV*, 196)

Having thus disposed of the praise-tradition and its practitioners to his own satisfaction, he concludes by dismissing such ‘fictions falsely sung from guile’, who set out ‘to insult folk with falsehoods’. Casually displaying the ugly anti-Semitism rife in his period, he brands such poets as no better than ‘Jews’, before concluding by inviting any who would defend them to stand up and be counted.

While scholars have been at pains to point out that in content such a sustained attack on the bards was by no means unknown at the time, they have also been as one in remarking on the deadly venom that Siôn Cent uniquely injects into his poetry, a quality made all the more evident by the limp flippancy of Rhys Goch Eryri’s jocular reply (*CIG*, 184–6). What is evident is that, as moralist as much as poet, Siôn Cent was not a figure to be made light of, or to be trifled with in any way. There is about him an icy integrity, a core strength manifest in everything he writes. He is famous for one epigrammatic line that R. S. Thomas was much given to recalling: ‘Ystad bardd astudio byd’ (*CIG*, 284): the responsibility of the poet is to study the world – the world as it actually is, that is, and not the world as it might be, or should be. And in his opinion, it was a crazy, violent world: ‘Astrus erioed, mewn ystryw / Ystyr y byd, ynyfyd yw, / Llawn dialedd, llawn dolur, / Llawn lliid, llawn gofid o gur’ (*CIG*, 284). He was the uncompromising empiricist to the bards’ vatic Platonism. He is the ultimate Welsh poet of the reality principle, just like Thomas himself of course. As the great poet Guto’r Glyn was to recall after his death, ‘Cywydd heb gelwydd a gân’, he sang only a *cywydd* free of lies, a line that could be equally applied to the uncompromising and unflinching poetry that R. S. Thomas wrote on the pitiful state of his nation.

And, again like Thomas, it seems that Siôn Cent is a figure to be associated with the Welsh border-country of the Marches (*GWL*, 150), a locality beautifully suggestive, in both their cases, of their own off-centre poetic stance. One suggestion is that he came from the East-Breconshire-western-Herefordshire region, at a time when the latter was still part of Wales and Welsh the native language.¹¹ It seems, too, that his poetry shows signs – in its rhetorical conventions for instance – of the easy cultural intercourse there was between Welsh and English poetry during that fluid period when the elite in Wales were inclined

to multilingualism and multiculturalism. Equally, there can be little doubt that Siôn Cent was a ‘European poet’, as Ruddock has styled it (*GWL*, 154), his poetry betraying a likely awareness, for instance, of the Goliards of the Continent, the young, disaffected clerics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who had turned to satiric performance to highlight the shortcomings of their late Medieval church.

* * *

But what, then, of that great poem singled out by R. S. Thomas for mention and quotation in his conversation with Beti George? Generally acknowledged to be Siôn Cent’s masterpiece, and a supreme example of the remarkable power that could be generated exclusively by strict-metre poetry, the poem fully lives up to the title it was probably given by a later scribe: ‘I Wagedd ac Oferedd y Byd’ (To the Nothingness and Vanity of the World). In kind, therefore, it is an unsurpassable Welsh prototype of Johnson’s eighteenth-century English classic, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’. In other words, from one point of view it is, as scholars have tirelessly demonstrated, an exercise in a very well established Christian convention, replete with tropes and *topoi* and formulae galore, such as the *ubi sunt* refrain, the *danse macabre* motif, the *memento mori* admonishments, and many more such devices. And in genre it dates back to such great books of the Old Testament as Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Job – and here, again, there is a link with R. S. Thomas, who took the title of his first published book from that Book and repeatedly pointed to it as a favourite of his. But in Siôn Cent’s hands, all these established sources are transformed into a singular utterance that is urgently personal and that seems to have originated from a deep confessional impulse.

English translations tend to make heavy weather of it all, reducing the sublimity of the Welsh expressions to the banal and the pedestrian, but the effort of Gwyn Williams does at least have a grim sprightliness about it and manages, here and there, to capture Siôn Cent’s obvious relish for the grotesque (another link with Thomas, whose images could sometimes have a similarly warped character). The poem opens with a frontal attack on the *uchelwyr*, those men of property and status who were the darlings of the bards. The trouble, Siôn Cent suggested, was that these gentry were extortionate in the demands they made of their tenants, and violent unscrupulous appropriators of the property of their underlings:

He steals the poor man's cottage
And then the next man's acre.
He'll steal the oats under the ash,
The innocent man's hay.
He'll take two hundred cattle;
Gather the cattle, jail the man.¹²

Such *lèse majesté* shown by a member of what was expected to be the supplicant, sycophantic class of the bards was, scholars are agreed, unprecedented in Siôn Cent's time. And he continues his outrageous attack by modulating his tone so that it becomes positively gleeful in its vengeful anticipation of the earthy levelling of all this power. Consigned to the grave, the *uchelwr* will find that

His bed will be too low,
His head will touch the rafter,
The shroud's his tight-bound kirtle,
His heavy cradle the earth.
The porter over his head
Is black nightmarish earth,
His brave body in box of oak,
His nose a dismal grey.
His corslet the dark soil,
Its fringes now are rusted. (RTDL, 43)

There is macabre wit here, as Siôn Cent is actually employing the classic rhetorical strategy of the praise tradition: he is itemising the *uchelwr*'s house, producing a mocking inventory, so to speak, of his property and his effects, and for good measure parodying praise of the *uchelwr*'s warrior armour. And then, not content with this, Siôn Cent proceeds to insult his manhood, and to make him a kind of cuckold in his grave, because no sooner it seems is he laid in earth than his wife has eagerly taken a new man: 'a'i wraig, o'r winllad adail, / Gywir iawn / yn gwra'r ail' (IG, 289). At moments such as this, Siôn Cent displays the misogynistic view of women as the weak, fatally seductive sex – daughters all of Eve – that typified the Medieval outlook, and a similar misogynistic strain, resonant with a deep mistrust of women that is companion to a sensual infatuation with them, may be readily found in R. S. Thomas's poetry, particularly in those poems in which he responds to Impressionist paintings.

There is a sensual appetitiveness, and perverse sexual frisson, in the next passage of the *cywydd*, as Siôn Cent sardonically observes that ‘No marvel of a slim girl / slips a hand under that sheet’ – the double entendre is obvious. The decaying body is lasciviously imagined – ‘When he’s been there an hour, / the man with the long yellow hair, / in that dark house an ugly toad, / if he wakes, will tend his bed’ – and the romantic tryst under obliging trees is perverted: ‘Likelier under that stone’s back / are fat worms than gay branches.’ Then the *cywydd* segues into an *ubi sunt* passage which mockingly enquires what has become of all those signifiers of largesse so lovingly listed by the praise-poets, before the concluding peroration, where the particularities with which the poem has hitherto been occupied gradually give way to the preacher’s generalities, his ‘warning word’ to all about the need for repentance and reform in good time:

Let not man grasp for the good
Of frequent lust his heaven here
Lest he lose, say the praise-masters,
Through this sin eternal heaven. (RTDL, 49)

Thus much, then, for this tour de force of a poem, but in requesting it, how did R. S. Thomas account for his special interest in it? While not demurring when Beti George suggested he may have been interested in a view of human transience greatly heightened, in Siôn Cent’s case, by memories of the great pandemic of the previous century, Thomas preferred to place the emphasis elsewhere. What appealed to him, he explained, was the strain of nihilism evident in the poem, a negativity of outlook also found much later, for instance, in the poetry of A. E. Housman, and that in the latter’s case was the bitter residue of Romantic idealism. He was himself very aware, he added, of a like strain in his own nature – a nakedly confessional remark all the more arresting because it exactly corresponded to a highly revealing entry he had made some half-century earlier in a notebook that has only recently come to light. ‘Whence comes the furtive love of death within one,’ he had written at that time:

The flirtation with destruction, evil, annihilation...At times as I read or think of the future, I realize how little love I have for spiritual health and perfection, as compared with the darker waywardness

of the soul. It is only in moments of weakness or sickness of body that I run whimpering to a God created out of my immediate need. Well, I see God as spirit, moving endless, impersonal as wind, through the waste places of the world.¹³

This is a psychologically acute passage, one that not only throws an important new light on R. S. Thomas's own career as a poet, as demonstrated below, but also illuminates that of Siôn Cent too. As for the source of such a state of mind in the latter's case, one possibility is that suggested by Saunders Lewis, in that essay that has previously been mentioned and to which attention now needs to be paid.

* * *

While R. S. Thomas included 'I Wagedd ac Oferedd y Byd' in the batch of records that were played in the first of the two programmes with Beti George, he turned to Siôn Cent again in the second programme, but this time in a very different context.¹⁴ While discussing his pacifism, he added, as if in an aside, that he wasn't at all sure, however, that his outlook would have been the same had he been alive at the time of the Owain Glyndŵr uprising, and he admiringly cited Siôn Cent as one who, like many privileged young men of his background who were being educated at Oxford, had enthusiastically turned their back on their studies and hurriedly returned to Wales to take part in the rebellion. In the process, he betrayed a reading of Siôn Cent's life that seemed to owe much to Saunders Lewis's essay.¹⁵

The tone of Lewis's conclusions in that essay are typically *ex cathedra*. He is convinced that he has pieced together, from evidence carefully gleaned from the poems themselves, a reliable, and indeed definitive, account of Siôn Cent's life. According to his powerful fictional narrative, Siôn Cent had come from a background of comfortable wealth and status, but had lost everything when the family sided with Glyndŵr and suffered in the aftermath of his defeat. This it was, in Lewis's opinion, that may have soured Siôn Cent's outlook and precipitated his turn to religion. If so, then his was a prominent example of a familiar syndrome: of the replacement of a failed secular belief in a political Messiah with a secure religious belief in a Heavenly Messiah.

This Romantic image of Siôn Cent as a daring rebel cum outcast and outlaw was well calculated to appeal to R. S. Thomas, who had long har-

boured his own fantasy of himself as a militant Welsh resistance fighter, just as he cultivated a view of his later religious poetry as deriving in part from his disillusionment with the Welsh people he had attempted to address in his earlier poetry, his profound dissatisfaction with Welsh politics, and with the purportedly Welsh Church he nevertheless stubbornly continued to serve as priest. His own position in relation to all this is clearly articulated in the finale of 'A Welshman at St James' Park' – that use of 'at' where one would expect 'in' is telling; it already signals Thomas's stance as merely a passing visitor, an outsider – where he falls to thinking

Of a Welsh hill
That is without fencing, and the men,
Bosworth blind, who left the heather
And the high pastures of the heart¹⁶

Like all of Thomas's poetry, this passage conceals its allusive complexity beneath its beguiling surface simplicity. It includes an allusion to what was to Thomas, following his political hero Saunders Lewis, the great historic act of Welsh betrayal that had condemned the nation to perpetual servitude: the commitment of the nation's leaders to the cause of Henry Tudor on his way to Bosworth field, a path that had led directly and inexorably to the annexation of Wales by England in the fateful 1536 Act of Union. Bearing this in mind, the innocuous phrase 'left the heather' takes on a depth of meaning. In this context it is the conscious reversal of the subversive act of 'taking to the heather', that is of turning rebel and outlaw, as in the famous instance of the followers of the defeated Prince Charlie after the Battle of Culloden – and as in the case of Siôn Cent and all of Glyndŵr's unrepentant followers in Saunders Lewis's dramatic version of his life. Thus, R. S. Thomas chooses to conclude 'A Welshman at St James' Park' by defiantly announcing himself to be a rebel poet, one determined to take to the heather rather than to leave it like most of his cowed compatriots. But at the same time, he ruefully acknowledges that his is, in the end, an anti-heroic and anti-climactic gesture: one that merely consists of comically retaining that half of his train ticket that allows him to return home to Wales. By contrast, Siôn Cent had risked his all for the cause, and had duly lost it all. Hence R. S. Thomas's enduring respect and admiration for him.

Saunders Lewis speculates that Siôn Cent's jaundiced, disillusioned view of his world may have had its origins in his personal experience of

losing land, property and status as a result of the support shown by him and his family to Glyndŵr. In Lewis's view, Siôn Cent consequently felt disinherited. So did R. S. Thomas, who throughout his life continued to harbour a deep grievance at having been deprived of what he regarded as his rightful inheritance: the Welsh language and its culture.

He repeatedly gave voice to tortured anger at the way that, in his entrenched opinion, his psyche, whole life and career as a poet had all been deformed by this crippling cultural deficiency. This was the theme of his classic confessional essay 'The Creative Writer's Suicide' (1978) in which he made it searingly clear that, for someone in his position, if it would have meant creative suicide *not* to write, it was equally creative suicide for him *to have to* write in what he regarded as a language foreign to his very being as a Welsh man.¹⁷ The same self-lacerating awareness of cultural disinheritance also surfaces repeatedly, of course, in the poetry, grotesquely so in 'Welsh,' a startling poem, raw with self-disgust, which opens:

Why must I write so?
I'm Welsh, see:
A real Cymro,
Peat in my veins.
I was born late;
She claimed me,
Brought me up nice,
No hardship;
Only the one loss,
I can't speak my own
Language – Iesu,
All those good words;
And I outside them,
Picking up alms
From blonde strangers.¹⁸

This parodic adoption by Thomas of what he obviously took to be a typical 'look-you' 'Anglo-Welsh' accent, is the Welsh equivalent of a Black American self-mockingly adopting the grotesque patois of white black-face minstrelsy in a complex act of self-mockery and subaltern protest.

Siôn Cent is celebrated for the plainness of his speaking and the brevity of his style – a feature he implicitly endorsed when he attacked the

bards for their pompous verbosity. It was, he asserted, a sure symptom of their deceit and falsehood. Conversely, he implied that his own lapidary style was a reliable sign of his openness, frankness, honesty and plain dealing, an assertion that predated by several centuries the similar belief of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Siôn Cent's style clearly derived in part from his aims as a preacher, and the same was true of the similarly unfashionable and unconventional simplicity of R. S. Thomas's poetry. During his conversation with Beti George he attributed it to his years of experience at Manafon, where he had learnt to be careful to adjust his pulpit manner to the limited intellectual capacities of his largely uneducated rural parishioners. Thomas further contrasted his own lacerating style, pared down to the bare bone of truth, with the glib garrulousness of the South Wales school of thirties writers, including Dylan Thomas.

Saunders Lewis was confident that Siôn Cent's distinctive stylistics was a legacy of his period of study at Oxford, where he had been exposed to the new, ground-breaking philosophy and theology of late Scholasticism, and had become a disciple of the *scientia experimentalis*, or scientific philosophy, usefully characterised as follows by Gilbert Ruddock:

The Oxford tradition... was formed by three men of genius, in particular Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, Duns Scotus (who taught at Oxford during 1305–8), and, during the first half of the fourteenth century, William of Ockham, [who developed his views in a commentary on Peter Lombard]. ... One important aspect of it may be summed up thus: Neither general ideas nor abstractions have objective reality. Such was Siôn Cent's attitude towards the bardic tradition of praise. He attacked its Platonism, regarding the poets as heretics. (*GWL*, 165)¹⁹

While Thomas was no fan of the applied science he blamed for the emergence of the baleful modern reign of Technology over the human mind and its world, he was a devotee of popular pure science, most particularly of physics as it operated to reveal the mysterious quantum world of sub-atomic particles and the sublimely infinite and perplexing universe. In those respects, he, too, was a disciple of *scientia experimentalis*, ever anxious to reconcile its revelations with those of modern theology and to apply its astonishing understanding of the processes of

the material world metaphorically to the equally bewildering world of the spirit.

And there is one further aspect of Siôn Cent's career that is directly relevant to Thomas's interest in him. He lived in a time of fateful transitions. The final defeat of Glyndŵr marked the end of the old native order, to which Siôn Cent belonged, and the beginning of that long last stage of Wales's assimilation by England that culminated in the Act of Union of 1536. Thomas, too, was acutely aware of living in a time of transitions, in the cultural sphere, where the ancient native Welsh-language culture seemed to be in a state of terminal decline, and in the ecclesiastical sphere, where both the Christian faith in general and the Church in Wales in particular were undergoing major upheavals. It was in the case of the changes affecting national identity that the radically conservative vision of Thomas aligned most closely with that of his great predecessor, who had written a powerful poem, following the suppression of the Glyndŵr rebellion, about the state and the fate of his poor nation.

The case of Glyndŵr obviously continued to occupy the imagination of Siôn Cent. He composed a whole poem with the melancholy refrain 'Gobeithiaw a ddaw ydd wyf' ('I place my hope in what is to come'), and in it he makes an interesting implicit connection between the defeat of Glyndŵr and his own subsequent intense devotion to religious matters. It could even have been that it was by means of the latter that he was able to find solace for the disaster that had befallen both his Wales and his own family. He speaks of his country as existing now 'in *limbo patrum*', that is in that intermediate stage between earthly and paradisaical existence to which, according to traditional Church teaching in his time, the dead 'fathers' were confined until they were released by Christ. And he actually resurrects the idea of the appearance of a 'mab darogan', or son of prophecy, that had been assiduously cultivated in bardic prophesying following the death of Llywelyn, last Prince of Wales, in 1282.²⁰ The appearance and sweeping successes of Glyndŵr, who had himself been motivated to rebel partly by his awareness of the 'canu brud' (prophetic poetry) had seemed like the fulfilling of that prophecy. But Siôn Cent seems determined that his conclusive defeat should not be allowed to mark the end of the myth of the 'mab darogan'.

In his own way, Thomas seems to have viewed the history of the Glyndŵr rebellion and its significance for the contemporary condition of Wales in not dissimilar terms. He was fascinated by Glyndŵr

from the beginning of his career. His very first collection, *The Stones of the Field*, included a jingly little poem, reminiscent of the bombastic English ‘patriotic’ poetry of Henry Newbolt and others, entitled ‘The Rising of Glyndŵr’ (CP, 6). The best lines do, however, effectively convey the naïve romantic thrill with which Thomas jealously imagined the awakening of his whole country in those far-off days:

Winds awoke, and vixen-footed
Firelight prowled the glade; ...
Beasts gave tongue and barn-owls hooted,
Every branch grew loud
With the menace of that crowd

And what is touching is that, in this fantasy, it is the *words* of Glyndŵr that effect this magical transformation: ‘Then he spoke, and anger kindled / In each brooding eye’. This bespeaks the wistfulness of a young would-be ‘national’ poet of the mid-twentieth-century, keen to set a whole land alight, whose only insurrectionary weapon is the eloquent speech of his verse.

Nor did Thomas immediately abandon that plangent fantasy of the power of poetry to effect revolutionary political change. He returned to it in ‘The Tree: Owain Glyndŵr Speaks’, a poem that appeared in *An Acre of Land* (CP, 32). Thomas concentrates here on the power of the bardic myth of the ‘mab darogan’, suggesting that it was this that had opened the eyes of Glyndŵr – who had, after all, been living a comfortable life and had profitably served the English order – to the condition of his countrymen, who were struggling beyond the borders of his own, immediate, privileged domain at Sycharth. ‘I heard,’ declares Glyndŵr, ‘above the tuneful consonants’ of the poems being sung, to harp accompaniment, by the compliant, glibly eulogistic bards,

The sharp anguish, the despair
Of men beyond my smooth domain
Fretting under the barbed sting
Of English law, starving among
The sleek woods no longer theirs.

Like Siôn Cent, then, Thomas is here savaging the falsehoods of the popular poetry sung to please the age and attributing Glyndŵr’s awakening

to the experience of having his eyes opened to the false sycophantic nature of conventional bardic praise.

Glyndŵr likens the growth within him of a revolutionary national vision to that the growth of a great tree. The poem eventually discloses that he has, throughout, been speaking from his grave, and that even there he continues to feed that tree with his hope that one day his spirit will once again become powerfully operative in his country, before the poem draws to an ominous conclusion: 'sorrow may bud the tree with tears, / But only his blood can make it bloom'. In those lines it can clearly be seen that, even at this date, Thomas was still influenced by that body of nationalist Irish poetry that had made much of the idea of blood-sacrifice and had repeatedly imaged it in terms of natural forms such as tree and red rose. And he may even have been aware of the older symbol of the 'Liberty Tree' that had featured widely in the literature of political radicals both in France and in England in the later eighteenth century.²¹

Even in old age, Thomas continued to be fascinated by the idea of the dead Glyndŵr as a 'mab darogan' in waiting – a centuries-old conflation of Glyndŵr's story with that of the legendary King Arthur, who was likewise believed to be sleeping with his host in some secret cave, pending his return one day. Among the scraps of unpublished poems he left at his death there were his repeated efforts to translate a powerful short poem on the subject by Saunders Lewis, 'Caer Arianrhod', which appears as follows in Joseph Clancy's translation:

I saw the night close its wing over the moorland
Over scant flimsy cottages, fallow land, infrequent furrow,
And the stars and Arianrhod's fortress came out, profound miracle,
To spatter the firmament's feathers with their thousand peacock
eyes,

I spread the wing of my dream over you, my country;
I would have raised for you – Oh, if you'd wished it – a sweet for
tress;

But one with the falling star, flung from amid the stars
To stain the gloom with its dawn that soon died, such is my state.²²

The allusion is to a legend which claimed that the ghost of Glyndŵr had appeared one dawn to the abbot of Glyn-y-gwestl, enquiring whether the time for him to return had yet arrived, only to receive the advice that it

was still too early, because his land was not yet ready for it. And it is obvious enough how both Saunders Lewis and R. S. Thomas alike identified strongly with this Glyndŵr, as both had discovered late in life to their tragic cost that Wales was not yet ready to listen to what they had to say.

* * *

Contempt for the trashy values of the contemporary world; anger at its endemic corruption; an unflinchingly realistic assessment of human existence; a confirmed anti-clericalism; a rejection of the suspect hyperbole and euphoria of the praise tradition; an attraction to sermonising; a mistrust of glibness; a determined commitment to a language concise enough ‘not to be betrayed,’ as Edward Thomas put it, by seductive rhetoric; a misogynistic strain; a bitter settled resentment at disinheritance; an acute sense of displacement; a vision of Wales as a defeated nation; an obstinate belief in national deliverance, and in a poet’s power to trigger it; and a grim, implacable acknowledgement of the inescapability of mortality: R. S. Thomas shared all of these features with Siôn Cent. In addition, both were capable of fusing patriotism with piety. No wonder, therefore, that this important early fifteenth-century poet should have been so important a figure for R. S. Thomas. In him he found yet another important *alter ego* in the Welsh-language literary tradition; another cultural validation for his own poetry about Wales in English.

Jason Walford Davies’s *Gororau’r Iaith* is an electrifying classical survey of the depth and breadth of R. S. Thomas’s intimate involvement with the Welsh-language literary tradition from its beginning in Aneurin and Taliesin down to his own time.²³ What is amply demonstrated in it is the complexity and subtlety of this permanent involvement and how utterly seminal it is to Thomas’s own poetic practice. There can be no doubt, Davies convincingly asserts and demonstrates, ‘that full appreciation of Thomas’s innumerable references to this tradition is essential if one wishes to estimate correct the true nature of his Welshness as expressed in his primary cultural medium, poetry’ (*GI*, 16: my translation). Walford Davies clearly traces the skilful way in which R. S. Thomas succeeded in ‘weaving time’s / branches together’, as he put it in his tribute to David Jones (*CP*, 429). The tentacular character of his inter-cultural dialogue with Siôn Cent is an excellent case in point and Thomas himself indicates further ways in which our understanding of it might be developed to further advantage in the remarks he makes

in his interview with Beti George after listening to Aled Lloyd Davies's performance.

Noting his great admiration for Siôn Cent, Beti George, who could not have been unaware of his notoriously dismissive attitude towards most of his contemporaries, dares to enquire what he thinks of the Welsh poetry of his own time. He admires, he replies, only such as follow the example set by Siôn Cent and accordingly bend all their efforts entirely to keeping alive the feeble spirit of the Welsh nation: that, he emphatically adds, can be the only fit and proper function for any Welsh writer of his day, and by way of example he approvingly mentions Alan Llwyd – who, like R. S. Thomas, is tortured by his impotent awareness of the way his native region of the Llŷn peninsula is being overrun, appropriated and ravaged by foreigners – and Gerallt Lloyd Owen. At which point, R. S. Thomas – assisted by Beti George – hesitatingly recalls the opening lines of Lloyd's Owen great poem 'Fy Ngwlad' ('My Country'). It is a poem of national protest, outrage and grief composed in response to the 1969 Investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales in Caernarfon Castle, which opens by envisaging the reaction of Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf, the last native Prince of Wales, to this shameful phoney pageant:

Wylit, wylit, Llywelyn,
Wylit waed pe gwelit hyn.
Ein calon gan estron wŵr,
Ein coron gan goncwerwr,
A gwerin o ffafgarwyr
Llariaidd eu gwên lle'r oedd gwŷr.²⁴

[You would weep, weep, Llywelyn,/ Would weep blood to see this./
Our heart given to a foreigner,/ Our crown to a conqueror./ And
a people turned favour-seekers/ Meek of smile where once were
men.]

R. S. Thomas's body of poetry about the state of Wales, remarkable because it is so radically disconcerting, badly needs revisiting and sympathetic revaluation in light of the great twentieth-century Welsh-language tradition of a poetry of national protest and lament. Because it consists of poems born on the raw nerve, poems that are impatient of any stylistic refinement, Thomas's remarkable contributions to this tradition can make for painful reading, their rhetorical clumsiness

and vulnerable openness making them almost embarrassing at times. They are easily dismissed as nothing but redneck utterances. But for me, their value as unforgettable witness to a cultural crisis makes them totally memorable and irreplaceable. They might be described as examples of ‘radical innocence’, to adopt a useful expression coined long ago by Cleanth Brooks. Their uninhibited innocence doesn’t antedate experience, it post-dates it: it proceeds from it; it is not pre-ironic, it is post-ironic; it has gone beyond irony to a shockingly heedless and unguarded frankness of expression that captures the unselfconscious nakedness of R. S. Thomas’s pain at the state of his country.

Implicit in Jason Walford Davies’s important pioneering study is an invitation to future scholars to continue where perforce he had to leave off. And one possible step would be to concentrate not on Thomas’s interactions with individual poets and poems from the Welsh tradition but on his continuation of some of the genres, after his own fashion, that have been central to Welsh-language poetry of the twentieth century. One of these is the Jeremiad, which in its pure form is a prophetic utterance savagely accusing a whole people of having abandoned their commitment to the sole living God, of having broken their sacred covenant with the Almighty that had made them the Chosen People, and of having gone whoring after strange gods. Demanding wholesale national repentance and regeneration, the genre owes its name to the Prophet Jeremiah and his forewarning of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, and it has recurred in Welsh cultural history from its origin in Gildas’s sixth century *De Excidio Brittanniae*, right down to Emyr Humphreys’s great novel of the late 1960s, *Outside the House of Baal*, where the very title of course alludes to Jeremiah’s contest with the pagan priests.²⁵ Siôn Cent’s poetry sits squarely in this tradition. And so does the poetry of R. S. Thomas.

Major twentieth-century practitioners of the genre among Welsh poets of the twentieth century include Saunders Lewis, and, above all, D. Gwenallt Jones, a poet greatly admired by R. S. Thomas for his having metaphorically ‘taken to the heather’ when a young man, as he admitted in ‘A Lecturer,’ his fine tribute to a Gwenallt turned respectable – although never really tamed – by becoming an academic at Aberystwyth. The title turns out to be both an accurate and an ironic one. No more harmless creature could probably be imagined than a university lecturer, and the poem begins by reinforcing this misleading impression as it describes the elderly Gwenallt as ‘A little man, / Sallow, /

Keeping close to the wall / Of life' (WA, 23). The end, however, is explosively unexpected as it reveals Gwenallt to be a cultural guerrilla fighter, a freedom fighter and a sometime jailbird;

Watch him,
As with short steps he goes.
Not dangerous?
He has been in gaol. (WV, 23)

In his poem on the Christian tradition of Wales, Gwenallt speaks of 'braenu'r tir', the preparing of fallow land for the sowing of new seed. It is to Jeremiah 4:3 that he is alluding: 'Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.' And one of the most celebrated of his poems is a sonnet that opens, 'Er mor annheilwng ydwyt ti o'n serch, / Di, butain fudr y stryd â'r taeog lais', where Wales is accused of having made herself unworthy of her people's affections by prostituting herself on every street corner.²⁶ But next it moves to a confession that nevertheless the country still retains her hold on the Welsh mind:

Eto, ni allwn ni, bob mab a merch,
Ddiffodd y cariad atat tan ein hais:
Fe'th welwn di â llygaid pŵl ein ffydd
Gynt yn flodeuog yn dy wyrfdod hardd[.]

This stubbornly enduring patriotism he attributes to popular memory of Wales as once in her virginal innocence she had been, a country devoted to the values promulgated by deep Christian faith.

Gwenallt takes this image of a nation as a degraded harlot directly from the Book of Jeremiah, as he does the forgiveness he expresses in the lines that follow. The trope is one recurrently used by the Old Testament prophet to describe the plight of the people of Israel following their desertion of the faith of their fathers. 'Thou saidst, I will not transgress,' says God in Jeremiah's report, 'when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot' (2:20). But then, like Gwenallt, Jehovah offers to forgive His nation provided she refrain from 'play[ing] the harlot with many lovers' (3:1) and that she 'return again to me'. For all her defilement of the land by 'committing adultery with rocks and stones,' God is willing to receive her back, because He is merciful, and continues to acknowledge that 'I am mar-

ried to you' (3:14). So Gwenallt ends his sonnet by begging God to be merciful to the Welsh people, trusting they too can be persuaded to recover their ancient faithfulness to the Lord. He follows Jeremiah in believing that his people are among the Chosen Ones of God, a People of the Book still covenanted as of old to the service of the Almighty.

One useful way to approach that collection of poems about Wales that R. S. Thomas published under the punning title of *Welsh Airs* would be to read it against the background of some of the major Welsh-language poetry of much the same period, such as that of Gwenallt, to which he was undoubtedly very alive, and, one might venture to add, to which he was implicitly responsive. Indeed, one might even see him as 'writing back' to Gwenallt. Viewed in that light, Thomas's approach might be described as that of a post-Jeremiad. Paradoxically, dark and pessimistic though the classic Jeremiad may be, in the end it recognizes that Israel still remains the favoured nation of the Almighty, and that there will always be a way – which it is the responsibility of the prophet to point out – to seal its covenant with the God of Israel anew. By contrast, the national poetry of Thomas is born of terminal disillusionment. Whereas Jeremiah's vision was basically one of an eventual Exodus, or escape from self-willed captivity, that of Thomas is of a people self-doomed to permanent Babylonian servitude. It proceeds from the exhaustion of a despair that is still stubbornly and vaguely ghosted by a wistful forlorn hope. It is a poetry of the end of days. On the rare occasions when, as in the conclusion of 'Welsh History', the poetry flares briefly into a gesture of defiance, it sounds about as convincing as the mad, powerless Lear's rant that 'I will do such things'. Much more in tune with Thomas's settled vision of the state of his nation is the conclusion of 'A Land', which could be read as a nihilistic parody of Jeremiah's renowned, and immensely influential, vision of a land under covenant, a land given the people of Israel by the Almighty, a vision, by the way, that plays a crucial role in the poetry of both Gwenallt and Waldo Williams's version of Wales.

They have hard hands that money adheres
to like the scales
of some hideous disease, so that they grizzle
as it is picked off. And the chapel crouches,
a stone monster, waiting to spring,
waiting with the disinfectant of its language
for the bodies rotting with

their unsaid prayers.
It is at such times
that they sing, not music
so much as the sound of a nation
rending itself, fierce with all the promise
of a beauty that might have been theirs. (WA, 43)

This is very like some of the poetry of Siôn Cent in being so totally uncompromising in the bare honesty of its pessimism, and that is precisely what makes these poems as a whole so memorable and shocking. From the point of view of activists, they inevitably appear to be an unforgivable example of the kind of betrayal of which R. S. Thomas accuses his benighted compatriots. Hence Dafydd Elis Thomas's notorious swingeing attack on it (since honourably disavowed) back in the early seventies, when young people were – very much with R. S. Thomas's admiration and approval – actively working to undermine the established order, and when the fortunes of Plaid Cymru seemed very much in the ascendancy.

Even more unabashedly offensive – to the point of viciousness at times – are the Gilray-like squibs, lampoons and satires he published in the stiletto-thin pamphlet facetiously entitled *What Is a Welshman?*,²⁷ brought out by a fringe publisher. Here we encounter an R. S. Thomas who has yet to be house-trained, so to speak; and again Siôn Cent comes to mind as a similar example. Critics have averted their eyes from this volume. It has been air-brushed out of the record, presumably because it is deemed unfit for decent company. Which is rather to miss the point, because R. S. Thomas's principal target in that collection, over and above the subjects specifically singled out for attack, is the terrible 'niceness' of his people, a niceness he interprets as a symptom of the utter servility of the defeated and subjugated ('She brought me up nice'). The only antidote to it, in his opinion, is to scandalise and to enrage. To change the metaphor, his (unconvinced) aim is to galvanise the people out of their political and cultural somnolence. His immediate predecessor in exactly such an enterprise was Gwenallt, but if we look further across the long centuries of the Welsh tradition we discover in Siôn Cent much the same desire to disturb the prevailing social peace, to disrupt the even, comfortable tenor of the complacent – and complaisant – relationship between bard and patron that he regarded as corrupt and corrupting; to upset

the apple-cart by gratuitously violating the customary decorum of the poet-listener relationship.

* * *

It would be a mistake to search Thomas's poetry for images and motifs clearly echoing those of Siôn Cent. His relationship with his great predecessor was of an entirely different kind and order and was based on deep similarities of temperament that decided the very temper of their rhetoric. Because the feature of Siôn Cent's poetry that undoubtedly attracted R. S. Thomas most profoundly was its *saeva indignatio* (fierce indignation),²⁸ Thomas used this very phrase more than once at various points in his writings. 'For we know,' he wrote in a diary entry, 'that we will never grow old in the Church, never grow comfortable and tolerant of other people, never make our peace with the world. The older we get, the less we will stomach the people around us, the more *saeva indignatio* will rend us.' And he used it again, in a particularly illuminating context, during the course of his fascinating early essay on contemporary Scottish Writing:

Scots...has about it an air of fierceness which makes it peculiarly apt for the expression of *saeva indignatio*. Douglas Young's translation of Sorley Maclean's 'Heliant Woman', and these lines from 'Le Cimitière Marin':

D'ye think ye'll sing when ye're a wraith o reek?

C'wa! For aa thing flees! Frae pores I leak!

And unco-guide Impatience tae maun dee!

Suggests that power to upbraid, which made Raftery in Ireland and Twm o'r Nant in Wales poets to be feared by the unprincipled and mean. (SP, 30)

Throughout his life, Thomas bitterly regretted the absence in modern Welsh writing of that 'power to upbraid', which was alike the gift of the great Old Testament prophets that he so deeply admired and emulated and of the great satirists. Of the latter, the one most famous for his *saeva indignatio* was undoubtedly Juvenal – whose feral satires influenced Alexander Pope, naturally attracted though he was to the urbane satire of Horace. And just as R. S. Thomas admired the Juvenalian aspects of Siôn Cent's poetry so he sought to inject into his own poems something

of the moral venom found in both the great medieval Welsh poet and the Roman satirist. Indeed, Thomas might be usefully thought of as the Juvenal of Wales, and is perhaps most evidently so in *What Is a Welshman?*. There is no poetry of comparable savage bite in the Welsh canon. Turn to any page and you are sure to be confronted with a poem that shocks and discomforts because it is so clearly the issue of a sensibility rubbed raw by the condition of Wales, just as that of Siôn Cent was by the condition of his countrymen in his day. So the latter could, for example, open his *cywydd* 'Gobeithiau a Ddaw Ydd Wyf' by bewailing his country's fate: 'Och Gymry fynych gamfrait! / Och wŷr o'r dynged, awch haint!': 'Alas my countrymen for your many insults / Alas for your fate, the sharp edge of plague' (CIG, 265). Take the following passage for example of R. S. Thomas in similar mood:

In Wales there are
no crocodiles, but the tears
continue to flow from
their slimed sources. Women
with white hair and strawberry
faces peer at you from behind
curtains; wobbling sopranos
split the chapels; the clerks undress
the secretaries with
their lean eyes. (2)

What was it that had moved Thomas to such extremes of *saeva indignatio*; to produce poems laced with such disgust? It seems to have been the 1969 Investiture of Charles as the Prince of Wales. For Thomas it was the ritualised expression of obeisance of 'a servile people' (WIW, 6), whose 'pacifism' (here meaning supine passivity) outraged him beyond reasonable measure. Interestingly and revealingly, he casts himself in the role of a dreamer at one point, thus turning his poem into a dream vision like *Piers Ploughman* or Goronwy Owen's *Gweledigaethu y Bardd Cwsg*. He writes of how 'I lay on the bleak hills / black with the dust of coal / not yet mined' and 'a pulpit grew up under my feet / and I climbed into it / and it was the cage of the mine-shaft down down / to preach to the lost souls / of the coal-face' (1). There is an extraordinary conflation here of the legend of Dewi Sant, who famously found the ground rising under his feet when he began to preach at Llanddewi-brefi, with

reminiscences of the 1904 Revival when Evan Roberts set out to evangelise the Rhondda and so moved them that some erected their own chapels for worship deep underground. Except that what Thomas wants to preach is not the Gospel but the need to abandon the class struggle for the national struggle.

And just as Siôn Cent included himself among the targets he was attacking, when he wrote a remorseful *cywydd* itemising the sins of his youth, so does Thomas towards the end of his collection when he recalls how the

industrialists came, burrowing
in the corpse of a nation
for its congealed blood. I was
born into the squalor of
their feeding and sucked their speech
in with my mother's
infected milk, so that whatever
I throw up now is still theirs. (WIW, 12)

Here he is acknowledging his birth in Cardiff, the town (yet to be a city) that had benefited the most from the wealth produced by the labour of the proletariat of the valleys, and is bitterly confessing that the very poetry he is using to savage his fellow-countrymen is composed in a language by which part of him is revolted. Composition here takes the form of evacuation, of elimination – of what Kristeva would term the process of ‘abjection’ – as Harri Garrod Roberts has already perceived in an arresting study.²⁹ It is a futile attempt at self-cleansing.

But Thomas did not reserve his *saeva indignatio* for the sphere of national politics any more than did Siôn Cent, who reserved some of his most cutting comments for the clergy of his day. However, while Thomas's relationship with his Church was almost as adversarial as that of Siôn Cent with his, his anger was usually otherwise directed. What he most hated were those reassuring traditional images of a benign God that bred a comfortable intellectual somnolence in so many believers, despite their awareness of living in a Darwinian universe. And the collections in which all his pent-up frustrations on this score found most graphic issue were those of the 1970s, which feature several examples of the sudden spontaneous flare-up of *saeva indignatio*, as in the following passage from *H'm*:

All this I will do
Said God, and watch the bitterness in their eyes
Grow, and their lips suppurate with
Their prayers. And their women shall bring forth
On my altars, and I will choose the best
Of them to be thrown back into the sea.
And that was only on one island (CP, 223)

This passage forms the sestet of a highly irregular sonnet. It is as if Thomas, in the iron grip of his furious outrage, couldn't resist grotesquely twisting the traditional form into one suitable for textually registering the damaged modern Welsh condition.

As has already been noted above, one of the most arresting and illuminating passages in his early Notebooks is that where he confesses to being fearfully attracted to a nihilism of outlook, so it's not surprising that the dramatic turn his religious poetry took with *H'm* owed much to his admiration for Ted Hughes's recent collection *Crow*, which surely remains the most nihilistic collection of poetry in the English language. And when reading some of his religious poems it is indeed easy to understand how they afforded him the means of channelling that nihilistic impulse in a new direction, by transforming it into pulsating expressions of *saeva indignatio*. Even when that righteous outrage is suppressed, a text can radiate the menace of a violent fury:

Instead of the altar
the pulpit. Instead
of the bread the fraction
of the language. And God
a shadow of himself
on a blank wall. Their prayers
are a passing of hands
over their brows as though
in an effort to wipe sin
off. Their buildings
are in praise of concrete
and macadam. Frowning
upon divorce, they divorce
art and religion.

Here it is the revisions in text and liturgy insisted on by the Church in Wales that are the immediate object of his anger, and the passage comes from 'Bleak Liturgies', part of the collection *Mass for Hard Times*.³⁰ That was his penultimate collection, and the passage confirms for us that Thomas's anger remained unabated to the very end – one reason, perhaps, why he entitled what was to be his very last collection *No Truce With the Furies*.

* * *

To attend closely, then, to R. S. Thomas's self-avowed 'special relationship' to Siôn Cent, is to find ourselves embarking on an inter-cultural journey rich in implication and potential. As Jason Walford Davies has pointed out, in 1962 David Jones wrote a remarkable letter to Vernon Watkins. In it he complained of how impossible it was to convey to readers totally unfamiliar with Welsh-language history, culture and literary tradition the halo of associations surrounding the name 'Rhiannon'. 'It is,' he exclaimed in exasperation, 'this "break" with a whole complex, cultural, religious and linguistic tradition that is the real buggeration for those of us who while able only to use English have our deepest roots (in some way or other) in the Welsh past.' (*GI*, 320) 'The real buggeration': this is the colourfully coarse vernacular of the trenches, that David Jones recalled with affection. He was, after all, proud of being an old sweat. In all probability, Siôn Cent was an old sweat too, and might well have relished David Jones's vocabulary. All his life, R. S. Thomas wrestled with precisely the same 'buggeration', but that he did so to some remarkable creative purpose in the end has, I hope, been demonstrated in this discussion.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful for the response of an anonymous reader for the *International Journal* to an earlier version of this essay.
- ² I am very grateful to Beti George and Tomos Morse for tracking down tapes of these two programmes, that had been deemed lost by the BBC, and for making them available to me. I am also indebted to Professor Dafydd Johnston for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this essay. A published transcription is available in Ioan Roberts (ed.), *Beti a'i Phobol - 1: Addasiad llyfr o'r sgyrsiau radio* (Llanrwst; Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2002), 771–7.

- ³ Thomas referenced Siôn Cent on several occasions, even claiming in a conversation with Jason Walford Davies that Siôn Cent was his favourite poet (*Gororau'r Iaith*: Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, 293). Hereafter *GI*.
- ⁴ Chapter 7, 'Siôn Cent', in A. O. H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (eds), rev. Dafydd Johnston, *A Guide to Welsh Literature, 1282–c.1550* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 150–69. Hereafter *GWL*.
- ⁵ It is probable that Thomas would also have been aware of Saunders Lewis's earlier discussion of Siôn Cent in *Baslun o Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg* (1932). There specific mention is made of Gruffydd Llwyd's 'politically important cywydd' to Owain Glyndŵr (99), which Thomas may have had in mind when writing 'The Tree' in *An Acre of Land*.
- ⁶ The standard edition of Siôn Cent's poetry is still Henry Lewis, Thomas Roberts, Ifor Williams (eds), *Cywyddau Iolo Goch Ac Eraill* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1937). Hereafter *CIG*.
- ⁷ An important source for such conclusions is Siôn Cent's self-indictment in his *cywydd* to the Seven Deadly Sins, 'Tr Saith Pechod Marwol'. What is interesting is that he briefly departs from established convention by accusing himself of having been much given to flattery. Clearly he viewed that practice, which he normally ascribed to other toadying bards, as particularly distasteful (*CIG*, 255–6). Indeed in his *cywydd* to the Lying Muse, he specifically brands the form of lying that is flattery a sin: 'Pob celwydd, yn nydd, yn nod, / Bychan, mae ynddo bechod' (*CIG*, 182).
- ⁸ The definitive scholarly discussion of Siôn Cent's life and work is that by Dafydd Johnston in *Llên yr Uchelwyr: Hanes Beirniadol Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg 1300–1525* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), *passim*, but particularly 228, 394–5.
- ⁹ A convenient English version of the poem under the title 'In Defence of Praise' may be found in Joseph P. Clancy, trans., *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 261–3. Hereafter *MPW*.
- ¹⁰ 'The Lying Muse', in Tony Conran, trans., *Welsh Verse* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press revised edn, 1986), 194. See also 'The Bards', *MPW*, 284–6.
- ¹¹ One the most notable of his poems is in praise of Breconshire (*CIG*, 268–9).
- ¹² 'The Emptiness and Worthlessness of the World', in Gwyn Williams, trans., *The Rent That's Due to Love* (London: Poetry London Editions, 1950), 41. Hereafter *RTDV*. See also Clancy, *MWP*, 290–3, where the title chosen is 'The Vanity of the World'.
- ¹³ (Nbk1, March 14, 1945)
- ¹⁴ The original text of the poem is conveniently printed in Thomas Parry (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 1998 reprint), 98–103. It may also be found in *CIG*, 288–92.
- ¹⁵ 'Siôn Cent', in Gwynn ap Gwilym (ed.), *Saunders Lewis, Meistri a'u Crefft* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981), 148–60.
- ¹⁶ 'A Welshman at St James' Park', in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993), 165. Hereafter *CP*.
- ¹⁷ 'The Creative Writer's Suicide', in Sandra Anstey (ed.), *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983), 167–74.
- ¹⁸ 'Welsh', in *Welsh Airs* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1987, 1993 reprint), 19. Hereafter *WV*.
- ¹⁹ It should, however, be noted that the most recent scholarship is doubtful of Siôn Cent's Oxford credentials. See Alexander Falileyev, 'Siôn Cent, Saunders Lewis and the Oxford Philosophers: A Reassessment', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 80 (Winter, 2020), 45–75. His conclusion is that 'The uncertainties regarding the *persona* of Siôn Cent cannot but remain. What is definite is that this owner of a preacher's voice cannot be associated with Oxford learning with any degree of confidence; his

poetry is not distinctively nominalistic and certainly does not reflect *scientia experimentalis*.’

- ²⁰ For a useful view of the prophetic tradition in Welsh poetry, see the chapter by R. Wallis Evans in *GWL*, 256–74.
- ²¹ The original Liberty Tree was an elm on Boston Common that became famous as the rallying point of the rebellious colonists. Such trees later became associated in Europe with the French Revolution, and in Britain were symbols of the cause of political radicalism.
- ²² Joseph Clancy (ed.), *Saunders Lewis: Selected Poems* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 30.
- ²³ Jason Walford Davies, *Gororau'r Iaith: R. S. Thomas a'r Traddodiad Llenyddol Cymraeg* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003). Hereafter *GI*.
- ²⁴ Gwynn ap Gwilym and Alan Llwyd (eds), *Blodeugeredd o Farddoniaeth Gymraeg* (Gomer: Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 1987), 506. The translation is mine.
- ²⁵ The importance of Gildas to Welsh identification with land is interestingly discussed by Dorian Llywellyn in *Sacred Land, Chosen People: Land and National Identity in Welsh Spirituality* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), particularly 80ff.
- ²⁶ Christine James (ed.), *Cerddi Gwenallt: Y Casgliad Cyflawn* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2001), 98. For an informative English introduction to his work see Donald Allchin, D. Densil Morgan and Patrick Thomas (eds and trans.), *Sensuous Glory: The Poetic Vision of D. Gwenallt Jones* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000). Translations of some of his poems may be found in Menna Elfyn and John Rowlands (eds), *The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2003), 93–9, and Joseph P. Clancy, trans., *Twentieth-Century Welsh Poems* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982), 94–105.
- ²⁷ R. S. Thomas, *What is a Welshman?* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, nd.). Hereafter *WIW*.
- ²⁸ The phrase originated in the phrase used by Jonathan Swift in the Latin epitaph that Jonathan Swift composed for himself.
- ²⁹ Harri Garrod Roberts, *Embodying Identity; Representations of the Body in Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 141 and 133.
- ³⁰ For the impact of these changes on Thomas and his poetry see the two essays on that subject in M. Wynn Thomas, *All That is Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), chapters 7 and 8.