

# Przemysław Michalski

---

## The Churches and Chapels of Ronald Stuart Thomas

---

Religious and Sacred Poetry : An International Quarterly of Religion, Culture and Education 2/3, 83-97

---

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

PRZEMYSŁAW MICHALSKI (Cracow, Poland)  
E-mail: przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl

## The Churches and Chapels of Ronald Stuart Thomas

### Introduction

#### 1. Introduction

Bearing in mind that Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000) spent over forty years of his committed ministry in a number of small parishes in Wales, and that over this period of time, as well as after his retirement, he would write roughly one poem every fortnight, it is little wonder that he has bequeathed to us a relatively large body of verse dealing with ecclesiastical issues, which include several poems about places of worship. The churches which figure in these poems are mostly inconspicuous rural buildings, located in some out-of-the-way part of Wales. Occasionally, they may be dignified with a name, especially when Thomas writes about a specific church or chapel, but more often than not they remain steeped in anonymity. All of them seem to share certain qualities: they are usually empty, or there is just one person inside – usually an alter ego of the poet himself – who is down on his knees, engrossed in silent prayer<sup>1</sup>. They also appear to be pervaded by a silence so tangible that it becomes an integral part of their stark interior. Because these places have little, historically or architecturally, to command them to a casual tourist, they provide a space in which one can pray or meditate without being disturbed. Thomas has been often called a poet of the hidden God, but he is also a poet of silence and of a hushed voice, which qualities are well attuned to the subject matter of his work<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, these poems are never limited to pure description. This is not to say that he surreptitiously smuggles theological problems into the text, but rather that such questions arise naturally from the description itself. One's reading of these texts depends to a large degree on whether one is inclined to identify specific buildings Thomas describes with the church understood in terms of institutional religion, or

---

<sup>1</sup> W. J. McGill remarks: "[...] his descriptions of churches tend to emphasize their sparseness, their quiet, and at time their coldness, and not often did he describe the people at prayer." W. J. McGill, *Poets' Meeting. George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, Jefferson 2004, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> A particularly perceptive study of this aspect of Thomas's poetry is: D. Z. Philips, *Poet of the Hidden God. Meaning and Mediation in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, Eugene 1986.

even with what theology calls the mystical body of Christ – *Corpus Mysticum*. Can those rural, dilapidated churches be symbolic of, or even synonymous with, the Church? This raises the question of universality of these poems. Are they mere elegies bewailing the physical decline of this little parish church or that ancient chapel, or are they more general in scope, thus trying to make an important statement about the role of religion in the modern world?

### 1. “Country Church (Manafon)”

The first poem to be examined is called “Country Church (Manafon)”. True to its title, it is a description of a small parish church in the village of Manafon<sup>3</sup>. It is also one of the poems which relate to an actual building rather than church as symbolic of faith in general. Manafon was a little parish in Wales, where Thomas was rector at the local church of St. Michael and All Angels in the years 1942-1953. Here is the text of the poem:

“The church stands, built from the river stone,  
Brittle with light, as though a breath could shatter  
Its slender frame, or spill the limpid water,  
Quiet as sunlight, cupped within the bone.  
It stands yet. But though soft flowers break  
In delicate waves round limbs the river fashioned  
With so smooth care, no friendly God has cautioned  
The brimming tides of fescue for its sake.”<sup>4</sup>

It seems that for all its lucidity and straightforwardness, the poem is grounded in what one might call semantic counterpoint of solidity and vulnerability since it features words suggestive of solidity, sturdiness, and strength, but these are juxtaposed with words which imply weakness, fragility, and perishability. The brittle beauty of the church is undercut by vulnerability, which contrasts strongly with the details of its material structure. The poet’s anxiety that it might be shattered by a mere breath follows oddly on the heels of the previous line, in which he matter-of-factly states that it is “built from the river stone”. Most probably Thomas chose to stack such contradictions against each other in order to suggest that these seem-

---

<sup>3</sup> In Brian Morris’s description: “The little church of St. Michael and All Angels, which Mr. Thomas served, is an ancient structure, stone built, with a good timber roof. But it was heavily restored in 1898, its rood screen is uncompromisingly modern, and the overall effect is of a well-kept but quite undistinguished piece of Victorian architecture. It has neither the beauty nor the historical associations of the churches he knew at Chirk and Hanmer. Manafon has nothing of the romantic associations of George Herbert’s Bemerton, or even Henry Vaughan’s Llansantffraed, but neither does it exhibit the powerful rural squalor of George Crabbe’s Aldeburgh.” B. Morris, *The Topography of R. S. Thomas* [in:] W. D. Davis (ed.) *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas*, Fayetteville 1993, pp. 48-9.

<sup>4</sup> R. S. Thomas. *Collected Poems. 1945-1990*, London 2000, p. 11.

ingly contradictory qualities can co-exist side by side. Perhaps in this way he wanted to hint at the inherently paradoxical nature of the institution of the church itself, which, though founded on the rock of Peter's dedicated discipleship, remains every bit as vulnerable as the apostle's own faith.

The second stanza is even more ambiguous. The penultimate line is particularly troubling since the phrase "No friendly God" carries a rather disconcerting suggestion of both (either) atheism and (or) polytheism. The line could be taken to indicate that the God of Christianity proves helpless when confronted with the indifferent forces of nature, represented here by the slow advance of the tides of fescue. It might also mean that out of many gods, none turns out to be a caring, interventionist deity, ready to succour the sacral space from decrepitude. Perhaps another reading is even more disturbing as it implies that the second stanza is an oblique confession of an agnostic – perhaps there are no gods at all, and the slow, but ultimate victory of the grass is just a matter of time. Would it be justifiable to say that the days of religion are numbered in the same way as the days of this church seem to be? Despite its quiet tone and wonderful lucidity of phrase, the poem arouses a feeling of foreboding<sup>5</sup>.

Incidentally, the picture of "unholy" grass slowly invading the space of an abandoned shrine brings to mind a passage from an essay by Zbigniew Herbert: "I remember a certain episode that happened many years ago not far from Paris in an old monastery transformed into a retreat for intellectuals. A park, and in the park the ruins of a Gothic temple. The remains of the walls, white and thin as parchment, grew out of the ground. Their reality was emphasized by the large, ogival windows through which light-hearted birds were flying. There were no longer stained-glass windows or columns, vaults or stone floors; only the skin of the architecture remained, as if hanging in the air. Inside the nave fat, pagan grass"<sup>6</sup>. Herbert describes the church in which time has already completed its destructive work, leaving behind an empty carapace from which sanctity has been effectively exorcised by its physical decline. "The brimming tides of fescue", which look poised to launch a final assault on the vulnerable church in the Thomas's poem, have already pullulated the nave, supplanting the once sanctified floors with "pagan grass". It is difficult to resist the temptation to see both accounts as metaphors of the general decline of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Wynn Thomas half-jokingly prompts an ambitious literary critic: "'No friendly God' – what a fine, miratory title that would make for a study of R. S. Thomas religious poetry". M. W. Thomas, *R. S. Thomas. Serial Obsessive*, Cardiff, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Herbert, *The Collected Prose. 1948-1998*, A. Válfes (trans.), New York 2010, p. 248.

## 2. “Maes-yr-Onnen”

The next poem is a lyrical description of an otherwise inconspicuous chapel at Maes-yr-Onnen, which was “a very important starting point for the Nonconformity that came to dominate Welsh life and culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries”<sup>7</sup>. The chapel is north of Glasbury, on the west bank of the Wye, and is now the oldest chapel in Wales still in use for worship. Thomas visited the place in 1947, and in the following year he wrote an essay “Two Chapels” – an account of an unexpected vision in which he saw the past of the chapel when it was still alive with worship: “When I had walked around the building and stared in through the windows (there was no one there to unlock the door for me), I stretched myself out on the grass and let my mind wander back into the past. And indeed after a while, I saw the first worshippers coming through the fields - sober men and women dressed in a sober fashion. I saw them leave the sunlight for the darkness of the chapel and then heard the rustling of the Bible pages and the murmurs of soft voices mingling with the wind. Yes, it was two and a half centuries earlier on a fine August morning. And almost immediately, I saw, I understood. As with St. John the Divine on the island of Patmos I was ‘in the Spirit’ and I had a vision, in which I could comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of the mystery of the creation”<sup>8</sup>. More importantly for the ends of this article, Thomas later returned to the visit in the poem simply called “Maes-yr-Onnen”:

“Though I describe it stone by stone, the chapel  
Left stranded in the hurrying grass,  
Painting faithfully the mossed tiles and the tree,  
The one listener to the long homily  
Of the ministering wind, and the dry, locked doors,  
And the stale piety, mouldering within;  
You cannot share with me that rarer air,  
Blue as a flower and heady with the scent  
Of the years past and others yet to be,  
That brushed each window and outsoared the clouds’  
Far foliage with its own high canopy.  
You cannot hear as I, incredulous, heard  
Up in the rafters, where the bell should ring,  
The wild, sweet singing of Rhiannon’s birds.”<sup>9</sup>.

There are notable similarities between the two poems: both are pictures of old buildings trying to withstand the pressure of indifferent forces of nature. In the

---

<sup>7</sup> D. E. Pike, “Two Poets Visit Maesyrönen” at: <http://daibach-welldigger.blogspot.com/2013/03/two-poets-visit-maesyrönen.html> [Access: 03.07.2014].

<sup>8</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Two Chapels* [in:] *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, S. Anstey (ed.), Seren 1995, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

second poem, however, the role of nature is more ambiguous. The imagery of the poem points to the possibility of a higher synthesis between the world of nature and the world of spirit, or even an unlikely symbiosis between the sacred and the profane. It is true that nature has taken over the place, but this is not a “hostile” takeover but a “friendly” one, as things of nature have filled the vacuum created by the departure of human worshippers. Consequently, the reader has an impression that the paganising action of the elements is countermanded by the sanctification they “experience” by acting in the sacred space of worship. Thus the potential hostility between *sacrum* and *profanum* is nullified since the very building erected with the aim of praising the creator of nature is now home to natural forces, which play the part of the departed congregation. The tree in Thomas’s poetry is almost invariably symbolic of the crucifixion, while the sinister phalanx of fescue from the previous poem has disappeared, giving way to the “sweet, singing of Rhiannon’s birds.” At the same time, the trinity of the wind, the foliage and the sun seem to endow the chapel with a new vitality, officiating at a sort of pantheistic thanksgiving.

### 3. “In Church”

The poem “In Church” was originally published in the 1963 collection *Pieta*:

“Often I try  
 To analyze the quality  
 Of its silences. Is this where God hides  
 From my searching? I have stopped to listen,  
 After the few people have gone,  
 To the air recomposing itself  
 For vigil. It has waited like this  
 Since the stones grouped themselves about it.  
 These are the hard ribs  
 Of a body that our prayers have failed  
 To animate. Shadows advance  
 From their corners to take possession  
 Of places the light held  
 For an hour. The bats resume  
 Their business. The uneasiness of the pews  
 Ceases. There is no other sound  
 In the darkness but the sound of a man  
 Breathing, testing his faith  
 On emptiness, nailing his questions  
 One by one to an untenanted cross”<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 180.

The speaker's focus is on the interior of the church. Thomas was not averse to stirring controversy, which might either duly scandalise the rigidly pious or rouse them from their dogmatic slumber. This poem also courts controversy by implying that the church may be a (or even "the") place where God hides from one's searching<sup>11</sup>. This otherwise anonymous church is depicted as a collection of silence-encircling stones, which cannot be animated from within<sup>12</sup>. The "hard ribs" of the building remain an architectural metaphor since prayers have failed to breathe life into them, or transform them into a dwelling place for God. The incessant incursions of various forces (shadows, bats) inimical to the hallowed interior can be staved off only for a limited period of time. The fragile poise between the sacred and the profane is reminiscent of Thomas's other poems about church buildings. Whether it is grass, wind or bats, the churches are exposed to the deleterious influence of forces of nature which are nibbling away at them from without, but in this poem the failure of the congregants to animate the space from within can also be traced back to the disturbing metaphor which concludes the poem. The lines about the untenanted cross have often been quoted and commented on, since they tersely encapsulate many strands of Thomas's theology (and Christology), which once again squarely confront the paradoxes of presence and absence, faith and doubt, silence and speech, crucifixion and resurrection<sup>13</sup>. Certainly the image – which may be also a metaphor – of an untenanted cross is pregnant with hermeneutic possibilities, but diverse readings can be reduced to two main variants: the absence of Christ on the cross may suggest the factual veracity of the Resurrection, or it may serve as a powerful reminder that we live in a post-Christian era, in which the disappearance of God is a fact not only of culture, philosophy and art, but also of theology. As William Davis points out: "Even so, the image of the untenanted cross is perhaps more complex, and more enigmatic, than it at first might seem. On the simplest level, Thomas seems to be referring to the traditional Protestant cross found in churches and distinguishing it from the Roman Catholic crucifix. A 'tenant' is one who uses or occupies a place or property owned by another. If we think of the cross, symbol both of the crucifixion and the resurrection simultaneously, certainly Jesus,

---

<sup>11</sup> According to Davis, "Is it possible, for instance, that God hides from man's specific searching for him in churches either because he cannot be found there, or because he cannot be found there invariably, inevitably or exclusively – that, rather, he is only "visible" unbiddenly, outside of any particular place, and only within one's heart or mind?" W. V. Davis, *R. S. Thomas. Poetry and Theology*, Waco 2007, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> John Ward writes about the opening lines: "[...] the emptiness itself, in effect a small square yardage of the moorland air, has been netted, to incubate a greater spiritual intensity." J. P. Ward, *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, Seren 2001, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> As Justin Wintle has noticed, "The untenanted cross is beheld as a marvellously compact image for the great issues of faith and doubt." J. Wintle, *Furious Interiors. Wales, R. S. Thomas and God*, London 1996, p. 294.

as the Christ, is an appropriate tenant for this symbol, as the Roman Catholic crucifix affirms by so depicting him there. If, on the other hand, the cross is empty, untenanted, as it is in the Protestant tradition, this is not to deny the fact of the crucifixion, but to affirm the truth of the resurrection. The symbol, as symbols do, stands for a truth beyond what it suggests or symbolizes; it is a less literal, but equally valid, representation of the truth it signifies or symbolizes”<sup>14</sup>.

This may well be true, and there is no reason why one should not opt for the more bracingly orthodox, resurrection-affirming, reading, but at the same time there is no sidestepping the fact that the poem ends with the image of a lonely man who is nailing his question (like Luther once did), and “testing his faith / On emptiness” in a bleak, empty church. This dramatic image must remind us of Christ’s agonised realisation that he had been forsaken and abandoned to die. But Christians believe that the answer came three days later, not in the shape of a philosophically compelling argument, but in a far more unambiguous manner. Like any believer desperately waiting for an answer, the poet has stopped to listen, but he will never stop listening.

#### 4. “Kneeling”

“Kneeling,” the next poem to be discussed, comes from the 1968 collection *Not That He Brought Flowers*:

“Moments of great calm,  
Kneeling before an altar  
Of wood in a stone church  
In summer, waiting for the God  
To speak; the air a staircase  
For silence; the sun’s light  
Ringing me, as though I acted  
A great role. And the audiences  
Still; all that close throng  
Of spirits waiting, as I,  
For the message.  
Prompt me, God;  
But not yet. When I speak,  
Though it be you who speak  
Through me, something is lost.  
The meaning is in the waiting”<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> W. Davis, *Poetry and Theology*, op. cit., p. 48. Another insightful commentary can be found in: Elaine Shepherd, *Conceding an Absence. Images of God Explored*, New York 1996, pp. 131-133.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 199.



The title of the poem itself unequivocally locates it in the realm of religious verse. The physical act of genuflecting figures centrally in many strands of Christianity, and can be expressive of many things, such as disinterested worship but also prayer of petition or intercession; it may signal acceptance and humility but it can also be caused by a sensation of utter futility or crushing despair. The poem does not specify what exactly has prompted the speaker to go down on his knees, but it is clear that both his mind and the interior of the church are permeated by a sense of great calm and peace. In other words, it is often argued that God can speak only in silence, but in the poem the “great calm” seems to be not only a feature of the environment, which is still so that the voice of God might resonate all the more strongly, but also the inner state of the speaker himself. Interestingly, the great calm he feels is not the result of a mystical communion with God, but a state prior to such an event; rather surprisingly, the poet asks God to postpone it since “the meaning is in the waiting”, while the words “Prompt me, God; but not yet” allude to the famously flippant appeal of St. Augustine<sup>16</sup>. In the words of Rowan Williams: “The poem as a whole makes it clear that the waiting is something that is, at one level, chosen: it is what happens when the praying person refuses premature speech, waiting for the unimaginable moment when God is manifest as God, not as the end of a human process of justification, not as a performance by a human speaker. God cannot be forced to appear, even when the words we speak are good words, authorised words, words of adoration and worship”<sup>17</sup>.

“Kneeling” belongs to a vanishingly small category of religious verse which asks God to delay His self-revelation, while Christian poets are far more likely to beseech God to make Himself known to them. The Holy Sonnets of John Donne and the “Terrible Sonnets” of Gerard Manley Hopkins provide plentiful examples of such desperate pleadings. What is more, not only the meaning, but also a feeling of elation is contained in the waiting, and the poem is suffused with an overwhelming sense of serenity as if waiting was a delightful state of peaceful suspension between the triviality of pure immediacy and the ineffable fullness of complete transcendence.

---

<sup>16</sup> W. M. Merchant makes the following comment: “We carry as its background the earlier poems of the expectant worshipper in an empty church, but the conclusion in this poem is far profounder than simple revelation [...]. There is an ironic revelation – but to what a different end – of St Augustine in the words, ‘But not yet’ (‘Convert me, God, but not yet’), but the poem leads to no vision, no creedal conclusion but simply to a process, a meditative patience, a ‘waiting’”. W. M Merchant, *R. S. Thomas*, Fayetteville 1990, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> R. Williams, *Suspending the Ethical*, [in:] D. W. Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen*, Cardiff 2009, p. 211.

The setting is that of a theatre with a multitude of “spirits” waiting like an audience for some grand finale<sup>18</sup>. The air is not an incorporeal portal to a different reality, but a staircase for silence and the possibility of vertical ascension remains the prerogative of natural forces rather than a sublime version of Jacob’s ladder. The speaker feels penetrated by light, which is “ringing” him as if he became a temporarily translucent Aeolian harp. To say that it is a record of a mystical experience is perhaps too grandiose a claim to make, but what links this poem to the writings of great mystics is the emphasis it lays on passivity<sup>19</sup>. There is no irritable reaching after visions or voices, but a patient waiting, a more spiritual variety of Keats’ “negative capability”, an ability to remain suspended between the material and the metaphysical, an account of a protracted prelude to some otherwise unspecified encounter with the transcendent, as if that which is happening now and what is about to happen have coalesced into the unity of a positively ecstatic experience. It is a rare example of man’s disappearance into the humility of prayer to such an extent that he does not particularly insist on emerging on the side of vision. The interdependent waiting, silence and light reinforce each other in the aura of deliberate deferral, a willingly arrested dynamics of possible rapture into a colloquy with God, as if their fragile equilibrium could be jeopardised by the actuality of speech.

Although the aim of all prayer is some sort of tangible reciprocity, in this poem the speaker wants to cherish the frozen moment of peaceful contemplation, and prolong the inevitably ephemeral moment of what the German language describes as *Vorfreude*. According to A. M. Allchin, in this poem “We step out from the insistent horizontal line which hurries us from past to future, and begin to be aware of the present moment as a moment which is touched by eternity and thus full of the riches of eternity. And we find that this eternal presence is not as we had thought something transitory. It is something which awaits us, which we find time and time again when we thought we had lost it; or better which is always there to disclose itself to us”<sup>20</sup>. For once, the fact of God’s ungraspability is a source of joy and not anguish. Paradoxically, waiting, though conceptually but a preamble to true communion, is both waiting for, and being in the presence of, the Other.

Many readers will be intrigued by “the God” in line four. The use of the definite article is rather puzzling as it is not followed by a clause which might justify its unorthodox application. It is made even stranger by the reappearance of the word

---

<sup>18</sup> According to Elaine Shepherd, “The components in the scene are itemised with the precision and clarity of a set of stage directions”, E. Shepherd, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> John Powell Ward suggests that: “The pastoral vicar moves perceptibly towards the mystic. The echo of Augustine merges with the necessary stance of a twentieth century man. Like Simon Weil and Beckett’s tramps, for this period at least, Thomas waits.” (J. Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, op. cit., p. 90).

<sup>20</sup> A.M. Allchin, *Emerging: A Look at Some of R. S. Thomas’ More Recent Poems*, “Theology”, 683: 1978, p. 106.

“God” several lines later, where it is no longer accompanied by the definite article as if linguistic subtleties were half hinting at the possibility of polytheistic confusion<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps by writing about “the God” the poet implies that once the transcendent is “translated” into speech, it becomes reduced to one specific deity, thus compromising its own ineffable otherness? Consequently, the text intimates that the real deity is the truly elusive God of the prophets, whom theology has been ineffectively trying to pin down with an intellectual formula, or a sufficiently sophisticated definition of the divine, so as to anchor him safely in the realm of the definable in order to make sure that the restless mind and the restless heart can find an illusory comfort of having grasped the attributes of God. Thomas, by contrast, has little interest in the God of philosophers and theologians. His is an unpredictable (but predictably inscrutable) God, who transcends the delimiting framework of mutually exclusive categories which predicate our thinking.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me sound a slightly more personal note at the end of these deliberations. I believe that the poems discussed here show religious verse at its very best, which is to say poetry imperceptibly and seamlessly morphing into prayer. What is more, they fall into the category of prayer regardless of whether they technically rely on the rhetorical device of apostrophe. Even those among them which do not turn directly to God, instead probing the thorny paradoxes of God’s paradoxically simultaneous presence and absence are an attempt to establish some form of communication with the elusive Other. Thomas once said in an interview: “One of the advantages and the challenges of living in a country parish as a priest is the silence and the loneliness, and one has spent quite a lot of time in small churches on one’s knees, seeking for God, trying to establish contact and being rewarded by silence, and a feeling of absence, because it is we who are in him rather than he who is in any of our buildings or traps”<sup>22</sup>. There is certainly no sarcasm in saying that one is “rewarded” by silence. Thomas makes it clear that silence is not God’s refusal to speak to man, but a space in which one can contemplate His infinite otherness. As one of the finest commentators on Thomas’s poetry has remarked: “Who is it who ever saw God? Whoever heard him speak? We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God. But that was never a bar to anyone seeking to come into contact with Him. That is what prayer is”<sup>23</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> The line is particularly difficult to interpret for somebody whose native linguistic furniture contains no convenient handles on the use of articles, and who must remain at least to some extent ignorant of the more excitingly subtle nuances of their usage.

<sup>22</sup> [In:] Davis, *Poetry and Theology*, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> B. Morgan, *Strangely Orthodox. R. S. Thomas and his Poetry of Faith*, Llandysul 2006, p. 17.

### **Abstract / Summary:**

This essay tries to analyse a handful of poems by the Welsh poet Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000) in an attempt to explore some of the ambiguities and ambivalences with which Thomas's poetry is riddled. His work focused either on Wales and Welsh people, often in a distinctly caustic manner, or on the challenges religion and faith must confront today. Many of his poems feature descriptions of churches, chapels and other places of worship; these are usually secluded buildings lying in half-deserted villages, rather than the imposing cathedrals and magnificent abbeys of great cities. The churches and chapels which appear in his verse have the double status of official places of worship but also of locations in which a far more intimate communion with the divine can be forged. These prevailingly empty places with their stark interior, dim lights, resonant silence and an air of Protestant frigidity can be treated as objective correlatives of faith, a stony *analogon* of the modern man's spiritual plight, a tangible symbol of religion's demise.

The problem signalled in the title of this article has appeared in critical works on Thomas, as well as occasional elucidations of his work, but so far there has been no single scholarly article of substantial length which would focus solely on this issue. While, for reasons of time and space, this essay makes no claims to exhaustiveness, it has the ambition of being an important contribution to literary criticism in the realm of contemporary religious verse. The methods used are those of orthodox literary criticism, the core of which lies in close reading of the text and remaining alert to both shades of meaning of words used by the poet as well as structural aspects of the text which make poetry so rich in hermeneutic possibilities.

### **Key words:**

Church, chapel, faith, God, kneel, pray, silence,

### **Polish title / Tytuł po polsku:**

*Kościół i kaplice Ronalda Stuarta Thomasa*

### **Abstrakt (Streszczenie) po polsku / Abstract (Summary) in Polish:**

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą analizy kilku utworów walijskiego poety Ronalda Stuarta Thomasa (1913-2000). Wieloznaczna i złożona twórczość Thomasa dotyczyła głównie Walii i jej mieszkańców, których poeta zwykle przedstawiał w bardzo krytyczny sposób. Równie często opisywał on wyzwania, jakie w dzisiej-

szym świecie czekają na wiarę i religię. Niektóre wiersze Thomasa zawierają opisy kościołów, kaplic oraz innych miejsc kultu; zazwyczaj są to osamotnione budynki leżące w na poły opuszczonych wioskach raczej niż imponujące katedry i okazałe opactwa wielkich miast. Owe kościoły i kaplice pełnią podwójną rolę – są to oficjalne miejsca kultu, lecz również przestrzeń umożliwiającą nawiązanie bardziej intymnej relacji z tym, co boskie. Ciemne i opustoszałe wnętrza tych miejsc oraz panująca w nich atmosfera „protestanckiego” zimna każą traktować je jako swego rodzaju obiektywny korelat wiary, kamienny *analogon* duchowych rozterek człowieka wiary w dzisiejszym świecie, czy nawet jako namacalny symbol schyłku religii.

Zagadnienie zasygnalizowane w tytule tego artykułu było niejednokrotnie podejmowane w krytycznych opracowaniach poezji Thomasa, lecz jak dotąd nie doczekało się żadnego studium poświęconego wyłącznie temu problemowi. Z powodu braku miejsca i czasu niniejszy esej z pewnością nie może rościć sobie pretensji do wyczerpania tematu, jednak ma nadzieję być przyczynkiem w dyskusji na temat współczesnej poezji religijnej. Narzędzia metodologiczne użyte przez autora to tradycyjne instrumentarium hermeneutyczne, które przede wszystkim kładzie nacisk na uważne wczytanie się w tekst oraz dokładną analizę jego warstwy semantycznej oraz strukturalnej.

### **Słowa-klucze / Key words in Polish:**

kościół, kaplica, wiara, Bóg, klęczeć, modlitwa, cisza

### **Bibliography:**

#### **Primary bibliographical sources:**

**Thomas R. S.**, “Two Chapels” (in): *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose*. S. Anstey (ed.), Seren, Bridgend 1995, p. 43-47.

**Thomas R. S.**, *Collected Poems. 1945-1990*, Phoenix, London 2000, pp. 560.

**Thomas, M. W.**, *R. S. Thomas. Serial Obsessive*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2013, pp. 335.

#### **Secondary bibliographical sources:**

**Allchin A. M.**, *Emerging: A Look at Some of R. S. Thomas' More Recent Poems*, “Theology LXXXI”, 683: 1978, p. 352-61.

**Davis W. V.**, *R. S. Thomas, Poetry and Theology*, Baylor University Press, Waco 2007, pp. 219.

**Herbert Z.**, *The Collected Prose. 1948-1998*, A. Váles (ed.), Harper Collins Publishers, New York 2010, pp. 736.

**McGill W. J.**, *Poets' Meeting. George Herbert, R.S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, Jefferson 2004, pp. 219.

**Merchant W. M.**, *R. S. Thomas*, The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville 1990, pp. 77.

**Morgan B.**, *Strangely Orthodox. R. S. Thomas and his Poetry of Faith*, Gomer Press, Llandysul 2006, pp. 64.

**Morris B.**, *The Topography of R. S. Thomas*, "The Little Review", 13/14: 1980, p. 5-11.

**Phillips D. Z.**, *Poet of the Hidden God Meaning and Mediation in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene 1986, pp. 204.

**Pike D. E.**, *Two Poets Visit Maesyronen* at: <http://daibach-welldigger.blogspot.com/2013/03/two-poets-visit-maesyronen.html> [accessed: 23.05.2014]

**Shepherd E.**, *R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence: Images of God Explored*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1996, pp. 232.

**Ward J. P.**, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, Seren, Bridgend 2001, pp. 242.

**Williams R.**, "Suspending the Ethical" (in): *Echoes to the Amen. Essays after R. S. Thomas*, D. W. Davies (ed.) University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2009, p. 206-219.

**Wintle J.**, *Furious Interiors. Wales, R. S. Thomas and God*, Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., London 1996, pp. 492.

### Information about the Author:

### Information about the author in English:

**Przemysław Michalski PhD**, studied at the Department of English at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (1990-1996). His M.A. thesis concerned the problem of *Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (1996). In 2005 he defended his doctoral dissertation on the problem of mysticism in the Hopkin's poetry (*Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Jagiellonian University, Cracow 2005). He is currently affiliated at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, Faculty of Philology, Institute of Modern Languages, Department of English, where he works as assistant professor. His main interests include comparative literature, literary criticism, modern religious poetry (metaphysical poetry), as well as parallels and intersections between literature, philosophy and religion. E-mail: [przemyslawmichalski\[at\]wp.pl](mailto:przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl)

### Informacja o autorze po polsku / Information about the Author in Polish:

**Przemysław Michalski, PhD**, doktor nauk humanistycznych w zakresie literaturoznawstwa, studiował w Zakładzie Anglistyki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Krakowie (1990-1996). Jego praca magisterska dotyczyła problemu Kierkegaardowskiego pojęcia rozpacz w wybranej poezji Thomasa Stearns'a Eliota (*Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot* [Kierkegaardowskie pojęcie rozpacz w wybranej poezji T. S. Eliota] (Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków 1996). W 2005 roku obronił dysertację doktorską na temat problemu mistyki w poezji G. M. Hopkinsa (*Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* [Elementy mistyki w poezji Gerarda Manley'a Hopkins'a], Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków 2005). Obecnie jest afiliowany w Uniwersytecie Pedagogicznym imienia Komisji Edukacji Narodowej (Kraków), gdzie pracuje jako adiunkt na Wydziale Filologicznym w Instytucie Języków Nowożytnych, w Katedrze Literatury Anglojęzycznej [Anglistyki]. Jego główne zainteresowania dotyczą literaturoznawstwa porównawczego [komparatystryki literatury], krytyki literackiej, nowoczesnej poezji religijnej (metafizycznej), jak również paraleli i punktów wspólnych [przecięć] pomiędzy literaturą, filozofią i religią. E-mail: [przemyslawmichalski\[at\]wp.pl](mailto:przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl)

[Polski przekład: Marek Mariusz Tytko]

### Informace o autorovi v češtině / Information about the Author in Czech:

**Przemysław Michalski, PhD**, doktor humanitních věd v oblasti literární vědy, studoval na katedře anglistiky Jagellonské univerzity v Krakově (1990–1996), kde obhájil magisterskou práci *Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot* („Kierkegaardovské pojetí zoufalství na vybraných ukázkách poezie Thomase Stearnse Eliota“, Jagellonská univerzita, Krakov 1996). V r. 2005 obhájil doktorskou disertaci *Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* („Prvky mystiky v poezii Gerarda Manleyho Hopkinse“). V současné době působí na Pedagogické univerzitě Národní vzdělávací komise v Krakově, kde působí jako adjunkt na katedře anglistiky Ústavu moderních jazyků Filologické fakulty. Jeho hlavní zájmy se týkají srovnávací literatury, literární kritiky, současné religiózní (metafyzické) poezie, paralel a společných prvků mezi literaturou, filozofií a náboženstvím. E-mail: przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl

[Český překlad: Libor Martinek]

### Informácie o autorovi v slovenčine / Information about the Author in Slovak:

**Przemysław Michalski, PhD**, doktor humanitných vied v oblasti literárnej vedy. Študoval na Katedre anglistiky Jagellonskej univerzity v Krakove (1990 – 1996), kde obhájil magisterskú prácu *Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot* („Kierkegaardovské poňatie zúfalstva na vybraných ukážkach poézie Thomase Stearnse Eliota“, Jagellonská univerzita, Krakov 1996). V r. 2005 obhájil dizertačnú prácu *Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* („Prvky mystiky v poézii Gerarda Manleyho Hopkinse“). V súčasnej dobe pôsobí na Pedagogickej univerzite Národnej vzdelávacej komisie v Krakove ako odborný asistent na Katedre anglistiky Ústavu moderných jazykov Filologickej fakulty. Jeho hlavné záujmy sa týkajú porovnávacej literatúry, literárnej kritiky, súčasnej religióznej (metafyzickej) poézie, paralel a spoločných prvkov medzi literatúrou, filozofiou a náboženstvom. E-mail: przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl

[Slovenský preklad: Ivica Hajdučeková]

### Информация об авторе по-русски / Справка об авторе на русском языке / Information about the Author in Russian:

**Пшемислав Михальский** – PhD, доктор наук, хабилитованный (литературоведение). Изучал английскую филологию в Ягеллонском Университете в Кракове (1990-1996). Его магистерская диссертация посвящена кьеркегоровскому понятию отчаяния в лирике Т. С. Элиота (*Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, 1996). В 2005 г. защитил докторскую диссертацию о проблеме мистицизма в поэзии Дж. М. Хопкинса (*Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Ягеллонский Университет, Краков, 2005). В настоящее время – адъюнкт в Педагогическом Университете имени Комиссии Народного Образования в Кракове, на филологическом факультете в Институте новых языков, на кафедре англистики (англоязычных литератур). Научные интересы относятся к сфере сравнительного литературоведения, литературной критики, новейшей религиозной (метафизической) поэзии, а также параллелей и точек соприкосновения литературы, философии и религии. E-mail: przemyslawmichalski[at]wp.pl

[Русский перевод: Надежда Георгиевна Колошук]

**Інформація про автора / Довідка про автора українською мовою /  
Information about the Author in Ukrainian:**

**Пшемислав Михальський** – PhD, доктор наук, габілітований (літературознавство). Вивчав англійську філологію в Ягеллонському Університеті у Кракові (1990-1996). Його магістерська праця присвячена к'єркегорівському поняттю відчаю у ліриці Т. С. Еліота (*Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, 1996). У 2005-му захистив докторську дисертацію про проблему містицизму в поезії Дж. М. Гопкінса (*Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Ягеллонський Університет, Краків, 2005). Наразі – ад'юнкт у Педагогічному Університеті імені Комісії Народної Освіти у Кракові, на філологічному факультеті Інституту нових мов, на кафедрі англістики (англомовних літератур). Наукові інтереси стосуються царини порівняльного літературознавства, літературної критики, новітньої релігійної (метафізичної) поезії, а також паралелей і пунктів дотичності літератури, філософії та релігії. E-mail: [przemyslawmichalski@wp.pl](mailto:przemyslawmichalski@wp.pl)

[Український переклад Надія Георгіївна Колошук]