

“Articulate to the End”:
R. S. Thomas and the Crisis of Language

DAVID LLOYD

IN R. S. THOMAS'S poetry published to date, language has increasingly emerged as a primary preoccupation, to the extent that poem after poem in his latest collections — *Frieze* and *Mass for Hard Times*, both published in 1992, and *No Truce With the Furies*, published in 1995 — tackles what Thomas has termed, in his poem “Too Late?,” the “Crisis of Language” (*Frieze* 11). The poem “Nativity,” from *Mass for Hard Times*, portrays “five hundred poets” waiting “for the poem,” which “passe[s] them by on its way to oblivion” (21). In “Symbols,” from *No Truce With the Furies*, Thomas laments that,

It is true, our larynxes
are becoming rusty. The computer
can do things as fast,
faster. Vocabulary toils
breathlessly in the wake of contrived
objects. (38)

“It is too late for language,” Thomas declares in the poem “Too Late?” (*Frieze* 11); he asserts in “Polar” that “The mind knows . . . that speech failed from the beginning” (*Frieze* 14). The poem “One Day” announces that the day will arrive when “language / shall expose its sores, / begging for the alms / we can not give” (*Mass* 19). These and other poems in Thomas's recent collections explore the inadequacy of language as a tool for addressing the human situation in an era inhospitable to art.

Thomas's relationship to language is itself multi-faceted. First, the poet's well-known political commitment to the establishment of a Welsh-speaking, independent Wales creates ambivalence towards the English language, his mother tongue, an ambivalence explored most fully in his essay, “The Creative

Writer's Suicide." The disjunction between his Welsh nationalism and his vocation as an English-language poet results in what Thomas terms a "cleavage of personality" ("Probings" 42), which takes its extreme form in the writer's revulsion from the actual medium of poetic composition. Thomas's 1964 lecture *Words and the Poet* directly addresses his conflicted attitude toward the language of his upbringing, education, and poetry:

One of the first questions that arises for a Welshman face to face with the English tongue is: What is my true feeling for these words? Am I fascinated, repelled, resentful? I think we will find that the manner in which the contribution is made will vary according to the writer's attitude toward his medium. Where he is a willing exile, associating his native speech and locality with a backward stage in man's progress towards the English millennium, he will delight in the newly-discovered riches of English words. Where he has a real love and respect for his native traditions, he will regret his enforced separation from them, and resent the necessity of having to use words, which to all intents and purposes are those of a foreign people. . . . I mention that as personally applicable. (18)

In addition to acknowledging the political and cultural complexities of Thomas's attitude to language, one must take into account his vocation as a priest of the Church in Wales. Prayer, for Thomas, is a form of words closely related to poetry; indeed, many of his poems reveal prayer-like characteristics, or make allusion to the prayer form. For R. S. Thomas "the word" carries a weight of sacred, as well as literary, meaning: it is God's word, uttered at the beginning of all things and thus endowing human language with particular significance. "The chief distinction of a human has always been language," Thomas states in a 1972 interview, adding that "literature . . . is the supreme human statement" ("Probings" 34). In some poems, Thomas in fact appears to conflate literature and religion into a single "sacrament of the imagination," as in this stanza from "Homage to Wallace Stevens":

Blessings, Stevens;
 I stand with my back to grammar
 at an altar you never aspired
 to, celebrating the sacrament
 of the imagination whose high-priest
 notwithstanding you are. (*No Truce with the Furies* 62)

Thomas's poems are suffused with explicit and subtle references to a great variety of Welsh, English, Irish and American poets, whose words Thomas echoes, quotes, paraphrases, and parodies. And yet, although Thomas demonstrates a great knowledge of, and love for, modern poetry, he has expressed dissatisfaction with the modern willingness to replace resonant, crafted language with a simpler, more accessible vocabulary, a position evident in the poet/priest's resistance to the changes during his lifetime in liturgy and the translation of the Scriptures. In his autobiography "Neb" — written in Welsh in the third person and translated as "No One" — Thomas reflects on these changes:

A commission on the liturgy had been busy considering changes to the services and retranslating the Scriptures. Since Welsh was for him a second language, R. S. did not feel that he was qualified to assess these new versions. But it was a different matter where English was concerned. For good or ill, this was his mother tongue and the language he had to write his poetry in. He wasn't content at all. He therefore clung to the King James Bible and to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, considering the language of both to be indescribably superior . . . (88)

In the poem "Bleak Liturgies," Thomas ponders the outcome of this deterioration of sacred language in terms of the relationship between expression and belief:

Shall we revise the language?
And in revising the language
will we alter the doctrine?

Do we seek to plug the hole
in faith with faith's substitute
grammar? (*Mass* 59)

Related to the perceived decline in the quality of sacred language is Thomas's conviction that the modern era has promoted the ascendancy of dubious, technologically-oriented "arts." "Literature is on the way / out" Thomas exclaims in "One Life":

The still, small voice
 is that of Orpheus looking
 over his shoulder at a dream
 fading. At the mouth
 of the cave is the machine's
 whirlwind, hurrying the new
 arts in (*Mass* 56)

These few lines conflate the myth of Orpheus losing Eurydice by looking over his shoulder with the Old Testament story of Elijah hearing the "still small voice" of the Lord: "And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind" (King James Version, 1 Kings 19:11-12). Instead of hearing the Lord's "still small voice" at the mouth of the cave, the poem's speaker hears the "machine's whirlwind" — the ominous harbinger of a frenetic new god.

One way in which Thomas reacts to this perceived "crisis of language" is through his recent appropriation of the diction of consumer culture. Readers familiar with Thomas's poetry will be aware of his past appropriation of the language of science and technology, evident in his watershed 1972 collection, *H'm*, but continuing on to the present. Poems published since 1972 commonly include references to such things as "viruses," "molecules," "electrons," "leptons," "quarks," "pulsars," or "quasars."¹ Thomas's 1992 collection *Frieze*, however, shifts focus from the vocabulary of science and technology to that of the consumerist, advertising, and business culture of the industrialized West, in poems with titles such as "Economy," "Numbers," and "Capitalism." A quick glance through *Frieze* reveals frequent references to "inflation," "the proletariat," "the dollar," "pesetas," "consumers," "advertisements," "invoices," "writs," the "banker," and the "cheque-book."² Thomas injects into poems of *Frieze* addressing the human capacity for art, poetry, and spiritual conviction, fragments of the seemingly unrelated and intractable language of materialistic culture. This technique is evident in "Contemporary," the final poem of *Frieze*:

So we come to articulated
 man, the letterless word
 life pronounces in place
 of an earlier version
 of him that was rejected.

I have seen him going
 without joy to his employment,
 without joy to the reproduction
 of his species, reading
 the genes' code, incurious

of an intention. He is the man
 of spare parts, gesticulating
 on our horizons, his art
 of nylon, his poetry computed
 by a silicon muse.

He is the notation of a new
 scale to which he is marching
 to no end and in no direction
 other than the recession
 of the incredible, but marching, marching. (38)

"Contemporary" presents a speaker who is distinct from, but observant of, a human subject.³ Thomas distinguishes between the contemporary "every man," the poem's "he," who represents all humanity; and the "I," "we" and "our" of the poem, the speaker, who possesses a global perspective — one might say the perspective of the Earth itself. The poem's first-person speaker is not confined to contemporary time, but projects a consciousness of all the millennia that have passed during the earth's evolution. This Blakean personification of Earth considers "man" as a being brought forth by the processes of "life," yet oddly set apart from life, from the speaker and, ironically, even from the reader.

After millions of years of evolutionary development, we (the speaker and the reader) arrive, at the beginning of the poem, "to articulated / man": man capable of speech, but also man as a unified being, a creature of articulated bones, joints, ligaments, tendons. He is, from the broad and timeless perspective of the poem's speaker, not "noble in reason," "infinite in faculty," "in action . . . like an angel" — Hamlet's words (II. ii.

466-467) — but rather a “letterless word” that life pronounces, one among the millions of words that have been, are being, and will be pronounced during life’s long disquisition. The poem’s opening stanza refers to the evolutionary process by which modern humankind as a species, *homo sapiens*, “replaced” earlier versions that had reached an end on the tree of life.

Despite the unique gift of articulation, the contemporary human moves through life’s experiences lacking, according to the poem, three crucial qualities: joy, curiosity, purpose. To launch this critique of human deficiencies, Thomas raids the vocabulary of contemporary consumer culture. While Thomas is of course not the first poet to jolt a reader with poems including consciously non-poetic, banal language, he undertakes a qualitatively different linguistic appropriation. Rather than reproducing the language as actually spoken by sales agents or business people, or as written on billboards or in newspaper advertisements, he selects bits of the deadened vocabulary, detaching words from their original contexts to provide a radically altered context *in the poem*, one that invests the words with far different, and far richer, meanings than they had possessed — a technique all the more striking in that, as Walford Davies puts it, “the linguistically fastidious Thomas so rarely uses slang” (67).⁴ In the second line of the third stanza of “Contemporary,” for example, the speaker designates contemporary man as “the man / of spare parts,” one who produces, at least in the industrialized west, not what is necessary or sufficient or whole, but what is excessive and fragmented, the “spare parts” lying about an appliance repair shop or a mechanic’s garage. “Spare parts” is a phrase one associates with machines and with shops employing workers to fix machines. Thus the phrase makes indirect reference to *the machine*: R. S. Thomas’s well-known poetic shorthand for what he terms the “robotic takeover” of technology (“Probings” 37).⁵ By defining contemporary man as “a man of spare parts,” the poem’s speaker suggests that humans have become mere adjuncts to the machine, mechanics who catalog parts in stock and keep a wrench handy, so the machine can continue, uninterrupted, its smooth functioning.

"Spare parts" is a stock phrase which in its usual context yields a specific and banal meaning: we glide over the words if we even recognize them on shop signs or in catalogues, having no reason to pause. By configuring the words in a poem addressing the condition of contemporary humankind, Thomas causes them to accrue levels of reference beyond the primary meaning of "extra machine parts," and so does indeed ask the reader to pause, and to consider. The word "spare," while denoting items not currently in use, also refers to the quality of being lean, scanty, or limited. And the word "parts" can refer not only to manufactured objects, but also to human qualities, talents, and abilities. Man, in the poem "Contemporary," is neither a "man of many parts" nor the Homeric "man of many ways"⁶; rather, he is "the man / of spare [or lean] parts," lacking the fullness that could be realized through a capacity for joy, curiosity, and purpose. While the words "spare parts" retain their root association with the context of the machine and the mechanic, they expand within the fresh context of the poem into a richly complex and ironic depiction of the plight of contemporary humankind, now — in Thomas's view — subservient to the machine. According to the poem's opening line, contemporary man *is* "articulated": a whole creature, and the only creature capable of speech. But in stark contrast to this depiction, the poem's third stanza presents him "gesticulating on our horizons" — flaying his arms at the edge of the earth, not formulating speech with purpose and clarity at the center of human endeavor. His "art of nylon" is cheap and synthetic rather than artful; "his poetry [is] computed / by a silicon muse."

The poem's final stanza introduces a new image of contemporary humanity, one based on music:

He is the notation of a new
scale to which he is marching
to no end and in no direction
other than the recession
of the incredible, but marching, marching.

The word "notation" refers to a system of symbols, such as those in a musical composition. But instead of a fluid and original

work of art, this notation produces a rigid scale, notes at fixed intervals making no pattern but their own monotonous and endless short steps, emphasized through the repeated verb “marching.” Thomas suggests that the contemporary period differs from the past in being peculiarly narrow, uniform, and small. “Scale” can mean a series of musical notes, but it also refers to a change in size; the “new scale” of the modern period reflects a diminished size as man becomes a tiny figure “gesticulating on [the] horizons.” The word “marching” suggests not only the militarism of the modern period — the age of world wars and nuclear threat — but also the tendency towards worldwide cultural uniformity, an issue of particular urgency for a man of Thomas’s convictions about nationalism and Welsh-language culture.

In the poem “Contemporary” there is “no end” and “no direction” in sight for marching humanity, other than “the recession / of the incredible.” Given the inclusion in this poem and in the collection’s previous poems of language fragments unmoored from the world of advertising, consumerism, and capitalism, the word “recession” commands attention. “Recession,” of course, refers to an acknowledged cost of capitalism: intermittent periods of economic decline, resulting in job loss, lowered wages, and an increase in the “misery index.” Thomas recontextualizes the word “recession” so that it links competitive capitalism with the progressive loss of what makes life worth living: the wondrous, the miraculous, the “in-credible.” While the incredible that recedes as humanity marches on is not specifically defined by Thomas, the context suggests that art, poetry, and spirituality are among the unvalued dimensions of human experience that we are leaving behind. “The incredible” thus stands in ironic contrast, according to Thomas, to what *is* given credence in Western contemporary culture: spare parts, synthetic art, a silicon muse. In expressing a vision of the modern world in retreat from artistic and spiritual values, the poem “Contemporary” looks back to earlier poems in which Thomas treats that subject, such as the untitled poem on page 57 of *Counterpoint*, in which Thomas describes

the moon come to its fifteenth phase
 from whose beauty and madness
 men have withdrawn these last days,
 hand on heart, to its far
 side of sanity and darkness.

One cannot deny that "Contemporary" offers a pessimistic view of humanity's present and future, as it postulates a lockstep march into oblivion. But a full understanding of this poem and others like it in the R. S. Thomas canon must also acknowledge an optimistic dimension, for its formal strategies perform a daring act of rescue, an act almost of linguistic redemption. Most of us are familiar with the process by which the vocabulary of advertising and especially of television invades contemporary speech, insinuating itself even into our most intimate and heart-felt expression. "The young ones professed / love, embarrassing themselves / with their language," Thomas writes in "Eschatology" (*Mass*, 48). But the poet works to reverse that imperative, at least within the realm of the poem, launching retaliatory strikes by re-contextualizing and reinvigorating the language of materialist concerns, so that it becomes part of an "incredible" and unvalued thing, a poem, and — more than that — a poem that opposes and transcends the anti-poetic context from which its words — or some of its words — are drawn. In this sense, writing a poem such as "Contemporary" is a subversive act that undertakes the role Ezra Pound once demanded of poetry: that it "purify the dialect of the tribe." Thomas movingly expresses this combination of pessimism and optimism concerning the human fate and human language in his interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie: "We must remain articulate to the end . . . I like to think of man, even on his last day on this planet, gazing out into the universe and speaking words of love and beauty in his native tongue" ("Probings" 34).

NOTES

- 1 See Deane on Thomas's use of the language of science and technology.
- 2 In his interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie, Thomas deliberately links technology and capitalism: "It is of applied science as manifest in technology that I am suspicious with its reductionist tendencies, and positively dislike its

- prostitution to the money power. So it is not pure science and religion that are irreconcilable, but a profit-making attitude to all technology" ("Probings" 36).
- ³ Readers will recognize the technique of presenting a disengaged but observant narrator from as far back as the early Prytherch poems, such as "A Peasant," from *The Stones of the Field*.
- ⁴ In the "Probings" interview, however, Thomas advocates attention to everyday speech, asking, "what are we to make of a poetry that cannot embrace some scientific knowledge and that is incapable of using words which are daily on the lips of a growing section of the population?" (37).
- ⁵ "The Machine" has occupied a central place in Thomas's poetry since the publication of *H'm* in 1972.
- ⁶ This is Richard Lattimore's translation of "polytropos," Odysseus's epithet, from *The Odyssey of Homer*, line 1 (27).

WORKS CITED

- Davies, Walford. "R. S. Thomas and Dylan Thomas." *The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty*. Ed. M. Wynn Thomas. Bridgend, Wales: Seren Books, 1993.
- Deane, Patrick. "The Unmanageable Bone: Language in R. S. Thomas's Poetry." *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas*. Ed. William V. Davies. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1933.
- Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Thomas, R. S. *Counterpoint*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990.
- . "The Creative Writer's Suicide." *Autobiographies*. Ed. Jason Walford Davies. London: Dent, 1997.
- . *Frieze*. Schondorf am Ammersee, Germany: Babel, 1992.
- . *H'm*. London: Macmillan, 1972.
- . *Mass for Hard Times*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992.
- . "No One." *Autobiographies*. Trans. Jason Walford Davies. London: Dent, 1997.
- . *No Truce With the Furies*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995.
- . "Probings: An interview with R. S. Thomas." Ned Thomas and John Barnie. *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas*. Ed. William V. Davies. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1993.
- . *The Stones of the Field*. Carmarthen, Wales: Druid, 1946.
- . *Words and the Poet*. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1964.