**R.S.Thomas and Søren Kierkegaard**

The Welsh poet and priest, R.S.Thomas famously held to a strict routine for most of his working life. In the afternoons he apparently gardened and did domestic things, in the evenings he visited his parishioners. In his poem, *Present,* he writes ‘I engage with philosophy/in the morning’.

Of the philosophers he admits to reading, it is Søren Kierkegaard who stands out, the one he affectionately calls ‘the Dane’ in *Fathoms:* ‘with the Dane’s/help, from bottomless fathoms, I dredge up the truth’. No doubt, this is partly because Kierkegaard is not a very typical philosopher. Kierkegaard had a distrust of abstract reason, and of science, and like Thomas, regarded Christian faith as the most important thing in human life. Kierkegaard constantly battled the towering philosophy of Hegel, which he called ‘the System’, within which everything had its place. The Dane argued instead for the importance of the individual subject, against any ‘system’, even the system of the Church. He valued, above all, the spiritual life of the individual subject, as did Thomas.

Thomas wrote a number of poems that refer to Kierkegaard. He offers us a sketch of the philospher’s lifw in his poem, *Kierkegaard.* Kierkegaard’s birth, in 1813 was, curiously, a century before Thomas’s in 1913. Thomas, characteristically, is drawn to the greyer aspects of the philosopher’s life. He picks up the stories of Kierkegaard’s gloomy childhood, which the philosopher once described as ‘unparalleled torture’. Thomas notes a ‘family that wore itself out/On its conscience’, under the aegis of Kierkegaard’s deeply religious, melancholic father, Michael. In a later poem, *S.K.*, Thomas writes of ‘Jutland, where his father,/from the Calvary of himself,/had accused God’. In *Kierkegaard,* he touches on the only meaningful love affair of the philosopher’s life, the failed relationship with Regine Olsen. Kierkegaard had proposed to her, then broke the engagement, so that he could become an author, or so that he should not become bourgeois, or so that he could draw closer to God. Much of Kierkegaard’s early philosophy, like *Either/Or,* and *Repetition,*  is influenced by the anguish of this choice. Thomas hints at the pain of loss, ‘Her hair was to be/The moonlight towards which he leaned/From darkness’. When Kierkegaard died, he left all his belongings to Olsen. The poem ends with Kierkegaard’s draining squabbles with the Danish *Corsair* newspaper - which printed mocking cartoons of him in reply - and with powerful figures in the Danish church : ‘wounded, he crawled/To the monastery of his chaste thought/To offer up his crumpled amen’. It is a poem of disappointment: a gloomy childhood, a solitary love foregone, a grumbling middle-age. There was to be no old age. Kierkegaard died suddenly in 1855, at the age of 42. For Thomas, Kierkegaard often seems to embody religious despair. In *Synopsis*, he presents a dark summary of the Dane’s vision, of the self as ‘that grey subject/of dread … /….. crossing its thousands/of fathoms’*.*

In their key attitudes to Christian faith, Thomas and Kierkegaard share crucial views, but there is at least one significant tension. Kierkegaard, in works like *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* rejects the idea that faith can be based objectively on Biblical revelation or on rational argument. Faith is primarily an inner transformation in relation to one’s sense of God. He also proposed the controversial idea that faith is essentially absurd. This idea is developed vividly in one of his most popular works, *Fear and Trembling,* based on the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. When commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham does not lapse into mere resignation at God’s will. Rather, he feels himself blessed and believes Isaac will not be lost – even, amazingly, if Isaac is sacrificed - and, indeed, Isaac is returned to him. This, says Kierkegaard, is what faith is, and it is truly absurd, a ‘leap’ as he puts it, beyond the rational. He calls Abraham a Knight of Faith, contrasting this critically – for purposes of comparisons with Thomas – with what he calls a Knight of Resignation. The latter accepts evil and suffering in the world by a kind of spiritual detachment from the world, assuming that happiness and justice are not possible in *this* world. The former, however, feel blessed in this world.

Thomas certainly shares Kierkegaard’s view that Biblical revelation cannot be treated as an objective, literal account. In his essay, *A Frame for Poetry,* he talks of revelation as metaphor, a fundamentally poetic response to the divine. Influenced by theologians like Paul Tillich, as well as Kierkegaard, Thomas always referred to God as ‘ultimate reality’, and asked ‘how shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor and symbol?’. So what then of faith?

What is striking in Thomas’s work is a recurrent mood of religious despair, although this is precisely what attracts many of his readers and appeals to critics such as Christopher Morgan, who sees this as the mark of Thomas’s distinctively contemporary spiritual experience. For Morgan, Thomas’s despair is ‘one of intense spiritual yearning’. Modern faith is seen as having despair as a proper part; we are all meant to have moved on from the pre-Enlightenment acceptance of *Death Be Not Proud*. We now have *Evans.* For Kierkegaard, though, famous despairing poems like *Evans,* or *The Airy Tomb,* would not be poems of faith. At best, they are poems of what he calls ‘infinite resignation’, in which there is no sense that in this world there can be happiness, or justice. Other poems, like *The Island,* which sardonically depict God as almost vindictive, show something less even than resignation. But for Thomas despair is not irreligious, but a key mark of a spiritual being. In his preface to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse,* he holds, ‘The ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative, and proclaims the true nature of such a being’, and points us to the apparent despair of Manley Hopkins’ *Sonnet 41,* and to Christ’s last words from the Cross.

In his work, *The Sickness Unto Death,* Kierkegaard also accepts the condition of despair as fully human and unavoidable, but sees it as a sign of spiritual weakness for which faith is the solution; despair is not seen as a part of faith. What is worst, Kierkegaard suggests, is despair characterised by ‘self-assertion’, an unwillingness to acknowledge – which Abraham does not have – one’s complete dependence on God. In *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard suggests that this is not actually an attitude he tends to find among poets, but – Abraham apart – more among shopkeers, who are seen as more capable of the humility required for complete trust in God than poets. Of one person he suspects of having faith he writes, ‘you would think he was a shopkeeper having his fling, such is his way of taking pleasure; for he is not a poet and I have sought in vain to prise out of him the secret of any poetic incommmensurabilty’. Yet Kierkegaard always admitted that, with Abraham as his mode,l he himself did not have faith but, on Kierkegaards’ terms, nor often did Thomas the poet.

But there are poems where Thomas’s anger and sense of protest does seem to soften, such as the well-known *In a Country Church, ‘*…. He kneeled long,/And saw love in a dark crown/Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree/Golden with fruit of a man’s body’. Thomas is often at prayer, seeking a God he describes as ‘hidden’. In this search he has clearly valued Kierkegaard, writing in *S.K.*

 Is prayer

not a glass that, beginning

in obscurity as his books

do, the longer we stare

into the clearer becomes

the reflection of a countenance

in it other than our own?

Thomas’s sense of a ‘hidden’ God closely mirrors Kierkegaard’s view that religious faith is essentially absurd. For Thomas, there are no objective signs of God, no sensory evidence or compelling argument; revelation is mere metaphor. Strictly speaking, the ‘evidence’, as in *Evans,* is that there is no God, that we are here alone and that we will suffer until death and oblivion. In a sense, therefore, faith in God is unreasonable, even absurd. One cannot rationally believe in a ‘hidden’ God.

In his Welsh autobiography, *Neb (No one),* Thomas does admit that ultimately only humility will suffice for a ‘wise man’. He concedes he is nothing, and tries to lean on God : ‘R.S. is no-one. He leaves it to God to decide whether he will become someone in another world’. This work, written oddly in the 3rd person, reminds us to some extent of the many pseudonyms Kierkegaard used to author his works. But what Thomas offers here is still closer to infinite resignation than to faith. What wholeness of self there will be must wait for ‘another world’. ‘Wholeness of self’ is, for Kierkegaard, the enemy of despair and is what faith brings as solution to the sickness unto death which is despair. This is a hard lesson, if lesson it is, and one that is perhaps harder for someone born in 1913 to absorb than one born a century earlier. Despite Kierkegaards’ influence, it is not clear that Thomas the poet fully absorbed it.