9 Betwixt and Between

At the end of Chapter 6, I called attention to the poems in R. S. Thomas’s work which contain the deepest religious insights. These are made up of two poems in *Song at the Year’s Turning*, one poem in *Poetry for Supper*, four poems in *Pietà*, and nine poems in *H’m*, the insights reaching maturity in this last volume. In the early volumes *The Stones of the Field* and *An Acre of Land*, it was the challenge to religious sense which dominated. And in volumes interspersed among these I have mentioned, in *The Minister*, *Tares*, *The Bread of Truth* and *Not that he Brought Flowers*, questions, difficulties and doubts reassert themselves. The struggle between belief and rebellion, between warring conceptions of God in *H’m* continues in *Laboratories of the Spirit*. The objections to certain ways of talking of God are expressed with an increased savagery, but in the poems ‘Somewhere’, ‘The Moon in Lleyn’, ‘The Flower’, ‘Hill Christmas’, ‘The Prisoner’, ‘Farming Peter’, ‘The Bright Field’, ‘Llananno’, ‘Sea-Watching’ and ‘Alive’, there is a return to the religious insights found in *H’m*. Yet, the poems which express difficulties for religion are just as powerful in *Laboratories of the Spirit* as those which express insights and, for many readers, they will no doubt make the greater impression. The volume *The Way of It* expresses these tensions too, but without the same measure of intensity.


In picking out poems from the various volumes which contain the deepest religious insights my aim is not religious apologetic. Rather, it is simply to identify the character of the hard-won religious understanding in verse which R. S. Thomas has achieved.
Neither is it my intention to suggest that these poems are better works than those which express difficulties with and protests against other religious conceptions. I have tried to comment on striking poems from each side of the tension which the poet celebrates. Indeed, it is only over against the poems of protest and rebellion that the poems of religious affirmation can be fully appreciated.

In *H'm, The Laboratories of the Spirit and Frequencies*, as we have seen, there are magnificent evocations of the tensions to which I have referred. In the other volumes, it is the questioning or protesting voice which can be heard. Keeping in mind this oscillation of mood and spirit, it comes as no surprise to find that in *Between Here and Now* (1981) it is the question rather than the protest which dominates. Affirmation recedes. Yet, in the way the poet wrestles with his questions, he casts further light on the necessary conditions which must be met if there is to be a successful mediation of religious sense in language.

If there is one heresy which stands in the way of such mediation it is the Manichean heresy – the belief that all matter is evil and that the infinite can be approached directly. What we have seen is that, if talk of the eternal is to have any sense, it must be seen in an illumination it provides or fails to provide for the temporal facts of human existence. This condition of intelligibility is emphasised again and again in the questions which the poet puts to himself in *Between Here and Now*.

R. S. Thomas’s volume is divided into two parts. In the first, each poem is a reaction to an impressionist painting in the Louvre. The second part, ‘Other Poems’, is, as I shall try to show, intimately connected with the most important issues raised in the first part. R. S. Thomas, alarmed at the increased difficulty of speaking of God, wonders whether, in his verse, something of the sense of doing so may be celebrated. It is instructive to approach R. S. Thomas’s volume by recalling Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. We remember how, for most of the poem, Keats describes scenes depicted on the urn; scenes which are celebrated there, but which are beyond all change.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;