

## A poem by R.S.Thomas

*Fishing*, not one of R.S.Thomas's best known poems, but one of his best, begins prosaically but thoughtfully with a long sentence that runs to eight lines of verse.

*Sometimes I go out with the small men  
with dark faces and let my line  
down quietly into the water*

The sentence continues, as if the line, like the fishing line, could be unreeled endlessly.

Anyone familiar with R.S.Thomas's poetry will recognise in these opening lines the sense of isolation, the difference he felt as a vicar between him and his parishioners. He was tall, they were small. They kept their thoughts to themselves behind their dark faces, dark to him if not to each other. The small men had no need of speech. The 'peasant greeting', he wrote in another poem, requires...

*No speech; the raised hand affirms  
All that is left unsaid  
By the mute tongue and the unmoistened lips*

The difference in *Fishing* is that he joins them in their silence, becomes, or tries to become, one of them.

*Sometimes I go out with the small men  
with dark faces and let my line  
down quietly into the water, meditating  
as they do for hours on end  
on the nature and destiny of fish*

The long sentence is not over yet. The meditation that is to last for hours on end, has only just begun...

*on the nature and destiny of fish,  
of how they are many and other and good  
to eat*

The implied limit on the nature of the meditations of the small men with dark faces becomes the subject of his own. His search for meaning in what they accept without question, with no need of words, his questioning, his need to articulate, his sense of difference, set him apart...

*of how they are many and other and good  
to eat, willing them by a sort of personal  
magic to attach themselves to my hook.*

The long sentence, stretching over the first two verses of this eight verse poem, is finished. The rest of the poem is made up of shorter sentences, reflecting the discontinuous, though endless, nature of R.S.Thomas's personal meditation.

The third verse begins with one short sentence, to be echoed in the fourth verse by one even shorter. 'The water is deep' in one, 'Life is short' in the other.

*The water is deep. Sometimes from far  
down invisible messages arrive.*

Line length and rhythm are the only things that distinguish R.S.Thomas's poetry from prose. He never makes use of more obviously poetic devices, such as rhyme or alliteration. He never wrote a long poem. His poems are short and spare, like trees in winter, devoid of foliage.

*Often it seems it is for more than fish  
that we seek; we wait for the  
withheld answer to an insoluble  
problem.*

The problem, perhaps, of Christian faith.

A poem called *Fishing*, written by an Anglican priest, cannot help but remind a reader brought up in the Christian tradition of the phrase in St Mark's gospel, 'fishers of men'.

*Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.*

*And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.*

*And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him.*

The biblical metaphor may have been at the back of R.S.Thomas's mind, but his own metaphor sets deliberate obstacles in the way of simplistic interpretation. 'The withheld answer to an insoluble problem' sets a higher bar than the one implied in St Mark's gospel, though not necessarily than the one actually meant by the author or understood by the poet.

The obstacles to understanding pile up, one after another, in short sentences that deliberately interrupt the flow of the poetry. Lines are split, sentences run on from line to line in a way that makes their division seem pointless...

*withheld answer to an insoluble  
problem. Life is short. The sea starts  
where the land ends; its surface  
is all flowers, but within are the  
grim inmates.*

The meditation that goes on for hours on end is about more in R.S.Thomas's mind than the destiny of fish and it goes on endlessly. The seemingly innocuous observation that 'the sea starts where the land ends' could be one of those old sayings that depend on ambiguity, making it as useful to an optimist as to a pessimist.

The sequence of sentences goes on breaking up the lines...

*grim inmates. The line trembles; mostly,  
when we would reel in the catch, there  
is nothing to see.*

What is to be seen recalls, not St Mark's gospel, but Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*...

*is nothing to see. The hook gleams, the  
smooth face creases in an obscene  
grin.*

The faith that R.S.Thomas struggled to hold onto seems to have eluded him altogether in the last verse. Just as the previous verse began with the last words of a sentence, 'grim inmates', so this begins with the last word of another. Both recall the words of Kurtz in Conrad's story.

'The horror! The horror!'

*grin. But we fish on, and gradually  
they accumulate, the bodies, in the torn  
light that is about us and the air  
echoes to their inaudible screaming.*