


Saunders Lewis, “Prayer at the End” (Gweddi’r Terfyn): A Translation and a Commentary

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Abstract

Having spent my professional career in England I am more familiar with English poetry than with Welsh and so one of my great pleasures now is reading Welsh poetry. A book I have read and re-read more than once is *The Poems of Saunders Lewis*. There the poem that has gripped me and still does is this great poem. Apparently, it received much attention when it was published - three articles by D. Z. Phillips with a reply and a note by the poet commenting on the background influences. Without returning to that, I want to note the importance of the influence. Simple though the language may be, the poem is full of philosophical and theological ideas together with a keen awareness of Biblical study.

Keywords

Saunders, Lewis, poetry, Heidegger, death, mystery

It’s an experience nobody else shares
Everyone on his own and in his own way
Owns his death
Throughout the thousands of years of human story.
It can be watched, Sometimes the moment be recognized;
It’s impossible to sympathize with anyone in that moment
When the breathing and the person together cease.
Afterwards? There’s no stretching to the afterwards only prayer
groping
How pitiful is man, how childish his imagination;
‘In my Father’s house are many mansions’.
As impoverished as we, just as earthly confused
Was his genius in the days of his kenosis.

As for us similarly we can only picture hope:
 'He sits at the right hand of God Almighty Father' -
 A general with his celebration through Rome
 With the slaughter in Persia as a creation
 Crowned Augustus, a Co-Augustus with his Father –
 How laughable are our own highest faith-statements.
 And around us remains silence and the deep void
 Into which our world one night will silently sink.
 Words cannot trace the boundaries of silence
 Nor say God meaningfully.
 One prayer remains for all, silently to go to silence.

Having¹ spent my professional career in England I am more familiar with English poetry than with Welsh and so one of my great pleasures now is reading Welsh poetry. A book I have read and re-read more than once is *The Poems of Saunders Lewis*. There the poem that has gripped me and still does is this great poem. Apparently, it received much attention when it was published – three articles by D. Z. Phillips with a reply and a note by the poet commenting on the background influences.² Without returning to that, I want to note the importance of the influence. Simple though the language may be, the poem is full of philosophical and theological ideas together with a keen awareness of Biblical study.

The background for the opening lines is the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time* Heidegger treats the problem of the person,³ saying that personal life is always something that is ahead of itself. But, he asks, what is it to understand life as complete? When we say that death is the end, have we understood what death is, that is me dying? If a man dies, he is no longer 'there' in the world. Clearly this is not an experience that I can name because the nature of personal existence is being with others. Experiencing someone else dying is the only experience I have of death. In our daily life death is something that happens every day – something the Pandemic has made all the more real for us in 2020. But it is something that happens to others and is not part of our experience. 'Someone dies every day', we say; but I am not that 'someone'. In fact that 'someone' is not anybody at all, nobody. In this way Heidegger says that we change the meaning of death from being something personal to me to being something public that occurs to others. The nature of the relation to others is something for Heidegger all-important. Someone else can represent me in many situations,

¹ An article originally published in Welsh, *Y Traethodydd*, October 2020.

² Articles in the Welsh journal, *Y Tryst*, May and June 1974.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, (SCM, London, 1962), ¶ 47, *The Possibility of Experiencing the Death of Others, and the Possibility of Getting a Whole Dasein into our Grasp*, 281-285.

however limited these number; and in that sense this other person will be myself. But when we consider the end, that is not possible. 'No one can take the *Other's* dying away from him'.⁴

Heidegger then considers our death as a loss. That it is so is all too true, but it is a loss suffered by those left behind. This does not mean that we experience the loss that is the life coming to an end. Even if it were possible for us to imagine what our death is, we have not grasped what this coming to an end is. Life as something incomplete is what we have in the personal life that comes to an end in death. As long as I live, there is always something yet to come in my history. What is this? It is not like a debt on the final instalment of a purchase agreement. Neither is it like the last stage of a fruit's ripening. Life *must* become what is left to be. So this end is not like anything else that we know as fulfilment. Again, it is not like the disappearance of something. So death reveals itself to be the most personal possibility of whatever I conceive as possibility. This has the closest relation to myself. It is also devoid of any fixed time. This is a possibility which is part of my being, an indeterminate possibility which can occur at any time: as soon as a man is born he is old enough to die.

As I said, it is abundantly clear that what is behind the opening lines is Heidegger's treatment of death; but what is more important is the fact that Saunders grasped the significance of that philosophy. 'It's an experience, everyone's', he says 'that nobody else knows anything of it'. In these words resonates not simply Heidegger's influence but what I regard as one of his great contributions to 20th century philosophy. Against the philosophical stream of the 20th century, Heidegger insists on the experiential understanding of death. Generally, what had been a starting-point and often the conclusion of treatment was Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus*: 'Death is not an event in life'.⁵ As a matter of interest that was not a novel observation; in his *Journal* Kierkegaard quotes Epicurus 'Death cannot catch me because as long as I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not'.⁶ But however true Wittgenstein's further remark that 'death is not lived through'⁷ which is to say that after I die I no longer live – this is not the whole story. Now I know that it is only in my dreams that I would be describing my funeral or witnessing it. But the very nature of dreams is that they are experiences. It is true that these are not experiences of my history; but that does not alter the propriety of calling them experiences. Heidegger's point is simply that though I shall not be here the morning after my death, my dying is

⁴ *Being and Time*, 284.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Kegan Paul, London, 1922), 6.4311.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. H. E and E. U. Hong (Indiana University Press, 1967), 726.

⁷ *Ibid.*

an experience which I had. This is why Kierkegaard condemned what he saw as the modern tendency to push death out of life; and in the poem's opening lines Saunders echoes Heidegger.

The poem's opening lines not only echo Heidegger; they show how carefully Saunders had read him, as he absorbs the experience. It is 'an experience nobody else knows'. 'Everyone on his own in his own way/ Owns his death'. As Heidegger says, the more truly our consideration of death, the clearer it is that the death of the being-coming-to- the end is – something which we do not experience – 'precisely the sort of thing which we do *not* experience'.⁸ We are not aware of the death of the other in any real sense – 'at most we are always just there alongside'.⁹ So the poet says that we can 'look at it'. Sometimes we can even note and recognize 'the moment' – as in some official announcement it will be said that someone died at 10.20 am. A real sympathy, he says, is impossible – 'It's not possible to sympathize with anyone in that moment'. As I read the words I could not but remember the phrase so often quoted from Donne's sermon – 'Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee'. In his celebrated essay on the metaphysical poets, T. S. Eliot says of Donne: 'A thought was to Donne an experience; it modified his sensibility'.¹⁰ Here Saunders grasps more than Donne. However much sensibility is modified it falls short of a real sympathy. The Victorians often spoke of a good death; but good or bad the person 'died on his own and in his own way'. Echoing Heidegger's words, 'No one can take my dying away from me'. Saunders says that no one can sympathize with anyone in that moment.

One of the first to embrace Heidegger was Sartre. It is wrong, he says, to regard death as giving my life significance. As for death 'nous mourons toujours par-dessus le marché'.¹¹ True, he says, nobody can do my dying for me; but no one can do my writing, my plumbing, any work of mine for me. Sartre's criterion, then, is that Heidegger's statement is a tautology, just as true and just as empty as saying 'Daytime is daytime'. At first glance the criticism is irrefutable, but it does not in fact refute Heidegger's argument. It is not only that tautologies are not uniform so that 'Johnson is Boris' will also be a tautology; but more importantly not all tautologies are empty of meaning. When R. S. Thomas says 'Gorse is gorse' he is making a significant statement,

Gorse is gorse
It never goes off
the gold standard, smells
warm and insinuating

⁸ *Being and Time*, 282.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1934), 287.

¹¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, (Gallimard, 1966), 592.

as a creature with fur
 Crows often musically
 in the breeze coming
 at us off a delphinium
 sea.¹²

It will not do to say that it is only what R. S. Thomas goes on to say that is non-tautologous: that is the meaning of the tautology. The first line is non-tautologous, because R. S. Thomas wants to remember the nature of gorse just as he will later remind us of the economy of Graham Sutherland's painting. In the same way Saunders and Heidegger are saying something significant. This stress on privacy is an important point. I think of Keat's famous sonnet 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'. This was no sentiment. Keats was already an apothecary and in his further studies at Guy's Hospital he had also been reading Butler's *Analogy of Religion*. With a new note of authority he reflects, I think, that awareness of the privacy of death.

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain...
 ... then on the shore
 Of the wide world I stand alone...

We note the strong emphasis on the privacy of his destiny – 'I have', 'my pen', 'my teeming brain', 'I stand alone'.

To return to Saunders' poem, the next line emphasizes the mystery that faces the experience – 'Afterwards? There is no stretching to the afterwards only prayer groping'. Only when we have the thought of death and examined its 'full ontological essence', says Heidegger, can we begin to consider the question of life after death. This is an attitude that says a great deal about the persistence of a belief in immortality within modern secularity. It is, in its way, quite specific. He's 'looking down on us', etc.. This is what Tillich calls 'the last remnant of the Christian message'.¹³ With the same sentiments that Heidegger shows, the poet eschews such talk and honestly says that all we have is 'prayer groping'. It is the same honesty of faith that we have in his picture of Jesus. A theologian reading this will perhaps applaud his Christocentricity but he will certainly note his awareness of modern Biblical study and the emphasis on kenosis. So he stresses the ignorance that Christ shared with us. I find this a most moving expression of faith.

¹² R. S. Thomas, *Too Brave to Dream: Encounters with Modern Art*, (Bloodaxe Books, Hexham, 2016), 53. Thomas, in this poem, is reflecting on the painting, Gorse by a Sea Wall, by Graham Sutherland.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, (James Nisbett, Welwyn, 1964), 437.

The limitation of Jesus' knowledge as human is all too evident for the poet in *our* faith-statements about him. It is only in pictures that we express our hope which is Christ – pitiful pictures which are laughable compared with the seriousness of our hope. We conceive it as some kind of Roman dream, describing Christ as some Roman general on his triumphal march through the city, and now being called '*divus*'; he's a god and further placed as a fellow-god with the Father. Of this, the first thing to be noted is that it reminds us that religious language is not literal, and so Saunders points to the fact that we cannot but picture and that it is not any failure to find the right language. Quite a different matter, however, is the failure to understand the need to understand it as pictorial. The mocking reference to 'sitting at the right hand of the Father' is a far cry from the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The final lines of the poem speak of the contrast between the childish talk of the seriousness of the end and what it calls for. That is not talk but silence. Strangely, Saunders' words 'the deep void /Into which our world one night will silently sink' reminds me of what Wittgenstein went on to say 'in death... the world does not change, but ceases'.¹⁴ However, it is here mystics who influence Saunders – a healthy influence. 'Mysticism', said Baron von Hügel, 'is pure religion'. When Saunders says 'we can't say God properly', I think of Eckhardt (interestingly a figure condemned by the Pope in 1329). Eckhardt's aim was to fuse the dialectics of orthodoxy with the intimacy of religious feeling. His frequent quotations of St Thomas could in that way be said to be a recreation of 'the Master's' faith. His stress on the distinction between Divinity and God and on the prevenience of grace seem to me to be what Saunders is talking of when he says that at the end we come to the receptivity of silence. I think of Kierkegaard's comment that prayer is talking that leads to silence.¹⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem *The Habit of Perfection* has the same thought;

Elected Silence sing to me
 And beat upon my whorlèd ear
 Pipe me to pastures still and be
 The music that I care to hear.

¹⁴ *Tractatus*, 6.431 (Ogden's translation).

¹⁵ See my discussion, 'Kierkegaard on Prayer', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 98 No. 1077 (September 2017), 501-509.

To my mind, a positive lesson of 'Prayer at the end' is that of silence. Only in such silence can we glean what another great Welsh poet, Gwyn Thomas, calls 'the scheme that is beyond understanding'.

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