“This is what Art could do”: An Exercise in Exegesis — R. S. Thomas’s Souillac: Le Sacrifice d’Abraham

William V. Davis
Baylor University

You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
You know and do not know, that acting is suffering,
And suffering action.

... But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent...

... that the wheel my turn and still
Be forever still.

— T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

Throughout his long career, R. S. Thomas, the contemporary Welsh poet and Anglican priest, has frequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, been drawn to theological themes. Usually, however, Thomas has taken a philosophic approach to such themes or he has dealt with them indirectly or in general terms. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising to find him writing about a specific Biblical text rather directly in his poem

Souillac: Le Sacrifice d’Abraham (Collected Poems 147):

And he grasps him by the hair
With innocent savagery.
And the son’s face is calm;
There is trust there.

And the beast looks on.
This is what art could do,
Interpreting faith
With serene chisel.
The resistant stone
Is quiet as our breath,
And is accepted.

Thomas’s poem is, of course, based on the well-known story in Genesis 22:1-13, which is often referred to as “the testing of Abraham.” The Biblical text reads:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And