

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

THREE POETICAL PRAYER-MAKERS  
OF THE ISLAND OF BRITAIN

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IT is a humbling admission for a Welshman to make—and humbly I make it—that in the course of a life which while not yet grown long grows longer by the hour, and a career much given over to trafficking in history and legend, fiction and myth, I have never once invented a triad. Let me, under your protective shield and benevolent helm, here and now redress this injustice to the Threeness of Three, and begin by hanging three small flower baskets of verbal amplification on the bare trellis-work of my would-be triadic title. Thus:

Three Poetical Prayer-Makers of the Island of Britain: Cynddelw the Great Poet, who praised the Princes of Earth and the King of Heaven, and requested his dues of both; James Kitchener Davies the Deathbed Poet, who in extremis prayed to God to deny him all those things he had most worked and prayed for; and Saunders Lewis the Poet of Arduous Causes, who prayed that the Good Thief who died with Jesus on the Cross should pray for us, that we too may know Him in the hour of our extremity.

Which brings me to the second paragraph of my preamble. Having read my terms of reference I am aware, acutely aware, that the Warton Lectures of the British Academy are unambiguously entitled the Warton Lectures on English Poetry. I am even more acutely aware that my Warton Lecture is strictly speaking *not* precisely, entirely, exclusively, or even predominantly on English poetry, and lifetime apostle of the blurred edge though I am, I would expect no one to believe me if I said it was. So I need indulgence—and as I hope, with good reason. For Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr most decidedly was not an English poet. His praise-poems to his patrons the Welsh princes made all they could of the mischief, murder, and mayhem those same princes tirelessly inflicted on the English foe, who it must be admitted as tirelessly inflicted an equal uncharity on them.

In arms against Angles, in Tegeingl's lands,  
 Blood spilling in streams, blood pouring forth . . .  
 In strife with the Dragon of the East,  
 Fair Western Dragon, the best was his.  
 Ardent the lord, sword bright above sheath,  
 Spear in strife and outpouring from sword,  
 Sword-blade in hand and hand hewing heads,  
 Hand on sword and sword on Norman troops,  
 And constant anguish from the sight of death . . .  
 I saw war-stags and stiff red corpses,  
 It was left to the wolves, their burial;  
 I saw them routed, without their hands,  
 Beneath birds' claws, men mighty in war;  
 I saw their ruin, three hundred dead,  
 I saw, battle done, bowels on thorns;  
 I saw strife cause a dreadful uproar,  
 Troops contending, a rout collapsing . . .  
 I saw lances red with Owain's rush,  
 I saw for Saxons sorry corpses . . .

Not an English poet, did I say? He wasn't even pro-English. Nor was James Kitchener Davies pro-English, though somewhere along the line (he was christened James) he must have been pro-Kitchener. Nor is Saunders Lewis pro-English either. He is pro-Welsh. The dearest wish of his political life has been to preserve the Welsh language, achieve Welsh self-government and national independence, and arrest and reverse the twentieth-century process of anglicization and alienation which seeps and creeps through much, indeed most, of Wales today. But to drive my own horses and fly my own hawk—it has been my conviction throughout most of my adult life that it is not only our Welsh business to know what we can of English poetry, but the Englishman's business to know what he can of Welsh poetry. These separate businesses being part and parcel of our common business of being and belonging with and to each other and to the ever-expanding sphere of family, locality, region, country, and as far thereafter as our modest fund of humanity may carry us. This isn't as pious—and certainly not as pi—as it may sound, for I am also a convinced believer in what, within the law and the bounds of regard, is separate and different and individual in us all. Welsh poetry has various characteristics, qualities, ambitions of manner and matter, and above all of metrical and verbal patterns and congruences of sound, not much met with in English poetry. Few among you have more love for English poetry than I—or a warmer admiration—but it is without any constricting modesty,

as it is entirely without arrogance, that I am seizing my opportunity to touch lightly, and with the help of two inspired translators,<sup>1</sup> on a subject that the mildly aberrant and erratically inquiring Thomas Warton would, I am sure, approve of.

Which brings me urbanely to the three less than urbane poetical prayer-makers of my lecture this evening. They belong, be it noted, to widely separated centuries. Cynndelw's *floruit* was the second half of the twelfth century, one of the outstanding ages of Welsh poetry. He acquired the cognomen *Brydydd Mawr* during his lifetime, and though at first it may have remarked the width of his shoulders, it served soon to acknowledge the magnitude of his mind. He was thus not only the Large Poet but also the Great Poet, and either way accepted the appellation without demur.

He was a poet of the Gogynfeirdd. The first great age of Welsh poetry was that of the Cynfeirdd, literally the First or First-Come Poets. The Gogynfeirdd were the Next-to-the-First or Next-Come Poets. They are also known as the Court Poets and the Poets of the Princes. The Cynfeirdd or First Poets produced and in part preserved a substantial body of heroic and tragic verse, exemplified by the poems associated with the names of Taliesin and Aneirin on the one hand, and the saga-names of Llywarch the Old, Heledd, and Cynddylan on the other. The emphasis was on the heroic kinds: eulogy, elegy, and commemoration. Gnostic and nature poetry survive too, vaticination and religion; but the age was a Heroic Age, and its verse mirrored and portrayed it.

The circumstance is relevant to Cynddelw and his peers. The Gogynfeirdd were in every good sense of the word professionals, who inherited, practised, and transmitted not so much an art as a highly organized and strictly regulated craft of verse-making. What you did and how you did it—in what words, in what form, and with what techniques—these things were prescribed. One has heard the phrase, 'a painters' painter'. Cynddelw was of all things a poets' poet. He knew all modes, all means, all measures, and knew that he knew them. His patrons knew it, his fellow-poets knew it, his disciples knew it, and after eight hundred years we know it. He was the greatest of the Gogynfeirdd for two chief reasons. The first is that just mentioned: he was so accomplished a performer (and I stress that word) that whatever task he took in hand he performed superlatively. Like his fellows he had taken over from

<sup>1</sup> The translations of Cynddelw (in *The Earliest Welsh Poetry*, Macmillan, 1970) and of J. Kitchener Davies are by Professor Joseph Clancy of New York. Those of Mr Saunders Lewis are by Dr Gwyn Thomas of Bangor. I owe them warm thanks, as I do Mrs Mair K. Davies and Mr Saunders Lewis.

Taliesin and Aneirin the poetic kinds proper to a professional poet. He seems to have begun his career as court poet to Madawg ap Maredudd, lord of Powys, for whom he composed a classical eulogy while he lived, and a classical elegy when he was dead. Ah, that we might all have our Cynddelw!

Madawg dead and dirged, Cynddelw went on to ply his skills before other great ones of the Welsh world, Owain Gwynedd in the north, and the lord Rhys down south, and again and again discharged with resource and authority whatever a patron might properly require and a craft would rightly permit. Which brings us to the second reason why he was the greatest of the Gogynfeirdd. Word-master, song-master, rule-master though he was, the very personification of the bardic ideal, he brought something more to verse-making: he brought himself. He made a little more room within the tradition, a little more elbow-room for the poet to work in. And so we find Cynddelw addressing Madawg's young daughter Efa in an innovatory poem which combines ardent respect with respectful ardour, private devotion with public regard, the innocent friendship due to a child (and your lord's child at that) with the awakening compliment welcome to a young woman. Cynddelw was gallant in his ode to Efa as Dryden in his day would be gallant in his address to the Duchess of Ormond, all things wondrously subdued by a master of his craft and made concordant with the purpose, the pleasure, and the duty of a court poet who is also a Great Poet, Brydydd Mawr. He made use of the *llatai* or love's messenger in a fashion prophetic of Dafydd ap Gwilym; somewhat surprisingly wrote a poem after the death in battle of his own son; and in the grammarians' discussion of the modes of versification there is reference to the 'manner of Cynddelw', with its suggestion that he experimented there too. And on everything he composed he set his own unmistakable stamp and impress.

I came to Cynddelw late—and that not to my regret. There is much to be said for postponing some major delights and enlightenments till one is old enough to appreciate just what it is one has been missing. He instantly looked a poet for me. His confidence appealed to my feeling for authority, his courtly arrogance to my courtly humility. Here was a man who at all times was conscious of what God had given him. 'Be silent, bards—a bard is speaking!' I judged him true brother of my old friend, the tenth-century poet Egill Skallagrímsson of Borg á Mýrum out in Iceland, who stepped before kings, opened his mighty jaws (which were also melodious), and instantly had silence; and to my still



What more natural, and what more inevitable, than to enunciate these patent truths yet again, this time to the Prince of Princes and King of Kings, with whom in justice and mercy they would count most? Which he did, in a formal composition of an established kind, the *marwysgafn* or Deathbed Poem, a mode of address at once personal and public to Almighty God, and one which he brought more into line with secular eulogy than his contemporaries did.

The Deathbed Poem opens with our author's customary ease, authority, and assurance:

I salute God, asylum's gift,  
To praise my lord, bounteous, benign,  
Sole son of Mary, source of morn and eve  
And teeming river-mouths,  
Who made wood, and mead, and true measure,  
And harvests, and God's overflowing gifts,  
Who made grass and grove and mountain heather . . .

The entire introduction is excellent in manner and exemplary in sentiment. So is his second section, which begins with Cynddelw nudging God's elbow—or was it the lesser though still exalted humerus of the Archangel Michael?

I salute God, I solicit acclaim  
For the piece I perform . . .

And less ambiguously than is usual he speaks of a gift to be given, a reward to be received. In the third section his eloquence heightens, and he lets sound his grand diapason of words, phrases, and poetic counters. This is the very stuff of twelfth-century poetic rhetoric, and from first line to last Cynddelw is in control of it.

Almighty Ruler, when you were born,  
Came mercy for us, came redemption,  
Came Adam's sons from faithless faction . . .  
Came Christ incarnate, mainstay, master,  
Came in Mary's womb the wished-for Son,  
Came the world's five ages from torment . . .  
And He is our helm and our haven  
Who judges our deeds by our doing,  
And He, heaven's Lord, portion of peace,  
Brought us forth from perdition when pierced,  
And He rose for us, and won His reward,  
And the Lord will not deny us His help.  
And as a reward He was seated  
In full might, the sun's road His domain.

The man whose hand will give his tithe to God,  
 He is not thwarted of his reward.  
 I am a bard, flawlessly fashioned:  
 In my Creator's hold, legion's Lord,  
 I, Cynddelw the singer, grace I ask;  
 Michael, who knows me, welcome be mine!

The masculine strength of the diction, the compulsive appeal of the imagery, the pressure and timing of the emotional sequence would conceal, if concealment were possible, or even desirable, the gradual merger of redemption and reward which grows explicit in the second half of Cynddelw's exposition of God's justice and mercy. Christ won his reward, the man who pays his tithe wins his reward: shall not God's bard, flawlessly fashioned, win his too? Something well past reason if short of commonsense tells me, Why not? If we can approve of the juggler of Notre Dame who brought the tribute of his one skill to a private performance before Our Lady, why not a performance, public or private, to the glory of God by that conjuror with words and magician with metre, Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr? 'Be silent, bards; a bard is speaking!'

Almighty Ruler, when of you I sang,  
 Not worthless the piece I performed,  
 No lack of fine style in the lyric . . .

And so to the poem's ending. Cynddelw's skills, his largeness of utterance, his power and conviction, do not for one moment desert him as he moves from claim to appeal, and from appeal to his plea for salvation. I will read it, then leave it to speak for itself, for its poet, and for the poetical resources, intellectual, emotional, linguistic, and metrical, of Welsh twelfth-century poetic prosody:

Almighty Ruler, deign to receive,  
 Reverent request, harmonious,  
 Flawless in formation of language,  
 My song in your praise, fair land's candle.  
 Since you are master, since you are monarch,  
 Since you are prophet, since you are judge,  
 Since you are kind, since you are benign,  
 Since you are my teacher, banish me not,  
 In your wrath, from your fair land.  
 Refuse me not your grace, exile's Lord,  
 Scorn me not amidst the wretched crew,  
 Spill me not from your hand, vile dwelling,  
 Throw me not to the black loveless throng.

And so, leaving Cynddelw the Great Poet behind us, to confront God with his greatness, we approach over the gulf of

eight centuries the second and third close-set spider-legs of my wide-spanned poetical tripod. By way of a bridge it was my intention, as it is still my hope, to proffer a few sentences about religious poets and their poetry in Wales today, in both our languages; a remark or two about the erosion of Christian belief which we share with the rest of Great Britain; and the sparest of spare words about the decline of Nonconformity and Methodism, which to me, as to so many of my South Wales born and bred generation *were* Christianity in those kingfisher days when life's pasture is green and youth's cup runneth over.

I would not, of course, be misunderstood as saying that Welsh poets are more notoriously or even more numerically backsliders from the Lord than their readers or the generality of their English, Scottish, and Irish peers. On the contrary, mighty exceptions at once spring to mind. In the English-language literature of Wales, for example, that so-called Anglo-Welsh writing whose flowering over the last half-century or so has been so variously rich, R. S. Thomas and David Jones are not just religious poets: they are specifically and eminently Christian poets, the one a priest of the Church in Wales, the other a convert to Roman Catholicism. A Christian upbringing and a Christian witness are not in themselves, need I say? enough to make even a religious man a religious poet. Nor can a religious fiction greatly avail. Dylan Thomas, who despite Swansea and 'Where Tawe Flows', belonged at heart with uberous Dyfed and tidal Towy, fostered a poetical attachment to a deity who was old before Zeus and Yahweh were young—a deity human-animal-divine, part Polar Bear, part Father Christmas, with a spoonful of Merlin to taste.

Animals thick as thieves  
On God's great tumbling grounds  
Hail to his Beasthood!

And why not? But it is a long way off from the Whitsun Walk of childhood and the Easter Sacraments of age. Any religion deserving of the name, though the dictionaries are beginning to give ground, requires a God, and demands that he be worshipped. Pleasure before a sunset, awe on a mountain's height, wonder at the struts and hinges of a seagull's wing, are not enough. The 'Author's Prologue' to the *Collected Poems* of 1952, whose hundred lines, we are told, it took Dylan a whole year to compose, may well be the most discreetly evasive poetic evasion of the Christian God in twentieth-century literature.

Then there was John Cowper Powys, a giant—nay, Titan—of



our age, whose life was a baffling search for Truth between the sulphurous chasms of the First Cause and the sleety highlands of the Fourth Dimension. And what was the Truth he came up, or down, with? 'To be at the death of God is my single quest.' Few of us had thought to go as far as that. We were modest, tolerant men with no taste for Deicide, but rather a disposition to find old beliefs grown empty of meaning, so that we let them go. For better, and partly for worse, men like Gwyn Thomas, Idris Davies, Raymond Williams, Rhys Davies, and myself, took shape in the evening of our teens as religious men without a religion, men of faith without a faith, who had still to learn the saddening lesson that Pelagius was a born loser, and his genial Celtic heresy concerning the goodness of man a non-starter from the start.

Hedge and dyke a little and who will be surprised to hear that the situation in Welsh-language poetry is not too dissimilar? The last eighty years or so, the years encompassing T. Gwynn Jones, R. Williams Parry, T. H. Parry-Williams, Saunders Lewis, Gwenallt, Waldo Williams, and Alun Llywelyn-Williams (I have drawn a birthday line under the outbreak of the First World War), have been the most splendid age of Welsh poetry since the Age of the Cywydd. Of religious poets three are outstanding: Saunders Lewis, Gwenallt, and Waldo Williams. Of the three the best for my purpose is Saunders Lewis, which implies no criticism of the others; for there is no doubt in my mind that a handful of his religious poems, and especially 'Mary Magdalene' (*Mair Fadlen*), 'To the Good Thief' (*I'r Lleidr Da*), and 'Ascension Thursday' (*Difiau Dyrchafael*), are our supreme modern Welsh artefacts of their self-declared unequivocally Christian kind. Here is a man who in Thomas Merton's phrase is 'writing for God', and bringing to that exalted task every literary skill, every exercise of care, and every quality of unremitting exactitude of which he is capable. You don't have to share Mr Lewis's religious convictions to feel this. Each one of these poems, as a made and finished thing, has a completeness, a 'truth' which is its own, even more than it is the poet's—a statement which may well seem to you in need of explication. But a poem, we should from time to time remind ourselves, is not a poet, though it sometimes coincides with, and is quite often confused with, its maker or his supposed outlines. Rather, it is a poet's artefact, a poet being a man with the will and means to make and perfect a statement in verse entirely adequate in its manner and matter to fulfil the intention of its maker and the expectancy of its hearer, or reader.

That expectancy need not precede acquaintance. A poem can

arouse and gratify expectancy simultaneously, at a first hearing or a fiftieth. As we hear it, possess it, and are possessed by it, we acknowledge the highest and most effective mode of communication of which human speech, our highest human communicant, is capable. Something significant and necessary has been stated, made manifest, in the best words and in the best structured form. This is the empyrean function of a craft employed in the service of what we nowadays call an art. This is what Cynddelw believed, though he would certainly have expressed himself differently. There can be found (indeed, there *has* been found) a right way of expressing a theme of general rather than private import (to be merely private, personal, self-exploratory, and self-indulgent—such is the theory—is to diminish, to slough significance), and to achieve that rightness is the first and full business of a poet.

One speculation always leads to another. Were Saunders Lewis to write a Deathbed Poem, after the fashion of the Masters, it would certainly be found one of the most striking and effective of its affecting and formalized kind. Most of our mortal vicissitudes have befallen him, often as though by personal invitation, his longings higher and his disappointments correspondingly deeper than those of his fellows. Like his friend David Jones a convert to Roman Catholicism, unlike his friend an authoritarian by temperament and conviction, he is in all things a man of burning and self-sacrificing beliefs, in religion, national and nationalist politics, and unaccommodatingly devoted to the preservation and enhancement of the Welsh language and his concept of our Welsh destiny. He has been a lifelong fighter, braced by the knowledge that you must not take on only those battles you expect to win. That would be the easy satisfaction of fighting for glory. You must fight for your cause because it *is* your cause, even though it may carry with it the bitter lesson that the majority of your fellow-countrymen neither approve your struggle nor want your sacrifice. For much of his life he has been among the most notable public figures in Wales, and is certainly one of the most distinguished Welsh poets, dramatists, and polemicists of the century.

By his own definition he is a craftsman who has learnt to trust technique, and knows that a good poem is an impersonal thing. It can be so, no question of it; but for me there is equally no question that a good poem may also be found a personal thing. But there is no particular dilemma: the inexactitude of language and the imprecision of thought, personal weightings, and private refinements (of which I recognize a great many in myself), make many literary disagreements more apparent and soluble than real and

permanent. But before I go on to look at an 'impersonal' poem of his which impresses me as a poignantly 'personal' one, let us consider a poem, not his, where the critical proposition that a poem has its own truth, which is not necessarily or wholly the truth of its poet, brings comfort and admiration, whereas a belief in its literal, professed personal truth would bring desolation and grief to the reader. This is James Kitchener Davies's *Sŵn y Gwynt Sy'n Chwithu*, 'The Sound of the Wind that is Blowing'. I have no wish to deal in absolutes and bests, but this poem, because of its autobiographical content and social commentary, its cry of pain for the self and despair for the nation, the Old Testament nature of its appeal to God in hope's destruction; and because it shows the selection, shaping, and reshaping of material proper to a work of art; and because of its effect upon every kind of reader, whatever his politics, religious faith, social background, and life's history; for these reasons, along with its command of words and metre, it is among the most remarkable statements made about industrial South Wales and its people during the harsh decades of poverty and strain between the two world wars.

It coheres with my general purpose in that like Cynddelw's Deathbed Poem (and not unlike the effigy of some early seventeenth-century divine portrayed while still alive in his chosen shroud and coffin), it is an address to God postmarked for Earth as well as Heaven. *Sŵn y Gwynt*, as it fell out, was literally a deathbed poem, commissioned by Radio Wales, and composed in hospital between two surgical operations a short time before its author's death in 1952. Most of it he was himself too weak to write down. 'It was from a few notes of his on paper,' wrote his wife, 'and from listening to my husband's spoken words line by line, that I set it down on paper, there by his bedside.' It is a work simple in structure but complex in intention. The poet's life was neither commonplace nor, in South Wales terms, all that remarkable. At the age of twenty-four he had left the farm and fields of Tregaron in Mid-Wales for the fields and pits of the Rhondda Valley in South Wales, where he became a teacher, married, wrote some interesting plays for a playless land, espoused the Welsh nationalist cause with fervour, 'ventured in elections', and played an active though not dominant part as orator and preacher in what Gwyn Thomas has called the 'fermenting disquiet' of the busy, harassed, can't-be-kept-down life of the strung-out Valley townships.

He was, let us say, dedicated to good causes. Certainly to good intentions. A life so dedicated, so occupied (and preoccupied), so demanding, so prone to set-backs, and so slow to harvest—who

among us, trapped in the murk of disappointment and the opacity of doubt, but might ask himself, 'Why do I do it? Why should I? And, God help me, to what end?'

Remember,

There was no need for you, more than the rest of your fellows  
 To scream your guts out on a soap-box  
 on the street-corners and the town squares;  
 no call for you to march in the ranks of the jobless,  
 your dragon-rampant hobnobbing with the hammer-and-sickle;  
 there was no need for you  
 to dare the packed Empire and the Hippodrome on Sunday  
 evening,  
 —you a dandy bantam on the dung-heap of the spurred cocks  
 of the Federation and the Exchange—  
 but you ventured,  
 and ventured in elections for the town Council and the County  
 and Parliament all in good time  
 against Goliath in a day that knows no miracle.

When I say I don't know how much of this is hard fact, and how much is metaphor, that is not indifference. If I add that their precise boundaries require no drawing, that is not heartlessness. Truth in a court of law is one thing: the truth of distilled or rearranged experience is another, especially in a poet's autobiography, and perhaps above all in his *marwysgafn* or Deathbed Poem.

For it not only blows where it will, the tempest,  
 But blows what it will before it where it will.

And one thing it can blow before it, shedding a little here and heaping a little there, is literal truth, which is a commodity that Ancient Mariners and Cider-drinkers with Rosie have always managed to do very nicely without. May we not assume that Kitchener Davies at a fraught period of his life entered as many men must within the dark night of the soul, and from that unsettling experience of insight and self-deception, anxiety and regret, together with such incidentals as every writer's longing for a subject to write about, our human need to explain our uniqueness, to tell how it was and is with us (reinforced by the Welsh tradition of the poetic set piece and work of public significance), Kitchener's being in hospital and undergoing surgery for abdominal cancer, his wife's sustaining presence—from these things, and others guessable, came incomparably the best poem he ever wrote, and the one by which he will be remembered.

To recall past happiness (he was to say that the tumbledown walls of the farmhouse of Y Llain set a brand as of Cain on him in the Rhondda); to have literary, professional, and political ambitions, and know oneself grown older with no great matter accomplished; to brood on pain and survival—these are the black crows of middle age. To suspect oneself a failure, and fall prey to self-doubt, self-pity, self-accusation—these make the crows look bigger and blacker. ‘What shall I cry?’ saith the Preacher. ‘Birds build’ was Gerard Manley Hopkins’s cry in *Crowland*:

Birds build—but not I build, no, but strain,  
Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

The wind that in childhood ruffled the sheltering hedges of Y Llain and spared the shelterers in its protective ditch; that made squirrels of boys in the tossing branches; the wind that blew broken hopes and soiled ambitions with yesterday’s tins and newspapers along the gutters of the Rhondda; the wind he had courted and challenged to brace and cleanse his soul—

May God who is slow to anger forgive my presumption,  
pulpiteering, singing hymns and praying to Him . . .  
I asked for the wind that was probing the skeletons  
to breathe into my dry bones the breath of life.  
I pleaded with the tempest to winnow with the whirlwind  
my desert’s draff, and drench with its rains  
my wasteland’s parched ground till it bloomed as a garden.  
I appealed with fervour without considering—  
without considering (O terror) He could take me at my word,  
He could take me at my word and answer my prayer,  
And answer my prayer.

Self-accusations, however unjust and unnecessary, are a destructive burden for a man wasted by a cruel illness, a weight of foreboding, and a longing for the lost normality of home, family, peace and quiet. But God is merciful: Can one yet unpray one’s prayers, unhope one’s hopes, undream one’s dreams? Can one by God’s grace renege? It was of the Father of Mercies that Kitchener asked this impossible boon.

O Father of Mercies, be merciful,  
Leave me my comrades’ company, and my acquaintances’ trust,  
And the strength that is mine in my wife and children . . .  
Atonement who purchased freedom,  
Do not tangle me in my prayers like Amlyn in his vow,  
do not kill me at the altar by whose horns I have blasphemed,—

but let me, I pray, despite each wound, however hideous,  
fail to be a saint.

O Saviour of the lost,  
save me, save me, save me,  
from your baptism that washes the Old Man so clean:  
keep me, keep me, keep me,  
from the inevitable martyrdom of Your elect.  
Save and keep me  
from the wind that is blowing where it will.  
So be it, Amen,  
and Amen.

When I first read this astonishing exercise in self-revelation, as one born in the crumpled blanket of the coal valleys, bred to the innocence of book-learning, and raised on the breast of religion, it seemed to me the almost unbearable expression of a poet's truth. Nowadays, for all the seas and cities in between, still Antaeus to my native plot; my judgement sharpened but my ideals unimpaired; my theology under snow but my sympathies vernal in leaf and flower; I see it rather as the *poem's* truth, to which the poet's narrower truth has been legitimately accommodated. It is no compliment to a work of the creative imagination to catalogue it as a factual record. Our poem is not fact unadulterate and unadorned, but fact transmuted, selective, coloured, re-emphasized, re-ordered. *Sŵn y Gwynt*, 'The Sound of the Wind that is Blowing', is a deeply moving poem because it is a beautifully contrived poetic artefact, whose truth is to human nature and experience.

There can be no doubt that for all its public aspects *Sŵn y Gwynt* is an intensely personal poem, a poem of Me and Mine and Here and Now. We left Saunders Lewis after remarking his opinion that a good poem is an impersonal thing, and after my promising to read an 'impersonal' poem of his which impresses me as being not only personal but poignantly so. It is a poem called *Caer Arianrhod*, which means 'The Fortress of Arianrhod', *arian* meaning 'silver' and the whole phrase the apt Welsh name for the Milky Way. It is a poem of just eight lines, and purports to be the soliloquy of Owain Glyndŵr (Owen Glendower) before he was encountered on the Berwyn mountain in North Wales early one morning by the early rising Abbot of Valle Crucis. 'You have risen early,' said Owain. 'No,' answered the Abbot; 'It is you who have risen early—a hundred years before your time.' Whereupon Owain disappeared. It was Owain Glyndŵr, you remember, who last led a revolt in arms to restore an independent kingdom of Wales, was defeated by the English monarchy, disappeared, and died in

1410-17. Whatever the rights and wrongs of it, Glyndŵr's rising and its failure remains a somewhat throat-constricting episode in Welsh history. Here are the thoughts, the words, one national leader found for a predecessor of 500 years before:

I saw the night closing its wing over the moor,  
 Over a few frail homesteads, fallow land, infrequent furrows,  
 And the stars came and the Milky Way, a dense miracle,  
 To spatter the feathers of the firmament with their myriad  
 peacock-eyes.

I spread the wing of my dream over you, my country,  
 I would have raised for you—had you willed it—a joyful strong-  
 hold;  
 But my lot is like a shooting star that's cast out from among the  
 stars  
 To stain the darkness with its hue and to burn out.

Earlier I congratulated Dylan Thomas on a masterpiece of evasive evasion. Now I congratulate Saunders Lewis on a triumph of personal impersonalism. The impersonalism is there, all right, in the distancing of the subject, the appeal to history and legend, the vast unrolling of landscape and stars, the loftiness of the diction and control of the emotion, the balanced structure. Paradoxically, these same things make it a deeply personal poem. The protective wing of the night, the wing of my dream; the raising of *Caer Arianrhod*, and the joyous stronghold I would have raised for you, my people; the dense miracle of a myriad stars, and the star which was not chosen, but was rejected to fall alone; the more public and impersonal, the more private and personal, with the truth of the poem and the truth of the poet in classical equipoise. And a poem of painful ironies, for poet and reader alike.

But our real business with Saunders Lewis is not in respect of this beautifully designed allegory, parable, metaphor—what shall we call it?—of a poem. It is rather with him as one of our Three Poetical Prayer-Makers of the Island of Britain. In prayer, as in eulogy and elegy, in patriotic diatribe and vaticination, he belongs with the bards, the men of professional skill and technical exactitude, above all the men of high and noble utterance. Like *Cynddelw's*, his voice is the voice of a living tradition. And like *Cynddelw* he made a little more room within the tradition. During my meditations and procrastinations and changes of direction for this evening's talk, I at one time thought to choose a poem each from Medieval Welsh, Old Norse, and Old English, to

illustrate—no, just to proclaim—the fascination they have for me: Cynddelw's *Deathbed Poem*, the *Sonatorrek* of Egill Skallagrímsson, in which the poet, shattered by the loss of his sons but canny even in his grief, railed at Othin, threatened him with his sword—and then took him back into favour for his poetry's sake—and that most beautiful, tender, and moving of all Old English religious poems, *The Dream of the Rood*. It was not to be, but it would be a present enrichment if the last of these, *The Dream of the Rood*, were in your minds now, as I begin to read, without comment, without explication, without praise—for the poem needs none of these things from me—Saunders Lewis's poem *I'r Lleidr Da*, 'To the Good Thief'.

You did not see him on the mountain of Transfiguration  
 Nor walking the sea at night;  
 You never saw corpses blushing when a bier or sepulchre  
 Was struck by his cry.

It was in the rawness of his flesh and his dirt that you saw Him,  
 Whipped and under thorns,  
 And in his nailing like a sack of bones outside the town  
 On a pole, like a scarecrow.

You never heard the making of the parables like a Parthenon of  
 words,  
 Nor his tone when he talked of his Father,  
 Neither did you hear the secrets of the room above,  
 Nor the prayer before Cedron and the treachery.

It was in the racket of a crowd of sadists revelling in pain  
 And their screeches, howls, curses and shouts  
 That you heard the profound cry of the breaking heart of their  
 prey:  
 'Why hast thou forsaken me?'

You, hanging on his right; on his left, your brother;  
 Writhing like skinned frogs,  
 Flea-bitten petty thieves thrown in as a retinue to his shame,  
 Courtiers to a mock king in his pain.

O master of courtesy and manners, who enlightened you  
 About your part in this harsh parody?  
 'Lord, when you come into your kingdom, remember me,'—  
 The kingdom that was conquered through death.



*Rex Judaeorum*; it was you who saw first the vain  
Blasphemy as a living oracle,  
You who first believed in the Latin, Hebrew and Greek,  
That the gallows was the throne of God.

O thief who took Paradise from the nails of a gibbet,  
Foremost of the nobilitas of heaven,  
Before the hour of death pray that it may be given to us  
To perceive Him and to taste Him.