

DAFYDD AP GWILYM

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UNTIL recent years Dafydd ap Gwilym was the only Welsh poet with a high reputation outside Wales. This was not so strange. He fitted into the conventional picture of medieval poetry. He shared themes and modes with Guido Cavalcanti and with Thibaut de Champagne. He stretched a hand to Rutebeuf and another to the early Chaucer. Sir Idris Bell tackled English translations; Stern treated him as a Welsh *minnesänger*; a Dutch scholar, Theodor Chotzen, killed later in a Nazi prison, had in 1927 published his *Recherches sur la poésie de Dafydd ap Gwilym*, a large volume which remains still a most valuable survey of much of the poetry of Northern Europe in the fourteenth century. Now Professor Parry, of the University College of Bangor, gives us the long-awaited edition¹ which is based on a study of all the manuscript sources. One must not speak of a final edition, for the simple reason that oral tradition admits of very little finality; but here are the text and critical apparatus that will be the starting point of study for the rest of this century. What I propose to attempt now is to give English readers a glimpse of Dafydd ap Gwilym from the point of view of the Welsh literary tradition.

This is no longer too difficult. The first volume of *The Growth of Literature* by H. M. and N. K. Chadwick—a great and noble work despite necessary lacunae and some errors—has revealed to English students the tradition of heroic panegyric that is the main stream of Welsh poetry from the sixth century onwards. The Welsh poets themselves used to call it the tradition of Taliesin, from the sixth-century poet of that name. The Norman conquest of England and the consequent threat to the Welsh that began in the closing years of the eleventh century gave fresh impetus to the heroic praise of the defending princes in the

¹ *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*. Golygydd gan Thomas Parry. (Cardiff, University Press. pp. cciii, 607; 30s.)

three princedoms of Wales. The struggle and its verse lasted till 1282 and later; but with the extinction of the principality and of the North Wales dynasty, the poetic activity that had made panegyric of the princes its main theme and heroic lyric its mode, came to a difficult period.

For some two generations, say 1290 to 1330, there was multifarious and robust confusion. It is a still uncharted patch of Welsh literary history. The poets were professionals, organised in a *confrérie* that had points of likeness to the French corporations, or *pays*, and the Chief of Song exercised offices not dissimilar from those of the *Roi des ministrals* of the French and Anglo-French thirteenth century. But the high rank and the panegyric function of the *prydydd* or court poet seemed (or seems) at this period to be merging with those of the bohemian *ioculatorum turba*. Then, out of the confusion came, before the middle years of the fourteenth century, two strong movements of renaissance.

The first was a reorganisation of the poets' corporation and a re-statement and enlargement of the tradition of panegyric. I must deal with it summarily, since it is a big matter. It is represented by a new chapter in the official grammar-books of the poets, a chapter that describes the function of each class of poet and the appropriate modes of high panegyric. This reorganisation, with its emphatic separation of the noble panegyrist from the miming and railing clown, is akin to the only little earlier movement of poetic reform in France, that is specially reflected in the work of Watrquet de Couvin and Jean de Condé. There are moral exhortations in Watrquet—

Menestrieus qui veut son droit faire
Ne doit le jangleur contrefaire,
Mais en sa bouche avoir tous diz
Douce paroles et biaux diz.

and again in Jean de Condé—

Sois de cuer et nés et jolis.
Courtois, envoisiés et polis,
Pour les boines gens solacier.

which have their exact equivalent in the sentences in the Welsh grammar books that describe the moral qualities

required of the poet of panegyric. Moreover, panegyric itself, the tradition of heroic praise as the highest poetic function, was now attached both to the *Laudes* of the daily Office and to the dialectic taught in the Cistercian schools, and so given new significance and *raison d'être*. Thus reorientated it became the basis of the great *cywydd* and *awdl* poetry of the next two centuries. That corpus of poetry is the major glory of Welsh literature.

The second movement, contemporary with this, is the work specially linked with the name of Dafydd ap Gwilym. Baldly, this response to the predicament was a turning aside from the tradition of heroic panegyric in order to embrace what Dafydd himself called the 'art of Ovid'. This meant all the varieties of invented love lyric and 'feigning' that stemmed from the *Roman de la Rose* or found in it (particularly lines 2265-2580 in Langlois' edition) their widest-known exemplars. It was a turning from what the Chadwicks have called the tradition of the Northern Islands to the continental and classical modes of *jongleur* and *trouvère*. Dafydd ap Gwilym himself, very aware of the challenge he was involved in, proudly maintained the equal dignity and honour of the Ovidian tradition he had elected for his own—

The dignity of feigned love-song, however resisted,
Is no less than that of panegyric.

Nid llai urddas, heb ras rydd,
Na gwawd geuwawd o gywydd.²

How came he to make his choice? Let us say that it was all around him. We shall not get a proper idea of the cultural climate of the late Middle Ages in Britain unless we recognise that Anglo-French and Middle English and Welsh were all cheek by jowl in the Welsh Marches and Crown Lordships. In the thirteenth century Brother Simon of Carmarthen writes French didactic verse that seems to betray the influence of the monorhyme of the Welsh *awdl*. Dr Carleton Brown has shown that the most remarkable English lyric poet of the late thirteenth century was a Welsh-speaking Welshman 'between Wye and Wirral' who

² I have to disagree with Professor Parry's reading and interpretation of this most important poem (p. 202)

makes the North Wind his love-messenger—
 Blow, Northern wind,
 Sent thou me my suetyng,

and whose curiously contrived *Annot and Johon* is notably influenced both in imagery and technique by the Welsh love *awdl*.³ Dafydd ap Gwilym was nurtured in a household that belonged to the king's service, did the king's business and met with political trouble. Pembroke and Carmarthen and Cardigan were within easy reach, a busy, turbulent, polyglot region. One might hazard the suggestion that it is in the verse of Dafydd ap Gwilym that French-Flemish-English South Pembrokeshire makes its most signal contribution to Welsh literature. Certainly he was early acquainted with castle and abbey, town and tavern. He learned the cosmopolitan fashion of minstrel and *jongleur* and wandering poor clerk. He sings the courtly high-born love-song, esoteric and learned with literary allusion. He sings as often the broad song of tavern druery and all the irreverent parody and farce and adventure of the goliard tradition. There is nothing that can precisely be called *fabliau* in his work, but his spirit is frequently that of the *fabliaux* writers. He is the gay, insouciant hero of his own misadventures, and so brilliantly master of the mood and manner that he turns *l'esprit gaulois* into *esprit gallois* and gives it for two centuries the freedom of Welsh verse.

Yet the tale of misadventure is rarely the purpose of a poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym. Unlike the *fabliaux* writers he is a true poet, and what is most typical of him, what imposes itself as the chief device of all his verse, is as ancient as the Heroic Age. The Chadwicks have a chapter on the riddle poetry of old Norse and English and Welsh. It was a species of descriptive poetry and they give this riddle of a fog as a Norse example—

What is that huge one that passes over the earth, swallowing lakes and pools? He fears the wind, but he fears not man, and carries on hostilities against the sun.

³ No. 76 in Brown's *Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*. See the notes, but Dr Brown fails to observe the *concatenatio* between the last half-line of the monorhyme and the first half-line of the final couplet throughout the poem.

There is a kindred but longer and more elaborate riddling of the Wind in old Welsh, the only early Welsh example surviving. The Welsh poets of the fourteenth century, and Dafydd ap Gwilym especially, developed this riddling description into clusters of metaphor and fantastic simile bound together metrically by strong *concatenatio*, a poetic junction of intense rhetoric and contemplation. He walks over the moor to meet his mistress and a bramble catches his foot; the bramble becomes the theme of his riddle. He rides at night in a strange country, perhaps Cheshire, and he and his horse stumble in a peat-pit, and the bog is wondrously riddled. Mist blocks his love journey or the stars light it, thunder frightens his lady; or an echo, icicles and a gander disturb his serenade; a ruined house on his road where once he made love, his own heart and his deep sigh, they all—and a score more—become themes of his riddling. And of course his love-messengers, stag or wind or wave or bird—

Flashing gull on the full tide,
 Hue of snow or white moon,
 Speckless in loveliness,
 Ball like a sun, fist of foam,
 Gaily-winged fish-swallower,
 There at anchor I'd have you float
 Linked hand with mine, sea lily,
 Like a paper glistening,
 A nun cresting the flowing tide.

It is as compulsive as Dylan Thomas for the English. All Dafydd's themes seem to rise like Goethe's songs out of moments of experience, realised with swift intensity, accidents, and occasions for incandescence. At the very same time Petrarch was teaching all Europe a slow and measured pace for poetry, but Dafydd ap Gwilym's verse is as nimble as his imagery; his mind is all turned out to see, to hear, to be with the fox and hare and blackbird, to climb the sky with the skylark, in a rapture of entranced living. They tell us his life was short. It could not but be so.