

SPIRITUALITY IN WELSH POETRY 1930–1980

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Introduction

THE WELSH POETIC TRADITION is one of the oldest in western Europe. Scholars are agreed that the authentic poems of Aneirin and Taliesin date from the second half of the sixth century and record the struggle of the Romano-British peoples with the Anglo-Saxon invaders from the Continent. The language has of course changed over the course of fourteen hundred years, but there has been no break of the kind that occurred between Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. A contemporary writer spontaneously feels himself or herself to be part of this fourteen hundred-year-old tradition.

Within this long and varied history the twentieth century has proved to be one of the richest of all. Because Welsh-language poetry is still so little studied outside Wales it is difficult to make confident comparisons between Welsh writers and their contemporaries in other parts of the world. But I think it would be universally felt by those concerned with the subject that there have been in this century ten or a dozen poets whose work deserves to be known at an international level. One of the striking and unexpected things about them is that since the 1930s the majority of them have written from a conscious and explicit affirmation of Christian faith.

This was not the case with the three great figures of the earlier part of this century, T. Gwynn Jones, R. Williams Parry and T. H. Parry-Williams, who in their various ways represent an agnosticism not untypical of the twentieth century. But if we look at the four major poets who dominated the middle years of this century, Saunders Lewis (1893–1985), Gwenallt (1899–1968), Waldo Williams (1904–1971) and Euros Bowen (1904–1988) we shall see that all of them write with a strong commitment of faith, faith in the Welsh language and the Welsh nation, faith in the Christian tradition which has created and sustained that people and its distinctive culture through the vicissitudes of its history.

These facts are in themselves significant from the point of view of twentieth-century spirituality. This period of literary creativity and affirmation has also been a time in which with every census the number

of Welsh speakers has declined, starting at almost a million in 1901 until today when the figure stands at around 500,000. Only in the last decade has the decline begun to come to an end and the first tentative signs of a numerical revival begun to appear. Thus the work of these poets has been carried on in the face of steady numerical diminution. This in itself provides a powerful rebuke to our tendency to be mesmerized by statistics. In the things of the spirit numbers are of strictly limited significance. In the face of outward discouragement the human spirit can reveal unsuspected inner resources. Out of what looks like death, new life can come. In the case of a threatened language and literature, that can be true at least for a time. But every Welsh writer of the last sixty years has been acutely conscious that the decline of the Welsh-language community could in the end be terminal. The very act of writing, and writing with such passion in such a situation, is itself a witness to the death-defying quality of art.

The nation and the nations

To join together the names of Saunders, Gwenallt, Waldo and Euros in the way that I have done might suggest that they were members of a single group or school. This was not at all the case. As we shall see, they were very varied in their poetic style and approach. They were also varied in the history of their religious convictions. But of course they all had certain things in common. All came out of the world of Welsh nonconformity. Within the smaller world of Welsh-speaking Wales the influence of eighteenth-century Methodism was all-pervasive in a way it could not be in England. The social and literary culture of twentieth-century Wales has been overwhelmingly indebted to that eighteenth-century movement. But all our writers felt the need to explore further. Saunders Lewis became a Roman Catholic in the 1930s, greatly influenced by the French Catholicism of his time. Gwenallt, after a Marxist period in his youth, in the 1940s became an Anglican of a distinctly Catholic type. But in his later years, appalled by the Englishness of the Church of Wales at that time, he returned to Calvinistic Methodism. Waldo grew up as a Baptist, but in mature life became a Quaker. He was much influenced by the writing of Berdyaev and, as we shall see, had strong Catholic sympathies. Euros came from a family of Congregationalist ministers. In his student years he became an Anglican and was ordained in the Church in Wales. He alone of the four entered the ordained ministry; Saunders and Gwenallt were both university lecturers. Waldo was for most of his life a primary-school teacher.

All four were consciously and specifically Christian in their affirmation. All were also consciously and explicitly nationalist. But just as

answer to blind destructive nationalism is not a bland and superficial internationalism, but a sane and balanced awareness of national difference and the necessary interaction of nations with one another. This involves a particular recognition of the rights of small and threatened linguistic communities. If, as I should maintain, the four writers we are considering were all basically catholic in their attitude towards Christian faith, all were convinced that catholicity is best expressed when rooted in particular places and people. The principle of the incarnation, like the gift of Pentecost, unites and diversifies at one and the same time.

Incarnation and Pentecost

Writing of Gwyn Thomas (b. 1936), one of the outstanding Welsh poets of today, Joseph Clancy has said:

I think to put it as simply as possible that Gwyn Thomas's poetry is fundamentally Christian in its way of affirming the reality of time and space, flesh and blood – in, if you will, its materialism, something essential to Christianity, rooted as it is in Judaism, and in the mystery of the incarnation . . . It is this, I believe, that accounts for his stress on the actuality and significance of each moment. And it is the acceptance of the mystery of evil and suffering and the faith that 'reality' includes and redeems (rather than lies beyond) the particular moment that accounts for the absence of despair . . .¹

This acceptance of the reality of time and space, flesh and blood, is of course characteristic of all our poets, anchored as they are in the life of a geographically small country and a numerically small people. They work with that. If in the end despair is absent from their work, that is only in an extremely paradoxical and ultimate sense. All face the despair inherent in the possibility of the death of the language in which they create. All at times express that depth of darkness and look into the face of death. But since for all the death on the cross is the central paradigm of human dying, they are able in the end to look with hope.

Gwenallt, who was of them all the least afraid to put his theology directly into his verse and who therefore sometimes falls into the trap of being a preacher rather than a poet, puts all this very clearly in a poem from his last collection, called simply 'Catholicity'.

He was imprisoned by his flesh and Jewish bones
Within the confines of his land
But he gave them as a living plank to the hammering

And was raised from the grave, despite the
guards

As a catholic body by his Father.

And now Cardiff is as near as Calvary,
And Bangor every inch as near as Bethlehem.
Storms are stilled on Cardigan Bay,
And in every street the afflicted
Find healing from the touch of his hem.

He did not hide his gospel among the clouds of
Judea,

Beyond the tongues and eyes of men,
But he gives the life which lasts forever
In a drop of wine and a crumb of bread
And the gift of the Spirit in the flow of water.

Here in a brief space we see incarnation, redemption, ascension and Pentecost, the nearness of the risen Christ in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist – and all in a way which insists on the reality of time and place, flesh and blood, here and now.

If Gwenallt was tempted sometimes to be too theological in his poetry, some Welsh readers have thought that in much of his poetry Euros went to the other extreme. God is seldom mentioned directly. The theological affirmations are implicit, hidden, buried in the substance of the poetry. His too is a totally different poetic style. Because he translated some of the French symbolist poets of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud, it was often said that he himself was a symbolist. Certainly he wrote and thought in images, but Euros always insisted that he was a sacramental poet and not a symbolist. The method of his poetry was sacramental and its subject matter was, to use his own words, 'the sacramental order of the goodness'. Like Gwenallt, but in a very different way, he too can write of the relationship between Calvary and Pentecost with great economy, as in a poem called 'Red Poppy', from a collection of 1976.

Is that a religion of comfort,
when the sower,
in picking up stones
and weeding the thorns and briars,
has to bleed
for his pains?
But on the breeze
his wounds released

a poem
from the hillock of the headland,
like a red poppy in the corn,
and called it another comforter.

Communion of saints

The conjunction of incarnation, cross and Pentecost is central in this poetry of twentieth-century Wales. The breeze released by the wounds seems to breathe through it all. But there are some themes which receive special attention. One, a theme deeply rooted in early Celtic spirituality, is that of the communion of saints. Both Gwenallt and Saunders, for instance, have long ruminative poems on the figure of St David. Gwenallt sees him as a figure of our own time, going out like the gypsy of God with the altar and the gospel in his caravan and travelling through rural and industrial Wales. Saunders ponders on the words of David's last sermon as recorded in the medieval life of the saint, and in particular, '*Do the little things* you heard and saw in me'. This message Saunders associates with the life of Bernadette and the little way of Thérèse of Lisieux.

One of the most striking of all the poems on this subject comes from Waldo Williams. It dates from the 1940s and in the original there is a footnote reference to T. P. Ellis' *The Welsh Catholic martyrs*. The poem is addressed to the Counter-Reformation martyrs and has the title 'After the silent centuries'. It is a poem which has been translated a number of times, most recently by Bishop Rowan Williams in his collection of poems, itself entitled *After silent centuries*. I quote two verses in his translation.

The centuries of silence gone, now let me weave a
celebration;
Because the heart of faith is one, the moment glows
in which
Souls recognise each other, one with the great tree's
kernel at the root of things.
They are at one with the light, where peace masses
and gathers
In the infinities above my head; and, where the sky
moves into night,
Then each one is a spyhole for my darkened eyes,
lifting the veil.

In early Celtic tradition three types of martyrdom are spoken of: red, green and white. Waldo himself did not know the martyrdom of blood

but he was intimately acquainted in his life with the martyrdom involved in being a witness to the truth. He writes this poem, it seems to me, from very close to the subject he is working with. Gwenallt too in the 1940s was thinking much about martyrdom. He has more than one poem addressed to the martyrs of continental Europe, those who had given their lives for the faith under both Nazi and Communist oppression. The sense that our life in time is held within the embrace of an eternal world is one which pervades his poetry. In a poem of Waldo's on the subject, 'What is man?', the question is asked, 'What is love of country?' and the reply comes, 'Keeping house amidst a cloud of witnesses'.

The sacredness of the earth

So far we have not mentioned the subject which is such a notable feature of the Celtic Christianity of the early centuries, the sense of the sacredness of the earth, the vision of the material world shot through with the wisdom and activity of God. It is this theme which more than any other attracts people to what is often called Celtic spirituality and which relates directly to our own sense of the need to respond to the ecological crisis of our times. All our authors express this vision of the world as a sign, a sacrament of God's glory. The title of Alexander Schmemmann's book, *The world as sacrament*, would be congenial to them all. It raises the intriguing and difficult question of the possibility of some special affinity between Celtic and Eastern Christianity.

Again this sense of the sacredness of the earth expresses itself in various ways. There is a poem of Gwenallt called simply 'Wales', which makes a direct and perhaps too simple statement of the holiness of the land.

His resurrection was thy springtime,
Thy summer was his triumph green,
And in the winter of thy mountains
Tabernacles have been seen.

Waldo Williams, in a much greater and more complex poem, 'Between two fields', speaks of God as an exiled king who, in spite of everything, is still always present hidden in his world, hidden among his people, revealed when we least expect him.

In Euros Bowen the celebration of 'the elements of goodness' in the natural world recurs again and again. It is interesting to notice that at times the eucharistic focus of this general and diffused sacramental way of looking at things becomes explicit. In a poem written about a celebration of the eucharist in the chapel of a house overlooking the

Menai Straits, with a view towards the mountains of Snowdonia, Euros sees the celebrant's eyes straying from the properties of the communion table to the world outside, as it were putting his hands on the fields and mountains as though they were the bread and the wine.

At public readings of this poem both in England and in the United States, people have frequently remarked on its similarity to the meditation of Teilhard de Chardin, *The mass on the world*. The sense of the interrelationship of grace and nature, creation and redemption, the world as sacrament and the eucharist itself, is certainly there in both.

As we might expect, the same theme is taken up by Saunders Lewis, though with a direct reference to the way in which some of the medieval poets of Wales use liturgical and sacramental terms to speak about the world of nature and human society. There is a brief poem called 'The pine' which speaks of a quiet, silent moonlit night. The pine tree shoots up into the darkness 'like the paschal candle under its flame'.

Hush, the night stands round you in the tranquil
chancel
And heaven's host crosses the earth with its
blessing.

Even more striking is a poem called 'Ascension Day' in which the experience of a May morning in the countryside is fused with the experience of a Latin high mass celebrated as before Vatican Two. This is one of the poems which has found its way into nearly all the anthologies both in Welsh and in English.

Conclusion

In this article we have looked at some of the themes which occur in four of the outstanding Welsh-language poets of the middle years of this century. We have said nothing of their successors today, writers who are in or are approaching their sixties, writers like Bobi Jones, Gwyn Thomas and James Nicholas, nor of the writers who are in mid-career like Alan Llwyd and Donald Evans, let alone their younger rivals. We have said nothing too of the three English-language poets from Wales whose writing has become widely known outside the Principality, Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins and R. S. Thomas; nor of the writer and artist David Jones, though it will be no surprise that he was a close and greatly valued friend of Saunders Lewis. How far some of these themes are to be found in them, and how far they were influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins, the one English poet who learned to write in Welsh, are subjects which deserve more study.

Meanwhile it will be clear that in Wales we have a number of Welsh-language poets who in the mid-twentieth century have succeeded in articulating a profound and varied vision of the world, growing from their Christian faith. With their origins in the world of Welsh nonconformity, and with their study of Welsh poetic tradition through the ages, they have become aware of the immense skill with which for more than a millennium the themes of incarnation, redemption and the coming of the Spirit have been handled in that tradition and the praise of God has been spoken on behalf of all creation. Despite all the difficulties of their situation as spokesmen of a minority culture they have been able, as Joseph Clancy remarks, to fulfil

the traditional role of the Welsh poet as a public rather than a private voice, expressing the central values and concerns of his community as he entertains, celebrates, satirizes and inspires it. They have had a sense of a valued role within the local and larger community that is foreign to most modern English, American and European poets.²

NOTES

¹ Gwyn Thomas, *Living a life, selected poems* (Amsterdam: Bridge Books, 1982). From the Introduction by Joseph Clancy, pp 9-10.

² *Ibid.*, p 12.

A further note on books

Nearly all the poems quoted in this article can be found in my book *Praise above all, discovering the Welsh tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991). A selection of Euros Bowen's poems was published by Church in Wales Publications in 1993, *Euros Bowen, priest-poet*. Much the most prolific translator of Welsh literature, prose as well as poetry, is Joseph P. Clancy, an American scholar and poet now retired and living in Wales. See in particular Joseph P. Clancy, *Twentieth century Welsh poems* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1982), *Bobi Jones, selected poems* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1987) and *Living a life* as above (n 1). Tony Couran's anthology, *Welsh verse* (Cardiff: Poetry Works Press, 1986), also has a generous selection from the twentieth century.

Recently published is Rowan Williams' *After silent centuries* (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 1994). As well as his original poems this volume contains a number of translations from the Welsh. Here is a new and very gifted interpreter of the Welsh tradition.