

Under The Influence

MENNA ELFYN

T Gwynn Jones was born in Gwyndy Uchaf, Abergele, North Wales in 1871, the son of a hill-farmer who loved literature and who taught him to compose poetry at an early age. He died in 1949, having brought Welsh verse from the Celtic twilight into a golden age. He stood alone in the vanguard of the literary renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century, giving Welsh poetry a presence and the language a future.

In Wales, poetry allows you a key to a kingdom. Yes, you can actually become a king – of verse, that is! A Crown is given at the National Eisteddfod for a free verse poem and a Chair to a poet writing an ode in strict metre. These coveted ceremonies are seen by some as the pinnacle of the Bardic year. To become a chief poet is therefore both a national and a poetic honour. As for T. Gwynn: when he won his first National Eisteddfod chair in 1902, and his name was announced, under a pseudonym of course, to a hushed audience, there was more than a little *frisson*. Although he had heard that he had won the Chair, he'd taken a train that morning to attend a friend's wedding.

That winning ode, 'Ymadawiad Arthur' ('The Leaving of Arthur'), was deemed a stunning departure, as the poet had reworked the well-known story of Arthur's journey to the Isle of Avalon, which he called "Afallon ei hun sy felly". This means "As the isle of Avalon itself is so", a kenning that is itself in *cynghanedd* (strict metre). Although heavily influenced by Tennyson's 'Morte D'Arthur', the ode prophesied a national awakening and revival, with the wounded king being taken to the otherworld of Afallon. The poem seems to have appeared at just the right time. Wales was tiring of religious themes and this gave a certain edge to Welsh verse:

Draw dros y don mae bro dirion-nad ery
Cwyn yn ei thir [...]

Over the waves there's a gracious country
Nor in that land lingers lamentation;
Whoever comes there, no old age or pestilence
Strikes down, for the clean breeze of freedom
Keeps every heart of us nimble and merry,
As the Isle of Avalon itself is so. (translated by Tony Conran)

A romantic when he set out as a poet, T. Gwynn Jones was a restless spirit who wanted to shake up the establishment. In 1910 he wrote in the periodical *The Nationalist*, “I think I shall not be far wrong if I say that the bardic tradition has stood in the way of the greater development of Welsh Poetry.” But how did he influence me? I never took to these myths and never sought to write epic poems, let alone to be part of a Bardic circle: something which seemed anathema to me as a woman poet and later as a feminist. In the seventies, my writing was more akin to the tone of American poets such as Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop or the struggles of Anne Sexton. I started out writing in the late sixties, the era of wanting to embrace the world by fighting oppression. Abhorrence of the Vietnam War, the necessity of the anti-apartheid movement, and the urgency of language campaigns were all a backdrop to my writing and the tone of my voice also differed from that of T. Gwynn, as in this poem translated by the late R.S. Thomas:

‘Speak up’ is, of course,
the command to speak English.
I sentence myself to a lifetime
of sentences that make no sense.
No pronunciation, no annunciation –
inflection. I am infected
with dumbness. I can neither lampoon
sing in tune; much less can I
intone [...] (from ‘Song of a Voiceless Person to British Telecom’)

But in my head, and in my heart, were the riches of his odes. One magnificent poem tells the tale of a twelfth century Welsh prince wanting to escape the feuding of his brothers, crossing the Atlantic and perhaps discovering the Mandan Indians. This gave rise to my desire to imagine a worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood just as ‘Madog’ had done, and to escape the bigotry and small-mindedness of belonging to a small nation. And in this, I identified with T. Gwynn’s romantic notion of other worlds. The poet himself *is* Madog, his ship *is* his imagination – and ‘Madog’ embodies his reaction to the war in Europe. T. Gwynn once said he was a pacifist with the emphasis on the ‘fist’: so much so, that he in fact walked out of chapel one Sunday morning when the preacher started to pray for the success of the British in the First World War.

Here are the concluding lines of ‘Madog’, a poem which ends in despair. The ideals of a better world perish along with the prince:

Rhonciodd y llong, a rhyw wancus egni'n ei sugno a'i lyncu,
Trystiodd y tonnau trosti, bwlch ni ddangosai lle bu

The ship swayed with a fierce energy then, swallowed alive,
The waves gashed over her, a gap showed not where she'd been.

'Argoed', written in 1927, is in my mind his most memorable work; a story based on the Roman conquest of pre-Christian Gaul, in which an entire tribe chooses suicide rather than the humiliation of Roman rule. Here, the poet once again translates that idea so that it will resonate with Welsh experience:

Argoed, Argoed of the secret places,
Your hills, your sunken glades, where were they,
Your winding glooms and quiet towns?

Ah quiet then, till doom was dealt you,
But after it, nothing save a black desert
Of ashes was seen of wide-wooded Argoed.

Argoed, wide-wooded... Though you have vanished
Yet from the unremembering depths, for a moment,
Are you there, unconquerable soul, when we listen –

Listen in silence to the wordless speech
Where the wave of yearning clings to your name,
Argoed, Argoed of the secret places? (translated by Tony Conran)

This kind of poem about doomed civilisations inspired my generation, in the sixties, to ensure that the Welsh language had a future. I can't say that T. Gwynn was directly responsible for my imprisonment on a number of occasions for non-violent language campaigns, but the thought of a language and culture disappearing completely did spur so many of us on to fight for a bilingual Wales, something which is now almost within reach.

A recent poem of mine, from *Perfect Blemish*, though a much happier poem than 'Argoed', is I feel close to the gleam captured in his work. Written about seeing the sea when we'd visit it as children, it must have been influenced somewhat by T. Gwynn's fascination also with oceans:

Y cynta'i weld y môr

Bod y cynta' i weld y môr
Dyna'r agosa y down [...]

Seeing the Sea

To be first to see the sea
Is the closest we may come
To open-eyed discovery.

There she lies, a temple
Helping us draw the line
Between heaven and earth,
Nothing and oceans.

We travel gladly towards her laughter
Reaching the skirt-hem of her stories,
Where her tongues tell truths.

For a time, we stare, not understanding
Her depths, this divinity who will
Not reveal herself, hugging her secret

And see anew that a sea
Is no less beautiful because ships
Founder on rocks, because, look
In her split-second waves

We grow younger with each frisson;
Seeing the sea
For the first time
Is the closest we may come
To the wonder of eyes opened.

T. Gwynn Jones's last volume, *Y Dwymyn* (The Fever), published in 1944, testifies to the fact that he became a Modernist in later life, as he wrote even more starkly of his fear and despair of humanity. In many ways, the romantic and patriarchal poet is overturned here, where he rails against the futility of war and its treatment of women. Two poems stand out in my mind

as being so unsettling that they have not yet been fully appreciated by Welsh readers. The first is 'Pro Patria', which draws attention to the horrors of war. In hospital, the narrator tells a Welsh nurse his experience of witnessing, in the midst of war, the rape of a woman:

'Hurry up! You're damn slow at it laggards!'
Said one of the twenty, quite hoarse;
From the house came Jobkins and Jaggards
With their faces all red and coarse;
Juggins and Muggins and Snoddy,
Damning 'these bloody Boers';
'Taffy!' called one, as I got up,
'Buck up! There's some fun indoors!'

'Twenty seven of those devils had been there –
And she, who till then had been pure-
Damn it all! My soul was on fire
Though not better myself, to be sure,
The sound of their lecherous sniggering
As the other two walked through the door
And the lust and the greed on their faces –
I don't recall any more.

'Stand back!' I remember I said that,
'Or I'll brain you, by God, that I'll do!'
As I raised the butt of my gun up
I remember the oath I swore;
I don't know where I aimed each bullet
In that frenzied quarter-hour
But the noise grew quiet. I looked down
And saw two wads of brain on the floor! (translated by Elin ap Hywel)

The last piece I want to mention could have just as easily have been written after 9/11, or the recent attack on Mumbai, but in fact appeared in 1934/1935, and is called 'Dynoliaeth' ('Humanity'). It describes the destruction of a city; the aftermath is told in dramatic detail. There is, as always in T. Gwynn's poems, brute force but also a priest, hermit or scholar on the sidelines. In this poem, as in so many others, he realizes his belief that the poet deals with what is eternal in man and is concerned with mercy as a redeeming force:

It was night in one of the old cities,
Heiress of every daredevil deed of the long centuries,
She who had gilded herself
With the loot of the lands she despoiled,
In the days of her power
She who knew then she was no longer
The greatest city in the world.
It was night in the old city.

Fog enveloped her,
Her streets lay empty,
Dark and silent
Not a crack of light
Not a peep of pomp or poverty,
The network of sewers where ran
The pity and filth of life's twists and turns
From the veins of her wealth and its glance of glory
[...] (translated by Gillian Clarke)

As an antidote, I wrote about the need for every country to learn the language of its neighbour. I published this after returning from Bled in Slovenia, where I led a workshop for refugees who had to flee Bosnia in the early nineties:

Bloedd
(Let the World's People Shout)

Have you noticed how time-free a person is
When approaching a new language?
Yes, you stumble over consonants,
Postpone vowels,
Encumbered with all the armour of your longing
For the conquest of expression,
And yes, your tongue is like
A baby bumping along on its bottom.
Well then, let each of the world's people learn
The excommunicated language of its neighbour,
Yes, creep and crouch in corners,
Lose sleep in messing it up,
Since this is how tenses will be deleted.

The past will not come fluently on tongue,
The language of today with stay. It will sue for peace,
Pull down all the barbed-wire verbs.
The imperfect will never be so perfect
As when it ceases to exist.

There will be no time for spreading hatred,
Since the tribes will be overcome
By the riches of all the founding stones –

And through the babies in Babel
A yoke will be raised, a United Languages heal
In freeing oneself, freeing in sowing the seed.

If the world beyond Wales knows little today about T. Gwynn Jones, he made absolutely sure that Wales should know the world. He was both prolific and polymathic, and single-handedly translated Goethe's *Faust*, several of Ibsen's plays, Greek and Latin poetry and Irish literature into Welsh. He wrote essays, libretti, novels, plays and literary criticism. He was a true European, at a time when it wasn't terribly attractive to be so. (In 1928, he said that "we'll all be English when we stop writing in Welsh".) His wide-ranging work and agnostic world-view made him a towering figure, unrivalled in Welsh poetry. Although for many years a journalist and then a librarian, despite his lack of university education a personal Chair – Professor of Welsh at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth – was created for him. Not bad for a man who had left school at fourteen! In fact, there were plans afoot to nominate him for the Nobel Prize for Literature. But as soon as he heard of this he put a stop to it, asserting that his work wasn't good enough. This modesty, his deep sensitivity and accompanying bouts of melancholy are all evident in his work. The early writing sought a "lost paradise" and his later work was a quest for serenity.

Two words I overuse because of T. Gwynn Jones are *nwyd* – passion – and *noeth*, meaning "to be bare, or naked". He laid his passion bare and also gave me the riches of his inspiration, the commitment to still search for that "lost paradise". He was also, to me, a poet of the light – and what can a poet ever hope to achieve but to bear witness to, to catch, that light?

Commissioned by Julian May for BBC Radio Three and broadcast on 4th December 2008.

References & Further Reading

- Tony Conran, *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, Penguin, 1967
Tony Conran, *Welsh Verse*, Poetry Wales Press, 1986
Menna Elfyn, *Eucalyptus*, Gomer, 1995
Menna Elfyn, *Peffraith Nam, Perfect Blemish*, Bloodaxe, 2007
M Elfyn & J Rowlands, *Bloodaxe Modern Welsh Poetry*, Bloodaxe, 2003
Gwilym ap Gwynn, *T. Gwynn Jones, Cyfres y Meistri*, Christopher Davies, 1982
David Jenkins, *Thomas Gwynn Jones*, Gwasg Gee, 1973
T. Gwynn Jones, *Caniadau*, Hughes, 1934
T. Gwynn Jones, *Y Dwymyn*, Gwasg Aberystwyth, 1944, (University of Wales Press, 1972)
Iwan Llwyd & Dafydd ap Myrddin, *Gêm rhwng dau fileniwm*, Carreg Gwalch, 2004

