

WHEEL OF FIRE:
THE DYNAMICS OF DYLAN THOMAS

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The true Abstract of this thesis is contained in its title, "Wheel of Fire: The Dynamics of Dylan Thomas". Wheel of Fire was a term used by the people of Wales, by Sir James Frazer in The Golden Bough, by Shakespeare in King Lear, and by Dylan Thomas himself in the poem "All All and All the Dry Worlds Lever".

Paul Nash painted a picture of ~~the~~ wheel itself and called it "Solstice of the Sunflower". In a sense, this, too, is a picture or at least a study of the forces which motivated the creative activity of a poet who was my contemporary. I hoped that such an attempt would bring greater understanding of his art to me and, hence, to others.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the poet in his native environs. The next three chapters are each divided into five sections as enumerated in the Table of Contents. The second chapter is avowedly a tribute to the literary heritage of England and of Wales, a heritage that was constant in the consciousness of Dylan Thomas. The third chapter attempts a ~~resumé~~ ^{summary} of the influences most prevalent in our own age and which most obviously affected the creative output of our poet. The fourth chapter deals with the techniques of his vocabulary, rhythm, rhyme, sentence structure, story construction, wit, humor, and the stages of his creative development. The fifth chapter is the epilogue to his story, as I see it.

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CHAPTER I

SEED OF FIRE: THE WELSH TRADITION

'I'm working on a long poem," I said, 'about the princes of Wales and the wizards and everybody.'¹

Wales is a promontory in the Irish Sea. The whole country is only one hundred and thirty-six miles long and thirty-five to ninety-two miles wide. It houses the descendants of the Goidelic and Brythonic tribes whom Cenedda, in the fifth century A.D., united into a great homogenous nation called the Cymri (compatriots). Described by historians as a people of obstinate vitality with the happy power of adapting themselves to new circumstances, they are the first Celts of Wales.

But before them came an earlier race, when the only flint available was derived from boulder clay. The native poet reminds his compatriots of that post-glacial time:

I am the man your father was.
We are the sons of flint and pitch².

It might have been late in the Paleolithic era when he decided to leave his cave in the Gower, and become not quite a beach-comber but, more like the otter, a river-drifter.

Some eras and degrees of climate warmer, he finally secures his roots amid the ancient woods of his blood³, somewhere in the Black Mountain region of Carmarthenshire. Though he no longer dwells within "the carved mouths in the

rocks"⁴, he still carries with him his stone implements. More insular now and Neolithic, he herds his own flocks and weaves his own cloth. He is the stunted, dark-eyed, black-haired cousin of the Iberians, who are cousins of the Egyptians; and he builds mounds and cromlechs there amid the Palaeozoic, precarboniferous rock, and the carboniferous limestone, and the old red sandstone near Radnor forest. He does not know that he is standing on fields and fields of coal that lie under the great ria of Milford Haven. He only sees the rivers fanning out through the radiating valleys to the "bilingual sea"⁵.

He is there to meet the Beaker folk who are broad-headed, fair and tall; they arrive with the age of metal. Then his land is over-run by the Celts from the east, and the sea-raiders, mostly Irish, from the west. Dai Poet takes to the caves again where he clings to all that is left to him--his own tongue. In the end, the Celts impose their Aryan culture and Brythonic vocabulary. But our pre-Celtic man retains his non-Aryan syntax with its strange order of words.

In Aryan languages the verb comes last. In the Welsh language the verb comes first, the nominative next and the object last, while the general sentence structure, say the historians, is not unlike that of ancient Hamitic.

A natural and national facility of language, acknowledged proudly as "the gift of the gab", is then the hard-won heritage of the Celtic and non-Celtic elements that compose the present Welshman. An early observer, Giraldus Cambrensis, marvels that

All the Welsh without any exception, from the highest to the lowest, are ready and free in speech, and have great confidence in replying even to princes and magnates⁶.

Another Welshman, J. Rhys, argues, however, that "Skulls are harder than consonants, and races lurk when languages slink away"⁷. The basic question may be not, What did they speak? but rather, What did they think? and, How did they act?

Giraldus attributes to the Welsh in general a wild, irresponsible nature that brooks little or no discipline. Yet, he adds, they are religious and respect the man of God. Such paradoxical behavior is further confirmed by the poet:

←In the name of the damned →
I would turn back and run
To the hidden land
But the loud sun
Christens down
The sky⁸.

Their chief sin, one gathers, is that they indulge in extremes of conduct. The poet in "A Story" about his uncle tells us how

...dusk came down warm and gentle on thirty, wild,
wet, pickled, splashing men without a care in the world
at the end of the world in the west of Wales⁹.

For some, like Mrs. Cherry Owen of Llaregyb, intemperance is coupled with the visitation of old gods; for others, it is just another cross to bear: "Poor Dad," grieves the Reverend Eli in Under Milk Wood, "to die of drink and agriculture." But the Reverend prays for all sheep, black and white:

'We are not wholly bad or good,
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, will be the first
To see our best side, not our worst'.

This conforms with the final judgment of Giraldus: "The nation is earnest in all its pursuits, and neither worse than the bad, nor better than the good can be met with".¹⁰

More aggressively partisan is an article which appeared in the Welsh issue of Life and Letters, March 1940, edited by Robert Herring:

'Wild' is a word given usually to Wales and often to Welshmen. If by 'wild' is meant 'untamed', then for once the English have shown some understanding towards their disowned partial ancestors.... Wales has maintained its source...cut off even inside their borders from among themselves.... Wherefore in all Welsh matters you come to two things which...make men truly men...death and love.... The English call those two things 'sacred', and set, therefore, taboo on them: they mustn't be faced. The Welsh face them from birth.... The virtue of Wales is that love...is kept, like a kettle, on the hot. It is there, it is ready.

It is certainly there and ready in Under Milk Wood:

Mrs. Dai Bread Two

There's two women in bed. He looks at them both, with his head cocked on one side. He's whistling through his teeth. Now he grips his little arms around one of the women.

Mrs. Dai Bread One

Which one, which one?

Mrs. Dai Bread Two

I can't see any more. There's great clouds blowing again.

Mrs. Dai Bread One

Ach, the mean old clouds!

Great freedom is accorded the women of their early matriarchal society, according to the historians.

According to the poet:

They yearn with tongues of curlews for the unconceived
And immemorial sons of the cudgelling, hacked / Hill¹¹.

As the female of the species, they are a prime and primeval
part of the mystic rite of "Spring with its breasts full of
rivering May-milk...of the town that has fallen head over
bells in love"¹².

Every town has its trollop, and every trollop has a
song. This is Polly Garter's:

O Tom, Dick and Harry were three fine men
And I'll never have such loving again¹³.

Every town has a schoolmistress; but poets and adventurers
are rather wont to deplore the advance of civilization in
Llaregyb:

Sinbad Sailors

O beautiful, beautiful Gossamer B, I wish, I wish that
you were for me.
I wish you were not so educated.

In the happy childhood of the race, a girl at the age
of twelve was granted her da (dowry) with a view to the more
practical demands of existence, such as, "Kiss me on Llaregyb
Hill, Johnny Cristo" or "Kiss me in ~~the~~ Milk Wood, Dicky."
For "the boys of summer", manhood begins officially at four-
teen. After six years of military service, at the age of
twenty-one, they each receive a grant of land of their own.
So they learn to defend and to feed their respective cenædloed
(kindreds) or tribes, some forty of which inhabit Wales by

the time "the caesared camp"¹⁴ is pitched.

Later Saxon invaders find the Welsh living in circular tribal houses with high pointed ceilings. The walls are built of trees, the roof of boughs and rough thatch. Beds are rushes, and the footboards serve as seats in the daytime. The centre nave is the hearth, and round it the beds radiate like spokes, with their feet to the cosy fire. Native historians, like the Reverend Eli Jenkins, tell us that "In the warm White Book of Llaregyb you will find the little maps of the island of their contentment."

From the Black Book of Carmarthen and other sources we learn that castles are more given to protocol. Fourteen persons sit on chairs in the palace. First the king, then, to his left, the canghellor (territorial officer), then the osb (guest), then the edling (fledgling or heir apparent), then the chief-falconer, the footholder, and the medicine-man. To the right of the king sit the priest, the judge of the court, and then the "chaired bard" reserved for special occasions, such as the funeral of "humped Ann":

She would lie dumb and deep,
And need no druid of her broken body,
But I, Ann's bard on raised hearth, call all...¹⁵.

For every-day use, however, there is a household bard who sits near the chief of the household who sits with his left hand to the front door. They are a reception committee of two, sometimes, in the more stringent household, synthesized into one. The poet speaks of visiting another uncle

who "sat down in his special chair, which was the broken throne of a bankrupt bard."¹⁶

Entertainment for the evening, around hearthstone or dais, is invariably the same: plenty of song and story. "Knitting Nights" find the whole kindred round the fire, listening to "the hobnail tales"¹⁷ of Celtic fairies. Long before Arthur takes refuge in the caves of Wales, or before The O'Donoghue is secreted beneath Killarney Lakes, the Welsh have already established a flourishing home market for "twice told tales of infancy."¹⁸

They are particularly keen on stories about pedigrees:

While yet unborn, Derdriu screamed so as to alarm King Conchobar Macnessa and his nobles banqueting in her father's house, and Conchobar's Druid, Cathbad, said 'Verily it is a girl and let Derdriu be her name'¹⁹,

because derderestar means screamed. Cathbad knows his way around words: therefore, name-fixing is an important part of his lore.

Besides being symbolic, names must also be susceptible to rhythm and to rhyme, to alliteration and to incantation, thus rendering facility to the rite and intensity to the recollection of ancient occasions:

...the Reverend Eli Jenkins, poet, preacher...
gropes out of bed into his preacher's black, combs
back his bard's white hair...looking out at the day
and up at the eternal hill, and hearing the sea
break and the gab of birds, remembers his own
verses...

'By mountains where King Arthur dreams,
By Penmaenmawr defiant
Llaregyb Hill a molehill seems
A pygmy to a giant....

Claerwen, Cleddau, Dulais, Daw,
Ely, Gwili, Ogwy, Nedd,
Small is our River Dewi, Lord,
A baby on a rushy bed....'

Such is his incantation to the dawn. Like the early
Druids, he is wary of the dark and reveres the light of his
solar universe:

'O let us see another day!
Bless us this night, I pray,
And to the sun we all will bow
And say, good-bye--but just for now!²⁰

The solar year is naturally divided by May and November. On
May Day a blazing cart-wheel swathed in straw is ignited and
sent rolling down Glamorgan's Hill. If the flames are extin-
guished before the "wheel of fire" reaches the foot of the
hill, there will be a bad harvest; but if the wheel keeps
alight all the way down, the crop will be heavy that summer;
for the fire of the wheel symbolizes the fire of the sun
upon which fertility depends.²¹

The advent of winter calls forth its own celebrations.
The poet claims that "the daughters of darkness flame like
Fawkes fires still".²² He describes himself as a boy in
November:

...standing on a signalling country hill where they
fed a hungry bonfire Guy with brushwood, sticks, and
cracker-jacks...small sulphurous puddings banged in
his burning belly, and his thorned hair caught....
He was a long time dying on the hill.²³

Coel Certh (bonfires) lighted on these occasions are called the Beltane fires, after the Druid idol, Bel or Beli, god of fertility. There is a theory that Bel may have come from as far east as Babylonia. There is another theory that the name and idea was derived from the Tuton deity Belin or the Roman Belinus named for Apollo, the Greek archer and sun god.

But whatever its origin, the worship of the Druids is primarily a tree-worship. To the collective unconscious of the Welsh, quite possibly "all trees are oaks"²⁴, and whenever a milky growth appears overnight upon the boughs, racial memory again is summoned for a special ceremony that can only be performed by the Principal "Oak-man" or Druid. Gowned in white, he cuts the mistletoe off the bough and into a white cloth, with a golden knife. Then he sacrifices two white heifers beneath the boughs to acknowledge the visitation of the supernatural which the mistletoe embodies.

The "all-healer", as mistletoe is called, is so potent that under its influence even barren animals may bring forth. It also cures epilepsy, helps labor, and heals ulcers--in conjunction, of course, with prayers and incantations. A knowledge of the right incantation for the right occasion is indispensable: "From the broomed witch's spume you are shielded by fern"²⁵ is a handy household hint, when you live in a country that boasts "The School for Witches".

We are told on most reliable authority that

On Cader Peak there was a school for witches where the doctor's daughter, teaching the unholy cradle and the devil's pin, had seven country girls.²⁶

Here they receive instruction in the rudimentary dance, while music is supplied by the self-same serpent who "fiddles in the shaping-time" of Eden²⁷. Student witches are indoctrinated in the Transference of Evil:

Say I cross you, I cross you, said the girl, and,
with the needle in her hand, struck at the black cat
racked on the daughter's lap.²⁸

The basic curriculum consists of experiments in Metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, a subject that is enough to set anyone wondering

How shall my animal...
Endure burial under the spelling wall...
How shall it magnetize...
To trot with a loud mate the haybeds of a mile...
Die in red feathers when the flying heaven's cut....²⁹

Anything can happen "on Mother Goose's ground"³⁰: a frog may change into a prince, and a woman into a hill: "There was a lover, spellbound in the time of mass, now formed and featured in the image of the darting cat." For it seems that "love takes many shapes, cat, dog, pig, or goat".³¹

The Persians and Pliny himself bowed to the superiority of British magic, so why should we demur. Besides, we must believe Reverend Jenkins when he tells us that on the mystic tumulus of Llaregyb Hill, the old wizards made themselves a wife out of flowers. Since this is a rather difficult feat to perform, we are not surprised to learn that the apprentices of Druidicht are trained in a twenty-year probation period of utmost discipline and secrecy. Use of letters is prohibited, oral transmission alone ensuring the cult of mystery. "Each precept is delivered in verse by the teacher,

and committed to memory by the disciple", says the Historian's History on the subject.³²

But what untellable things do they study? Unlike the School for Witches, the schools of the Druids are interested in the study of magic for the Transference of Good, not of Evil. They stress the nature of the divine; the position, motion, and influence of the stars; the figure, size, formation, and final destruction of the earth. Their object in life is to reform morals, to secure peace, to encourage goodness. The first three principles of existence, they say, are obedience to the laws of God, concern for the good of man, and fortitude under the accidents of life! Theirs is a faith beyond death:

There
Crouched bare
In the shrine
Of his blazing
Breast I shall waken
To the judge blown bedlam
Of the uncaged sea bottom
The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb
And the hidden dust upsailing
With his flame in every grain
O spiral of ascension
From the vultured urn
Of the morning
Of man....³³

The Druids dwell alone, apart from the people, in hidden caves and densest forest. As the "ceremonial dusk" envelops Llaregyb, and the mystic elements of "Milk waking Wood" set old desires a-quiver, the processional begins. For the rite of sacrifice the propitious hour is midnight, or high noon. Victims are usually snakes or other beings of the animal kingdom. On significant occasions, however,

humans are enclosed in straw basket-work cages and burned to death. Describing the rite, the poet tells how "from the planted womb the man of straw"³⁴ is sacrificed in the interests of greater fertility for the land. It is a great honor to be chosen for such sacrifice. The greatest punishment, on the other hand, is excommunication. This is visited upon those who disobey the will of the Druids.

Like the more ancient Egyptians, the Holy Men of Wales teach the immortality of death; and we may expect fatalism and predestination still to be part of the inherent philosophy of the land:

Grandpa said: 'I am going to Llangadock to be buried'...and stared at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt.³⁵

The bards, rather secondary prophets, are a special sect of Druids, but also gifted in the art of divination. They, too, are instructed in "The leaping saga of prayer"³⁶, but they specialize more in the lyrical aspect of community service. Because of them, even today "The music of the spheres is heard distinctly over Milk Wood." But Giraldus has praised the Welsh as a whole for their prowess at part-singing and for their talent with harp, pipe, and crwth (early violin). He says that besides being hospitable and generous, they are full of the elements of poetry and of wild native music. Here in Milk Wood where "the dead oak walks for love"³⁷, where Polly Garter keens for Little Willie Wee, and where even the Drowned return to ask, "How's the tenors

in Dowlais?" the Reverend Jenkins can be depended upon to make this appropriate blessing: "Praise the Lord, we are a musical nation."

To entertain in song is the first duty of the domestic bard (teulu). He serves also as the teacher and companion of the chieftain's children. In addition, he is required, as the guardian and preserver of the kindred's genealogy, to care for the family documents. Fully conscious of his obligations is

The Reverend Eli Jenkins inky in his cool front parlour or ~~peem~~-room...his Lifework--the Population, Main Industry, Shipping, History, Topography, Flora and Fauna of the town he worships in.... Look up Bessie Bighead in the White Book of Llaregyb.

The bard belongs to a friendly and evocative company, quite accustomed to holding the centre of the Welsh podium. Fluent and bold in conversation, he is the ingenious "maker" of lyrics and the creator of what Giraldus calls "ornaments of wonderful and exquisite invention, both in the words and sentences".^{37a} Wit is the prerequisite of his art. If sometimes the story is dead from the devil up³⁸, the bard never is.

He has one sad duty, however. He is not only the army minstrel, but its chaplain, as well,--a paradoxical role, if there ever was one, requiring paradoxical expression:

Forgive
Us forgive
Us your death that myselfes the believers
May hold it in a great flood
Till the blood shall spurt,
And the dust shall sing like a bird
As the grains blow, as your death grows, through
your heart.³⁹