

DAFYDD AP GWILYM¹

To get to Wales is a morning's journey from London. Yet to reach the Welsh that is the language of the poets is one of the rarer English achievements. Returning anthropologists are apt to say that the poetry of the Ubangi is unrivalled, but there are few who will be impressed, since Ubangi is not usually found on the English curriculum. There is perhaps a chauvinism of the mind that looks for some connection between great art and national prestige. The lesser breeds may be conceded a memorable folk-tale, but the growth of imperialism has given a quantitative, and therefore false, importance to the artist who uses the imperial language—English, French or German.

Ideally, the particularism of the artist who springs from a small nation should be absorbed by the unity of a larger tradition. But poetry is not at its best following a flag, even a federal one. The conflict between the local language and the wider world of Europe did not in the 14th century relegate the former to a parochialism that has been the lot, for instance, of Welsh poetry, since the Reformation. Welsh poetry has indeed survived, and most gloriously, but, as cut off from the fertilising contact with Europe, it has too often seemed moralising, repetitive and trivial—the inevitable results of any sort of isolation.

For Dafydd ap Gwilym, an older contemporary of Chaucer, there was no conflict between Wales and the world outside. He wrote in the traditional Welsh metres (though not usually in the strictest) which had become exactly formulated by generations of professional bards, themselves an enclosed body demanding an allegiance to canons of procedure and expression which we associate nowadays with the Law Society rather than with poets. Yet Dafydd is infinitely more than a local poet absorbed in the familiar interplay of *cynghanedd*, with its subtle assonance and consonantal pattern. It is true that he writes—as he must—of the world he knows : of Morfudd, of the women of Llanbadarn, of Ifor Hael ; of the swan and the magpie ; of snow in the woods. But he is heir to the wide estate of the Catholic world, a world that transmutes—without de-

¹ Dafydd Gwilym: Fifty poems translated with introductory essays by Idris Bell and David Bell (The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 20 Bedford Square, W.C.; 15s.).

stroying—the immediate loyalties of a place and time, and brings Dafydd into the company of Dante and Chaucer, of the wandering scholars (*y Glêr*) and the poets of Provence. His achievement was to build out of the classic mould of the *Gogynfeirdd* something that was at once Welsh and universal. He is Catholic ; that is to say he sees the world as the mirror of God, and there is nothing that is which cannot be reflected there. Inevitably to the post-Tridentine world such comprehension seems a rock of contradiction ; for better or worse, much of what Dafydd writes would nowadays be called anti-clerical*and ribald, and might be seized upon as apologetically useful in contests with the Church. Yet it would be a travesty of the truth to conclude that Dafydd's impatience at the strictures of the friars or his candid praise of romantic love are an attack, in the modern sense, on the religion of the Word made Flesh, for

“ From a woman all men known
 Received their life save three alone (i.e. the Trinity)
 Should it then our wonder move
 That maid and wife win men's love ? ”

Dafydd was sure that *Byd heb ddim yw bod heb Dduw* (“ A world without God is a world of nothing ”), and he feels no inconsistency between the mood of the *aubade* and the lovely lines to the Crucified—*Dy draed yn llawn gwaed, nid gweddu*—’*y nghof*. (“ Thy blood-bedabbled feet . . . ” etc.)

Dafydd was profoundly stirred by the romantic itch of his age, and as a cultured man used to the contacts of the court he had plenty of opportunity to get to know the poetry of troubadour and minnesinger. Indeed his love poetry is full of the conventions of *amour courtois* ; the love-messenger (*llatai*), the jealous husband (*Eiddig*), the trysting-place and the rest. The extent of Dafydd's indebtedness to continental models is a matter of acute debate, but the fact of it is plain. He uses the Welsh *cywydd*² metre with a new suppleness to express this new mood, and he thereby proves that an elaborate metrical formality is by no means a hindrance to a poet's spontaneity ; is rather the disciplined structure on which fancy may the more confidently build. He breaks away from the rignarole of court versifying—the conventional eulogy and the careful genealogy—and, according to some, takes advantage of the

² *Cywydd*—Rhymed Couplets ; seven syllables to a line ; rhyme invariably of a stressed with an unstressed syllable—e.g., *brôn, afôn* ; each line having *Cynghanedd*, i.e. alliteration and assonance according to four recognised patterns.

breaking up of the old bardism to regularise a poetic technique hitherto excluded from the rigorous higher grades favoured in the courts of the Welsh princes.

Dafydd may, then, be truly claimed as a poet who is both Welsh and European, both humanist and Catholic. And at last, thanks to the discernment of the Society of Cymmrodorion, English readers can assess his achievement. The Society's recently published volume contains translations of fifty of Dafydd's *cywyddau* (the Welsh text is also given) together with one hundred pages of introduction; Dr. Bell dealing with Dafydd's life, his place in Welsh poetry, his themes and methods of treatment, while his son provides a lengthy essay on the general problem of translation. Any verse translation is a formidable venture, but when it means translating 14th century Welsh poetry, with its acrostic-like precision of form, its incomparable resonance and concentration into the slack and anaemic-seeming English we know nowadays—then the task seems impossible. Mr. David Bell is well aware of this, and his essay is a careful valuation of the difficulties, concluding that 'the ideal of translation is to make a poem whose form is as seemingly spontaneous as the poem it seeks to translate and to put into that form the the whole wealth of the original conception.' Most wisely this is not held to demand an imitation of the specific metre, syntax and sound of the original. The result of such a process at best would be algebra of some ingenuity, unspontaneous and wholly inadequate as an illustration of the peculiar genius of Welsh poetry. All a translation can hope to achieve is the two-dimensional monochrome sketch of a land that is all life and colour and sound. Mr Bell has a lengthy piece of special pleading arguing for an extensive Welsh influence on G. M. Hopkins, and it may well be that Hopkins alone of English poets has conveyed something of the quality of *cynghanedd* to those unacquainted with Welsh. But he stands alone, and his slight knowledge of Welsh never allowed him to embark on an adventure such as that of the Messrs. Bell.

There is no room to say more than that the translators have, within these limits, been successful. Although there is lacking the full harmony of the original's *cynghanedd*, the English version still has something of the fidelity of recollection, something of the same sharp response to the shape and music of things, that is for a modern reader Dafydd's most notable quality. The conventions of leafy glade and lovesick maiden are really the small change of his poetry; below them and beyond them is an awareness which marks a mind that is lively and free. The swan is an abbot in a white habit: the

skylark is *borewr byd*, the world's awakener; the waves are hoarse-tongued and curly-headed. There is a ground-bass of humour and aside, a candid joy in things; yet an edged irony is ever present awaiting its astringent moment. Much of this escapes translation, however dexterous, yet the English text points to a poetry that is full of subtlety and movement, with nothing that is hazy and sentimental. It is hard to quote from Dafydd, but one example of the translators' work may be given in order to show the extent of their achievement.

' A white seagull on the breast of the sea.
 Surely as perfect in beauty is she
 As the white snow or the whiter moon,
 A glove of the sea, gleaned from the sun.
 Proud and swift where she fishes and light
 Over the waves of the sea is her flight.
 O white, white bird, we will go, you and I,
 Your hand in my hand, the lily of the sea.'

Thinking of another poet, Dafydd had written :

' If some one could but find a key
 To unlock that chest, what wealth there would be
 Of music and warm-heartedness.'

English lovers of poetry should rise up and bless the name of Bell, father and son, for showing them where that key may be found.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

THE OBSCURE POET

WHEN Oliver Goldsmith wrote *The Deserted Village* he made it perfectly clear, both by his title and the content of his poem, what he was intending to say. A great poet of to-day, Mr. T. S. Eliot, in writing *East Coker* and *Burnt Norton*, has not been so explicit either in his title or in his contents; few of his readers know Mr. Eliot well enough to realise the significance of these place-names in his own personal history; nor will they find it easy to elucidate all the references within the poems. The title of the third of the trilogy, *The Dry Salvages*, has been explained by a footnote, though there too the text is not easy to follow.