# Dylan Thomas and the Bardic Impulse

by Patrick Morgan

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After the colossal Yeats-Pound-Eliot thrust in the early part of the century, poetry both in Britain and America has tended to cluster around two poles of diminishing splendour. We might call them the pole of the classicists or the academics and the pole of the wild men or the would-be bards.

In America the latter group emerged mainly from underground currents that had managed to survive somehow in dark quarters of New York City and in Black Mountain College in San Francisco; apart from these two hubs, the rest of the poets were scattered widely and only came together through the noble efforts of the "little" presses and "little" magazines; in the mid 50s they came to attention with the rise of the Beats, principal amongst them Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder.

In Britain, there were fewer wild men. One who qualifies was Hugh MacDiarmid, whose vigorous work was written mainly in Scots. Another, who rose in the mid 1930's, in Wales, and tried very hard to provide a poetry of Dionysian impetuosity, was Dylan Thomas. Otherwise, the panorama in the latter part of the century is of groupings and centralization: in and around Oxford and Cambridge, with, or against, the "Pylon Poets", or those of "The Movement" or the "Mavericks" or "The Group", or those who subscribed to the jazz-and-poetry aesthetic so devotedly commandeered by Mike Horovitz in London. Basically, and on both sides of the Atlantic, the academics and the bards gathered around the age-old mustering-points of "predominance of reason (and the reasonable)" and "predominance of emotion (and the emotional)".

The former found in forbears like Crabbe and Graves their parameters of excellence. Poetry, they argued, should speak to the ordinary intelligent reader; it should not be too queer, too abstruse, too personal, but should use what we would now call an "open" code: such postulates tended to sweep even Eliot and Pound out of fashion and to reinstate the tidiness of Pope as a major target of poetic achievement, the type that was to characterise the work of Philip Larkin, at the point of culmination of this "clean-up" operation.

In the other camp, we find all the remnants of individual urge systems, the chaos and obscurity of the Apocalyptics, the unchartable frivolity of Romantic dream visions, the psychology of the unconscious - a menagerie occasionally manageable, as in the case of Ted Hughes.

The “Pylon Poets”, who were the first “group” to follow in the aftermath of Pound and Eliot, and were much talked about in the ’30s, seem, in retrospect, to have got off to a false re-start.

They were never really a group, for all the editorial coverage they received. W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, C. Day Lewis and Stephen Spender all partially overlapped at Oxford, but - according to Stephen Spender - the four never sat together in the same room, until one day after World War II, when they were prompted to do as a result of the accumulated publicity.

Of the four, Auden was the chief theorizer, and certainly the most successful poet. He was to settle in America, renounce his British nationality, and - more pertinent - to become altogether American in his outlook.

About the same age as the members of this so-called group was the wild Welsh loner Dylan Thomas. Wild men are supposed “never to blot a line;” unlike craftsmen of the Pope-Crabbe-Hardy-Larkin tradition, the vigour and the sincerity of their overpowerful, overbrimming emotion wells out into automatic or semi-automatic effusions, and casts words into unchallengeable patterns of association or into juxtapositions mysterious and undisputable - i.e. directed by the unconscious mind.

Thomas, though, was a toiler. He pretended to be the high priest of a mythic Celtic world in which the sources of life were magic and revelation, but in fact he was the most laborious of manufacturers, struggling in the imitation of Hopkins, the undeclared master.

If you take a bardic impulse and then try to chisel it down, it is likely that you will end up with two incremental defects: the succession of substitutions, as produced by the chisel, will have distanced the text from the raw power of the original, and inevitably, insincerity will have crept in.

This is the source of most of the disenchantment that prolonged or repeated reading of Dylan Thomas produces. We find it at the back of such critical judgements as David Holbrook’s (“the difficulty in discussing Dylan Thomas is to know what it is one is discussing, since his words are not the clue they should be ...”) or Elder Olson’s (“his imagination could transport him anywhere, through all space and time; but it is also true, that wherever it takes him, he sees nothing but himself ...”).

Curiously enough, it is the poems that catapulted Dylan Thomas to instant fame that least seem to have withstood the test of time.

*A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London*, for instance, now rings quite awkwardly of Hopkins; it is also platitudinous and rather perverse; it is difficult to describe the sentiments as other than unpleasant:

*Never...*
*Shall I let pray the*
*shadow of a sound*
*Or sow my salt seed*
*In the least valley of*
*sackcloth to mourn*
*The majesty and burning*
*of the child’s death*
*I shall not murder*
*The mankind of her going with a grave truth ...*
*Deep with the first dead lies London’s daughter ...*
*After the first death, there is no other ...*

When Thomas was not deliberately attempting the bardic, as for instance in *After the Funeral* (In memory of Ann Jones), which, like all less bardic poems, is also less famous, he could be most

attractively precise, piling up effective images and minute particulars, with words, echoes and alliterations crackling together in evocative down-to-earth Anglo Saxon:

*After the funeral, mule praises, brays,*
*Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffled-toed tap*
*Tap happily of one peg in the thick*
*Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth in black,*
*The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,*
*Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,*
*Shakes a desolate boy, who slits his throat*
*In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves,*
*That breaks one bone to light with a judgement clout,*
*After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles*
*In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern ...*

We can see how the poet is achieving his effects, which is not to say that we can resist them; had Dylan Thomas always been so honest, he would have made, indeed, a most formidable artist.