

## EDITORIAL

Poetry written in English is obviously not the same thing as English poetry, and offers interesting challenges for editors of an international poetry journal. The challenges are usually implicit in the poems chosen, rather than lengthy theoretical discourses. As a poet involved in some of the editing, and a poet influenced from adolescence by both American and English poets, the experience has been especially interesting for me. The centenary year of Dylan Thomas's birth seems a suitable opportunity to look at some of the challenges involved.

Thomas is often called bardic and there is no doubt he was influenced by Blake, Lawrence, and Whitman, or at least had read them and picked up something of their rhythms. The Welsh influence is also important, and though he spoke no Welsh, the Welsh rhythms. But the idea of the bardic owes as much to the music of the *King James Bible* as to any specific poet or poetic tradition. In the popular mind, it also probably owes more to Thomas's deliberately nurtured profile as a romantic and tragic, not to say drunken, public figure.

To borrow a phrase from Robert Lowell, he is paradoxically a poet who appears "raw" but is actually as "cooked" as the most baroque of seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. As Drew Milne argues in his "Introduction" to John Malcolm Brinnin's *Dylan Thomas in America* (London: Prion Books, 2000, x), "Beneath the bardic bluff of booze, sex and song, Thomas was mediating a wide range of literary predecessors such as Blake, Whitman, Lawrence and surrealism. His poetry sought to combine the comic invention of Joyce, the metaphysical wit of Donne, and the fluid and sonorously intellectual syntax of later Yeats."

The "raw" in Lowell's "the cooked and the raw" clearly derives from Whitman, though without the traditional American *genre* of the brag. Ginsberg and the Beat Poets are the West Coast poets who had their influence on *Life Studies*, though probably not on Thomas. In as much as Blake influenced Whitman, and Whitman influenced Lawrence, there is a rhetorical extravagance to Thomas's poetry which might be described as an influence, but this seems to me more to do with denotation than connotation, to borrow the terms Wallace Stevens uses in *The Necessary Angel*. Emerson's suggestion in his essay

“The Poet” that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”, *Nature and Selected Essays*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003, 263-4) may be a clue to something different happening in the directly American tradition. But though Pound and Eliot are clear American voices, Pound especially being claimed as the inspiration for much of what goes on in the “raw” school of poetry, their determination to break free of the limitations of the iambic pentameter have little to do with Dylan Thomas’s practice.

Lowell’s prosody in *Lord Weary’s Castle* and the shorter poems in *The Mills of the Kavanagh’s* does remind us of early Dylan Thomas, though I’m not suggesting that as an influence as such, simply a comparison. The myth of Thomas as a permanently drunk poet crouched over his Thesaurus has done much damage to the truth of his incredibly elaborate and laboured struggles with words and rhythms. His mastery of prosody is in fact extraordinary, and though rhetoric of the kind he favours has been out of fashion for several decades, that is largely a matter of fashion. We have grown wary of grand gestures, and prefer the more subtle but equally demanding difficulties of a genius such as Elizabeth Bishop’s. We ought perhaps to remember that however different they were, Bishop and Lowell remained constant friends in poetry, if not over Lowell’s use of personal and private letters in *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*.

What has this to do with the pleasures of being involved in editing *Poetry Salzburg Review*? For me, it is partly to do with the challenge of recognising traditions other than one’s own, even when those traditions are closely linked by a common though radically different language. This is not the same as the challenge offered by poetry that is actually written in a language other than one’s own. Ted Hughes would be the most significant recent example for me of a poet who has gained immeasurably from his encounters with both post-war European poetry and the classical tradition. My own role does not include such submissions. For me, the experience of helping with *Poetry Salzburg Review* is limited to submissions written in English. And here, one is involved with a review which is attempting to incorporate poetry actually written in a variety of versions of English, no matter how culturally and linguistically diverse. When submissions arrive, there is always the hope that a new voice will draw linguistic and imaginative

energy not only from the poet's own tradition, but the tensions growing out of the place of English in the contemporary world. This is something radically new. The nearest comparison would be with Elizabethan English, when the language was being changed by a whole range of new linguistic terms and registers. Pound's "Make it new" remains as demanding a task as ever, no matter how exciting. I'm not convinced that Thomas shared "the comic invention of Joyce", but had he lived, his creative experience as a Welsh poet writing in English but performing in an international community of poetry might well have led to even finer flights of imagination.

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