

The Voice of Wales: Gillian Clarke and the Anglo-Welsh Poetic Tradition

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In a dismissive comment in his 'Essays on the English Poets of Wales', Anthony Conran takes issue with Gillian Clarke's subject matter, and categorises her (incorrectly) as an introspective petty bourgeois who can write about nothing other than herself:

The fact that individual life styles are, or are not, presented all the time for assessment is not a necessary criterion of human value. The trouble is, the Anglo-Welsh are being driven by the logic of their class to adopt just this criterion. Particularly is this true of the poets who have made their reputations since the death of Dylan Thomas, such as Leslie Norris or Gillian Clarke.¹

In fact, Clarke's ancestors were *gwerin* (rural folk). She is descended from millers and hill farmers and is the natural heir to the poetic craft conserved by the *beirdd gwlad* (country poets) who worked in the fields and composed englyns as intricate as the hedgerows. Poetry was the job of 'craftsmen', he argues (correctly, this time), but while R. S. Thomas is granted Conran's respect, he sees Clarke as one of the 'wasted powers' of the 'devalued' Anglo-Welsh tradition, disinherited of the tools of the poetic craft and the skill to use them. No wonder she scrunched up her poems and threw them in the bin to begin with. Earlier, in the sixties, Glyn Jones' attitude to the future of Anglo-Welsh verse is also surprisingly tentative:

One is frequently asked what the future of Anglo-Welsh is to be. This question has of course two distinct meanings. If the

meaning is 'How will the future regard what has already been written by Anglo-Welsh writers?' the answer is that no-one can possibly tell....Sometimes the question appears to have a slightly different meaning, namely: 'Will the Anglo-Welsh "movement" continue, or will it die out?' Again, so many imponderables exist in our rapidly changing world that even the most general prophecy is impossible.²

Although there has been extensive debate surrounding the definition of Anglo-Welsh Poetry, and further disagreement about the consequences of being branded a member of this school, the merits of identifying with this tradition in the twenty-first century cannot be in doubt. In the late 1990s, Dannie Abse revised his 1960s statement in a BBC interview – 'there is no such thing as a specific Anglo-Welsh style or tone' – admitting that there are specific and notable characteristics to this body of literature, including an awareness of 'being part of a defeated nation' which leads Anglo-Welsh writers to 'side with the underdogs, the outsiders, the downtrodden'.

So, with some trepidation, Gillian Clarke stepped up to receive the mantle of The National Poet of Wales in 2008 and went on to raise the status of Anglo-Welsh verse on a global scale. Whereas Anglo-Welsh poets of the past have written about Wales, from Wales or to Wales, Clarke writes *as* Wales, her prosopoeiac voice full of the harmony and rural idiom of her forbears, the *cynfeirdd* (early poets) and the *gogynfeirdd* (later early poets). Jones called for poets with 'a wider knowledge of the past and present of our country, particularly of our native literature, and a deeper sense of identity with her destiny', expecting, perhaps, some sort of Anglophone Owain Glyndwr to stage another coup and stake his claim as suitor; 'the only English thing about an Anglo-Welsh writer ought to be his language', insisted Jones. Instead, from the coast of Penarth, from the hillsides of Ceredigion, emerged Clarke, a woman akin to Rhiannon the Queen of Dyfed, who not only speaks Welsh and English but listens in Welsh and in English. She can communicate with and interpret nature's own poetic language, her 'heart listening / for the line's perfect pitch'.³

Clarke's poetry is immediately recognisable for its compassionate voice and detailed sensory observation of the world. Talking about her collection 'Ice' on BBC Radio 4's Book Club at the Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea in May 2013, Clarke defined her poetic method as one of careful observation; she has the gift of a rare sensitivity to the senses. It is her empathy that makes her observations of Welsh people, creatures and

places so compelling and so unmistakably rooted in the Anglo-Welsh tradition and, as Raymond Garlick and Roland Mathias argue, in the Welsh landscape itself:

Many Anglo-Welsh poets seem to assume that their function is not primarily to explore the private world of their own thought and feelings but to address their community ... The celebration of particular landscapes, the sense of place, the naming of locations mark many of their poems ... Moreover this sense of place is often associated with a sense of time – sometimes a personal past (as in ‘Fern Hill’) but more often a national past, the immensely venerable continuity of the history of Wales.⁴

Her poetry maps Wales in a way that cartographers cannot. The speaker of ‘Letter From a Far Country’ explains her documentary vocation; ‘I have charted all your needs’. Blaen Cwrt, Middleton, Llyn, Cardiff, Cader Idris, Pisgah, Six Bells, Ystrad Fflûr, Llanbadarn, Mynachlog, Port Talbot, Cyncoed, the Teifi, the Tywi are connected by the speaker’s intimate understanding of the shared history of joy and suffering experienced in these places, an understanding achieved through listening, in silence, to the generations.

I hear the dead grandmothers,
Mamgu from Ceredigion,
Nain from the North, all calling
their daughters down from the fields,
calling me in from the road.⁵

This is a voice that speaks from within the home, near to the hearth, and none of this intimacy is lost, even though, in this poem, the speaker herself is removed to a distant future and the message ‘might take a generation to arrive’. Reading Clarke’s poetry is indeed like opening a message from a bottle in the sea; you are the intended reader. Another quality that endears the reader to Clarke’s voice is the sense that you are being let into a shared secret. When she addressed an audience of teachers and students at our literary society last summer, Clarke revealed that, to her, ‘poetry is full of the shimmering of private secrets: this awakens the secrets of the reader’. And this is exactly the sort of connection Clarke’s verse makes; her private grief for the nest of young adders ‘smashed with stones’, her guilt of having ‘yolk on her hands’

when her scything breaks the eggs of the willow warbler, the knowing look from her spaniel during a silent conversation over the body of a dead hare are all heart-breaking but reassuring moments for the reader as we realise that it is only natural to encounter deep pain and sadness for things beyond our control, and Clarke's words give voice to the reader's own secret grieving.

While Clarke is full of admiration and love for R. S. Thomas and his work, her poetry is distinctly different to his: he is stoical, Clarke is sentimental; where Thomas finds resentment, division, unease and emptiness, Clarke heals wounds, nurtures hope and finds consolation in a better future. Clarke's poetry exposes the indulgent nostalgia of R. S. Thomas' claim that:

There is no present in Wales
And no future;
There is only the past⁶

Her verse, her work at Ty Newydd and with *Llenyddiaeth Cymru* has ensured the present and future vitality of Welsh literature. However, she acknowledges that some connection with the past is inherent to Welsh writers; 'as a Welsh poet, I feel ghosts at my back, a poetic lineage going back to the dark ages'.⁷ This haunting feeling is special to Anglo-Welsh writers. Edward Thomas was bewitched by 'all those phantoms following phantoms in a phantom land, – a gleam of spears, a murmur of arrows, a shout of victory, a fair face, a scream of torture, a song, the form of some conqueror and pursuer of English kings, – which make Welsh history'.⁸ Earlier still, even visiting writers sense the *hanes*. Matthew Arnold, staying in nineteenth century Llandudno, observed that 'Wales is where the past still lives, where every place has its tradition, every name its poetry, and where the people, the genuine people, still know this past, this tradition, this poetry, and live with and cling to it'.⁹ Meic Stephens cites the main poetic concerns of the Anglo-Welsh writer as 'Welsh scenes, the Welsh people, the Welsh past';¹⁰ Clarke has developed this from a retrospective glance at an ancestral portrait into a palimpsest. Traces of Dafydd Ap Gwilym, Ann Griffiths, John Dyer, the *Mabinogion*, Llywarch Hên and Taliesin are visible beneath the surface and in the margins of her work. Her lines resonate the sonorous quality of the old metres of the *cywyddwyr*. A *cywydd* is a couplet of seven syllabled lines which rhyme unrhymically. The *cywyddwyr* were the poets who wrote in this metre.

The Welsh past is both a burden and a blessing to the Anglo-Welsh poet. Clarke forges connections between the past and the present through

imagery of layering which acts as a metaphor for the function of memory. Where so many Anglo-Welsh poets have set the past in conflict with the present, she brings about a reconciliation, enabling them to coexist harmoniously. In her sonnet, 'Marged',¹¹ Clarke shows how the past inhabits the present and can be a great comfort and a way of better understanding a place. While in her attic room, a 'space' of her own with a 'new roof-window', giving her a perspective on the world for lofty and creative thought, she invites the character of Marged, the woman who lived in Blaen Cwrt generations before, back into her home, to share in her loneliness. Both women also inhabit the 'room' of the sonnet itself, the present layered over the past in a series of juxtapositions: Clarke types away at her desk 'over the old dark parlwr where she died', parks the car on the road where the cow used to walk, discovers remnants of Marged's broken earthenware beneath the surface in the garden. Their lives are brought close in the parallels throughout the poem and Clarke acknowledges their shared connection through the landscape by 'looking at the hills she looked at too'. The final line of the couplet asks 'What else do we share, but being women?', a question which overcomes the boundaries of time and place to unite them in the universal experience of womanhood. So the poem both celebrates and overcomes the narrow provincialism and specificity of its subject matter where characters who are living on top of each other in the layered claustrophobia of a tiny rural community become representative of all women 'under the stars' who struggle alone, endure and die. 'Stone Hare', a sonnet written in praise of the work of Welsh stone mason Meic Watts, deals with the same idea of layered time and the craftsman's role in connecting the past to the present. Through the imagery of limestone, the sculpted hare, 'its eye a planet', represents the connection between Clarke's poem and the 'long trajectories' of poetic tradition of which it is a product. The poem is an extended metaphor; the hare is 'the country tradition [that] runs back across the centuries as something essentially Welsh and every Welsh writer, whatever his language, has a responsibility in this respect'.¹²

Clarke, like Thomas, sometimes uses the animal symbolism of the hare to represent God in the natural world. In 'Stone Hare', the speaker worships the sculpted idol of the hare in reverence of its timeless mystery. The poetic quest becomes a seeking after God in nature. For Thomas, He was always elusive:

His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints He has just
Left.¹³

The image of a God just out of reach was further illustrated by Thomas in a BBC radio interview in which he elaborated:

Being something of a naturalist myself, I know how I have found a hare's form on the hillside and I have been able to put my hand in it and feel it still warm, and this is my feeling of God – that we don't actually find him but we find where he has been, we find the place still warm with his presence, but he is absent, and we find his footsteps, his footprints, but we never actually come upon him because how can we? If we could comprehend God we would be God ourselves.

Clarke continues the quest, walking in R. S. Thomas's footsteps;

finding
the footprint of God
warm in the shoe of the hare.¹⁴

Clarke shares Thomas' reverence for the mystery of the hare, the holiness of Enlli and the bleak power of nature. But Clarke's sensory awareness leads to an acute compassion to which Thomas was insensitive. In her poem 'The Hare', a tribute to the poet Frances Horovitz who died in 1983, Clarke remembers how the 'sharp cry' of the creature caught in a trap unlocks a nightmare for Horovitz in which she bears witness to 'all the suffering of the world / in a single moment'. The hare becomes a Christ-like figure of innocent suffering for the sins of the world, with allusions to the crucifixion, the blackthorn's 'thorny crowns against the sky', further confirming the synecdoche of nature suffering at the hand of man. But while Thomas is lost to God in a gnostic void, Clarke seems to sense his presence everywhere. She sometimes characterises him as inconsistent;

God who loves the lilies of the field
and the one lamb which is lost
forgot this one...¹⁵

On other occasions, He is portrayed as vengeful, sending the foot and mouth plague to 'scour your soul',¹⁶ commit the newborn to death and throw beasts to the flames 'like sinners consumed'.¹⁷

The title of the most poignant of Clarke's collections, *Making Beds for the Dead*, connects the 'theatre of death'¹⁸ with a maternal need to clean up

and put the house in order again after the chaos of the 2001 foot and mouth crisis. The sequence within the collection of the same title deals specifically with the epizootic that resulted in the slaughter of one million animals in Wales alone. I remember the smoking pyres of charred carcasses on the highest point of Epynt that year and the apocalyptic devastation shrouding the faces of the boys from the lonely farms who'd lost their livelihood and their beloved livestock. Reading these poems seventeen years after the event still made tears well up in my eyes. The reviewer who said in 2004 that this series of poems is 'in places harrowing to read, since it is still fresh in the mind, though it is not clear how such a sequence will stand up over time'¹⁹ can have no idea how deep the scars run on the Welsh consciousness: this disaster will leave its stain for generations. These poems are crucial in helping the country articulate its grief and acknowledge its guilt. Clarke's apocalyptic imagery is not hyperbole. But her gentle, maternal concerns, conveyed through sensory descriptions of ewes in lamb, cold and warmth and water imagery, are the more powerfully heart-rending. This is a metaphorical way of exploring the distinctly maternal culture of Wales that is so rooted in the domestic environment of the subsistence farming family. Moreover, the acknowledgement of a mother-tongue is apparent in her diction that incorporates Welsh vocabulary, unglossed, into her lines. The poem 'Ewe, March 2003,' and the whole sequence, begins with the word 'No', and then another negative, setting the tone of denial, horror and negation that is the only appropriate response to the chaotic mass murder of livestock that ensues. The speaker participates in the annual ritual of 'birth and baptismal' out of love ('no money in it'), the heat and fulness of life contrasting with the destruction that is to come. The sonorous quality of the water imagery is apparent in the near *cynghanedd sain* of the line 'for a while, cold, whole' in the simile comparing the farmers (presumably Clarke herself and her husband) to rivers that meet at this miraculous juncture of the birth and then go on to witness the great flowing out of life into the world. (*Cynghanedd* is a technical term for the regular pattern of alliteration combined with internal rhyme. *Cynghanedd sain* is the oldest type of this metre and was the kind most favoured by Dafydd ap Gwilym and other fourteenth century poets.) The alliteration and assonance captures the intensity of the silent observation of the experience, as, cornered in the field, the speaker feels part of the great mysterious current of life. The next poem, 'Wethers', pays homage to Thomas with the trope of the definite article followed by the word 'one' as an adjective to mark out the distinct loneliness of this rural hill farm lifestyle²⁰ 'on the one slope, in the one flock'. The personification of the

lambs in the first stanza who 'grow wild' in summer and 'grow tame' in winter illustrates the paradoxical dependence and independence of farm creatures, and only serves to heighten the shock of that deadly monosyllabic word waiting at the end of the second stanza, the 'gun', that is so out of place in the semantic field of diction to do with nurturing – 'hand', 'calling', 'learn', 'grow', 'quiets'. Clarke's rhyming of monosyllabic words delivers the shock of the shots 'done / one by one' and makes the reader painfully aware of the brutal nature of this loss, even though it is 'quicker' than being sent to a foreign abattoir. Having established the narrator's acute compassion for the ewes, lambs and wethers, the collection goes on to portray every death as a personal loss, felt as acutely as a family bereavement. The great hope is that the ewe of the first poem might just be 'Flowerface', the sheep we are introduced to at the end of 'Blackface, March 2002', a poem that follows immediately the end of 'Making Beds for the Dead'. In it, Clarke's speaker's secret defiance is a triumph of love. The death of the one precious sheep who was named against the warnings of the anonymously practical 'them' who deny any emotional attachment to farm animals, recalls all the anguish of the foot and mouth crisis as Blackface's burial becomes a simile for 'the millions they threw on the pyres / in the days of the virus', the latter phrase giving the crisis the status of a Biblical plague. But this intimate connection between humanity and nature, enacted by the image of Clarke (who I identify as the speaker here) with her 'fingers deep in her wool / till the pulse in her neck / fades to a flutter', has taught Clarke the opposite – naming is all the more important lest we forget to mourn. And she notes the 'tender glimpse' of the dead lamb too, including the unborn in her grief. The collection also explores the corruption and infection of language itself by the virus; the pollution of the air inevitably leads to the pollution of breath and the spread of foot and mouth is enacted through the spread of the news of the virus by word of mouth, gossip, rumour and lies, 'the virus on the move / like whispers'. Silence in the absence of appropriate language is an important theme as Clarke takes on the challenge of giving voice to the unspeakable horrors and devastation of the crisis:

Words drowned in a howl of wind
In the howl of a man in a hollow barn.²¹

The melancholy assonance and onomatopoeia begin to capture the failure of language. Using the same imagery of the airborne plague, emulsified 'particles of blood on the wind'²² and the memento mori of 'dust', Clarke moves seamlessly to the obliteration of the Twin Towers into 'ashes /

blown by an old wind' and we are reminded that one catastrophe follows another and all humanity suffers for its sin, all over the world.

But in the dust and ashes, Clarke finds inspiration. Another thing she shares with her poetic ancestors is a tender love of ruins. Dafydd ap Gwilym (c.1320-1370), '*eos Dyfed*', (the nightingale of Dyfed) a wandering scholar and also a native of Ceredigion, predates Clarke by several centuries and yet she has a strong kinship with this Welsh language poet, more so, perhaps than with some of her embittered Anglo-Welsh contemporaries. In ap Gwilym's poem 'Yr Adfail' (The Ruin) a lyric voice in an elegiac tone examines the destroyed shell of a stone house, lamenting the turbulent breakdown of the speaker's relationship with a lover. The hollowness of the house represents the speaker's emptiness as he expresses feelings of being laid bare by storms of passion:

Ys mau gŵyn geirswyn gwersyllt,
Am hynt a wnaeth y gwynt gwyllt.
Ystorm o fynwes dwyrain
A wnaeth gur hyd y mur main.
Uchenaid gwynt, gerrynt gawdd,
Y deau a'm didoawdd.²⁴

The structure itself 'y bwth tirhwth twn, / Yrrhwng gweundir a gwyndwn' (ruined cottage with open gable-end between the mountain and the pasture) could almost be Blaen Cwrt, where, similarly, 'the air spins in the stone rectangle' in 'the four folds of the valley' on a backdrop of 'ochre and earth and cloud-green'. However, while ap Gwilym's poem is full of desolation, Clarke, like an architect sympathetic to old buildings, has put the heart back into the disintegrating building in her poem, without diminishing its crumbling charm.

The wattle and daub
Chimney hood has decayed away, slowly
Creeping to dust, chalking the slate
Floor with stories.

The enjambment here enacts the irregular and drawn out decay of the traditional walls 'slowly / creeping', but in this destruction Clarke finds creative inspiration, the syntax of the line bringing the reader to the conclusion that truth will survive and this place will be preserved in the form of 'stories' told around the hearth, even when the chalk dust has

worn away. However, ap Gwilym sees only 'amwyll' (delusion) and 'twyll' (deception). At the end of ap Gwilym's poem there is a deep sense of nostalgia for a way of life that can never be restored 'Aeth talm o waith y teulu, / Dafydd, â chroes; da foes fu,²⁵ the rhyming couplet here consigning the family's work to the past (teulu/fu). However, Clarke's poem ends on a distinctly hopeful note:

Two rooms, waking and sleeping,
Two languages, two centuries of past
To ponder on, and the basic need
To work hard to survive.²⁶

The personified house could stand for Clarke's own poetic vocation, a monument to Clarke's ability to work with the materials of the past and bring them to life through practical use. The *cymeriad*²⁷ binding together these last four lines, a device characteristic of ap Gwilym's verse form, suggests the strength and integrity of the walls of this house, the body of poetic work and the way of life that Clarke has worked so hard craft into a long-standing structure, robust enough to withstand the elements, despite the potential for division between past and present, Welsh and English. She has achieved in her own craft precisely what she what she admired in Taliesin's, who 'sang a new architecture / from the old, in perfect metre.'²⁸ There is no doubt that her poetry will endure.

If for ap Glyn, appointed in March this year as the next National Poet of Wales, cannot wear Gillian Clarke's mantle of the beloved *carthen*, woven in a Welsh mill, treasured for years in a trousseau, inherited from Marged, worn casually and comfortably over the shoulders, a blanket for nursing babies in the *cwtch* of her arm by day and an extra layer on the bed at night; he must fashion for himself some bardic robes of a different fabric.

Notes

1. Conran, A., (1982) *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer).
2. Jones, G., (1968) *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (Dent: London).
3. Clarke, G., (2004) 'The Poet's Ear' in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
4. Garlick, R. and Mathias, R., eds., (1984) *Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1980* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press).
5. Clarke, G., (1982) *Letter from a Far Country* (Manchester: Carcanet).
6. Thomas, R. S. (1952) 'Welsh Landscape' in *An Acre of Land* (Newtown :

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7. BBC Radio 3 (2008) *A Laureate's Life*
 8. Thomas, E., (1924) *Wales* (London: A & C Black).
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 11. Clarke, G., (1996) *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet).
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 15. Clarke, G., (2004) 'Virus' in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 16. Clarke, G., (2004) 'Rumour' in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 17. Clarke, G., (2004) 'The Vet' in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 18. Clarke, G., (2004) 'Cull' in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 19. Cooke, B., (2004) *Poetry Ireland Review* (86).
 20. Thomas, R. S. (1958) 'Ap Huw's Testament' in *Poetry for Supper* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis).
 21. Clarke, G., (2004) Silence in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 22. Clarke, G., (2004) Three Minutes in *Making Beds for the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 23. Bromwich, R., (1982) *Dafydd ap Gwilym Poems* (Cardiff: UWP)
 Translation: Mine is the grief of a decamped army,
 For the course the wild wind took:
 A storm from out the bosom of the east
 wrought destruction along the stone wall
 the sighing south wind, on its course of wrath
 tore away my roof.
 24. Translation: Dafydd, the household's span of work is done,
 beneath the cross, it was a decent way of life.
 25. Clarke, G., (1996) 'Blaen Cwrt' in *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet).
 26. Similar to anaphora, cymeriad is the technique of beginning a series of lines with the same letter, word or phrase.
 27. Clarke, G., (2012) Taliesin in *Ice* (Manchester: Carcanet).