

LEWYS GLYN COTHI: SACRAMENTAL POET*

Among Professor Dafydd Johnston's scholarly kindnesses is his excellent edition of the works of Lewys Glyn Cothi (*ca.*1420-89),¹ one of the foremost master-poets of the *grand siècle* of medieval Welsh literature.² This splendid volume affords us in a nutshell a comprehensive and transparent view of the aristocratic and Catholic civilization of late medieval Wales. Henceforth, this edition elevates Lewys to a position of great distinction, if not of prime importance, among the many skilful practitioners of the bardic craft in the heyday of the polished praise poetry of the *cywyddwyr* (poets of the nobility).

Before we proceed to the subject of this article it may well be worthwhile to relate, albeit briefly, some of the more general impressions arising from a cursory reading of the *oeuvre* of this *pencerdd* (master-poet). The poet's delightful mastery of the conventional intricacies of the bardic craft of *cerdd dafod* is flexible and his diction uncommonly refined. Of his many poetic skills the most exemplary may well be his tidy constructions of thought, developed mainly in couplet style. He is also very fond of amassing 'aristocratic' images, more especially images derived from the world of tree growth, when singing the praises of a patron of good lineage, and this – in the mind of the poet at least – enhances the corresponding status of the patron in the wider community. In this last respect the imagery is woven into rich patterns of thought and feeling which are quite commonplace to the ideology and repertoire of the poets of this period as a whole. Indeed this characteristic deployment of aristocratic imagery is the poet's way of thinking and feeling about his patrons and their idealized hospitality from the time of Taliesin onward. The similes and metaphors employed by him are merely the stock-in-trade of bardic learning as a whole. Moreover his identification of his patrons with the heroes of the classical world, the old North, the Arthurian and French cycles, and of course the scriptures, is traditional in function and intent. He is also skilful at identifying his patrons with the mighty lords of the great bardic renaissance of the Age of the Princes, and with the famous figures of fourteenth-century Wales. In this particular respect his bardic learning is thoroughly traditional in scope and content.

Turning at last to the subject of this article, I should like to suggest that the poet's ideology is a powerful combination of Platonic philosophy on the one hand, and sacramental theology on the other.³ It is indeed certain that Lewys Glyn Cothi did not sing the praises of the philosophical *idea* of a Great Chain of Being, but his ideological heritage had for long been imbued with the human awareness of a divine order made visible in the Creation, an order whereby all created beings and things belonged essentially to different categories or classes but which were nevertheless chained together in one great interlocking unity. This supreme notion of a Great Chain of Being was merely the medieval way of thinking about what was generally perceived to be a divine order filling the cosmos, and it was, moreover, a noble and choice meditative philosophy available to the bards because its essence was encapsulated in the bardic grammar.⁴

According to this philosophy, man was placed in a position of paramount importance in the universe, for he was created in the image of the Creator Himself, and entrusted by Him with the lordship of all Creation. In accordance with this unique privilege man was expected in some definite and practical way – and this despite the negative theological implications of Adam’s fall – to reflect the generosity and kindness, justice and forgiveness of the Creator by nurturing a charitable attitude not only within the confines of the nobleman’s house and toward his family and friends, but also in the wider community and toward people of all social rank. In fact one of the most skilful and consistent themes of Lewys Glyn Cothi’s refined praise poetry is the one praising the patron’s function as *custodian* to his community, that is, his essentially *religious* function as the upholder of civilization itself. *Canllaw yw hil Siancyn Llwyd/cynheiliawdr nawcan haelwyd* (Siancyn Llwyd’s lineage is a support/a sustainer of nine hundred hearths), he maintains of Tomas ab Phylib of Pictwn. Maredudd Amheredudd of Trefeglwys is exemplified as *Ceidwad i wan a chadarn* (a custodian to the weak and strong). Praising such social values as these was one direct way the poet had of extolling the goodness of God Himself. Lewys had a notion that the loss of man’s civilizing influence in house and community threatened the very fabric of religious life, not only in the sphere of the individual but more importantly in wider secular society as a whole; it threatened to supplant the divinely ordained order with uninhabitable desolation:

Gwag tir a welir heb reolaeth
 gwag tŷ heb wely a mabolaeth,
 gwag tref heb blasau, gwag traeth – heb ddyfredd,
 gwag annedd heb wledd, heb fedd, heb faeth.

Gwag llan heb brelad, heb geidwadaeth,
 gwag tŵr heb sowdiwr a bwa saeth,
 gwag aelwyd heb fwg, a gwaeth – fydd heb dân,
 gwag gwladan lydan heb ddeiliadaeth.⁵

(A land beheld without management is empty/ a house without a bed and progeny is empty,/ a township without homesteads is empty, a beach without waters is empty,/ a dwelling without a feast, without mead, without nourishment is empty.

A church without a prelate, without oversight is empty,/ a tower without a soldier and bow-and-arrow is empty,/ a hearth without smoke is empty, and it will be even worse without a fire,/ a wide country without landholding is empty)

When man shrugs off his cultural responsibilities even the natural order lapses into a state of chaos and desolation. *Gwag* (empty) is indeed a fearsome monosyllable clothed with the same explicitness as drawing one’s last breath. And does not the intentional negative repetition of the preposition *heb* (without) generate a profound terror? But in the nobleman’s house the contrary is true for there culture is nurtured and the religious meaning of life is maintained in spotless abundance from one generation to the next. This poet

did not care for solitude for he was deeply aware of the lack of protection and succour in solitude. Body and soul are nourished around the hearth and the house and the warmth surrounding it is the *eisteddfod* of Lewys's life. It was the succour of flesh and spirit, in its deepest sacramental sense, that gave birth to his socio-religious function as the master-poet of life's beauty. Therefore it behoves us to remember that it is in Lewys's poetry perhaps that the zenith of the *cywyddwyr*'s deeply felt awareness of the comely luxury and wealth of civilized living in the nobleman's house in late medieval Wales is realised. His quiet but sure exultation in the divine order from the summit of the Great Chain of Being down to its very roots, but with man in the centre radiating the blessings of the Creator in house and community, is reflected in the creatively consistent, sensitive and even movement of the refined *awdlau* and constant *cywyddau* to noblemen of good lineage.

Intensive reading of the poems in the light of the opening series of *englynion* to God⁶ gradually deepens the reader's conviction that this excellent poetry exemplifies a certain single-minded and serene sacramental vision of man and his community before the Creator God. At least on the basis of the evidence of Peniarth MS 70, in the poet's own hand, it may be maintained that there is a deep and dynamic significance forming a framework to Lewys's awareness of his religious calling as master-poet of hospitality (*perchentyaeth*). Now and again in the poems we are afforded glimpses of the strong religious significance he attributed to the noblemen's generosity. Indeed the conscious decision at the beginning of Peniarth 70 to sing first to God, exactly as the *gogynfeirdd* (poets of the princes) had done before him, reveals Lewys's awareness of the religious nature of his praise poetry.⁷

In essence it is a sacramental vision of man and the world which is reflected *par excellence* in the series of *englynion* which constitutes the first poem. Lewys delights in being able to detect the handiwork of the Creator God in His Creation and his constant aim was to embody in his praise poetry, and that as sensitively as possible, the glory of this integral vision.

In one of his essays Saunders Lewis asserts:

Ysbeiliwyd y bywyd Cymreig a llenyddiaeth Gymraeg o Sagrafennau
Cristnogaeth Gatholig o ail hanner yr unfed ganrif ar bymtheg hyd
heddiw. Yr olwg sagrafennaidd hon ar fywyd a barodd fod
barddoniaeth Gymraeg yr Oesau Canol, er mai Duw oedd ei nod, eto'n
cofleidio holl lawenydd pethau daearol, cig a gwin a difyrrwch
cymdeithasol ac ardderchowgrwydd chwerthin.⁸

(Welsh life and Welsh literature has been despoiled of the Christian Catholic Sacraments from the second half of the sixteenth century to this day. It was this sacramental view of life that ensured that medieval Welsh poetry, although God was its objective, embraced all the gladness of earthly things, meat and wine and social merriment and the glory of laughter).

The second half of this verdict can be applied directly to the poetry of Lewys Glyn Cothi, which we propose to do now.

If a sacrament is an ordinance whereby earthly objects become the medium of mediating the blessings of God to man, then possibly we may define the latter as a sacramental being. Some theologians even speak of Christ as the fundamental sacrament of Christianity since His Incarnation can be viewed as an earthly sign of the gracious connection between God and humanity. And even the Church may be considered a sacrament, for man comes to a redeemed condition and to a saving connection with Christ and the Father through the Church's preaching and mediation. The Church viewed in this way is merely a continuation of the Incarnation of Christ. In the Church the grace of God transforms the life of the believer who is gradually deified (theosis). This is a gift from God so that man may come to know Him and love Him and enter into a spiritual relationship with Him, although this relationship is entirely undeserved on the part of man. Therefore sacramentalism affirms the gracious presence of God in the world and His Spirit becomes comprehensible in the objects of His love. All visible things are but earthly expressions of God's creative grace and at the same time they mediate God's grace to man in his condition of spiritual need. The Creation *in toto* is a revelation of the divine character and love of God, and thereby becomes the means of disseminating universal grace to mankind as a whole. The invisible spiritual realm is incarnated, so to speak, in the earthly, which becomes the visible counterpart of that which is heavenly.⁹ But it should also be remembered that the cosmos is not an extension of the transcendent essence of God, and that there is a real metaphysical distinction between Him and that which is created.

As a good Augustinian, Lewys Glyn Cothi is able to hold together dextrously his passionate awareness of the universal grace of God in His Creation and in man, and also remain conscious of the comprehensiveness of the Fall's effect on the latter. This is evident in the opening series of *englynion* to God, and we can sense the way the poet realizes that providence and a supernatural order lie behind his ideological or theological *credo*. His response to this general revelation is to subject himself to that which is supernatural and sing the praises of God and fellow man and also the world of nature. The *credo* that objectifies his sacramentalism is Augustinian.¹⁰ His theology is thoroughly Augustinian, a fact which is generally true of Welsh literary works from the earliest period down to *ca.*1450. This leads us naturally to surmise with the editor that Lewys had received ecclesiastical training of a kind in the fundamentals of this theology when he was a disciple at the church of Abergwili or when sitting at the feet of some anonymous friar at the Priory of Carmarthen. It is obvious that Lewys was well versed in central Augustinian ideas such as the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, Creation, the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ, and also the Last Judgement, and of course he profited much from Augustine's idea of grace.¹¹ He even mentions the saint by name in one *englyn* and it is only fair to surmise that he knew more about him than just his name.¹²

Lewys's vision of life as a sacrament is crystallized in a number of constant and even *englynion* toward the end of the opening poem and we may now quote these at length in order to savour his deep conviction that the entire world is consecrated to God:

Yn y trŵn y mae trwy ynni – yn Un,
yn y nef y mae'n Dri,
yn yr haul, yn yr heli,
yn y sêr, myn f'eiioes i.

(On the throne He is One because of inward force,/ in heaven He is Three,/ in the sun, in the seaspray,/ in the stars, by my own life).

Yn y gwŷdd y bydd, ym mhob âr – drwy'r byd
yn yr ŷd a'r adar
yn Dduw y mae'n y ddaear,
yn ddewin gwyn, yn ddyn gwâr.

(He will be in the trees, in arable land throughout the world,/ in the wheat and all the birds;/ in the earth He is God,/ a holy magician, a gracious man.)

Yn eigion ymhell, yn agos – y mae,
yn y main, yn y rhos,
yn y dydd yn y diddos
yn y niwl ac yn y nos.

(He is in oceans far and near,/ in the precious stones, in the moor,/ in the day and in the shelter,/ in the mist and in the night.)

Yn egin y llin gerllaw, – yn y gwynt,
yn y gwellt yn gwreiddiau,
yn y gwenith yn rhithiau,
yn y gwllith ac yn y gwllaw.

(In the sprouts of the flax nearby, in the wind,/ in the grass taking root,/ appearing as if by magic in the wheat,/ in the dew and in the rain.)

Yn y dwyrain fryn, frenin – y ieithoedd,
yn eitha'r gorllewin
yng ngogledd, anhunedd hin,
yn y deau'n un dewin.

(In the eastern hill, the King of languages,/ in the extremity of the west, in the north, [from whence comes] weather [causing] sleeplessness, in the south One magician.)

Yn deg y mae 'mhob degwm,
ym mhob da oll, ym mhob dim,
yno y mae Duw ynom,
yn Nuw erioed, yno'r ŷm.¹³

(He is fair in every tithe,/ in every good thing, in every thing,/ there God is in us,/we have always been there in God.)

We can see from the evidence adduced above that earthly things are mirrors to the grace of God. Lewys thinks of Him in the same light as an ideal patron of this world, and he addresses God with a traditional metaphor for a nobleman. He calls the Creator *Arglwyddwalch yr arglwydd* (the lord-hawk of lords). Indeed the Son also is a nobleman: *Crist o'r nef yw'r pendefig* (Christ from heaven is the nobleman). The poet's praise is anthropomorphic for he sees God as a perfect earthly Lord. But he agrees also that the Creator is a supernatural and transcendent Being. He clinches the two aspects to God's character – the one invisible, the other made manifest by the creation – in this theologically precise line when he refers to the Creator as *yn ddewin gwyn, yn ddyn gwâr* (a holy magician, a gracious man.). God is the Platonic source of all that is created and man as the centrepiece of the universe is but an earthly reflection of the 'holy magician' (*dewin gwyn*). On the other hand the Godhead is precisely 'a gracious man' (*dyn gwâr*). The Creator and what He has created are mirrors in which is reflected each other's nature.

In this poet's thinking there lies an essential unity between heaven and earth, between God and mankind; God's grace is the living connection between them. The divine is embodied in the earthly and God scatters His blessings on everyone and everything. Twice Lewys applies to God the metaphor *dewin*, 'magician' and he celebrates with gladness the fact that God reveals Himself as a supernatural 'magician' who has endowed the entire Creation with the marks of His creative grace. Indeed this poet has a firm conviction in the *englynion* quoted above, that God's transcendent immanence upholds the Creation and that His creative grace animates the very fabric of existence. This brilliant vision of life is entirely in harmony with the Augustinian tradition and its inherent Platonism in late medieval Wales.

Without doubt this productive theology is the *raison d'être* of Lewys's work. In his view the noblemen are God's representatives on earth and their bounteous generosity toward the poet and the destitute in society reflects the eternal generosity of God's universal grace. He praises attending to the needy and defenceless:

a di-lesg y rhôl i dlawd
 bara da brau a diawd,
 llaweroedd oll o arian,
 llety clyd a lle teg glân.¹⁴

(without stint he gave to the poor / good generous bread and drink, / plenty enough money, / warm lodgings and a fair clean place.)

These virtues are the marks of a civilized man and exactly as Lewys can refer to God in terms of a 'gracious man' (*dyn gwâr*) he can vividly exchange the metaphor for a supernatural one and attribute it boldly to man on the other hand. There is a certain spiritual boldness in using such a 'holy' metaphor in this fashion for a patron who is addressed with the name of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity:

Oen Duw oedd Einion'n ei dai ¹⁵

(Einion was the Lamb of God in his chambers)

or as he says of Tomos Fychan:

Oen Duw eilwaith ein dwywlad ¹⁶

(Twice Lamb of God in our two countries).

Indeed Talhaearn ab Ieuan is none other than a *rhyw oen nefol* ¹⁷ (stock of the heavenly Lamb).

Lewys believes that the transcendent God becomes immanent in the persona of the nobleman as He did in fullness with the Incarnation of Christ. In other words, there is in this poet's thinking a feeling of unity between man and God but they are in no way identified with each other. Lewys thus avoids the pitfall of Pantheism. God remains a transcendent Being apart from man. The rich variety of poems – both in form and content – reflect the creative glory of God and His providential grace. Lewys sees clearly the divine unity which underlies the dynamic variety of man's world. Life, be it religious or secular, ¹⁸ is subjected to God's supernatural grace. He is the fountainhead of all forms of human cultural activity both in the house and in the wider community, and therefore of all social ranks. God is the heavenly Father of the order made visible on earth. This is the reason why the poet attributes meaning and significance to the civilization to which he belonged and tried to embody in his praise poetry:

A'm swydd gyda'm arglwydd mên,
oedd ddeall iddo awen,
darllein art arall yn well,
darllein ystoriau wellwell
Siensis, drwy'r siens a drig,
achau'r ynys a'i chronig,
a'r hen gerdd, er hyn o gof,
a rhieingerdd o'r hengof. ¹⁹

(And my calling with my mesne lord, / was to explain the muse to him, / to read better another art, / to read even better the tales of / Genesis, by means of the knowledge that endures, / the genealogies of the Isle and her chronicles / and the early poetry for the benefit of this present craft, / and love-poems from [the stock of] the ancient craft).

The unique Welsh civilization he was intent on protecting and furthering was the sacramental 'wine' of his praise poetry, poetry that turns with vision into a great hymn of praise to the Creation and its Creator. For this master-poet all men are essentially religious beings and the deepest purpose of their existence is subjected to God's claim on them. It is in this subjection to God, both body and spirit, that Lewys sees life in its entirety reaching upward to a more deeply felt awareness of spotless wholeness. His comprehension of his *religious* calling as

praise poet had crystallized in this simple couplet, but which abounds with significance (in the context of his entire work), to Phylip ap Rhys of Cenarth and his wife Gwenllian:

Uddynt y canaf weddi,
a gwin fydd a ganwyf i.²⁰

(To them I sing a prayer, / and what I will sing will be wine.)

Goronwy Wyn Owen

Bethesda

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- 1 *Cydymaith i Llenyddiaeth Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1986), s.v.
- 2 Dafydd Johnston (ed.), *Gwaith Lewys Glyn Cothi* (= GLGC), (Caerdydd, 1995); see A. Cynfael Lake's constructive review in *Llên Cymru*, 20 (1997), 164-82. For the concept of *grand siècle* see Saunders Lewis, *Braslun o Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg* (Caerdydd, 1932), chapter 7, 'Y Ganrif Fawr 1435-1535'.
- 3 For a lucid discussion of sacramentalism see R. M. Jones, *Cyfriniaeth Gymraeg* (Caerdydd, 1994) chapter 7, 'Sagrafennaeth a Llenyddiaeth', 262-86. For the philosophical idea of the Great Chain of Being, see – although by now old, but still useful – A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard, 1978), and also E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth, 1978).
- 4 E. J. Jones / G. J. Williams (eds.), *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid* (Cardiff, 1934), 15-16, 55-6, 131-33, 'Llyma lyfyr a elwir Graduelys', 198-203; Saunders Lewis, *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid* (Cardiff, 1967); Ceri W. Lewis, 'Einion Offeiriad and the bardic grammar', in A. O. H. Jarman / G. Rees Hughes (eds.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, vol. 2 (Swansea, 1979), 58-88; R. Iestyn Daniel, 'Awduriaeth y Gramadeg a briodolir i Einion Offeiriad', in J. E. Caerwyn Williams (ed.), *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, 2 (Dinbych, 1985); R. Geraint Gruffydd, 'Dafydd Ddu o Hiraddug', *Llên Cymru*, 18 (1995), 205-220; idem, 'Wales's second grammarian: Dafydd Ddu of Hiraddug', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XC (1995), 1-29; of related interest see R. Geraint Gruffydd / Rhiannon Ifans (eds.), *Gwaith Einion Offeiriad a Dafydd Ddu o Hiraddug* (Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymraeg a Cheltaidd, Aberystwyth, 1997).
- 5 *GLGC*, 10. 109-116.
- 6 It should be emphasized that of the whole corpus of LGC's work only a handful of poems are of a definitely religious nature.
- 7 Cf. E. D. Jones (ed.), *Lewys Glyn Cothi (Detholiad)* (Caerdydd, 1984), 115.
- 8 Meg Dafydd (ed.), *Ati Wŷr Ifainc* (Caerdydd, 1986), 8-13.
- 9 Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979), I. v, vi.
- 10 Frederick B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages* (London, 1980); Michael Haren, *Medieval Thought: The Western Intellectual Tradition from Antiquity to the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1992), 38-58; Bernard McGinn *et al.* (eds.), *Christian Spirituality, Vol. I: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (London, 1985); Eugene Teselle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York, 1970); John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St Augustine* (Norwich, 1991); Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo* (Norwich, 2002); Serge Lancel, *St Augustine* (London, 2002).
- 11 For Augustine's idea of grace see J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris, 1980).
- 12 *GLGC*, 1. 429.
- 13 *Ibid.* 1. 457-480.
- 14 *Ibid.* 63. 19-22.
- 15 *Ibid.* 63. 9.
- 16 *Ibid.* 125-50.
- 17 *Ibid.* 117-34.
- 18 Lewys would not agree with the modern emphasis on secularism which is tantamount to '... forgetting Christ, because secularisation is the isolation of the world within its own immanence', G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976), 18.
- 19 *GLGC*, 58. 27-34.
- 20 *Ibid.* 187. 53-54.