

Llewelyn Powys and Aspects of the Poetical

IN JUNE 1941, scarcely eighteen months after his death, an essay on Llewelyn Powys appeared in *The Poetry Review*. It carried the title 'A Poet who wrote no Verse'. In it the author, E. Curt Peters, wrote:

I shall content myself, then, with saying that the majority of Llewelyn Powys's essays are no less than prose-poems; that they are shot through with a true poet's imagination, sensibility and apperception. Indeed, it is remarkable that he never attempted the verse form...

Llewelyn was steeped in poetry and although he chose to express himself in prose form, much of his prose was, in spirit, close to poetry.

I was a young man when, by chance, I came across *Love and Death*. At the time I was reading a good deal of poetry but with what I now view as a fortunate lack of awareness, I gave no thought to what boundaries there might be between prose and poetry. I was entranced by the writing in *Love and Death*, perhaps Llewelyn's most poetic work, and never sought to distinguish it from the poetry I was then reading.

In his essay on Llewelyn¹, Kenneth Hopkins writes that "the twentieth century has produced in England a wealth of writers whose works present that 'heightened prose' which may loosely be called poetical—without encroaching on the province of poetry, *where such prose must always fail* [my emphasis].... With these Llewelyn Powys may fittingly stand." Hopkins, for all his affection for and admiration of Llewelyn, seems to be defending his poetical territory against prose writers such as Llewelyn who, at their most imaginative, might be said to rank alongside the poets.

This is not the occasion to stray very far along the rock-strewn path towards a definition of poetry and the poetical, but in considering Llewelyn as a 'poetical' writer it is interesting to note that some poets think of poetry in terms of its imaginative power, rather than in relation to its precise form.

Ezra Pound defined great literature as "simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree" and poetry as "the most concentrated form of verbal expression"². In his *Defence of Poetry* Shelley referred to prose as words in their best order and poetry as the best words in the best order. Both Pound and Shelley seem to draw no great distinction between prose forms and verse forms. In these terms, it is easy to see how much writing that, from its appearance on the page, would rank as prose, in its heightened and imaginative use of language and in its compression and precision of meaning, conveys the impact and the sensation of poetry.

If we accept this convergence, many of the essays of Llewelyn Powys can be read as poems. His essay, 'A Pond'³, for instance, opens plainly enough:

A mile from my cottage there is a small pond. It lies in the centre of a triangular lawn where two valleys meet. Except for the old shepherd, nobody knows of it. Though it has the beautiful shape of a dew pond, it is not one. It is only a common pond supplied by the surface water of the wide downland gorges,

These simple, unadorned lines might put us in mind of the opening words of a

¹ K. Hopkins, *Llewelyn Powys, an Essay*, Enitharmon Press, 1979, p.64.

² E. Pound, *ABC of Reading*, New Directions, 1987.

³ In *A Struggle for Life*, introduction A. Head, Editor, Oneworld Classics, 2010, p.129.

poem such as Wordsworth's 'The Thorn'. But in this same opening paragraph Llewelyn elevates the tone:

and yet it has always seemed to me to be enchanted. I have often thought, as I have passed by it, that one day, under a special dispensation, I should receive from this little pool of water, from this small, green stoup of lustral water, a whisper as to the secret of life. It will be revealed to me, I have thought, as surely and as naturally as the presence of dew makes itself felt on folded twilight flowers found suddenly damp to the touch after the dry butterfly periods of a summer's day.

Particularly with his simile of dew on twilight flowers, we now feel ourselves to be in the region of poetry.

Llewelyn muses on the changing life of the pond:

A few seconds' scrutiny of a frog, in all its perfection, corrects us of that gross apathy with which we too often approach the miracle of our fugitive existence. Use and wont make all life a commonplace thing. Our ordinary minds demand an ordinary world and feel at ease only when they have explained and taken for granted the mysteries among which we have been given so short a licence to breathe.

It is as if Llewelyn is echoing Wordsworth's sonnet, 'The world is too much with us'.

The essay continues:

It was on a soft evening of this last September that there came to me the breath of the knowledge I sought. Beneath the sky the downs raised their patient shoulders with noble simplicity.... The last rays of the sun touched to brightest silver the fluff of the thistles withered and brown. All was silent, all was expectant.

He sees a hare.

Was she actually intending to drink? ... Surely if I were permitted to witness so delicate an operation, then at last I should receive the revelation I sought ... infinitely remote, the moon hung in an utter calm.

This hour in the downland valley was, I knew well, but of an inconsequent second's duration in the moon's age-long espionage of the earth's physical being. She had seen the magical and molten ash of the earth's orb stirred with the trouble of life. She had seen passionate men, resolute and adroit, raise themselves out of the dust. (...) She had seen them go stumbling through lucky grass, their hearts distraught with love. She herself was part of the profound mystery of the humming firmament, the outer rim of which, for a few scattered moments, has been envisaged by the dreaming minds of men. The truth resides in matter's proud processions as they are revealed to our uncertain senses. In what can be seen, in what can be heard, in what can be touched, tasted, and felt, there is no treason. Only these messengers can be trusted. Here are the golden threads which alone can lead us without betrayal to those true states of beatific vision, ephemeral and sublime, wherein through the medium of our vulgar faculties we may see immortal movement, bright and clear, upon our planet.

Llewelyn concludes the piece:

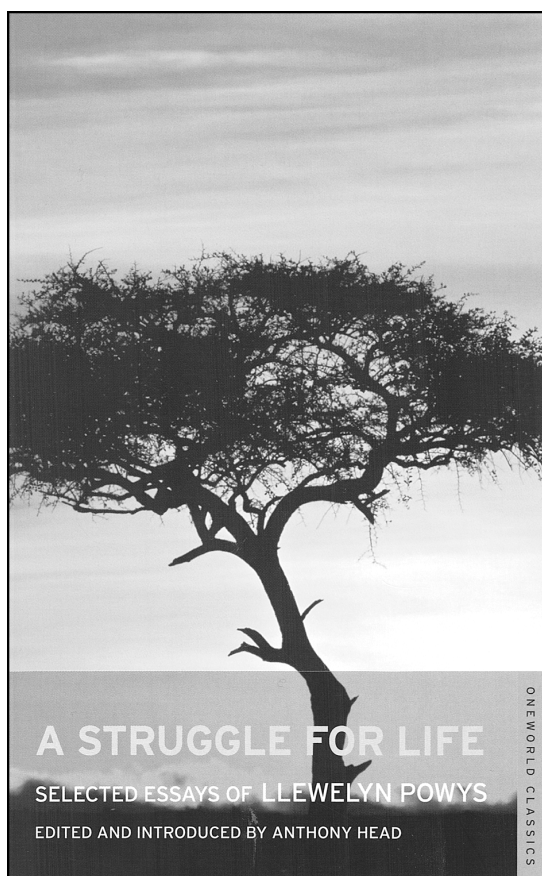
I was suddenly awakened from my rapture. I had heard a sound, a sound sensitive and fresh as soft rain upon a leaf. It was the hare drinking.

I have quoted this essay at length because in it (as in many others of his

essays) Llewelyn Powys draws on the practices of the poets. He explores the outer reaches of language to express a poetic vision and puts us in mind of Pound's description of poetry as the most concentrated form of verbal expression. The flow of his imagination from the first simple words of the essay to its sublime speculation is not far removed from Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' or Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. The lyrical intensity with which he evokes fleeting moments matches the power of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet, 'Silent Noon'. His cadences are more redolent of poetry than of prose.

Wordsworth's famous words from his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* could be applied equally to Llewelyn's more imaginative passages as to the lines of Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves:

[Poetry] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.



Hopkins alludes to Llewelyn's "frequent happy use of quotation". He counted fifty-seven quotations or allusions in *Swiss Essays* and forty-one in *Dorset Essays*. In *Love and Death* Llewelyn himself notes forty-one poets from whom he quotes, extending from Homer to the twentieth century. The introduction of quotations and allusions, chiefly poetic, in his work illustrates his knowledge and love of poetry. The poets he quotes, Hopkins suggests, had entered "into his inner consciousness, ready to come unbidden with words to support his own." He employed quotations to deepen and add resonance to his meaning, a poetic tradition that, in the twentieth century, found its resurgence.

Though he appears to have written no poetry, Llewelyn gladly provided penetrating advice to the young poet, Kenneth Hopkins, sending him, in his affectionate letters, line-by-line and word-by-word observations on his poems. In his first letter to him, Llewelyn writes more generally:

To be a poet you must live with an intensity five times, nay a hundred times more furious than that of those about you. There is no scene, no experience which should not contribute to your poetic appreciations and culture.

Llewelyn could be said, in his prose, to have given us the most poetic expression of atheism in our times. But admirers of Llewelyn may have placed an undue emphasis on him as a philosophical thinker. To do so, I suspect, may have unfairly invited comparison with work of writers who employ a genre of intellectual rigour more appropriate to the scholar than the poet. Llewelyn had

the creative imagination of the poet and wrote with an intense lyricism in such works as *Impassioned Clay* and *Glory of Life*, about what he saw to be a godless universe.

Above all, Llewelyn expressed a poetic happiness; his writings echo his childhood words—“Happy, happy me!” To admirers of Llewelyn, the writer, Shelley’s description of poetry as “the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds” will be an apt description of Llewelyn Powys’s work.

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By profession, David Solomon is neither a scholar nor a writer. He is a retired lawyer who has had a long-standing love for the writings of Llewelyn Powys and for poetry.