

EDITORIAL

Dylan Thomas and John Berryman were born two days apart a century ago. They were to become unlikely friends, with Berryman a somewhat histrionic bystander during Thomas's final days in New York. "I'm breathing for Dylan," he is reported as saying when Thomas was dying, "if I breathe for him perhaps he will remain alive."

Both poets achieved widespread fame and notoriety. Their reputations died back in the decades after their deaths. They have revived now on a narrower, but firmer, basis. Their legacies, though, are very different. Thomas's unshakeable reputation rests on a handful of poems, whose "radiant stanzas", to use Patrick Crotty's phrase in this issue, no living poet would want to emulate. But Berryman's brassy, improvisatory style – celebrated in Simon Barraclough's essay – is again in vogue. The Dream Songs have proved resilient when at their brilliant best. At once candid and cannily fictive, equally funny and heartrending, they ring true in a world loose at all ends.

For it is, once again, an age of anxiety. We find ourselves in an era of planetary and microbial vulnerability, at a time of political disenchantment, with governments engaged in foolish wars they have long repented of but cannot extricate themselves from. It's a century as well of runaway advances in neuroscience and technology. We are in a phase of exhilarating change, whose consequences, however, we cannot measure or foresee. The nervous energy of our time expresses itself in microcosm, perhaps, in this issue in the use in some poems of glyphs and punctuation marks to fracture the lines. More conspicuously, we've resorted to folded 'throw-out' pages in order to fit the athletic strides of D.A. Powell and Padraig Regan.

If we recall 1914 as the birth-year of two of poetry's *enfants terribles*, we remember it more generally for that generation of poets then going to war. The history of modern poetry is bound up with their remaking of the tradition in response to the shock of modern warfare, and the degree to which poetry is held in broader esteem is part of their legacy. Paul Fussell's 1975 classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* recounted the impact that the trenches had on the writers of the modernist period. In effect, the experience of the war became part of our common imaginative stock – hence, the continuing appetite for novels about the Great War; hence, indeed, the millions captivated this November by the poppy installation in the Tower moat. However one may question such easy public emotion, the making, laying, and removing of each poppy on its wire stem provided a strikingly precise means of honouring one-by-one the enormous toll of 888,246 deaths.

But it should bring to mind, too, the wars of our own time, and in particular

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the chain of conflicts since 9/11, whose guessed-at body count will soon begin to match that on the Western Front. As yet our poetry barely reflects this chronic state of warfare – though in his review of Simon Armitage, John McAuliffe draws attention to the prevalent imagery of body parts in the poems. These wars are partly conducted on ‘our’ side by men, and women, who work at a desk, sleep in their own beds, drive their children to school, who lead in effect civilian, bureaucratic lives. Bent over their screens, they are liable to feel no doubt the same suspense and excitement as gaming teenagers.

The unmanned drone versus the body vest: we live in a century where martial inequality is evident more than ever in superior technology. Whether in the rubble of Gaza or the broader ruins of Islamic countries, the gross disparities between cultures are masked by debased language and ideological constructs that serve to render meaningless the deaths of terrorists, along with their womenfolk and children. The poetry of “pity” can have no truck with this. It is the work of the imagination to find the adequate words – and so shape in Yeats’s phrase, when responding to the comparatively small-scale brutalities of the Irish Civil War, “befitting emblems of adversity”.

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