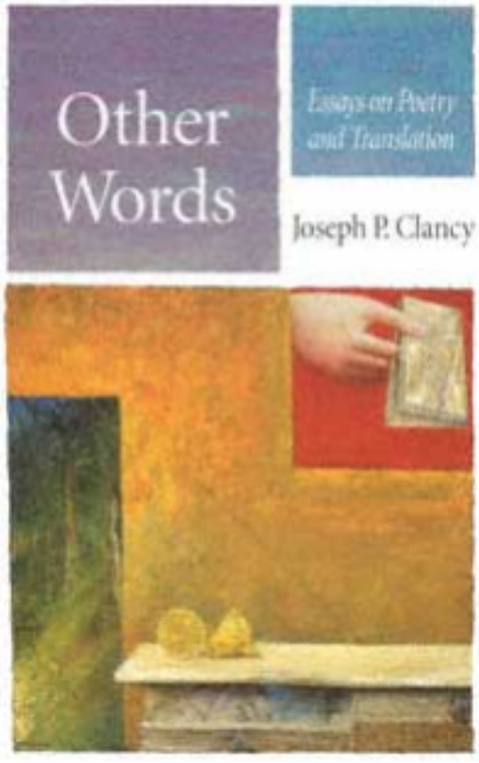



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Other Words

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# Other Words

## Essays on Poetry and Translation

Joseph P. Clancy

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Preface

My first thought was to call this collection *On Occasion,* since it chiefly consists of responses to requests for a lecture or an article. The origins in most cases provide contexts for the essays, and I have therefore stated these in headnotes rather than on a page of acknowledgements.

*Other Words,* though, has seemed the most appropriate title. Because of the reference to translation, to be sure, with which a number of these essays are concerned, but also because poetry is a use of words other than ordinary discourse. Last, and not least, because these pieces should be seen primarily as offshoots, by-products, notes from a poet-translator's workshop.

What that means, frankly, is that this is a fairly egocentric book though no more so, I suppose, than most collections of one's poetry. Two essays, however, while including my translations, attempt critiques of major authors, and translation itself can be considered a mode of criticism, a way of interpreting and calling attention to the work of other writers to be effective it must be more than self-serving.

I have made some changes in every essay, usually to clarify points or improve the style. What did not permit revision was a certain amount of repetition, in pieces that originated and are still designed to be read independently. The repetitions can perhaps be thought of as variations on certain themes if the book is considered as a whole.

One of these themes, seemingly unavoidable in discussions of modern Welsh literature, is national identity, Welshness, *Cymreictod.* My semi-detached observations on this, for whatever they're worth, are best considered within the contexts of the particular essays, but it may be helpful to explain here where, quite literally, I am coming from. I was born, raised and educated, lived and worked in New York City until I retired from college teaching in 1990 and moved to Aberystwyth. My parents were also native New Yorkers. Both of my

mother's parents were immigrants, my grandmother from Ireland, my grandfather (whom I never knew) from France. On my father's side, my grandmother had also emigrated from Ireland, but my grandfather's originally Irish family had apparently been settled for several generations in the United States. While I grew up in a predominantly Irish-American neighbourhood, I've never thought of myself as anything but unhyphenatedly American, probably because not that much, as far as I can recall, was made of 'Irishness' by my parents or most of our neighbours, and what there was I reacted to fairly negatively. I certainly had no interest in Ireland and its culture during my formative years, and I'm still uncomfortably ambivalent about it, and more ignorant of it than I should be.

Thanks to a grandmother from Roscommon, however, I have in recent years become an Irish as well as a US citizen, not as an act of filial piety but as a way to reside in Wales and, importantly, have the right to vote. I would be happy to hold dual Welsh and American citizenship, were that possible, but I have no wish to become a British subject. And yes, in September 1997 I voted in favour of the Welsh Assembly what else would one expect of an American?

Professor R. M. Jones and poet Bobi Jones are referred to frequently throughout this book. They are, as Welsh-language readers will know, one and the same. Bobi has been a constant source of advice and encouragement, for my poems as well as my translations, during the past quarter of a century. He has been a major influence on my views of Wales and its literature, and it was his suggestion that first made me consider compiling these lectures and articles. So it is only fitting that the book be dedicated to him *gyda diolch a chariad a phob bendith.*

Poetry as Translation

*For a series of faculty lectures at Marymount Manhattan College in 1980. A considerably abridged version was published in* Llais Llyfrau/Book News from Wales *(Autumn 1981), in connection with the publication of my anthology of twentieth-century Welsh poems.*

During this past year I have on several occasions had the experience of working almost simultaneously at translating a modern Welsh poem, writing an original poem, and translating the prose dialogue of a Welsh play. That had not happened to me before, and it led to some reflection on the relationship between the processes involved, and finally to considering 'translation' as a way of thinking about all imaginative writing.

Not only non-writers but writers including, often, myself have a tendency to talk of the act of poetry, of 'making', as if it were the bringing over, the converting into verbal form, of a single pre-existent but non-verbalized experience, a completed action of thought, sensation, emotion. But when I reflect on what happens in the making of one of my own poems (insofar as I am conscious of the process and can comprehend it), it isn't like that at all. The 'idea' of a poem begins for me, usually, with an image, a situation, an incident, and what is eventually 'translated', brought across into the finished verbal artefact, are thoughts, feelings, experiences which were originally widely scattered, which did not coexist, or better, co-inhere, before the process of making the poem brought them together. This process is essentially the discovery of what experience is plausible *inside* the poem, of fictifying as a way of knowing as well as of expressing, and this is what I am most aware of doing even in writing a poem that seems personal to the point of being confessional.

Once I have begun an action inside the poem, a beginning that includes the finding of a verse form as a framework, as a necessary

constraint that frees me from the confusion of excessive possibilities, it remains for me to explore what is plausible for that person in the poem (usually a version of myself, to be sure, but still someone who now exists apart from me) to think and feel within the particular situation and verse form. In doing so, I must sometimes draw on quite private experiences, but at the risk of sounding pretentious, what I am conscious of as I write is a desire for the poem to come into being and therefore a need for self-sacrifice, self-surrender, rather than any desire for self-expression or self-revelation. This process of drawing on diverse actual experiences to invent a plausible fictive experience within the poem applies not only to composing the larger movements of thoughts and feelings but also to the close work, the testing out of one word or another, this phrase or that. And the total process very often involves exclusion as well as inclusion of actual experiences: some experiences which initially seek or even demand to get into the poem must be denied admission to preserve the poem's integrity; they are experiences which I cannot 'translate', at least at that moment into that poem.

Several years ago, for example, I had bought my wife two presents for Christmas, a kitchen clock (her suggestion) and a wristwatch (my own idea). It occurred to me that I was giving her time, and that this could be the basis for a poem. And so I began with a title, 'A Gift of Time', and a first line that led easily into two more, creating an initial conflict and establishing an unrhymed tercet as the stanza-pattern:

> Another Christmas, and I give you time
> A smiling face to warn you from the wall,
> A golden manacle to grace your wrist.

I had initially written 'to greet you' and 'a golden bracelet', but that seemed bland. It was changing these to 'warn' and 'manacle', bringing into the very beginning of the poem the double-edged nature of one's experience of time, that set the poem in motion, creating a tension that compelled the speaker into generalized reflection:

> Time is. Time was. Time's gone.
> Time's spent, time's lost, time's wasted.
> Trifles of time, we trifle time away.
>
> Time-stained, time-drained, time-driven,
> We cry against the time we're given.
> We beg more time that never is enough.

At this point it seemed high time my speaker's thoughts and feelings focused on his particular situation, that his 'we' moved from the human condition in general to the two people immediately involved:

> Past fifty now, we trace time's traces
> In stroking sparse grey hairs, slack skin,
> Or fumbling to remember times and places,
>
> Or raging at fatigued caresses,
> Or listening in darkness to the heart's
> Murmur of an end to our embraces.

I remember looking at what I had written so far (with the usual slow searching for the right words and phrases it would be tedious to go into here), and feeling dismayed. This was meant, after all, to be a Christmas poem, a love poem, a celebration, and it had become a middle-aged husband's dark brooding, a translation, certainly, of some of my own experience, but far from all of it. I was less concerned, though, with my own experience outside the poem than with where, inside the poem, my speaker could convincingly proceed. Back to the beginning, I decided, reminding himself (as I had just been reminded) of what Christmas is meant to celebrate:

> Another Christmas, and He gives us time
> Who lived and crossed time's contradictions
> To praise this miracle of time together,
>
> To know time's greatest blessing is each other.

I wondered then, and I have continued to wonder, whether this shift is not too abrupt, whether there should be a transitional stanza. I tried several times to write one, but nothing worked. The poem was given to my wife on Christmas morning, together with the kitchen clock and the wristwatch, and later published without what may or may not be a missing stanza. Perhaps, after all, as the poem itself seemed to insist, the speaker's final turn is the right one, right even in its abruptness, as for this Christian speaker the most natural outcome of his previous reflections.

It was only later, from comments made at a reading, that I realized that for some readers or listeners what makes the final turn particularly abrupt is that nothing earlier in the poem prepares for the Christianity

of the speaker. It was something I had taken for granted an unconscious translation, if you will, of my own religious beliefs, forgetting that these might not be shared by a good many potential readers. This can be a problem, I think, for anyone who usually writes from a sometimes implicit religious perspective. I don't feel obliged to revise the poem on this account, and in any case I'm unable to do so. But I have to acknowledge that if the poem is read by itself rather than in the context of the preceding poems in my collection, *The Significance of Flesh,* the Christian ending may well seem a defect even to Christian readers, unaccustomed as they are likely to be to a contemporary poem being so explicitly religious.

'A Gift of Time' was written in a few days. A very different poem, 'Living with a Castle', could not be written until fourteen years after the initial experience. The poem first, then the explanation:

Centuries, in our city's
Centre, before we were born,
They reared it, the conquerors,
Fortress to overshadow,
Quell, compelling submission,
Our rebel fathers, their shame.

No menace now, a nuisance
To city planners, bleak rock,
Breaking, sleek stream, the flow,
Decaying tooth, of traffic,
Overtowered, hewn boulders,
Steel girders, by office blocks,
Sight sought by conquerors' heirs,
Fair trade, tourist attraction,
Postcarded, youngsters' playground.

Reminder, conquered race's
Unnatural, resource, stone,
Ignored by us, testament,
Blind with boredom, of torment,
Marketing, walking from work,
Buried by, all roads lead to,
Heedless suburbs, the centre.

Heritage shaping, worn ghost,
Today, raw gash, tomorrow.

On my first visit to Wales in 1961 I was struck, as an American is likely to be, by the juxtaposition of medieval and modern in such places as Cardiff and Caernarfon, and I jotted this as an idea for a poem, including the title, in my notebook. I made several futile attempts at it in the following years, but it was only in 1975 that I was able, and fairly quickly, to write the poem. What was needed to give the image of castle in city significance was further experience of Wales, greater knowledge of its history and deeper awareness of its present condition, through several more visits and especially a year of living in Aberystwyth in 19723. The poem had initially been conceived as an observer's meditation, using 'they', but in 1975 it demanded to be spoken from the inside, using 'we', however hesitant I felt about doing this.

It demanded also the use of what I have elsewhere called a *quasicywydd,* an adaptation of a Welsh verse-form I first used in translating Dafydd ap Gwilym and employed for most of my own poems over a dozen years or so. This particular poem uses not only seven-syllable lines in couplets that alternate stressed and unstressed endings but also radial structure and, very extensively and perhaps bewilderingly on first reading, the syntactic side-steps known as *sangiad* and *trychiad*.

A very Welsh poem, then, in style as well as substance the most Welsh poem, I have been known to claim, ever written in English, at least the most Welsh poem ever written by an American. But what the poem 'translated' was not only an experience of Wales. What it deals with, the tension between past and present, tradition and change, the sense of history as a frequenly unwelcome burden but an inescapable inheritance, this was very much an American experience in the 1960s. Without this experience, I am certain, the poem could not have been written, though of course it remains a poem about Wales.

If I now state that I find the process of translating in its more usual sense, and specifically of translating modern Welsh poems, essentially the same as this process of writing an original poem, that here too what I am aware of as my first concern is the making of a plausible English poem, I may perhaps be misunderstood. I am not making a case for what is sometimes called 'free translation', but my understanding of the nature, the possibilities and the necessities of 'strict translation' I presume that is not at all the same thing as literal translation requires further explanation and some specific examples.

The simplest way of putting it is that out of my experience of a Welsh poem I attempt to make a poem in English. In contrast to the range of experiences available to me when I compose an original work, my experience of the Welsh poem necessarily includes as central the recognition that the process I have described for original composition has already taken place and resulted in a finished poem. (It is acknowledging this that makes for 'strict translation', disregarding it that permits 'free translation'.) But that process of inventing a plausible action of thoughts and feelings has taken place in Welsh it has not yet happened in English. Or rather, it has not yet happened to *me* in English: I am not trying to dismiss cavalierly the work of other translators, fellows rather than rivals, all of us I suspect motivated at times by dissatisfaction with one another's translations as renderings of *our* experiences of Welsh poems, however satisfactory they may be in themselves as English poems. Translating poetry has been for me very much like directing plays or acting parts that someone else has written: I must make the play my own within the 'language' of voice and movement (and without unwarranted improvisation) if I am to present it effectively to others.

I experience a Welsh poem as an intermittent reader (not speaker) of the language, an American with some knowledge of Welsh life, history, and literature, a frequently slow and fumbling reader, all too often an ignorant or careless one. I try none the less to ensure that my experience of a Welsh poem is that of a literate reader, and my chief problems as a translator are less with the deficiencies of that experience in itself than with my poetic limitations or with the inadequacy of one language to cope with an experience within the other.

When I first read Waldo Williams' 'Eirlysiau' (Snowdrops), for instance, my experience of the poem seemed so much beyond my capacity to translate it beyond, perhaps, the capacity of the English language that I put the poem aside, as I have done with many others. But it haunted me I went back to it again and again, and finally ventured to attempt a translation. Here is, first, the translation, then the original Welsh poem:

> White, white.
> The early throng down the glen is bright.
> They are claimed by heaven from earth's dark night,
> Ransomed by light from their bed beneath,
> And the untainted springtime flows
> From their commotion on field and heath.

Pure, pure,
The pearl face of the first flower.
Their delicate cheeks, although demure,
Like steel endure the wind and cold,
And lead before the splendid weather
Summer's endeavour. None more bold.

Chaste, chaste,
With the first whiteness their song is graced.
When the spectrum separates
The land will blaze, its hues unfurled.
But pureness, pureness blossoms now
From the mouth of the Bard who forms the world.

* * *

Gwyn, gwyn
Yw'r gynnar dorf ar lawr y glyn.
O'r ddaear ddu y nef a'u myn.
Golau a'u pryn o'u gwely pridd
A rhed y gwanwyn yn ddi-glwy
O'u cyffro hwy uwch cae a ffridd.

Pur, pur,
Wynebau perl y cyntaf fflur.
Er eu gwyleidd-dra fel y dur
I odde' cur ar ruddiau cain,
I arwain cyn y tywydd braf
Ymdrech yr haf. Mae dewrach 'rhain?

Glân, glân,
Y gwynder cyntaf yw eu cân.
Pan elo'r rhannau ar wahân
Ail llawer tân fydd lliwiau'r tud.
Ond glendid glendid yma dardd
O enau'r Bardd sy'n llunio'r byd.

Waldo's delicate, intricate verse-pattern a six-line stanza opening with a spondee followed by five lines of iambic tetrameter, rhyming and cross-rhyming aaa(a)bc(c) d(d)c, with *cynghanedd* in the fourth and sixth lines was so central to my experience of the poem that the process of creating an English equivalent determined how much of the

progression of thoughts and feelings I experienced in the Welsh I could make available in English. In achieving a pattern of end-rhymes and cross-rhymes I allowed myself some approximate rather than perfect rhymes, and I was content to suggest the use of *cynghanedd* by frequency rather than strict patterns of alliteration. Within this form I composed what I hope is a fairly plausible English poem that nevertheless translates only part of my experience of Waldo's poem.

To note some of the process, the choices, and the losses: the verse form required me to begin each stanza with a repeated monosyllabic adjective. In the second stanza, this offered no problem, since Welsh *pur* is English 'pure'. There is no monosyllabic adjective in English, however, that expresses simultaneously, as Waldo's opening word *gwyn* does in Welsh, the colour white and the attributes of holiness and beauty. In any case the colour of the flowers as the basic visual experience left me no choice but to begin the poem with 'White, white' and hope that enough of the colour's symbolic associations would be present. The adjective *glân,* though, which opens the third stanza, posed a virtually insoluble problem: to begin that stanza with 'Holy, holy', which my experience of the poem called for, would have violated the verse pattern, and I also needed to convey the qualities of cleanness, purity, and beauty inherent in the Welsh adjective. I eventually settled for 'chaste' as coming closest to rendering these simultaneous meanings, though I realize it contains too much, so to speak, of the purity and too little of the holiness and the beauty. But 'White, white', 'Pure, pure', 'Chaste, chaste' offered, I thought, the best progression of adjectives I could achieve to open the successive stanzas.

Those particular decisions pretty well determined how much I could bring into the chosen stanza-pattern. While there are compromises throughout, it is with the climactic third stanza that I especially recognize how I have had to dilute a rich experience in order to achieve an English poem. 'Chaste, chaste' as an opening required its rhyme, and so I brought over some of the partially suppressed meanings of *glân* but lost both the multiple meanings of *gwynder* and Waldo's stunning directness of statement in rendering 'Y gwynder cyntaf yw eu cân' (The primal whiteness/blessedness is their song) as 'With the first whiteness their song is graced'. The third line of the stanza, 'Pan elo'r rhannau ar wahân' (When the parts go apart), baffled me at first reading some discussion with others and some consultation of commentaries clarified the experience of a

devastatingly simple statement of the neo-Platonic concept of the whiteness of the eternal being broken prismatically into the colours of the spectrum by time. I alternated between 'When the One disintegrates' and 'When the spectrum separates' as translations, with the uncomfortable sense that I was translating my 'footnoting' of the line as well as my experience of the basic image the latter seems the more satisfactory rendering, for sound as well as sense, though it smacks too much of the physics laboratory. I carried over the 'separating' action of this line into the following one again under the pressures of working within the rhyme pattern by rendering 'Ail llawer tân fydd lliwiau'r tud' (Like many fires will be the colours of the countryside) as 'The land will blaze, its hues unfurled', since I knew the poem had to end with 'world', *byd.* In probing the possibilities in English within this stanza-pattern of the final lines, 'Ond glendid glendid yma dardd / O enau'r Bardd sy'n llunio'r byd' (But beauty beauty / purity purity / holiness holiness here comes forth / From the mouth of the Poet who is shaping the world), I had my strongest awareness of how much of what I experienced in reading the Welsh could not be carried over. I could only hope that 'pureness' would keep some trace of the multiple meanings of *glendid;* I saw no way of conveying the sense of continuous divine creativity conveyed by the final verb except to hope that some of it resides in the use of present rather than past tense. About using 'Bard' for 'Poet' I am less disturbed: I know the word has suffered in English from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century associations, but for this poem and others it is a useful monosyllabic noun that has for me become cleansed of its impurities through reading the authentic Welsh *beirdd,* and I have hoped that by frequent use in my translations I could make English readers equally comfortable with it. And so I translated those final lines as: 'But pureness pureness blossoms now / From the mouth of the Bard who forms the world.'

I have made it sound as if the process of translating 'Snowdrops' was brief and has been completed. In fact with this as with many of my other translations, the process has gone on over a period of years and is still perhaps unfinished. What Paul Valéry said of a poem, that it is never completed but merely abandoned, is at least equally true of translation.

Translating Bobi Jones' 'Merch Fach' was a somewhat different process from the one I went through with Waldo's 'Eirlysiau'. I could immediately begin to translate my experience of this poem by

inventing in English a Christian father's voice expressing amusement, wonder, and joy in his daughter, perhaps because I could draw upon my own experience as the Christian father of four daughters to find a voice for the poem's speaker that would let his thoughts and feelings develop plausibly. Here, again, is first the translation, then the original poem:

You are nothing but a word. Such consonants
Flutter-footed in a lightness of melody
Like maidens leaping in the dance of your eyes!

And vowels of a length and pitch that never before
Were declaimed! Stool, shoes, ball, these that have always
Been playing, their innocence terrifies.

Nothing but a word: not a sentence nor even a phrase.
A word, the word uttered for a beginning, spoke a world:
In us it declared praise. It formed an alarm, 'Let there be'

'Water for me.' And as you wish, in a minute
There is the firmament arching the earth for you.
We strain our ears to collect you, like opening

A parched throat for the clarities of rain. You hesitate
(As though with a speech impediment) to say it all,
As if to bear it were beyond our plight.

A word of blessing. O! your fear behind the shield
Of my arms, your arms encircling my neck!
You bless our frailty with your small frailty;

And when you scrunch in a nook out of our sight,
We cannot hide from the apparition
That sets foot in our soul, despite our evil.

In a small frock and panties a word dwells among us.

* * *

Nid wyt ti ond gair. Y fath gytseiniaid
Crynedig eu traed yn ysgawnder alaw
Fel morynion sy'n sgeintio yn nawns dy lygaid!

A llafariaid nad adroddid eu hyd na'u traw
Byth! Stôl, sgidiau, pêl, rhai a fu erioed
Yn chwarae, dwg eu diniweidrwydd fraw.

Dim ond gair: nid brawddeg nac ymadrodd hyd yn oed.
Gair, y gair a lefarwyd i ddechrau, dywedodd fyd:
Ynom mynegodd foliant. Lluniodd alarwm 'Boed'

'Dr i mi.' Ac fel y mynni, mewn munud
Mae'r ffurfafen dros ben y ddaear i ti.
Gwyrwn ein clustiau i'th gasglu fel agoryd

Gwddf cras i'r gloywon glaw. Petrusi
(Fel pe bai atal-dweud) rhag dweud y cyfan,
Fel pe bai'r gynhaliaeth y tu hwnt i'n cyni.

Gair bendith. O! dy ofn y tu ôl i darian
Fy mreichiau, dy freichiau am fy ngwddwg!
Bendigi ein gwendid â'th wendid bychan;

A phan fyddi'n cwato mewn cwtsh o'n golwg
Ni allwn ninnau guddio rhag y lledrith
Sy'n camu yn ein henaid, er gwaetha'n drwg.

Mewn ffrog fach a nics triga gair yn ein plith.

Very early in my work on this poem I made a key decision about the English verse form. While I was aware that Bobi's poem is in *terza rima,* this did not seem primary in my experience of it, and I discovered fairly quickly that I could not achieve the essential flow of thought and energy of language within that verse form. What *terza rima* provided for Bobi Jones in the way of stimulus and release I could more readily achieve by unrhymed tercets, and it was within this form that I worked. I concentrated on conveying my experience of an associative process within the poem in which intellectual and emotional intensity finds startling metaphoric expression. 'We strain our ears to collect you, like opening / A parched throat for the clarities of rain' that translates as well as I can hope to the metaphoric shock and density of sound in 'Gwyrwn ein clustiau i'th gasglu fel agoryd / Gwddf cras i'r gloywon glaw'. Excited perhaps by an English

possibility, I had my speaker say 'Stool, shoes, ball, these that have always / Been playing, come with their fragile innocence', an accurate translation of a flawed experience of the Welsh. When the poet, with more courtesy than I deserved, noted the flaw (I had misread *fraw* as *frau),* it changed the experience, and so my speaker now says that 'their innocence terrifies'. But I encountered two curious problems *not* of my own making, one rooted in the nature of Welsh, the other in the diversities of English, in dealing with the title and the last line of the poem.

It was a pleasure to experience 'Merch Fach' as saying simultaneously 'Little Girl' and 'Dear Daughter'. But how was I to translate this experience into English? I tried such combinations as 'A Darling Daughter' and'My Little Girl' and for reasons that I trust are obvious rejected them, settling eventually for the plain and simple title 'A Small Girl' as closest to the effect of the two monosyllables and best suited to this 'portrait poem', leaving the tenderness of father addressing daughter to be conveyed by the body of the poem.

With the final line, 'Mewn ffrog fach a nics triga gair yn ein plith', I wrote the second half of the line almost unthinkingly as 'a word dwells among us', so readily do English and Welsh render the same associations of the same biblical phrase, but should I place that word 'In a small frock and knickers'? A Welsh or English reader may be puzzled that I had a problem this may hardly seem translating at all, since the Welsh words derive from the English. But I am a New Yorker for whom 'Knicks' is the name of our local basketball team and 'knickers' means a male garment (translatable from American to British English as 'plus-fours'), and who has never, that I can recall, referred to a dress as a 'frock'. In its small way the problem illustrates some basic decisions I have had to make as a translator.

I experience a Welsh poem as someone who thinks in American English, and it is natural for me to create the speaker of a translated poem in the same language. I try to avoid too blatant Americanisms (when I am conscious of them) but not at the cost of a blandly neutral speech. This presented no great difficulty when I was translating medieval Welsh poetry: while I have been twitted for having a fifteenth-century Welshman refer to a 'ballgame', that seems to me no odder than to have him speak modern British rather than Middle English. But in the case of a modern poem, I must reckon with the fact that British English is one of the languages of Wales. Still, I have not felt the need to render my experience of most modern Welsh

poems by creating speakers whose voices are markedly those of Welsh speakers of English, and none of the poets I have translated has so far seemed very troubled by this. My problem with Bobi Jones' final line was not a discomfort in itself with having a speaker who used modern British colloquial diction, but with having such usage come with a jolt at the very end of the poem it was 'out of character' for my speaker. I saw no opportunity to prepare for it earlier in the poem; in fact I had rendered 'A phan fyddi'n cwato mewn cwtsh o'n golwg' as 'And when you scrunch in a nook out of our sight', which seemed the most plausible if somewhat American diction. It was, I finally decided, those *nics* that created most of the problem, and with a mid-Atlantic compromise I had my speaker end with: 'In a small frock and panties a word dwells among us.'

I will add briefly that I have found this question of 'which English?' posing far greater problems for my recent work on Welsh plays than it has with the poems. Not all plays, of course: Saunders Lewis' legendary and historical dramas in verse, while demanding that the translator find a heightened, metrical English speech, certainly do not demand that it be a distinctively modern British one. The contemporary plays of Saunders and of John Gwilym Jones, on the other hand, require the translator to render adequately the voices he hears as those of modern Welsh people, or else to adapt rather than translate the play by transposing the setting. (I find the characters so rooted in a particular culture that in all but a few cases this seems impossible, and in those few it is not really desirable.) I have therefore been trying to create plausibly Welsh speakers of English in my translations of these plays. But the social status and cultural background of those middle-class characters make such translation far easier than dealing with the problems posed by the plays of Gwenlyn Parry, who orchestrates delicately the rhythms, diction, and syntax of very colloquial speech. I have been working for the better part of a year on *Y Twr* (The Tower), aided by two actor colleagues who have enabled me to hear the language spoken on stage, and it has been a continuing process of trying to find an English that will translate my experience of the Welsh without exaggerating to the point of parody or making the language 'quaint'.

Questions of colloquial Welsh and British and American English aside, I have found it natural to move into attempts at translating drama while I was translating modern poems. The greatest challenge

posed by the poems has been the range of 'characters' I have experienced in Welsh and tried to create in English. In writing my own poems I work essentially with one 'character', however diverse that character's experiences may become from poem to poem, however much I may therefore need to adapt my style to changing situations, thoughts, and feelings. That character and voice carries over, I am sure, in ways of which I am not fully conscious, into the translations as with an actor who is recognizable whatever his or her different roles. But just as the ideal for actors is to have whatever may be identifiable about them serve the particular characterizations, so I have hoped to create from my own basic character and style the characters and style demanded by my experience of a remarkable range of poets. If I have at all succeeded as a translator, the readers should encounter in the following opening lines quite distinctive persons, quite individual voices:

They come when the cuckoo comes,
When she goes, they go too,
The wild nostalgic scent,
The old enchanting hue;
Arriving, then bidding good-bye
Ah, but their days are few.

(R. Williams Parry, 'Bluebells')

After a man has turned fifty he sees rather clearly
The people and the homestead that have shaped his life,
And the cords of steel that hold me tightest are the graves
In two cemeteries in one of the villages of the South.

(Gwenallt, 'The Graves')

To see intimating and mystery
Is a sanctum's art today,
To see colour and muscularity, to see a candid
Visitor from heaven among our time's bare hills

(Euros Bowen, 'The Swan')

We stumble from the vague mist of the small hours
to the ready light in the ascetic hall,
as if night had tossed us
to a brief lodging between the scabby earthly journey
and the splendid leap to the limitless heavens.

(Alun Llywelyn-Williams, 'Airport Goodbye')

Amid earth and rocks, like an old dog,
Death was gnawing on a bone
Three thousand years at Bryn Celli Ddu.

Till the sun was hacked into its belly
And time shovelled from the skeletons
And grey echoes of a race's early life laid bare.

(Gwyn Thomas, 'Bryn Celli Ddu')

It is questionable, I know, whether one poet can be an adequate translator of a diversity of others. Certainly I find myself particularly sympathetic to certain poets for reasons of subject, theme, or style. I am far from sure, though, that I have translated these poets more convincingly than those I find less attractive. I know that I feel equally possessive about all the poems I have translated: because of the process I have described they have become *mine*. (I respect, of course, the Welsh poets' rights in their original poems, including the right to reject my translations. I have found in most cases, though, a ready recognition by the poets that I have created my own poems from my experience of theirs, and that these poems must be obedient to their own laws and have their own right to exist.) There is in any case something to be said for reading the poetry of a period as it has been translated from a single poet's experience of it. It provides a kind of equivalent for the period's common speech and style, from which individual poets fashion their own distinctive voices.

In looking back over these remarks, I am afraid that I may have made translating, in both the wide and the narrow senses of the word, seem a rather grim and portentous business. I have not sufficiently stressed the fun of it, especially the pleasure of trying to translate an experience of life or of a poem that challenges my habits of thought or feeling or

style. For the practice of poetry is, after all, a game like any good game, it is worth playing seriously, and like any good game it has its special satisfactions. It seems appropriate to end with a translation of this experience too, in a poem that is mine and not mine, my translation of T. H. Parry-Williams' 'Words':

I do not know, indeed, what right was given me
To play such games with your reality,

And at a whim manipulate and toss
And juggle with your glories and your grace;

But in making each and all of you my care,
I caught a glimpse of my own nature there.

Ann Griffiths and Emily Dickinson: Contexts and Convergences

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When I began a year ago to attempt translations of Ann Griffiths, I found myself continually haunted by Emily Dickinson, to the point where I often seemed to be rendering Ann's .poems in ways that echoed Emily's voice. I will be quoting Ann Griffiths in these translations not with any notion that they are more than shadows of the original Welsh substance, but because my Englishing of the poems may help to bring out certain points.

Personal idiosyncrasy apart, this association of the two poets is perhaps more likely to occur to an American than a Welsh reader. It has, in any case, led me to juxtapose them in a kind of diptych, to see whether a consideration of some points of convergence can give a fresh perspective on the contexts within which the poems were composed and on the poems themselves.

I must begin by noting one considerable disparity. Ann Griffiths died in 1805, at twenty-nine years of age, having composed some thirty poems. Emily Dickinson at twenty-nine, in 1859, had already written at least a hundred poems; she would go on to write, astonishingly, more than 900 in the following six years, a total of almost 1,800 before her death in 1886. What is of concern critically is not so much the differences in length of life and quantity of work. One can with justice represent Ann Griffiths by half a dozen poems indeed, Saunders Lewis could point to a single poem as bringing together all her themes in her most characteristic diction. But I have never seen Emily Dickinson anthologized, however generously, without thinking some

essential poems have been left out, and every time I read a new critical study my attention is called to poems I have previously overlooked that cast a somewhat different light on her central concerns. Richard Sewall introduced his two-volume biography by remarking that he felt guilty of 'thinning' the poet and her work, and I will of necessity be ignoring many aspects of both. I will be suggesting, however, that Emily Dickinson's multiplicity and Ann Griffiths' singleness of focus can be seen as springing from their differing responses to the one central formative experience they had in common.

What they most obviously have in common, of course, is that their poems were produced and published in quite unusual circumstances. That Ann Griffiths' poems were preserved and posthumously published only because of her maid Ruth's retentive memory and the literacy of Ruth's minister husband is, at least initially, somewhat disconcerting. That Emily Dickinson should, after very tentatively seeking publication and then determining against it, have continued to write, revise, and store her poems in a dresser drawer, leaving them to the mercies of the editors she distrusted in her lifetime, is possibly less surprising. But one can note, without cynicism, that both poets *did* see to it that their work was known Emily Dickinson by constantly including poems in her letters (and her numerous correspondents included the editors of the *Springfield Republican* and the *Atlantic Monthly,* both friends of the family, as well as two of the most popular authors of the period); Ann Griffiths by reciting her verses, not unaware, I suspect, that they would be repeated, even if they were not written down.

One further thing they have had in common, not unrelated to this, is mythification by their admirers and biographers. Ann Griffiths as pregnant wife in the final year of her short life does not fit comfortably into the picture of the mystic of Dolwar Fach; Emily Dickinson in her early fifties enjoying the embraces of Judge Otis Lord all but shatters the image of the virginal recluse of Amherst, Massachusetts. But even when the mythifying has been carefully discounted, critics have tended in both cases too readily and too simply to identify the person in the poems with the historical person who composed them. Saunders Lewis once stated firmly that 'poets are not as good as their poetry and are not served by being identified with their poems', but I cannot see that he discriminated in this way when discussing Ann Griffiths. In approaching both poets, we do well to bear in mind Yeats' warning that 'even when the poet seems most himself he is never the

bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete'.

Emily Dickinson issued her own warning when she sent a group of poems to the writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson: 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse it does not mean me but a supposed person.' That assertion has been not simply ignored but casually dismissed by many of her critics, but I believe it testifies to the nature of poetic composition, and I will be applying it to Ann Griffiths as well. At the same time, we should consider whether the fact that so many readers in each case have felt the need to ground the poems in a biographical context does not suggest something about those poems, that the 'supposed person' in them is perhaps not 'complete', cannot be fully responded to, without some information the poems themselves apparently do not provide.

I said that these two poets had one central formative experience in common.

> I presume you know what she now believes religion makes her face quite different, calmer, but full of radiance, holy, yet very joyful. She talks of herself quite freely, seems to love Lord Christ most dearly, and to wonder, and be bewildered, at the life she has always led. It all looks black, and distant, and God, and Heaven, are near, she is certainly very much changed.

Emily Dickinson, May 1850, in a letter to one girlhood friend about another but she might have been writing about Ann Griffiths in north Wales some fifty years earlier. While there is abundant material from contemporary witnesses about the eighteenth-century Methodist revival, nothing has brought me closer to twenty-year-old Ann's experiences than Emily's at about the same age. Both were lively, intelligent, imaginative young women: Ann is reported to have been 'rather wild and light in her youth', with a taste for merry evenings of games and dancing; Emily could remark that 'Amherst is alive with fun this winter' and tell of her own late night out sleigh-riding with a convivial group of young women and men. It was perhaps a year after Ann had been stirred by hearing Benjamin Jones preach at Llanfyllin that she joined the Methodist *seiat* in Pontrobert. I think it is not inappropriate to imagine her saying, like Emily, '[I] pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why not surely for *this* brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven and I

ask what this message *means* that they ask for so eagerly ' And to imagine Ann finding, as Emily did, that 'it is hard for me to give up the world'.

For that was how the Christian life was presented to both of them as a way of negation, a way, as is said in one of Ann's poems, 'wholly against nature'. It was not a matter for either of them, at this point in their lives, of Christian belief. Ann's family, we are told, were devout Anglicans before they turned Methodist; Emily, her older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia, and their parents regularly attended the Congregational church, though until 1850 only her mother had entered full membership. 'Christ is calling everyone here,' Emily wrote to another friend that year, 'all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion and growing very careless.'

Her sister Vinnie experienced conversion, as did her father Edward later in the year, at the age of forty-seven, much as Ann's brothers and father and finally Ann herself had over fifty years before. Emily did not. She had found herself 'alone in rebellion' earlier, during her year at Mount Holyoke Seminary, in contrast to all but a few of her schoolmates. One of her letters refers to a still earlier time, when she was about fifteen, saying that she now thinks 'of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven' as if it were 'a delightful dream'. But, she writes, 'the world allured me'. At sixteen she expressed her conflict this way: 'I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a permanent place in my affections.'

Unlike Ann Griffiths, Emily Dickinson was never to become a communicant, a full member of her Church, and it is questionable whether later in her life she can properly be called a Christian. But her poems, no less than Ann's, were informed and defined by and assume as context the Christian world-view, as this was understood and experienced through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century 'revivals', what in New England as elsewhere were called 'awakening'.

Part of that awakening, for both of them, was to the hymn as the basic form for their poetry. Ann Griffiths was, in Derec Llwyd Morgan's words, one of 'Pantycelyn's people' it is hardly surprising that when she was impelled to compose poems it should be in what we must

remember was an excitingly new and primarily oral poetic form, brought into Welsh by William Williams and his contemporaries from Isaac Watts and his successors, one suited to express the renewed fervour of Christian faith, hope, and love.

That Emily Dickinson, among whose favourite poets were Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for whom one might expect the sonnet to be the most attractive verseform, should employ hymn-metres is much more surprising. What we are told of Ann Griffiths's habits of composing poems, apparently while engaged in household tasks, suggests to me that both women were likely to sing hymns as they baked their bread and tended their plants, and that when either was struck by the idea for a poem it was natural for her to begin with the rhythm in her head if not on her lips.

It was only some thirty-five years ago that it was realized that the stanzas classified in her hymnal as Common Metre, Short Metre, Long Metre, Sevens-and-Sixes etc. were the basis for most of Emily Dickinson's poems in part because she so thoroughly adapted the metres to the speaking rather than the singing voice, often using partial rhymes, sometimes shifting within a single poem from one stanza-pattern to another for changes of mood and tone; chiefly because she most often uses the form, in contrast to Ann Griffiths, to deal with thoughts and feelings we do not associate with hymns, even when those thoughts and feelings concern religion. Indeed, while such a well-known poem as 'Because I could not stop for Death' can be sung to the tune of, for instance, 'Amazing Grace', it must be emphasized that Emily Dickinson's poems are *not* hymns most of them not only do not require this association, but gain nothing from it.

It was, none the less, Samuel Worcester's 1819 edition of *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D., to which are added Select Hymns from other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression* which gave Emily Dickinson not only her stanza-patterns but what strikes every reader on first encountering her punctuation as highly idiosyncratic her constant use of dashes (with occasionally an equivalent use of commas). 'The dash', Worcester explained of his own frequent usage, 'is intended to denote an expressive suspension.' As you will see, I have been experimenting with the dash this way in translating Ann Griffiths.

What the eighteenth-century hymn gave both poets was not just the mechanics of verse. We are likely to be so familiar with the hymn in the context of congregational singing that we lose sight of its

construction as a lyric poem, as, in Aristotelian terms, a fiction, an imitation of an action. What Eliot said of the Shakespearean sonnet, that it is an entire way of thinking and feeling, is true also of the hymns of Watts and Doddridge, Wesley and Newton and Cowper, Williams Pantycelyn and Morgan Rhys and Dafydd Jones of Caeo (who translated Isaac Watts into Welsh).

The way Ann Griffiths opens a poem, for instance, is usually intense, immediate: 'I see an open door before me'; 'To be alive how great the wonder / In furnaces so blazing hot'; 'Oh to penetrate the knowledge / Of the one true living God'; 'If I must face the troubled river'. We find the same tendency to abrupt openings in Emily Dickinson, the same effect of a sudden thought or surge of feeling: 'I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true'; "Twas like a maelstrom, with a notch'; 'There's been a Death, in the Opposite House'; 'I know that He exists, / Somewhere in Silence '.

In both cases this has often been taken as evidence of a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' in the poet herself. 'The natural excitation bubbling forth', Thomas Parry writes of Ann, 'not bridled or fettered by metre or reflection', and John Ryan calls the poems 'ebullitions of her inner encounter with God'. 'The composition of many of her poems was as nearly spontaneous as may be', Douglas Duncan says of Emily. Maybe so a poem may often have begun for them in just such a way, but we should be wary of assuming that process in the poem was process in the poet. In any case, it is noteworthy that we find strong openings frequent in the eighteenth-century hymn: 'When I survey the wondrous cross / Where the young Prince of Glory died' (Watts); 'O happy day, that fixed my choice / On thee, my Saviour and my God!' (Doddridge); 'I want [i.e., lack] a principle within / Of watchful, godly fear' (Charles Wesley); 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me' (Newton); 'O for a closer walk with God (Cowper); 'O agor fy llygaid i weled' ('Oh open my eyes to see' Morgan Rhys); 'Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch / Fi, bererin gwael ei wedd' (Pantycelyn, of course, familiar in English as 'Lead me, Oh thou great Jehovah', but I have ventured to translate it rather as 'Lord God, lead me through the wasteland / A pilgrim and a sorry sight'). Whatever Ann Griffiths' or Emily Dickinson's methods of composition, they would have learned from the hymnists a dramatic way of beginning a *poem* what the reader experiences is an overhearing of someone breaking into speech.

What we can notice if we read both poets together with a number of such hymns is that despite one's sense that this is a highly charged moment for the speaker, the poem provides no singular occasion, no specific context, within which these words are being spoken. It is this, of course, that leaves hymns spoken by an individual 'I' rather than a communal 'we' nonetheless open for congregational singing the focus is not on the particularity of the individual but on what the individual's experience as a person trying to live a Christian life has in common with his or her fellow Christians. Their context is assumed this is what any Christian at particular moments in life might think and feel. And that is the context also for the speaker in Ann Griffiths' poems these are not grounded explicitly or even implicitly in specific moments of an individual's life. Saunders Lewis remarked pertinently that 'No one has been more silent about her spiritual experiences than Ann Griffiths'. Her most fervent poems might be spoken by any devout Christian at some time in life:

Oh for faith to look profoundly
With the angels upon high
Into salvation's order
There is a secret there
Two natures in one person
Inseparable ever more
In purity uncommingled
Perfect through and through

Oh my soul see how fitting
This divine person is
Venture your life upon him
And cast your burden on him
He is man to feel compassion
With all your weaknesses
He is God to lord it over
Devil world and flesh

There is each day a yearning
To leave the bloody field
Not part from the ark or Israel
But hateful self-conceit
To come to the king's table
Who bids me sit above

When I frail and feeble
Was for loving in the dust

However strong the tempests
And the sea's waves as they surge
Wisdom is the pilot
And his name is mighty Lord
In spite of sin's deluge
And corruption of every kind
Safe in the end delivered
Because the ark is God

Emily Dickinson will similarly often use unspecified occasion and assumed context. This can be a barrier to the reader; in some poems there is none of the presumption of a shared culture and a body of common experience such as we have in the hymnists and Ann Griffiths, and the thoughts and feelings of the speaker may remain very individual, excessively private. Rather than look at such a problematic poem at this point, however, I will cite as an example of her practice a fairly typical one, which conveys strongly the sense that the speaker is reflecting on a particular event in her life but does not specify this, expressing it instead in terms of general human experience:

We grow accustomed to the Dark
When Light is put away
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye

A moment We uncertain step
For newness of the night
Then fit our Vision to the Dark
And meet the Road erect

And so of larger Darknesses
Those Evenings of the Brain
When not a Moon disclose a sign
Or Star come out within

The Bravest grope a little
And sometimes hit a tree

Directly in the Forehead
But as they learn to see

Either the Darkness alters
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight
And Life steps almost straight.

I am not suggesting that certain forms of poetic construction are exclusive to these two poets and the eighteenth-century hymn, any more than I would deny that Emily Dickinson was acquainted with Common Metre in many poems outside her hymnal, including ballads, or that Ann Griffiths' cultural milieu included *plygain* carols and the work of local poets, *beirdd gwlad*. These structural techniques have often been employed for lyric by, among many before and after them, seventeenth-century devotional poets, and not least, it is worth remarking, George Herbert, who considerably influenced the English hymnists. What I *am* noting is that it was through the hymns that both of these poets would have been familiar with such techniques.

The process of thought and feeling in a typical Emily Dickinson poem, for example, has been well characterized by Helen McNeill as 'passionate investigation', using 'emotionally heightened states as occasions for clarity'. This way of constructing a poem, moving from an opening expression of apparently spontaneous thought and feeling through a closely analytical but still emotionally intense working out of the implications and consequences of what has been said in that first moment, is something we can note in Ann Griffiths as well. While other influences on both poets are sometimes evident, I believe they learned this structural process from the eighteenth-century hymn, where one consistendy finds 'faith seeking understanding', as Anselm described theology, something less typical of the nineteenth-century hymn, where a sometimes indefinite faith tends chiefly to seek emotional expression.

Donald Davie in recent years has been calling attention to 'the energies of human Reason' in hymns by Watts, Charles Wesley, and Christopher Smart, and A. M. Allchin has remarked how Ann Griffiths manages 'to wed depth of feeling to intellectual lucidity'. Davie has pointed to the way in which the strict and simple stanzaic patterns are used for strong and clear syntactic patterns of repetition, co-ordination and subordination, parallels and antitheses, as a means of blending passionate feeling with intellectual precision. This is what

Emily Dickinson once called 'the Thews of Hymn', and we find these sinews in her own use of the stanza-patterns:

> This World is not Conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond
> Invisible, as Music
> But positive, as Sound

So too in Ann Griffiths:

> Put to death life's very Author
> Buried the great Resurrection
> Bringing in a peace eternal
> Between low earth and highest heaven

As in Charles Wesley:

> Emptied of his Majesty,
> Of his dazzling Glories shorn,
> Being's Source begins to Be,
> And God himself is born!

And in Pantycelyn:

> Hidden from my sight I love you
> And I have not in the world
> Any object I can trust in
> Any object worth my thought

And of course in Isaac Watts:

> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were an offering far too small;
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.

In these last two examples we find that 'way of negation' I noted earlier as the form in which both Ann Griffiths and Emily Dickinson encountered Christianity, and I will devote the remainder of my essay to considering how this affected their poetry.

It is well to begin by stressing, as Watts and Pantycelyn do, that the wish to negate, to reject what Ann Griffiths like Pantycelyn calls 'this world's sorry toys', springs from love, the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, which is seen as alone able to satisfy human desire:

> See there stands among the myrtles
> An object worthy of my heart
> Though I only know in part how
> He transcends all worldly thought
> Welcome morning
> When I see him as he is
>
> He is named the Rose of Sharon
> White and ruddied fair of face
> He surpasses the ten thousand
> Foremost things the world contains
> Friend of sinners
> He their pilot through the sea
>
> Why should I deal any longer
> With base idols of the earth
> Their whole company I swear it
> Is no match for Jesus' worth
> Oh to linger
> All my days within his love

The power of Ann Griffiths' poems is surely that in them she effectively created a speaker utterly convinced of God's redeeming love, entirely focused on her desire for union with him, bent upon renouncing 'this world's transitory things', 'the world with all its baubles'. It is totally consistent with this asceticism that it refuses to permit the imagination to specify any of the transitory things, to go beyond generalizing them as 'baubles', to recall particular moments of temptation, to recreate in any detail the tensions between love of the world and love of God. If we are to respond properly to these poems, we must accept that they are based on an aesthetic of severe self-denial, for the poet and for the person in the poems.

Ann Griffiths' poems were composed by a historical person, one living in a particular place at a particular time but except for the Welsh language the person in her poems is all but de-historicized. She

lives in time and space while yearning to be free of them; her reference points are historical only insofar as they are biblical; she will not draw on any imagery that has not been biblically sanctioned. She has become, we could say, a biblical character, not someone living in another century, another country. Whatever her individual history, it has been stripped away, discarded as irrelevant and distracting by a person conscious of herself only as a person loving and loved by God at the present moment.

The speaker in these poems focuses, as I said of the hymns that gave the poet her model, on what every Christian should believe and should seek to be. Ann Griffiths' few letters refer to 'smart trial and strong winds, so that I was almost out of breath on the slopes', to having had 'many disappointments in myself without a break', to being 'far gone in spiritual whoredom from the Lord', to 'the sin of thought' pressing on her 'most heavily'. One can say, I suppose, that such experiences are implied by the ardent longing for union with God that is dramatized in the poems, but (unlike such devotional poets as Donne, Herbert, Hopkins) the painful struggles the letters record are not otherwise drawn upon as material for the poetry. There is one partial exception, a poem usually printed as a single stanza, but more effective, I believe, if the quatrains are separated:

> Must my zeal that fervent ember
> Once for glory rightly yours
> And my youthtime's loving-kindness
> Become colder towards my God
>
> Mighty dweller on the heights
> Now disclose your joyful face
> And wean my spirit from this moment
> Away from this creation's breasts

In one letter Ann Griffiths declared that 'the most pressing thing that is on my mind is the sinfulness of any visible thing obtaining a leading place in my mind'. The letters indicate that she frequently failed to prevent this, but in composing her poems, she created a person who has, at least for the moment of the poem, succeeded. I said at the beginning that commentators have tended too simply to identify the historical Ann Griffiths with this person in the poems. What I am suggesting here is that it would be more accurate to say that Ann

Griffiths strove to become the person she imagined in her poems, the person who could say:

Wondrous wondrous to the angels
Great wonder in the sight of faith
To see the giver of being sustainer
And governor of all that is
In swaddling clothing in the manger
With no place to lay his head
And yet the shining host of glory
Worships him as their great God

When the smoke is shrouding Sinai
At the trumpet's loudest sound
I will go across the boundary
To feast in Christ the Word unslain
There fulfilment has its dwelling
Full the void man's loss once made
The breach between divine and human
His selfsacrifice reconciled

He the Atonement between the robbers
He endured the swoon of death
He empowered his executioners'
Arms to nail him on the cross
Paying the debt of brands for burning
And honouring his Father's law
Justice it shines forth in fervour
Forgiving freely reconciled

See my soul where he was lying
Lord of kings author of peace
The creation in him moving
And he dead within the grave
Song and life of all the lost ones
Greatest wonder of heaven's host
God in flesh they see and worship
The choir cries 'To him be praise '

Thanks ever thanks a hundred thousand
Thanks while there is breath in me

Because an object's there to worship
And an endless text for song
Who was in my nature tempted
Like the worst of human kind
Tiny infant feeble strengthless
Infinite truth and living God

Rid of this body of corruption
To pierce with the fervent choir on high
Deep into the boundless wonders
Of salvation on Calvary
To live to see the unseen One who
Died and who is now alive
Eternal undivided union
And communion with my God

There I will exalt the name that
Is the Atonement God has willed
Without fancy veil or cover
My soul his image to the full
As fellow in the mystery
Opened to us in his wound
Kiss the Son for everlasting
Turn my back on him no more

One critic, David Higgins, has glibly remarked that 'luckily for her art, Emily Dickinson saved herself from salvation'. I do not think she ever saw it that way certainly she never saw it that simply. She continued to attend services, and to comment on the sermons favourably as well as unfavourably, until she was about thirty and began to withdraw from society in general. That withdrawal has given rise to endless speculation, beginning in her lifetime, and although one family friend in a letter to her brother calls her 'the Queen Recluse' and seems to suggest religious motives, it is impossible to be certain. Her sister Lavinia said after Emily's death that she 'had to think; she was the only one of us who had that to do', and that may be the best way to account for Emily Dickinson's entering her own singular 'way of negation', her own version of the contemplative life. Like Ann Griffiths praying in the peat-shed, she created her own 'secret room'.

'Look in upon Eternity in your own chamber', the seventeenth-century devotional writer Morgan Llwyd advised in a book and language Emily Dickinson could not have read, 'that you may come to the ground of all things, and of yourselves.' She did know well a book in the same tradition, a translation of Thomas á Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* her copy is heavily marked, especially in the chapters on Love and the Cross. Christianity remained central to Emily Dickinson's thinking: her letters, like her poems, are almost as saturated with biblical allusions as Ann Griffiths', though by no means always reverently used.

'Faith is *Doubt',* she wrote in one letter, two years before she died. Faith and Doubt are the central experiences of her poems. It was another American poet, her contemporary Walt Whitman (whom apparently she never read), who boasted: 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself I contain multitudes', but it might have been more truly said by Emily Dickinson of the thoughts and feelings she dramatized through the person or persons in her poems. Martha England sees in them 'no coherent vision of life, but rather a thousand vignettes, clear, intensely seen, beautiful', and David Porter can find no 'life-centering angle of vision in the poet's mind'. If we accept, however, that religious searching, the subjecting of doubt as well as faith to an experiential testing, may centre a life, then we can see this as the core of her poetry.

'My Business is Circumference', she once declared, and the word recurs enigmatically in the poems. What she meant by it apparently was what Saunders Lewis dealt with in his 'Gweddi'r Terfyn', which could in Emily Dickinson's terms be translated not as 'Prayer at the End' but 'at the Circumference' the outer limit of our experience, the borderline between life and (perhaps) immortality, time and (perhaps) eternity, the finite and (perhaps) the Infinite. Those words 'infinity', 'eternity', immortality', were as central to Emily Dickinson's poetic vocabulary as they were to Ann Griffiths' together with 'grace', 'crucifixion', 'redemption', and 'glory'. It was Christianity, not as a firm conviction but as a persistent possibility, frequently questioned but often seen as the only conceivable alternative to utter meaninglessness, that provided the 'angle of vision' from which her poems explored particular experiences, especially experiences of the natural world and of erotic love.

A. M. Allchin says in *Praise above All* that in recent centuries 'the religion of redemption seems to have become divorced from the

religion of creation, and sometimes completely to have overshadowed it' though surely we find at least constant tension between them from the beginning of Christianity, the effect in some measure of Neo-Platonic and Stoic philosophy. Certainly such a divorce and overshadowing characterized Emily Dickinson's encounter with Christianity as it did Ann Griffiths's, and had as strong an impact on her poetry.

Euros Bowen, defending Ann against John Gwilym Jones' charge that she saw nature as an enemy, can somewhat desperately cite only one quatrain as evidence that in fact she delighted in it:

> I command you Nature's posies
> Beautifying earth below
> Not to stir until he wills it
> My love and my great glory's lord

But no one could ever question Emily Dickinson's delight in the natural world. That, together with close observation of its particular phenomena, is the central experience for hundreds of her poems. In them she creates a person intensely aware of being "This Consciousness that is aware / Of neighbors and the sun'. The neighbours include not only other human beings but humming-birds, bluejays, snakes, bats, butterflies, crickets, dandelions, gentians, roses; and the sun rises and sets in spectacular beauty and produces singular qualities of light in spring and on winter afternoons. I do not think, though, that what we find in these poems can accurately be called a "religion of nature", either as an alternative to Christianity or as a Christian 'way of affirmation', what Allchin and Euros Bowen call a religion of creation. What I find most remarkable about Emily Dickinson's nature poems, in fact, coming as they do in the later half of the nineteenth century, is how often they refuse to take one course or the other.

It would take more space than I have at my disposal to explore sufficiently this controversial point. I must content myself with asserting that while the speaker in the poems will often use religious language metaphorically to express the sense of awesome harmony and mystery evoked by nature, in one poem even drawing on both Druids and the Roman Catholic mass, I cannot see that she ever really finds it, to use Ann Griffiths' words, 'an object to be worshipped'. Nature is explicitly distinguished from God in a number of poems; it is personified, fairly conventionally, as 'the gentlest mother' in one

poem, much less conventionally in a later poem as still 'a stranger', with a 'haunted house' whose 'ghost' cannot be 'simplified'. Certainly at no point does Emily Dickinson imagine being able to say with her older New England contemporary whose work she admired, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that 'the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God'. The negative way's firm insistence on distinguishing creature from Creator seems to have kept her from that.

Some of her nature poems do at least suggest the possibility of the affirmative way. A fairly early one, celebrating the revival of nature in spring, declares that 'Nicodemus' Mystery', his bewildered question to Jesus about being reborn, 'Receives its annual reply'. A jaunty one, that would have had Dafydd ap Gwilym's approval though not Ann Griffiths', begins:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church
> I keep it, staying at Home
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister
> And an Orchard, for a Dome

and ends: 'So instead of getting to Heaven, at last / I'm going, all along.' In one poem the speaker finds in various times of day 'different Signs' for what Heaven may be like; in others she actually calls earth itself 'Heaven', 'Paradise', 'Eden', reminding one of Thomas Traherne (still undiscovered in her time) writing in the seventeenth century that 'your Enjoyment of the World is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven and look upon the skies and the Earth and the Air as Celestial Joys'.

But what is most typical of Emily Dickinson's nature poems, I think, is what we find in this one:

> A Bird came down the Walk
> He did not know I saw
> He bit an Angleworm in halves
> And ate the fellow, raw,
>
> And then he drank a Dew
> From a convenient Grass
> And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
> To let a Beetle pass

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

Almost inevitably, there have been attempts to read this and other nature poems emblematically to say that the speaker finds the bird symbolic of the human soul, or at least that the reader should, thereby placing Emily Dickinson conveniently in the tradition that would include the American poet William Cullen Bryant's 'To a Waterfowl' and Thomas Jones of Dinbych's *cywydd* to the song-thrush, and which Jonathan Edwards, by the way, had approved. I cannot agree. The bird, out of place on the ground, at ease in its element of air, seems to me to be experienced simply as 'other', non-human, one of what another poem calls 'Nature's People' for whom the speaker feels 'a Transport / Of Cordiality'. The closing words of Gwyn Thomas' poem about a hedgehog, which would surely have delighted her, express what I find at the heart of Emily Dickinson's nature poetry, the experience of being 'Fellow-tenants in a transient world'. Painfully so, in one late poem:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play
In accidental power
The blonde Assassin passes on
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God.

It is a different and far more complex matter when we turn to Emily Dickinson's poems of erotic love. I am not concerned with the continual biographical debate about who may have been the man behind the poems, if indeed the poems were not fictions directly inspired by her reading of the Brontës and other romantic novelists. Whether or not her sister Lavinia was right in saying that 'Emily never had any love-disaster Her intense verses were no more personal experiences than Shakespeare's tragedies', what matters is that we have a number of poems, composed from about 1860 to 1865, in no evident sequence, that imply as their context a particular love story. A female speaker falls passsionately in love and is loved in return; she has no hope of fulfilment in her lifetime, presumably because the man is married and neither will contemplate adultery; but she can sometimes believe that they will be united in heaven.

Emily Dickinson treats this relationship not only with the use of religious imagery but by having her speaker at times interpret the experience itself as religious, both a way of negation and a way of affirmation:

There came a Day at Summer's full,
Entirely for me
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections be

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new

The time was scarce profaned, by speech
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament,
The Wardrobe of our Lord

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this time
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast as Hours will,
Clutched tight, by greedy hands

So faces on two Decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands

And so when all the time had leaked,
Without external sound
Each bound the Other's Crucifix
We gave no other Bond

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise
Deposed at length, the Grave
To that new Marriage, Justified
Through Calvaries of Love

B. L. St Armand, reading the poems autobiographically, calls this Emily Dickinson's 'blasphemous private mythology', for which she is 'appropriating the language of Calvinist dogma to describe her crisis conversion to love'. Autobiographical questions aside, I am doubtful that this is how the poems should be read. I see them instead as 'interior monologues' expressing sometimes great joy in being loved, sometimes deep longing for fulfilment, sometimes imagining how happy an earthly marriage might have been, sometimes surrendering all hope of fulfillment, even after death. The longest of these monologues begins 'I cannot live with You', explains why 'I could not die with You', and then declares:

Nor could I rise with You
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus'

The speaker calls Paradise 'sordid excellence' compared with the sight of the beloved, concluding:

And were You lost, I would be
Though My Name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame

And were You saved
And I condemned to be
Where You were not
That self were Hell to Me

So We must meet apart
You there I here
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are and Prayer
And that White Sustenance
Despair

Is the speaker being blasphemous? Certainly she herself recognizes that she is idolatrous in her inability to reconcile the demands of her Christian faith with her desperate passion.

Emily Dickinson, as noted earlier, often uses unspecified occasion and assumed context in constructing a poem. Her own gathering of her works into small home-made booklets did not organize them thematically or on any other basis yet discovered. She seems, in writing her poems, deliberately and frequently to have compartmentalized rather than synthesized experiences of love, of nature, of mental anguish, of death, of religious faith or doubt. It is therefore hard to know when it is appropriate to see other poems of these years as providing contexts for the love poetry, and vice versa. But at least a cautionary perspective is possible by recognizing that a number of her religious poems, neither blasphemous nor idolatrous, were composed throughout the same period among them, though not necessarily related to the love poems, one that begins 'At least to pray is left is left' and ends by asking: 'Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth / Hast thou no Arm for Me?'

There are some poems in which the speaker views her love in a way analogous to Dante's for Beatrice. I do not believe Emily Dickinson ever read Dante (though she could have, in Longfellow's translation, and she certainly would have known of him), but she wrote, late in her life, to the one man she unquestionably loved, Otis Lord, that 'Cupid taught Jehovah to many an untutored Mind'. As she had imagined in a poem written decades before, opening with 'A Wife at Daybreak I shall be', and concluding: 'Eternity, I'm coming Sir, / Savior I've seen the face before!' One should, I submit, read this as a triumphant (if perhaps momentary) realization of 'the way of affirmation', in which the speaker imagines death as bringing her union with Jesus, and the Creator satisfying the longing first aroused by the creature. I have placed this poem within a context provided by the love poems it is not surprising that, taken on its own or within the context of Emily Dickinson's religious poems from the same years,

it has been read not as 'blasphemous private mythology' but as Christian mystical experience.

With that poem, we are brought to the most intriguing point of convergence between Emily Dickinson and Ann Griffiths. In *The Imitation of Christ,* the former would have read this prayer: 'O thou most beloved spouse of my soul, Jesu Christ, thou most pure Lover, thou Lord of all creation; O that I had the wings of true liberty, that I might flee away and rest in thee!' The book was translated into Welsh under the title *Pattrwm y Gwir-Gristion* in 1723, but I have seen no suggestion that Ann Griffiths might have known it. She would not have needed to, however, to employ as she does the image of Jesus as lover and husband, and erotic love as a ground for and symbolic of divine. The Christian Church had long since sanctioned this by its interpretation of the biblical Song of Songs, and it had become a frequent image in devotional literature throughout Europe.

A. M. Allchin has remarked that compared to many of these writings Ann Griffiths 'is very sparing in explicit use of the imagery of bride and bridegroom'. Her poem on the negative way at one point calls it 'way as husband way as head'; in another poem, the speaker's prayer is to

> Love the cross and always bear it
> For it is my husband's cross
> Find my rapture in his person
> Ever worship him as God;

in still another, the desire is to

> Live waiting for my Lord's arrival
> Be at his coming wide awake
> To open to him in an instant
> Enjoy his image to the full .

It may be wise at this point to note the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset's comment to the effect (I do not have the exact quotation) that those who view sanctity as sublimated sex should consider whether much sex is not perhaps sublimated sanctity. Analogy is not identity, and it is quite clear from the poems themselves as well as their assumed biblical context that Ann Griffiths knew the difference when she used the language of erotic love to express the soul's yearning to be united with God. But did Emily Dickinson recognize this difference?

David Higgins thinks not. 'The Biblical "God is love"', he writes, treating the poems as autobiography, 'meant to Emily that love was God. The human and divine aspects of love mingled in her mind until both lover and deity were God.' It is a view shared by many others, who place in the context, not of her religious but of her erotic poems, the following brief ecstatic lyric:

> Given in Marriage unto Thee
> Oh thou Celestial Host
> Bride of the Father and the Son
> Bride of the Holy Ghost.
>
> Other Betrothal shall dissolve
> Wedlock of Will, decay
> Only the Keeper of this Ring
> Conquer Mortality

It is, of course, a love poem, and one in which the speaker, as far as I can see, means exactly what she says. 'Bride' and 'Marriage' and 'Host' are metaphoric the Trinity is not. It is a poem Ann Griffiths would have understood perfectly. It is a poem she herself might have written.

It is clear by now, I trust, why Emily Dickinson has continued to haunt me as I try to translate Ann Griffiths. They illuminate one another: with due allowance for social circumstances and divine grace, each is the poet the other might have been.

What, one wonders, might these two remarkable women have thought of one another, as persons and as poets? We can do a bit more than guess at how Emily would have responded to Ann:

> So proud she was to die
> It made us all ashamed
> That what we cherished, so unknown
> To her desire seemed
> So satisfied to go
> Where none of us should be
> Immediately that Anguish stooped
> Almost to Jealousy

It was not, of course, about Ann Griffiths, but it might well have been. Though Emily would probably have found Ann uncomfortable to be with: asked once about her 'shunning Men and Women', she complained that 'they talk of Hallowed things, aloud and embarrass my Dog'.

As for what Ann would have thought of Emily she would probably, at least in her more ascetic moments, have disapproved of most of the poems. But I think she might well have understood and recognized her own likeness in the poet who could declare: *'My* business is to love *My* business is to *sing.'*

Hymns and Poems: An Experiment in Translation

*A kind of supplement to the preceding essay, though it can be read independently. Some of the introductory material and four of the translations were published in* Planet *(AugustSeptember 1991) under the title 'On Translating Pantycelyn'.*

In an editorial for *Llais Llyfrau/Books in Wales* (Winter 1997), Katie Gramich stated that 'no translator has, to my mind, succeeded in rendering Ann Griffiths' hymns well in English'. She added that she finds it strange that 'with all the difficulties and complexities of *cynghanedd* to contend with in other Welsh poetry it is Ann Griffiths' intense lyrical work, with its lack of metrical complexity, which has continued to outwit and defeat even the most ingenious of translators.'

Much the same could be said of attempts to translate the works that were the greatest influence on Ann Griffiths' poems, the hymns of William Williams Pantycelyn. 'Hymns which are outstanding poetry', Sir Thomas Parry said, and John Gwilym Jones declared that 'Williams is not only a poet, but a great poet'. Welshless readers are unlikely to have been convinced of this by reading the hymns in translation it is something they have had to take, perhaps appropriately, on faith.

The chief problem in both cases has been, paradoxically, with that 'lack of metrical complexity' Katie Gramich remarked. Confronted with the impossibilty of capturing *cynghanedd* in English verse, translators and readers have been willing to settle for poems that echo faintly the original music, and even with less demanding verse-forms they have often found it possible to keep much of the vitality of the original poem without adhering to its basic pattern of rhythm and rhyme. But translators of both poets have thought it essential to retain the simple stanzaic patterns of Pantycelyn's hymns that later echoed in the ears of Ann Griffiths when she orally composed her poems.

One can understand why. It is a matter of what I once heard poet-translator Hubert Lomas refer to as 'foreground' and 'background'. For some poems, the rhythm and rhyme scheme, the basic sound patterns, are so strongly part of one's experience that it seems impossible to imagine dispensing with them as 'background', as the translator sometimes can with other poems. In my earliest attempts at translating some of Pantycelyn's hymns it seemed essential to reproduce the rhyming pattern as well as the rhythm: as a result I found myself resorting to words and phrasings that were very distant from the Welsh, so much so that what I produced was at best only half-Pantycelyn, and tended to sound like Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley on an off day. When insistence on keeping the 'foreground' in the translations means retaining the verse at the expense of the poetry, it is time for a translator to think again.

R. Gerallt Jones, in the special Welsh issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Spring 1995), welcomed 'with however many reservations, the huge increase in the translation of verse which has taken place in recent years', and asserted that 'we must simply swallow our frustrations, abandon our purism and get on with it. Partial communication, which is what it will always be, is ultimately far better than no communication at all.' It was in that spirit that I returned to attempting translations of Pantycelyn's hymns and of Ann Griffiths' poems.

What translation must try to convey in both poets, must somehow render convincingly, is what Parry spoke of in Pantycelyn, after noting some stylistic faults, as 'his immense and profound passion, the impression left on us that this man's experience is seething in him, swelling up like the sea till it possesses him wholly, every limb, every instinct, every impulse in his personality'. This is what was lost or diminished in my first attempts, and so I decided to take the risk of sacrificing end-rhyme unless it proved to be readily available in a fairly close translation.

I assumed that it was necessary to keep as much as possible to the original rhythms, but in doing this I found there was a constant danger of the metre dominating and suffocating rather than expressing thought and feelings. But I also became acutely aware through these attempts of the truth of Donald Davie's observation that 'the congregational hymn belongs with the anonymous and oral forms of poetry like the ballad'. Even when one has not sung the original hymn or has never heard its tune, there is the constant sense that an auditory

element, providing particular emphases and shadings beyond anything suggested by stanza-pattern and punctuation, is necessary for the *poem* to be fully realized. I therefore tried to see whether substituting dashes for standard punctuation could bring out some of these effects, might at least avoid the sing-song that is a continual threat to adequately expressive rhythms. There was precedent for this in Samuel Worcester's 1819 edition of Watts, in which he explained the abundance of dashes by saying that 'the dash is intended to denote an expressive suspension'. Worcester's practice strongly influenced Emily Dickinson's way of adapting hymn-metres as her basic poetic form, and it was her poems that first suggested to me that this might be a means of controlling the rhythm so as to capture the poetry.

A mini-anthology of the resulting translations follows. I hope the admittedly odd look of the poems will have a positive rather than negative effect, encouraging or challenging the reader to attend to them, listen to them, respond to them with greater immediacy than if they were encountered through conventional punctuation. I confess to some arbitrariness in the use of dashes indeed, I have found myself putting some in or taking some out almost every time I have gone over one of these translations. Readers should feel free to try their own hands at this, inserting or excising a dash where they think this would be more effective something similar happens, does it not, with pauses and emphases whenever different persons recite a poem? I suggest that the translations be tested orally, and that only a few be read at any one time. I should add that, paradoxical as it may seem, I have not done these translations with musical settings in mind.

Those who know the originals are likely to see translating hymns as more of a traduction than other translating, and Welsh readers familiar with these works from childhood may see what I have tried to do as a violation of what is precious and sacred. They should read no further if they do, I ask them to remember that the translations are not meant for them. My aim has been to produce poems, closer to William Williams Pantycelyn and to Ann Griffiths than other translations, in which a Welshless reader can take some pleasure while experiencing something of the passionate power of the original authors.

I. WILLIAM WILLIAMS PANTYCELYN (17171791)

1. Let my mind be on you Jesus
Let my song be of your love
Let the mention of your sufferings
Bear my affections clean away
Your love surpasses
What anyone has ever felt

Oh that I might pass my burdened
Days beneath your heavenly cross
Every thought securely fastened
On your Person day and night
Live each minute
In tranquillity and peace

In my heart there is a longing
To escape the noisy world
And to see days when I lose sight of
All the baubles it contains
Feed forever
On what's heavenly alone

Jesus Friend and Jesus Bridegroom
Jesus Love above all else
He a Prophet to instruct me
He a Priest to forgive my sin
In his shadow
I would conquer countless faults

If it's He that stands beside me
I'll not fear my enemies
In despite of their cruel fury
Of their cunning of their strength
Stronger wholly
Is the conquest on Calvary

2. Jesus come into the wasteland
To a sinner in sorry shape
A hundred times in snares entangled
Snares that he himself has made
Burning brambles they surround me

Set me firmly on my feet
Lend your hand and lead my feeble
Soul across to its own land

I have need of heavenly manna
Running water living clear
Rising from beneath the threshold
Of God's temple sacred pure
Washing the soiled whitening the Ethiop
Cleansing those begrimed with guilt
Yours the praise a myriad ages
When the earth has turned to flame

Never could my strict devotions
Never could the womb's dear fruit
A thousand streams of oil long flowing
Satisfy you in the least
Choice rams by the tens of thousands
Or most delicate perfumes
Not one thing beneath the heavens
That could wash the foulness clean
All my trust is in your power
I will venture come what may
Passing through the depths of rivers
All your words are firmly sealed
Faith in you will never fail me
One who's ever stood by me
I will go on come whatever
Rock and hill-rise in your path

3. I have asked Lord nothing further
Nothing but to spend my days
Loving you and wondering at you
And subsisting on your grace
That suffices
I'll ask nothing else than this

Keep my eye keep it steady
Keep it on your promises
Keep my feet restrained from stirring

Past the bounds of your pure law
Let your commandments
Be my comfort and my peace

Oh let me have an end to loving
Any pleasure under heaven
And an end to contemplating
Any object in your stead
Let my spirit
Become altogether yours

Put the tempers put the graces
All together in my soul
You have given to your dearest
Freely since the world began
Joyful joyful
It will be while heaven is

If you must bear the cross's tempests
And the afflictions it entails
Oh dear Jesus let me rest there
In your bosom close contained
In each affliction
Bear all my burdens you alone

4. I see the cloud of black
On the brink of taking flight
And the north wind it shifts
The very slightest bit
After a mighty storm soon comes
Fair weather for my feeble soul

The dark tempestuous night
It will not last for long
To none have epochs been
Assigned to bear the cross
The cheerful dawn that lights beyond
Says a fine morning is at hand

I see the sunlight on
The hills of my Father's house

Showing to me the ground
Of my free salvation's grace
My name's in heaven's books on high
And there's not a thing will blot it out

And though for lengthy years
I've travelled the barren night
And have drunk many a draught
From the cross's bitter cup
It was my strength to suffer the yoke
And my suffering will not go for naught

The burden on my neck
It was lightened by my God
And I was fully blessed
In the darkest of distress
My fervent prayer it turned the wheel
Made the most bitter poison sweet

5. Hidden from my sight I love you
And I have not in the world
Any object I can trust in
Any object worth my thought
Nothing fills me
With all pleasure but yourself

You have led me from all creatures
By the very roughest paths
Have not let alone my pleasure
Ever morn or afternoon
In the wasteland
Spoken words that gladdened me

I'm content with your chastisements
When I know it is your voice
That delivers me from lions
From all abuse all violence
Heaven's words have
More appeal than honeycombs

Ear's not heard  eye's seen never
Nor has entered human heart
Idea  or imagination
Of a being like yourself
You are fairer
Far  than heaven or earth has seen

And it's I  myself  who loves you
Beyond all I've ever seen
Beyond anything I've heard of
Or imagined to exist
These are perfect
Gentle flames  where heaven dwells

6. Jesus  my foolish soul's delight
Is looking on your face
And the pure letters of your name
Are life to me  and peace

And underneath your tranquil wing
Is where I wish to live
Finding no joy in anything
But love toward my God

Oh shut my eyes  lest I should see
The vain joys of the world
And that I never deviate
From your precious  priceless  paths

I have only your great might
To brace me  to go on
Your salvation is my strength
My conquest  and my song

A moment of enjoying you
Is sweeter than honeycombs
And there's no pleasure for me now
Unless that lasts and lasts

And when the stars of heaven fall
Like green figs to the ground
My comfort will be none the less
All in my great Lord

7. Lord God lead me through the wasteland
A pilgrim and a sorry sight
With no strength no life within me
As though lying in the grave
The almighty
Is the one who'll raise me up

I for lengthy years have wandered
Never seeing dawn arise
Have despaired without your power
Of coming from the barren land
Come in person
That is when I will come out

Give the pillar of fire to guide me
And the pillar of cloud by day
Hold me when I walk the rugged
Places that are on my way
Give me manna
So that I may not lose heart

Open the sweet fountains for me
That come gushing from the rock
Through the far-stretched desolation
Let salvation's graces flow
Grant me only
That I may yourself enjoy.

When I'm crossing through the Jordan
In its power cruel death
You yourself once made the crossing
Why should I now be afraid?
Triumph! Triumph!
Make me shout this in the flood

I am trusting in your power
Yours are always mighty works
You had death you had Satan
You had hell beneath your feet
Lord of Calvary
Let that never leave my mind

8. I look across the distant hills
Hour by hour for you
Come my Dear One it grows late
And my sun is almost down

My loves have altogether turned
Faithless to me now
But I am sick delightfully
With a much stronger love

A love whose virtue and whose grace
Earth's children have not known
That sucks my passion and my mind
From all created things

Oh make me faithful while I live
And point me towards your praise
And may no pleasure seen below
Lead my thoughts astray
Draw my affections utterly
Away from empty things
To the one object that remains
Faithful perpetually

There is no circumstance beneath
The sky in which I'd live
But ever my delight is found
In the porches of my God

The savour's gone the craving's gone
For all the world's bouquets
Only incessant vanity
Permeates it all

II. ANN GRIFFITHS (17761805)

1. The world with all its baubles cannot
Satisfy my passions now
That were conquered were expanded
In my great Jesus' day of power
He can nothing less fulfil them
Though none may him comprehend
Oh to gaze upon his person
As he is both God and man

Oh to spend my days alive with
Exaltation of his blood
Shelter tranquil in his shadow
Living dying at his feet
Love the cross and always bear it
For it is my husband's cross
Find my rapture in his person
Ever worship him as God

2. Oh to pierce through to the knowledge
Of the one true living God
To such depths there would be slaughter
Of all fancy ever dreamed
To believe the word that's spoken
Of his nature manifest
Death to sinners were it not for
The atonement God devised

In this knowledge sure and certain
High and mighty looks must fall
Man is petty wretched loathsome
God is great transcending all
Christ in his work of mediating
Priceless only help in need
At the sight the guilty spirit
Glorifies him as our God

3. When the soul at its most fervent
Loves with ardour most intense
Such a moment comes far short of
God's perfect holy ordinance
Oh that I might do it honour
By taking free salvation's gift
And communion at its sweetest
Saturated in the blood

I will wonder with great wonder
When the blessed hour arrives
I will see my mind that's flitting
After this earth's sorry toys
Fixed forever on his person
The great object of my thoughts
And unshakeably conformed to
Heaven's pure and holy laws

4. To be alive how great the wonder
In furnaces so blazing hot
More wondrous that I shall once tested
Come to the centre like gold refined
Time of cleansing day of sifting
Yet tranquilly quite unafraid
It is the Man will be my refuge
Whose hand now holds the winnowing fan

Enemies make my life weary
Since their numbers are so great
I am as though by bees surrounded
From early in the day to late
Those on my own side are foremost
Leaders of a hellish band
By the help of grace I mean to
Battle on even unto blood

5. If I must face the troubled river
There's one to stem the water's might
He my faithful high priest Jesus
Whose grip is firm and confident

In his bosom I'll cry conquest
Over death hell grave and world
Eternal being no means of sinning
In his image glorified

Sweet to keep in mind the compact
Made above by three in one
Gaze eternally on the person
Who made human nature his
In fulfilling the conditions
His soul was sorrowful unto death
This song one hundred forty thousand
Shout with joy beyond the veil

To live without heat or sun beating
To live unable to die again
Every grief forever over
Only to sing of a mortal wound
To swim at ease in life's pure river
The endless peace of the holy Three
Underneath the cloudless priceless
Shining rays of Calvary

6. I see an open door before me
A way to wholly win the field
Strong in the gifts that he was given
Who took on a servant's form
The principalities were plundered
By him and the powers too
And the prisoner in the prison
Through his priceless agony

In remembering the battle
My sad soul leaps up with joy
Seeing that the law was honoured
And its great transgressors free
Put to death life's very Author
Buried the great Resurrection
Bringing in a peace eternal
Between low earth and highest heaven

When he ascended who descended
Having finished his work here
The portals wondering in their language
Lifted up their heads in awe
Doors were opening choir bowing
To God incarnate there beyond
The Father cheerfully invited
Him to sit at his right hand

Sufficient in a flood of waters
Sufficient in the fire's flames
Oh to go on clinging to him
Never my soul to be apart
On Arabia's baffling pathways
Countless enemies threaten me
Give me fellowship in the priceless
Pangs of death on Calvary

Elwau

*These musings were published in* The New Welsh Review *(Summer 1993) as 'What is a Welsh Book?' I have restored the original title.*

Sooner or later, I knew, the question would come. And it did. 'Would you care', Ceri Sherlock asked, a mischievous gleam in his eye, 'to define what is meant by "a Welsh book"?'

I was being interviewed for BBC Wales' *The Slate as* one of the English-language adjudicators for the 1992 Welsh Book of the Year, possibly because it was thought that an American might have a different viewpoint. Or at least a different accent.

'Not if I can help it,' I said. The eight-member television team who had somehow managed to fit into our rather compact living-room smiled sympathetically, I think. There was, as in a Gwenlyn Parry play, 'a long pause of silence'. And then, of course, I tried to answer the question.

I can't recall exactly what I said. I didn't find out when I watched the programme, since that turned out to be part of the nine minutes and thirty seconds from a ten-minute interview that ended up on the cutting-room floor. That, perhaps, is where it should be left except that the question refuses to go away, especially after the reading of forty-three books in a quest for 'The Welsh Book of the Year'.

I think I said something like 'Welsh books are what Welsh authors write.' That was certainly the basis on which the Welsh Arts Council submitted books for our consideration. As I told Ceri, the question never entered the amicable, often closely analytical discussions among Sheenagh Pugh, Phil George, and me. At no point did any of us suggest that the 'Welshness' of a book should be one of the criteria.

Should we perhaps have done so? I confess to having misgivings about some of the entries to saying as I read, 'But there's nothing *Welsh* about this book!' Except, of course, that it had been written by

a Welsh author. Would it clarify matters if the award were for 'The Welsh Author of the Year'?

Probably not. It would only change the question from 'What is a Welsh Book?' to 'Who is a Welsh Author?' Or, more precisely, 'Who is an English-language Welsh Author?' 'Anglo-Welsh' having once more become politically incorrect. For brevity's sake, I will hereafter use the term ELWA, which I suggest might be adopted as a useful acronym - unlike WWIE (Welsh Writer in English) it can be pronounced, and in fact *sounds* Welsh, can even be pluralized as ELWAU, and has very positive associations with the Welsh word for 'profit, gain, benefit', thereby indicating that, no matter what anybody says, ELWAU are good things to have.

But who, then, is an ELWA? According to the Welsh Arts Council, she or he is either 'someone living permanently in Wales' or 'is Welsh by birth and/or upbringing'. (I'm quoting from the rules for eligibility sent to me as an adjudicator by the Literature Director.) That, I suspect, is the most practical definition possible. It does raise a few questions, though. How do you determine whether someone is living 'permanently' in Wales? One can think of a few writers who have been, at most, temporary ELWAU. 'Birth and/or upbringing' can be a bit tricky too. Is someone born in Cefn Pendraw and transplanted after a month, a year, ten years or twenty, to London or Los Angeles, nonetheless an ELWA? And then there was an author this year, neither born nor resident in Wales but of partially Welsh ancestry, whose *book* was decidedly Welsh in subject and theme an ELWA in spirit, though ineligible for the award.

Still, the WAC definition is likely to be the best one can do. There would be obvious problems in officially defining ELWAU as elected members of Yr Academi Gymreig (English Language Section). Ideally, it might be better for writers to define themselves rather than leaving it to others, but in practice allowing only self-proclaimed ELWAU to compete for the award would be asking for trouble.

Come to think of it, I suppose I have become an ELWA myself, by virtue of settling in Aberystwyth for the foreseeable future. (Bobi Jones would seem to have confirmed this by recently listing me among 'Anglo-Welsh' poets, though I suspect him of merely trying to confuse things.) I don't know that I'm very comfortable about this. I think of myself as an American writer living in Wales but should my next book of poems be short-listed for Welsh Book of the Year, I might change my self-definition.

It's possible that under the present rules there will be a great row one of these years when the Welsh Book of the Year (in English) turns out to be a novel about Waco written by a Latvian who's been living for the previous two years in Machynlleth, and who moves to Sydney shortly after receiving the award. But meanwhile, I suspect that adjudicators will at least tacitly judge by the spirit as well as the letter, and that Welsh books of the year, whatever their contents, will be the products of authentic ELWAU however hard they are to define.

On Trying to be a Christian Poet

*For the series on 'Christianity and the Arts' at the Catholic Chaplaincy, Edinburgh University, 27 November 1993. These previously unpublished reflections, combined with a reading of some of my recent poems at the points indicated here by asterisks, provided, as I told the audience, "a kind of literary sandwich'.*

When Fr Gilbert Márkus asked me to suggest a title for this session, I said, 'Call it "On Trying to Be a Christian Poet".' After putting down the phone I was immediately tempted to call Gilbert back and change it to something, anything, else. But after further reflection I decided to let it stand, in the hope that confronting my ambivalence about it might produce something useful, to myself as well as you.

That I impulsively proposed the topic resulted from Gilbert's invitation coming just as I was reading proofs for a new collection of poems and realizing in the process how often those poems depend on Christian references. It sprang from the recognition that, in the most obvious sense of the words, I *am* a Christian poet, regardless of whether I try to be.

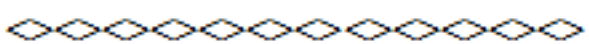
This is not, though, the way I'm accustomed to thinking of myself, and I tend to react negatively to that label. I respond to being called a Christian poet rather as some women who are writers object to being categorized as 'women writers' it seems to suggest limitation, exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness in dealing with human experience. It conveys as well a suggestion of condescension, a marginalizing of what one is doing, in contrast with the mainstream of contemporary writing. Though 'women writers' are surely by now firmly in the mainstream, something that can hardly be said of Christian poets. Who among contemporary poets is plainly, professedly, Christian? In England, Elizabeth Jennings; in Wales, R. S. Thomas; in Australia, dedicating his poems 'to the greater glory of

God', Les Murray; in America? Among the Welsh-language poets I've translated, explicitly Christian poems appear as a norm rather than an exception, but I cannot see that this is so anywhere else.

One American poet resident in the UK, on reading my translations of a major contemporary Welsh-language poet, is reported to have remarked, 'But they're awfully religious, aren't they?" The poet who deals with religious experience by which I mean nothing beyond the ordinary experiences of believing, questioning, praying, attempting to live a Christian life has the sense not only of being in a minority but of making listeners and readers and especially editors uncomfortable, embarrassed. Certainly one finds, in such a case as R. S. Thomas, that doubt is more acceptable than conviction, or at least that religious affirmation is only likely to be acceptable when it is tentative, tempered by constant uncertainty.

The poet who is a Christian must accept the fact that religious experience has become for modern society, in the sociologist Peter Berger's term, 'privatized', and is not for many, perhaps for most, of one's potential readers what William James called a 'live option'. The poet may be tempted to exclude explicitly Christian materials from the poems, to seek common ground with those readers in shared experiences and leave a Christian perspective at most implicit, an unspoken possibility rather than a necessary element of the poem.

For the Christian who writes poetry to react in this way, though, however understandably, is to accept an unjustifiable limitation, to leave out of the poetry not only central experiences but one's essential way of seeing the world. So if I have problems with being categorized as a 'Christian poet', I resent even more the cultural pressure to suppress my Christianity in order to write more generally acceptable poems. My own response to the situation has been simply to write whatever poems I can as well as I can, neither suppressing nor striving for Christian content, not worrying about how the poems may be received or categorized, and not consciously categorizing myself.



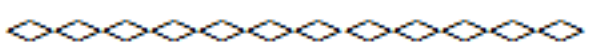
Except on special occasions, such as writing a hymn or a poem for a religious service, I am not conscious of trying to be a Christian poet. I am very conscious, to be sure, of trying to be a Christian. I don't mean trying to *believe* as a Christian that doesn't seem a matter of choice, since however much I question I find myself believing in the

propositions of the Apostles' Creed whether I want to or not. I mean trying to be a Christian in practice, something I will not venture to speak about here except for the question of whether that practice should include writing explicitly Christian poems.

There have certainly been Christian poets who saw it as their vocation to propagate the faith but I think that feeling one *ought* to use one's poetic talent this way can be a temptation, and that yielding to it is good for neither faith nor poetry. I must add, however, that although 'didacticism' has generally been in disrepute in our time, poetry does have a didactic function as the harmonious imitation of an action it will instruct in beliefs and may persuade to practice, however unconscious of this the audience may be, and whatever the poet's conscious intention.

My own conscious intention, ordinarily, is just to write a good poem. When I get an idea for a poem, and throughout the process of composition, what I'm conscious of is trying to make the best possible poem from the 'raw material' of particular experiences. Whether those experiences are religious or not is, during the process, a matter of indifference. 'Belief', in this process, has a purely aesthetic function it can provide a conceptual and therefore a structural basis for the harmonious imitation of an action, that is, it can be the way the person in the poem deals with his particular experience. In a good many cases, it turns out, the person in my poems deals with his experiences in Christian terms but this is not something I plan, it's something that happens as the poem develops.

This may seem to suggest a total separation between religious and aesthetic experience. But I think that writing a good poem, or at least writing the best poem one can, in itself serves God, whether or not the poem is explicitly or implicitly religious. Aesthetic experience for the writer, as for the reader or listener, in itself satisfies an essential need of our God-created human nature it is, as Jacques Maritain argued long ago, not a luxury but a necessity. And as W. H. Auden once observed, 'a painting of the Crucifixion is not necessarily more Christian in spirit than a still life, and may very well be less'.



It would be foolish to deny that there does exist a tension between aesthetic and religious experience. I've noted two temptations for the Christian poet to make the poetry a means of preaching the Gospel;

to exclude explicitly Christian experiences so as to meet contemporary readers on common ground. But there is a third temptation which for me is the strongest to see religious experience as interesting material, as something that exists for the sake of the poems one can make of it. This is a temptation, though, for all poets, all artists, whatever their beliefs to view any experience simply as raw material for the work, so that instead of creating art for art's sake, one is living life for art's sake.

Faced with this temptation, what the Christian can do is remain constantly aware that while religious experience can contribute to aesthetic experience, and aesthetic to religious, they are *not* identical. What the Christian poet can do, must do, is try to be a better Christian, whatever the consequences for the poems.

And that, I suppose, is where I find myself when I think of trying to be a Christian poet. It is a matter of trying to be a better Christian while trying to be a better poet and trusting that there will be a fruitful interaction. For all that I've said, though, about not consciously trying to be a Christian poet, if my poems as a whole did not reflect Christian experience then I would be very conscious of the absence, and very concerned about it. It goes beyond that, though it is not a matter of occasional poems, but of the body of the work being grounded in the Christian faith, faith in the redeeming mysteries of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection.

So I do not want, in the final analysis, a separation between the life and the work. And do I want an effect on readers and listeners that goes beyond the aesthetic? Well, yes. I would like to think that the poems by sharing certain experiences may help others to confirm or discover, within the muddle and the frequent horror of the human situation, the possibility of celebrating our existence in time and space, what the title of my selected poems referred to, in a phrase from Browning, as 'the significance of flesh'.

Capturing Poems

*An article for the special translation issue of* Poetry Wales *(April 1994).*

'Of the many kinds of poems by Lewis translated by Clancy, several have very successfully resisted capture.' Thus, with exquisite tact, Professor M. Wynn Thomas, in a generally favourable review of *Saunders Lewis: Selected Poems*. I smiled and nodded: it seemed not only foolish but ungracious to disagree.

I nodded again, though reluctantly, when Wynn went on to say that 'famous lyrics such as "Lavernock" become brusquely prosaic'. I thought I knew what he meant. Yet I began to wonder whether this would be the response of the readers for whom the book was intended, readers whose only access to the poem is through translation. Would they find the opening stanza 'brusquely prosaic'?

> Moor and sea, the song of a lark
> rising through the wind's precincts,
> and ourselves standing to listen
> as we'd listen long ago.

I hope not I certainly tried to make this 'lyrical'. But I can see how this English version might strike readers who have the original stanza at their ear-tips:

> Gwaun a môr, cân ehedydd
> yn esgyn drwy libart y gwynt,
> ninnau'n sefyll i wrando
> fel y gwrandawem gynt.

What particularly resists capture here, besides the end-rhyme and the length and pitch of key vowels, are effects achieved by Welsh

syntax. 'Cân ehedydd' evokes the bird's song with great simplicity because the second noun is genitive by juxtaposition whereas English must use two articles and a preposition. One could, to be sure, render this as 'lark song', but that not only reverses the emphasis of the nouns but is rhythmically abrupt and melodically harsh, less attractive and evocative, less true to the original's effect, than 'the song of a lark'.

But with 'libart y gwynt', where again the Welsh can express the genitive by juxtaposition, such a literal rendering 'the liberty of the wind' would be poetically hopeless, not brusque but slack, all too prosaic. 'The wind's precincts' *is* perhaps brusque. Certainly it reverses the position of the nouns and creates a rhythm and melody quite different from the Welsh. But after a number of attempts I decided that the hovering accent, the delaying effect of five consonants between the stressed vowels, the assonance and the falling rhythm made for the most effective *English* poem. I couldn't see that 'liberty', rhythmic questions aside, would convey to contemporary English readers the older meanings of the word still strongly present in Welsh, of private territory, domain, as well as freedom from constraint. I could find no English word in current use to convey both, and so I went for the concrete rather than the abstract meaning with 'precincts', as stronger poetically and closer to the basic effects of 'libart', in itself a fairly prosaic word (one modern meaning is 'backyard'). The phrase is repeated to close the second and final stanza of the poem: *yn disgyn o libart y gwynt,* 'falling from the wind's precincts'. If my Englishing of this phrase has initially struck the reader as not lingeringly evocative but 'brusquely prosaic', then it will surely do so again, and Saunders Lewis's haunting brief lyric will indeed have successfully resisted capture.

Perhaps it is something like this explanation of what Bobi Jones calls 'diplomatic negotiations' between the two languages that would be most useful to Welshless readers as an accompaniment to poems in translation. It would, I believe, have more interest and value for those readers than bilingual editions, whether these attempt poetic translation or present 'literal' prose versions. Stanley Burnshaw's anthology *The Poem Itself* (New York, 1960) made partial use of this method, appending to modern poems in five European languages 'a literal rendering interwoven with an explanatory discussion of each poem'.

My ideal volume would have a first section containing only poetic translations. What the majority of potential readers, those without even a smattering of the language, seeks and should be given initially is the pleasure of poetry, undistracted by the left-hand page of the usual bilingual format. Enjoyment of a translation would lead, one hopes, to the second section of the book for the original poem with a commentary, a very basic explanation of how language was handled by the original poet and by the translator.

Yes, I know. Such an edition would probably be too large and too expensive to be practical. I certainly don't expect to find a publisher eager to undertake it. Something of this sort is feasible, however, on a much smaller scale. Magazines like *Poetry Wales* could adopt this approach for translations of single poems. What follows is a demonstration of this mode of presenting translations, a way of capturing poems, that readers (and editors) may find worth considering.

I have been trying for several years to translate one of the late Euros Bowen's finest poems. Here is my latest, though possibly not my last, attempt to capture 'Reredos':

Not symbols,
ecclesiastical decor,
but a clear pane of glass,
that was the reredos,
and there was the risk
of drawing the celebrating's focus
away
from the properties of the communion table,

because there,
in the transparence,
the greenery of earth was
flourishing in the sight of morning,
the river's spate blossoming,
the air a flight of joy,
and the sunshine setting
the clouds on fire,

and I observed
the eyes of the priest

as if unawares
placing his hand
upon these gifts
as though
they
were the bread and wine.

And here is the original poem, from *Amrywion* (1980):

Nid simbolau'n
addurnwaith eglwysig
oedd y reredos,
ond gwydr plaen,
a'r perygl
fod tynnu sylw'r gweinyddu
oddi wrth
briodoleddau'r bwrdd cymun,

oblegid
yn y tryloywedd
roedd gwyrddlesni'r ddaear
yn brigo yng ngolwg y bore,
dylif yr afon yn blodeuo,
yr awyr yn hediad llawenydd
a'r heulwen
yn tanio'r cymylau,

a mi sylwais
ar lygaid yr offeiriad
megis yn ddiarwybod
yn rhoi ei law
ar y rhoddion hyn,
fel pe bai'r rhain
oedd
y bara a'r gwin.

Saunders Davies remarks in *Euros Bowen: Priest-Poet/Bardd-Offeiriad* (1993) that Bowen's employment of free verse in his later work 'has certainly made the task of the translator a little less daunting'. I haven't found it so, particularly not with 'Reredos'. Finding rhythms for the short lines that can sustain the flow of the single sentence, trying to

keep this from becoming a prosaic trickle down the page, negotiating between Welsh and English syntax, and seeking equivalents for Bowen's sometimes idiosyncratic handling of language is at least as 'daunting' as coping with longer-lined strict verse.

Davies' bilingual selection has now made the poet's own translation of 'Reredos' available, and it is of interest that he apparently aimed chiefly for clarity, probably because the translation was intended to introduce his reading of the Welsh poem, as A. M. Allchin notes in his introduction. Bowen's Englishing of the first four lines is very prosaic:

> The reredos was not
> an ecclesiastical adornment
> of symbols,
> but plain glass.

There is no attempt to capture the arresting opening achieved by the Welsh sentence structure's emphatic negation of artifice, and the somewhat scornful tone of *addurnwaith eglwysig* is muffled when 'symbols as / ecclesiastical decorative work' becomes 'an ecclesiastical adornment / of symbols'. To retain the force of these opening lines while avoiding awkward inversions I found it necessary to construct a different sentence, making the antithesis with plain glass the third line and using the demonstrative 'that was' in what then became the fourth line. It was chiefly rhythmic and melodic demands that amplified *ond gwydr plaen* into 'but a pane of clear glass', though the normal Welsh order of noun + adjective sometimes, as here, seems to require something more to capture the effect than the usual English adjective + noun.

The last four lines of this first stanza can be prosed as: 'and the danger / was of distracting the celebrating / from / the properties of the communion table'. What I saw as rhythmic necessities again in considerable measure determined my version of this. I didn't find 'distracting the celebrating' very attractive, and a more literal version of *tynnu sylw* as 'drawing attention' was still less so. I thought it essential to keep Bowen's characteristic use of the verbal noun in *gweinyddu,* 'celebrating [the religious service]', because of its emphasis on the action (though the poet himself, I later discovered, altered this in English to 'distracting the celebrant'!). To use 'from' for *oddi wrth* made a very terse and flat single line; 'away from' would hurry one through the line; but 'away' all by itself seemed to hold this transitional line effectively. And that led me to decide on 'focus' in the preceding

line, and to start the final line with 'from'. The remainder of that line must, I think, be Englished quite literally, though this means using two definite articles and a preposition for what the Welsh expresses with one article between nouns, and doing without the alliterations that articulate and somewhat lyricize the original line.

The second stanza begins with one word as its first line, *oblegid.* It makes a stronger, a sharper line than its English equivalent 'because' hence my addition of 'there' and use of commas to slow down and emphasize the first two lines. Bowen rather puzzlingly translated *tryloywedd* as 'translucence', though 'transparency' is what seems called for the latter, however, is usually *tryloywder,* and I ventured 'transparence' as closer to the Welsh effect. The remainder of this stanza turns on the single use of *roedd,* 'was', that makes the subsequent clauses a crescendo: 'the greenness of the earth was / sprouting in the view of the morning, / the flood of the river [was] flowering, / the air [was] a flight of joy / and the sunshine [was] igniting the clouds'. I tried to keep the sense of energy intensely at work in the natural world by having the English also depend on a single use of the auxiliary verb, at the risk, I can see, of some initial difficulty for the reader. (Bowen's translation again settles for clarity:

> the green earth
> budded in the morning view,
> the river was in bloom,
> the air a joyous flight,
> and the sunshine
> set the clouds ablaze.)

The final stanza can be rendered fairly literally as: 'and I noticed / the eyes of the priest / as though unconsciously / putting his hand / on these gifts, / as if it were these / [that] were / the bread and the wine'. I found myself puzzling over whether it was the priest or his eyes that put his hand on the gifts, and allowed the translation to remain ambiguous. Bowen's rendering, when I read it, seemed to make this quite unambiguous:

> and I noticed
> the priest's eyes
> as it were unconsciously
> placing his hand
> on these gifts.

But for the moment, at least, I am staying with my own version: for one thing, 'the eyes of the priest' makes a better line, closer to the Welsh in emphasis and rhythm, and the ambiguity seems inherent in the original.

I tried in my first attempts simply to duplicate in English the last three lines. Bowen's *oedd,* 'were', achieves emphasis because of the way he uses the subjunctive in the previous line, but this construction would sound very awkward in English. Mirroring Bowen's final line was obviously desirable, but my earlier version 'as though these / were / the bread and wine' was flat, anti-climactic, partly because 'were' could not hold the single line. (Though this, I saw later, is how Bowen's own translation ends.) Breaking the line after 'though', using 'they' rather than 'these' as a single line, and then completing sentence and poem with the statement 'were the bread and wine' seemed to provide the ending needed for the translation to work *as* a poem.

Has the Welshless reader through this combination of translation and commentary experienced to a satisfactory degree the Welsh poem? 'Had an experience analogous to reading the Welsh poem?' would perhaps be more precise.

If the answer is at all affirmative, then I suggest one final step to complete this experiment. Do what is always desirable after discussing any poem: return informed by the commentary to experience the poem itself once more. Or rather, in this case, return to that shadow of 'Reredos', as poetically substantial as I could make it, which is the most one can hope to capture through translation.

Modern Welsh Poetry: Observations of an American Translator

*A lecture for the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in London, 18 January 1994, and published in their* Transactions *for that year.*

Ten years ago I revisited Strata Florida, with its yew tree marking the spot where Dafydd ap Gwilym is supposedly buried. Afterwards, I wrote this poem, addressing it to Dafydd:

> It was you enticed me into learning Welsh
> Twenty-five years ago,
> And in your brightly woven nets of lust and laughter
> Drew me after into Wales.
> What I have to show for this quarter-century
> Is a small shelf of books, an album of dear faces,
> And a second land whose grip will not let go.

I did not foresee that in another decade that grip would be stronger than ever, that my wife and I would be happily settled in Aberystwyth any more than I could have anticipated thirty-five years ago that happening upon Gwyn Williams' *Introduction to Welsh Poetry* in my college library and becoming entranced by Dafydd ap Gwilym's poems would lead to half a lifetime of translating Welsh literature. Certainly I never expected when I began learning Welsh in order to translate Dafydd that I would one day be invited to address this ancient and honourable society.

There is something rather absurd, though, about an American presuming to lecture to the Welsh on their own literature. At least there is in the case of this American. I have never managed, to my regret, to become Welsh-speaking, and despite the years of sporadic reading and translating, I am still finding my way around the literature, still very much a tourist. My published translations have come from a

still-continuing process of self-education a process, I must quickly add, generously encouraged and aided by the late Sir Thomas Parry and Professor Thomas Jones, by Professor D. J. Bowen who guided me through the *cywyddwyr* on my first summer in Wales, and in recent years by Professors R. Geraint Gruffydd and R. M. Jones. I am, in short, still a learner and as we all know, 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'. That same poet also had something to say about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread.

I am nonetheless venturing to comment on modern Welsh poetry in the hope that my peculiar outside/inside perspective may have some interest and value. If these observations turn out to stress what is obvious, it is often the case that the obvious is what needs to be stressed, that we need to be reminded of the things we take for granted. And it may be useful to have insiders' views confirmed by an outside observer.

I must add two further preliminary notes.

Firstly: 'Welsh poetry', for the purpose of this lecture, will refer only to poetry in the Welsh language. To what extent these observations may also hold true for modern Welsh poetry in English is something I must leave for your consideration, or for my own on another occasion. I suggest, though, that viewing either body of work from the other's vantage-point is something worth pursuing, and something not yet, as far as I know, fully attempted.

Secondly: I will be quoting poems by way of illustration only in my translations, including several made especially for this occasion. This is not at all to suggest that a translation can be more than a shadow of the original substance. Idris Bell, that pioneer translator of Welsh poetry, rightly said to this society back in 1941 that 'every poem is unique, an indivisible compound of matter and form, which can never be transferred to another language'. Translation must always be in great measure, as the Italian saying puts it, betrayal. But I would argue that translation can also be illumination, and not least to those who know the original work. In renderings of modern Welsh poems into English we may be enabled to see more clearly what they have in common with the English-language poetry of this century, and most importantly, how they differ in what ways modern Welsh poetry is distinctively Welsh.

One thing that is immediately apparent through translation is that a good many modern Welsh poems are *not* markedly different, in subjects and themes and even in techniques, from English and American or for that matter from Canadian and Australian poems. This is true, I believe, of much of R. Williams Parry's work in the first half of this century, as of Menna Elfyn's in recent years. What distinguishes these poems is that they are in Welsh and that, of course, is vital. Translation can never convey the effect of finding a common human experience freshly realized in one particular language, or the pleasure of discovering the possibilities of an imported verseform and naturalizing it for one's own language, as in the case of the sonnet in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and of course English during the Renaissance, and in Welsh during the first decades of the present century.

Readers whose only access to modern Welsh poetry is through translation are likely to experience some disappointment when encountering poems whose subjects, themes and techniques are already familiar, even when they recognize and enjoy the quality of an individual poem. What the literary tourist, like other tourists, is apt to be after is difference, novelty, the exotic. Encountering through translation a poem like Alun Llywelyn-Williams' 'Y Lleuad a'r Tu Hwnt' (The Moon and Beyond), a reflection on the first moon-landing, may evoke some such response as: 'Yes, this is obviously a fine poem but there's nothing *Welsh* about it.' It is something like encountering a McDonald's in Paris or, as I recall from my first visit to Wales, a Woolworths in Aberystwyth.

McDonald's and Woolworths have their uses, though, and not least for the tourist. The familiar can be a comfort, a refuge, from the demands of what is unquestionably 'foreign', and in the case of the literary tourist, from coming to terms with what is challengingly different, not easily accepted, in another literature. The first modern Welsh poet I read extensively and translated was T. H. Parry-Williams, and in looking back, I can see that it was not only the excellence of the poems that attracted me but his 'modernity', those things he has in common with modern poetry in general and with which I could feel at ease. For example, his poem on the Grand Canyon:

> Strange that I should set out on a trip of this kind,
> Thousands and thousands of tedious miles to the end,

Because of something shouting inside me somewhere
Without voice or cry, 'Grand Canyon: go there.'

And here I am then, heading for the spot where it happened,
The multicoloured, jagged, bloodless rent

In the earth's breast. I anticipate fear
Of the gaping marvel in the deep cleft there.
* * *
Not surprising, since here in the mute abyss
Are the pinnacled temples of the world's creeds,

A rocky, consecrated row before my sight,
Layer upon layer, their walls miles wide,

And their roofs stretching lustily, gracefully,
Towards the loftiness of the grave profundity.

(And the yellow muddy Colorado
Roars ceaselessly silently down below.)
* * *
I will wait to see the clear-cut rockiness
Become shrouded in night below the earth's surface,

And leave to others at dawn's reflection
The explosion of their mighty resurrection.

The ironic voice, expressing awareness of self-division and irrationality, the religious scepticism, the refusal to be taken in by natural grandeur, the colloquial speech in roughened rhythms these are all very characteristic of modern poetry. I could feel at home with this poem, even though I am one American who has never been to the Grand Canyon.

Conversational tone, colloquial diction, irregular rhythms, became commonplace features of style after Parry-Williams began to 'modernize' Welsh poetry with the publication of *Cerddi* in 1931. But the ironic stance, the sceptical perspective that wryly or defiantly or at times

wistfully finds any wholehearted conviction or commitment impossible, these 'modern' elements in Parry-Williams did *not* become characteristic of Welsh poetry, and this is likely to come as a surprise, and not necessarily a welcome one, to the outsider just beginning to explore it.

What is such an outsider to make, for instance, of a poem like Waldo Williams' 'Cymru a Chymraeg', which I have translated under the title 'Welsh Land, Welsh Language'?

> Here are the mountains. One language alone can lift them
> And set them in their freedom against a sky of song.
> Only one has penetrated the riches of their poverty
> Through the dream of ages, brief momentary visions.
> When the sun through the thin air etches the rocks,
> The sturdy above a drop, the sure on chance's playground,
> I do not know how they stand unless the bounds
> Of time have caught them in the eternal dance's round.
>
> Fit home for its interpreter! No matter what,
> We must claim the place without asking the price.
> She is danger's daughter. The wind whips her path,
> Her foot where they failed, where they fell, those of the lower air.
> Till now she has seen her way more clearly than prophets,
> She is as young as ever, as full of mischief.

I cannot think of any English-language poets of this century who sing so fervently and so well the praises of their country, let alone their language. Patriotism tends to be seen by writers elsewhere as suspect, as what Samuel Johnson called it two centuries ago, 'the last refuge of a scoundrel'. Welsh poets would surely acknowledge that it has sometimes been so in Wales as well, but that has not stopped them from writing celebratory poems. I wish some other term than 'patriotic' or 'nationalist' were available for discussing what is such a constant theme in Welsh poetry since the 1930s. 'Nationalism' in particular has acquired some very negative associations, especially of late, and I am tempted to try a coinage like 'matriatism' as more expressive of the Welsh variety, but 'nationalism' remains the most convenient term.

It is hardly necessary to explain to this audience why the idea of Wales has inspired and informed so many modern Welsh poems. Iwan Llwyd writes in a poem entitled 'Near Offa's Dyke, May 1984' that

The dyke has become one
with the landscape now;
it has been levelled to raise
streets and new estates,
and the boundary is merely
a sign in going by
welcoming the foreigner to Wales:

the ford is in us today
where the conflict and its challenge are constant

He ends by asking forgiveness for the anger of 'one who does not wish to be assimilated, / and who cannot close the rent'. There are plenty of angry poems in which the speaker does *not* ask forgiveness for attacking the English, or for attacking those fellow Welshmen who are happy to be assimilated and to help the process along.

It takes little effort for a non-Welsh reader to understand how the crisis of modern Wales, the threatened erosion of its identity as a country with its own history and culture incarnate in its own language, has made nationalist conviction and commitment not simply an option but a necessity for many of the Welsh people, and how their experience of this has naturally been expressed in poetry. It is less easy, perhaps, for the outsider to respond to this aesthetically. Putting aside those poems that are little more than sentimental wallows or strident rhetoric, there is still likely to be the feeling that even the best poems on this theme are insiders' poetry, that the non-Welsh reader is an eavesdropper if not an unwelcome intruder. (The male reader of feminist literature, or the white reader of black, is apt to have the same feeling.) One quite reasonable reaction would be to acknowledge that 'universality' is not, as has often been thought, an ultimate criterion for good literature, and to conclude that there are some experiences which in the absence of shared backgrounds do not 'translate'. But to my mind it is preferable to attempt an imaginative empathy by drawing on parallel experiences in the history of one's own country and discovering common ground, something that may come more easily to an American or someone from another post-colonial culture than to English readers. For myself, it was Saunders Lewis who supplied a basis for this empathy when he wrote: 'Civilization must be more than an abstraction. It must have a local habitation and a name. Here, its name is Wales.'

What may be hardest for the non-Welsh reader to respond to is not that the persons in these poems speak as nationalists rather than internationalists but that they speak 'politically', in the root meaning of the word: as members of a *polis,* citizens, individuals but not individualists. This is a point I will return to later.

The non-Welsh reader is likely to feel most an outsider, to feel indeed like an accomplice in absurdity, when reading a poem praising the Welsh language in English translation! I was certainly conscious of this when translating Waldo's poem and others. Still, some of these are splendid poems, and the theme is central to modern Welsh poetry: they cannot be ignored. Nor is it all that difficult for an outsider to respond appropriately to a poem like the one that ends Iwan Llwyd's recent collection *Dan Fy Ngwynt* (Under My Breath), though the use of *dyfalu,* the multiplying of comparisons, may be unfamiliar. It begins:

> While we live the Welsh language will be a hard bargain,
> a stubborn seam of the rock,
> a promise on a pillow, a lie between man and wife,
> an uneasy sleep, a drunken chorus at New Year's,
> a wall to keep a patch of land from the incoming tide

In a recent *Planet* article on English-language newspapers in Wales, and especially the *Western Mail,* Kevin Williams concluded depressingly that 'collectively, people in Yorkshire have a greater loyalty to that region than the people of Wales have to their country', and that 'the history of the press indicates that Wales is, perhaps at best a divided nation, at worst a dead nation whose broken bones can only be picked over'. Whatever truth there may be in these remarks, they help to put the nationalist poetry into perspective. It is a poetry concerned at least as much with the possibility of Wales as with its actuality, a poetry that will often simplify and idealize the past for the sake of creating a future, a poetry that (to the possible discomfort of the outsider) sometimes turns oratorical, hortatory, public rather than private, as a consequence of the poets seeing themselves as having a social function to imagine Wales as one means of healing divisions and clothing dead bones with living flesh. The nationalist poetry of modern Wales is grounded on an act of faith, and as the English poet Sydney Carter has said, 'faith must be prepared to trust the reality of its desire: to lean on something which, in time and place, may not be there not yet, at any rate'.

Faith in its more customary meaning, religious faith, and specifically Christian faith, has also been a notable aspect of Welsh poetry since the 1930s. The non-Welsh reader may find this easier to accept than Welsh nationalism, but I am not so sure. It is likely to come as a surprise, welcome or not. There have, to be sure, been Christian poets in the English language during this century in addition to the obvious examples of Eliot and Auden in their later work, we can note at present Elizabeth Jennings in England, Les Murray in Australia dedicating his poems 'to the greater glory of God', and, of course, R. S. Thomas in Wales. But English-language poetry has tended since the eighteenth century to be 'post-Christian', with Christian poets, especially in these concluding years of our own century, appearing as isolated phenomena. One frequently senses discomfort when literary critics and historians, for many of whom religion of any kind is no longer what William James called a 'live option', try to deal with them. Critics are usually more comfortable treating an English poet like Geoffrey Hill as, the editor of a recent American anthology says, 'a religious poet, but a poet of religious doubt, an agnostic confronting the extremes of human experience'. It is, I suspect, the strong element of religious doubt, the constant questioning, and the emphasis on the difficulty of believing, that has made R. S. Thomas's poetry so widely acceptable in recent years, rather than his splendid but less frequent poems of religious affirmation.

Alan Llwyd in a recent poem declared that 'only the coming of Christ / creates meaning in a world that exists without meaning'. One large section of his collected poems, published in 1990 and thematically organized, is entitled 'Cerddi Crefyddol' (Religious Poems), but Christian belief pervades the entire collection. Alan Llwyd in this respect is not at all exceptional among modern Welsh poets. Ever since Gwenallt and Saunders Lewis in the 1930s reacted against the poetry of their 'post-Christian' predecessors T. Gwynn Jones, R. Williams Parry, W. J. Gruffydd, T. H. Parry-Williams, themselves reacting against their nineteenth-century Methodist ancestors religion has had a prominent role in Welsh poetry. And this has most often been a poetry not of religious doubt but of conviction, usually expressing quite orthodox Christian beliefs. It is by no means a matter of every Welsh poet writing Christian poems, of course, but neither can primarily religious poets like Euros Bowen, John Fitzgerald, Donald Evans, Siôn Aled, be seen as isolated figures. One encounters explicitly Christian poems often enough in the work of others to see this as

remarkable only when compared to the experience of reading their English-language contemporaries. Sometimes, in poets like Gwyn Thomas, the occasional presence of a Christian poem suggests the implicit ground of their other poems. I doubt that an anthology like Alan Llwyd's *Nadolig y Beirdd* (The Poets' Christmas), in which most of the poets are from this century and more than half of them are still active, could be as readily selected from modern English or American poetry. And if a broader anthology, of the Welsh religious poetry of this century, should ever be compiled, it would make a very strong contrast to any similar English-language collection not least, I should think, in the number of poems in which the person speaks, implicitly if not explicitly, not just as an individual but as someone whose Christian faith is shared by the community.

As myself a Christian, I am wary of attempts to explain such a phenomenon in psychological or sociological terms. This usually tends to be simplistic, reductive. It does not seem merely coincidental, however, that Christian poetry and Welsh nationalist poetry have developed simultaneously, and often, as with Gwenallt and Saunders Lewis, Bobi Jones and Alan Llwyd, in the same poets. One can at least suggest some relationship between the belief that the existence of Wales matters, and that it is meaningful to live and write in the Welsh language, and what in theology has come to be called 'the scandal of particularity'. Christianity does have a universalist, internationalist dimension that can curb the dangers of nationalism by affirming with St Paul that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek [and therefore presumably neither English nor American nor Welsh] for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. Yet paradoxically the core belief of Christianity, that God became man in Jesus Christ at one moment in time and in one place, can also be seen to affirm the essential goodness, the meaningfulness, of particularity, of times and places, of peoples, of nature, and of history. I will further venture to suggest that this Christian tradition, as it affects even those who are not themselves believers, may account for the underlying conviction throughout modern Welsh poetry that human experience is in touch with a reality beyond the self, that there is a world that can be known, that there are *objects* to be observed and celebrated.

One section of Alan Llwyd's collected poems is devoted to 'Lleoedd' (Places), and an even larger section specifically to 'Llyn'. R. Gerallt

Jones, for whom Llyn is also a significant place, similarly grouped one-third of his collected poems, published in 1989, under the heading 'Lleoedd', and I should think most modern Welsh poets could do the same were they to arrange such collections thematically. Poems of place are by no means, of course, exclusive to the Welsh, but they do seem more central in modern Welsh poetry than elsewhere, and to be one manifestation of the way a modern Welsh poet tends to prize particularity. Many of these poems commemorate the poet's native region, often with sadness or anger, as in Gwenallt's famous poem of 'Rhydcymerau' where

> by now there is nothing there but trees,
> Their impudent roots sucking the ancient soil:
> Trees where a neighbourhood was,
> A forest where once there were farms

One can grow weary in reading modern Welsh poetry, I must confess, of elegies for deserted villages, and become surfeited with *hiraeth,* nostalgia, however understandable the frequency and however fine the individual poems. But Welsh poets have regularly carried this sense of the specialness of place beyond their native villages and regions, not only to other parts of Wales and Britain but to Ireland, to Spain, Greece, Israel, to Latin America, Africa, Australia, Canada, and even my own United States witness poems in the last few decades by Euros Bowen, Bobi Jones, Gareth Alban Davies, Gerallt Jones, Iwan Llwyd, among many others. However devoted they have been to their particular parishes, modern Welsh poets have seldom been merely parochial.

Gerallt Jones grouped another one-third of his collected poems under the heading 'Pobl', and poems about people have been at least as central as poems of place in modern Welsh poetry. It is not simply their frequency, though, that makes them characteristically Welsh. Consider, for example, Gerallt's poem on a beggar:

> And here he is, for instance, dragging his feet
> across highway and path in the same slow way,
> in hope of an eternal sleep on a heavenly hayrick
> some night full of the tenderness of stars.

He's had young days; he'd walk with a lad's energy
before contentment came with its claw to snatch away the past.
But it isn't fair to remember this; he's old;
he gets older every day.

Look at him now, a machine for singing folk songs
heavy with yearning, a shilling apiece. Oh, he has sown
his ripening wheat and left it on a meadow
for the wind to harvest.

And today he sings of returning to reap it.
Around him the children are mocking, and gaps
appear in the hedges, and autumn is coming, and he talks
as always of leaving the road.

But here he will be, and what shall we say to him?
Well, he has cast his mite into the store of those who hope;
he too is one of God's fools,
homeless here between the moon and the dust.

To my mind, it is much less the allusion to a well-known folk song that distinguishes the poem as Welsh than the way the speaker says 'we' rather than 'I' and sees the beggar as part of the community. Gerallt writes in another poem of four men with nothing in common who become a 'quartet' during a stay in hospital, where

they spoke the language and kept the faith
together. Now, they're confined again
to the separations of the world
They were a foursome for a month: they'd experienced
neighbourhood.
They're individuals now in the twentieth-century world.

*Cymdogaeth,* neighbourhood, neighbourliness: this seems to me a particularly striking feature of modern Welsh poetry. I noted earlier that the person in a modern Welsh poem is likely to speak as a fellow citizen, but he or she is even more likely to speak, implicitly if not explicitly, as a neighbour. Almost any volume by a modern Welsh poet tends to be abundantly populated. Alan Llwyd's collected poems can serve once more as representative, with one large section of 'Teyrngedau' (Tributes) and another of 'Marwnadau' (Elegies). Eulogy

and elegy are, of course, central to the Welsh poetic tradition, and they have featured largely in the poetry of other nations as well, but the frequency with which modern Welsh poets celebrate or mourn not only public figures but ordinary private persons is surely remarkable. The American sociologist Peter Berger has defined two kinds of society one 'in which people have transitory, superficial relations with each other, in which people cannot cast down deeper roots, in which most kinds of belonging (other than those within the immediate family) are precarious', and in contrast, a society 'in which people belong to each other profoundly and with the totality of their persons, in which life is rooted in community, in which human relations are not fragmented or transient'. Modern Welsh poetry is certainly not unaware of the first, but it is the second kind of society that is experienced not just as an ideal but as a reality, and by no means always a comfortable one, in most of the poems, and it is from within this reality that the person in a modern Welsh poem usually speaks.

'Neighbourhood' in modern Welsh poetry extends beyond people, to, adopting again the heading of one section of Alan Llwyd's collection, 'Birds, Animals, Creatures'. I seem to be tempted in this lecture to speculate on possible anthologies, and quite a large one could be made of modern Welsh poems on this theme, even larger if one included poems on flowers, the seasons, the natural world as a whole. My own collection would include Williams Parry's fox and Euros Bowen's eel, Isfoel's salmon and I. D. Hooson's red kestrel, Einir Jones' house martins, Pennar Davies' dung-beetle, and Gwyn Thomas' elephant, seagulls, horses, and hedgehog. My title, should I ever compile such an anthology, would be taken from Gwyn Thomas:

> This hedgehog:
> About nine every night
> 'His nibs' appears
> To have a look at his estate.
>
> In the beginning he'd come shambling
> On the swarming of his short feet,
> Would go hunched, warily,
> Across the back garden,
> Or cautiously, along the hedge,

Peering nosily past the stakes for peas
Or peeking out from beneath the hydrangea
Before scuttling to the next bush.

It would be very hard to describe
A hedgehog as at all 'jaunty',
But truly, by now, he's developing confidence.
And though he'll never ever cast off his anxiety
He ventures beneath the French windows
To get a look at us, or he'll stretch
His head, I'm sure, to see what's on television.
Then he'll scoot with his feet, stopping sometimes
To sniff like a busybody in going by.

'His estate', I say sarcastically,
Because here we are, burdened with a mortgage,
Making a brave attempt to persuade ourselves
That we own the place.
'Our estate.'

'Our estate!'
How we, the human race,
Play the lords of creation!
Will Hedgehog's claim to his estate
Is as good as ours.
Fellow-tenants, that's all,
Fellow-tenants in a transient world,
Fellow-tenants, us and him.

'Fellow-tenants' seems to me the perfect way of expressing what characterizes modern Welsh poetry's treatment of natural creatures. While poets sometimes make the experience an occasion for reflection, as with Gwyn Thomas, or deal with it as symbolic, what we find most often is not a sense of divine immanence or transcendence or of the natural world offering matter for allegory or analogical mirrors. Contemplation of the creature is most often the heart of the poem, a focus through close observation of the *thisness* of the creature, on delight and awe that it exists, that the creature is what it is and so, many poets will surprise the non-Welsh reader by finding celebratory description sufficient in itself to constitute the poem. This seems to me a thoroughly Christian response, though not often explicitly or

perhaps even consciously so: while they are by no means all, like Gwilym R. Jones' well-known poem, 'A Psalm to the Creatures', these poems rejoice in and praise creation. I suggest at least that it is this Christian tradition which has kept Welsh poets, non-believers as well as believers, from either making a religion of nature or finding it utterly alien. The 'otherness' of the natural world, however strange at times, is none the less the otherness of one's fellow creatures.

It is tempting to call this response, while acknowledging that it can be found elsewhere, peculiarly Celtic. It is present in Irish and Welsh poetry from their beginnings, and indeed in this respect modern Welsh poetry shows continuity with its past, especially with the medieval poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym and others. Such a continuity is apparent in many other respects as well, including those themes I have been noting as characteristic of the modern poetry. It was very fortunate, I think, that I had read and translated the medieval poetry before I came to the modern: I am not sure what I would otherwise have made of a good deal of twentieth-century Welsh poetry, so strongly is it linked to its ancestors. One effect of Welsh nationalism has been that Taliesin, Aneirin, the poems spoken by Llywarch Hen and Heledd, the Poets of the Princes and of the Nobility, *matter* to a modern Welsh poet in a vital way that Anglo-Saxon poetry or the work of Chaucer and his fourteenth-century contemporaries do not, probably cannot, to a modern English or American poet.

I have been using 'modern' throughout this lecture as a convenient adjective, a neutral term synonymous with 'twentieth-century'. But 'modern' has other strong associations, and taking all together those features I have been noting as characteristic, one may conclude that except for certain elements of style much of modern Welsh poetry is the antithesis of 'modern'. Or at least of what is called by literary historians 'modernist', insofar as this is characterized by historical and artistic discontinuity. 'At the heart of the modernist aesthetic', writes one American critic, 'lay the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or aesthetic, had either been destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies.' While one can see a tendency in this direction during the opening decades of this century, that has clearly not been the dominant aesthetic of modern Welsh poetry.

I cannot imagine a contemporary Welsh poet saying, as the American poet Charles Simic did when introducing the annual anthology of *The Best American Poetry* for 1992, that 'lyric poets perpetuate the oldest values on earth. They assert the individual's experience against that of the tribe.' Simic went on to assert that American poetry's main conviction is that

> everything in the world, profane or sacred, needs to be re-examined repeatedly in the light of one's own experience The American poet is a modern citizen, of a democracy who lacks any clear historical, religious, or philosophical foundation The problem of identity is ever present as is the nagging suspicion that one's existence lacks meaning.

Any similar attempt at defining 'the Welsh poet' would have to begin from the opposite pole.

It is not that Welsh poets are unread in other modern literatures far from it. Nor is it that Welsh poets have supposed that the forces in the modern world which have created the situation in which poets elsewhere find themselves are not also at work in Wales. Neither have they imagined that gaining enough autonomy to sustain Wales as a distinct cultural entity would fill once more the chapels and cure all social ills. Sooner or later, though, to judge by my own experience, the non-Welsh reader begins to feel that something is seriously lacking in this body of poetry, and to complain that Welsh poets should be 'more modern'. I would not be surprised to learn that Welsh readers have occasionally voiced the same complaint. Becoming 'more modern', however, would require Welsh poets to suffer the loss of traditions and convictions which most of them up to now have found it possible, whatever the difficulties, to develop and to sustain. It is ironic that such a loss, with the negative experiences it has compelled poets elsewhere to use as their basic material, can be seen as desirable, as something Welsh poets *should* undergo. Ironic, too, that the comparative absence of those negative experiences should be felt as a deficiency or a limitation in twentieth-century Welsh poetry. I will add, again on the basis of my own experience, that after reflecting on this initial reaction the non-Welsh reader may begin to see things in reverse, to become aware of things seriously lacking in the contemporary poetry in English, and perhaps come to think that poets in Welsh have remained closer to the experiences, to the view of the world, of most ordinary people in their daily lives than have poets in English.

I cannot see that Welsh poets have failed to re-examine, closely and often, their social, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic inheritance. While tradition may be said to carry more weight in Wales than elsewhere, no more than anywhere else is it now something one uncritically accepts if, indeed, it ever was. If labels are of any use, one cannot fairly label modern Welsh poetry 'pre-modernist', I was tempted when writing introductions to my translations of Gwyn Thomas and Bobi Jones to call them 'post-modernist', but that term has acquired quite different meanings from the one I intended. What seems clear to me is that Welsh poets in general have come through and gone beyond 'modernism' in their own way. Its view of the individual as isolated, alienated from history and society, compelled to find, in Robert Frost's words, 'a momentary stay against confusion' by constructing one's own meaning or by surrendering to absurdity as the only meaning for one's experience, this they have found at best narrow, stifling, incapable finally of sustaining life or art. The simplest way of putting it is that, in the experience of the modern Welsh poet, acts of faith are not only possible but necessary if one is to go on living and writing.

I said at the beginning that translation can illuminate what is characteristically Welsh in modern Welsh poems. I want to draw these observations together through a consideration of two more poems, one by the late Alun Llywelyn-Williams, the other by Bobi Jones, both decidedly modern in style but in themes distinctively Welsh.

When, early in my reading of modern Welsh poetry, I told a friend how much I was enjoying the work of Alun Llywelyn-Williams, he commented: 'That's because his poems aren't very Welsh they're closer to English poetry.' The remark is true enough: in 'Pont y Caniedydd' (The Songster's Bridge), for instance, Llywelyn-Williams speaks of

> our comfortable city, where the cathedral-cinemas
> sprout like contented weeds from lower-class houses;
> around the angry arteries
> that pour their endless flood past the empty chapel
> the petrol pumps glitter,
> and there, by night, when the stars are banished,
> the lonely faces rush fretfully here and there
> on their inexpressible quest.

And, very memorably, in 'A Trip to Llety'r Eos', he gives to the drive up a mountain in winter a symbolic dimension, as the car with its human cargo becomes a space capsule, a 'small guided world' travelling through the void, 'the purity of the calm pastures' cosmos' and 'the snow's suffocating muteness', to the warmth of a family reunion. What I find in Alun Llywelyn-Williams, though, for all his 'modernity', is a constant gravitation towards themes central to Welsh poetry. This found full expression in what became, significantly, the last poem in his final collection appropriately, a poem of place, 'Tynyfedw':

I once climbed through the heat on a summer afternoon
along the banks of the unpolluted, virginal stream
and I soaked my naked weariness in its white waters;
till I reached the top of the ridge's expanse
and then descended on the far side to the unfamiliar valley.

I walked the mountain pastures, young and bold,
without an heir, without a share in the land,
without a stake in the unknown's tomorrow,
and I came, late in the day,
to this farm:
and I greeted here an astonished company
who'd been toiling in the sun at haymaking all the long day.
Well, I was something of a vagabond,
and I was welcomed as a foreigner.

Late in the day?
Talk of the turns life takes
who'd have thought, after half a hundred harvests,
this strange house on the slope beneath the trees
would be a familiar home today
for two generations of my blood and my wandering family?

We, who've been exiles so long from the longsuffering land,
will we now repossess the future, late in the day,
in this most Welsh of regions,
and succour its language
in the lively speech
of the children of those who've come back from the town?

Bobi Jones's very recent poem on 'Racing Pigeons' is, typically, thoroughly modern in the unconventional and demanding way he

uses language. It weds modern with traditional by combining free verse with the strict sound-patternings of *cynghanedd,* something other Welsh poets since T. Gwynn Jones have also done. But this is impossible to capture in translation, and there is otherwise, as my translation will show, nothing obviously Welsh about the poem:

The tread of the train,
slowly
but inexorably,
was leading them screeching, and bearing them,
dilly-dally,
staring stupid, out of their syntax
heavy track's
click clack
and battened in baskets,
further and further into a horizontal
pit.
And they were evaporating
to the east,
disfranchised,
away through the frontier until their instincts'
sense of judgement was moaning, thundering
exile-wild
in their wings.
There
they were, layers of them, having lost (and they cried aloud)
the instinctual sap of their rootworld's talons.
Anguish was scratching in their claws
and spraining their feathers and compressing the fettered dread's
lead in their spurious flight.
They were tangled, were torn from station to station in coursing
outside the wit-craft of their belonging.
What miracles
could henceforth keep them from being bruised
deeper and deeper into the black orbit?

They were drawn there,
were drawn,
their grey
stains were stretched further, Oh! without fail, from their nets
of recognition.

Nary
one
knew the true toll of its loss
or why a tail was plucked from its lair.
In the orphan lightning of their ridiculous
remoteness from their cosy roosts
they were becoming bankrupt of memory
and to an extent there was secret reaching all through their ear roots
aloft the terror language of their longing.

And yet,
look, there's restraining:
here comes their untangling,
look, there's the terminus of all concealing;
and they can
be released,
dispersed, to seek
the faith now of the sunny roads
of the slant breeze
with its silver
pavements.
They sprinkle
their feebleness whirring high,
flip-flapping their tribulation in the home-patch of their twirling
ceaseless choiceless
aloft in circled tomorrows, they chalk
back now,
aiming
along them on the course of their lineage.
And ruled by their rapture,
leaping to magnets
and sailing back down sunshine,
from their need gladness they fashion
the pattern
of pigeon mania's syntax.
And the pigeon-coop claims its pigeons.

The poem has, to be sure, the close and delighted observation of the birds that I have noted as a Welsh characteristic, but this alone would not distinguish it as Welsh. Yet I find it hard to imagine a poem in English on this subject being written in just this way. What seems to

me distinctively Welsh is the key-word I have translated, with Bobi's approval, as 'syntax'. It is *cwlwm* in the original, the knot, the bond, the linkage, that rescues the birds from the terrifying experience of exile, disintegration, isolation, reunites them and brings them joyfully home. It would be heavy-handed to read the poem allegorically, but I do not think it excessive to claim that it is, tacitly, nationalist and Christian, a celebration of the need for community and of the mystery of Providence, a recognition and affirmation of divine grace.

This has been a simplified overview of a very complex body of literature. I have thought it most useful to focus on themes, but this has meant leaving fascinating and very Welsh poetic techniques untouched, the individual achievements of major poets unexamined, many good poets and fine poems unmentioned. I would have liked to take a look at modern Welsh love poems, which before the 1950s would have made a *very* slim anthology, and at the frequency in the last three decades of poems dealing with children. Welsh poets themselves, I am sure, would qualify and find numerous exceptions to any of my generalizations, and might well join other poets and critics in claiming with some justice that I have presented too narrow and negative a view of poetry in English. I have never felt very comfortable about generalizations, especially my own.

But as far as this American observer with his admittedly limited knowledge can see, we find in Bobi Jones' poem, as in Alun Llywelyn-Williams' and others I have presented through translation, what is most noteworthy about the Welsh poetry of our century. Here is a poetry at once modern and yet un-modern, and in ways that are thoroughly, distinctively Welsh.

The Empty Page

*For the 'Writer's Diary' column in* Llais Llyfrau/ Books in Wales *(Spring 1994).*

I've never kept a diary. I've always feared that a diary could become an end in itself and not, like the jottings in my notebook, raw material. Introspection is the basis for my kind of poetry, but introspection detached, objectified, *used,* in order to fashion the verbal artefact that is a poem. Keeping a diary would be for me, I suspect, a self-indulgent substitute for writing poems.

So an invitation to contribute to 'Writer's Diary' comes as a temptation to an egotistical wallow. Since I haven't resisted it, you are duly warned. I'm yielding partly because it should offer the chance to mention, not at all simply in passing, two books just published, but mostly because it gives me an excuse this morning for *not* trying to write a poem, something to do besides stare frustratedly at an empty page.

I've found myself doing that on all too many mornings these last four years, since I retired from college teaching in New York City and moved to Aberystwyth. 'To be a full-time writer', I announced rashly at the time, to anyone who cared to know and some who didn't. The problem with defining yourself as a full-time writer, I've discovered, is that you have to write. There's no longer the excuse of a course to prepare or papers to grade. I never hoped to Trollope my way through a set number of words every morning, but I hadn't expected to fail so often to fill an empty page with anything more than stillborn or aborted lines.

My notebook is chock-a-block with ideas for poems. Finding language for them is something else again. After an hour or so in which five versions of an opening line refuse to open anything, I begin to look longingly towards a book. After all, reading is part of a writer's

work too, isn't it? New collections by Gillian Clarke, Sheenagh Pugh, Tony Curtis, Tony Conran, these have been godsends this year, justifying quite a few mornings of not writing my own poems. But the book is just as apt to be a mystery novel begun the previous evening and how can I justify reading *that* instead of writing?

Thanks to my wife Gerrie, I seem to have found a way. It was Gerrie who had the idea for our novel *Death is a Pilgrim,* in which Geoffrey Chaucer solves the mystery of a murder on the way to Canterbury. She has the kind of storytelling imagination I lack, though at this point neither of us can remember who thought up what in working out motives and alibis. We had the advantage of a third 'co-author' since all the characters are Chaucer's, though we developed some of them in ways he'd find surprising not least, perhaps, in making two of his pilgrims Welsh! The actual writing was mine, an unexpected outcome of many happy terms teaching medieval literature, and for several blessed weeks, on every morning the words just flowed.

So on subsequent mornings I've had a plausible reason for putting the empty page aside and picking up a detective story. Research preparation for the next time Gerrie comes up with a plot. I can't persuade myself all that easily, though. A morning spent reading a mystery still means a guilt-ridden afternoon.

My most frequent refuge from failure to write a poem of my own is to translate someone else's. That's what led me into translating in the first place, taking a poem that already exists in another language and trying to bring it to a new life in English. And I've found over the years that this can be a stimulus for my own poetry. Most of what became 'translation projects' began this way, including last year's *Saunders Lewis: Selected Poems,* and in the last few months I've attempted recent poems by Bobi Jones and others, as well as worked sporadically on a projected anthology of Welsh poetry from 1600 to 1900. Not only poems translating Kate Roberts has led me to attempts at other Welsh short stories, and I've just added a translation of the late Gwenlyn Parry's last play, *Panto,* to a collection of his other plays for which I sought vainly to find a publisher some years ago, and will seek again.

But it's in writing my own poems that I find the most satisfaction, the special joy of completing a verbal contraption and, godlike, finding it good. There *are* mornings when a poem insists on being made, and there have been enough of them since I settled in Wales to complete a

new collection called *Here & There,* the first since my selected poems ten years ago. As the title indicates, places in both Wales and the US are central to the collection, with two complementary sequences, one based on a tour of Wales, the other on an experience of jury service in the Bronx. Rereading one's poems isn't always a delight, but even after three proof-readings I find the book satisfying and can hope it will please someone else almost as much as it still pleases me.

The frequent arrival of proofs in the morning post lately has been very welcome it's given me the most justifiable way of avoiding the empty page. I won't have that excuse for a while, though. The poems and the novel are out, and there's no other book at the printer's. But writing this has now filled several pages, and Gerrie is calling me for lunch, so that takes care of this morning. And maybe, just maybe, tomorrow I'll be able to write a poem.

The Welshness of the ELWAU

*For the conference on Welsh literature under the title 'Towards the Millennium' at Ty Llê in Swansea, 35 March 1995, as part of the UK Year of Literature, and published in* The New Welsh Review *(Summer, 1995).*

On my first morning in Wales, in June 1961, I set out to buy a newspaper (the *Western Mail,* of course), humming to myself the tune of 'Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn', which I had learned from a record of Welsh folk songs Meredydd Evans made in the United States. And as I was nearing the shop in Aberystwyth I passed a decidedly Welsh -looking man of my own age who was carrying the *Daily Telegraph* and whistling 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning' from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma.*

It was, in its small way, a hint, a warning. It didn't exactly prepare me for such things as Gwyn Thomas' poem in Welsh on the death of Elvis Presley, but it did suggest that I had better be wary of making assumptions about Wales. It was a sign, however trivial, of the internationalizing, the homogenizing, to a great extent the Americanizing, of culture that has continued to raise questions about the 'Welshness' of at least some English-Language Welsh Authors.

(Since 'Anglo-Welsh' has become a politically incorrect or at least disputable term and 'Welsh Writers in English' is acronymically unpronouncable, I suggested a while ago that ELWAU, pronounced as in Welsh, would be a brief and appropriate-sounding way of referring to these writers. I can't say that anyone else has seemed eager to adopt it, but I mean to use it anyway. And, as a further preliminary warning, I must note that my remarks will chiefly concern poetry, with some relevance, I hope, to contemporary Welsh fiction and drama. I promise, however, not to refer to English-Language Welsh Poets as ELWPS.)

I confess that after more than thirty years of fairly close involvement with Wales, I tend to respond like many of my Welsh friends

whenever this topic of 'Welshness' comes up 'Dear Lord, not *that* again!' But however tedious we may find it by now, the question refuses to go away. I have encountered it in the last few years in a review by Meic Stephens regretting that R. S. Thomas in his later poems has abandoned Welsh subjects and themes; in a cogent argument by Tony Conran for restoring the term 'Anglo-Welsh'; in a penetrating and provocative article by Bobi Jones on the actual or potential 'demise of the Anglo-Welsh'; in an editorial interview with Sheenagh Pugh for *Poetry Wales;* in the statement by Ian Bell as retiring editor of *Llyfrau/Books in Wales* that he had tried 'to locate Welsh writing in a more global, less parochial context', and his declaration that 'Welsh writers have got to feel empowered to write as who they are, where they are, on their own terms'. An anthology of 'Contemporary English-Language Poetry from Wales' was published last year in the United States with the title *The Urgency of Identity:* David Greenslade, reviewing it for the Welsh-American newspaper *Y Drych,* commented that 'some authors exhibit no urgency whatever, others have no discernible identity at all'. More surprisingly, perhaps, there was Elwyn Evans' comment in his recent monograph on the late Alun Llywelyn-Williams that the poet's lack of interest in *cynghanedd* made him less of a Welsh poet, that in this respect, at least, he was 'an Englishman writing in Welsh'. Birth, residence, and even language do not, it would seem, automatically guarantee the 'Welshness' of one's writing.

As a way of taking this matter further and giving it some specificity, I want to present for your consideration three poems, each by a different and for the moment unidentified author, all made in Wales fairly recently, and by no means randomly chosen:

BABY-SITTING

I am sitting in a strange room listening
For the wrong baby. I don't love
This baby. She is sleeping a snuffly
Roseate, bubbling sleep; she is fair;
She is a perfectly acceptable child.
I am afraid of her. If she wakes
She will hate me. She will shout
Her hot, midnight rage, her nose
Will stream disgustingly and the perfume
Of her breath will fail to enchant me.

To her I will represent absolute
Abandonment. For her it will be worse
Than for the lover cold in lonely
Sheets; worse than for the woman who waits
A moment to collect her dignity
Beside the bleached bone in the terminal ward.
As she rises sobbing from the monstrous land
Stretching for milk-familiar comforting,
She will find me and between us two
It will not come. It will not come.

## HERON MUSIC

There is air and water in it. The angularity
Of stiff legs slowly striding, wading slowly
Through the shallows. Stillness in it. The sinuosity
Of neck poised over ripples, waiting, waiting.

There is solitude in it. The singular concentration
Of eyes upon fish. Severity in it. Suddenness:
Neck a shaft, beak splitting the brook. There is
Economy in it. Precision. Satisfaction.

There is gravity in it. The stability, year after year,
Of the bracken-lined bowl of sticks in the tall tree.
Serenity in it, of wings weighing the wind
Ruffling feathers, whistling through trailing toes.

## SPRING ON ITS WAY

I walk the path, every morning, from the house
to the garage, to fetch the car at the usual time,
giving thanks to the providence that's created a machine
to lighten the vexations of the world and the flesh.

The golden dance of the daffodils today
was cheering the lawn with its early enchantment,

and a blackbird was singing its heart out
on a bare twig, to comfort our world.

And the sun pierced suddenly through the crest
of the dark bush, and chose one black leaf
at the heart of pale winter's shadows,
and turned it to a tremor of precious brightness.

What psalm shall I sing in the purr of the car?
Who will listen to me? There was joy for a while;
Never mind now that March's cold wind
is flustering the flowers, that the bush is dark and the bird silent.

All three poems, as I said, were made in Wales. But if I hadn't told you, how would you know? I presume that no one will suggest that the presence of daffodils in the third poem distinguishes it as Welsh though the month localizes it in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere, and ornithologists will have noted that the blackbird rules out North America. But otherwise all three share subjects, themes, and style with a great many other contemporary poems in English.

I could without much effort have found three poems of recent years chock-a-block with Welsh references, and not necessarily of the sort John Davies has mocked in his 'How to Write Anglo-Welsh Poetry' itself, of course, very much an 'Anglo-Welsh' poem (when did you last see satirical verse on how to write English or American poetry, or for that matter Scottish, Irish, Canadian, or Australian?), and one that raises in its own deft way this question of what identifies a work as Welsh. But the three poems I have quoted are certainly not untypical of contemporary poetry in Wales. Taken by themselves they may seem to validate the English poet and critic C. H. Sisson's pronouncement that 'a literature may, for historical reasons, bear the name of a national state But a literature is the literature of a language.'

Sisson goes on to say that 'the phenomenon of literary separatism is based on shifts of the centres of political power, and nothing else'. It is worth noting that in the essay from which I am quoting Sisson uses as his prime example the Latin literature of the Roman empire and that he is an Englishman writing about American poetry. That may account for what seems to this American a fairly casual dismissal of the relevance, the formative effects on literature, of history, geography, national communities, and politics. Surely the Latin authors he cites,

though coming from various parts of the empire, were primarily conscious of themselves as Roman citizens, and wrote accordingly. That is hardly the case with English-language writers in modern postcolonial cultures, and certainly not with American writers.

An English critic like Sisson may question whether there is such a thing as a distinctive American literature, but I cannot see that this has been a concern for American authors since, perhaps, William Carlos Williams' quarrels with Pound and Eliot, or that American writers any longer experience their culture as 'post-colonial'. We once did, of course, and Welsh concern about identity has sounded very familiar to my American ears. One of our standard college-text anthologies focuses on 'The Quest for an American Literary Identity' in its introduction, noting that 'in the first half of the nineteenth century, lobbying for the existence of an American literature in magazines seemed to take up more space than the literature itself'. The anthology includes Herman Melville's oratorical declaration of independence in his essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne:

> let America then prize and cherish her writers; yea, let her glorify them. They are not so many in number, as to exhaust her good-will. And while she has good kith and kin of her own, to take to her bosom, let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien. For believe it or not England, after all, is, in many things, an alien to us.

Melville added, importantly, that he did *not* mean 'that all American writers should studiously cleave to nationality in their writings'. And while one can find abundant examples in that anthology of what the editors call 'The New Americanness of American Literature', with writers 'accomplishing things yet unattempted in the English language' not only in the nineteenth century but throughout the twentieth, there are also a great many works, past and present, in which it seems impossible to find anything distinctively American. To readers and critics anywhere (with the exception of the C. H. Sissonses), American literature by now is simply what American authors write.

Put another way: American writers now have the luxury of taking their national identity for granted. The second poem I quoted, 'Heron Music', was, as I said, made in Wales, but by a minor American poet myself. I hope I need not apologize for making a point this way. If there is nothing distinctively Welsh about that poem, neither, as far as I can see, is there anything distinctively American about it, and I feel

no need to apologize for that. While for many years my poems have been influenced by the Welsh poets I have translated and by experiencing Wales itself, and I have in the last few years become a resident rather than a visitor, I am none the less an American poet who now lives in Wales. It came as a surprise to find myself described by the Welsh Academy when it sponsored a reading tour in 1984 as a poet who wrote about Wales rather than his native New York City, and to be asked at a writers' workshop if in doing so I were not betraying my own country. That experience made me realize how much I tended to take for granted the New York background in many of my poems and my American identity in general, and how strange this could seem to Welsh writers.

When the editor of *Poetry Wales,* Richard Poole, remarked that Sheenagh Pugh's poetry seemed 'to have nothing in it that is recognisably Welsh or Anglo-Welsh', and asked whether the question of nationality was of no personal significance to her as a poet, she replied: 'It is possible to *be* something without endlessly going on about it.' A firm and sensible answer, from my American viewpoint. But she immediately added, a bit defensively, I thought, that 'in all my books there have been poems set in, and concerned with, Wales'. She went on to call nationality 'an accident, like gender', and to stress the importance to her of finding in the literatures of 'other lands, other ages, other beliefs some universal thought or experience'. This triple-barrelled response from one of Wales' most assured and independent as well as accomplished poets suggests that while ELWAU may now aspire to take their Welshness for granted, they find it hard to do so.

And for good reasons, of course. History and politics *matter* in the development of a national literature, and so too does geography. Three thousand miles of ocean as well as two hundred years of independence enable American writers to be at ease with their national identity, however critical they may be of the nation itself. I will not speculate on how much the establishment of a Welsh *senedd,* if not full independence, might change things for Welsh writers, and I must acknowledge that the Welsh situation has up to now, literarily at least, been more often a source of creative tension than a burden. I should add, too, that for this American writer it has been a salutary reminder that taking one's national identity for granted can be a dangerous luxury something which can lead to abstraction from particularity, from the times and places and communities within which the individual life is lived and meaning is found and the literary work is

made. It was not an accident that after returning from Wales in 1984 I wrote a sequence of poems set explicitly in the Bronx.

Even if it is useful at times to attempt to treat a literary work anonymously, 'autonymously', context, implicit if not explicit, is essential for our full experience of it. Presenting those three poems without further identification has served to highlight what they have in common with many contemporary poems, their apparent lack of national identity, or, in more positive terms, their shared culture. But that is not the way we usually encounter a poem, nor should it be. All three poems can 'stand on their own', so to speak, i.e., within the general context of recent twentieth-century literature in English but if they do not *require* a more specific context, they gain from it, especially in this matter of national identity.

You may think I have gone too far, however, when I now tell you that one of the poems is, in fact, a translation from the Welsh information that would have provided an immediate context had you seen it in print. The poem I have entitled 'Spring on its Way' is, in the original, 'Gwanwyn fel y Daw', by Alun Llywelyn-Williams. I included the translation not only as a way of demonstrating that a good deal of writing in Welsh now shares a common culture to the extent that I will not say 'merely the language', there is nothing 'mere' about it the language *alone* gives it national identity, but to emphasize that this has made the issue of 'Welshness' a concern for Welsh-language authors too. For them as for ELWAU this can lead to a desire and sometimes a demand to find something exclusively, uniquely, Welsh in the work, as a clear mark of national identity. Elwyn Evans' declaration that Alun Llywelyn-Williams, in his indifference to *cynghanedd,* was 'an Englishman writing in Welsh' is evidence of this. In quoting that statement earlier, I omitted Evans' significant addition that this was what the poet also 'sometimes feared he might be'. One could argue that such a fear in itself attests to Alun Llywelyn-Williams' Welshness. He himself had this to say, in the annual BBC lecture for 1966: '[it] becomes more and more obvious every day that literature in Welsh is now only a kind of extension of English literature, or at least of the literature of other countries. We don't create our own patterns, or even adapt foreign patterns to our own purpose, but follow foreign fashions.' It is an uncomfortably negative view of the effects of international culture on Welsh-language writing, of what in Alun Llywelyn-Williams' own work had, as Elwyn Evans acknowledges, 'a revitalizing effect on Welsh poetry, one that is still with us'. That the tension about national identity

was, in any case, a creative one for Alun Llywelyn-Williams seems unquestionable, and publishing 'Spring on its Way' within the context of his other poems, as I hope to do in another year or so, will make his Welshness evident even in translation.

As for the other poem I quoted, 'Baby-Sitting', the author's body of work and public identity again leave no doubt that this is a Welsh writer. No tricks this time, except for having taken the poem out of the context of her other work. The poet is Gillian Clarke, and it would be hard to find anyone who better exemplifies Bobi Jones' delineation of 'Anglo-Welsh literature' as

> that particular literature in English which is a strenuous expression of the rich and distinctive identity of a colourful and lively society that was defined by a special psychological complexity, by an earthy locale, by customs and a foreign accent (not a dialect), and by a relationship (to the past itself and to Welsh-language culture) which has been shaped positively and negatively by centuries of a particular responsibility.

That is, not surprisingly, a thoughtful and complex definition, giving full weight to the role of history, geography, and politics in forming a body of national literature. That it is also, not surprisingly, a political statement is clear when 'Anglo-Welsh literature' so defined is then seen as threatened by 'English-language literature in Wales' and its ' "neutral" values, a "neutral" style, and "neutral" subjects'. I am bothered by that word 'neutral' for what I think is better and more positively thought of, as in my example of the three poems, as 'common ground', subjects, themes, and style that are expressive of shared human experiences. Bobi Jones makes it plain in his article that he wants no part of 'the formulas and superficialities of the more insubstantial Anglo-Welsh' or of 'claustrophobic restrictions', and I understand well enough his fear that 'English-language Welsh literature [may] yield to a comparatively colourless and "impartial" generality', that if this literature, by seeking to transcend nationality, loses immanence, ceases to prize particularity, it may gain the world but lose its own Welsh soul. Were I one of the ELWAU, that article in *Poetry Wales* would cause me to look long and hard at my situation.

But I find myself very uncomfortable with some of the implications and possible consequences of Bobi Jones' distinction between two bodies of Welsh writing in English. What percentage of Sheenagh Pugh's poems, for instance, or of anyone else's, must conform to that

definition before they qualify as authentically 'Anglo-Welsh'? I would hate to see any works of the ELWAU labelled 'un-Welsh' or 'un-Anglo-Welsh', just as I would hate to have my own poems called 'un-American'. As every author knows all too well, you write what you can, when you can, or must and often, for good reasons or bad, you simply cannot write what you wish you could, or what others or you yourself think you *should*. I want to be able to say that Welsh literature, in either language, is what Welsh authors write, accepting their self-definition as I expect them to accept mine.

But then I have to acknowledge that the continued existence of the United States is not threatened, that American writers are not seen by others or themselves as called to help the nation survive, and that Welsh writers in both languages must find ways of dealing literarily with a core experience quite foreign to most American writers today. As Henry James once said of his fellow Americans, being Welsh is a 'complex fate'.

I often have the experience in debatable matters of finding myself not so much sitting on the fence as standing firmly on both sides of it. So it is with Bob Jones' article, and perhaps throughout this lecture. It may be useful, though, to remember that the present is itself a historical moment. It was almost ten years ago that Tony Curtis, in an essay in *Wales: The Imagined Nation,* observed of developments in 'Anglo-Welsh' poetry during the previous quarter-century: 'It seems that more often the younger poets are less concerned with the task of defining and defending Wales in terms of a separate nation than the poets of the "second wave" in the 1960s.' If there has been an even greater decrease in this concern, and an increased movement among ELWAU towards what Bobi Jones calls 'simply writing English literature in Wales', this is a historical development, to a great extent a response, as far as I can see, to the excesses and apparent restrictions, the sometimes insistently explicit and exclusive Welshness, of the previous generation. It is a reaction akin to that of R. S. Thomas' hill-farmer complaining of

> the absurd label
> Of birth, of race hanging askew
> About my shoulders,

and saying of foreign visitors:

always there was their eyes' strong
Pressure on me: You are Welsh, they said;
Speak to us so.

It is a very natural reaction, and those who have so reacted are in this, I would argue, very much Welsh writers. Seen in historical context, their work is part of a specific literary and cultural history that distinguishes them from English-language writers in other countries who may deal with similar materials in similar style.

Bobi Jones closed his article by remarking of the present generation of ELWAU, 'the third flowering', that 'it's early yet'. I don't know about that. The writers he names are mostly in their forties and fifties, and likely to be set in their ways. Should we instead anticipate as we enter the next millennium another counter-movement a fourth wave or flowering by those now under thirty, under twenty, under ten, products of an education that informs them through both of the languages and the literatures, and equips them with the history and culture of both Wales and the world? Thesisantithesissynthesis will that turn out to have been the historical pattern of Welsh literature in English after another quarter-century?

Too optimistic, perhaps. But I suspect it is such a development rather than any degree of political independence in itself that would enable Welsh writers to be more at ease with their national identity. It will, if it happens, enable all of us to see their work in either language, however much common ground it may share with other literatures, as *Welsh* literature, as a manifestation of Saunders Lewis' dictum that 'Civilization must be more than an abstraction. It must have a local habitation and a name. Here, its name is Wales.'

Lightning and Lightning-bugs

*For the Welsh issue of* Modern Poetry in Translation *(Spring 1995).*

It sometimes seems to me that, like Tolstoy's happy families, translators, whether happy or unhappy, are all alike, at least whenever we are tempted into discussing our craft or all too sullen art. Whatever the languages we translate from and into, we tend to dwell like many of our reviewers on the obvious impossibility of rendering the totality of any verbal artefact, and especially a poem, into another tongue. We quote with melancholy relish Robert Frost's dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation, and sometimes offer an exhibition of our own inevitable failures.

But translating is for me one means of writing poetry, and poetry is what I hope readers will find in my translations. I must admit that Paul Valéry's despairing remark that a poem is never completed, merely abandoned, has been more often and more frustratingly true of my translations than of my original poems. 'The difference between the right word and the almost right word', my countryman Mark Twain once said, 'is the difference between lightning and the lightning-bug.' (Should you require a translation, 'lightning-bug' is American for a firefly.) The frustration is most acute at those moments when English, for all its marvellous flexibility and range, seems to have no words for what is exactly the right word in Welsh. My translations are, I know, chock-a-block with lightning-bugs straining to convince the reader for at least a moment that they are the genuine article. Once in a while, though, unless I'm fooling myself, there is actually lightning there.

I am going to be rash enough to claim that poetry is what you can find in one of my recent translations. This time, I'm convinced, I found the right words, and I want to discuss some particular instances of those words after you have read the whole poem-in-translation,

what I hope is the translation-as-poem. Here then is my version of Bobi Jones' 'C'lomennod Rasio' (Racing Pigeons):

The tread of the train,
slowly
but inexorably,
was leading them screeching, and bearing them,
dilly-dally,
staring stupid, out of their syntax
heavy track's
click clack
and battened in baskets,
further and further into a horizontal
pit.
And they were evaporating
to the east,
disfranchised,
away through the frontier until their instincts'
sense of judgement was moaning, thundering
exile-wild
in their wings.
There
they were, layers of them, having lost (and they cried aloud)
the instinctual sap of their rootworld's talons.
Anguish was scratching in their claws
and spraining their feathers and compressing the fettered dread's
lead in their spurious flight.
They were tangled, were torn from station to station in coursing
outside the wit-craft of their belonging.
What miracles
could henceforth keep them from being bruised
deeper and deeper into the black orbit?

They were drawn there,
were drawn,
their grey
stains were stretched further, Oh! without fail, from their nets
of recognition.
Nary
one
knew the true toll of its loss

or why a tail was plucked from its lair.
In the orphan lightning of their ridiculous
remoteness from their cosy roosts
they were becoming bankrupt of memory
and to an extent there was secret reaching all through their ear roots
aloft the terror language of their longing.

And yet,
look, there's restraining:
here comes their untangling,
look, there's the terminus of all concealing;
and they can
be released,
dispersed, to seek
the faith now of the sunny roads
of the slant breeze
with its silver
pavements.
They sprinkle
their feebleness whirring high,
flip-flapping their tribulation in the home-patch of their twirling
ceaseless choiceless
aloft in circled tomorrows, they chalk
back now,
aiming
along them on the course of their lineage.
And ruled by their rapture,
leaping to magnets
and sailing back down sunshine,
from their need gladness they fashion
the pattern
of pigeon mania's syntax.
And the pigeon-coop claims its pigeons.

I can't know, of course, what your reaction may be at this point. On the basis of my own first encounters with Bobi's poems, I venture to suggest a second reading before you go on. And maybe a third. The idiosyncratic style, with its density, boldness, exuberant amplification, and wide range of diction, takes some getting used to, and this, whatever the difficulties and risks, is what (with occasional prodding from Bobi) I have tried to re-create in English.

There are four words in particular I am certain are the right ones, authentic lightning, and I want to explain how I came to use them, in the context of the total poem and in relation to the Welsh original. If you haven't already responded to these as the right words, then I suppose an explanation is unlikely to persuade you. But they are, at first sight, odd words, and a look at each of them may throw some light on the translation process in general, on how translating can be a way of creating a poem, and on Bobi Jones' poetry as well.

In the first half of the poem, the pigeons are terrified to find themselves *allan o gallwaith eu perthyn,* which I've rendered as 'outside the wit-craft of their belonging'. I confess to having been delighted with myself when I hit upon 'wit-craft' as the way to translate *callwaith* (mutated to *gallwaith* by the preposition). The Welsh word is itself a coinage, compounding *call* (wise, sane, shrewd) with *gwaith* (work), and I suppose I was drawing on my long-ago study of Anglo-Saxon when I came up with 'wit-craft'. I originally typed this as 'witcraft', in keeping with the Welsh compound, only to have an editor or printer change it to 'witchcraft' when the translation was published in the magazine *Verse.* Serves me right, perhaps, for feeling so smug about it, but poem and readers deserve accuracy, and I'm resigned to hyphenating this and similar compounds from now on.

At the start of the poem the pigeons are described in my English as 'battened in baskets'. In Bobi Jones' Welsh they are *yn basgedig mewn basgedi:* the play on words is obvious, but despite appearances, this doesn't mean 'basketed in baskets' (though I suspect even native Welsh-speakers find that reading hovering on the fringes of consciousness). *Basgedig* is a mutation of *pasgedig* (fattened), and on seeing my earliest version Bobi may have supposed 'battened' was a typographical error, since he deleted the 'b' and wrote 'f' in the margin. Whatever he first thought, I persuaded him that 'battened' served the poem best. It not only is a synonym for 'fattened' and alliterates (alliteration being a constant element in the traditional Welsh harmonic system known as *cynghanedd,* which Bobi Jones combines with free verse in this particular poem), but it can also mean 'secured', 'fastened down', giving the English line a double meaning not identical with but equivalent to the play on words in Welsh.

'Wit-craft' and 'battened' were words that came fairly readily in my first stage of work on the poem. ' Disfranchised' did not, in part because, though the general meaning seemed clear, I had problems working out what Bobi was doing with the Welsh sentence. The

word is *difreiniau,* not a word I remembered encountering before, at least not as used in the poem:

Ac anweddent
i'r dwyrain
difreiniau
i ffwrdd drwy'r ffin

There's no trace of *difreiniau* in *Y Geiriadur Mawr,* for all that it boasts of being 'The Complete Welsh-English Dictionary', but the still incomplete equivalent to the *OED, Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru,* notes *difraint* and tells one simply to see *di+braint. Braint* is a noun meaning 'privilege, status', whose plural is *breiniau* the negative prefix *di*-mutates the *b* and creates an adjective meaning 'un-privileged, without status'. But in the poem the adjective is in the plural, and this, taken with the spatial positioning that parallels *difreiniau* with the verb *anweddent* and what seemed so strongly to be a reference to the condition of the pigeons, led me to persuade myself that despite the norms of Welsh grammar (more about this later) the adjective was being used as a noun, as the subject of the sentence, which literally translated would read something like 'un-privileged [ones] were evaporating to the east away through the border'.

Given this reading, I thought it essential to keep the emphasis achieved by what is sometimes called 'visual prosody', but within a reasonably normal English sentence, and so with the addition of two commas what I thought of as the Welsh adjective-as-noun became a participial phrase modifying a plural pronoun subject:

And they were evaporating
to the east,
stripped of privilege,
away through the border

'Stripped of privilege' because, given what is happening to those pigeons, something stronger than 'without' seemed necessary. Bobi had no objections to this, but I wasn't really satisfied and went back to dictionaries and thesaurus. And there, rather belatedly, I became aware of the verb *difreinio* (to disfranchise), which suggested the possibility of 'disfranchised'. A strong single word, and very much the right one, I decided, for a poem that sees racing pigeons through nationalist as well

as Calvinist eyes. (Changing 'border' to 'frontier' would then reinforce this, I thought, as well as add an alliterative link.)

Only in writing this article was I made to realize that I had committed a grammatical misreading. *Difreiniau* is an adjective modifying, in quite normal Welsh structure, the preceding noun *dwyrain,* 'east'. I am embarrassed by this error, and yet grateful for it. Perhaps it would be mere rationalizing to claim that I had caught the poetry by misreading the sentence. But in the poem the east is 'without privileges' not in itself but in terms of the disorientation of the pigeons, something the spatial positioning serves to stress and which Bobi confirmed, when I discussed the error with him, by commenting that the meaning of the phrase is something like 'the east where-they-lacked-privileges'. Had I not persuaded myself into that complicated and erroneous grammatical scenario, I suspect that I might without thinking very hard about it have simply attended to the adjectivenoun relationship and translated the lines as

to the unprivileged
east,

grammatically correct but poetically weak, and with spatial emphasis wrongly given to the noun rather than the adjective. And I doubt that I would have arrived at 'disfranchised'.

So 'disfranchised', with Bobi's blessing, stays where it is, as the right word in the right position poetically right, and more faithful in its fashion than literal accuracy would be. As for my initial error *felix culpa?* At least a suggestion that the providence which is said to safeguard fools, drunks, and the Congress of the United States may sometimes smile upon translators.

The key-word in Bobi Jones' poem, used at the beginning and the end, is *cwlwm.* It is because they are carried out of their *cwlwm* that the pigeons experience such panic at the start, as it is the pattern of their *cwlwm* that they form in returning to their pigeon-coop at the finish. Unlike *callwaith* and *difreiniau, cwlwm* is a quite ordinary word. But it has an extraordinary resonance within the poem, and it was this resonance, along with the need to use the identical word both times, that made it difficult to find the right word in English. *(Cwlwm* also, especially when followed by *c'lomennod* 'pigeons' actually sounds like pigeons, but I saw no way of echoing this!)

The simplest translation of *cwlwm* is 'knot', but within the context of the two lines and the total poem this didn't seem to express the meaning adequately, and it didn't *sound* right in either line. Another meaning, 'bond', was more fully expressive, but it too sounded very flat when I tried it within those lines. Since *cwlwm* can also refer to a bunch of flowers, a 'posy', I hesitantly ventured that at an early stage, and Bobi firmly and rightly rejected it. My work-sheets show that between us, during what Bobi has called 'diplomatic negotiations', we went through a considerable number of non-starters, including cluster, ties, tether, skein, matrix, entwinement, linkage, network, nexus. I was almost resigned to settling for 'bond' when the focus in some of those words on connectedness made me suddenly think of 'syntax' and get out the unabridged *OED*.

Lightning, or lightning-bug?. I wouldn't blame anyone for protesting that in Welsh 'syntax' is *cystrawen* and has nothing to do with *cwlwm,* or for objecting to the use of an English word in an uncommon and partially archaic way for an everyday Welsh word. (Though the American poet and translator Rolfe Humphries once said he considered this a perfectly acceptable way of dealing with such words when it was otherwise characteristic of the original author's style.) All I can say, if defence is needed, is that I think it *works* (and happily, Bobi agrees). 'Syntax' to my mind brings the necessary range of meaning and association into the lines and poem, with a special charge of energy, a pointing up of this as key-word, that is particularly important for the penultimate line. And it brings the right *sound,* in rhythm, alliteration, and assonance, to both lines (even though they still don't coo like pigeons!). It has certainly seemed to work on the several occasions that I've read the poem to an audience by now I can't imagine using any other word.

So, as far as I can judge, 'Racing Pigeons' in English, like 'C'lomennod Rasio' in Welsh, satisfies Coleridge's definition of poetry as 'the best words in the best order'. With, I suggest, one proviso. Reviewers will sometimes say, intending a compliment, that a particular translation reads as if it were not a translation at all. I'm far from sure that this should be the translator's goal, at least with poetry. Even when we are unfamiliar with the original text or language, awareness that we are reading a translation usually is, and should be, part of how we read and judge the work. Put another way: what I have written and you have read is not simply a poem in English about racing pigeons, it is also a poem in English about reading Bobi Jones'

Welsh poem about racing pigeons. Our response to a poem-in-translation, a translation-as-poem, is always somewhat different, I believe, from our response to other kinds of poetry. We may even be willing to allow for an occasional lightning-bug.

Gwenlyn Parry and the Poetry of Theatre

*An earlier and unpublished version of this essay was given as a paper in 1982 for the first conference of the Eastern States Celtic Association at Glasboro Community College in New Jersey. A Welsh translation of this revised version by the editor, Professor J. E. Caerwyn Williams, was published in* Ysgrifau Beirniadol *XXI (1996).*

Gwenlyn Parry (193291) was the foremost Welsh-language dramatist of his generation. While his most popular work was done for television, notably *Fo a Fe, Grand Slam,* and *Pobl y Cwm,* and he adapted his plays for that medium, it is the plays in their original form that constitute his most remarkable and lasting achievement. In writing for the stage he demonstrated a singular command of 'the poetry of theatre'.

I use that Aristotelian term because, when treating 'poetry' in the dramatic mode, the first theorist of drama did not place the primary emphasis on language. While Aristotle considered 'a command of metaphor' to be the greatest gift of a poet, 'the mark of genius', he stressed that the finding and construction of story ('myth') is 'the first and foremost thing in tragedy', the very essence of the dramatic imagination.

These are not really separable elements of drama. It is the invention and shaping of a story that is itself metaphoric this is the basis for Aristotle's claim that poetry is 'more philosophical than history, because it is concerned with the general at least as much as the particular'. The visual and kinetic imagining of the temporal and spatial enactment of the story, and the selection and ordering of words for the characters' experience of their story: it is the fusion of these into a single work of art that is 'the poetry of theatre'.

In contrast to what is usually thought of, rightly enough, as characteristic of Welsh playwrights in either language, a verbal richness that has sometimes been more hindrance than help in realizing fully theatrical drama, Gwenlyn Parry created his plays through visual images that are the theatrical centres of action, characterization, and meaning. In his first full-length play, *Saer Doliau* (Doll Doctor, 1966), a workshop with bench, old-fashioned telephone, an untidy scattering of bits of wood and carpenter's tools, and on the shelves dolls row after row of tattered or armless or headless or legless dolls: this is what first meets the eye, and this is where old Evans the doll-mender undergoes his ultimate experiences of change, and doubt, and death.

*Ty ar y Tywod* (A House Built on Sand, 1969) centres on the rickety house itself and the wax mannequin brought into it by the owner as the play begins. In *Y Ffin* (Borderline, 1975), the ramshackle hut which Williams and Now, a very odd couple indeed, fashion in the first act into the home neither has ever had is in the second act divided both literally and symbolically by the borderline of the title, which becomes the borderline between sanity and madness as well. In *Sal* (The Fasting Girl, 1980), the image of a bed containing a twelve-year-old girl remains at the centre of the stage throughout, as a Prosecutor and a Defender summon witnesses from an historical nineteenth-century event to testify concerning the claim that this girl miraculously lived for two years without food or drink. *Panto* (1987), Gwenlyn Parry's last play, displays simultaneous actions on a pantomime stage and in the leading actor's dressing-room: theatrical fiction and 'real life' crisis interact and eventually interchange.

And in *Y Tyr* (The Tower, 1978), on which I intend to focus in this essay, the central image and setting is a room in an octagonal tower, entered by an unseen stair below, with a prominent staircase spiralling up to the unseen room just above, a large window in the upstage wall, and a number of simple, large, movable wooden blocks.

*The Tower* is usually considered Gwenlyn Parry's finest work. It is certainly his most moving play, and the one most likely to appeal to a general audience. At the risk of belabouring the obvious I wish to explore in some detail its effectiveness as 'poetry of theatre'.

In his earlier plays Gwenlyn Parry depicted extraordinary, seemingly eccentric characters involved in unusual, frequently bizarre events. In *The Tower,* however, we are presented with two terrifyingly ordinary

people, a man and a woman, in three stages of their terrifyingly ordinary lives together. The characters are nonetheless not dramatized as a nebulous 'everyman' and 'everywoman'. Though we never learn their names, their highly colloquial speech and several topographical references give them a local habitation in north Wales. They have shared schooldays, and neither has gone to university; her mother died painfully of cancer, her father drives a lorry, and she becomes a nurse; he goes to work for an electrical manufacturing firm, fails in middle age to be promoted to the managerial level, and is forced into an embittered early retirement. Their only child, Gwyn, marries a woman from south Wales she considers pretentious and jealous; they have two grandchildren, a boy and a girl. They are, in short, like most of us both individual and typical.

What we become aware of as the play progresses, however, is not simply the typicality but the poverty of their lives. What holds true for many lives in our time is made particularly striking in this play by its Welshness. In bleak contrast to what is most strongly associated with Welsh life into the present day, these characters have no rootedness no sense of the past as treasure or burden, no community to sustain or challenge them with a rich fellowship of family and neighbours, no shared religious faith or philosophy to give meaning to their lives, no tradition of music and poetry to give imaginative vitality to their existence and their language. The only meaningful thing they experience, essentially the only reality they know, is their personal relationship, often more bitter than sweet, and it is the reality of that relationship, through their changes from adolescence until death, which Gwenlyn Parry brilliantly isolates and articulates by presenting us with these two people alone at particular moments within the tower that is the visible, the *theatrical* image of the temporal life they share.

Gwenlyn Parry's use of this symbolic setting takes great risks in a poor production it could seem both externally imposed and pretentious. But allowed to function as the playwright imagined it, it is as simply and immediately effective in the theatre as his use of the archetypal metaphor of the seasons summer, autumn, and winter for the three acts that are the three stages in his characters' lives. Neither character experiences these seasons as metaphorical the season for them is just the time of year during which the events are taking place. And so too the tower room of each act, and especially the spiral staircase that leads promisingly or threateningly to the next phase of their lives, is literally there, a physical incarnation of their experience of living together.

Perhaps the finest thing about the play, and something that demanded the greatest restraint in the playwright, is Gwenlyn Parry's insistence on portraying his characters realistically in situations and speech, on giving us people whose 'unpoetic', unimaginative dialogue can never fully articulate for themselves what the author's poetry of theatre illuminates for us. For long stretches of each act, it is important to note, we are hardly conscious of the tower and its staircase, as the couple experiences their first sexual intimacy and later an unwanted pregnancy in Act I, a bitter bedroom quarrel after a hard-drinking night with his boss and the husband's later discovery of his wife's infidelity with that boss in Act II, the onset of terminal illness in Act III. Within each of these acts the bareness of the stage (with the use of the upstage window as occasionally a screen on which film sequences representing thoughts or memories are shown) allows smooth transitions in time, several 'scenes' within each act that is one period of their lives, without the massive set-changes that would be necessary in the traditional realistic play. What we are primarily aware of through most of each act is the immediacy and particularity of these experiences for these two people. The tower room and the staircase, meanwhile, in their constant presence, provide the central image from which and to which action flows, a physical rather than verbal realization of choices, crises, and changes.

Act I begins, after a brief film sequence showing two children playing on the seashore and in the waves, with the teenage girl's offstage laughter as she ascends to this stage of the tower, her appearance in a light summer frock, her exclamation 'Dwi yma!' (I'm here) as she looks delightedly around the room. This first scene depicts charmingly and comically the girl's eagerness to grow up, her joy in reaching womanhood, her readiness to take risks, in contrast to the boy's uncertainty and timidity. In the second 'scene' of this act, a brief reference to the tower and its stair is threaded easily through the first moment of sexual intimacy as their initial attitudes towards this phase of life are reversed. The stair is again used to give immediacy and vividness to the demands of adult responsibility in the later half of the act, during a moment of carefree chasing by boy of girl around the room, so that tower and stair provide a powerful and poignant realization of their choice of each other, marriage, and the unknowable future as they climb upwards and the first act closes.

It would have been all too easy for Gwenlyn Parry to overwork this central image. When I first read the script, I was fearful that with two

more acts to go, it would lose its initial impact and become tiresomely repetitious. It does not in part because instead of using a number of short 'scenes' as in Act I, the playwright takes us in the second act directly into the couple's later middle age for only one long and one short 'scene', and in the former makes particularly effective use of long stretches of literal action and dialogue for the quarrel that reveals the wife's bitter disenchantment and the husband's weariness and pathetic self-deception about his chances for promotion, a quarrel interrupted by moments of reminiscence about schooldays and their son's childhood. There are only a few very brief references to tower and stair through the early part of this long 'scene' but what it leads to is the stunning moment of the husband's crisis and collapse on the stair, quite different from anything in the first act. The final moment of the second act, in which, after we discover that his seemingly baseless accusations of her infidelity during his forced retirement are true after all, he begins to climb the stair despite her pleading, contrasts with both his earlier failure to climb it and the relationship between the couple as they climbed to end Act I.

In the third act Gwenlyn Parry again keeps tower and stair a continuously fresh means of embodying his characters' central experience from the very beginning of the act, as the now elderly man tries to comprehend the fact that there is, at this seemingly ultimate level of the tower, yet another staircase. This act is again very different from the first two, with much sometimes comic and all too typical bickering by the old couple and the old man's failures or distortions of memory. The playwright's chief use of his central image, apart from the very end of the play, comes at about the mid-point of this act, and I find it his most startling and poignant moment, as the old man tries to distract his wife from her sudden first realization and fear of death by trimming the staircase for Christmas, collapses on the stairs during a distorted retelling of his relationship with his boss that breaks the merriment of lavish decorating, and slowly descends with his wife's help to take to his bed for what will be the short remainder of his life.

All of Gwenlyn Parry's plays have endings that continue to create controversy over their ambiguity or their aesthetic success (of their immediate theatrical impact there is no doubt), and *The Tower* is no exception. It closes by presenting us with a final use of tower and staircase for an 'event', the transfiguration of the dead old man into the adolescent boy with whom the play began, something I find consistent with the 'psychomyth' that is the essence of the drama. This action

renders what is at least the woman's experience of reality, but it may also express the man's final experience of a reality that exists beyond the temporal life if we choose to see it so.

By attending in this way to the visual aspect of Gwenlyn Parry's poetry of theatre, I have necessarily but perhaps misleadingly been ignoring and appearing to undervalue his handling of language, his integrating firmly with his visual images larger and smaller verbal rhythms that are simultaneously character-revealing actions. The plot in which, as Saunders Lewis wrote in his introduction to the published script, 'nothing happens except life and its pain' is continuously unified, illuminated, and enriched by the iteration of particular references, phrases, and words, stylistically commonplace and realistically plausible, 'prosaic' within their specific contexts in the dialogue, but acquiring a haunting resonance as they recur throughout the play.

In Act I, for example, there is the sound of a train in the distance immediately after the girl's first sexual intimacy with the young man, and she exclaims 'Trên!' very softly and happily. In Act II, after the bitterness of their quarrelling has given way to a middle-aged reminiscence of a time in youth when he carried her up Snowdon on his shoulders, a very sexual memory of her thighs squeezing his neck, again there is the sound-effect and again she says 'Trên!', this time with fear and sadness, and asks him to 'Gwasga fi gwasga fi'n dynn' (Squeeze me squeeze me tight), simple words and actions that had previously occurred during a joyful moment very early in the first act. The final moment of the play thus acquires extraordinary significance and emotional force when the sound is heard for the third time and the old woman smiles and says 'Trên!'

There are many other uses of this iterative technique. It gives a special surprise and pathos to the final act when at one moment the old man confuses memories of taking their grandchildren for an outing with both the young couple's visit to Ben Foel in Act I and an outing to Coed Parciau with their son Gwyn which his wife had recalled in Act II. And there is a strange combination of the sad, the comic, and the terrible when late in Act II, after a shared tender moment of reflecting on their having remained together for a lifetime, he begins to boast of having had sexual opportunities with other women and confusedly blends his memory of a young woman about whom the girl had been jealous in Act I with the middle-aged wife he had

convicted of adultery in Act II, and who now in old age listens compassionately to his ravings.

It is, finally, with a deft orchestration of the simplest and most colloquial of prose phrases that Gwenlyn Parry expresses 'poetically' the essence of his play. In the middle of the second act, as the husband is lost in unlistening while he works late at his papers, the wife remembers their son as a little boy and recalls, in the vulgar language both often use, the outing during which he fell 'ar 'i ben i'r cachu gwarthog hwnnw' (head-first into that cowshit): 'mynd a fo adra a roid o'n syth yn y bath yn 'i ddillad Rarglwydd o'dd golwg arno fo' (We took him home and put him right in the bath in his clothes Lord, the way he looked). And she pauses, smiles, and then the smile fades as she says: 'Mi a'th y cyfan mor sydyn croesi cae Dringo grisia 'Dio ddim yn dy ddychryn di weithia?' (It's all gone so quickly crossing a field Climbing a stair Doesn't it frighten you sometimes?). In the middle of Act III, after he gives his promise not to lie to her if she becomes terminally ill (in itself another recurring theme that begins with her recollection in Act I of her mother's dying), the old woman says: 'Y cyfan wedi mynd mor sydyn ' (It's all gone so quickly), and the old man responds with 'illthro trw fysadd rhywun ' (slipping through one's fingers). And just before the final moment of the play, after she has given her husband the injection to secure for him a peaceful death, the old woman sits holding the syringe in her hands, gazes pensively in front of her, and says: 'Croesi cae dringo grisia y cwbwl mor sydyn llithro rhwng bysedd rhywun a'r cwbwl er mwyn hyn?' (Crossing a field climbing a stair all of it so quick slipping through one's fingers and all for this?).

That particular motif is counterpointed with another that begins very, very casually in Act I, when the boy says of the room of young adulthood to which he has now become accustomed: 'Ma'n bosib i ni gael beth uffar o hwyl yn fama sti' (We could have a damn good time here you know). In the second act, after the sound of the train has caused his wife to think of the sadness of departures and goodbyes, the middle-aged husband begins to reminisce about their school trip to London as children, saying: 'desu, guthun ni hwyl radag honno' (lord, we had a good time that time). In the last act, immediately after the words 'llithro trw fysadd rhywun' are spoken by the old man in the context noted above, there is this dialogue, drawing on the central image of tower and stair to lead into the recurrent phrase:

| | |
|---|---|
| HEN WRAIG: | Ni oeddan nhw, 'te? |
| HEN WR: | Be? |
| HEN WRAIG: | Ddoth i mewn i 'stafell isa 'na un diwrnod poeth o ha? |
| HEN WR: *(Yn gwenu)* | Ni oeddan nhw |
| HEN WRAIG: *(Yn gwenu)* | Gawson ni hwyl. |
| HEN WR: | Uffernol o hwyl. |
| (OLD WOMAN: | They were us, weren't they? |
| OLD MAN: | What? |
| OLD WOMAN: | Who came into that lowest room one hot summer day? |
| OLD MAN: *(Smiling)* | They were us |
| OLD WOMAN: *(Smiling)* | We had a good time. |
| OLD MAN: | A damn good time.) |

And near the end of the play, comforting the old man when he accuses himself of having done nothing with his life, of being 'blydi methiant' (a bloody failure), the old woman says: 'A taswn i'n cael cychwyn eto reit yn gwaelod 'na newidwn i run chwinciad' (If I could start over right there at the bottom I wouldn't change one wink). After she assures him that she really means it, he says: "Dan ni wedi cael hwyl' (We've had a good time) and she answers 'Cythral o hwyl' (A damn good time). The expression 'cael hwyl' (to have fun, to have a good time) is ordinary and colloquial, but in its recurrent usage it becomes complex, expressive simultaneously and paradoxically of the verbal, imaginative, and cultural poverty I noted earlier, and yet of a deep experience of loving that is the richest thing these characters have and the closest thing they have known to a religious experience.

'Dwi yma!' (I'm here!) the girl says as the play opens. "Dan ni yma' (We're here) the old woman says during this moment of comforting her despairing husband: "dan ni yma tydan yma yn y stafell ddwytha hefo'n gilydd' (we're here, aren't we here in this last room together). 'Hefo'n gilydd' is the most repeated phrase in the play. The old man, drying his tears, echoes her: "Dan ni yma' (We're here). 'Dyna sy'n cyfri' (That's what counts), she says, pauses, and then goes on: 'Faint fedar hawlia hynna ? Dwad wrtha i ' (How many can claim that ? Tell me ). "Sdim byd arall yn cyfri'

(There's nothing else that counts), he answers, and in his last lucid moment, as she is about to give him the injection, he says simply: 'Dyma'r unig beth oedd yn cyfri, sti' (This is the only thing that counted, you know). Gwenlyn Parry's artistry is such that at that moment, for all I have said of the characters inarticulateness and ordinariness, one feels that perhaps they are as articulate as they need be, and not so very ordinary after all.

In all his plays, and most notably in *The Tower,* Gwenlyn Parry found ways to accept what seems to be the necessity of 'realism' in our time and then go beyond it, transforming its restrictive, prosaic ordinariness by means of his poetry of theatre. He was understandably reluctant to analyse or explain his work he did not find it appropriate, he said, for a dramatist so to 'condition the minds' of his audience. In a brief foreword to his second full-length play, he stated what continued to be his practice:

> to use every possible device, within the limits of the situation on the stage, to communicate with the audience, hoping to link my theatrical experiences with their personal experiences and to do so at that moment in the theatre I have much more interest in appealing to their imagination and their feelings than to their intellect. After all, it is not the intellect that rules and governs the life of an individual but his hopes, his anxieties, his yearnings, his guilt, and, perhaps more than anything, his uncertainty.

One can sum up the basic experiences Gwenlyn Parry used his poetry of theatre to express, and the point at which the plays will continue to touch audiences, in the observation by the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel that 'we live on the fringe of reality'.

The Value of Translation

*An essay developed from preparatory reflections for a panel discussion during the conference on 'The Value of Bilingualism / The Value of Translation' at Jesus College, Oxford, 31 May 1997, sponsored by the college and the magazine* tu chwith. *An earlier version, translated by the editors into Welsh, was published in the Winter 1997 issue of* tu chwith *under the title 'I Bwy ac I Be?', this revised version in* Planet *(MarchApril 1998).*

When I was invited to participate in a discussion of 'The Value of Translation', my first thought was: 'That's obvious. So obvious that there's really no point in discussing it.' On further reflection, though, it became clear that whatever may be true of other languages and literatures, the context of contemporary Wales creates for the enterprise of translating Welsh literature, at least of translating it into English, a considerable degree of complexity.

I will take for granted the financial benefits of translation for author and translator, though very few are likely to get rich from the translation of Welsh literature. I take for granted as well the value of 'fame', in whatever measure, for the translator as well as the original author. For both, however, there are other values worth examining before taking a wider look at the value of translation for Wales and for non-Welsh readers.

Translation for me has been basically a selfish activity, in that I have usually translated as one means of writing poems rather than for any altruistic motive. I have dealt elsewhere in some detail with what I have gained from the experience of translating Welsh poetry, not simply in the influence of styles and verse-forms but in the opening up of subject matter and themes. If one follows the Scottish poet-translator Edwin Morgan's general principle of 'being a good servant

to the foreign poet, rather than thanking him very much and then going on to write a new poem of one's own', translation requires empathy, and it is healthy for a writer, especially for a poet, to get outside oneself by attempting to re-create in English the often quite different person in a Welsh poem, or the characters in a Welsh novel, short story, or play. In my own case, I have found a vicarious satisfaction in occasionally translating outside my usual genre of poetry, and it has had unanticipated consequences: after translating Gwenlyn Parry's *Y Tyr* I wrote a short play, and translating Kate Roberts has led me to write a number of short stories. It is worth noting, finally, that there are some writers in the case of poets, I can think of the Americans Horace Gregory, Robert Fitzgerald, Rolfe Humphries who have best realized their literary gifts through translating rather than in their original works, though they might have been understandably reluctant to acknowledge this.

It came as a surprise a few years ago when Bobi Jones remarked that reading his poems in my translations had enabled him to see them freshly and led him to make some revisions revisions that did *not* make the poems any easier to translate. I leave it for other translatees to say whether they too have found such a value in being translated, but note that they may also find some dangers. For the writer who wishes to be translated or who knows for certain that the work will be translated, there may be the temptation of writing to *be* translated, of turning what should be an end in itself into a means, and so not making full use of the resources of one's own language. This would be a particular danger for poets, but I think it could also be one for others, not only for novelists and playwrights but even for the writer of expository prose.

The danger would be greatest, I believe, when the writer is also the translator, but there are other reasons for questioning the value of self-translation, an activity their bilingualism seems to have tempted more Welsh writers, and especially poets, to try in recent years. The American poet, critic, and translator Stanley Burnshaw observed in *The Seamless Web* (1970) that 'regardless of the virtues it may possess as a poem, an English translation is always a different thing: it is an English poem'. While Wales has writers who excel in both Welsh and English, I doubt that one can serve both languages equally well when it comes to self-translation. I have seldom seen a Welsh poet's version

of his or her work in English, when this was intended to be more than a literal translation for a bilingual edition, so firmly rooted in the second language that it becomes a satisfactory rendering of the original work. To a lesser extent, but not infrequently, I have also found this true of self-translation in other genres. The problem most often results from the writer's understandable wish to render the original as closely as possible, too closely for the work to read comfortably in English. And contrariwise, when a self-translation works well in English, I usually find that the author has taken liberties I never feel entitled to take as a translator.

R. Gerallt Jones, himself an accomplished translator from as well as into Welsh, commented candidly on this in providing what he confessed were in some cases 'versions' of his work, 'another poem, similar but different', rather than 'true translation', for the Welsh issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Spring 1995).

> I find that there is a constant temptation, when rendering one's own work into another language, to refashion or rephrase what, as Eliot said, was not well phrased in the first place, if only because one is naturally reluctant to spend time making the same poem in the same way twice. Someone else at least comes to the task with a degree of objectivity, and bases the work of translation on a text rather than on a text plus a remembered experience.

Authors have every right, of course, to rewrite their works in another language. But, as Gerallt Jones observes, 'if a translation is to be any kind of representation of another poetic experience rather than something entirely new, then it must relate reasonably closely to the form and nature of the original; it cannot simply use the original as a springboard for another poem'. Where extensive changes take place, it would be better simply to publish it as a work in English rather than call it a translation.

My son Thomas, a lecturer in Celtic at Glasgow University, recently offered what may, in the light of all this, be the strongest argument against self-translation. In reading another's translation, he suggested, one views it and responds to it *as* a translation, but with a self-translation, this essential distinction is lost, so that the reader sees it and responds to it as if it were the original work. Even in the best cases, this produces a simplistic response to the work; in other cases, it may well have an unfortunate result. I found myself doubtful, for

instance, about the Scottish poet Sorley Maclean's high reputation when I first read his self-translations, and even now it takes an effort to remind myself that what generally reads as fairly unsatisfactory poetry in English is presumably the genuine article in Gaelic.

The value of translation for the translatee is greatest, I suggest, when someone else does the translating.

When I began translating Welsh literature forty years ago, I thought of myself as doing this (apart from the selfish motives already mentioned) primarily for American readers, secondarily for English-language readers elsewhere. I had not realized that most of my English-language readers would be in Wales. This is, I suppose, the greatest difference between translating Welsh and translating other literatures into English that one value of translation is that it enables Welshless Welsh readers to discover their own literature, and, one can hope, encourages them to acquire the language in which to read the originals.

This is surely the most important reason for translating Welsh literature into English. It is one way of strengthening national identity and status within Wales itself. It is also, of course, a way of asserting that identity and achieving status internationally. As an American I know very well how little awareness of Wales, let alone of Welsh literature, exists even among the intellectual elite of my native land. Whatever value there might be for the other countries, it would certainly be good for Wales' sense of itself to have its literature much more widely known.

The Arts Council of Wales has recently initiated a programme of grants to publishers 'for financial support towards the cost of commissioning the translation of literary works by Welsh writers', noting that this is primarily for fiction and poetry, that 'the original language of the work may be either Welsh or English', and that 'any language used as a medium of publication outside Wales (including English)' is eligible. Leaving aside the other languages, it would do a great deal to increase others' awareness and knowledge of Wales if even some half a dozen books a year, representing the whole range of writing in Welsh, could be translated into English provided the translation appears within a year or two of the original publication. Timing matters: if a work is not translated until a decade or more has passed, it is likely to be regarded as dated. This has been the case, I believe, with some twentieth-century Welsh poetry, fiction, and plays,

works that have a considerable reputation in the language but reached non-Welsh readers too late to be responded to as contemporary, too early to have acquired the historical distance we take into account when responding to past literary achievements.

I do not know what criteria the Arts Council will use in approving grants, but I suspect they may be taking it for granted (as I have tended to do) that what should be translated is Literature the best poems, novels, short stories, plays. What, though, of what I suppose we must call 'popular literature', especially fiction? G. K. Chesterton once observed that 'Literature is a luxury, fiction is a necessity'. Such English novels as thrillers by Dick Francis and mysteries by P. D. James are regularly published in Welsh, and for good reason to sustain the language by giving Welsh-speakers a wide range of reading matter. Similar Welsh novels, however, like the detective stories of Elgan Philip Davies, have not usually been translated into English. Should they be? Would there be any value in doing this?

One argument for the regular and timely translation of well-written popular fiction which would not apply to such work in most other European languages is that this could, by establishing not only that Wales exists as a country in its own right but that there is a vigorous literature at all levels in the Welsh language, make it easier to find a welcome by non-Welsh publishers and readers for translations of major works and authors. It might also be well to remember that, explain it how we will, some popular fiction, such as novels by John Buchan, Ngaio Marsh, Elizabeth Goudge, and P. G. Wodehouse, can outlive most of their 'literary' as well as 'popular' contemporaries and that Jane Austen and Charles Dickens were once considered authors of popular fiction rather than literature.

Translation of its literature can have, then, considerable value for Wales. What value does it have, though, for other countries and cultures? Most evidently, the primary value of any literary work, the pleasure and insight readers can gain, whether it is from a good detective story or a good poem. But is there some value in addition to this for the non-Welsh reader, particularly in the case of translations into English? What the English journalist Trevor Fishlock wrote some years ago in his *Talking of Wales* I have found especially true of its literature, that as the product of a nation with 'its own history, a different social and industrial development, special aspirations and

problems, [it is] a microcosm and if it can be understood it can give you an insight into the issues and difficulties facing people throughout the world'. Welsh literature has enough in common with English-language literatures to be readily accessible, enough that is distinctive to illuminate the value of particularity in our common experience of being human.

There is, of course, a danger that non-Welsh publishers and readers will be interested only in what strikes them as distinctively Welsh, and ignore or devalue works dealing principally with common human experiences, whether they are set in Wales or elsewhere. That has been all too often the case with the publication outside Wales of Anglo-Welsh writing, as with stage, radio, and television plays in English. It can result in a distorted, often an outdated, view of Wales and Welsh life. When, for example, there was an excellent production in Manhattan thirty years ago of John Gwilym Jones' own translation of his *Rhyfedd y'n Gwnaed,* one which delighted the playwright (who was quite impressed by the cast's command of north Wales accents), two newspaper critics devoted most of their reviews to expressing disappointment that there was nothing especially Welsh about the three short plays. The best remedy for such responses lies, I believe, in the regular and timely translation and publication of a full range of contemporary works, including popular fiction.

Finally, though, and without questioning the value of the Arts Council's translation programme and with high hopes for its success, it would be well for Wales to beware of giving too much importance to the translation of its literature. There is the danger of thinking that the worth of a literature is to be measured by its being translated, its being known on a world scale, its being compared and judged as though writing were a kind of Olympic competition. If translation can carry Welsh literature beyond its native community and thereby give it some further value for that community and for others, that is all to the good. But this is not essential it is something added to its primary value. If not a word of Welsh had been or would ever be translated into English or any other language, the literature would still have accomplished what literature is for, by giving pleasurable form and a meaningful voice to the experience of its own people.

Looking towards Wales

*For the conference of the Welsh Union of Writers at Rhosili, 1719 November 1995, and published in* The New Welsh Review *(Spring 1996).*

When I was invited to give this lecture and told that the theme of this year's conference was *Looking towards America,* I replied that what I thought I could best offer was a kind of counter-theme: 'An American Poet Looks towards Wales'. That, after all, is what I have been doing for almost forty years now in translating Welsh poetry, of course, but also in experiencing Wales itself as a fairly frequent sojourner and, for these last five years, as a resident.

It is especially in the writing of my own poems that I have looked towards Wales: Welsh poetry has influenced my poems technically and thematically in ways that are sometimes quite obvious, continually and profoundly in ways I have not always been immediately aware of myself. As a consequence of translating, it is poetry in the Welsh language that has had the most direct and strongest influence, and for the purposes of this lecture that is what I will be referring to as 'Welsh poetry'; trusting that no one will suppose that by doing so I am suggesting an inferior status for what Tony Conran has persuasively argued that we should resume calling Anglo-Welsh poetry, or in any way questioning its claim to Welshness. Apart from an early and brief bewitchment by Dylan Thomas, whatever influence has come from Anglo-Welsh poets has been as a reinforcement of those characteristics, and there are many, which they share with their Welsh-language compatriots.

You will have gathered that I mean to talk about my poems and quote some of them by way of illustration. That should come as no surprise. Ask a writer to address a union of writers, and the odds are that she or he will speak about his or her own work. I am uneasily

conscious of thereby presuming my poems have an interest for others than myself which may not be justified, but I hope you will find this lecture something more than an egocentric exercise. I would like it to throw some light on what is involved in trying to function as an American writer in these 'post-modernist' days, attempting to construct poems in an age of 'deconstruction', a time of questioning not so much whether the emperor has no clothes as whether the clothes have no emperor. I will, unavoidably, be touching on the question of national identity. Above all, though, I intend this lecture to be a way of publicly acknowledging a debt, of paying tribute and giving thanks a way, too, of calling attention to what modern Welsh poetry has to offer not simply of interest but of nourishment to the writer in another language and from another culture.

My wife and I visited Australia for the first time last spring, staying mostly with our eldest son and his family in Sydney. Gerrie took an astonishing number of snapshots from, it seemed, every possible location around Sydney harbour, of the famous Opera House. It was probably inevitable that in due course I wrote a poem called 'Views of the Sydney Opera House':

Inescapable apparition, unignorable
In Harbour, on postcard racks,
Great wind-swollen concrete sails.

Irresistible tourist attraction, blank
Insect eyes, heavy-lidded,
Unblinking at our lenses.

Shark fins, enormous moth wings, helmets
Of intergalactic raiders,
Architectural aberration.

Post-modernist fossil, spines of a de-
Constructed stegosaurus,
Monstrous multiplex mollusc.

Excrescence, extrusion, photogenic from any angle,
It signifies Sydney.
Cardiff Bay should be so lucky.

A poem as curious, perhaps, as the building one in which an Australian landmark designed by a Danish architect is seen by an American poet through Welsh-tinted glasses. Altogether, a reflection of contemporary international culture but not, poetically, in what has been called 'international style'. Though the last line of the poem has a decidedly New York City accent, many of you will have recognized my adaptation of a traditional Welsh verse form, the stanza known as *englyn penfyr,* and the use of *dyfalu,* incremental metaphors in what I would call radial structure. I hadn't used that particular stanzapattern before, though I have on occasion written in another form of *englyn,* and for a good many years, from 1961 to 1980 to be precise, my poems were mostly written in what I've called *quasi-cywydd* couplets, even employing at times the syntactic side-step known as *sangiad.* In poems not otherwise indebted to Welsh techniques, I have sometimes employed a kind of *dyfalu* and radial structure. Nothing in writing poems, though, is merely a stylistic matter. A verse form is, as Eliot said of Shakespeare's sonnets, a way of thinking and feeling: what Welsh techniques have often given me is a means of dealing with particular experiences, of giving them poetic expression, that I would otherwise have lacked. As with that first experience of the Sydney Opera House.

At almost the opposite pole from the strict patterns of *englyn* and *cywydd* is a verse form I first used in 1980 in a poem entitled, for reasons that will become evident, 'Moropus Elatus':

In the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh,
As you leave the Dinosaur Hall
And head for the Irish Elk in the Fossil Mammals Hall,
There, in an undefined space before you reach the
Amphibians and Reptiles,
Stands Moropus elatus,
Looking as if he didn't belong.

Above the huge claws and cleft toes,
Upon the stolid pillars of his legs,
The large, vaguely equine trunk
Leads to a neck that's not quite long enough to be notable
Holding a head with an undistinguished snout
And an expression that's a bit bewildered, a bit sad,
But not very interesting.

It's so easy to pass him by
On your way to the looming bones and terrifying jaws of
Tyrannosaurus Rex
And the abstract sculptures of scarlet and white and green
and yellow crystals
That astonish the eye and tease the imagination
In the Hall of Minerals and Gems
(Or going in the other direction to the Cafeteria),
Or even to find the antlered skeletal majesty
Of the Irish Elk attracting your sidelong vision
As you start to look at Moropus,
That it's not surprising to learn,
If you compel yourself to read the inscription,
That he had no descendants.

One of the blind alleys of evolution.
Strains that went to form the horse, the rhinoceros, and the
tapir
Mingled in him,
And it became clear to God, the Life Force, or whatever
That this just wouldn't work.

The aeons passed,
And he was dug up at the beginning of our century
In Nebraska,
Where he was probably no more at home than in Pittsburgh.
Somehow one should be sorrier about it;
At least it should lead to some kind of reflection
On God as less sure of Himself than we had supposed,
Or on life as a continuing cosmic experiment.
But that's not the effect of seeing Moropus at all.

He looks as if he knew
That he hadn't been a very good idea from the start,
Was resigned to becoming a dead end,
And cared no more about it at last
Than we who now pass him by.

The published poem was dedicated to Gwyn Thomas, because that summer, in translating some of Gwyn's poems which employ with

great deftness colloquial speech in *cocosaidd* (doggerelish) rhythms, I found a form I could use for my own work and, more importantly, a way of breaking out of the strictures of the *quasi-cywydd* in which I'd been writing so long. As is likely to be true of any verse-pattern or style, what had initially in the *quasi-cywydd* been an opening up, a new way to explore and express and order experience, had begun to feel like a trap. While I have occasionally gone back to that form when it seemed fitting, translating Gwyn and then writing some of my own *cocosaidd* poems was a release. It let me discover and exercise other muscles, so to speak, enabled me to 'breathe' differently in verse, and so provided a way of exploring and expressing other kinds of experience. It works by implicit contrast to the verbal behaviour we expect of verse, and so is best suited to comic or satirical poetry. I haven't written all that many *cocosaidd* poems as such, but in a considerable number of recent poems I have risked a prosaic flatness in long lines with lightly stressed syllables and played short lines against long in what I think of as a flexible formality, something unlikely to strike anyone as especially Welsh, but in fact another example of what I've owed technically to Welsh poetry.

My greatest debt, however, has been far more than technical, and it is a debt of which I have only lately become fully conscious. That, perhaps, has been just as well. As John Ormond once said, 'to know too much in advance is almost certainly to begin in failure' there are some things it is better not to be too conscious of at the moment of composition. What for better or worse brought me to total awareness was working two years ago on a lecture for the Cymmrodorion in London, in which at their suggestion I was rashly attempting some general observations about modern Welsh poetry, while I was at the same time reading proofs for my collection of poems *Here & There*. As I wrote the concluding paragraphs of the lecture it struck me that what I had been noting as thematically characterististic of modern Welsh poetry was true in large measure of my own poems. I had, I suddenly realized, been generalizing about that poetry in terms of its impact on me. I was tempted to say so in concluding the lecture, but I didn't. It would have been a distraction, an irrelevance, since my comments needed to be judged with reference to the Welsh poems in themselves, and I've been pleased that people who know the poetry far better than I consider my observations to be generally valid. I am saying now,

however, what I didn't say then, and turning things around looking at my own poems of the last few decades in terms of the central themes of modern Welsh poetry which have, I now see, been so strong an influence.

After going back to the States in 1973, having spent over a year in Wales translating the poetry of this century, I began to read more frequently and more widely in American history. After a much briefer stay in 1984, I wrote a sequence called *A Greener Place* and subtitled it 'Poems of Two Americans in Wales'. One poem deals with the Owain Glyn Dwr Parliament House in Machynlleth, and is entitled 'In Memoriam':

> Americans, accustomed to preserving shrines for winners,
> We're uneasy in a place that's dedicated less
> To was than might-have-been.
>
> It's all very well for Welsh historians to tell us
> The modern idea of Wales was born here,
> But it's as if we were visiting the House of Burgesses in
> Williamsburg, Virginia,
> Centuries after losing the Revolution,
> And reading a copy of the Declaration of Independence.
>
> We view the rising through the warping glass
> Of our own history
> (There's even a French alliance),
> And try to imagine Owain Glyn Dwr as a Welsh George
> Washington
> With more magic but less luck,
> And without three thousand miles of ocean as a surer wall
> than Snowdonia,
> And minus, of course, the happy American ending
> That democratically crowned a Cincinnatus as our first
> President.
>
> It isn't too difficult to envision Machynlleth
> As another Washington, DC,
> With Welsh energy flowing into and out of it north, east,
> south,
> Instead of draining out into England through Cardiff.
> It mightn't have been a convenient place for a national
> capital
> But winners can make such choices and make them stick.

It's hard for us, though, to imagine a Washington who faded
out
Through the mountains of Appalachia,
Mist magnifying the old weathermonger's figure till the wind
Cleared the way for a Henry Tudor.

No. This sober house
Is not for us,
Except as a reminder of our neglect to show proper respect
for failure,
Though our country's filled with images of a man on a cross.

Three years later I had my first experience of serving on a jury, out of which came a sequence called 'Common Ground'. It contains, in the midst of poems dealing with aspects of the trial and of living in the Bronx, a poem reflecting on the making of the US Constitution in what was its bicentennial year, and the sequence ends: 'I am, at fiftynine, more deeply an American / Than I had known.' While a few of the poems employ the radial structure I mentioned earlier, there is nothing else stylistically Welsh in that sequence and no mention of Wales itself. But I am certain that without an experience of Wales that made me stop taking national identity for granted, and without a saturation in modern Welsh poetry that made me realize how consciousness of that identity can be proper material for poems, that sequence would never have been written. I was surprised when it was singled out for favourable comment in Welsh reviews, but I shouldn't have been: the reviewers clearly found in it an American mirror of their own sense of the poetic role of national identity.

I have been avoiding the word 'nationalism', for good reason. It is, to say the least, a complex issue, and it's as well from time to time to consider H. G. Wells' dictum that 'our true nationality is mankind', and behave and write accordingly. Welsh nationalism has sometimes taken, in poetry as elsewhere, very questionable forms, but at its best it has had a legitimacy, an urgency, indeed I should think a necessity, that has not been part of the American experience for quite some time. American nationalism has tended to manifest itself in this century in such crass and ethically doubtful ways that most poets have understandably preferred to avoid it or view it negatively. Proclaiming American identity has become so much a politician's ploy that it is difficult to write a poem that is affirmative and yet analytical, critical in

the best sense, in dealing with it. National identity is, to be sure, everywhere apparent in modern American poetry, but it is usually implicit or simply taken for granted, and perhaps none the worse for that. This has its dangers, though, especially when one's national culture seems bent on homogenizing the world, and I am grateful to Wales and Welsh poetry for enabling me to write not 'nationalist' poetry but poems in which American identity is consciously, for good or ill, a fundamental reality in experience.

Literary influence alone is never enough to account for what one writes about and how, and the fact that I have travelled more in recent years has a great deal to do with my writing a number of 'poems of place'. It's true also that American poets in the last few decades seem more often than before to write of specific places. It has been the centrality of place in Welsh poetry, though, that has led me to look outward as well as inward, to consider where I am and where I have been as material for poems. It was certainly, as you might expect, a major influence in the sequence of poems on a sojourn in Wales eleven years ago (including, Bobi Jones remarked in a review, more poems about Aberystwyth than had ever before appeared in English), but it also determined my very specific treatment of the Bronx in the juror sequence. Modern Welsh poetry has oriented me to the significance of places, and by now the places have been in Scotland, England, and Australia, as well as Wales and the United States. And in the States, not only my native New York City but Washington, DC, Frederick, Maryland, a scrap of a village in Michigan called Bach (appropriately to Welsh ears, but in fact the name is German), and in an as yet unpublished poem, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the site of a decisive battle in the War between the States, and of Abraham Lincoln's famous address at the dedication of the cemetery. This is again a poem with nothing apparently Welsh about it, but whose roots are in Welsh poetry as well as American history, and called simply 'At Gettysburg':

1. Alien as a spacecraft from some distant galaxy,
    This platform on its metal struts commands
A view of ridges, woodlands, meadows,
The nine roads where two armies dustily
Converged, upon what was
An ordinary country town.

The roads are paved now, lined
With guest-house and antique shop.
The town's chief business
Is to display its scars.

Ascend the Observation Tower. Overlook
The battlefield, the cemetery.
Like the hundred-thirty years between
That time and ours, it serves to keep
History at a distance.

2. Row after row of cannon
        Define the empty fields. The car,
As though we made the Stations of the Cross,
Proceeds from monument to monument,
Site to site,
Tracing the three-day transfiguration
Of farmland into battleground.

Wheatfield. Peach Orchard. June
Sunlight is a blessing. We cannot feel
The blaze of their July. We cannot
Hear the rebel yell, the screams. We cannot
See the smoke, the tumbling bodies. We cannot
Smell the rotting flesh. We cannot taste
The third day's evening rain.

3. The visitors in shorts and T-shirts
Stroll amid tidy files of gravestones
And underneath the ancient trees.

The purple beech is gnarled, contorted.
The tulip poplar's straight and tall.

4. *A flat failure,* Lincoln said. The words
Would outlive the occasion. Whatever
Those buried here believed they fought for,
They died for his idea. Antithesis and metaphor

Articulate a meaning for the place.
From blood and bones, disintegrating flesh,

He forged a sacred text, incorporated here
An American sanctum. In that benediction

A future was determined. This
Is no place for deconstruction.

That poem says 'we', not 'I', and my latest revision to another poem has been to change two small words: from 'the' to 'our', and from 'they' to 'we'. Most of the time, of course, I do what Western poets have done in this kind of poem since Archilochus as Yeats put it, 'I speak in my own person, and dramatize myself.' But the person in my poems has tended increasingly to speak not as an isolated individual, and not only from within the 'personal community' of marriage and family, but as a citizen, one member of a local community, a neighbour. If what the American poet Louis Simpson wrote some twenty years ago is still true, that for American poetry since the end of the 1960s 'the personality is everything and art is confined to expressing this', that 'the personal voice does not speak for society at large or a belief held in common', then I have tended to go in the opposite direction. I have frequently written from what for the title and central experience of my Bronx jury sequence I called 'Common Ground', without denying in that sequence or elsewhere the flaws, tensions, divisions in particular communities, tacitly acknowledging that 'community' in general is always in some degree potential, never perfectly actualized.

However unaware I may have been of the influence of Welsh poetry in other ways, I quite consciously assumed at times the role of a *bardd gwlad,* a local poet, within my college community in writing eulogies and elegies for colleagues and poems for special occasions, and this, I believe, provided the basis for writing from within other communities as well. *Cymdogaeth,* neighbourhood, neighbourliness, has been the basis for the many Welsh poems about people, for eulogy and elegy and what Bobi Jones calls 'portraits'. I have written fewer of these than the average Welsh poet, but I want to read one because I have found reaction to it curious. The poem is set in Wales, and is called 'Evangelist':

Abruptly, in the queue for the bus to Bala,
She turned to us,
The thin fiftyish Englishwoman, plainly dressed,
Whose packages we'd minded while she hurried off to Marks
and Spencer,
And asked if we believed in Jesus Christ.

'The love of Jesus changed my life', she said.
We professed, embarrassed,
Christianity too, adding that we were Roman Catholics.
The wrong response. She explained to us that the Pope
Was the devil's tool, leading the world to hell with idolatrous
tricks.
We helped her onto the bus with her packages,
Then sat well to the rear.
But she came back, twice, to the opposite seat
With anti-papal pamphlets and apocalyptic warnings
And, several times each time, to repeat:

'The love of Jesus changed my life.' It was hard,
Held by the unblinking nails
Of her eyes, stabbed by the spear of her voice,
To know what she expected. Had anyone to whom she'd
spoken like this
Ever knelt on the floor of a bus

To praise the Saviour, or thanked her for having pierced
The darkness of their hearts?
She heard nothing, it seemed, that we tried to say.
She wasn't there to listen. She wasn't there to talk theology
Or debate ecclesiastical polity.

She was there to testify, inflexible
As a crucifix.
We were there to satisfy her need. The morning's targets,
On whom she'd homed, however guided, her programmed
Message of redeeming love. We heard no love in her joyless

Voice as she bore witness, as the Word within her
Compelled her words.

She left the bus, freighted with her clumsy packages,
Long before Bala. She looked at peace. Mission
Accomplished. She had brought good news.

I won't try to interpret your reaction to that poem. But when I've read it elsewhere, especially in the United States, I have sensed a change in the audience's response as the poem developed from comfortable amusement at the beginning to disquiet and uncertainty about how to respond at the end, as if the poem had not behaved as they expected. That may not necessarily be a bad thing, but the first few times it happened I was surprised I hadn't meant to challenge the listener or the reader. One reviewer described the poem approvingly as 'satire of christless proselytism', to which all I can say is if that is how the poem is likely to be understood, then I have failed. To my mind, what is comic is the Catholic couple's initial reaction; what is serious is the speaker's uncertainty in contrast to the woman's assurance, and his final acknowledgement that the evangelist had done what she was called to do. I meant it to be a complex poem, not a simple satire. My intention was that the woman be experienced not as an outsider but as a neighbour, if an uncomfortable one, that implicit in this poem as in others like it would be Chesterton's comment that 'we make our enemies, we make our friends, but God made our nextdoor neighbour', through whom He can sometimes work in very mysterious ways.

Intention is not execution, of course. I am inclined to wonder, though, perhaps too defensively, whether those problems of response do not suggest something about what audiences have come to expect of English-language poems. Do they presume that a portrait poem, especially one about an Evangelical Christian, will necessarily be satirical, or at least will not be written from a neighbourly let alone a Christian perspective? How comfortable, come to that, is a contemporary English-language audience with explicitly religious and specifically Christian poetry of any kind? I will be coming back to this question.

First, however, I want to observe that 'neighbourliness' in modern Welsh poetry extends beyond the human to include other creatures, from Alan Llwyd's hawk to Bobi Jones' worm, seeing them the way Gwyn Thomas sees his hedgehog, as 'fellow-tenants in a transient world'. I am very much a city person myself, preferring to keep the natural world at a distance in books or television programmes, but these last few years I have surprised myself by writing some poems

about animals. This may be the result of overdosing on David Attenborough, but I suspect it is again Welsh poetry that is responsible. What is remarkable in that poetry, going back to its early centuries, is that the heart of a poem is most often what David Jones called 'a certain affection for the creatureliness of things', contemplation, close observation, celebration of a creature's *thisness,* pleasure and awe that it should be what it is, in its otherness from the human. So it is probably not surprising that as a consequence of our Australian visit I wrote about emus and echidnas, coral and koalas, borrowing the aboriginal term 'Dreaming' as a way of indicating the otherness of the natural world, from which in these poems they are imagined as speaking to us, in some cases very strangely. This poem is called 'Coral Dreaming':

I are we. We am I.
Animal, but you cannot
Keep me as a pet, look us in the eye.
Snorkel around if you will,

I has nothing to do with you.
More plant than animal, more rock than anything,
Blips of polyps, I lives within
The fans and fronds, the cups and horns,
Of our skeleton garden.

Garden? A jungle. Soft I's and hard
Contend for turf. Parrots
Nip nip nip
Bits of us away. Crowns of thorns
Suck me wet and hollow.

We is home to butterflies, clowns, and bats,
Horses and dragons,
Jewels, damsels, and porcupines.
Nudibranchs nuzzle my branches.
Stars feather our labyrinth.
Angels flirt through my latticework.

We stay put. I bud our clones
Into colonies of me. But on a soft night
In spring, when the waters are still,
And the signal comes over the internet,
I explode through undersea moons.
We eject myselves in clouds of balloons,
Pink and red, blue and orange and green,
And I end as I always begin.

Your millennia mean
Nothing to us. We am what I are
For aeons of now.

There is nothing overtly religious about that poem, or about many others I have written. I noticed, though, in proof-reading my recent collection, that Christian belief has been tending to become more explicit in my poems, and I have come to realize that the most important influence Welsh poetry has had on my work is in sustaining its Christian basis. That may strike you as a strange statement from someone who is a 'cradle Catholic', and to explain it I must ask you to bear with me in considering some aspects of contemporary culture as this may affect a Christian poet, and in relation to modern Welsh poetry.

This brings me back to the point I touched on in discussing audience response to 'Evangelist'. I thought I sensed the same kind of discomfort this June at the conference of the Welsh Academy's English Language section in Machynlleth. I had been a bit surprised but intrigued when this year's theme, 'Paganism and Puritanism', was first published, and I was disappointed, frankly, in the outcome. Neither term was ever properly examined and clarified, and most of those attending, as far as I could tell, seemed to think paganism was nonreligious and in any case preferable to puritanism, which they tended to make synonymous with Christianity. In general, the audience seemed embarrassed to have religion discussed at all in front of a mixed audience. That the novelist and journalist Tom Davies for the first session confronted us somewhat in the fashion of the woman in my poem probably didn't help.

What this reflected, of course, is what has become the normal situation in contemporary Western society. It is what the sociology of knowledge calls the 'de-objectification' of religious belief, its loss of

'intersubjective plausibility', its 'privatization' so that, as the American sociologist Peter Berger puts it, whatever 'reality' religious beliefs retain for a person 'is apprehended as being rooted within the consciousness of the individual rather than in any facticities of the external world religion no longer refers to the cosmos or history, but to individual psychology'. Since every society is, Berger says, a 'world-building enterprise', the result is that 'those who continue to adhere to the world as defined by the religious traditions then find themselves in the position of cognitive minorities a status that has social-psychological as well as theoretical problems'.

Those social-psychological problems are very serious and immediate for the poet who is a religious believer. However it may be in society at large and in the local community, in belonging also to local, national, and international communities made up of what a philosopher friend of mine persists in calling, to the democratic dismay of his students and colleagues, 'the cultural elites', a Christian is very conscious of being in a cognitive minority. For the Christian poet in America, and in the English-language world in general, it has become a matter of experiencing oneself not just as in a minority but as marginal, all but invisible, at best as one of a very few individuals.

There was a brief period in the later 1940s and early 1950s when Eliot and Auden as major poets who were also converts seemed to have made Christianity literarily acceptable, and there were others - Edith Sitwell, Edwin Muir, the young Robert Lowell. This had considerable significance for me, since that is when I began trying to write poems, with Auden in particular as an influence, and to write from a Christian perspective seemed quite a normal thing to do. It is a time that seems very distant now, a literary fashion that lasted no more perhaps than a decade, with the change marked most clearly by Lowell's loss of faith and subsequent poetic development. The present situation is very different, and it compels one to recognize that poetry in the English language has been predominantly post-Christian since the eighteenth century, and that contemporary poetry is almost overwhelmingly secular. Hilary Davies observed this year in an article commemorating the centenary of the birth of David Jones that because 'Jones' vision is an affirmative one, in keeping with his faith', it 'has made him, in the poetic climate of the late twentieth century, problematic'. There is, to be sure, R. S. Thomas, but it is interesting that in a recent anthology of poets published by Bloodaxe, the editor, after quoting the *Times Literary Supplement*'s praise of Thomas as 'our

best living religious poet', selected none of his religious poems. I suspect it was Thomas's religious as much as his nationalist themes that delayed for so long his recognition in England and America as a major poet, and that this may well prove a barrier to his candidacy for the Nobel Prize. The Swedish Committee this year in honouring Seamus Heaney cited him as 'an Irish Catholic', but that is likely to have been a political rather than a religious reference. Heaney himself once stated in an interview that 'my language and my sensibility are yearning to admit a kind of religious or transcendental dimension. But then there's the reality: there's no heaven, no afterlife of the sort we were promised, and no personal God.'

That this is implicitly and sometimes explicitly 'the reality', the world within which most contemporary poets write, is fairly obvious in the individual collections of any recent year, in literary magazines, in anthologies such as Helen Vendler's *Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, published in 1986. In her introduction, Vendler comments that 'all of these poets write within a culture in which physical science has replaced metaphysics as the model of the knowable there is no significant poet whose work does not mirror, both formally and in its preoccupations, the absence of the transcendent'. I find it significant that in this anthology by one of the most influential of current American critics, the absence of the transcendent is made certain by the absence of Denise Levertov.

For a poet who writes not simply from belief in the actual or possible presence of the transcendent but from the ground, however shaky at times, of Christian faith, the present situation is disheartening, sometimes downright threatening. One threat is to suspect oneself of paranoia have these remarks been symptomatic of that? I admit the possibility, as I will also acknowledge I am fearful of this every time a group of poems is rejected by some editor and I find myself wondering whether this was an ideological decision. I'd really rather not know I prefer to hold on to my trust in the declared pluralism of most poetry editors. I have, though, grown more and more hesitant about submitting certain poems to editors for whom religious belief does not appear to be what William James called 'a live option'. Poems like this one, for instance, based on a passage in St Luke's Gospel, called 'Cracking the Shell':

> No joy, at first, to see Him.
> Time for us had become

Tranquil as sand at the bottom
Of a glass. We were taking
Comfort in the grave of our grieving,
At frigid peace in the shell
His loss rose to fill.

The womb of His absence
Quickened to His presence.
There, in our midst,
He stood, bidding 'Peace'. A ghost
Would have been welcome. Fright
Lets you know where you're at.

We peered at pitted hand,
Pitted foot. He ate the fish. Sand
Began to flow, blood wakened
Flesh in stabs of joy and terror.
His voice unstopped our eyes to stare
At the world He bade us enter
In tender flesh and blood, armoured
With nothing but His word.

The greatest fear for a Christian poet, though, is not of rejection by editors or of paranoia, but that the present cultural situation may affect one's creativity, may not just tempt you to avoid dealing directly with certain experiences or to leave religious convictions implicit, but may render your verbal imagination incapable of expressing your essential way of seeing the world. That is apparently what troubled the Australian poet James McAuley when he wrote:

Christ, you walked on the sea,
But cannot walk in a poem,
Not in our century.

Through the Welsh poetry of this century, however, from the 1930s to the present, Christ has walked frequently and vigorously. It is not just that most of the major poets have been Christian Gwenallt, Saunders Lewis, Euros Bowen, Waldo Williams, Bobi Jones, Alan Llwyd but that Christian poems regularly come from other poets as well. In the course of preparing this talk I went to the local library and took from the shelves, quite at random, five volumes published within the last three years, by three younger poets entirely unfamiliar to me

and two older ones I knew only by name. None of the collections had all that many explicitly Christian poems, but in each there were some, and it was clear that these provided a basis and a context for the others. This would surely not be true of five comparable collections in English.

Unlike modern religious poems in English, moreover, which for truth to the poet's experience or acknowledgement of a secular audience tend to incorporate uncertainty, this Welsh poetry has for the most part been rather disconcertingly a poetry of conviction. In this respect it is very traditionally Welsh: as Tony Conran has very cogently observed in writing of Waldo Williams, that tradition is 'non-empirical', in contrast to English and American poetry since the eighteenth century. Structurally the Welsh poems do not dramatize crises of faith or work their way from sense experience towards a tentative or momentary affirmation. They begin from belief.

Wynn Thomas, reviewing translations of Euros Bowen and Saunders Lewis two years ago, remarked that there were likely to be difficulties 'for many contemporary English-language readers', noting that Bowen's 'apparently untroubled sacramentalism is profoundly at odds with the sceptical spirit of both Britain and the United States', since 'the best American poetry has been a poetry of deliberate disincarnation, with plenitude of surface being consciously substituted for profundity of depth', and 'British poetry has implicitly deplored the mystique of metaphysics.' Present-day English-language readers are all too likely, I suspect, to dismiss this central characteristic of Welsh poetry as a manifestation of 'conservatism', 'traditionalism', a clinging to the past, a refusal to face what Seamus Heaney calls 'the reality'. That may well be true in some cases, but I cannot see that it has been true in general. While, in contrast to what is usually considered 'modernist', Welsh poetry in this century has tended to keep strong links with its past, the major poets have been thoroughly aware of Heaney's 'reality'. They are well read in English, American, and other literatures Saunders Lewis translated Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Gwyn Thomas his *Endgame,* and several of Saunders' later poems confront starkly the possibility of an indifferent, meaningless cosmos, the experience of divine absence that is so central to R. S. Thomas. They know, too, that this was 'the reality' for such major Welsh poets earlier in this century as R. Williams Parry and T. H. Parry-Williams, as it was more recently for Alun Llywelyn-Williams. And they have, very clearly, found themselves in dissent, rejecting that

version of 'reality' as ultimately unreal, at odds with their experience and their needs, unable to sustain life or poetry. Les Murray, citing those lines I quoted from his fellow Australian James McAuley, has declared that 'experience, Catholic Christianity, and what I discover by writing poems are my three prime guides to reality' with some substituting of Protestant Christianity for Catholic, that would seem to be true of many recent Welsh poets as well. It is Les Murray, too, who has expressed what I see as their basic stance:

> If it is in the power of irreligion and intellectual fashion to change the subjects of permitted discourse, and thus to alter the world, it is also in the power of poetry to reverse their work and bring old ones, including the supreme ones, back to vivid life.

The Christian world-view is not merely one element in modern Welsh poetry. It is the ground of its other central themes. At the heart of Christianity is the mystery of the Incarnation, the belief that God became fully human at one moment in time and in one place. It may not always be evident in the attitudes of some Christians and their churches, and it has often been obscured by the influence of neo-Platonism and the necessary emphasis on original sin, but this 'scandal of particularity', as theologians sometimes call it, is an affirmation of the essential goodness, the meaningfulness, the praiseworthiness, of particular times and places, of individual persons and peoples, of nature, of history.

It has also left its mark, as far as I can see, on many 'post-Christian' poets, in English as well as in Welsh, who might understandably not wish to be considered religious. The English poet and critic Jeremy Hooker spoke in a recent interview of 'the religious dimension whether it's vague or specific', that is part of the Welsh cultural tradition, stating that 'it's quite clear that one of the differences between Welsh and Anglo-Welsh, and English and American poetry, is in their religious preoccupations', and noting that 'Welsh and Anglo-Welsh poetry is really a praise poetry by and large, with some exceptions, poetry in English isn't'.

Ian Gregson last year described Anglo-Welsh poets as 'burdened with an exhausted tradition', a condition he would surely find even more true of poets in Welsh. He attacked Catherine Fisher's poetry for being 'doggedly single-voiced' and thereby seeming 'atavistic', declaring his preference for poetry with 'subtly ironic and wildly

surreal effects' that would deal with 'the postmodern question of how the "real world" gets mediated'. I am not certain how much Gregson realized that he was calling not just for a change of style but for a loss of faith. The critic Ian Robertson, in dealing with several contemporary English poets he calls 'postmodern', notes as chief characteristics 'unremitting self-deconstruction', 'terminal ironies', assimilation of 'people and objects into a common dehumanisation'. Introducing his very large anthology of *Postmodern American Poetry,* published last year as a college text, Paul Hoover wrote that 'in general, postmodern poetry opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and a heightened, even heroic, portrayal of the bourgeois self and its concerns'. Some of the most gifted poets in that collection offer at best a dazzlingly metamorphic Ovidian world, in which everything is interesting but nothing finally matters. If that is how poets experience the world, then of course that is how they must write though it raises the question of how meaningful it is to write a poem, a question, to be fair, that these poets themselves continually raise.

Welsh poets so far, in both languages, have not stopped believing in belief. They have continued to write a poetry of affirmation rather than of insignificance, of faith in at least the possibility of meaning in our experience of the natural world and human history, people and places, faith in poetry itself as at the least what it was for Robert Frost, 'a momentary stay against confusion'. That may well seem 'atavistic' to outsiders, and to disenchanted or would-be-fashionable insiders, but I am inclined to see it as Wales' own special brand of 'postmodernism', and to hope it catches on.

It has been this in Welsh poetry that has had its deepest effect on my own poems. I could say that as far as religion is concerned Welsh poetry has simply encouraged me to continue writing Christian poems, however adverse the climate. But there's much more to it than that. Translation is a different, a more intimate process than the closest of close reading. It involves assimilation, transmutation, taking a Welsh poem into one's imagination and converting it to English. Put another way: it means acting a role, creating the character of a Welsh poet in English, and this has carried over into the composition of my own poems, into imagining the person who speaks them. There is no knowing, of course, how things might have gone had I not begun translating modern Welsh poems some twenty-five years ago, but I am convinced that it has largely been this role which has sustained a

Christian world-view as the ground of my poetry, and so enabled me to go on functioning as a poet.

In speaking throughout this lecture of the 'influence' of Welsh poetry, I have really been referring to this process of continuing, most often unconsciously, to play the part of a Welsh poet in discovering material and writing a poem. Have I then ceased to be an American poet, become 'Anglo-Welsh'? The college library in Aberystwyth firmly classifies my poems as American. The local library classifies them as British. Meic Stephens includes them in his just-published bibliography of modern Welsh literature in English, along with Jon Dressel's. I don't know what Jon thinks of this, but I doubt that he considers us as constituting a two-person school of Americymric poetry.

In any case, I cannot see that Welsh influence has made me any less an American poet. For one thing, the basic characteristics I have noted as distinctive of modern Welsh poetry are not exclusively Welsh. In many countries, they have been considered not an ideal but the natural norm for a reasonably healthy civilization though I should add that this norm can determine the nature of a society's poetry but it will not guarantee its quality. A deficient culture may well produce poems at least as good aesthetically out of the very experience of this deficiency, as I believe has been true of much modern English-language poetry. For another thing, what I have been doing is typically, even traditionally, American. Longfellow translated Dante and used the verse-pattern of the Finnish *Kalevala* for his American Indian epic of *Hiawatha;* Ezra Pound translated and adapted Provençal and Chinese poetry; and since the 1950s it has been a very American thing to be a poet-translator, to understand, as a recent anthologist noted, 'translations of poetry from other languages as an important part of [one's] own work'. Witness Horace Gregory, Robert Fitzgerald, Richard Wilbur, W. S. Merwin, Robert Bly, and others, including the Welsh-American Rolfe Humphries.

But what it finally comes down to is what Gillian Clarke has said of being Welsh. There is no choice: I am American. A young man once asked publicly at a reading in Neath whether my involvement with Wales was not a betrayal of my own country. As is usual in such a case, I didn't find the best way to answer until some time later, and then I turned it into a poem. Reading that poem, called 'Loyalties', seems the

best way to sum up and end it is a poem, you will notice, with an appropriate touch of Frost:

Americans are born to look both west and east.
The westward look's what gave the place its start

And keeps it going when the wilderness
It pioneers has vanished into metaphor.

The looking east is not so much for origins
As to discover what the cutting loose

Has freed one born American to explore
In places that are far enough apart

To lend perspective to the exercise
Of endless self-invention. It's less

A question of which country one loves best
Than which helps keep one's head straight going west.

About the Author

Joseph P. Clancy was born in 1928 in New York City, where he lived until he retired from teaching in 1990 and settled in Wales. He holds his Ph.D. from Fordham University and is Marymount Manhattan College's Emeritus Professor of English Literature and Theatre Arts.

His selected poems, *The Significance of Flesh,* had its UK publication in 1984, his subsequent collection, *Here & There,* in 1994, and a new collection, *Ordinary Time,* will be published in 1999. He has translated extensively from Welsh literature most recently a collection of folk poems, *Where There's Love,* and *The Light in the Gloom,* poems and essays by Alun Llywelyn-Williams and with his wife Gertrude co-authored a mystery novel, *Death is a Pilgrim: A Canterbury Tale,* featuring Geoffrey Chaucer as detective.

Professor Clancy is a Fellow of the English-language Section of Yr Academi Gymreig (The Welsh Academy) and an Honorary Fellow of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. In 1998 he was awarded an honorary D. Litt. by the University of Wales for his work as poet and translator.