Ian Gregson

The New Women's Poetry in Wales

Poetry in Wales is especially notable, at the moment, for its ability to produce inventive young women writers. To some extent this can be attributed to the same causes as the more general strength of recent Welsh poetry which has produced such exciting poets as Robert Minhinnick, Stephen Knight and Oliver Reynolds. I have explored those causes in my book *The New Poetry in Wales* where I draw upon the theorising of Deleuze and Guattari in relation to what they call 'minor' literatures. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*[1] , they are concerned, not with 'minor' writers, but with the literature which a 'minority' constructs within a major language' (p.16); they focus upon writers who have the 'misfortune' to be born 'in the country of a great literature' and

Must write in its language, just as a Czech Jew writes in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian. Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow. And to do that, finding his own point of under-development, his own *patois*, his own third world, his own desert. (p.18)

Although Deleuze and Guattari see the condition as originally a misfortune, they celebrate minority status for being seized upon by these writers (including Joyce and Beckett) as a powerful opportunity to evolve a literature which undermines the stale authority of the major culture by reflecting the widespread contemporary condition of living in a language which is alien, learning to become 'a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language' (p.19).

It might be said that women writers in such a 'minor' literature have a doubly minority status and, being sited on two margins of the major culture, have an even more oblique angle on its assumptions and hierarchies. But the women have also benefited from the example of a particularly powerful recent female tradition of writers, like Pascale Petit and Gwyneth Lewis, older than themselves, and of one, Deryn Rees-Jones, not much older but long established.

These writers use a wide range of genres, from urban realism and acute observation of nature, right through to fantastical writing, including magic realism, and also the adoption of deconstructive and 'late modernist' styles. Kathryn Gray conveys a vivid sense of Swansea, including both its Welsh and immigrant

populations, and she is particularly adept at evoking a youthful experience of the city, edged with anxiety but charged, also, with rebellious energy. ‘Joyrider’, which opens her debut volume *The Never-Never* [2], contrasts an urban car thief with the sedate occupants of a rural village whose quiet is disturbed as he (or maybe even she) races through. The poem’s sympathy is evidently with the fraught exhiliration of the young criminal, rather than with the settled lives of the villagers – ‘the parish church where the dead/ were married’ articulates the joyrider’s probably inarticulate contempt for a rural death-in-life. And placed strategically as Gray’s debut poem it establishes a poetic which would take the joyrider’s defamiliarising perspective by approaching the settled and ordinary with restless scepticism.

Gray can effortlessly draw upon that mode of realist notation which male poets such as Louis MacNiece, Philip Larkin and Douglas Dunn have deployed synecdochically to depict a life: ‘Embassy Number 1, a spritz of Mornay Eau de Toilette - / in Lavender, I think – fitted kitchens, a bin liner, children.’ Carol Ann Duffy has also used this mode, but Gray’s version is less reductive than Duffy’s often is, and gendered differently to Duffy, with her simplistic animus towards men. Gray is more open-minded, and two of her most memorable poems are about relationships between straight women – ‘Where Did Our Love Go?’ about a female vocal group, and ‘Friend’ about the combination of resentful rivalry and eruptions of aggression with despite-it-all continuing affection between female friends:

                                                            and we are
not together, one a yard ahead of the other, arms
crossed, miles from morning doorsteps, two women
on an A-road and we stop to explain to one another...

please be quiet, come nearer and let our cupped hands
pool the languages of loose change, mascara, fiver.
(p.16)

Those stop-start rhythms are characteristic and one of her distinctive strengths in creating a sense of raw unpredictability. But Gray is at her best when her images are not fully directed at the ‘real’ but inflected more obliquely, as in ‘Guilt’ where the references to bathroom sinks and soap are not isolated images but raised to the status of a motif in which cleanliness and dirt are explored in their relationship to both an upper-working class respectability and adolescent sexuality.

Tiffany Atkinson can also write a version of urban realism, even though its setting is a town as small as Aberystwyth, which makes its own point about a contemporary condition in which the urban infiltrates itself almost everywhere. ‘Aberystwyth Short Fiction’[3] tells the story of a Jack Russell which gets ‘Kentucky/fried’ by some faulty circuitry it cocks its leg over, but it moves, after this initial black humour,

into a much nastier version of streetlife – a police cordon marking a place where 'someone's girlfriend' has been viciously attacked. Violence recurs in her work, sometimes just a matter of aggression in the colloquial language she is very good at transcribing, and occasionally fretted about as a masculine habit, as in 'Taxi Driver', where the speaker is unsettled to find that her companion identifies so much with the Scorsese film they have been to see that he has slipped into the Travis Bickle role, and imagines he is aiming a 44 magnum from the foot of their bed. Atkinson is not at all systematic, however, about diagnosing patriarchy as intrinsically violent, and generally treats violence obliquely as a routine part of normal life. So 'Photo from Belfast' deals with the death of a young man in a car bombing but treats it as a horrifying incongruity in a context carefully defined as casual, even trivial, the speaker having shared a flirtatious drink with the victim and been attracted to him, but having been distracted by the prospect of 'a pair of fuck-me shoes'.

One characteristic of Atkinson which is unusual in the poetry world – though less so in Wales, where it is also true of the more senior Gwyneth Lewis and the more junior Zoe Brigley – is that she is aware of recent critical theory, especially its treatment of gender and body politics. That is reflected in her forms and language, with their tendency to break apart into elliptical disjunctiveness, and in her imagery, especially in her more fantastical flights of fancy. 'The Man Whose Left Hand Thought it was a Chicken' is a hilarious piece of magic realism:

to say he
crossed the road more often than required, to say
he only ever drove an automatic, never got promoted
and was photographed more often than he liked, to
say he almost had his own eye out a hundred times
is not to say the man was not his own man. No. He
was a flock of tangents and surprises.

The rueful and grotesque humour is characteristic, but the fabulatory premise is exploited ingeniously to explore questions about ontological insecurity. Somewhere behind it is the much blander idiom in which the right hand is said not to know what the left is doing, but endowing that sinister hand with a separate animal existence dramatises the postmodern fear about the loss of the self's integrity, a queasiness about what alien elements the self contains. Atkinson is close, here, to those concerns so vividly described by Donna Haraway in her 'Cyborg Manifesto', whose socialist feminism is directed towards protecting women from being too easily associated with nature, but which, in the process, focuses on the breaking down of the boundaries between the human and the natural, and between the organic and the constructed.

For Atkinson, as for Gwyneth Lewis, philosophical concerns are joined by scientific ones, as in 'Quantum Theory for Beginners' and 'Anthurium', which contains the eponymous phrase 'kink and particle', and which conjoins explicitly the human and the natural which elsewhere is conjoined only

through the imagery. In ‘Re: Venus’ a street scene is transformed by its juxtaposition with a vixen’s cry and ‘the closer constellations’; and in ’Aberystwyth Short Fiction’ the human violence is seen from a baffled double-take by the closing references to ‘The same old moon standing by like/ an anaesthetist. The old sea sucking its teeth.’

Atkinson’s concern with the breaking down of ontological boundaries is echoed in the poems of Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch in their enacting of the interpenetration of diverse linguistic worlds.Wynne-Rhydderch is a Welsh speaker and so is especially aware of the boundaries between English and Welsh, and therefore of what the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls the ‘interstitial’ which has been drawn upon by M.Wynn Thomas, the most important critic of Welsh writing in English, when he speaks of splits inside nations, of an interior heterogeneity, so that the nation becomes ‘a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples.’[4] Wynne-Rhydderch has written angry Welsh nationalist poems such as ’71,200 Megalitres’[5], which records the flooding of a Welsh valley to provide water for English homes - and the presence of the poet’s own mother in the last protest march through Capel Celyn - and ‘Welsh Knot’ which is scathing about the second home owned by the poet’s neighbour who preaches to her about the need to ‘adapt’ but who will not adapt enough himself to learn any Welsh, and knows nothing about the English persecution of Welsh speakers.

Wynne-Rhydderch creates something more distinctively her own, however, when she draws upon this sensibility to invent a liminal poetic in which registers clash as linguistic worlds are placed in dialogue with each other. In ‘Paramilitary Lover’[6], the language of war is mingled sado-masochistically with the idiom of love poetry, so that it explores ideas of love as conquest, and a male lover as metaphorically a colonist: the speaker is ‘enfolded/ in an English flag I think will/ become my shroud’. Comic incongruity is often created by these linguistic clashes – ‘First-Aid Class’ is funny because its description of ungainly postures and awkward manoeuvres is achieved through inappropriately formal language. ‘Rowndio’r Horn’ contrasts a social event at a yacht club with the sinking of a ship, a century earlier, captained by Wynne-Rhydderch’s great-great-grandfather as he attempted to sail around Cape Horn. The boundary between the two events is fretted over, so that an actual sinking seems for a moment like an overstated metaphor for feeling capsized by tipsiness at an awkward party. That threshold between sea and land is a recurrent motif of her latest book and takes a memorably unnerving form in ‘The Naming of the Storm’, which is spoken by the figurehead of a boat, an image which returns in ‘The Sea Painter’s House’ and triggers a memory of her father

he one side of the wheel and I the other, or carefully
he is tying knots on the aft deck whilst I,
aerial in the rigging, untwist his red ensign.
In our attic, the uniforms of all my dead

captains moth away, a tiny brass anchor
stamped on each button.
(*Not in these Shoes* p. 41)

A comparable liminality is present in the poetry of Rhian Sadat in her fascination with observing cultures overlap. Her 'Grey Raincoats'[7] characterises two sisters in their contrasting attitudes to their traditional Islamic culture – one, Mariam, traditional, dressed in black from head to foot, and recommending Ayatollah *Dot.Com*, the other, Madia, wears heavy make-up and skimpy clothes, including a tee-shirt proclaiming *I Love America*, and has opened her own city-centre health club, 'sunbeds, beauty, mixed-sex hammam'. Her poems are preoccupied with exotica, not just with far-removed places, but with far-removed ideas and images, as in 'Migrating Bees' which recounts how Egyptian bee-keepers stack clay hives on rafts and allow them to drift down the Nile beyond Luxor, and how they will send you a queen wrapped in wood and plastic, which will then, 'travel intact/ navigating the whiteness of distance, the aerated taste of bubble-wrap.' But Sadat is at her best when she focuses upon boundaries where cultural territories - which are not necessarily geographical – intersect, as in 'The Passion of Bienaimé', which worries at the boundary between the secular and the religious by telling the story of an abbot who alarms his monks by idolatrously obsessing about bees and clouds of honey:

Wood, willow, rush and clay, marble and glass
And even the humble canvas – all serve the abbot
In his unravelling. The bees will have none of his transparency,
And he is impatient for a glimpse of their sweet, interior life.

Zoe Brigley's poems stand on the threshold between the politics of gender and the politics of nationality. She has an MA in Gender and Literature from Warwick and she can effortlessly enlist the resources of 1970s and 80s feminism. She can quote male writers blithely making sexist remarks or declaring that 'Woman is an object, sometimes precious sometimes harmful, but always different' (Octavio Paz) and then turn those masculine texts inside out with her own version of an 'écriture feminine' which subverts such confident definitiveness with a questioning open-endedness that implies the instabilities of desire and therefore of identity. So 'Love Song for his Mother'[8], which takes Paz's reification as its epigraph, shames it by considering the extent to which a woman might be represented, from a male point of view, by objects she possesses - a glove, a hand-mirror, a key 'glimpsed in the bosom of her blouse' - but will still finally elude such metonymies so that after she is gone the object that appears to replace her is

flickeringly ambiguous:

not a face,
but the white belly of a pigeon beating its wings
against the pane in the boarded-up house.

Her first book *The Secret* comprises three sequences: 'The Lesser Secrets' which is organised around symbols from the Tarot pack; 'The Greater Secrets' which is structured around the twenty-day cycle of the Aztec calendar; and 'The Curse of the Long-Tailed Bird' which collocates Bluebeard and Hernan Cortes. Brigley's use of the form of the sequence resembles that of Gwyneth Lewis in enabling her to build larger structures in which a coruscating set of associations are made to reconfigure each other. It is through this method that the themes of gender and nationhood crucially interpenetrate. The women who populate the poems always shimmer on the edge of personification: Blodeuwedd initiates a pattern of feminine figures who approximate, for Wales, that feminine principle described by Seamus Heaney which, for Ireland, is 'an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelar of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht'. A translation of a poem by T.H.Parry Williams, in which Snowdonia is described as a woman, fits easily into this pattern of associations: 'her hair nets my imagination, her roots/ wrap my bones'.

The linking of the mother with the nation, of the feminine with the land, with Mother Earth, all have uncomfortable connotations of racial and gender essentialism but here too Brigley's deconstructive methods allow her to draw upon the power of the metaphors while also questioning them. Particularly important is the reinvention of those metaphors, by reference to Freud, Lacan and Kristeva, which has been achieved by Gwyneth Lewis and Deryn Rees-Jones. In 'The Jewel-box' Brigley similarly explores a range of Freudian symbols for the female body (the title refers to one of Freud's 'Case Histories') in which the woman is transformed into a 'closed garden, collapsing castle', an eyrie and a square room. Thinking of the land in such terms is revealed as an expression of psychic drives centred on loss and desire, and inseparable from questions of language and power. Like Gwyneth Lewis, Brigley represents those questions by mingling Welsh and English, as in the title poem:

Dyma'r Wyddfa a'i chriw; dyma lymder, a moelni'r tir.
They said: Why do you want to go to that place? There is nothing
to see. And I said: But I like its name. It means 'snow' and 'death' .
It has something to do with the colours of red and green.

In Zoe Skoulding's poems the question of territory is extended so that the whole issue of place is explored as a concept. In the highly original sequence at the start of her latest book *Remains of a Future City*[9] she dismantles a city so that it is revealed as a sum which is literally more than its component parts, in the sense that it has far more than four 'quarters'. In associating each of these parts with a state of mind she draws upon her own version of postmodern allegory, a self-reflexive construction in which the poetic habit of representing subjectivity by projecting it onto the external world is simultaneously used and deconstructed. The apparent stabilities of place are constantly under threat from the relentless presence of time, whose rhythms are menacingly different from the seasonal rhythms of the countryside: 'The Sinister Quarter' refers to the multiplying, in city centres, of time-keeping devices like bells and clocks, but as an allegorical place this quarter is horrifyingly specialised as a site where time operates with ferocious power, where a watch, although it is 'jammed', jolts forward 'weekends at a time', and breath that is too heavy might trigger the bells:

Traffic churns
intestinal pressure
    and slightly irregular heartbeat
        setting off dreams

            that can't be reconciled

Every face melts
    as time looms in
the street signs all pointing at each other
    like angry hands or dislocated
            knees and shoulder blades

She looked at her watch and it was summer

Skoulding's forms distinguish her from the other poets I have been discussing and indicate her link to poets such as Denise Riley and others of the Cambridge school most famously associated with J.H.Prynne. Her concern with place, however, connects her to the repeated motif of the interstitial and the liminal in contemporary poetry in Wales, and in particular her focus on boundaries - and the crossing of

boundaries - indicates the influence on her work of ideas of cultural marginality and hybrid national identity. In Skoulding's case it is discussed in relation to theorists of postmodern geography such as Doreen Massey and Edward Soja who explore the extent to which place and space have been destabilised by globalisation and contemporary technologies. 'Undergrowth'[10], from her first book, starts with a quotation from Michel de Certeau, the theorist of spatiality and uses a forest to represent the erasure of boundaries and so to emphasise the key point in postmodern geography that places can only be understood in relation to each other and never in isolation.

I would say in conclusion that the strength of this new women's poetry is evident from the extent to which emerging poets like Deborah Kay Davies and Jeni Williams feel able to adopt a wide range of poetic modes which have been made available to them by both established poets and those establishing themselves. Both feel comfortable slipping between the real and the fantastical, and the exotic and the domestic. Davies's 'Sunday Morning'[11], for example, is a suavely managed account of an incident between a couple who have just starting living together, a frankly sexual moment which is a celebration of erotic ordinariness. Elsewhere, though, she has a deadpan account of a cytology test in which the nurse discovers the speaker's parents lodged inside her (p. 15), and another of a dream that smells of frog-spawn in which the speaker discovers an egg on the other side of her bed:

I put my ear to the still-warm smoothness
and heard a knocking-sound,
someone calling my name.
A piece of shell fell on the duvet.
I put my eye to the chink.
Is that you? I said.

And Jeni Williams[12] moves between realist notation of urban south Wales of a similar kind to Kathryn Gray, but can also extend herself to a vivid narrative about Muslim soldiers in a mountainous landscape, fearful, and suffering from cold and hunger:

The smell of cooking drew them close.
They forgot about chemicals, about halal.
The smell of meat in the cold air,
Even the smell warmed them

When they looked up there were more mountains stretching up,

Snow and behind the grey rock, grey sky.

There was a little rice and nothing else.

The major said we cannot live like this.

It is impossible.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, first published in French in 1975).
2. Kathryn Gray, *The Never-Never* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004).
3. Tiffany Atkinson, *Kink and Particle* (Bridgend: Seren, 2006).
4. Homi K.Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.148.
5. Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, *Not in these Shoes* (London: Picador, 2008), p.6.
6. Samantha Wynne Rhydderch, *Rockclimbing in Silk* (Bridgend: Seren,2001), p.10.
7. Rhian Sadat, *Window Dressing for Hermes* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2004).
8. Zoe Brigley, *The Secret* (Highgreen, Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2007), p.26.
9. Zoe Skoulding, *Remains of a Future City* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008).
10. Zoe Skoulding, *The Mirror Trade* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004).
11. Deborah Kay Davies, *Things You Think I Don't Know* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006).
12. Jeni Williams, *Telling the Orange Juice Story* (Cardigan: Parthian, forthcoming, 2009).