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<b>Authors(s)</b>	Williams, Nerys
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## **GWYNETH LEWIS: Blasphemy, taboo and testing bilingualism.**

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How does a language die? What is the premonitory that leads to that death and who is culpable? Forget momentarily the well-intentioned optimism of draft legislatures and bilingual mandates. Gwyneth Lewis gives the reader an incisive imagining of the final scene with her epitaph in 'Welsh Espionage':

This how languages die- the tongue  
forgetting what it knew by heart, the young

not understanding what, by rights, they should.  
And vital intelligence is gone for good.

If only our representatives read more poetry. That phrase 'vital intelligence' strikes a nerve. Not intellect, or knowledge but intelligence. What could this mean for any writer, especially a writer alert to a bardic tradition and navigating two languages? Intelligence certainly implies an exchange of ideas, scrutiny and in this poem even a collective unconscious. Turning to Ezra Pound writing on a decidedly different poet, T. S. Eliot, gives us a further insight:

The supreme test of a book is that we should feel some unusual intelligence working behind the words... I have expressly written here not 'intellect' but intelligence. There is no intelligence without emotion. The emotion may be anterior or concurrent. There may be emotion without much intelligence, but that does not concern us.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot might make for an uncomfortable and indeed tentative comparison with Lewis's position. But Pound's brief assertion is useful. Emotion and intelligence are bedfellows in good writing. Intelligence is thus not merely analytic but must be charged with feeling. This balance he also warns is a precarious one. Anyone writing in Wales must know how quickly emotion, even the 'muscular' emotions of anger and cultural pride threaten to disperse into a torpor of nostalgia.

If poets have anything to learn from the poetics of Anglo-American Modernism it is facing the challenge of examining that faultline between tradition, technique and addressing an audience. Gwyneth Lewis is a poet who not only reads this faultline well but is alert to the possibilities inherent in its juggling act. The address may shift, the language itself change from Welsh to English, but the intelligence persists. If 'intelligence' in itself sounds an arid word to damn a poet with, I want to stress that Gwyneth Lewis's intelligence is frequently navigated by humour. Humour if used well can have an important informing potential. Lewis herself remarks on humour as having both a pedagogical and cathartic role: 'Good jokes and poetry both allow us to think laterally about touchy subjects so that the mind can grasp solutions way out to the left of its normal field of vision... comedy permits us to deal with painful subjects in a therapeutic way. The taboo needs to be broken, that blasphemy spoken.'<sup>2</sup>

Somewhat neatly Lewis's words draw us into psychoanalytic territory, and one may want to recall Freud's identification of what he terms 'tendentious jokes.' Freud suggests that such jokes are able 'to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression' adding that they 'exhibit the main character of the joke work- that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions.'<sup>3</sup> So perhaps already we can see how humour is always an alluring strategy for a poet. It allows one to examine in Lewis's words, painful or even taboo subjects in a shared space. And humour's pleasure principle of course must not be underestimated. Dependent on that interaction between the speaker and addressee, humour is very different from irony which attempts to hold the reader at arm's length. Irony plays a dual technical game- it allows one to take part in social exchange but can also act as armour against articulating explicit meaning. Irony is 'abstract', as Lewis insists in her characterisation of the soul in the poem 'Menage à Trois' from *Zero Gravity*: 'Considered anodyne/ in social circles, this spinster soul/ was slowly dying of irony/ like a consumption.' Humour by comparison may be seen as a more generous gesture- enticing if not reeling the reader into a sustained engagement.

Of course this is not to suggest that Lewis is merely a poet cracking jokes, making us laugh, performing for our amusement. Lewis's poetry is *not* vaudeville. Indeed it should be emphasised that the range of her work spans from elegiac and devotional meditations to extended lyric sequences. But what interests me in this essay is how humour interacts both productively and dynamically with bilingualism in Lewis's poetry. And invariably the faultline I drew attention to earlier between tradition, technique and addressing an audience is further complicated once we consider the work of a poet writing both in Welsh and English.

Gwyneth Lewis has published three collections of poetry in Welsh: *Sonedau Redsa* ('The Sonnets of Redsa' Gomer 1990); *Cyfrif Un ac Un yn Dri* ('Counting One and One as Three' Barddas 1996) and *Y Llofrudd Iaith* ('The Language Murderer' Barddas 1999). Her English language volumes are *Parables & Faxes* (Bloodaxe 1994) and *Zero Gravity* (Bloodaxe 1998). Forthcoming next year from Bloodaxe is a volume which will include her own translations from the Welsh. The proposed title for this new work is *Keeping Mum*. While the volume will include material which is mined from the Welsh, Lewis emphasises that the new poems must be read as departures from the original, if not new explorations. In considering the inter-relationship between both languages Lewis reflects in one of her essays that:

the smuggling of familiar material from one language to another seemed to me on reflection, too easy a way of exploiting a Welsh subject matter in English. I wanted to be a full English language poet when I wrote in English and not just a translator of material which might not work in Welsh.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps most provocatively Lewis adds that 'translation doesn't just happen between languages- it's sometimes needed within one' (67).

Eventually I will return to this proposition, since it may offer us a way of reading the intersection of humour and bilingualism not only as establishing cultural and linguistic connections but as a fertile textuality in the poetry. Firstly I must introduce the writer. Outside of the poetry

circuit Lewis is possibly now better known as the author of *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book about Depression* (Flamingo, 2002). The book chronicles the immobilising effects of the 'nuclear winter of depression' from the author's own experience. In many ways *Sunbathing in the Rain* is a cross-genre work challenging the formulaic strategy of the self-help manual. The book examines professional advice against personal history, juxtaposes gobbets from poems and newspaper reports with philosophical tracts, gnomic citations and poetics. There is no dogmatic 'cure' in this work. Instead the interchapters of advice serve as reflective panels against a personal narrative history. Far from being a badge of bravery, Lewis is adamant that the work demanded to be written. In her introduction she states 'I am by no means a confessional writer. Writing helps me to understand my life, but it's not a cheap form of therapy.'<sup>5</sup> Instead she suggests that the work is an attempt to 'write the book I was looking for when I was recovering from depression' (xvii).

*Sunbathing in the Rain* may eventually become read as a *bildungsroman*, placing in considerable focus the passage of Lewis's commitment to writing as a full time occupation. Certainly Lewis's commitment to poetry is in no doubt. One senses this immediately from the mention of the workshops she attended with Nobel Laureates Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney at Columbia University. She has also studied with the American poet C. K. Williams. But on another level the practice of poetry forms the referential vectors on which many of the chapters rest. Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (cited in the book) seems to have more than a passing relevance in approaching this poet. Born in Cardiff in 1959 she won the literature medal at the National Urdd Eisteddfod with the volumes *Llwybrau Bywyd* ('Life Passages' 1977) and *Ar y Groesffordd* ('On the Cross Road' 1978).

This would seem to situate Lewis firmly within a distinct literary lineage. But Lewis is not to be pinned down so easily. Her first volume in English, *Parables & Faxes*, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize. She has worked as a documentary television producer at *BBC Wales* Cardiff. Her sequence of poems 'The Mind Museum' has been set to music by John Metcalf and performed by

the National Orchestra of Wales. She has also written a libretto for composer Karl Jenkins. As I write Lewis is currently on a five-year voyage with her husband Leighton on their boat *Jammelah*. The journey traces the voyages of Cardiff coalers to ports around the world. *Jammelah's* passage is chronicled on the web and will feature in a subsequent publication by the poet.<sup>6</sup> This experience promises to offer the reader an ambitious examination of the relationship between a documentary impulse and the practice of poetry.

## II 'My glossolalia shall be my passport'

'Pentecost' the opening poem of *Parables & Faxes* alerts us immediately to the gift of languages or 'glossolalia', which enables the speaker's safe passage through the checkpoints of Europe to Florida. Lewis suggests that this linguistic multiplicity is a passport, a point of entry into a 'perpetual Pentecost'. As is often the case in Lewis's work language is linked to the erotic and the tactile: 'I shall taste the tang/ of travel on the atlas of my tongue/ salt Poland, sour Denmark and sweet Vienna'. This entry into language, or languages in this case, is presented by the poem as a quest for symbolic significance. Perhaps then we are not far from Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the child's initiation into language as a manifestation of a lack; language offers a symbolic order that the subject can represent desire and thus be constituted.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly this is a process which Lewis correlates to an understanding of her own bilingualism in *Sunbathing in the Rain*:

They say that language develops in infants as the baby finds itself alone and calls out for its absent mother. At its very root then, language is about needing your mother and about responding to your desolation without her.... A truly bilingual person has not one mother tongue, but two. Welsh was my blood mother, English my stepmother (40- 42)

But what seems remarkable about this opening poem is how Lewis interrogates different conceptions of language. The poem at once celebrates linguistic multiplicity, its speaking *in tongues* and also seeks some correspondence with the immediate world of things. Fundamentally she plays with the abstract and the concrete. Drawing from a cabalistic notion of language as

supreme order ordained from God, the poem suggests that there is a continuity between how things are represented through language and an innate symbolism:

Then the S in the tail of the crocodile  
will make perfect sense to the bibliophile

who will study this land, his second Torah.  
All this was revealed. Now I wait for the Lord  
to move heaven and earth to send me abroad  
and fulfil His bold promise to Florida.

This desire for a unity between word and object becomes a sort of pilgrim's quest. Lewis is alert to the humorous ambitions of such a journey. Indeed even God himself intervenes at the end, closing the Atlantic, bridging the gap between continents of Europe and the Americas, allowing the speaker's immediate passage. The poem eventually points towards a landscape where there was once not only geographical unity, but a divine linguistic order.

Does this poem help us with our understanding of bilingualism? Certainly this tension between linguistic multiplicity and a unified order appears at points in Lewis's early poetry. Perhaps we could read this pilgrim's quest as an impossible nostalgia for a numinous language, where signifiers and signifieds are melded together. Or even a language that is not an elegy for absence. But turning to the sequence 'Welsh Espionage' might help us to navigate with greater clarity the immediate cultural clash between English and Welsh:

Welsh was the mother tongue, English was his.  
He taught her the body by fetishist quiz,  
father and daughter on the bottom stair:  
Dy benelin yw *elbow*, dy wallt di yw *hair*,

*chin* yw dy *ên* di, *head* yw dy *ben*.'  
She promptly forgot, made him do it again.  
Then he folded her *dwrn* and, calling it fist,  
held it to show her knuckles and wrist.

'Let's keep it from Mam, as a special surprise.

Lips are *gwefusau*, *llygaid* are eyes.'  
 Each part he touched in their secret game  
 thrilled as she whispered its English name.

The mother was livid when she was told.  
 'We agreed, no English till four years old!'  
 She listened upstairs, her head in a whirl.  
 Was it such a bad thing to be Daddy's girl?

Many critics have commented upon the suggestion of sexual abuse in this poem. What is certainly apparent is that the site where the two languages intersect is the body. This makes for a certain corporeality in the poem, the two languages become body parts or what Lewis points to as a 'fetishist quiz.' On first glance the translation seems straightforward enough, but on closer consideration one realises that both languages are jostling in this poem for ascendancy and power. Italics switch their roles; pedagogy is informed through the English and a certain active agency in Welsh. One has only to think here of the symbolic power of '*dwrn*'. The duality of what the poet refers to as having two mother tongues is underwritten with extreme unease and guilt. Lewis's own commentary on the poem is insightful:

I suspect that this sinister suggestion was a way for me to explore the discomfort I felt at being born between two cultures. Early on I had an acute sense of the cultural clash between the social values tied up in both languages. I suppose, that in some way, I still feel guilty about being Daddy's girl and writing in English at all. (59)

To harness the poem solely to a reading of sexual abuse would be to narrow its focus. Lewis examines the complex process of establishing and transgressing boundaries be they sexual, cultural or linguistic. Importantly in *Sunbathing in the Rain* Lewis states that 'You can't inhabit a language until you've loved in it' (43). The attention in this poem to inhabiting language through the body may draw some correspondence with Roland Barthes emphasis on the erotic corporeality of language. In a deliciously charged sequence from *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes suggests that 'Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tips of my words.'<sup>8</sup> Certainly on reflection the poem's resistance to a singular



reading (malign or benign), indicates that it is precisely this ambiguous relationship between the two languages which the poem is depends upon.

### **III 'Translation doesn't just happen between languages- it's sometimes needed within one.'**

In what way does Lewis's bilingualism inform her poetic practice? How can we read that cultural clash or possibly intersection she mentions? Thinking about this comparatively may help our investigation. One option taken by non-Welsh speaking poets is to examine idiomatic possibilities, or how dialect can give a certain texture to the poetry giving it a regional identity. Formally perhaps we could even think of the adaptation of technical feats such as *proest* and strains of *cynganedd* in the writing. This could be the cultural intersection which Deryn Rhys Jones points to as a consideration of the dualities of 'Welshness' and 'Englishness'. She suggests that the future for such writing may be found in establishing correspondences between binary oppositions. In her words this would be a poetics which 'while celebrating differences, works towards the exploration and interrogation of connections.'<sup>9</sup>

As Rhys-Jones suggests, the writing of poetry in Wales should not be shackled to some nationalistic monolith. Indeed such an ambition would be an irrelevant if not highly dubious aim. Lewis herself remarks that 'Nationalism seems to me like a distraction for the poet' (65). Yet I will suggest that our context of bilingualism complicates further this reading of exchange or interrogation between identities and differences. There are occasional *resistances* in the text of a bilingual poet which cannot be clearly addressed solely as a focus upon mobility between cultural identities.

In thinking about this I am drawn to a quixotic and perplexing statement by Lewis herself. She proposes that 'If you're truly bilingual it's not that there are two languages in your world, but that not everybody understands the whole of your personal speech' (58). Lewis is not simply

writing about neologisms or grammatical deviancy here. Perhaps one way of considering her words is thinking about bilingualism as a sort of simultaneity in the writing. And by this I do not mean the inclusion of Welsh words in an English language text. Tzvetan Todorov urges us not to think of bilingualism as two distinctive languages operating independently. Instead he suggests that we must approach bilingualism as the simultaneous existence of more than one cultural model, or what he gestures to as a form of 'dialogism'. This in turn becomes a sort of excess or intractable multiplicity:

Placing bilingualism within the framework of dialogism also allows us, rather than turning it into a purely linguistic question, to consider it in direct relation with two phenomena: the problem of the co-existence of cultural models within the same society, and the internal multiplicity of personality.<sup>10</sup>

Todorov's essay gives a troubling prognosis for any bilingual poet. But what Lewis does with considerable aplomb is to harness such excess or multiplicity in the text to humour. This is what is strikingly innovative about her poetry. An easier and more seductive option would be to berate this cultural confusion, or privilege one model above another. Humour to reiterate liberates anxiety, releases pleasure and importantly in Lewis's poetry allows her to celebrate the multiple identities that different cultural models exert. One need only consider the devouring compulsion of the speaker's reading habits in 'Oxford Bootlicker' from the extended sequence 'Parables and Faxes'. In this poem the speaker starts off eating a religious scroll, moves to Tolstoy and 'nourishing' Kafka, then proceeds to 'lick the fat' from all the other books in the vicinity's shops. Religious symbolism, knowledge and fantasy intertwine as the speaker states:

I am voracious  
for the Word- a lexicon is wine  
to me and wafer, so that home, at night,  
I ruminate on all that's mine

inside these messages. I am the fruit  
of God's expressiveness to man.

Indeed the speaker imagines that once she is 'ripe' multiple languages, texts and even a metropolis of inhabitants will be evacuated from her body: '*then* you'll see the caravans,/ processions, fleets, parades come from my mouth/ as I spew up cities, colonies of words/ and flocks of sentences with full-stop birds.' This is certainly taking Todorov's internal multiplicity to an extreme but satisfyingly humorous conclusion.

It is worth gesturing here to Lewis's Welsh language volume *Llofrudd Iaith* which can be read as a poetic murder mystery whodunit. In one of the final sections of this work, 'Y Munudau Olaf' (The Final Minutes) we have an equally voluminous evacuation from a body. But this scene is at the deathbed of the Welsh language and the connotations are sinister. Lewis dramatises the figure vomiting a cultural heritage. The sayings and nouns in this poem are not only idiomatic but have complex etymologies and irreplaceable linguistic figurations. One has only to consider the noun '*Anghydfurfiath*' (non-conformism) which both connotes an established religious nomination and a challenge to orthodoxy. Such phrases and names inscribe a historical continuity if not a collective memory. Complexly then, the same core image from 'Parables and Faxes' once transposed into this immediate cultural context has a malveolent edge. We are very far from humour here. But curiously this transcription of the figure's final stream of words asserts an emphatic celebration of the Welsh language. Lewis reflects that:

Being part of a dying culture is, paradoxically, of great value to a poet, if you're interested in ultimate questions about language and the nature of reality... The challenge in all cases is to sing as true as possible a song out into the dark before that final extinction of shimmering consciousness, before the brightness falls from the air. (65).

Most importantly the intersection of humour and bilingualism in Lewis's poetry establishes a crucial discursive framework for the reader. Humour as I suggested earlier depends on the reader's interaction and reciprocation. 'The Love of Furniture' from the volume *Zero Gravity* is at

once both ludic and serious about cultural heritage. In this poem the speaker decides that the latest in *haute couture* is a Welsh dresser and declares 'Not everyone has hardwood to wear, / a set of brass handled drawers/ But I have inheritance. So there.' Similarly another poem draws from a Welsh humorous saying which Lewis translates as "'Well!' said Will to the wall/ but the wall said nothing at all to Will'. But this act of translation runs away in the poem, and is extended to changing contexts which rely on a resonant phonetic play. We are told for instance that: 'Once it had started to talk, the wall/ couldn't stop itself. Will listened well' and 'all was well between Will and the wall/ so we all came to sit and stare with Will.'

These associative patternings remind one of Gertrude Stein's attention to repetition as a form of 'insistence'. But unlike Stein, Lewis prioritises the discursive aspect of writing. Usefully in this context Barthes suggests that 'the threat of Fine Art is a fate which hangs over any language not based exclusively on the speech of society'. He adds that 'the disintegration of language can only lead to the silence of writing.'<sup>11</sup> Syntactical disruption and the radical dislocation of language on the page are perhaps not viable options for a bilingual poet., especially one sharply attuned to the literal silencing of a language. Lewis chooses discursiveness over estrangement. Humour also offers the reader a generous gesture, a way into understanding the cultural complexity of a poet inhabiting two languages. In both *Parables & Faxes* and *Zero Gravity* there is certainly *no* stable position from which to commentate on either language in isolation. As the Epilogue to *Parables & Faxes* reminds us, such a position would restrict Lewis's poetry to '*a partial vision*' and halt a productive conversation '*scarcely begun*'.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound 'T.S Eliot' in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber &Faber, 1960) p.420. Originally published in 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Gwyneth Lewis 'Tenuous and Precarious: The Comic Muse' <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr88-3/lewis.htm>. Originally published in *Poetry Review: Fanfare for the Comic Muse* issue 88.3 (Autumn 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Pelican Freud Library Vol 6: Jokes and their relationship to the unconscious* (London: Pelican, 1976) p. 185

<sup>4</sup> Lewis 'Whose coat is that jacket? Whose hat is that cap?' *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art : Crossing Borders* Issue 27 (1996-7) 58-68 (p. 63). Further references are embedded in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Sunbathing in the Rain* (London: Flamingo, 2002) p. xv. Further references are embedded in the text.

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<sup>6</sup> The website address for access to *Jameelah's* journey is [gwynethlewis.com](http://gwynethlewis.com)

<sup>7</sup> see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* ed. Jacques Alain Miller trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Talking' in *A Lover's Discourse* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979) p. 73

<sup>9</sup> Deryn Rhys Jones, 'Editorial' *Poetry Wales* 32.1 (October 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'Bilingualism, Dialogism and Schizophrenia', *New Formations*, 17 (Summer 1992) 16-25 (p. 16)

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, 'Writing and Silence' in *Writing Degree Zero* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) p.74