

‘To speak in new ways’: Class and Poetry in Wales Since 1979

Hywel Dix

I

Shortly before Margaret Thatcher’s first re-election as Prime Minister in June 1983, one of Wales’s best-known working-class writers, Raymond Williams, was asked to give a paper entitled ‘Problems of the Coming Period’ to a meeting of the Socialist Society, London. In this chapter, I wish to use Williams’s paper to provide some of the social and historical contexts in which Welsh poetry since 1979 can be understood.

At the heart of Williams’s paper is one fundamental argument. Namely, that during the political onslaughts of the Thatcher years, a broad version of British national interest which placed primary value in human beings in their communities was replaced by a narrow definition that equated British interest with the financial interest of a certain sector of the whole society. Williams’s socialist political activism was then focussed on identifying means for re-establishing the prior, authentic, notion of community and hence of national interest:

there is this confusion and misrecognition because of the very specific situation of a nation, if it can still be called that, which has in all serious senses lost its confident social identity and its sense of its present and future; and which is, therefore, (this being the paradox) all the more vulnerable to an artificial and even false, in any case a very narrow, version of what it is.<sup>i</sup>

Williams's idea of a false version of the national interest informs many of the critical and political debates of the period in question. Just prior to Margaret Thatcher's original election in 1979, Tom Nairn had published his seminal study, *The Break-Up of Britain*. In it, Nairn provided long-term analysis of the causes and symptoms of the crisis in capitalist society in Britain. He was particularly struck by the simultaneous growth of a wealthy and powerful financial sector, and of a dispossessed and alienated working class.

In *The Break-Up of Britain*, Nairn sought to answer one fundamental question. Why, he wondered, did political opposition to the British state which had plunged the country into such a crisis emerge in the forms of nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales, rather than as socialist opposition to capitalist society? Nairn explored the possibility that these counter-nationalisms in the Celtic periphery were somehow more in tune with an authentic sense of national identity based on culture and political traditions, than the hard-line capitalist logic of Thatcher's 'national interest', which was based on the success or failure of certain British businesses in the context of a global economy.

In the end, Nairn veered away from the myth of cultural authenticity, arguing instead that opposition to the centralist British state emerged in Scotland and Wales as part of the wider crisis in capitalist society. In other words, Raymond Williams's notion of cultural authenticity might be disabling to a genuinely alternative socialist politics. Leftist intellectuals throughout the 1980s were quick to identify supposedly false versions of British identity, but somehow less eloquent when it came to suggesting what a true or fully articulated version of that identity might be.

The contradiction arises partly from a conceptual weakness in the historical analysis of the left at the time. It also arises out of a broader contradiction, in the organisation and operation of international capitalist society. Capitalist society by the 1980s was already becoming fully international in scope and outlook. Companies and corporations were able to move goods, jobs, money and livelihoods around the globe in an instant, bypassing national boundaries and the perimeters of existing nation-states. The world's largest corporations, active across the world, could even appear to be more powerful than mere national governments.

The term by which we normally understand this process is *globalisation*. We have become accustomed to thinking of globalisation as the coming to international dominance of a competitive capitalist market economy, founded on profit and loss, winners and losers. ~~But~~ since the early formulation of socialism into a political doctrine, one of its central tenets had been that the inequalities and injustices of capitalist society can only be defeated by a worldwide revolution of the proletariat. Hence ~~Marx's~~ rallying call ~~in~~ of the Communist Manifesto: 'Working men ~~ers~~ of ~~all countries,~~ the world unite<sup>21</sup>ii'. Globalisation, on this reckoning, is not a term that refers to the global preponderance of capitalist society ~~as the end point of history~~. On the contrary, *globalisation* creates the conditions for a radical socialist opposition to it. It is a matter of great significance that this implicit interpretation of the concept of globalisation historically ante-dates the meaning that has come to be attached to it since the end of the Cold War.

In other words, rather than simply referring to the spread of capitalist society, globalisation is a contested term, and a contested practice. This foundational contradiction impacts on the more local contradiction identified by Nairn in the 1970s.

The crisis of Britain's industrial society is a crisis in capitalist society, and yet opposition to it appeared to emerge in nationalist, rather than socialist, terms. This is precisely the trajectory followed by post-Cold War nationalisms in the former U.S.S.R. and the Balkans. One by one, emerging nations announced their arrival on the world stage by jettisoning their commitment to actually existing socialism and by participating in the emerging global free market economy. National definition was articulated in terms of this participation in a political, economic and militaristic global system that was, ironically, fully committed to transcending and superseding traditional models of the nation-state.

~~So it was also in~~In Scotland and Wales, ~~n-~~Nationalist movements emerged ~~at precisely~~ the historic moment when the nation-state ~~was~~ losing its association with organised socialism, and when new definitions of the national interest depended ~~ed~~ entirely on the success of a nation's financial institutions in the global economy. The hard-right that emerged in Britain, ~~the USA, France, Germany and Japan~~ during the 1980s increasingly defined 'national interest' in this way. ~~The result of this dominant paradigm was that for emerging nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales — as in Eastern Europe — socialism as a political creed came to seem something of a mismatch with those very national movements that might otherwise have been expected to advocate it.~~ Hence Tom Nairn's confusion about the emergence of nationalist, rather than socialist, movements in opposition to Thatcher's sense of British national interest. Hence also Raymond Williams's sense of how the conservative right had succeeded in assimilating national interest to the transnational economy. ~~If the British-state had become identified with capitalist economics, then opposition to that unitary state was also likely to take on an anti-capitalist character. As a result, the nationalisms that emerged in Scotland and Wales were more likely to be socialist in character than was elsewhere the case. This limited the~~

~~ability of emerging nations to articulate their interest or identity in any other than capitalist terms.~~

This is very relevant to the situation in the Welsh valleys in the 1980s. Once industry has either closed or been moved to a distant country, the people left behind are left with a locally visible sense of injustice, rather than a global vision of how to resist capitalist society. This might become identified with a nationalist alternative politics, as in Scotland and Wales, rather than with organised international socialism as such. But it is then a nationalism committed to ~~redressing the iniquities of a participation in the transnational global economy, or to put it more succinctly, a self-superseding nationalism.~~ Yet because global capitalism has become so powerful, those iniquities are not so easily redressed. Nationalist movements can then be folded back into a kind of cultural – rather than political and economic - nationalism, as a compensation for ~~theis failurefrustration.~~ Perry Anderson has argued in *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* that cultural politics emerged as a discipline precisely to compensate for the defeat of the political left in the broader political arena.<sup>iii</sup> In Wales, the past emphasis on the cultural trappings of nationalism, especially on the Welsh language and poetic tradition, might ironically have deflected the course of political progress towards national autonomy. This has been very evident in Wales in the past. From this point, it can seem like a short step to equating counter-nationalist political movements with true or authentic notions of cultural identity, and thereby overlooking the global prerogative of organised socialism.

Raymond Williams revealed himself to be aware of the disabling nature of myths of authenticity when he came to address, like Nairn, the crisis in Thatcherite capitalist society. Discussing the closure of industry, unemployment, social inequality,

homelessness, escalating debt, and the resurgence of racism, xenophobia and intolerance of all kinds, Williams suggested that:

many of the negative signs which ought to be alarming – that kind of jingoism; that kind of acquiescence; a quite new kind of submissiveness to the deliberate reduction, in some cases destruction, of people's lives, of whole communities – these should be seen as factors which arise from the dislocation, rather than the alternative reading, as the evidence of some essence of the people which Thatcher has in some way managed to distil. At least if one reads it that way... then one may begin to connect with those factors which are capable of identification and connection if we can learn to speak in new ways.<sup>iv</sup>

Williams shows himself to be aware that there is no such thing as an essential British identity. By implication, this must also be true of Scotland and Wales. Instead of being side-tracked by the authenticity myth, Williams shows that the definition of national interest is contingent, humanly generated, and disputed.

During a long career as a literary professor, Raymond Williams did not write much about poetry. I wish to argue here, however, that a certain notion of the *poetic* occupied a central place in his, and much socialist, thought. As he told *Poetry Wales* in 1977, his interest in reading poetry was 'a kind of interest... in the historical variation of words' which was also then 'an interest in a specific kind of history' and hence in changing social and political relationships.<sup>v</sup> He went on to say that one of the aspects he most highly valued in the work of Karl Marx was that Marx 'writes marvellously when his

imagination is touched historically or when he becomes indignant or moved, and the whole thing comes to life and you can feel him writing.<sup>vi</sup> Or in the words of his interviewer, John Powell Ward, Marx's political writings are most engaging when the reader is 'gripped by its poetry.'<sup>vii</sup> Only a properly poetic imagination can generate a sense of how existing capitalist relations might be transformed, and so take the first step towards achieving such a transformation.

This points to the utility of understanding the political onslaughts suffered in the Welsh valleys during the 1980s through a reading of some of the poetry produced in them. It is the capacity of the poetic imagination to call all notions of authenticity into question, positing instead qualities of flexibility and ambiguity, and hence enabling the important practice of political opposition to occur within the imagination itself. I wish to argue that Williams's metaphor of learning to speak in new ways might provide a more appropriate conceptual framework for understanding working class poetry in Wales since 1979, than his rather simplistic and underdeveloped notion of 'cultural authenticity' in the national context.

## II

One of the most prolific poets of the Welsh valleys since 1979 is Mike Jenkins. Jenkins's first collection of poetry, *The Common Land*, was published by *Poetry Wales* in 1981. It was followed two years later by *Empire of Smoke*, and in 1986 by *Invisible Times*.

Jenkins has produced new collections fairly regularly ever since. The dominant themes of these three early collections cluster around the political issues which Raymond Williams identified: the destruction of the working environment of the valleys; the human cost of

such destruction in terms of poverty and despair; concerns over the development of nuclear technology and the potential effect of this upon the natural environment; deeply felt protests over the Falklands War; and matters of racism and violence. Indeed Jenkins's poetry underlines the truth of Raymond Williams's argument that these issues are not easily separable from one another, and that they have to be understood as elements of a contemporary whole.

The title poem from Jenkins's *Empire of Smoke* is a sequence, in ten sections, exploring the interrelation between these different historical matters. In fact, 'Empire of Smoke' could be described as a sequence of ten distinct poems, each with its own title, each in some way exploring the theme of post-industrial decay in the valleys around Merthyr Tydfil, and hence also exploring the contemporary evisceration of the aspirations of the past. The poem-sequence seems to be a form in which Mike Jenkins is particularly at home. His subsequent poems 'The Lark and the Freedom Fighter', on the death of Ulster hunger striker Bobby Sands, and 'A Dissident Voice', on the mysterious death of the anti-nuclear campaigner Hilda Murrell, are both couched in this form. Mike Jenkins uses the poem-sequence as a form capable, simultaneously, of expressing connections through juxtaposition, and the inherent fragmentations and struggle to make connections which characterise contemporary society.

Jenkins begins 'Empire of Smoke' with a recollection of his childhood:

I was born in the crater of this town  
below a ring of tips and heaps  
which glower down.<sup>viii</sup>

In describing the town as a 'crater', Jenkins is underlining the fact that destruction had already come Merthyr by the time of the speaker's birth. There is no idealisation of a supposedly glorious past here. Instead, Jenkins uses the poem-sequence to generate a long-term understanding of the rise and growth, and later, the decline and closure, of industrial life in the valleys. He is interested in exploring the human implications of these historical developments. He is also interested in exploring potential futures, positive and negative, with a particularly strong apocalyptic vision.

In the related poem 'Quaker's Yard,' Jenkins suggests that the valleys themselves are doubly scarred, first by industrialisation and then by the closure and destruction of industry. He draws a parallel between this scarring and nuclear catastrophe: 'Hiroshima landscape flanking/ the coke-ovens, where stunted/ and charred trees contort their limbs/ in a paralysed gesture of agony.'<sup>ix</sup> Throughout the collection *Empire of Smoke*, Jenkins again and again returns to the nightmarish destruction of the physical and human landscape of the valleys that was caused by de-industrialisation:

The inheritance is at Dowlais Top,  
A black planet of scattered mounds  
where hardly a tuft of grass  
can take root; where sheep  
turn grey, branded by the soil;  
where mountain ponies must bed their hooves  
making arches for the wind to go through;  
where no person sups draughts of air

to see in perspective the valley's stepped roofs.<sup>x</sup>

Jenkins's Merthyr occupies a black world where no animal or human can flourish. There is no simplistic opposition between idealised childhood and gloomy present. That childhood itself was already struggling under the savage heritage of the past. Accordingly, Jenkins pursues his historic imagination even further back into the past, to a time remoter even from his own childhood, to explore the connections between the past and the present. The nineteenth-century industrialisation of Merthyr, comes to stand as a moment of hope and aspiration, an opportunity for creative cultural and industrial improvement, which retrospectively can be seen to have been wasted:

Merthyr seemed a town of hope then:  
Cefn and Pontsarn viaducts (relics  
of an age when the train corseted  
Victorian Britain) joined the mountains  
to the valleys; stone fingers  
supporting a forehead of cliff.

Ghosts were only a handshake away:  
Men harvesting ideas from Voltaire  
And Tom Paine...<sup>xi</sup>

Voltaire and Tom Paine stand for the idealism of a past long betrayed. In the present there is not hope, but poverty and deprivation:

“More dinner-times than dinners” – my father’s words  
lead me to the river. Sea-gulls draw masts  
in the sky there, take my eyes sailing like Madoc.  
There are new continents in the stars  
but no place for my hunger: my vision  
is framed in the window where I worked.<sup>xii</sup>

The stars are an uneasy symbol of future aspiration. It is in the stars alone that any hope of betterment can be glimpsed. But in this savage fact lies cause for sombre meditation on the futility of contemporary hope. Seagulls, like balloons, rise up into the stars of the future, but it is only in the myth of Madoc’s discovery of America that Jenkins can see any real prospect of escape from the nightmarish landscape of the apocalypse. The myth expresses something of Wales’s dream of nationhood, at the same time that it also hints at the unrealised nature of this. This poetic image encapsulates the political dilemma of the period in which nationalist movements were only able to emerge on a world stage – and a world economy – where national parameters were increasingly irrelevant.

This historical context is explored with significant poetic economy in Oliver Reynolds’s poem, ‘To Whom It May Concern.’ Here, Reynolds adopts the persona of a London civil servant, drafting a letter announcing the closure of the Welsh Valleys. The mimicry of government quango-speak is again imbued with a deep political and historic irony:

Dear Jones/ Jenkins/ Rees/ Roberts

(delete whichever is inapplicable)

as your Secretary of State

let me fill you in on your future:

you don't have one...

The last few jobs will soon be gone:

women making tellies for the Nips and men

taking tourists round the mining museums

(ex-NUM members need not apply)...<sup>xiii</sup>

'To Whom It May Concern' is a poem about the effects of globalisation in an age when 'globalisation' refers to the capacity of multi-national corporations to transfer jobs, activities, money and images around the world at very short notice. The only jobs that are to remain in the former industrial strongholds on which the strength of empire had been built are as manufacturers in Japanese factories, or as guides in industrial museums. During the period of de-industrialisation, the economies of the Welsh Valleys became dependent on inward investment via Welsh Development Agency grants to encourage overseas manufacturing companies to establish their factories in the area. This sapped the ability of the working people in the valleys to organise effective opposition to capitalist society, even when they were the most demonstrable victims of it. That this quiescence should be fostered by an organisation calling itself the Welsh Development Agency underlines the extent to which emergent nationalisms since the end of the Cold War have only been able to operate by committing themselves to the global free market economy.

In other words, counter-nationalisms can only emerge through engagement in an international network of capitalist relations that functionally overrides national parameters at a stroke. They are, that is, self-abnegating nationalisms.

Oliver Reynolds shows himself to be aware of the irony of this when he puts into the mouth of his Whitehall persona a proposed ‘solution’ to the problems of poverty and economic dependence resulting from the process of de-industrialisation in the Welsh valleys. The proposed solution is sharp and immediate:

The obvious answer to all this  
is something that combines  
maximum security for your future  
with investment on a large scale...

We have endeavoured, at great expense,  
to find an area rich in those qualities...

Sufferers from *hiraeth* (I trust that’s right)  
needn’t fret: Patagonia’s just hours away  
and there are echoes of home in your Islands’  
new name – Falkland Fawr and Falkland Fach.<sup>xiv</sup>

Reynolds’s persona proposes to depopulate the entire industrial valleys region, announcing the closure not only of the mines and factories, but of the whole of Wales. He then proposes to ship the residual working class population who continue to live there off

to the Falklands Islands, where they can be kept at a safe distance. Is this the logical endpoint of the work of the Welsh Development Agency? Ostensibly it exists to develop the national interest, while in Reynolds's ironic account of it, it has quite the opposite effect, announcing the foreclosure of the whole Welsh nation while also foreclosing political opposition to the centralistic British state. The nationalism that it perpetuates, in other words, is self-abnegating. It can only proclaim its own existence by working in a multinational network of relations which increasingly consider national identities to be irrelevant. It can only voice its opposition to the association of national interest with the financial sector in a way that ties it in to that very association.

### III

Oliver Reynolds invests his proposal to ship the whole of Wales over to the Falklands Islands with shrill political irony. He makes a conjunction between the process of de-industrialisation in the Welsh Valleys, and aggressive militarism overseas. These are both elements of the supposed national interest generated by the capitalist Thatcherite right that ruled Britain at the time. In fact, the Falklands War is a common subject for Welsh socialist poetry written during the 1980s. Significantly, it is also a nexus around which cluster different and contested versions of Britain's national interest and national identity during the period in question.

To Raymond Williams, the war had the ontological status of a media-managed spectacle. The Thatcher government had spent the first two or three years of its administration bombarding Britain with an anti-state rhetoric in matters of social welfare and public spending. This was suddenly combined with an aggressive pro-state rhetoric in the sphere of policing at home and military sanction overseas. There followed a quite different kind

of bombardment. The signals being given off by the political machinery of government were contradictory, overloaded, difficult to discern.

Perplexed by the combination of pro-state rhetoric in military aggression with anti-state rhetoric in matters of social welfare, Williams simply could not reconcile the versions of British identity he saw perpetuated in media reports during the Falklands episode with his own, less superficial, understanding of Britain. In 'Problems of the Coming Period' he addresses this difficulty:

It is not because the British people are excessively nationalist and self-confident that you got the absurd jingoism of the Falklands episode. The kind of spectacular consumerist militarism which that episode was – with all the guns going off eight thousand miles away, thus with war reduced, for all but the unfortunate people who were sent there, to television screens, rhetoric, flags and so on – simply cannot be defined with other versions of nationalism, let alone of national identity. It is in absence and distance that this kind of artificial and superficial image of the nation can be generated and temporarily adopted.<sup>xv</sup>

The Conservative government that led Britain into the Falklands War identified British interest exclusively in military terms. As a result of this, a new form of British identity was born in the popular media of the time: British, chauvinistic, hungry for war. Sensing that this was a temporarily adopted image of British identity, rather than an essential characteristic, several Welsh poets sought to explain how such an image could be generated and adopted, and how it coexisted with other versions of interest and identity.

Mike Jenkins has written several poems indicting the pointless brutality of the Falklands War. In 'Military Rule,' for example, Jenkins adopts the persona of an upper-class army commander, Rivers-Darby, praising his troops: 'we fought a decent campaign./ We didn't even call it *war*./ We made rules and broke them/ so invented some more.'<sup>xvi</sup> In 'Tinker's War,' Jenkins expands on the Falklands theme, this time through a different persona, that of an unranked member of the armed forces:

At school, I obsessively drew  
Union flags: distant windows,  
disparate thoughts. Now, at last,  
they move as one:  
our Task Force parting the waters.<sup>xvii</sup>

'Tinker's War' follows a large historic sweep, as the persona imagines his schoolboy days dreaming of the adventures that lay in wait outside distant windows. This theme is marshalled like a symphony into a poetic narrative of Tinker's present circumstances. There is great irony in the use of the Union flag as a symbol of Tinker's boyhood dreams of adventure. The flags are only able to move in harmony – 'as one' – when they are hoisted on the warships which are carrying Tinker to the war and hence to his moment of disillusionment with the concept of imperial adventures. This disillusionment is registered in outright fear, as Tinker imagines himself blown to pieces in the war:

This may be the last thing  
before the missiles come.

What will you think of me,  
you fish who fin past  
a strange, thin creature  
with smudged markings?  
Will you accidentally gulp  
This piece of England?<sup>xviii</sup>

Unlike the soldier who imagines a ‘corner of a foreign field / That is forever England’ in Rupert Brooke’s First World War sonnet, Tinker imagines himself blown to bits, sinking into the ocean and being consumed by the fish who live there. This fear causes Tinker to lose his romantic image of adventure and begin to question the validity of the war:

Malvinas.  
Falklands.  
Surely somebody can interpret?  
  
But who am I talking to?  
This paper will disintegrate  
and words rise up as insubstantial bubbles:  
the breath before we drown.<sup>xix</sup>

The sudden introduction of the Argentinean name for the islands over which the war was fought – and which had previously only been referred to by their English name in the poem – emphasises the new perspective of questioning that the character of Tinker imaginatively cultivates at the conclusion of the poem. It seems to have come too late,

however. The only question he is able to ask is: 'who am I talking to?' The poem then becomes folded back in that earlier metaphor of the drowning civilisation, as Jenkins imagines the very paper on which Tinker is writing sinking with his ship, disintegrating, and emitting the last bubbles of breath from a choking civilisation. The helplessness with which Tinker is portrayed is in stark contrast to the insouciant attitude of Commander Rivers-Darby in Jenkins's related poem, 'Military Rule.' Rivers-Darby dismisses the loss of Argentinean life as insignificant, and goes on to make a similar point about British casualties:

And ours?... well, what a sacrifice!  
(particularly the Welshies)  
for all that is good in England...  
er... sorry... Britain, old chap...  
the Queen, Ascot, Henley and Lords...  
the list of our greatness is endless.<sup>xx</sup>

Oliver Reynolds had employed political irony in his proposal to ship the Welsh working class out to the Falklands. This irony is taken to a full extent in the Jenkins poem, where we see what awaits those workers when they get there: casual slaughter. Reynolds uses his poem to suggest a tie-in between the political onslaughts suffered by the working class during the Thatcher years at home, and the militaristic frenzy of the Falklands war abroad. 'To Whom it May Concern' juxtaposes the two, and therefore allows Jenkins's poetic imagination to move from a tightly bounded valleys landscape and open a global perspective on capitalist society.

#### IV

The global perspective had been an important element of working class struggle since the earliest political writings of Marx and Engels, which had emphasised the transnational solidarity of an international proletariat. Reynolds explores this concept of global solidarity in his transliteration of a Brecht poem, 'A Worker Reads and Asks':

Who built Thebes with its seven gates?  
Books say it was kings.  
Did kings hew and haul the rock?  
And Babylon razed again and again,  
Who rebuilt it again and again? Where  
in gilded Lima did the builders live?  
When the Great Wall of China was finished  
and it was evening, where did the masons go?<sup>xxi</sup>

The poem employs political irony again. That the image of kings hewing and hauling rock should seem as implausible as it does is a measure of the extent to which the history of great civilisations has tended to mystify the workers on whose labour the civilisations depend. Reynolds goes on:

A victory per page.  
Who cooked the victory feast?

A great man per decade.

Who paid the bill?

So much to read.

So much to ask.<sup>xxii</sup>

There is a political pun intended in the line ‘a victory per page.’ Reynolds’s worker suggests that military victories and the monuments which enshrine them can be read about on every page of a history book. Page also has the meaning of worker, or servant. By punning on this meaning, the poem also suggests that these glories are not possible without the unacknowledged labourers whose physical work creates them. Reynolds adopts the persona of a worker reading the histories of great civilisation and wondering how the workers have come to be left so entirely out of the accounts.

A more sophisticated version of this technique can be found in Landeg White’s poem, ‘The Brown Girl.’ Landeg White, born in south Wales in 1940, is a writer who has travelled, taught and studied colonial history in Trinidad, Malawi, and Portugal. His politically charged poems explore the economic hardship and political terror that constricts the lives of neo-colonial societies in several former Portuguese colonies in Africa which have fallen under the rule of dictatorships.

‘The Brown Girl’ is about a girl in just such a society, reading a Portuguese translation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and measuring the veracity of the novel against the reality of her own life. The poem is at first difficult to read, for there are two different threads to its narrative:

When, on the molasses barge reading Austen's  
*Orgulho e Preconceito*, she was even then,  
in the swamplands, plotting houses on envelopes,

*Reader, we begin this poem a long way  
back, with the brown girl, just twenty-one,  
on a flooded tributary of the green Zambesi,*

sketching rooms for family, for sleeping  
and cooking, and a hatchet-hewn  
fig wood table, seating not less than twenty,

*steaming upriver, the reed plumes  
whitening at dawn.*

in a long room with a ceiling fan and wooden  
shutters, a veranda with anthuriums  
in milk tins...<sup>xxiii</sup>

The stanzas written in ordinary type are dispersed and interrupted by the italicised stanzas. In this way, White is able to make his poem provide an oblique meta-poetic commentary on itself. He uses the starting point of a woman reading a class text of western civilisation, and applying it to her own life. In the process, the original text itself,

and hence the civilisation for which it stands, is held up to ironic introspection. *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the English language's archetypal 'Dear Reader' novels. White uses this form and transforms it into a 'Dear Reader' poem. In the second stanza, he interrupts himself to explain to us, 'Reader, we begin this poem a long way back.' The form of *Pride and Prejudice* is in this way transformed into a new form. The girl reading the novel tries to imagine her own Darcys and Bingleys, her own Pemberley and Netherfield. She thus begins to imagine constructing her own country house, and this is conveyed through a detailed inventory of the rooms of the house in question. *Stanza* literally means *room*, so that these rooms also meta-poetically constitute the stanzas of the poem.

The attempt to imagine an English country house and the characters who people it on the banks of the Zambezi is not without considerable irony. Again, this irony is built into the poem, as at one level, we are told of the black girl's dream of owning a house, and at another, we are told that she is mocked for this:

... *giggling women*...

*semaphore to the bargemen their satiric  
invitations, as she turns the page, prettily  
incensed by Darcy's too proud proposal.*

Such things are hardly to be written of...<sup>xxiv</sup>

The indignant line ‘such things are hardly to be written of’ seems to refer to the dream house. It could equally refer to Darcy’s too proud proposal, or to the unkind mocking to which the African girl is subjected for daring to dream. It also seems to be a further literary allusion to *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Lady Catherine de Burgh pours scorn on the idea of humble Elizabeth marrying elevated Darcy, by suggesting that such things are hardly to be thought of. White mobilises the form of a classic text and uses that basic structure to formulate a new text, and hence a new vision of the world, out of it. ‘The Black Girl’ concludes with the girl looking forward to the time when her own house will not seem like a distant impossibility:

... she  
pledges in this foreign corner, hallowing  
in her mother’s name, this plot before she builds.<sup>xxv</sup>

Is the ‘plot’ which the black girl hallows the plot of the novel she has been reading, or the plot of land on which she intends to build? It is on the narrative structure of the novel that her concrete dreams of constructing a house are built, so that by the end of the poem, it is impossible to separate its different layers. They have become ironically entangled. White uses a meta-poetic commentary to draw attention to the relationship between the content of his writing and contemporary social and historical structures outside it.

White develops this practice in his later poem, ‘Sunday Worship.’ The title of the poem is morally and politically ironic, as the worship he refers to is not a visit to church or mosque, but a trip around a supermarket, where devotees worship the god of materialism.

Examining the supermarket shelves, and the products that have arrived from every part of the globe, causes White to meditate on the producers of these items:

Questions not to be asked. What if  
the earth turned on its axis, and you  
were banana growers for United Fruits,  
or quota fishermen burning your boats...

If you're reading this page, the chances  
are: most of what you eat,  
and much of what you wear,  
feeds off another world out there.<sup>xxvi</sup>

'Sunday Worship' provides another version of Oliver Reynolds's transnational solidarity of the global proletariat. Despite its beguilingly compact nature, it is a poem about class consciousness, and the ironic interrelation that had developed between anti-colonial nationalisms and revolutionary socialism in the decolonising world. White wants his readers to ask what happens to these movements in a world where 'nationalism' has increasingly come at a cost of participation in the global free market economy and hence at a further cost of shedding any commitment to socialism. Revolutionary nationalisms in this way do not appear to end poverty and inequality, but actually shore up the sharp divisions between rich and poor. Globalisation has come to be the dominant paradigm for capitalist society to such an extent that White is only able to hint at the pernicious effects of this by asking his readers to imagine that they are impoverished labourers in the third world, bound in to an economic system that perpetuates their hardship. White himself

expands on the notion of the global imagination in more conventionally poetic form in his later poem, 'Charcoal':

there is a moment when the fumes of burning  
lamb with oreganum, bay leaves and onions,  
drift across the rag of lawn  
to the brick wall where I'm reading  
Walcott or Sebastião da Gama  
Or Dafydd ap Gwilym slagging  
January, purring over May  
and his burning trysts  
in the improbable holly bush

... I walk to where you are turning  
skewers and I hold  
your waist while you press  
my wrists with your elbows:  
all summers with wine and charcoal  
are dark with south and south is you.<sup>xxvii</sup>

White deploys the names of specific cultural artefacts from three very different societies and three very different nations to create a specific sense of the connections that exist between them. These connections exist in a spatio-temporal dialectic, whereby the common histories of the Caribbean (home of Derek Walcott), Portugal (home of da

Gama) and Wales (home of Dafydd ap Gwilym) continue to inform relations between those places in the present. Derek Walcott could somewhat paradoxically be described as one of the most canonised and venerated of post-colonial writers. In this sense, his work is juxtaposed uneasily with that of Sebastião da Gama, a twentieth-century poet from Portugal, which was in turn formerly one of the most powerful military and economic empires in the world. Between this poetic juxtaposition of imperial power and post-colonial voice, the name of the medieval Welsh language poet Dafydd ap Gwilym obtrudes problematically, seeming to have a foot in each camp. For White here, the act of reading each of these significant writers opens a broad series of inter-related perspectives on world history. In 'Charcoal,' the act of reading is of piece with the act of burning a barbecue or hugging a loved one. Just as the world turns on its axis, so the skewers of the barbecue rotate over the fire. The elusive metaphor with which the poem concludes likens the cherished lover to a dark and mysterious global south. It is tender and lyrical, but at the same time it is solipsistic and un-engaging. It lacks the political ironies of 'Sunday Worship.'

~~The poem concludes with an elusive metaphor, likening the cherished lover to a dark and mysterious global south. There is a solipsistic quality to the poetry here, which would not have been found in the shrill political ironies of 'Sunday Worship.'~~

HereThis is a general challenge for the socialist writer seeking to write political poetry in an era of globalisation. Is poetry a form capable of moving from the most local and individual to the most general and dispersed? White writes in an era when a stockpile of global images is more available to his poetic imagination than for any generation in the past. The political and economic processes of globalisation that have furnished that image pool are themselves capitalist processes, not obviously offering to contribute to a global

revolutionary proletarian politics. antithetical to a global revolutionary proletarian

politics. White's elusive metaphysical metaphors finally seem more lyrical and in that sense more poetic than the cadences he had adopted in 'The Brown Girl' or 'Sunday Worship.' At the same time, the vibrant sense of political commitment that had characterised his earlier work has become submerged.

In the later work of Oliver Reynolds too, the poetry of a global imagination seems to lose some of become unburdened of the committed political interest with which he had earlier written. In 'The Almost,' a poem taken from a collection of the same name, Reynolds muses on a sketch by Rembrandt, depicting an elephant and three mysterious figures:

... Though the eye in its crow's- nest  
of wrinkles is friendly, the trunk's salutation  
unsettles the onlookers: three ghosts dressed  
in feints of chalk. Their robes might be Asian;  
their faces are faceless; and there I am  
among them, anonymous to myself,  
self-doubting, an unfilled outline, a clam –  
true by indirection, faithful by stealth...<sup>xxviii</sup>

Rembrandt's elephant here serves the same poetic function as the writing of Walcott and da Gama in the poem by Landeg White. It is a starting point for a poetic ramble through the global imagination. The onlookers might be Asian. The elephant itself might be African or Indian. The act of poetic composition reveals an implicit relationship between

the cultural artefacts from different societies around the world. The poem is unable to render clear or concrete the precise nature of that relationship. Instead, Reynolds – like White – drifts onto a different theme, expressing the yearning that lovers feel when they exchange paintings as presents. This yearning is again lyrical and poetic, and is also again solipsistic:

We sift the sky for lost kingdoms. A silt  
of stars hides the one star at apogee,  
this mirage of a life like water spilled  
in the star-grains of Sinai or Gobi.<sup>xxix</sup>

Reynolds allows his poetic imagination to search for lost kingdoms among stars which have been spilled like water across the sky, and scattered around the globe. The imaginary he employs here recalls Mike Jenkins's use of the image of stars to stand for impossible aspiration.

~~Elsewhere, Jenkins himself employs a technique very similar to that which I have been analysing in Reynolds and White. In a poem entitled 'Côr Cochion Caerdydd,' Jenkins himself uses the technique of too-arranging factors three distinct cultural artefacts from three distinct societies into a single poetic unit. It is a poem about three different choirs, from southern Africa, Latin America, and Wales. He imagines a Cardiff choir performing the national anthems of South Africa, Chile and Wales:~~

"N'Kosi Sikekel'i Africa"  
the policeman's warning couldn't march

notes off the stave of memory

“Adelante marchemos compañeros”

they steal the collected money

but harmonies cannot be obstructed

“Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau”

in the cell, in the court

no walls brick up their throats

which are roots of campesinos’ crops,

are the seams of a mineral

to bring light to everyone.<sup>xxx</sup>

The image of a choir is very suggestive to Jenkins, for it is in a choir that musical performance shifts from being individual to choral. The communion of choral participation hints at a democratic artistic form in which everybody can participate. This really is the important theme of the poem: the workers taking part in an anti-apartheid protest in southern Africa or a demonstration against compulsory land purchase in Latin America sing their anthems and slogans as they march in protest against the oppressive leaders who have deprived them of economic livelihood and political equality. Jenkins maintains two distinct qualities in this poem. He juxtaposes three different nationalthe choral anthems of three different societies, as if to suggest an implicit relation between political struggles for racial equality in South Africa, political freedom in Chile, and economic reform in Wales.

-There is a deliberate lack of precision in 'Côr Cochion Caerdydd'. It appears that the 'compañeros', or comrades, who march together in the second stanza are demonstrating their resistance to the political oppression and economic exploitation suffered by thousands in Pinochet's Chile. By avoiding these details, Jenkins allows the reader's imagination to fill in the blanks. The stanza could refer equally to the more recent, and differently aligned, political violence that has erupted in Gortari's Mexico or Chavez's Venezuela. Similarly, the Africans who demonstrate against oppressive rule in the first stanza might be South African opponents of apartheid, or political opponents of the Mugabe dictatorship in Zimbabwe. Although the Welsh marchers are unambiguously from Wales, it is nevertheless unclear what they might be protesting about as they march: war in the Falklands or the middle east? The expansion of Britain's nuclear stockpile? A continuing lack of legal equality for the Welsh language with English? By making the reader supply the details in this way, Jenkins causes him or her to have to think about the similarities that exist between political struggles in the different societies.

In interpreting the poem, we should remember that many of the most morally repellent and oppressive dictators in the developing world have also been political allies of capitalist governments in Britain, America, and across the west. To be an opponent of an oppressive regime in one country is thus in a sense also to take a step towards fostering a sense of global anti-capitalist solidarity. Ultimately, 'Côr Cochion Caerdydd' is not about three different choirs, or three different protest marches. It is about the common ground that exists between these different marches and their apparently different struggles, so that in the end, what Reynolds portrays is not three different choral movements, but one big chorus of opposition to global capitalism. Multinational capitalism maintains itself

through the imposition of right-wing power groups in the developing countries which supply raw materials to the capitalist west. At the same time, this transnational structure creates the conditions in which it becomes possible to organise international resistance to economic exploitation. In Karl Marx's words, 'what the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers.'<sup>xxx1</sup>

Mike Jenkins, like Raymond Williams and Karl Marx, wishes to mobilise the poetic imagination as a way of demonstrating the connections that exist across global struggles, and hence of intervening in those struggles. ~~That is,~~ in 'Côr Cochion Caerdydd,' Jenkins succeeds in combining a global imagination with an idiom of international revolutionary proletarian politics. This success is ~~rendered~~ all the more poignant for having been achieved during a period when globalisation has increasingly become a term used to describe the worldwide triumph of international capitalism, and in which the revolutionary impetus of the global proletariat has become so marginalized as to be barely active. Poetry, precisely because it is not direct political writing, can perform this work. As Raymond Williams puts it:

the value of literature is precisely that it is one of the areas where the grip of ideology is or can be loosened, because although it cannot escape ideological construction, the point about its literariness is that it is a continual questioning of it internally. So you get readings which are very similar to certain recent semiotic readings, where you construct a text and subtext, where you can say, 'this is what is reproduced from the ideology'; but also, 'this is what is incongruously

happening in the text which undermines or questions or in certain cases entirely subverts it.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Jenkins, Reynolds and White live and write in an era where the dominant ideology is one of organised global capitalism. It is impossible for them to escape this global structure since they are a part of it. It is therefore impossible also to imagine their poems free from its ideology. In other words, there are precise historical and political pressures that might help us explain why in their poetry, Oliver Reynolds and Landeg White struggle to maintain the integration of political commitment with the transnational imagination. Globalisation itself as a political and economic process does not sit well with an international revolutionary anti-capitalism.

When they are writing at their best, White and Reynolds are able to loosen the impact of the dominant ideology of international capitalism on their poetry. Only when they loosen that impact are they able to combine the global poetic imagination with the vital political commitments that characterise their early work. In a poem entitled 'For Her Wedding,' for example, White examines the life of a woman brought from a former colonial society in Africa to a grey English marriage. By using this juxtaposition of the girl's two different lives, White is able to maintain a focus on the different political connections that exist across the globe. The connections between former imperial centre and colony are exposed through this portrayal of the two lives of the girl in question:

For her wedding she wore her breasts  
bare with woven beadwork at her waist  
and plaited beadwork in her hair.

**Comment [DGW1]:** From here onwards the essay is rather weak. You become repetitive and your readings of the poems are rather underdeveloped. Try rewriting this final section

The girls sang, begging her  
never to leave them for the bridegroom's mat.  
Her heart soared as they drew her to his hut.

In Leeds she wears a duffel coat and headscarf.  
Her straightened hair is shielded from the rain.  
Her husband at the poly studies husbandry.  
He is proud his village wife wears dungarees.  
She pushes her packed trolley round Tesco's,  
black, pregnant, angry, missing

cowdung smouldering in the soft dusk as  
cattle praises echo from the kralls.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

White contrasts the freedom and sense of being at ease with which the girl had grown up with a sense of being entrapped after her migration to Britain for marriage. White's The political and historic juxtapositions here are stark and vibrant. It may seem unlyrical, and even unpoetic, to idealise cowdung in this manner. Yet the poem contains a number of effective poetic devices. There is the symbolism of the bare breasts, representing untrammelled freedom for the girl at home in her original village. This is contrasted with the symbolism of the duffel coat in which she is buttoned up following her virtual imprisonment in Britain. There is also ambiguity in the line 'her husband at the poly studies husbandry.' This hints that the husband should study not simply the practice of rearing animals (animal husbandry), but also the process of becoming a better husband himself. If he did this, the line implies, he would allow his wife to express her own

feelings and desires, including the fact that she comes from a rural agrarian society, and is already an expert in animal husbandry herself – hence her ironic yearning for the smell of cow dung, which in turn symbolises the economic independence that has been denied her following her marriage. Like Jenkins’s ‘Côr Cochion Caerdydd,’ ‘For her Wedding’ thus hints at the importance of resisting the global flow of raw materials – including human beings themselves – from developing societies to developed capitalist ones.

The extent to which the poem is less lyrical than White’s other poems ‘Charcoal’ or ‘The Almost’ is a measure of the extent to which it is also more urgently engaged with probing the connections between different societies in a common global history, which those poems could only hint at.

Oliver Reynolds too at his best is able to employ precise juxtapositions to hint at a connection between different societies on the globe, and therefore to combine an attempt at political writing with the transnational imagination. In ‘Gwroniaid,’ Reynolds draws a poetic comparison between the Welsh athlete Guto Nyth Brân, and the African-born runner Zola Budd, who controversially opted to represent Great Britain in major athletics competitions:

Lapping renown,  
They run from us:  
Guto Nyth Brân  
And Zola Budd.

Guto sprints,  
Leaving death stitched.

The chested tape  
Trails down decades.

She runs barefoot  
At Stellenbosch.  
Afrikaners  
Clap rhythmically...<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Thin and frowning,  
She prints spondees  
Along the track:  
*J'accuse. J'accuse.*

They modulate  
And then quicken  
To beat jagged:  
*Xhosa. Xhosa.*<sup>xxxv</sup>

Whereas Guto Nyth Brân has no independent country to represent, Zola Budd was unable to represent her country, South Africa, because it was the subject of international sanctions during the period of apartheid. Peame from a society in which political freedom and equality would~~had~~ only be~~en~~ bought at the cost of bitter individual revolutionary struggles, which Budd appeared to sidestep by making Britain, rather than South Africa, the country for which she competed, ~~and yet chose not to represent that society,~~

~~voluntarily surrendering those freedoms that an earlier generation had fought for~~. The accusation of Reynolds's poem is an accusation against the ~~contemporary~~ betrayal of political proletarian revolutionary ideals ~~in the past~~. By making this poetic juxtaposition of two different figures representing two different societies, Reynolds is able to combine his interest in global political currents with a worldwide poetic imagination.

**Comment [DGW2]:** She didn't really surrender freedoms did she? There was a boycott on SA, so she ran for Britain instead. Not sure what you're trying to say here.

Globalisation is the name for the spread of worldwide capitalism, and the concomitant extinguishing of revolutionary working class political action. Globalisation in its earliest guise was the concept by which working class socialists around the globe had hoped to effect the transnational revolution of the organised proletariat. Lodged between these ironically different concepts of globalisation, Mike Jenkins, Oliver Reynolds and Landeg White are subject to the same political and ideological pressures that characterise the era of worldwide capitalism. This ironic positioning impacts on the kinds of poetry they produce. All three writers write with strong Welsh working class political affiliations. All three draw on a stockpile of images drawn from the global imagination. It is impossible for any of them to stand outside the dominant ideology of the period in which they write. When their poetic imagination is at its most lucid, the impact of that ideology can be loosened or reduced. Only at their very best can these poets integrate a revolutionary political ethic with the global imagination. When this happens, they produce poems capable of telling us something about the ongoing struggles of the global working class, and offering, against the dominant ideology of the day, to teach us to speak in new ways.

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<sup>i</sup> Williams, 'Problems of the Coming Period,' p.164.

<sup>ii</sup> [Marx, \*The Marx-Engels Reader\*, p.500.](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Anderson, \*passim\*.](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Williams, 'Problems of the Coming Period,' p.165.

<sup>v</sup> [Williams, \*Who Speaks?\* p.83.](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [Williams, \*Who Speaks?\* p.85.](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [\*Ibid.\*](#)

<sup>viii</sup> Jenkins, *Empire*, p.22.

<sup>ix</sup> Jenkins, *Empire*, p.9.

<sup>x</sup> Jenkins, *Empire*, p.22.

<sup>xi</sup> Jenkins, *Empire*, p.24.

<sup>xii</sup> Jenkins, *Empire*, p.25.

<sup>xiii</sup> Reynolds, *Player*, p.67.

<sup>xiv</sup> Reynolds, *Player*, p.68.

<sup>xv</sup> Williams, 'Problems of the Coming Period,' p.164.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jenkins, *Invisible*, p.15.

<sup>xvii</sup> Jenkins, *Dissident*, p.77.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jenkins, *Dissident*, p.78.

<sup>xix</sup> Jenkins, *Dissident*, p.79.

<sup>xx</sup> Jenkins, *Invisible*, p.15.

<sup>xxi</sup> Reynolds, *Player*, p.45.

<sup>xxii</sup> Reynolds, *Player*, p.46.

<sup>xxiii</sup> White, *Angolans*, p.151.

<sup>xxiv</sup> White, *Angolans*, p.152.

<sup>xxv</sup> White, *Angolans*, p.152.

<sup>xxvi</sup> White, *Angolans*, p.156.

<sup>xxvii</sup> White, *Angolans*, p.61.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Reynolds, *Almost*, p.32.

<sup>xxix</sup> Reynolds, *Almost*, p.32.

<sup>xxx</sup> Jenkins, *Dissident*, p.8.

<sup>xxxi</sup> [Marx, \*The Marx-Engels Reader\*, p.483.](#)

<sup>xxxii</sup> Williams, *Writing*, p.208.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> White, *Angolans*, pp.51-52.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Reynolds, *Skevington*, p.72.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Reynolds, *Skevington*, p.72.