

## POETRY WALES: REVIEW: 3 pamphlets

Gavin Goodman *Estate Fragments*, (The Knives Forks And Spoons Press, 2014, £5.00)

Steven Hitchins and Rhys Trimble *Yth* (The Literary Pocket Book, 2015)

Spohie McKeand *Hanes* ([www.sophiemckeand.com](http://www.sophiemckeand.com) £7.00)

These three pamphlets, *Estate Fragments* by Gavin Goodwin; *Alban Arthan* by Steven Hitchins; and *Hanes* by Sophie McKeand in their different modes push the boundaries of language through an exploration of vocality in contemporary Wales. All make communication, understanding, mutual respect and trust, key to their poetry.

*Estate Fragments* juxtaposes the *I* of witness to critical writings. In the poetic documentary tradition of Reznikoff and Nowack, Goodwin takes on the quest for a reliable account of experience, as in the work of Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, or *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, contrasting with the intimacy of say Owen Sheers' poem for Radio 4 based on interviews recorded at a bench in Swansea overlooking the bay. With the promise of the bearer these poems enunciate a truth that we crave for in this post-factual quagmire, such as the questions: how do we understand our circumstances, the lives of our neighbours and friends, ourselves, and our role in this fast changing world that threatens the familiar. In the endnotes we find a light touch bibliography that includes Owen Jones, opening up the channels of discourse and sharing points of view that may enable us to approach each other. Interspersed with these registers of language, the voice of the *I* and quotation, we find another voice, that of the poet with distinct rhythms that drives the undertow of reflection.

As the title *Estate Fragments* disports its play between the noun of the fragmented and verb that enacts its violence, the reader is suspended in a temporal space of tension. Lynsey Hanley: 'you only have to say the word 'estates' for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it.' Who are we as a community? Fragments that imply a shattered whole? What will come to pass?

The second pamphlet operates with two halves that open in reverse. I read first *Alban Arthan*, which provides the intertextual reference to the inscription 'I am a model of the only obelisk now standing at Heliopolis on of the scriptures erected by Orsortseen 1s the earliest of Pharaohs, 1844' found at the base of an obelisk erected by Druid Francis Crawshay at Castle House, Merthyr Tydfil. Having inherited his father's vast estate based on the iron works, Francis

Crawshay moved to Trefforest and is renowned for learning Welsh and commissioning paintings of his workers.

The obelisk bears a figure and text translated by Chartist and Druid, Dr. William Price, citing the correspondence between Egyptian and Druidic beliefs that time is brought into being through causality.

The verso of the pamphlet page carries a line of translation from Price's *Gwyllllis yn Nayd*, 1871, then two lines of modern Welsh and English, making a series of tercets. The recto bears Hitchins' riffs on these translations, opening up language through phonetic and visual play, remaking a mythopoesis through an explosive *jouissance*.

Taking the obelisk as a trope of the Rosetta stone, it is as if from these facets we could find an Ur-language of communication, an origin, a truth uniting Ancient Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Welsh: 'The moon breaks in Welsh. In the foreign laydd.... Birth from the throat. Welshwomb. Tonguage born. Awful yn cold dyrr con oyd dumb willoyd.' Or riffs of translation, like Derrida's endless deferral of meaning, opening up a cascade of interpretation: the Obelisk a leitmotif, an image that releases a speaking in tongues, the desired Druidic midwinter ritual coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century mythmaker Iolo Morgannwg, the *Alban Arthan* of the title. Yet the language is cut by the contemporary vernacular, when 'Man ambles bag of dogshit pinched in hand swings into bin. Where sundry Druidical rites are performed. Where essence originates.'

This is to be read in conjunction with its twinned booklet, *Y Zidydd Ephemeris* [Common Prayer 1708]. In this companion text Rhys Trimble continues with a pyrotechnic display of language derived from the obelisk. In this case an online text reader OTR subjects Dr. Price's table (which is reproduced in the appendix) to modernist procedures and rules in the tradition of DADA and OULIPO. Unlike the collage techniques of, for example George Oppen, there is no quest for dissimulation and elision of the whole.

Here these mechanical ruptures are intercut with horoscope readings from the *Daily Mail* emphasizing the post-truth condition of the tabloids that further enforces the reading of the text as a quest for the oracular. The obelisk functions as a puzzle akin to the rebus of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, opening up the capacity for interpretation as infinite as that which Freud describes as the origin of dream, the 'navel' of dream.

The centerfold anchors the Zodiac, *Y Zidydd*, to the tradition of englyn milwr, the soldier, introducing the theme of war and the fragility of the body that plays across these macaronic englynion, juxtaposing rather than translating between languages yet keeping to the 3-line end rhyme.

The density of the Welsh-English collision relies on an extensive knowledge of both languages, yet the horizon of understanding escapes as the reader approaches on a wave of verbal intoxication.

*Hanes* offers the reader an apparently more measured approach to language through the introduction of Welsh with a typographical play that serves to disturb habitual forms of predictive reading. McKeand's opens up the chasm that is the new conceptual and emotional field of learning a language.

Any notion of a single grand narrative of History, *Hanes*, is ruptured through multiple voices that produce an instability of subject. Like the Biblical *Song of Songs*, 'I and you', 'she and he', 'her and him', the binary is evaded through gendered displacements. There is no single narrator and the vocalities become animal, bird, landscape and place: it is a world of becoming.

The effect on temporality displaces the causal chain of *hanes* into the *treigladau* of Welsh: the mutations attached to the gender of the noun, personhood of the verb, and the possessives, enact a contemporary unease. The central sequence *psycholingualeography* articulates the instability of time and the necessity of re-writing our histories:

'there is no time –  
inthis landofgiants

exists  
existed  
existing  
extinct  
diodde'

...

thereistoomuchtime

it lies everywhere

...

I see now that you did not understand her  
(we all re-write history) roedd rhaid i ni'

This is a poetry that enacts a drive into the material of language, digging and pushing against the order of things... The tropes of mutation and the brevity of life, picked up here as the twice born 'dysgu (lle)' when learning about a place is learning a language:

'I cannot hold the ocean  
*ewch ati hi*

*fallintothewater*

& be reborn'