

## TONY CONRAN INTERVIEW

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*You have said that you began to translate Welsh verse in a public library in Chelmsford. Could you say something about the process of discovery this instigated and its importance for your personal identification with Wales and its literary history?*

It is not quite true. The first poem I ever translated from Welsh was Williams Parry's 'Fox', which was before I went to Chelmsford. But yes, I was very homesick in the south of England, and translating helped a bit. You know, 'the best Welshman is the one who's left Wales'. But also I'd been excited by Gwyn Williams' versions in *The Rent that's due to Love*. And I felt when I left Bangor I really thought I would never know civilization again! It's strange, looking back, how much I felt banished. And yet I enjoyed meeting English people in London and so on, and most of my friends were English, even in Bangor. Everyone's heard of the London Welsh, but there's such a thing as Wales English - a national minority in Wales, not just incomers - people who belong here, often for generations, who've inter-married with Welsh people, but still call themselves English in Wales - in England of course I was Welsh. I was even called Taffy! And for various reasons (often class-reasons) this Wales English group had a part to play in the renaissance of Welsh national consciousness after the terrible interwar years, when the Depression was like some sort of genocide and the only way to survive was to get out.

Anyway, there I was. Philosophically I had nothing in common with English empiricism. A world discovered only in the senses was quite irrelevant to my sort of concerns. I think I was a natural Platonist, if you will excuse the term. That is, I felt that the ideal world was what mattered and the physical world was a kind of imitation. And it was all mixed up with the I-and-Thou relationships that I saw as fundamental to poetry, instead of the I-and-It that English empiricism deals with. And as Saunders Lewis says somewhere, Welsh praise poetry is based on a kind of Platonism - as it is certainly based on an I-thou relation. The Welsh poet does not praise his lord because he wants to describe his own experience - the way his lord has treated him, the way he is happy with his lord, and so on. He

praises his lord because the idea of lordship is vitally important to him and to his community, and because the lord is his lord. And later on, in Waldo Williams, for example, Welsh poetry is still basically anti-empiricist, rationalist if you like. So I found myself much more at home in Welsh poetry than I ever was in modern English - it was the age of Larkin and Ted Hughes and all that.

A lot of people - for instance Cary Archard - would want to stress the community as a unifying factor in Welsh and Anglo-Welsh poetry. O.K. but the only community I have had has been the student community in Bangor. Until very recently I have always written for that community, fluid, young, impressionable. It was that community that I was exiled from and that community that I wanted to praise and to make part of a new Wales.

*Going beyond this, how important do you think it is today for English-speakers in Wales to be able to approach this literary past in Welsh, and to what extent do you feel that translation is a sufficient method of making such an approach?*

In the pre-Referendum days, when there was a feeling that a Welsh nation-state was just round the corner, it clearly was important that Welsh people should be given back their own past, not in the sense of their personal roots but as an ideological inheritance for the nation as a whole. That was the function of the Gaelic League in the struggle for Irish independence; it is the reason why, when Rhodesia became independent, they called it Zimbabwe, after some of the very few ruins that could be ascribed to a specifically negro civilization.

Post-Referendum, one is more tentative. So much national consciousness-raising has gone into the language-issue that really one sometimes feels a traitor in daring to translate at all.

I translate for a wide variety of reasons, one being that I like making verses, and the technical problem involved in making English poems in so very unEnglish a way. And for a disabled person like myself, who has lived so much through other

people's experience, to put such poetic expertise as I have at the service of other poets is not so strange. But it is very hard work, all the same, and for a good twenty years after I did the Penguin I hardly did any translating at all. I'd had enough!

'Sufficient method of making such an approach' - I don't know. Is any method sufficient? It is all I can do. I cannot see what is good in a Welsh poem until I have translated it into my own verse. My Welsh is so abysmally poor, I have to wrestle with a Welsh poem to see why it is a poem at all. But what you really mean, is whether a reader - a student - can possibly know the original poem through my versions. Well, I personally read a vast amount of poetry in translation. It seems to me that we read poetry for many reasons, some of which are more or less adequately catered for by translations. For instance, if I insisted on my local vicar reading the psalms only in Hebrew, then the congregation would lose a lot of edification and pleasure.

A poem like anything else is never totally knowable. Our appreciation of it is always partial. For instance, reading a Shakespeare sonnet is a matter of translation, simply because we don't speak sixteenth century English. We don't totally grasp the system even in our own language. And some poems seem to transplant easier than others. But the worse people to judge a translation are always those who know the original poem, because they are not responding to the translation but to the original. The translation is then a kind of interference to be excused, not a positive experience in its own right.

I can give an example of this: when my book came out the reviewers (all Welsh-speaking) said that in general my attempts were O.K. but the englynion were failures. They were missing the cynghanedd and the 'englyn-ness'. They didn't even rhyme! And yet more of my translations of englynion have been reprinted in anthologies than anything else. English readers respond to them as they do to Japanese haiku, as imagist poems in their own right. Blow the formal intricacy! And this is really responding to something in Welsh, not just to my words. Good englynion often do behave like haiku, you can float them away from the form and they survive. The big problem in Welsh translation is not the englyn but the cywydd.

*We have suggested, in previous issues of this magazine, that translation is most useful if it appears in parallel with the original. Do you feel*

*that this is always so, or is a 'free' translation which doesn't follow the original closely best left to stand or fall on its own merits as a poem in the new language?*

It does depend on the translation. Those of Gwyn Williams seem to be unhappy away from the originals, whereas I feel sometimes that my own and Joseph Clancy's could well be embarrassed if the originals were on the facing page. This is not just a question of how free the versions are. Gwyn's were pretty accurate on the whole, but so are ours. Why Gwyn's were complaisant about being used as cribs and mine are not may have been something to do with the fact that as a Welsh-speaker the originals were present to him in all their complexity and beauty before, during and after the translating process; whereas to me they are discovered only in that process, and then dimly remembered afterwards. Gwyn's translations had to live with the originals as a condition of their existence, so they don't mind being used as cribs.

But a crib and a translation serve fundamentally different aims nonetheless, and in principle should not be confused. A crib is a scaffolding job to make the original accessible. The versions by Rachel Bromwich of Dafydd ap Gwilym are unspeakable as translations - really they hardly begin to address the problem - but as cribs they are wonderfully useful and informative. Which is not to say that they are either 'close' or 'free'. A scholarly crib is often very inaccurate, because it uses the conventions of scholarly prose which do not always fit the meaning of a poet's words. In a crib this does not matter, because you see through the scholarly waffle to the core of the original. But in a translation it is always a blemish, though sometimes an unavoidable one.

Though I think cribs have their place, they seem to me far more dangerous than good translations, simply because they do cloud with verbiage the brightness of the originals.

But despite all my reservations I wish that I could have had the originals printed opposite my versions, as a matter of honour to the first language of Wales. It smacks a bit of cultural imperialism to print a big anthology of Welsh poetry in English, without the Welsh there. I tried quite hard with Penguin, but they said the book was long enough already and they could not justify the additional expense. But I hope my Waldo versions will be in bilingual texts. Problem is, there's been no *Collected Poems* yet and I don't want to jump the gun. It makes me uneasy in principle that the first 'Selected Poems' -

virtually a Collected in fact - of a major poet should be published in a bilingual text. A poet should have the prior right to the privacy of his own language. It is something we have to thrash out before any book is feasible.

*Can this constitute a way of reclaiming the tradition in a new language?*

Well, it could. But even Welsh civilization has never totally limited itself to the Welsh language. Two of its major writers (at least) wrote in Latin: Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerallt Gymro. English has been used as a secondary vehicle for poems, letters and so on, since the fifteenth century: I don't mean by that the Anglo-Welsh, who really belong to Western not Welsh civilization - they are a product of breakdown. No, English was, and is, used by the proponents of Welsh culture, properly so called, from Ieuan ap Hywel Swrdwal, Goronwy Owen, William Williams of Pantycelyn, right up to Waldo Williams and the present day. Once you see that Welsh is a civilization and not just a language all kinds of things fall into place. For instance, David Jones can be seen as a Welsh writer, sharing the polarities of our civilization as much as T.Gwynn Jones or Saunders Lewis. He has almost nothing in common with Anglo-Welsh writers like Dylan Thomas or Tony Curtis.

Welsh civilization has been a very powerful force in England and indeed Europe as a whole. Its two main exports have been the legend of Arthur and the idea of Britain. *The Faerie Queen, King Lear*, 'Rule Britannia' and the Empire On Which The Sun Never Set, are among its by-products. England (properly so called) was always just one constituent part of what the middle ages called Latinitas and we call the West. There has never been an English empire - only a British one. Henry Tudor (a Welshman) was the hinge finally uniting these two radically distinct ideas; but there has been a British dimension to the English monarchy ever since Edward I, and the tension between England and Britain has certainly not yet been resolved. Mrs Thatcher undoubtedly saw her role as part of the Matter of Britain, defending true blue civilization against the German invaders, whether Karl Marx or Chancellor Kohl and the Bundesbank. John Major, on the other hand, is far more likely to think as a prototype Englishman: you can almost smell King Alfred burning the cakes!

*You have spoken of the process of 'seepage' taking place between Welsh and English and you seem to regard this as a fairly complex and subtle*

*process. Can you say something about the nature of this seepage and the extent to which you feel it continues to affect Anglo-Welsh poets writing today?*

The idea of 'seepage' was really only a first approximation to the problem. What kind of relationship can there be between a literary tradition and people who are physically its heirs yet know little or nothing about it? Can Welsh poetry, to put it crudely, affect the sensibility of Welsh people who know no Welsh and perhaps have turned their backs on Welshness. Linguistically and analogically exists. Latin drove out many languages as the Romans conquered. Latin was spoken in Spain, in North Africa, in Wales. Yet Latin in Spain differed significantly from Latin in North Africa or Wales because the former language, the 'substrate', affected the way people spoke it. And in time, some of these dialects were extinguished, but in others the differences were magnified by cultural isolation after the fall of Rome, and Spanish, French, Catalan, Italian, Rumanian grew into separate languages entirely. Is there anything in Anglo-Welsh poetry that corresponds to the effect of a substrate in linguistics?

I first formulated the idea when I noticed how W.H Davies's second book of poems could be divided fairly closely (allowing for personal and social differences) into the same categories as those of the Welsh 'folk' poets of the time: moral poems, poems of the person, nature poems, and so on. As far as I could see, these categories would not fit any English poet's work and betray a tendency - very Welsh, very rationalist - to think in terms of 'kinds' of poem rather than the unique experience that English nineteenth century poems were supposed to provide. (Of course, if you go back far enough you get 'kinds' in English too; but not in a volume of verse published in 1908.)

I don't think seepage is a very good word, but it got taken up and bandied about. It is certainly a very difficult concept to illustrate. Perhaps the negative aspects are more important than any positive influences. It is often more helpful to isolate the ways in which Anglo-Welsh poetry is not English than the ways in which it is Welsh. For instance, Idris Davies and Dylan Thomas are widely different poets; and yet their language in both cases has a tendency to use the 'big words' - 'dream', 'hope', 'sacrifice', and so on, in the case, and words like 'death', 'ghost', 'flesh' in the other, without any of the subtlety that an English poet of similar stature would instinctively use. They are used brazenly, they strut and flaunt

their bigness at us. In this case, we can legitimately refer to a negative 'seepage': English in the Davies and Thomas families was too recent an acquisition to have rubbed the big words down into their normal English self-effacing modesty.

Another such negative 'seepage' would be the almost total lack of an empiricist approach in Dylan Thomas's poetry. It does occur in his stories - indeed it is one of the differences between *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and the earlier more romantic and obscure prose. But in the poetry we very rarely feel that Dylan is trying to convey to us either a sensory experience of the world or the sort of attitude which regards such experience as crucial. I need hardly say that this is very unEnglish, in a radical way. It is much more important than any mere flavouring of nonconformist preaching style which critics often point to as an indication of Dylan's Welshness. What is more, the lack of empiricist preconceptions affects other Anglo-Welsh poets nearly as much: Idris Davies, Vernon Watkins and even Alun Lewis are all affected by it, in their various ways.

This situation has changed because poetry is now taught in schools throughout Wales - at both primary and secondary level - as something to do with recording sensory experience and drawing conclusions from it in the English, empiricist fashion. Creative Writing classes and Practical Criticism drive the message home. The irony is that science has become aware that sensory experience is not neutral: to observe something changes it irrevocably. In physics, the indeterminacy principle. In biology, the seamless ecology of nature in which to observe (as Wordsworth might have said) is to murder. In psychology and anthropology, the realisation that the investigator is also a person in the group. We find what we want to find - more or less. And yet in creative writing we still hanker after 'objectivity' - 'objective' correlatives - things. 'Real toads in imaginary gardens' to misquote the American poet Marianne Moore.

'Seepage' was not meant originally to cover conscious borrowing from Welsh, as when Gerard Hopkins tries to imitate cynghanedd or Nigel Jenkins uses the old formula of the triad for his own satirical purposes. But of course this is a valid procedure and I would like to see more cross-fertilization between the two civilizations of Wales, and less toadying to English poetical tastes.

*Do you see any future for Anglo-Welsh writing as a distinctive category beyond the Nineties?*

Well, in 2000 I shall be sixty-nine. A good age, but who knows I might still be writing. And Nigel will give 'em a good run for their money, I'm sure. The short answer is that 'Anglo-Welsh' is not a distinctive category even now, because 'Welsh' is not either. 'Welsh' can refer to a geographical area, a language, a putative nation, a peculiar people, or a civilization.

First, a geographical area, which is how the Welsh Arts Council tends to use it. Anglo-Welsh is literature in English from that area. And because, if a bureaucracy exists, then so does the object for which it exists, therefore Anglo-Welsh literature will have its own brand-name, its own career-structure. Anglo-Welsh literature will both try to be different (to justify not being under the Arts Council of Great Britain) and to compete with English literature (to justify its having public money at all). The resultant double-bind I don't have to describe to you because it is so depressingly familiar. But yes, so long as a Welsh Arts Council exists, Anglo-Welsh literature will also exist. It's part of the deal, part of the need to square giving money to a Welsh-speaking minority with the justice that has to be seen to be done to the majority.

Second, a language. This sense of 'Welsh' does not give a significant meaning to 'Anglo-Welsh', though I suppose macaronic verses or even translations might qualify. And yes, there will still be translators from the Welsh after 2000.

Third, a putative nation. Who knows? An awful lot can happen in ten years. And if there was a new Welsh state, in whatever watered-down form it was allowed to happen, then the boost that would give to Anglo-Welsh writing would be considerable. In the circumstances that led to the formation of the Welsh bureaucracy in the sixties, the whole 'second flowering' benefited - the group Meic Stephens gathered round *Poetry Wales*. A lot would depend on how much Welsh people could be imaginatively stirred by belonging to it. But I admit that the chances do not look very good.

Fourth, Welsh can refer to a peculiar people. Anglo-Welsh then becomes a literature which expresses that peculiarity in English. This is the normal use, I suppose, with writers like Jack Jones, Idris Davies, Dylan Thomas or Leslie Norris. The distinction between such writers and regional writers from England is not always clear, and is likely to become less so as Welsh educational habits become diluted and homogenised with those of other parts of the U.K. It is noteworthy that whereas Anglo-Welsh writers over

whelmingly used to come from the meltingpot of Glamorgan, now they are just as likely to come from Ynys Môn or Dolgellau. There are of course plenty of writers from Glamorgan - but how *peculiar* are they, how Anglo-Welsh? Anglo-Welsh culture is the culture of a frontier, which runs these days through Conwy or Aberaeron as much as Rhymney or Bridgend.

Fifth, Welsh can refer to a civilization. Anglo-Welsh then refers either to English writers vitally influenced by that civilisation - perhaps Nigel Wells might be an example, or Gerard Manley Hopkins if we disallow his own claim to be half-Welsh. Or it can refer to writers of that civilisation who happen for one reason or another to write in English, like Ieuan ap Hywel Swrdwal in the fifteenth century or David Jones in the twentieth. This fifth meaning of Anglo-Welsh (which includes me) presents us with a continuum, a spectrum of varying commitments where it is very difficult to draw rigid distinctions. Since Welsh civilization is not an obvious feature of the landscape (it has to be dug for, discovered anew in every generation) Anglo-Welshness in this sense has been fitfully persistent since Henry Tudor, and I see no immediate prospect of its being extinguished.

I hope all this is not just evading the question you want me to answer. But the way a lot of people talk of the demise of Anglo-Welshness - pessimists like John Barnie, latterly even Roland Mathias - seems to me to have no heart in it. It closes doors, not opens them.

*Quite apart from the process of translating Welsh verse, you have used early Welsh material in your own creative writing, notably in your long dramatic poem 'Blodeuwedd' and the highly effective play 'Branwen'. Some people pour scorn on the use of such material from Y Mabinogi for modern literary purposes, and indeed some rather superficial use has been made of it, or rather of modern translations of it. In 'Branwen' you draw effective parallels between contemporary Wales and contemporary Ireland in picking up the conflict between Brân and Matholwch in the original. But such fortuitous contrasts are not always available. Can you say something about the difficulties of using such material for modern writing?*

First, of all, let me say that I think of myself as a tragedian. Tragedy is a rare form in the history of theatre, and it tends to be thought of wrongly. It occupies a place somewhere between miracle play and history. Part ritual, part dance, part song. Now tragedians are not in general good at inventing their own plots. Greek tragedians

took off from ritual, so a lot of their plots come from myth. Shakespeare on the other hand derived his plots primarily from history, but often history that had been folklorised in one way or another. He often used other people's plays to mediate the story - as Sophocles and Euripides did with Aeschylus. The problem for any tragedian is to find a tragic fable. Once he's got that, Bob's your uncle. For example, there are literally hundreds of Greek tragedies we possess, about eleven concern the house of Atreus, the family of Agamemnon, and another five or six of the family of Oedipus. Tragic fables are rare, therefore. And both Blodeuwedd's story and Branwen's in Welsh and Deirdre's in Irish are examples. Saunders Lewis, the Welsh tragedian, used both Blodeuwedd and Branwen for his plays. Yeats and Synge, the two major Irish tragedians, both wrote plays about Deirdre.

Now if anything is certain, it is that tragedians are seriously concerned with their own times. Most of the Euripides' output is virtually engaged with contemporary problems, the folly of war, the position of women, slavery - you name it, Euripides is right there! And Shakespeare in *Lear* wrote about the growing problem of generation-conflict, in *Macbeth* about a change of dynasty, in *The Tempest* about the New World and colonialism. The plays aren't only about these problems, of course. I'm not reducing them to political tracts. But Euripides died in exile in the middle of the long war between Athens and Sparta that virtually destroyed Greek civilization; and it is recorded that Sophocles, the latest political and 'contemporary' of all tragedians, in the middle of all that war-bitterness, publicly wore mourning for his dead fellow-poet and rival.

What I am saying is that tragedy is about now, but not about the world of our sensory experience. You can never find in 'real' life anything resembling the world we experience in *Lear*. Tragedy is about now, but its method of dealing with it is metaphorical. The tragic world, like a miracle play, is fundamentally anachronistic. It may claim to be about the remote past, but actually, like a symphony, like a great ballet, it lives in its own time, tangential to all our worlds. In both 'Blodeuwedd' and 'Branwen' I perhaps too consciously rubbed the audience's noses in the anachronism of tragedy. But both plays - for they are both plays, even though 'Blodeuwedd' doesn't look like it - derive from the Feminist movement. They are both metaphors about the way men treat women, and the way women think of themselves. That's one side of Branwen. The other side is the disappearing tragic hero, Brân, who never speaks or appears on stage, but who is

described in fantastic detail as a giant several furlongs high.

As I say, one of the problems of writing tragedy is to find a tragic fable. Another is to find a tragic theatre. The appalling verse-dramas of the forties and fifties - 'The Cocktail Party' and so on - demonstrate the dangers aptly enough. You cannot just take the ordinary problem play, apply poetic seriousness and a catastrophe, and call it a tragedy. But the theatrical tradition resists change, even now, when good theatre like good poetry is more and more a minority pursuit. Which is why in both my plays I started off with theatrical models different to what we're used to. In 'Blodeuwedd' my model was the Kathakali theatre of South India, which I saw in Liverpool in the early seventies. And in 'Branwen' I started off with the Morris dance and the Mummer's Play, though these were joined by Greek tragedy and the Japanese Noh.

In Kathakali there is no stage. The actors/dancers come from behind a strip of cloth which is held up by two attendants and then let fall. The actors are so made-up it seems incredible that they can act at all, let alone dance. The musicians then strike up and the singer recites a long story from the Sanskrit epics, the Mahabherata or the Ramayana. This is mimed and danced by the actors. The actors do not utter a sound, except that the demons sometimes are allowed to grunt. The whole thing is perhaps the most magical and moving theatrical experience I have ever had.

Well, I was asked to provide a poem for two dancers to use as the basis for a dance. (It is always a dangerous thing to ask me do things like that!) So I wrote a tragedy for Kathakali and let the two dancers, and the two actresses who shared the recitation between them, work it out in their own terms. One of the actresses was my wife Lesley who had seen the Kathakali with me. Whether she realised what I had done I don't know. If so, she never let on, and I dogmatically refused to impose my ideas on their production.

I won't go into 'Branwen' now - it would take too long - but it begins in my mind with the long sweep of a morris processional up the aisle between the spectators into the acting 'place'. In 'Branwen' I did not trust the producer to do what I wanted with the dancers, so in my first versions I wrote out in great detail what dances I wanted, where, and what they had to signify. When Gilly Adams wanted to produce it, it took her a year before I agreed to let her do it in her own terms, without the morris. Essentially it was a translation job, into a somewhat different kind

of theatre to what I'd envisaged. But that's the nature of the game. At least I wasn't trying to write plays in terms of a theatre that was alien to me. She did most of the work of translating, and made a great go of it. I learnt a hell of a lot.

The tragic fable, the tragic theatre; the third requirement is prosodic, a matter of verbal rhythm, metre, poetic medium. Prose is a wretched, unnatural medium for tragedy, despite some quite distinguished examples. The sort of verse-like, very formal, question-and-answer-type dialogue you get in 'Waiting for Godot' or Pinter is a possibility, particularly for a tragic chorus, but I doubt if it would carry a protagonist. Blank verse does not seem an option any more; nor do I find the kind of rhymed iambics alternating with alliteration that Tony Harrison used for his adaptations very usable. They are too like doggerel for comfort. In a 'radio ode' I wrote in 1967 I experimented with a kind of abstract drama, without a plot, but using a sequence of lyrics to make a dramatic shape, a bit like a song cycle without the music. This is basically the medium I used for 'Blodeuwedd', except that all the lyrics were spoken by one person and told her story. The poetic line tended to a flexible four-stress metre, but each lyric movement was a unit, having its own formal roundedness and cadence. The dramatic interaction between the characters was left to be mimed by the dancers; the poetry narrated and filled in the lyric background to what happened, a bit like the soliloquies in *MacBeth*.

But for 'Branwen' I had to have not merely lyrics - sung or spoken - nor merely narration, but a medium to convey the interaction. My characters had to converse with each other. It was like the change from silent films to the talkies; and it was here that my experience as a translator came in useful. In the poetry which Sir Ifor Williams has taught us to call 'saga-poems' - ballads, perhaps, is how I would describe them now - poems about Llywarch Hen and Urien Rheged and Cynddylan - you get dialogues written in three-line stanzas of varying shape of which the 'englyn milwr' (soldier's englyn - three rhyming lines each of seven syllables) can count as typical. If you translate these stanzas into free verse, you get a quite distinctive rhythm:

**Llywarch** The horn that Urien gave you  
With a gold baldrik round its neck -  
Sound that, if you're sorely pressed.

**Gwên** Though terror press round me, and  
the fierce thieves of England,  
I'll not shame my pride.  
I'll not wake your maidens.

### Llywarch

When I was as young as that youngman  
Who now puts on his spurs of gold  
How I would hurl myself on the spears!

### Gwêr

There, indeed, is a safe assertion  
With you alive, and your witness dead.  
Never an old man was faint as a lad.

It is this rhythm that forms the basis of 'Branwen'. The whole play is written in three-line stanzas, apart from lyrical passages, songs and single-line alterations. The rhythm 'homes in' on the Llywarch Hen stanza, sometimes very loosely, sometimes imitating it quite closely even (for special effects) in its rhyming pattern. Here is a fairly central example, with the typical parallelism between stanzas very marked:

### Manawydan

Branwen, what is this? We celebrate your  
betrothal  
Happy for you, and here you are  
Naked and shameless in the street.

Are you mad, Branwen? Matholwch king of  
Ireland  
Wishes to meet his queen,  
And you're here, bare-arsed for his soldiers.

### Branwen

You've sold me for your own safety, Manawydan.  
Queen of Ireland, am I? In the stone walls  
Roofed in, cluttered with gifts.

You'd make a hostage out of me, a gaolbird  
In a gold bed, given  
To some lout of a king, cluttered like burial.

At the root of Being there's not one witheredness.  
The heartwood is safe.  
The courage of tenderness is there,  
The life of every fragile life.

When the storm's over, there the heart flies.  
All's scattered away,  
But in the low fort the squirrel of bliss  
Tonight makes its dray.

The amount of patterning this stanza-form allows makes it a very rich discovery for a tragedian, I believe, as flexible as blank verse and capable of lyrical passion beyond any prose.

*Finally we understand that you have recently been working on some new translations from Waldo Williams. What were the particular delights and difficulties of this work?*

If you don't mind, I won't answer this question in any detail. My head's too full of tragedy to think straight about translating Waldo as a process, and I haven't finished doing it yet, which means I haven't stood back from the situation enough to give my reaction. I was told by Eddie Lunt that he'd enjoyed my translations from Waldo in the Penguin and he more or less demanded more. I nearly always respond to requests for poems; so, when I felt the stuffing knocked out of me by Seren Books' scuppering my career as a poet, I turned back to translation as a standby, a very present help in time of trouble. Waldo is a great poet, a pacifist, a writer of many different kinds of poetry - astonishingly varied from real cywyddau mawl, through eisteddfod awdl, mystical odes, protest poetry, parody and comic verse, right down to the most humble little poems for children, about opening a Christmas stocking or taking an ant that you think is lost back to its anthill - a perilous undertaking for the poor ant, but the thought was kind! He is a whole civilization in himself.

*There follow two poems by Waldo Williams translated by Tony Conran, the first of which has no title.*

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Nid oes yng ngwreiddyn Bod un wywedigaeth,  
Yno mae'n rhuddin yn parhau.  
Yno mae'r dewrder sy'n dynerwch,  
Bywyd pob bywyd brau.

Yno wedi'r ystorom y cilia'r galon.  
Mae'r byd yn chwal,  
Ond yn yr isel gaer mae gwiwer gwynfyd  
Heno yn gwneud ei gwal.

## ACKNOWLEDGE

From a world lost through the fingers  
Of those who dissect and sever,  
Stretch, old-wholeness-bringer,  
Reach out, save us together.  
A snake head, sinister, rises  
Out of the coils of knowledge -  
Against treason, against destruction,  
Help us, O muse Acknowledge!

Soul opens to soul its secret  
From the depths where you are kind.  
Our excelling freedom  
In your mystery we find.  
Acknowledge, you're miracle. You're dowry  
That keeps community green  
Hid cell of everlastingness  
That all poems mean.

Stars are your witnesses, the timing  
Orbits turn as you acquaint -  
Clear as love's memory, and sure as  
The imagination of a saint.  
Acknowledge, be our weapon, be energy.  
You show sincerity's way  
Give to us mercy, and strength  
On the climb of forgiveness to stay.

You're our breath. You're our hiraeth's  
Flight to the deep sky.  
Against desert of anxiety and fear  
You're water flowing by.  
You're the salt to make us pure.  
You're the blast to the pomps of state.  
You're the traveller who wounds,  
And within us, you're the Prince who waits.

Despite the devourer of years  
You're the grain that's not to his grip,  
Despite the threshing of mountains  
And the tangle of chance let rip.  
You are the moment of light  
That embraces the way we pass.  
The Sun crowds through the clouds -  
You're the sunshine on the grass.

The title offers particular problems to the translator. *Adnabod* is a verb-noun with a much wider meaning than any comparable word in English. It means primarily 'to know a person - French *connaitre*, as opposed to *savoir*, 'to know a thing' - but it also means 'to acknowledge' or 'to be acquainted with' or 'to recognise kinship with'; and it can mean 'to have carnal knowledge of'.

## ADNABOD

Rhag y rhemp sydd i law'r dadelfennwr  
A gyll, rhwng ei fysedd, fyd,  
Tyrdd yn ol, hen gyfannwr,  
Ac ymestyn i'n hachub ynghyd.  
Cyfyd pen sarffaidd, sinistr  
O ganol torchau gwybod.  
Rhag bradwriaeth, rhag dinistr,  
Dy gymorth O! awen Adnabod.

Y mae rhin cydeneidiau'n ymagor  
O'u dyfnnder lle delych yn hael.  
Mae ein rhyddid rhagor  
Yn nhir dy ddirgelwch i'w gael.  
Ti yw'r wyrth. Ti yw'r waddol  
A gediw bob cymdeithas yn werdd.  
Ti yw'r un gell dragwyddol  
Yn ymguddio yng nghnewylllyn pob cerdd.

Dy dystion yw'r ser, i'w hamseriad  
Yn treiglo eu cylchoedd trwy'r cant  
Rhai clir fel cof cariad  
A sicr fel dychymyg y sant.  
Ti fo'n harf. Ti fo'n hynni.  
Ti sy'n dangos y ffordd ddiffuant.  
Tosturi rho inni  
A'th nerth esgynfa maddeuant.

Ti yw'n hanadl. Ti yw ehedeg  
Ein hiraeth i'r wybren ddofn.  
Ti yw'r dwfr sy'n rhedeg  
Rhag diffeithwch pryder ac ofn.  
Ti yw'r halen i'n puro.  
Ti yw'r deifwynt i'r rhwysg amdanom.  
Ti yw'r teithiwr sy'n curio.  
Ti yw'r tywysog sy'n aros ynom.

Er gwaethaf bwytawr y blynnyddoedd  
Ti yw'r gronyn ni red i'w grap,  
Er dyrnu'r mynyddoedd,  
Er drysu'n helynt a'n hap.  
Ti yw'r eiliad o olau  
Sydd a'i naws yn cofleidio'r yrfa.  
Ti yw yr Haul trwy'r cymylau -  
Ti yw Ei baladr ar y borfa.

At the cost of some awkwardness I have kept the verbal form as a name, and selected the meaning for opportunist reasons: 'Acknowledge' rhymes with knowledge. *Adnabod* is a keyword in Waldo's poetry, but usually it is possible to find a suitable paraphrase for it. Here it is not: either you accept one or other awkwardness, or you don't translate the poem at all.