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WHEN ENGLISH IS NOT ENOUGH: Bilingual Poetry and Fidelity to the Mother Tongue

Menna Elfyn. 2025. Parch. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, pp. 128, £12.99, ISBN: 9781780377544



https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/product/parch-1382

Menna Elfyn is one of the most distinguished Welsh poets on the contemporary literary scene; her work has been translated into eighteen languages. She has published plays, libretti and books for children and was Wales's National Children's Laureate in 2002. In the 1970s and 1980s she was involved in the movement to defend the Welsh language, and was even imprisoned for civil disobedience. Until very recently she has written exclusively in Welsh, entrusting the English translations to fellow contemporary poets. This was a courageous choice: an affirmation of the dignity of a language long relegated to insignificance by the dominance of English, a choice paid for even with imprisonment in the face of repeated attempts to hinder its diffusion.

Unlike her previous dual language publications, *Parch*, her latest collection, contains only two poems accompanied by the original texts on the facing page. As the author herself explains in the preface, the reason for this decision is that "the Welsh language is now accepted and respected as an official language in Wales" (11). In Welsh, the poet notes, *Parch*

literally means "respect", but it is also used to refer to a Reverend of the Anglican Church. These two meanings converge in a poem bearing the same title, which revolves around the concepts of charity, respect, and unassuming sacrifice for others. It is certainly one of the most significant poems in the collection, as it concentrates the work's fundamental orientation and meaning in a single statement: the respect due to the individual, both as such and as an integral part of the universe of a shared humanity.

This collection differs from the previous ones, not only because Welsh is no longer predominant, but also due to the reduced emphasis on the internal and external conflicts surrounding the preservation and use of so-called minority languages. Yet, at a deeper level, there remains a sense of an indistinct threat, of a silent violence, which finds expression now in elegy, now in irony, the latter turning into sarcasm at moments of greatest indignation. "Song of a Voiceless Person to BT (British Telecom)" is an example of this: the poem opens with a question, in Welsh. The speaker is asking for a telephone number in Cardiff, but the operator does not understand and asks to repeat it in clear British English – "Speak up". At this point, a reflection begins on the marginalisation of Welsh in Great Britain – "We are mutes, Trappists, conspirators" (89). The tone, initially light, almost playful, gradually becomes more bitter, ultimately giving way to indignation – "Our civility must give ground" (89). How is this possible? "A people in counterpoint / to the leitmotif"! (90). The outburst has given the speaker an awareness of the injustice suffered by their language, and of its dignity, which must be asserted. The final stanza takes up again the Welsh words from the beginning, translated in parentheses for the benefit of the non-Welsh reader: "And now may / I have that number in Cardiff please?" (90). The challenge to the English telephone operator is clear: let him make the effort to understand a language older than his own, alive and well, despite him, on British soil.

For those who have had to struggle for centuries against attempts by dominant powers to silence a language and an identity – and, with the language, the identity itself – only a few signs are enough to trigger a sense of unease and alarm. One example is "In Solus and Out", a brief piece of rhythmic prose. While visiting an arts centre in Ukraine, the visitors, including the poetic voice itself, suddenly feel lost, suffocated, held hostage within an opaque, artificial atmosphere, like a premonition of imminent war, a premonition that becomes certainty in "Marbled Men" – "All may thaw to war any second" (45) – a poem, again, in which violence does not yet cry out, but hisses, and cruelty and cynicism act as its forerunners. Menna Elfyn has been to Ukraine, has seen those places, has spoken with the people: hers is experience, not an abstract reflection on war. In "Nine for Peace" the nine referred to are pacifist activists who exposed themselves in a protest against war, particularly the Vietnam War. The memory of these individuals becomes the occasion for a monologue, all the more dramatic for being less reliant on rhetorical language. The monologue unfolds in 33 lines distributed across five stanzas of unequal length – mostly sestets – and a final couplet which, as in the Elizabethan sonnet, gives the entire poem a strong assertive force.

For Elfyn every form of cruelty or abuse, and the suffering of every individual, becomes a political act, even when the lexical choices and tones of a poem grow tender or elegiac. Solidarity, charity, and compassion all fall within the broad semantic field of Peace,

understood as harmony and balance in opposition to the disorder and brutality of war and oppression. In "A Ukrainian Mother", a woman whose son has been killed abandons herself, from a television screen, to thoughts of revenge against the Russian soldier who caused his death, only to yield immediately afterwards to a troubled awareness that such a reaction would result in further suffering – namely, that of the Russian soldier's mother, whose son she would like to strangle. This capacity to put herself in the other's place, to share in her pain, resolves itself into a disturbance that robs her of speech, casting her back into what the poet defines as "the in-between-ness of motherhood's lowly state" (45).

The entire collection seems to move between two poles: on the one hand, the denunciation of violence, oppression, and injustice; on the other, a persistent search for forms – however minimal – of harmony, compassion, and mutual recognition. With regard to this, "The Gift of Giving Way" assumes particular significance. After the tensions, fractures, and conflicts that run through the collection, this poem offers a minimal scene: a drive along secondary roads; someone travelling the same path in the opposite direction, the silent language of flashing signals, the discreet presence of another human being. Within these almost imperceptible everyday gestures, a concrete form of peace is realised, one that elsewhere seems denied or under threat. "Giving way" thus becomes far more than a simple traffic rule: it emerges as an ethical and relational metaphor, a model of coexistence grounded in reciprocity, attentiveness to others, and a quiet, unspoken solidarity. In contrast to the brutality of the "wider lane", a symbolic space of power, competition, and indifference, the poem suggests that the possibility of human balance resides precisely in such minimal gestures. It lies in this willingness to yield, to acknowledge, and to share space. In its apparent simplicity, "The Gift of Giving Way" perhaps offers the clearest synthesis of this tension: not an escape from reality, but the suggestion of a possible ethics of the everyday, in which peace is not proclaimed, but enacted.

"Three Poems to İlhan Sami Çomak" continues and deepens this trajectory, transporting it into a more explicitly political dimension without relinquishing its tenderness. The Kurdish poet, imprisoned for thirty years in a Turkish prison, becomes the focal point of a meditation on resistance, hope, and silent communication: from the dialogue with the bird in the first poem, "The Piper", to the presence of the wild ponies in "Wild Ponies", and finally to the almost ritual delicacy of "Rowan". The rowan tree, in Celtic tradition, is a protective tree, believed to ward off evil and therefore also known as the "tree of life". The poet's address to the prisoner is marked by a tone of intimate, almost restrained tenderness: the speaker expresses regret at her inability to send tangible elements of her homeland – its air, its abundant Welsh rain, concrete signs of nearness and support. In the end, she sends him a rowan leaf together with a poem, as a gesture of goodwill and blessing:

> "I send you a leaf, / from a rowan tree / beautiful for you to hold / in both hands. In its veins a secret message in Welsh: *criafolen,* / *criaf-o-len*: a cry behind a veil, / and a song's murmur / as you walk one day / towards her and gaze / under her branches / at the sky unveiled with a gift of *awer* (muse)" (103).

In this context, the earlier satirical inflections and more overtly polemical tones recede, though they do not entirely disappear. Rather, they persist in a subdued form, as a quiet but

unmistakable indignation that inhabits what remains unspoken: the implicit denunciation of a system capable of incarcerating a man – a poet – for three decades on account of his beliefs. This sensibility is accompanied by a pervasive compassion for suffering, together with frequent invocations of peace and a contemplation of beauty not only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also in its cognitive and ethical dimensions. It is within this horizon that many of the poems in the collection find their deepest coherence: the tension between violence and harmony, oppression and mutual recognition, is not resolved but continually rearticulated through gestures that are often minimal, almost imperceptible, yet charged with ethical significance. In this way, poetry emerges as a space in which solidarity can be enacted and shared humanity reaffirmed, even under the most restrictive conditions.

In both her prose and verse Menna Elfyn has consistently been anti-conformist, courageous, and openly critical of power in its many forms. She furnishes an instance of this in the present collection, translating from the Welsh a poem by Gwerful Mechain, a remarkable poet of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, renowned for her openly erotic poetry from a female perspective; the poem, provocatively entitled "Female Genitals", uses a language at once explicit and revelatory of a sexual pleasure for which man serves as a mere instrument. This choice reveals something of her own character and poetics: poetry can say anything; it must not, and cannot, be constrained by barriers or prohibitions. In "Stones", for instance, stones become a metaphor for poetry, which builds, yet at the same time cannot be confined by the very walls it shapes and constructs; poetry, in fact, is not something immobile or static, but "wants to be on the move" (39).

In *Parch* there is a greater focus on feelings and memories, in a recovery of values that were always present but not foregrounded, emphasised, or brought to the fore in her earlier work. Some of these values are recovered by Elfyn in figures, gestures, and sensations rooted in past experience. Two poems in particular are grounded in the memory of her brother and sister. Transcending the death that claimed them both, she rediscovers their presence in a sound, a voice, a gesture. "The Pear Tree, The Manse, Pontardawe" was composed in Welsh in memory of her brother, who died on 13 February 2022. The English version is by Menna Elfyn herself. It is a brief elegy in three stanzas; it gathers tender, finely shaded memories of childhood that seem to hold grief in suspension, opening instead onto a vision of serenity: an afterlife imagined as no less fair than the earthly garden he was compelled to leave:

> "My big brother, nobody climbed / branches better or further than you. / In our orchard, high above, there you were / in the midst of pears, feet on a plank / in the arms of the boughs, looking / through a canopy to the sky above" (75).

In another poem, "Wedi'r glaw" ("After the Rain"), written in memory of her sister, emotion is conveyed rather than declared through the evocation of a scent: "I open a vial – / her daily perfume // a dab on skin / from nape to pulse // the fragrance of roses – / lime sandalwood" (29). One more poem, "Horse Chestnut Tree in Uppsala", is a celebration of the horse chestnut and its glossy fruits, which remind the poet of her childhood, when children would go out to gather them and everything was imbued with a spirit of innocence. It is a language closer to speech, though still highly controlled in the rhythm of the lines and stanzas.

Some of the poems were written in Welsh, while others were composed directly in English. In the acknowledgements, Menna Elfyn thanks five translators, including R. S. Thomas, perhaps the greatest Welsh poet of the twentieth century, who died in 2000, a friend of the author and a strong advocate of the Welsh language and its literary tradition. The poems translated by Elfyn herself, together with those written directly in English, display a directness that is less evident in those translated by other collaborators, such as Joseph Clancy, Gillian Clarke, Robert Minhinnick – whose contribution, however, is limited to one or two poems. A different case is represented by the two other translators, Emma Baines and R. S. Thomas. Emma Baines translated twenty-two poems from the collection, almost as many as those handled by Elfyn herself. She is, however, a poet quite distinct from Menna Elfyn, and this difference is perceptible in her translations. R. S. Thomas, undoubtedly "one of the greatest Welsh poets of the twentieth century" and "a fellow campaigner and international travel companion" (9), contributed only one translation, "Song of a voiceless person to BT", which, as previously noted, refers to an arrogant stance against which the two poets had fought together. His translation is splendid, revealing a particularly acute sensitivity to the phonic quality of the verse. Since attention to the sonic substance of the line is also one of Menna Elfyn's defining qualities, the correspondence between the two poets is especially convincing.

For a long time, the undervaluation of literatures in less widely spoken languages has been sustained by a prejudice about their supposed marginality – the assumption that they cannot extend their scope beyond the confines of a limited horizon. The body of poetry by Menna Elfyn, like that of many Irish and Scottish writers – if we confine ourselves to the context of the British Isles – demonstrates precisely the contrary: her work is deeply engaged with the issues and events of the contemporary world. It observes them, enters into them with a lucid and critical awareness, and establishes a dialectical relationship so that any attentive reader can easily understand and connect with it.

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