

### Tunes without words

It's just possible, with some elasticity of interpretation, that the first work of science fiction in English was written in Wales. *The Man in the Moone* by Francis Godwin, published in 1638, is a first-person account of the journey of Domingo Gonsales, a Spaniard who flies to the moon pulled by geese and discovers a utopian civilization there, along with weightlessness that allows its inhabitants to fly around by propelling themselves with giant fans.

I discovered it earlier this year when I stayed in Moynes Court near Monmouth, residence in Elizabethan times of Godwin when he was Bishop of Llandaff, as the guest of William Ayot (promoter of the On the Border reading series), who has lovingly renovated the house. The next day it would be the venue for Border/Lines, a gathering of poets and critics for which I still had a sheaf of papers to read in preparation. Instead, lying awake with the wind rustling in the sixteenth-century chimney, I was transfixed by the deadpan eccentricity (if not lunacy) of this tale, which William had mentioned and kindly lent me. While hesitating to agree fully with Copernicus, the speaker notes that planetary movements make much more sense if the earth is not taken as a fixed point. When Gonsales leaves, as what looks like a sensible precaution on Godwin's part, the ruler of the moon sends him back to earth with best regards to Elizabeth I, as he has heard that she is 'the most glorious of all women living.' Even when tempered by such flattery, Godwin's fable was too inflammatory to be published (literally – he had studied under Giordano Bruno who was burnt at the stake for his heretical views), so it did not appear until after his death. It's generally agreed that the book was written in the 1630s, when Godwin had moved on from Moynes Court. But why bother to flatter a monarch who was long since dead? Could it not, William wonders, have been written in this house, when Elizabeth ruled?

Whether or not the book was written in Wales, proximity is an appealing thought even if the book itself is concerned with creating the distance necessary to discuss dangerous theories. As well as gravity and planetary movement, it explores the distance that language itself creates, since the moon dwellers speak a language that, like Chinese, conveys meaning through tonal variation that here seems to offer a more direct transmission of thought:

it consisteth not so much of words and Letters, as of tunes and uncouth sounds, that no letters can expresse. For you have few wordes but they signifie divers and severall things, and they are distinguished onely by their tunes that are as it were sung in the utterance of them, yea many wordes there are consisting of tunes onely, so as if they list they will utter their mindes by tunes without wordes

This is illustrated in the text by musical notation of a couple of phrases. It's a resonant idea, hinting at an affinity between language and the music of the spheres, a mathematical utopian harmony.

While Godwin's idea of direct transmission of thought via pitch and tone is compelling, poetry is made of words, including their absences and silences, which stick

in their cultural and geographical contexts, and it's this stickiness that makes translation both fascinating and impossible. I was reminded of this recently at the Lyd + Litteratur (Sound and Literature) Festival in Aarhus, Denmark, which presented poetry in Danish or English without translation, but in various combinations with sound and music. The last issue of *PW* explored poetry and the visual, yet poetry's sonic roots are much stronger and older than its visual ones. Because the timbre and pitch of a voice carry meaning from one body to another, the loss of semantic meaning in songs is often accepted (take the Kingsmen's hugely popular 'Louie Louie', for example, which the FBI, after trying to prosecute for obscenity, concluded was 'unintelligible at any speed'). Given that all songs with lyrics combine words and music, what's new about sound and literature? In the dark theatre space of the Musikcaféen, the Kammerflimmer Kollektief made a dark pool of noise – guitar, keyboards and wailing female vocal that settled to a silence framing Carsten Rene Nielsen's calm delivery, as if the shared medium were the silence from which both elements emerged. Morten Søndergaard began with loops of speech gradually layered into the textures of dance music, language fading into a different kind of silence as the quality of the human voice faded and reasserted itself. Thomas Krogsbøl worked with electronic musician Michael Mørkholt to create a conversation between the two elements. What exactly was going on in that conversation I can't say, all Danish being sound poetry to me. However, each of these acts brought a different focus to bear on the physicality of words, their weight in the air.

Two nights previously I'd heard Thomas read in English at a different event in Copenhagen, organized by *PW*'s European editor Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese, who is now based there. He'd translated some of his own work into English, a series of wry poems imagined as short films. Elżbieta, to introduce the readers, had asked them what in their work travels or doesn't travel into other languages. While Denmark appears to be functionally bilingual, English being so widely spoken, it is of course a very different situation from Wales. Yet some of the same issues arise: Thomas and one of the other poets, Louise Rosengreen, both felt that their work's humour was not transferable, political references and twisted idioms skewering it to its Danish context. Another reader was the Polish poet Grzegorz Wróblewski, featured in this issue, who has lived in Copenhagen for many years, his reading and his work here suggesting not only the dislocation of an adopted culture but also a conversational immediacy that fully inhabits the moment of performance.

The written word creates and speaks through absence, since every word is a metaphor, and how words touch us is dependent on their simultaneous distance. For Wendy Mulford and Geoffrey Hill, the two very different poets interviewed in this issue, Wales exerts a magnetic pull. Neither of them reduces it simply to a metaphorical 'other place', a lunar projection as viewed from England, and both are linked to it by complex personal and political ties that make meanings out of contact in the context of geographical separation, meanings that come from distance rather than proximity. John Goodby's article, meanwhile, explores the fugitive lineage of Welsh modernist poetry. Like the earth, the past is not a fixed point. Claiming this history for poetry in Wales continues conversations not only about the past but about shifting relationships in the present.