

From Cardiff to Florida

By Mark Fitzgerald

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Parables and Faxes is Gwyneth Lewis's first book of poetry written in the English, but its tone is all Welsh. Lewis, a native of Cardiff, represents a small percentage of people in Wales who still speak and write the language. "Welsh was the mother tongue, English was his," Lewis recalls, referring to her parents in a poem called "Welsh Espionage." With the devolution of Wales and the Welsh language bill guaranteeing equal status to the Welsh and English languages in Wales, Lewis is writing at a time when Welsh nationalism has at long last burst from its seams.

Of the sixteen poems included in the collection, three are sequential, including her title poem, "Parables and Faxes," which spans nearly twenty-seven pages. Here is where Lewis weaves polarity into sameness. Both Fax and Parable are personified as saints who seek the truth behind "observation" and "simile." Fax wants to know how Parable can interpret the world in such a simple and orderly fashion. Parable wants to know how Fax can pay homage to objects that refuse insight: "simple facts lit from afar, / seen in themselves by long attention," or, as William Carlos Williams once said, there is "no truth but in things." So we have the dreamer and the realist. Haven't we been through this before? Both are copies in the most conventional sense. Both want to be right without having to recognize their interdependence. It is not surprising then that once the saints realize their own futility they are saved. The argument is part of an allegory that Lewis sets up to remind us "that we are all transformers: we change what we see." And you can tell she's having fun in changing what we expect to see after the subtitle "Parable" or "Fax"—allotted to each section—as though there's a clear distinction between the two.

It is too simple to say that Lewis is a formalist who likes to write narrative poems. Indeed, as an emerging poet, it might be said that she is rather savvy in using meter and rhyme so deliberately. But if form is an extension of content, then the privilege of many of Lewis's poems seems to reside less in sense than it does in sound. This is not to say that poetry can't embrace both measures with equal success. Surely Homer and Virgil and Shakespeare have taught us this. It's just that Lewis's use of syllabics and meter seems a bit gratuitous in places. And this brings to mind another question. To whom is she speaking? Although Lewis displays a certain candor and wit that is unmistakably Welsh, she is very much concerned with English and American sensibilities.

In her opening poem, "Pentecost," Lewis begins by saying, "The Lord wants me to go to Florida." Spoken in a biblical voice, but set in a modern day context "of golf

course and freeway, shopping mall and car,” Lewis assumes a persona that glibly juggles the American scenery and the flames of the Holy Spirit. The form is a set in an a-b-b-a-c-c rhyme scheme, with six sestets that sing of imperatives and bold leaps of faith. With references to “palm fruit” and the “Torah,” Lewis seems to be invoking the Jewish Feast of Weeks, an agricultural festival, celebrated fifty days after the first day of Passover. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, during the festival the first fruits of the harvest were offered, and every male Israelite was expected to “appear before the Lord” in Jerusalem. At the end of the poem, Lewis asks God to appear “and fulfill His bold promise to Florida.” But the “Atlantic closes,” and the implication is that “the sheet of time” is Lewis’s only currency for survival.

After such a strong recipe for salvation, it’s interesting that she proceeds with a meditation about a hedge: “On bad days now I see nothing but hedge, / my world crazed by the branches of should, / for I have lost all centre, have become an edge.” Unlike some of her other poem’s more strident gestures, there’s a visceral simile here, both on the corporal and metaphysical levels, that expresses humility in the ordinary. Lewis knows that reaching the sublime needn’t come through force. She finds it by surrendering and acknowledging her own mortality. The hedge’s existence is as fleeting as her own and she submits completely to its “narrowness.” This is a long poem, seventy-two lines, but the tercets are just the right balance for this kind of melancholy contemplation.

Religion, history, politics, scholarship, culture and strong verse are just a few of the many concerns Lewis tries to thread through the collection. In “Looking for the Celts,” her most historically adept poem, she begins with the image of The Duchess of Mecklenburg at an excavation site in Austria “digging in soft Salzkammergut rain.” The Duchess is looking for some evidence of these great tribesmen when she suddenly smells something and “drops to her knees.” She uncovers a Hallstatt Celt, dating from the 8th century B.C., and cries out “as she touches his chest, his barbarian loins.” You can’t keep the past buried forever, seems to be the message, and the narrative captures much of the anticipation and eroticism of the situation. That the Duchess is moaning in ecstasy as she touches the very loins from which she descended is just the kind of twist such a poem builds up to. The past jumps forward and what was once “barbarian” is now quite civilized.

This fantastic revelation of the past is muted, however, by the time we reach “Six Poems on Nothing,” a sequential and philosophical poem that questions the nature of substance and occurrence. In the fifth sequence, “A Calm,” Lewis begins by saying, “Nothing is happening everywhere, if only we knew it.” What are we really seeing then? This is a familiar enough epistemological platform, and it works nicely as a vehicle that turns the glass of water upside down. Is anything for certain? The questions are as simple as they are ancient and hardly news, but Lewis poses them nonetheless with just the right dose of deflated observation. Indeed, her first poem in the sequence,

“Midwinter Marriage,” seems to parallel much of what Wallace Stevens has said in his seminal poem, “The Plain Sense of Things.” Compare, for example, Lewis’s first line, “After autumn’s fever and its vivid trees,” to Stevens’s: “After the leaves have fallen.” Here’s another link: Lewis: “A time to take your ease / in not knowing, in blankness, in vacuity.” Stevens: “It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination, / Inanimate to an inert savoir.” Using the season of winter, the “acutest angle of the shortest day,” as a means to mirror the mood of silence and emptiness brings the external into a certain intimacy with the poet and the reader. Like “The Hedge,” this is one of Lewis’s more reflective musings. And like Stevens, Lewis works on the ordinary state of what’s absent to show what’s present, “the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is”—as Stevens has said in a way that has hollered harrowingly throughout the recesses of the twentieth century.

Further along in the collection Lewis returns to a narrative mode that regards highly the framework from which language and meter can best dictate the action. In “The Soul Mine” the backdrop is a “nunnery/where no one [speaks] English.” There is a nearby quarry, where workers are blasting for rock. Using a lonely “nun” much like an arrow, Lewis pulls the back the bow, the quarry for the sake of metaphor, and lets fly. The target is the “smashed heart,” which she consoles to validate its condition and the “predatory” nature of “love.” Split symmetrically into nine line stanzas, the cadence of this poem reads almost like a hymn, and the emotional intensity of the second half drills home Lewis’s appreciation for the vocation, while the rather phallic nature of the granite (“water flows, soft, from the rock. / Minds and minerals submit to their loads”) and the “sisters” chaste influence on the figurative (“cold stones that women kiss explode”) disclose a playful detachment.

Upon returning to the title poem, the thread that blurs the object and subject and seeks to bind the collection, we better understand how Lewis accommodates her historical and political views. As she admits in her eleventh sequence, “mercy’s a mystery and takes time to see.” Or a lot of poems. Indeed, one feels by the end of the last sequence that she has achieved with Fax and Parable at least a “partial vision” of self-knowledge. This is an ambitious collection of poems and it’s hard to refute Lewis’s command of her craft: the strong narrative tone, ironic closures, skillful use of myth and erudition, and at times eccentric and witty resolutions.

But it’s also worth mentioning the meta-poetic attention Lewis draws to herself. The most blatant example of this occurs in the first section: “and the hive behind them, its whitewashed slats/squat as a stanza. I can feel its heat.” Here is where the question of form becomes more pressing. I mention this only because Lewis is consistent in the way her syntax relies on her end-stops. Sure, it’s a matter of taste, and works wonderfully in the same tradition of formal poets who’ve been working wonderfully for centuries. But let’s face it: too many footsteps down the same grass path tends to wear away the roots and can even muddy one’s soles.