

## Investment Review Discussion Paper

An important part of the Investment Review is to encourage debate and discussion on a range of arts issues.

We've asked 11 authors to prepare discussion papers on 5 different subjects. This is one of these papers. The brief didn't request specific proposals or recommendations, instead the authors were asked to offer their individual and personal views to stimulate and provoke discussions. Any views or opinions expressed in the discussion paper are the author's own and not those of Arts Council of Wales.

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Title: **Ranting and Raving – The lack of critical discussion of the Arts in Wales**

Author: **Gareth Miles**

I think one of the major reasons for the 'ranting and raving' and 'the lack of critical discussion of the Arts in Wales' is that many of our critics, like the majority of their compatriots, are not sure exactly what Wales is.

That is the opinion of a cultured Englishman by the name of Gilbert Norwood about us, in a review of J.O Francis's play, *Cross Currents/Gwyntoedd Croesion*, in *Y Llenor* in 1923:

*The air is thick with some vague talk of the rights of nationalism, of the Welsh spirit, of Wales' hopes. There is also a great deal of underground enmity towards England, a kind of constant and half-spoken feeling that the Englishman in Wales holds the Welshman in scorn and elbows him out of his rights...*

*If I may presume to suggest, there are two ways to rule Wales. One is to regard Wales as part of England, and to consider the island to be one entity from the North Sea to the Irish Sea, and obtain the considerable benefits resulting from that union. The other way is to regard Wales as a country quite separate from England, as Switzerland is separate from France, and obtain the considerable benefits resulting from that separation. There is much to be said for both ways; they are both reasonable and seemly. But neither self-respect nor national unity lies in taking the middle road, and vacillating between them both, - being part of England when her protection and wealth and fame are required, and being a separate people when the genius and bravery of the Welsh, or the enterprise of Welsh resources have produced something worth claiming. 'How long will you be between two minds?' Being a small independent country, dignified like Denmark, is excellent; being a large powerful country like Britain is excellent. But running with the hare and hunting with*

*the hounds is not excellent, being a poor relation today and a malevolent neighbour tomorrow.*

The criticism still holds good today. In the pages of the *Western Mail* daily and in *Go!wg* weekly there are articles celebrating the international reputation of Welsh rugby players and athletes and actors and pop singers who have some connection with our country, mixed with articles and letters moaning that we have been wronged by Westminster or 'Europe' and that we've been slated by some English celeb or other. On one page it is claimed Wales is a world-leader in some scientific or industrial field, and on the next the lamentation that she is one of the most deprived regions of Europe. Sometimes Wales is the 'nation' referred to, and at other times it is 'the UK'.

It is not unjust to say that the majority of our intellectuals have only a superficial knowledge of Welsh history and of the economic and social developments which have made her what she is today; and that the many nationalists among them know little more on the subject than the contents of Dafydd Iwan's popular songs and anthems: Magnus Maximus, the two Llywelyns, Owain Glyndŵr, the Burning of the Bombing School, Trefechan Bridge, Gwynfor's victory in Carmarthen in 1966, the disappointment of the 1979 Referendum, the narrow victory of 1997 and the establishment of the National Assembly. The concern of the majority of Welsh nationalists is the survival of the Language, not the future of the nation.

There are two types of non-Welsh speaking nationalists; the liberals, with European horizons, very often incomers, who see the safeguarding of the Welsh culture and landscape as part and parcel of the same world-wide, green, ecological campaign; and the natives who are furious that so few of their compatriots wish to be a genuine nation, such as Ireland or the USA, and depict that apathy as some kind of *sexually transmitted disease*.

This reflects the fact that Welshness, to the majority of Wales' inhabitants, is a subjective condition, rather than loyalty to a historical community and an objective political entity.

Another stumbling block is misguided theorizing – at least in my opinion – about the purpose of artistic creativity in Wales. I do not think that the following considerations should be in a critic's mind when he or she evaluates a poem, a novel, a play, a picture or a piece of music:

It could promote tourism, create employment and boost the local economy.  
It reinforces Welsh awareness, or the value of the Welsh language, or proves that Welsh is a language fit to deal with some of life's most complex problems at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It provides the opportunity for a Welsh artist to shine on the international stage – usually in England and the USA – and 'raises Wales' profile' internationally.

Like Prozac and Valium, it makes the Welsh 'feel comfortable with themselves'.

### **Saunders Lewis (1893-1985)**

Rather than theorize further, I am now going to consider the qualifications of the most brilliant literary critic of the twentieth century in the Welsh language, bearing in mind that critics in other fields need their equivalent:

Experience of life outside the world of the arts and academia. S.L. served as an officer during the First World War and was injured. He was one of the founders of the Welsh Nationalist Party and was its President from 1925 to 1943.

A thorough knowledge of Welsh literature through the ages.

A thorough knowledge of the literatures of other countries, in particular England, France, Italy and Greek and Roman classics and of the arts in general.

A deep love of literature and empathy with all sincere poets and writers.

An understanding of the conventions and techniques of the *genre* in question. (With a few rare exceptions, Welsh-language reviewers limit themselves to summarizing the plot of the novel or play, describing the leading characters and praising or criticizing the language.)

Objectivity and honesty. I heard Saunders Lewis admit that he was 'fiercely anti-Socialist' but these are his words in a series of essays on Marxism which appeared in *Y Ddraig Goch*, the Welsh Nationalist Party's monthly publication, in 1938: *It is very important for us to confront our enemies fairly. It would pain me were it to be proved that any essential point in the analysis of Marxism in this address were a misrepresentation.*

The elimination of personal, partisan or sectarian considerations from the discussion. In the pages of *Y Llenor* in the nineteen twenties and thirties, Welsh literary criticism was raised above the narrow-minded, sectarian and ignorant bickering of the decades before the First World War. The best example of the civility of the reform is the lengthy debate between the liberals, W.J. Gruffydd and R.T. Jenkins, and the reactionaries Saunders Lewis and Ambrose Bebb.

It was the possession of a coherent doctrine and a broad world view based on social reality which enabled him to set the Welsh works with which he dealt in a global context and compare them to works of authors in other languages. It is not easy, in a small country such as Wales, on the one hand for a critic to curb his natural desire not to 'offend' a friend, a colleague, or an acquaintance, and on the other hand to take revenge on a person who has offended one. Adherence to the values of a general ideology, whether political, liberal, socialist or religious, helps to overcome personal prejudices and gives a firmer philosophical basis to the criticism than subjective and arbitrary eclecticism.

Saunders Lewis was born and brought up in Victorian and Edwardian Liverpool, a member of a middle class led by businessmen, bankers and wealthy industrialists: the only strong and self-aware bourgeoisie the Welsh ever had. He was educated in an expensive private school and at Liverpool University, by conservative teachers; then he came under the reactionary influence of Maurice Barrès, and other like-minded French authors. Here are some of the interesting statements which resulted from that cultural inheritance as they are seen in an essay on *Safonau Beirniadaeth Lenyddol* (*Standards of Literary Criticism*) in *Y Llenor*, (Volume 1), 1922:

*I believe that everything which is art, whether song or sculpture, is an individual, special thing, and completely unique. Ultimately not even the simplest lyric may be categorized; it is one of a kind. The reason for this is that art is an interpretation of the author's personality, the product of his spirit and experience; and every poet is a distinct creature, with neither partner nor anyone on earth who empathizes completely with him. Art is the fruit of spiritual loneliness - yes, and that of a spirit who knows his loneliness and knows he is overwhelmed by it, - an attempt to bridge the terrible abyss between man and fellow man...*

*...I aim to try to prove that the literary critic has nothing to do with either judging literature or with standardizing it...the work of a literary critic is the composition of literature. Is that not the ambition of all authors? The poet and the author attempt to express their experience of the world, giving us a portrait of life as reflected in their own minds. The author differs from them in only one particular – his subject matter. The novelist writes about man and society whilst the critic writes about literature.*

*...the literary history of every country proves consistently that standards which once proved useful must be destroyed.*

*Wherever there is competition and standardization in art, it is interesting to note that especial emphasis is placed on the moral attitudes of the competitors. This is to be seen not only in Welsh eisteddfodau. From reading the plays of Aristophanes and Euripides' life history we perceive that the standards of Greek criticism of their age were every bit as moral as the standards of many an eisteddfod critic in Wales.*

The following comments are rather more controversial:

*That is one reason – not the only reason – why the common herd can never recognize literature. Saying this is no insult to anyone. But patently the 'common man' cannot understand the uncommon except after a very long time; and the uncommon is the essence of literature....*

*I heard, but know not whether it be true, that Mr Williams-Parry's political convictions are democratic. The idea is repugnant. An artist has no right to be a democrat. His inheritance is too old. (Barddoniaeth Mr R. Williams-Parry (The Poetry of Mr R. Williams-Parry) in Y Llenor (Volume 2), 1922.)*

*The loss of sin is a loss to literature. Without sin there can be nothing but lyrical poetry such as is found in Wales today and, I have heard tell, such as is found in heaven, another country which is short of sinners. But as we are on earth, we should respect our inheritance and make the most of sin. This is the making of the world's greatest tragedies, the work of Shakespeare and Racine. (Llythyr ynghylch Catholigiaeth (A letter on Catholicism), in Y Llenor, Summer 1927)*

I am not the first critic to notice that the essence of tragedy is a conviction that death is final and that there is no 'hereafter' but that the human spirit, as it is incarnate in Antigone and Othello in Sophocles' and Shakespeare's plays and John and Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, for example, is a far finer thing than the negative forces which may destroy the body. If S.L.'s mind was enriched by his religion, it was also narrowed. His comments on authors he could include in what he called 'Europe's classical Christian tradition' are always perceptive and revealing but he has only scorn for the others, the romantics, liberals and anyone who has a good word to say for the French Revolution.

Here is a quotation from the reply of W.J. Gruffydd, Editor of *Y Llenor*, to *A letter on Catholicism*:

*'...we know that it has always been the 'atheists' and the 'sceptics' and the 'heretics' at the root of every movement to cut the bonds of ancient cruelties and to open windows on all ancient stupidity and cowardice. Today, one of the world's immortal stupidities, the shameful sin which retains the taste of blood on its tongue, is war; and those people who believe in war as something laudable and inevitable are those who hold clearly defined religious beliefs...'*

Plus ça change...

S.L.'s reactionary conservatism caused him to hold political opinions completely at odds with those of the majority of his compatriots, inhabitants of what was then one of the most proletarian countries in Europe. He rejoiced in General Franco's victory over the Republic in the Spanish Civil War and he advocated Welsh neutrality during the Second World War.

S.L.'s eulogy to 'sin' contradicts his previous comments on the irrelevance of moral considerations in evaluating literary works. I believe that his adherence to the Roman Catholic doctrine in relation to sexuality – in addition to the strict puritanism of his Welsh Nonconformist upbringing – damaged his work as a dramatist and also as a novelist. Branwen Jarvis hit the nail on the head in describing him as the 'Prophet of Patriarchy'; his women are either heroic saints who are model mothers and wives - Iris, in *Gymerwch chi Sigaret?*, the eponymous Siwan, for example; or fickle and immoral creatures, such as Blodeuwedd and Monica.

### **A doctrine for the twenty-first century**

The Roman Catholic Church has, for some time, lost the power and authority it held in the nineteen twenties and thirties as millions of its faithful in the old 'Lands of Belief' renounce it. We have seen the death of the Soviet Communism which Saunders Lewis respected, as a fitting opponent – was that not an authoritarian and dogmatic faith? – while condemning its materialist, anti-metaphysical vision.

Say what you will about the Soviet Union – and I think it did far more good than harm – it cannot be denied that its existence forced Capitalism and Imperialism to behave unnaturally; i.e. the granting of freedom to colonies in Africa and Asia, the establishment of welfare states and the significant increase of trade union rights in Europe and nuclear

disarmament. Following its demise and that of its socialist allies in Europe, the *status quo ante* has been restored, and lo and behold Capitalism and Imperialism again, *red in tooth and claw*, as they were before 1917. The Keynesianism of the thirty years after the Second World War has been supplanted by the neo-liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher which has undermined the liberal and social-democratic ideologies which flourished in the ideological gap between Washington and Moscow. Artists and academics flocked Rightwards. Many embraced the politics of George W. Bush and the American *neo-cons*, endorsing the 'war against terrorism', Islamophobia and 'the End of History'. Others sank into the egocentric, introverted, frivolous, anti-realism swamps of Post-modernism or lost their way in a wilderness of scholastic theories.

George W. Bush's government ended at the same time as the latest bankruptcy of the economic and political system he crusaded for. The fat cats who proclaimed with such confidence that state interference in economic matters was at the root of social problems and that the free, uncontrolled market had the answers, now acknowledge that it is entirely to the contrary. That is why I claim, with more confidence now than would have been the case eighteen months ago, that Marxism is 'a coherent doctrine based on social realism' which offers interpretations of Welsh history and the purpose of Art which artists and critics would do well to consider seriously; and which could prove useful to Welsh artists enabling them to overcome parochialism on the one hand and *provincialism* and Britishness on the other.

#### **A very short summary of the foundations of Marxism.**

- Social conditions are what shape human consciousness and not to the contrary.
- Men, both male and female, have always struggled to increase their freedom; the essence of that struggle is their compulsion to master the material conditions of their existence.
- *At a particular point in its history society divided into a number of economic classes whose interests conflicted. Class struggle arose from this historical and social basis. From the perspective of this struggle, the principle aim of the ruling class is to maintain government in its own hands; it opposes social change, causes culture and production to remain increasingly at a standstill, and depends increasingly on arms to ensure its authority. The principle aim of the subordinate class is to liberate itself from its subjection to the ruling class and establish itself as a new ruling class.* (W.J. Rees, in the Foreword to his translation of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Frederich Engels).
- The factors we must comprehend if we are to understand any historical phenomenon - whether revolution, or social reform, political change, a novel, a play or a particular doctrine - are the most predominant methods of production of the period and the comparative power and interrelationship of the various classes.

#### **Welsh History**

France became a nation-state because the French bourgeoisie needed such a regime to safeguard its industries, its markets and property. A similar process occurred in

all European countries where a sovereign state was established. Our country was deprived of statehood not because we Welsh are an inferior or a more servile people than most, but because here, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was no substantial social class which needed a state for the promotion of its interests. Between 1848 and 1922 the Liberal Nonconformist middle class of Welsh-speaking Wales succeeded in becoming a regional ruling class with power and influence in Westminster and Whitehall, without threatening the unity of the UK; and Imperial markets were vital to the prosperity of the coal-owners, dock-owners and ironmasters of the South. As to the working class, it had to form alliances with its comrades in England and Scotland and join the same unions and political parties as they did, in order to withstand the tyranny of a united and powerful British ruling class of capitalists and landowners.

### **Wales Today**

We have a feeble National Assembly made up of the representatives of four middle-class parties who profess some kind of luke-warm nationalism and a coalition Government attempting to implement social-democratic policies without challenging the monetarist principles of Neo-liberalism, i.e. the Thatcherism of the Conservatives and New Labour. We constantly hear MPs and AMs deploring the fact that 'people, especially young people, have lost interest in politics'. I have not heard one of them acknowledge that the reason for this is that they have disenfranchised most of their electorate by renouncing policies which would respond to their essential needs: world peace, safeguarding the environment, full employment, high standard council housing, an effective health and education service free of charge for all, integrated transport and a culture derived from their history and experience rather than the corporate entertainment factories of the mass media. The condition for the achievement of all this is the restraint of the Free Market: 'the simple thing which is so difficult to achieve', as Bertolt Brecht said.

We Welsh will never be a 'real nation' like England or France, nor even Ireland. Our status is like that of the indigenous nations of South America which are now, after centuries of oppression, demanding political and economic autonomy in their traditional territories, along with respect for their cultures, traditions and languages.

Let's face the sad and shameful fact that Wales is a colony: an English colony; England's first colony and its last.

### **A Welsh Aesthetic**

I am not calling on Welsh artists to preach and propagandize for this political programme but encouraging them to place their creativity in the twenty-first century's most important and significant social currents. Neither am I trying to persuade them to profess the same political beliefs as I; I am simply asking them to consider Marxism as an ideological weapon which can deepen our understanding of society and of the world we live in and of what we try to achieve as painters, musicians, poets and writers.

According to Marxist critics - such as the Irishman, George Thomson (see *Aeschylus and Athens* and *The Prehistoric Aegean*) - dance, music, poetry and painting began as magic, that is the attempts of our primitive forefathers, through ritual, to will success for the

hunt and favourable weather for their crops. In more complex societies, artists try to create a synthesis from subjective and objective conflicts and from experiences which grieve or gladden them; the creation from a maelstrom of experiences a meaning with which others can identify.

If I were asked to give a name to the aesthetic I'm trying to describe, I would call it 'Humanist and democratic realism'. Here are two recent novels and one play which are realistic, humanist and democratic in character and which I enjoyed immensely. Like all successful artistic creations, they make us wonder at the pertinacity, heroism, altruism and cruelty of humankind and at the genius and imagination of the artist.

*Teulu Lord Bach* by Geraint Vaughan Jones, (Gomer). The story of a family in a quarrying area in Meirionnydd attempting to get to grips with the effects of both World Wars and the Depression of the nineteen twenties and thirties.

*Petrograd* by Wiliam Owen Roberts, (Barddas). The story of a very wealthy, Russian, upper-middle-class family during the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent years.

Both novels tell gripping tales of interesting and convincing characters and deepen our knowledge of the world and our fellow-men by putting flesh and blood on the bones of History.

*Amgen: Broken* by Gary Owen (Sherman Cymru). A bold, bilingual play which explores the relationship between language and personality and the different values implicit in the two languages spoken by a bilingual person. It also conveys to the audience the agonizing alienation which is ruining the lives of so many young people today and sometimes destroys them. When I saw this play, over half the audience were non-Welsh speakers, including people from other countries, but judging by the impassioned discussion between the Company and the audience at the end of the performance, that had not affected their appreciation.

### **The Poet's Propaganda**

R. Williams-Parry (1884-1956) is a poet whose mature poems are humanist and democratic in spirit and display an awareness of the fiercest social conflicts of his age. I don't suppose the first of the poems quoted was intended as a response to Saunders Lewis' snobbish admiration, but it does so very effectively. In the second, the poet describes the role of the Muse in his own era and today.

### ***"WELSH POETIC MASTERPIECES" 1773 \****

All masterpieces fine and hard  
I read, all that each and every  
Poet wrote;  
Past the hard regular  
Muse of Tudur Aled  
To Wiliam Llŷn.

Sometimes beneath awdl or cywydd,



An occasional trail  
Here and there,  
Among the immortals  
I saw ancient traces  
Of a mortal hand.

Name and address  
In unlettered wording  
Were for me  
More thrilling music  
Than the feats  
Of the great and the good.

As on a September evening  
Beneath a thousand  
Twinkling stars,  
The sight through some distant cottage window  
Of a wax candle's  
Flickering light.

\* 'One of the most important collections ever of Welsh poetry'. *Cydymaith i Lenyddiaeth Cymru (Companion to Welsh Literature)*

### **WELSH 1937**

Take up thy bed and walk, Oh Wind,  
Or rather fly through the air weeping and empty-handed;  
Sow discontent through the ends of the earth on your way -  
No tyrant's guards nor viceroy's retinue can stop you.  
Make human again the flesh made steel,  
Baptize the bereft-of-longing with your tears, re-christianize the wise;  
Give the apathetic behind his wall an hour of madness,  
Make earthquakes under the firm concrete of Philistia;  
Or with the harmonies of your restless viol  
Teach the blameless regret, and teach him hope;  
Reach the self-satisfied through the cushion of his gluttony,  
And give the insouciant materialist a thrill of despair:  
From the Llanfair on the Hill or Lanfair Mathafarn  
Blow him to the synagogue or blow him to the tavern.

\* \* \*

**“I want to see a Wales which is comfortable with herself, and her people confident of their own value and identity”**

So do I, but we will not achieve that until after the European Socialist revolution and that won't be for some time.

### **Counsel for the Council**

I should like to see the Arts Council of Wales ceasing to fund international arts competitions with huge prizes and visits to the Biennale in Venice by a few artists and a handful of the Council's officers and administrators. Such events foster the superficial and pretentious cultural nationalism of a privileged elite without being of any use to the general populace. The money saved should be directed towards the promotion of arts practice and appreciation in schools and deprived areas.

**GARETH MILES, Pontypridd.**

***Bibliography** There is an interesting collection of essays on literature and literary criticism by Karl Marx, Frederich Engels, Christopher Caudwell, George Thomson, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht and others between the covers of **MARXISTS ON LITERATURE: An Anthology**. Ed. David Craig. (Penguin).*