Daniel G. Williams

BEYOND INVISIBILITY

USES OF COMPARISON IN WELSH CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The trope of invisibility has provided a resilient motif for national minorities. It is associated in particular with the African-American experience, partly due to Ralph Ellison's seminal novel *Invisible man* (1952), which re-interpreted the title of H.G. Wells's science-fiction fantasy and transformed it into a metaphor that symbolised the consequences of racial blindness and indifference.[1] Yet, as Anne Anlin Cheng has noted, 'the nature of racial blindness – and its antidote social visibility – has never been as simple as the binary terms imply.'[2] Visibility and invisibility can only emerge in relation to one another. English and Spanish visibility relies on the normality and ubiquity of these categories, that is on their perceived *in*visibility. Welsh and Catalan invisibility acquire their shape and existence due to their potentially disturbing *visibility* through language and the outward symbols of nationhood. The processes by which those markers of difference are rendered inconsequential by the dominant culture are complex. The rhetoric of 'becoming visible', so central to minority nationalist movements, tends to ignore the tensions underpinning social visibility. Ralph Ellison was fully aware of these tensions, and the conceit of invisibility in *Invisible Man* embodies not the opposition between being seen and not being seen, but the mutual

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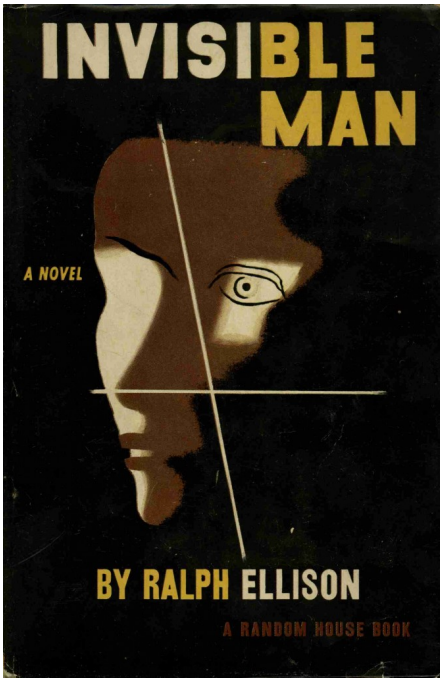
projections embraced by 'self' and 'other' in structuring the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures.

The 'invisibility to which I refer', states the narrator of Ellison's novel,

> occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist.[3]

The narrator is not literally invisible, but because of his race finds himself unacknowledged and un-represented in American society. In beginning to make himself visible, to develop a sense of selfhood, he compares himself with others, defining himself in relation to other political actors and ideologies: Victorian racial uplift, folk culture, black nationalism, communism. In this respect Ellison's celebrated work is a development of a series of stories that he wrote in the early 1940s. Ellison served in the merchant marine as second cook and baker from 1943 to 1945, seeing this as a means of contributing to the war effort without serving in the segregated American army.[4] His period aboard the *S.S. Sun Yat Sen* in 1943 took him to the Welsh ports of Cardiff, Barry and Swansea, and it is



Cover of Ralph Ellison's Invisible man (1952) | RANDOM HOUSE INC.

the latter destination that formed a setting for the story 'In a strange country' which was published in 1944. It begins with the central character, Parker, sitting in a Welsh pub recalling events that have happened earlier that evening:

> Coming ashore from the ship he had felt the excited expectancy of entering a strange land. Moving along the road in the dark he had planned to stay ashore all night, and in the morning he would see the country with fresh eyes. […] Someone had cried 'Jesus H. Christ', and he had thought, He's from home, and grinned and apologized into the light they flashed in his eyes. He had felt the blow coming when they yelled, 'It's a goddamn nigger', but it struck him anyway. He was having a time of it when some of Mr Catti's countrymen stepped in and Mr Catti had guided him into the pub […].
>
> At first he had included them in his blind rage. But they had seemed so genuinely and uncondescendingly polite that he was disarmed. Now the anger and resentment had slowly ebbed, and he felt only a smouldering sense of self-hate and ineffectiveness. Why should he blame them when they had helped him? He had been the one so glad to hear an American voice. You can't take it out on them, they're a different breed; even from the English.[5]

The passage traces a shift in Parker's perception of the Welsh, from initially including them in his 'blind rage' to his increasing awareness of their ethnic difference. Following a violent encounter with white American GIs, Parker has a literal black eye that functions as a suggestive metaphor in a story preoccupied with issues of sight and self-perception. Upon entering the club with his Welsh hosts the light strikes Parker's injured eye – 'it was as though it were being peeled by an invisible hand' – and the story proceeds to explore the layers of identity that constitute the African-American self – the black 'I'.[6]

The black 'I' is defined comparatively, and this reflects Ellison's own experiences of defining his African-American subjectivity in Wales. In a letter to a past lover, Senora Babb, Ellison noted of the Welsh that 'I love them like my own people', and expressed his pleasure 'that hundreds of

Negro boys are acquiring their first notions of real democracy among these people who, strangely, are culturally so similar.'[7] If Ellison is here evoking a somewhat romantic sense of attachment between the Welsh and African Americans, he is identifying and articulating a strategy of comparison adopted by all minorities in attempting to define their own identities, and in attempting to visualise themselves and to get themselves seen.

In Wales, where the world continues to be largely seen through the lens of a London-centric press and media, the comparative impulse is one of the defining elements within nationalist thought. From Emrys ap Iwan in the nineteenth century through to Raymond Williams in the twentieth, many of those who have tried to conceptualise and discuss Welsh culture have attempted to break out of the perceptual confines of 'Britishness' to make a wider set of comparisons, in which 'England' itself becomes defamiliarised. This article draws attention to some of the ways in which Wales has been located, and in doing so seeks to explore the advantages and pitfalls of comparison. The analysis is inevitably highly selective and rather sweeping, but in exploring some of the ways in which those embracing various forms of Welsh identity have viewed their place in the world, I am also offering particular examples of a much wider phenomenon. For, while decried as 'provincial' and 'narrow-minded' by the dominant culture, the internationalist perspectives adopted by minority nationalist movements is often striking.

Emrys ap Iwan (1848-1906) was one of the first to describe the Welsh experience in broadly colonial terms, and to identify the salient characteristics of the nation's subjugation. He described a Welsh inferiority complex that he thought manifested itself in a lack of respect for the indigenous Welsh language, in the excessive respectability of Welsh religious Nonconformity, in the desire never to upset or criticise the English, in a political quietism and in a perpetual desire to define culture and civilisation in English terms. The best medicine to administer against this illness, suggested ap Iwan, was for the Welsh to see themselves reflected in the mirror of Europe rather than that of England. The servile Welshman would see in the European mirror, that the 'English are a

monolingual nation – more so than any other nation in Europe. They don't wish to, and indeed they can't, learn to speak any foreign language.'[8]

> We have been so long in servitude and become so used to it, that most of us can't even see that we are slaves. The dear English are so careful in administering crumbs and water to us that the wires of our cell have been rendered invisible.[9]

Emrys ap Iwan sought to break the cell's wires by creating a plural vision of an Europe in which the Welsh could locate themselves, thus emancipating their hearts and minds from the dominance of the British 'John Bully':

> By spending three or fours years on the continent they'll realise that the English aren't half as big in the eyes of other nations as they think themselves to be, and as is thought by those childish Welshmen who think that the Englishman's 'I say' is the equivalent of the Welshman's 'Fel hyn y dywed yr Arglwydd' / 'And thus Sayeth the Lord'.[10]

Ap Iwan's vision of Europe is, of course, highly selective. While he lambasts the English Empire, he ignores the Empires of France and Germany. In adopting the pseudonym Emrij van Jan for some of his essays, presenting himself as a cultured and peaceful Belgian, he forgets that Belgium, during that very period, was creating a hell on earth in the Congo. This selective vision is not unique to Welsh nationalist thought of course – most of us create a Europe congenial to our needs and interests. But the emphasis on locating Wales within an idealised 'Europe' has constituted a central strain within Welsh nationalist thought, and a means of defining the nation against an equally imaginary 'insular' England.

Emrys ap Iwan's European vision was drawn upon by Saunders Lewis (1893-1985), dramatist and first president of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (the National Party of Wales). According to Lewis, the Welsh could claim to have been members of the Roman Empire and, uniquely among the peoples of Britain, could claim to have 'sucked at the teat' of Roman Europe.[11] Lewis argued that the Roman influence had persisted in Wales

even while England was enduring its Dark Ages, and thus the Welsh were a fundamentally European people. This formed the historical basis for his 1926 pamphlet on the principles of nationalism:

> World economic peace can only be hoped for if British capitalists fail in their attempts at turning the British Empire into an economic army that will attack Europe and America. But in Britain is there a European tradition? Is there here a nation that was an original member of Western Civilization, who thinks in Western terms and who understands Europe and sympathises with her? The answer is: Wales. The Welsh are the only nation in Britain who were a part of the Roman Empire, that sucked from the teat of the West as a baby, that has the blood of the West in her veins. Wales can understand Europe, because she is a member of the family.[12]

Here Lewis is formulating a creation myth, a foundational story for the Welsh that bypasses Britain and England in adopting Europe as the backdrop of its narrative. In the late 1130s, Geoffrey of Monmouth produced an Arthurian mythology for Britain that was later forged into an effective ideology by the polymath John Dee as he invented the phrase 'British Empire' and reinforced Elizabeth's claim on North America by evoking the legend of Prince Madoc, the Welshman who had 'discovered' America 300 years before Columbus. While conceptions of Welsh history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were similarly contributionist in intent, emphasising Wales's role in the making of the British Empire, Saunders Lewis's major legacy to Welsh nationalist thought was the belief that Wales was an integral part of European culture – a part of Europe that had been cut off from its natural home by the development of the modern, imperial, British


Lieut. J. Saunders Lewis, B. A., mab y Parch. Lodwig Lewis, Lerpwl, ac wyr i'r diweddar Dr. Owen Thomas. Enillodd ei B. A. yn Athrofa Lerpwl. Tra yn y coleg enillodd wobr a gynygid gan y "Review of Reviews."

Saunders Lewis in 1916 | WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

state.[13] This notion remained a key element in his celebrated works of literature and literary criticism. In the latter case, as Richard Wyn Jones has noted, Europe served both an analytic and normative function. Analytic in the sense that the European context allowed for links to be traced between Welsh literature and broader 'classical' European traditions and modes of writing and expression. Normative in the sense that closeness to and awareness of that European tradition were regarded as key attributes of the works in question and the assumed foundation for Welsh political and historical distinctiveness.[14]

What became far more controversial was Lewis's association of that Europeanism with Catholicism. His increasing interest in the Catholic Church and Catholic doctrine was anathema to the largely Nonconformist protestant Welsh and his eventual conversion in 1931 threatened to alienate him from the majority of the members of the nationalist party. This element of his thought became more and more problematic as the 1930s progressed and the shadow of European politics grew darker. During the second half of the 1930s, Lewis and his party were accused of fascist sympathies, a charge that could be made with more validity of some other minority nationalisms in Europe but that gained some traction due to Lewis's conditional admiration for Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal and the strain of anti-Semitism in his 1930s writings (which he retracted in the following decades). As Richard Wyn Jones has noted the anti-statist and pacifist Plaid Cymru never embraced any overtly fascist policies, and the 'fascist' slur was imbued with, and informed by, a widespread anti-Catholic sentiment.[15]

While Saunders Lewis was the dominant influence on Plaid Cymru during the first period of the party's existence, his cultural and political conservatism has made him an uneasy presence within the party's leftist post-war trajectory. His contemporary D.J. Davies (1893-1956) has been elevated in the pantheon of 'founders' in recent decades. Davies, who had a varied and colourful life as coal miner, gold prospector, hobo and navy seaman, forged an alternative vision of Europe to that espoused by Lewis. The most important moment of Davies's intellectual development came during his stay at a *folkeskole* in Denmark in 1924.[16] It was here that the former socialist agitator became a Welsh nationalist. On returning to

Wales, Davies joined the newly formed nationalist party and along with his Irish wife Noëlle became one of its leading economic thinkers. The Scandinavian social democracies, in particular the role of the co-operative movements in those countries, were the model around which Davies developed his economic vision. As Richard Wyn Jones notes, by the post-war period the success of the Scandinavian 'small nations' was recurrently foregrounded in Plaid Cymru publications. When Gwynfor Evans became Plaid Cymru's first Member of Parliament in 1966 he noted in his maiden speech that 'the Welsh are beginning to take their country as seriously as the Danes and Swedes take their countries.'[17]

One way of thinking of the difference between the conceptualisations of Europe in the works of Lewis and Davies, is to think of the former as broadly cultural and civilisationist and the latter as institutional and political. This is of course a fairly commonplace distinction in theories of nationalism, a distinction between what we might problematically describe as cultural and political conceptions of the nation. These strains of thought are usually ascribed to particular nationalisms – the well-established contrast between French civic nationalism and German ethnic nationalism for instance – but both strains co-exist uneasily in Welsh nationalist thought and this is reflected in Welsh nationalist conceptions of Europe and of Wales itself.[18] We might address the cultural and political strains in Welsh nationalist thought further by resurrecting the even older schema of historical and non-historical countries. Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Engels used the distinction to discredit the smaller and more backward peoples whom they found to be a nuisance on the map of Europe.[19] The basic concept is however stronger than its polemical use, and indicates that in the great variety of national and regional formations there are those who have not managed to form their own modern states and others that have or did at some point in their history. The inheritance that historical statehood leaves behind in both the psychology and institutional history of peoples is important, as witnessed in the fact that it is two 'historical nations' in the traditional sense of having a memory of institutional independence (Scotland and Catalonia) that are leading the potential 'renaissance of the peoples' in contemporary Europe.[20]

As Tom Nairn argued back in the 1970s, Wales does not neatly fit the historic or non-historic models. The non-historic features of the Welsh past are very well known. To use Eric Hobsbawm's characteristically dismissive description 'a territory inhabited by an agrarian population united by […] a primitive social and economic structure and by the fact of not speaking English'.[21] But Wales was also a major secondary centre of the European Industrial revolution. As many historians have noted, south Wales became the centre of the iron, steel and coal industries and the techniques developed were copied in every developing country. According to Nairn, nothing remotely comparable could be said of other European countries with forms of cultural nationalism superficially resembling that of Wales. What emerges in the late nineteenth century through capitalist development and cultural nationalism is what Nairn calls 'a tracery of a nation' where no state had existed – a movement that extended from the renewed cultural festival known as the Eisteddfod, to the University Colleges of Wales, from the Welsh National Library to the National Museum in Cardiff.[22] While the emergence of a 'tracery' may gesture optimistically at future developments whereby the 'non-historic' Welsh nation seemed to be acquiring the trappings of a historic nation, Welsh authors and artists in the twentieth century have often emphasised the stagnant, bifurcated, and grotesque characteristics of a Wales in which two thirds of the population was packed into the industrial power-house of the South-East leaving the larger expanse of the nation's geography in a state of underdeveloped ruralism.[23] As it entered the twentieth century, Wales may be said to have been suspended between the standard historic and non-historic alternatives of European neo-nationalisms. This resulted in a divided, schizophrenic form of nationhood, a feature that was registered by those attempting to describe and define the divided nature of the Welsh nation.

The sociologist Alfred Zimmern, travelling across Wales in the early 1920s, famously suggested that

> […] the Wales of today is not a unity. There is not one Wales; there are three… There is Welsh Wales, there is industrial or as I sometimes think of it American Wales, and there is upper class or

> English Wales. These three represent different types and different traditions. They are moving in different directions, and if they all three survive, they are not likely to re-unite.[24]

While a residual Welsh speaking working-class culture remained within the dominant English speaking society, the communities of industrial south Wales were increasingly perceived as, in the words of novelist Gwyn Thomas, 'the parts of America that never managed to get the boat'.[25] South Wales, to quote Thomas again was a 'place where the Taff and Mississippi kissed', a place of considerable ethnic and, for a period, linguistic diversity.[26] For the post-war generation of anti-nationalist, English language writers and historians – Gwyn Thomas, Duncan Bush, Dai Smith – industrial America seemed the most appropriate comparison to industrial Wales. Welsh revisionist anti-nationalist history established a series of repeated mantras which were based on a crude and misleading binary opposition between what they called a 'privileged minority' of 'self-blinded visionaries' who espoused a 'linguistically exclusive Welshness', and a 'collectivist, universalist' working-class who promoted 'an inter-meshing of class and community solidarities whose horizons were truly international.'[27] The American melting pot was perceived to be a useful metaphor for the assimilationist narrative in which cultural differences were eradicated in the formation of what was, nevertheless, a distinctive common, Anglophone, south Walian society.

The Welsh language retained a presence in industrial south Wales, however, and continued to claim a territorial heartland that extended from the island of Ynys Môn in the north to the town of Llanelli in the south.[28] There were alternative 'Americas' to which cultural nationalists could turn to within what Simon Brooks has described as an 'indigenous Atlantic'.[29] In the post-war era the mantle of Saunders Lewis was carried in the English language by the poet R.S. Thomas (there were also many Welsh language writers profoundly influenced by Lewis's writings). Thomas attacked a contemporary Wales 'fuddled with democracy' and lamented the loss of 'a Welsh-speaking nobility that succoured music and poetry'.[30] In his poem 'Afallon' from *No truce with the Furies*, his imagined Avalon is a place where a Welsh-speaking David has 'floor[ed]' the Goliath

of 'a world / oscillating between dollar / and yen'.[31] In his review of Dee Brown's history of Native Americans *Bury my heart at Wounded Knee,* R.S. Thomas evoked the indigenous peoples of America as part of a primitivist resistance to industrialisation:

> Here was yet another of the primitive peoples of the world who had followed a particular way of life since time immemorial; a way of life which was beautiful and in keeping with nature itself. It was confronted by the mechanised way of life, a money-gathering life based on the machine and the gun, and like every other culture, it collapsed before this soul-less Leviathan.[32]

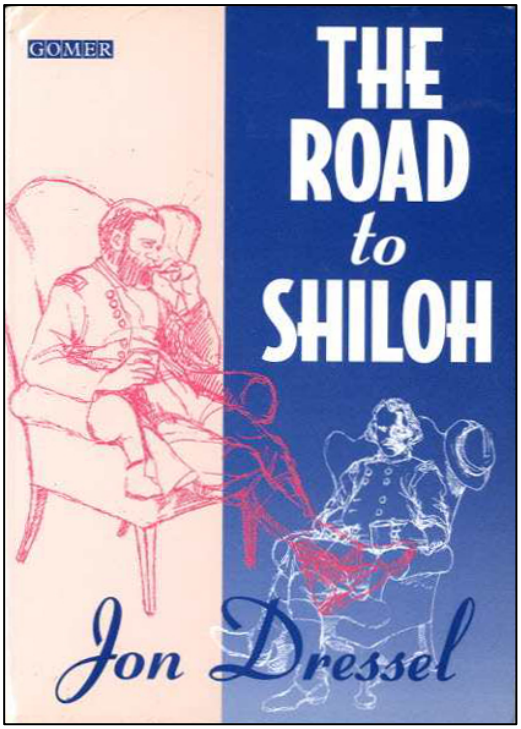
This romanticisation of the American Indian's 'beautiful' life leads Thomas back to his youthful 'dream of a different society':

> When I was younger, I used to dream of a different society in Wales. The population was comparatively small; there was a distinctive language; there was space. Most of the country had not yet been built on; most of the inhabitants worked on the land – except for the industrial monster in the south. Language is important; it partly reflects the personality of a people and it partly moulds it. Would it not be possible, by means of Welsh, to avoid the over industrialisation that had taken place in England, the bottomless pit into which so many western countries were rushing? The years went by. The industrialisation increased. The Welsh countryside was covered in forests; the cottages and smallholdings were taken by Englishmen. The dream receded. Today, having read this book; having realised that the Indians, with their comparatively simple ideas, were right; having begun to realise the extent of the crisis which faces England and its imitators because of over-industrialisation, its over-population, the greed of its businessmen, the wish to turn these islands into a shop in which others can buy, I see that the dream was not so unfounded after all.[33]

The encounter with Dee Brown's sympathetic history of American Indians leads Thomas to reiterate the central values at the heart of his remarkably consistent, if simplistic, social philosophy. The adherence to an identity

rooted in language, the idealisation of a pre-industrial past, the dismissal of 'the south' as an 'industrial monster', are all characteristics of Welsh cultural nationalism in the twentieth century, but draw on a long tradition of responses to industrialisation.

Thomas's somewhat simplistic identification with Native Americans serves as a reminder that not all kinds of comparisons are necessarily progressive nor benevolent. There is always the danger of crass appropriation and romanticisation of margins and minorities. In seeking to establish an intellectual and poetic space for exploring his own Welsh and 'Southern' identities, and in seeking to acknowledge what he problematically describes as 'white Southern dignity', Jon Dressel, a Welsh-American poet from St Louis, Missouri, turns to a form of anti-industrialism characteristic of nationalist and ruralist thought in both Wales and the American South. Dressel's father was from Llanelli, and in his long poem *The road to Shiloh* Dressel describes how increasing identification with his ancestral Wales in the 1970s led to his increasing identification as a Southerner in the United States. Shiloh was one of the major battles of the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865, and his poem is a meditation on the legacy and meaning of southern defeat. His anti-industrialism is close to that of the Southern Agrarians; figures such as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate



Cover of Jon Dressel's The road to Shiloh (1994) | HYPERION BOOKS

who vented their dislike of industrialism, urbanisation, immigration and the American left in their manifesto *I'll take my stand* of 1930.[34] For the Agrarians, Northern 'industry', rather than the abolition of slavery or Federalism, had been the South's main adversary in the Civil War. More recently Southern anti-industrialism has been linked to an essentially 'Celtic' agrarianism in the writings of latter day Confederates. In his *Cracker culture: Celtic ways in the old South*, the military historian and Confederate sympathiser Grady McWhiney argues that 'Southerners lost the war because they were too Celtic and their opponents were too English.'[35] 'Viewed through this prism', notes Tony Horowitz,

> the War of Northern Aggression had little to do with slavery. Rather, it was a culture war in which Yankees imposed their imperialist and capitalistic will on the agrarian South, just as the English had done to the Irish and Scots – and as America did to the Indians and Mexicans in the name of Manifest Destiny.[36]

The 'Celtic' myth of the south helps to reinforce a racial, and often racist, myth of Southern identity in which the true South is 'Celtic' and therefore 'other Souths (notably African American) […] become illegitimate and inferior'.[37]

If there are worrying parallels between Dressel's construction of Southern history and that of neo-Confederates, it has to be emphasised that Dressel is no white supremacist. He stresses that the African-American experience is 'inextricably interwoven' into the history of the South, and the power and impact of *The road to Shiloh* derives partly from the way in which the poet's desire to create a poetic space for 'white Southern dignity' comes up against African-American voices and concerns in the text.[38] This is the poet meditating before the inscription on a monument to Confederate soldiers:

> The hands of a loving and grateful people:
>
> a final, eloquently humble, phrase,
> or so it might seem, but was it an eloquence
> of criminal disregard, impervious

to Klan terror, to mob rule and lynching,
and every other lesser, hardly speakable
indignity inflicted on the black, down all

the years? He did not want to think it, yet
he had to, it was the price of his being
moved, the sine qua non of his understanding

that the words rang not untrue. That gratitude
and love were real, and what was more, deserved,
he could not doubt, despite the moral rightness

of the South's defeat, a rightness that resisted
all of Yankee cant, and guilt. Yet the right
of it was hard, another right had been there,

the right, and need, to defend your land.[39]

The development of this passage reflects the broader trajectory of the sequence itself. The African-American experience is registered, Klan atrocities are registered, but they cannot extinguish the suffering and willingness of Confederate soldiers to defend their land. The problem is that once African Americans are fully included in one's definition of 'the South', then it can be questioned how many Southerners actually supported the Confederacy. Dressel's 'South' is thus ultimately a white South. African-American voices are heard in the text, but they belong to its margins. In the final poem of the sequence the American Civil War is described as 'not Civil' but for 'Southern Independence':

Leave
the slaves for now. Each one must know that
too, but here we look on something else…
Consider Dixie, Wales, though it is more through
than you. Waterloo, Sebastopol, Mafeking,
World War, crown your high streets, sanctify
your squares. Where are the hard tall figures
of the men whose fight was just their own, and yours?
A stone for Llywelyn, a cairn for Glyn Dwr,

> right where they are, are not enough.
> Lee and Jackson in the noon at Richmond
> ride against the blue where thousands move.
> Who can imagine the midday gray of Cardiff
> under such spectacular, less vain, assault? [40]

In order, ultimately, for the comparison between Wales and the South to be sustained the 'slave must be laid aside'. But to construct a South, or a history of the Civil War, that marginalises the experience of slavery is surely ethically repugnant. Dressel seems to be asking why there are no statues of Owain Glyndŵr and Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in Wales equivalent to the statues of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis in Southern towns. Given his historical fantasy that 'parallels between Robert E. Lee and Owain Glyndŵr' are 'remarkable indeed', perhaps our response to Dressel's question should be: 'Is it not time those statues to Confederate leaders were torn down?'[41] There are, undoubtedly, similarities between the ruralist fantasies of the Southern Agrarians and those of Saunders Lewis and others, as there are similarities between the elements of defeat and perseverance in the nationalist thought of Wales and the American South, and in the experiences of rapid and uneven industrialisation.[42] But to draw parallels is quite different to suggesting that we should endorse the particular forms of ethnic nationalism that inform a Southern identity, or that the South should function as a model for Wales to follow. If Wales is to 'consider Dixie', we should also consider African-American novelist Ishmael Reed's response to those who believe that Confederate monuments 'represent a heritage': 'A heritage of whipping people'.[43] Dressel tells us that his 'road to Shiloh […] is a road that runs through Wales.'[44] Whatever the strengths of the poetry, it is not a road to follow.

In seeking an alternative path we may turn to the most insistently internationalist of contemporary writers, the Welsh language female poet Menna Elfyn. Elfyn writes in Welsh, but publishes volumes with parallel facing English translations. While there are some notable precedents to the practice of publishing bilingual editions of poetry in Wales (Euros Bowen's *Poems* (1974), Gwyn Thomas's *Living a life* (1982) and R. Gerallt Jones's edited anthology *Poetry of Wales 1930-1970*) Menna Elfyn's lauded collections proved controversial as she had been a prominent language

activist who had spent time in prison.[45] In seeking an international visibility for her Welsh language poetry she turned to leading Anglophone poets such as R.S. Thomas, Gillian Clarke and Nigel Jenkins to translate her works. Wynn Thomas offers a shrewd analysis of the politics informing Elfyn's cultural strategy:

> She realized that by identifying herself, through translation, with a women's movement that has developed a powerful international and internationalist discourse, she was able both to overcome prejudices about the supposed 'narrowness' and 'backwardness' of Welsh-language culture, and to render that culture potently current.[46]

Yet, that internationalism could only be assessed by a wider audience due to the English translations, and several Welsh language critics expressed their misgivings at the fact that Elfyn's increasingly 'European' standing would inevitably be determined by analyses of her works in translation.[47] Her international 'visibility' was thus seen by some to render 'invisible' her original Welsh language work. Her poems indicate that Elfyn is fully cognisant of this danger. 'Rice Papers', for example, is a poem that derives directly from the poet's 'international standing' and her desire to explore new publics for her work. Dedicated 'I'm cyfieithydd Trinh yn Hanoi', to 'Trinh, my interpreter in Vietnam', the poem recalls a meal at an expensive restaurant that the poet shared with her translator:

> Hi oedd fy ngwestai. Hi fy nhafod.
>
> Hi yn ganghellor, hefyd fy morwyn.
> 'Mae'n rhy ddrud i mi fynd i fwytai
>
> heblaw gyda foreigner yn talu.'

She was my host, my voice

my chancellor, my maid.
'Too expensive to eat in places like this

except with a foreigner paying.'[48]

Trinh has never been to such an establishment, and is there because of the funds available to the Welsh poet. The poem responds to Vietnam's contemporary poverty and its violent past, and closes with the poet noting that 'I dined on the sight of her feasting for me.' While the closing evokes Elfyn's pleasure in the fact that her presence enables her translator to enjoy a rare feast, the final line may also be read as a meditation on translation itself. The act of translating allows the English language to feed on the other languages that it mediates (Welsh and Vietnamese in this instance). The poem seems to be asking, self-reflexively, whether the English translation of a Welsh language work allows a new audience to feed on the literature. Does English feed on Welsh in our behalf, thus allowing Welsh culture to be appreciated by new international audiences? Or does the feeding metaphor allude to a dominant language's ability to devour minority languages leaving a carcass in its wake? The implications of this questions are of course intensified by an awareness that English was the language of the American culture that waged war on Vietnam for more than a decade, causing the rice shortages to which Trinh refers. In 'Rice Papers', Elfyn is in the economically dominant position, able to enjoy the fruits of her generosity, able to assuage her Western guilt, but also uneasily reversing the relationship between 'visitor' and 'host'. Elfyn is reliant on the international poetry circuit for this temporary wealth and visibility, and knows that it has been gained through the translations of her writings. Lines of economic inequality cross uneasily with lines of linguistic and cultural inequality in a poem that can be read as an extended meditation on metaphors of poverty, power, and translation and on the benefits and dangers of comparison.

In 'dining on the sight' of Trinh feasting, Elfyn foregrounds the often vexing interplay between perception and projection, identification and differentiation, visibility and invisibility, inherent in any act of comparison.

Against a universalist desire to claim that 'we are all alike' (which can render cultural differences invisible), the minority nationalist will often seek to dramatise and foreground differences (which can over-exaggerate cultural specificities). Paradoxically, as I have attempted to show, the nationalist attempt at making oneself visible will often involve making comparisons with others. Elfyn's 'Rice Papers' embodies an internal critique of our desire to identify and to compare. Recognition – that is recognising 'the Other' and being recognised by 'an other' – is where nationalism finds its cultural embodiment and expression. Yet things are never as straightforward as the binary terms in which we tend to visualise such comparisons might imply. National visibility and invisibility can only emerge in relation to one another and are processes that inevitably become intertwined with questions of economic power and cultural capital. Perhaps one of the most significant cultural agendas for any nationalist movement is to differentiate those comparative contexts that may, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, contain 'the seeds of life in them', from those 'perhaps deep in our minds' that harbour the 'seeds of a general death'.[49]

Endnotes

[1] R. Ellison, *Invisible man* (New York, [1952] 1995).

[2] A.A. Cheng, 'Passing, natural selection, and love's failure. Ethics of survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jaques Lacan', in: *American literary history*, 17/3 (2005) 553.

[3] Ellison, *Invisible man*, 3-4.

[4] See the chapter 'The Invisible Man's Welsh routes. Ralph Ellison in wartime Wales', in: D.G. Williams, *Black skin, blue books. African Americans and Wales* (Cardiff, 2012) 208-252.

[5] R. Ellison, 'In a strange country' (1944), in: *Flying home and other stories* (London, [1996] 1998) 138-9.

[6] Ellison, 'In a strange country', 140.

[7] Quoted in A. Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison. A biography* (New York, [2007] 2008) 171.

[8] Emrys ap Iwan was born Robert Ambrose Jones. Original in Welsh, my translations. 'Cenedl uniaith yw'r Saeson yn anad un genedl yn Ewrop. Ni fynnant ac ni fedrant ddysgu un iaith ddiethr'. D. Myrddin Lloyd (ed.), *Detholiad o Erthyglau a Llythyrau Emrys ap Iwan*, 3 vol. (Aberystwyth, 1937-1940) vol. 2, xv.

[9] Emrys ap Iwan, 168 ('Yr ydym wedi bod cyhyd mewn caethiwed, ac wedi ymddygymod cystal â fo, fel na fynn y rhan fwyaf ohonom gredu eu bod mewn caethiwed. Y mae gwifrau ein cawell mor anweledig o feinion, a'r Saeson annwyl yn ein porthi mor ofalus â briwsion a dwfr').

[10] Emrys ap Iwan, 24 ('Trwy dreulio tair neu bedair blynedd ar y Cyfandir, gwelent nad yw'r Saeson ddim mor fawr o lawer yng ngolwg cenhedloedd eraill ag ydynt yn eu golwg eu hunain, ac yng ngolwg y Cymry plentynaidd sy'n credu bod 'I say' yn Saesneg yr un peth â 'Fel hyn y dywed yr Arglwydd' yn y Gymraeg'). My discussion of ap Iwan draws on M. Wynn Thomas, 'Ewtopia: Cyfandir Dychymyg y Cymry', in: G.H. Jenkins (ed.), *Cymry a'r Cymry 2000 / Wales and the Welsh 2000* (Aberystwyth, 2001) 99-118.

[11] S. Lewis, *Canlyn Arthur* (Llandysul, [1938] 1985) 31.

[12] Lewis, *Canlyn Arthur*, 31.

[13] For a lively overview of Welsh national mythologies and histories, see G.A. Williams, 'When was Wales', in: Idem, *The Welsh in their history* (London, 1982) 189-201.

[14] R. Wyn Jones, 'From Utopia to reality. Plaid Cymru and Europe', in: *Nations and nationalism,* 15/1 (2009) 134.

[15] D. Hywel Davies, *The Welsh Nationalist Party*, *1925-1945* (Cardiff, 1983) 113. On Catholicism, see R. Wyn Jones, *The fascist party in Wales. Plaid Cymru, Welsh nationalism and the accusation of fascism* (Cardiff, 2014) 14-18.

[16] Hywel Davies, *The Welsh Nationalist Party*, 87, 108.

[17] Wyn Jones, 'From Utopia to reality', 135.

[18] A.D. Smith, *Nationalism and modernism* (London, 1998); R. Brubacker, *Citizenship and nationhood* (Cambridge MA, 1992).

[19] See K.B. Anderson, *Marx at the margins. On nationalism, ethnicity and non-Western societies* (Chicago, 2010) 74-5.

[20] See the conversation between Tom Nairn and Richard Wyn Jones, 'Ukanian discussions and Homo britannicus', in: G. Hassan & R. Ilett (eds.), *Radical Scotland. Arguments for self-determination* (Edinburgh, 2011) 267-81.

[21] T. Nairn, *The break-up of Britain. Crisis and neo-nationalism* (London, 1977) 197.

[22] Nairn, *The break-up*, 185-204.

[23] For historical accounts of uneven development, see J. Williams, *Was Wales industrialised: essays in modern Welsh history* (Llandysul, 1995); G.A. Williams, *The Welsh in their history* (Beckenham, 1985). On the grotesque and divided manifestations of this in literature, see G. Jones, *The dragon has two tongues* (London, 1968); A. Conran, *The cost of strangeness* (Llandysul, 1982).

[24] A.E. Zimmern, *My impressions of Wales* (London, 1921), quoted in D. Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the world of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), i.

[25] Quoted in D. Smith, *Wales! Wales?* (London, 1984) 152.

[26] G. Thomas, *A few selected exits* (Bridgend, [1968] 1987) 103.

[27] Ch. Williams, *Democratic Rhondda* (Cardiff, 1996) 212.

[28] J. Aitchison & H. Carter, *A geography of the Welsh language 1961-1991* (Cardiff, 1994).

[29] S. Brooks, 'The indigenous Atlantic', in: M. Newton (ed.), *The Celts in the Americas* (Cape Breton, 2013) 323-334.

[30] R.S. Thomas, *Cymru or Wales?* (Llandysul, 1992) 8.

[31] R.S. Thomas, *No truce with the Furies* (Newcastle, 1995) 25.

[32] R.S. Thomas, 'Review of "Bury my heart at Wounded Knee"', in: S. Anstey (ed.), *R.S. Thomas. Selected prose* (Bridgend, 1983) 179.

[33] Thomas, 'Bury my heart', 180.

[34] See W. Kaufman, *The Civil War in American culture* (Edinburgh, 2006) 33-7.

[35] Quoted in T. Horowitz, *Confederates in the attic. Dispatches from the unfinished Civil War* (New York, 1999) 69.

[36] Horowitz, *Confederates*, 69.

[37] H. Taylor, *Circling Dixie. Contemporary Southern culture through a transatlantic lens* (New Brunswick, 2001) 16.

[38] J. Dressel, *The road to Shiloh* (Llandysul, 1994) xviii.

[39] Dressel, *The road*, 88-89.

[40] Dressel, *The road*, 110.

[41] Dressel, *The road*, xx.

[42] In his seminal essay on Saunders Lewis's politics, Dafydd Glyn Jones noted the ubiquity of a 'myth of the Golden Age' in the 1930s, which extended from 'Dublin to Dixieland' and placed Lewis's ruralism within that context (D. Glyn Jones, 'His politics', in: A.R. Jones & G. Thomas (eds.), *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff, 1973) 51).

[43] I. Reed, *Another day at the front. Dispatches from the Race War* (New York, 2003) 100.

[44] Dressel, *The road*, xii.

[45] See M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding cultures. The two literatures of Wales* (Cardiff, 1999) 272 fn. 65.

[46] Thomas, *Corresponding cultures*, 145.

[47] See T. Hallam, 'When a bardd meets a poet. Menna Elfyn and the displacement of parallel facing texts', in: D.G. Williams (ed.), *Slanderous tongues. Essays on Welsh Poetry in English 1970-2005* (Bridgend, 2010) 89-111.

[48] M. Elfyn, *Merch Perygl: Cerddi 1976-2011* (Llandysul, 2011) 46-47. The translation by Nigel Jenkins appears in M. Elfyn & J. Rowlands (eds.), *The Bloodaxe Book of modern Welsh poetry* (Tarset, 2003) 321-322.

[49] R. Williams, *Culture and society* (London, 1958) 338.