

Article

'I've Put a Yule Log on Your Grate': Lynette Roberts's 'Naïve' Modernism

Siriol McAvoy

Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, Swansea University, Swansea SA28PP, Wales, UK; Siriol.McAvoy@swansea.ac.uk

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Abstract: In this article, I suggest that Lynette Roberts develops a 'naïve' modernism that emphasizes tropes of folk art, home-made craft, and creative labour as a therapeutic response to war and a means of carving out a public role for the woman writer in the post-war world. Bringing high modernist strategies down to earth through an engagement with localized rural cultures, she strives to bridge the divide between the public and the private in order to open up a space for the woman writer within public life. As part of my discussion, I draw on Rebecca L. Walkowitz's contention that literary style—conceived broadly as 'attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness'—is crucial to modernist writers' attempts to think in—and beyond—the nation. Embracing a liberating openness to experience and 'amateurish' passion, Roberts's 'home-made' style challenges imperial constructions of nationhood centred in authority and control with a more collective, constructivist, improvisatory concept of belonging (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi). Probing the intersections between folk art, national commitments, and global feminist projects in British modernism, I investigate how a radically transformed 'naïve' subtends the emergence of a new kind of feminist modernism, rooted in concepts of collective making and creative labour.

Keywords: folk art; Welsh Modernism; Feminism; nationalism; ethnography

Powder shivers down the walls, grey as the cold grate. This is my own cold surroundings where green men call and death walks up the stairs. I go out stumbling to face reality. The kale roads are full of careless droppings, but this I think is a good omen. A land of plenty ... dig for Victory, back again to the soil.¹

At the time of writing this passage, Argentine–Welsh poet Lynette Roberts had been living in rural Carmarthenshire in Wales for scarcely two months. Despite the bone-aching cold and lack of material comforts in her small cottage—neither she nor her husband had money, and their village was not yet networked to mains water or electricity—she was full of energy and a sense of possibility. The strange 'reality' of her new location seems to have unlocked her poetic creativity and given vent to her intellectual inquisitiveness: her diary from that time records her plans for a poem for the South Wales miners, and describes, in painstaking detail, elements of local life, from the brightly coloured window-dressings of her neighbours to the 'top-hat hag wringing out the tripes and swilling them at the running pool up by the Blacksmith's shed' (DLR, 4). Her ambivalent affiliation with Welsh culture as a liminal 'contact zone' not only helped Roberts to define her gendered identity as a poet, but also activated her sense of the possibility of radically transforming poetic form—and revitalizing national culture—from within and without, at the same time.

¹ Lynette Roberts, 'A Carmarthenshire Diary', 10 December 1939, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Roberts 2008a), 4. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

In this article, I suggest that Roberts develops a ‘naïve’ modernism that emphasizes tropes of folk art, home-made craft, and creative labour as a therapeutic response to war and a means of carving out a public role for the woman writer in the post-war world.² As several critics have noticed, that Roberts was a practicing artist as well as a poet is important to an understanding of her writing.³ However, the confluences between her poetics and the Primitivist scenes of domestic and village life that she painted throughout her career remain underexplored. Roberts trained at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in the 1930s, illustrated articles for the Argentine paper *La Nacion*, and, in 1955–1956, set up the Chislehurst Caves art project featuring Guyanese artist Denis Williams. During the war she contributed poems to the *Caseg Broadsheets*, a collaboration between poet Brenda Chamberlain, her artist husband John Petts, and soldier-poet Alun Lewis, on sheets of poetry and woodcuts intended for popular distribution.

The marrying of visual art and poetry was a particular feature of Anglophone Welsh women’s cultural production at this time. Together with Welsh-identified ‘border’ writer Margiad Evans, Roberts and Chamberlain are figured by Tony Conran as members of the ‘heroic generation’ of Welsh women poets.⁴ All three were visual artists as well as writers, and their work, in Conran’s view, exhibits the ‘primitive’ style traditionally associated with poets without a formal training in literature. These writers’ idiosyncratic visuality and flouting of literary convention is symptomatic, for Conran, of the expression and negotiation of their charged relation—as women and partial outsiders—to Wales and to the English literary tradition.⁵

Roberts adopts a ‘naïve’ style—informed both by her own art, and by her interest in ‘indigenous’ folklore and ethnography—in order to assert a specifically gendered point of view within the framework of modernist traditions, and to lend form and significance to shared, communal experience. Bringing high modernist strategies down to earth through an engagement with localized rural cultures, she strives to bridge the divide between the public and the private in order to open up a space for the woman writer within public life. Although an understanding of the contexts for Roberts’s practice as a visual artist informs this article throughout, my discussion focuses on her transformation of the ‘naïve’ into a distinctive literary poetics and mode of social and political engagement. In this, I draw on Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s contention that literary style—conceived broadly as ‘attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness’—is crucial to modernist writers’ attempts to think in—and beyond—the nation.⁶ Embracing a liberating openness to experience and ‘amateurish’ passion, Roberts’s ‘home-made’ style challenges imperial constructions of nationhood centred in authority and control with a more collective, constructivist, improvisatory concept of belonging.⁷

1. Lynette Roberts and the Modernist ‘Return to the Folk’

The recent rediscovery of Roberts’s poetry, as Leo Mellor observed, ‘has decisively changed several literary-critical narratives’ surrounding both gender and poetic subjectivity, and British literary

² This article thus sounds the implications of Patrick McGuinness’s suggestion that ‘Her extraordinary freedoms of scale, subject and imaginative conception ... are unique to Roberts, and to what we could call her “home-made” world.’

³ William May analyses Roberts’s gendered engagement with the ekphrastic tradition in his essay ‘Verbal and Visual Art in Twentieth-Century British Women’s Poetry’, situating it in the context of ‘the female writer’s re-examination of painting’s assumptions and expectations’ during and after the modernist period. Tony Conran, John Pikoulis and Patrick McGuinness have similarly emphasised the visuality of Roberts’s imaginary and the forms of hermeneutic invited by her poetry. See (May 2011, pp. 42–61; Conran 1997; Pikoulis 1983, pp. 9–29; Roberts 2005, pp. xi–xxxix).

⁴ (Conran 1997, p. 165).

⁵ Ibid. May has similarly pointed out the connections between the ‘verbal-visual’ interplay in women modernists’ poetry and their gendered renegotiation of literary tradition, suggesting that Stevie Smith, Liz Lochhead and Roberts ‘seemed particularly conscious of the visual as a category where they might both draw attention to and escape the label of “women” writers.’ (pp. 45–46).

⁶ (Walkowitz 2006, p. 2).

⁷ (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi). This article sounds the implications of McGuinness’s suggestion that ‘Her extraordinary freedoms of scale, subject and imaginative conception ... are unique to Roberts, and to what we could call her “home-made” world.’

experiment of the 1940s.⁸ Read in the context of her personal writings and prose, it also illuminates forgotten patterns of cultural transit connecting Britain, Wales and the Americas during the 1940s and 1950s. Born in Buenos Aires in 1909 to parents of Welsh heritage, Roberts was brought up in Mechita, a small railway township to the west of the capital, where her engineer father was stationed. Her family were part of affluent British ‘colonial’ circles in Argentina; she recalls their yachts and racehorses, and an *estancia* with white peacocks. Educated in a French and Spanish Convent in Buenos Aires and later in a boarding school in Bournemouth, as a young woman she acted as her father’s official companion and held soirées, with her friend Mariusa Fernandez Beyro, for members of the Hispanic intelligentsia. She returned to London in the mid-1930s, eventually gravitating toward the outer rings of Fitzrovia’s bohemian literati.⁹ It was in 1939 at a Poetry London event that she met Keidrych Rhys, poet and ‘flamboyant impresario’¹⁰ of Welsh letters; he ‘was charming and spoke like a prince’.¹¹ They married in October 1939 in the village of Llansteffan (with Dylan Thomas as best man), and moved to Llanybri, a tiny village near the south coast of Carmarthenshire, perched just across the Taf estuary from Thomas’s Laugharne. Roberts lived there for the duration of the war, and much of her poetry is anchored within the life of the locality.

Because her writing is ‘grounded in a variety of places: West Wales, South America, London’, locating Roberts within the late modernist literary scene can be a difficult task.¹² She collaborated with Robert Graves on his poetic myth odyssey, *The White Goddess* (1948), and was close friends with Edith Sitwell. Her poetry, which includes her first collection, *Poems* (1944) and a long ‘heroic’ poem of the Second World War, *Gods with Stainless Ears* (written 1941–1943, published 1951), is at turns riskily experimental and stylishly artless. Though her poetry found considerable acclaim among British and North American readerships, it gradually fell out of favour in the 1950s, and became subject to critical neglect for much of the twentieth century. Patrick McGuinness’s republication of Roberts’s *Collected Poems* in 2005 has re-ignited interest in her work, but she has yet to enjoy the belated canonization conferred on fellow ‘colonial’ women writers, such as Katherine Mansfield or Jean Rhys.

Critics have long noticed the challenges posed by Roberts’s poetics to norms identified with Britain’s literary centre. Maroula Joannou has observed that her poetry is remarkable for its ‘commitment to Modernism within an anti-metropolitan modernist framework’, while John Wilkinson sees it as a ‘highly localised modernism, intent on reanimating bodies of tradition to resist a planned and administered world’.¹³ One way of understanding Roberts’s poetry is in relation to the Welsh modernist formation that took shape around her husband Keidrych Rhys’s experimental journal *Wales* during the late 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴ Identified with such figures as Dylan Thomas, Idris Davies, David Jones, and Margiad Evans, Welsh modernism, as John Goodby and Chris Wigginton have suggested, was a distinctive and relatively ‘belated’ phenomenon, which subverted and pastiched high modernist claims in the creation of an ‘internalised, imploded, even mimic modernism’.¹⁵

In particular, Roberts’s poetry speaks to a strain of Welsh modernist practice identified by Daniel G. Williams as the ‘return to the folk’. Similar to the ‘proletarian’ modernism of other Welsh writers,

⁸ (Mellor 2019, p. 156).

⁹ For instance, Sonia Brownell, the future wife of George Orwell, was a close friend, and she met Wyndham Lewis and Augustus John at their studios. Patrick McGuinness’s Introduction to *Collected Poems* offers a comprehensive, reliable account of Roberts’s biography. Roberts’s own ‘Notes for an Autobiography’, collected in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, also offers instructive insights (it was originally published as ‘Parts of an Autobiography’ in the *Poetry Wales* special issue on Lynette Roberts, 19/2 (1983): 30–50). However, McGuinness has advised that readers take into account the circumstances under which these notes were written, pointing out that Roberts had experienced significant difficulties in her mental health during this period. See *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, 228.

¹⁰ (Thomas 1999, p. 84).

¹¹ (Roberts 2008b, p. 205). All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹² (Roberts 2005, p. xx).

¹³ (Joannou 2012, p. 116; Wilkinson 2007, p. 190)

¹⁴ Keidrych Rhys edited and published three series of this magazine, which became the primary channel for new English-language writing in Wales, between 1937–1939, 1943–1949, and 1958–1960.

¹⁵ (Goodby and Wigginton 2000, pp. 95, 106).

this sought to counter high modernist elitism through the use of ‘low’ vernacular forms, but it directed its attentions not toward fragmenting industrial heartlands, but to those rural cultures threatened by modernity’s orthodoxy of progress.¹⁶ Of course, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, the valorization of the ‘vitality of the naïve’ had always been a mainstay of the international avant-garde, and some readers have been critical of what they see as Roberts’s tendency to ‘[co-opt] or [appropriate] the local indigenous [Welsh] culture into her modernist vision’.¹⁷ This essay, however, takes as its point of departure Daniel G. Williams’s suggestion that the ‘return to the folk’ coexists in women writers such as Margiad Evans and Zora Neale Hurston ‘with a self-conscious literary attempt at giving voice to repressed and marginalized female consciousness’.¹⁸ As I show, through its rupturing of linguistic conventions and multiplications of perspective, Roberts’s presentation of rural Welsh life calls colonial and patriarchal dynamics of viewing and interpretation into question. Harnessing ethnographic discourses of conservation and protection, her writing suggests that the project of voicing gendered consciousness in art is coextensive with the project of lending visibility to repressed cultural minorities. But while Roberts’s poetry has been seen as attempting to disclose a putatively ‘real’ Wales, I suggest that she employs ‘naïve’ tropes of craft and folk art, linked to images of costuming and disguise, to call that ‘reality’ (and the ‘reality’ of the gendered self, with which Wales is rhetorically connected) into question.¹⁹ To address these questions, I explore in turn what I consider to be three major locations for Roberts’s deterritorialized, reinvigorated ‘naïve’: the cottage; the rural village; and sewing.

2. Home Making: Rootedness and Re-Enactment in the Shadow of War

Roberts’s writing is in many ways motivated by her search for a ‘place’. Although most of her life was unsettled and nomadic, as her daughter, Angharad Rhys, recalls, she ‘always longed for a simple home, with a fire and a table — a place to look after friends in need’.²⁰ Accordingly, domestic space, especially that of her two-roomed cottage, ‘Tygwyn’, has a central presence in Roberts’s poetry, radiating out to touch all other aspects of life. The home appears in her poetry as a site of performance offering an ‘inner spiritual continuity’ with a Welsh past, and the habitualized return to the rural hearth becomes a way of composing the self—literally and figuratively—among the ‘ruins’ and havoc of war.²¹ The spectacle of violence erupting within the confines of the ‘home front’ during the 1940s forced a new attention to everyday life during this time, lending ordinary, daily rhythms a new importance and significance. Accordingly, rural household tasks—drawing ‘water from the well’,²² ‘bak[ing] bread’ (CP, 4), or ‘hang[ing]/Dishcloth over the weeping hedge’ (CP, 7)—often take centre stage in Roberts’s poetry; presented in a heightened, ritualized form, they are imbued with pointed emotional significance. Take, for example, her poem ‘The Shadow Remains’:

To speak of everyday things with ease
 And arrest the mind to a simpler world
 Where living tables are stripped of a cloth;
 Of wood on which I washed, sat at peace:
 Cooked duck, shot on an evening in peacock cold:
 Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both.
 But here by the hearth with leisured grace
 I prefer to speak of the vulgar clock that drips

¹⁶ (Williams 2010, p. 811).

¹⁷ (Williams, p. 58; Evans 2010, p. 40).

¹⁸ (Williams 2012, p. 121).

¹⁹ In this, I draw on readings of Frida Kahlo’s self-construction offered by Alice Gambrell in (Gambrell 1997, p. 67).

²⁰ Angharad Rhys, Preface to *Collected Poems*, ix.

²¹ (Robichaud 2007, p. 108).

²² (Roberts 2005, p. 3). All references to Roberts’s poetry are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

With the falling of rain: woodbine tips, and yarrow. (CP, 4)

Roberts saw in Llanybri's rural traditions an opportunity to clarify her life and language—'To speak of everyday things with ease'—by anchoring it in something that *mattered*. In this sense, her poetry subscribes to the 'back to the source' discourse that saw resurgence in the troubled 1930s and 1940s: she told soldier-poet Alun Lewis in the early years of the war that she was 'at a time in my life when I want to get down to those emotions thoughts and ideas which are to be found only close to the earth.'²³ Placing itself in dialogue with the spiritualized rhetoric of purification and renewal found in contemporary texts such as *Four Quartets*, 'The Shadow Remains' appears to essentialize what Roberts elsewhere called the 'earth rhythms' of rural Welsh life, in order to enlist them as part of a modernist 'recreation refolding of the world' in language.²⁴

The 'grace[ful]' performance of country life found in poems such as 'The Shadow Remains' speaks in part of what scholars such as John Pikoulis have recognized as Roberts's Yeatsian valorization of the 'integrity, dignity, and unfeathered ways' of the rural 'peasantry': in her diary, she notes admiringly that 'The people I have met here in Llanybri seem to me to retain all the natural and true qualities of an aristocrat' (DLR, 17).²⁵ But, significantly, Roberts rejected what she saw as the sentimental vagaries of the Celtic Revival: after a visit by Yeats's close friend Ernest Rhys, she noted that '[h]e was still caught up in [the] aura' of 'rather a mock Celtic Twilight' when she met him, 'and, frankly, this nauseated me.' (DLR, 13) She preferred to direct her poetry outwards, towards external social worlds, staking her desire 'to be just a normal person who can take my full share of responsibility.' (DLR, 3)

Roberts's conception of the 'peasant' thus perhaps bears closer relation to the modern, sociological definition of the term, as a subordinated class of subsistence rural worker—a group with whom she identified Llanybri villagers and Argentine rural 'peons' alike.²⁶ Poems such as 'The New World', for instance, vividly dramatize the Argentine peasants' dispossession by global capital:

Death ate their hearts like locusts over a croaking plain,
Fell tears red as fireflies on the rising dust;
Barbed wire fenced them in or fenced them out,
these outcasts of the land.
[...]
Lost now. No sound or care can revive their ways:
La Plata gambles on their courage, spends too flippantly,
Mocks beauty from the shading tree, mounts a corrugated roof
over their cultured hut. (CP, 28–9)

As Roberts put it in her diary, 'That is why I have such an interest in the village of Llanybri. I see that in the future it will be forced to change for the worse' (DLR, 17). The veneration of vernacular simplicity (as embodied in the 'cultured hut') in 'The New World' and 'The Shadow Remains' is also redolent, as Daniel G. Williams has shown, of strategies adopted by Welsh modernists such as Idris Davies and African American writers such as Langston Hughes. For proletarian Davies, simplicity was a way of articulating commitment to his industrial Valleys communities, while in Hughes's case it served his aim of expressing the particularity of African American culture; as he suggested, 'I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be'.²⁷ As I show, 'The Shadow Remains' bespeaks Roberts's search to materialize, in writing, the invisible—to 'grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms' of domestic Welsh life—in order to investigate and lend expression to the gendered experience of cultural difference.

²³ (Roberts n.d., p. 2).

²⁴ See (Roberts 2008f, p. 150).

²⁵ (Pikoulis 1983, p. 17). The quotation is from the same unpublished letter to Alun Lewis as above, 4.

²⁶ (Thomas 2019, p. 32).

²⁷ (Hughes 1926, p. 694).

Speech, thought, and organic matter: all are held in harmonious, if perhaps precarious, balance in 'The Shadow Remains'. Patrick McGuinness has observed that, unlike high modernists such as Pound and Eliot, Roberts demonstrates 'an enabling—and in the best sense unsophisticated—belief in language's sufficiency', and the poem speaks of her continued faith in the possibility of bringing language, self, and word/world into harmony.²⁸ Central to the poem's thematic structure is an attempt to integrate the spiritual and the material everyday. Roberts used her diary to record moments when 'even the most dreary tasks take on an ethereal quality' (DLR, 26), and an analogous transformation of daily life can be seen in this poem. Ordinary actions such as washing and baking bread are imbued with the solemnity of the Eucharist, while the bare, altar-like 'wood' and consumption of flesh are suggestive of pagan ritual. Alliteration ('everyday ... ease', 'wood ... washed', 'here ... hearth') and loosely-applied tetrameter smooth the surfaces of the poem with a sense of (informal) convention, while the pointed use of the colon and semi-colon further elongates the lines' 'leisured' rhythms, shaping moments of silence (or pauses in the speaking voice) that suggest that these traditional activities of Welsh domestic life allow considerable time for thought. The 'vulgar clock' offers material and imaginative connection to the generations of women who may have sat and listened to the rain, and is portrayed as implicitly healing: the same rain nourished the 'yarrow' on the shelf, a plant revered since ancient times for its healing properties (its Latin name, *Achillea millefolium*, signals that it was named after the god Achilles, said to have employed the plant to staunch wounds on the battlefield).

Integrating the 'spiritual' world of literature and the everyday world of the body was an important task for modernist women writers. In her essay 'Professions for Women', Virginia Woolf owned that, as a writer, she continued to stumble upon a central feminist conundrum: 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body'.²⁹ In Roberts's poem, domestic labour, placed in a relation of flow and equivalence with acts of thinking and writing ('Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both') opens up the private lyric to collectivity and embodiment. It also foregrounds the body as a mode of intertextual engagement with an unofficial, gendered tradition, rooted in the domestic, the material and the particular—what Welsh modernist Margiad Evans called 'a corner cupboard history, a deliberate evocation, a summary of man's odd needs'.³⁰

For Roberts, the devil (divinity?) was in the detail. Similar to David Jones, her poetry seeks to 'make sacral, or give otherness to', the particular, as a means of articulating the experience of cultural difference. In his preface to *Epoch and Artist* (Jones 1959), Jones argued that, while modern Western culture may have repressed the 'primitive' tendency to confuse the universal with the relative and particular, this tendency persists in all of us. Moreover, the confusion of the human and the divine, the real and the ideal, is the foundation stone of poetry:

poiesis should and sometimes does make radiant 'particular facts' so that they become intimations of immortality or, if the reader won't stand for that, then intimations of *some otherness of some sort* [my emphasis].³¹

Roberts's concentration on local or domestic minutiae in her poems thus alludes to an 'otherness' hidden within the fabric of the familiar.

Luminously illuminated but also somehow always in shadow, Roberts's domestic interiors display a broader 'ethnographic impulse to document ways of living and thinking' in British literary culture of the 1930s and 1940s.³² 'The Shadow Remains' references a specifically Welsh anthropology that, associated with H.J. Fleure and folklorist Iorwerth Peate, intersected in significant ways with the development of both Welsh nationalism and Welsh literary modernism (Fleure's article on 'The Welsh

²⁸ (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi).

²⁹ (Woolf 2008, p. 144)

³⁰ (Evans 1939, p. 286). Evans similarly posits a subterranean link between the spiritual past and domestic everyday by speculating on the connection between domestic culture in rural areas and 'the dispersal of the monasteries'.

³¹ (Jones 1959, p. 16).

³² (Williams 2012, p. 127).

People', for example, was published in the tenth (1939) edition of *Wales*, alongside writing by vanguards like Dylan Thomas, Margiad Evans, George Barker and John Cowper Powys).³³ As Gareth Evans has noted, 'Roberts was familiar with Peate's involvement in the reconstruction of representative, traditional Welsh household rooms at the National Museum in Cardiff and an advocate of his ideas for an Open Air folk Museum that would serve to recover traditional Welsh culture for the nation.'³⁴ Yet, while Peate saw his project in terms of the conservation of an 'authentic' Welsh past, poems such as 'The Shadow Remains' recast his ideas from the perspective of gender to subtly destabilize the idea of a coherent, unified national culture.³⁵

Katie Gramich has observed that 'Roberts's cottage in Wales is simultaneously an embodiment of Wales's history and of her own autobiography as a cosmopolitan, much-travelled, avant-garde writer.'³⁶ Roberts described 'The Shadows Remains' as 'a good poem of my v. simple life' (DLR, 47), explaining that it depicted her bathing practices at a time when water, like many other commodities, was scarce in the village:

Keidrych (that is my husband) and I wash once a week: we boil a bucket of water, strip-tease exposing a small bare patch of flesh, we scrub the exposed part violently, then cover the part with wool, and immediately attack another part. Soon, our whole body is cleansed from our head to toes. We work thoroughly and methodically, each bending over his or her basin sharing the soap which rests between us on the kitchen table. (DLR, 9)

Like Frida Kahlo, another Hispanic modernist who took inspiration from 'indigenous' folkloric culture, Roberts's 'creative impulse'—and her modernist mythography—always emerged 'from her own concrete reality'.³⁷ In fact, her poetry resonates with the 'autoethnography' identified by Alice Gambrell in the work of figures such as Kahlo, Ella Deloria, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom set about doing 'fieldwork' within their 'home' communities.³⁸ Gambrell uses the term 'insider-outsider activity' to describe their bifurcated, self-reflexive practice, which sought at once to revision both 'metropolitan' and 'home' cultures.³⁹

'Insider-outsider' would seem an apposite way of describing Roberts's hyphenated identity as what Nigel Wheale terms 'the one and only Latino-Welsh [sic] modernist'.⁴⁰ Affiliated to Wales in a legal sense via her marriage to Rhys, her writing often manifests her commitment to Wales and the Welsh nationalist project that gathered momentum after the founding of Plaid Cymru in 1925; *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for instance, makes an invocation to 'my people' to 'Upshine, outshine the day's sun' (CP, 53). In seeking, like David Jones, to re-route the universal through the local and particular, her writing speaks of her conviction in the poet's role in 'the development of a politically charged national tradition' whose rhetoric mirrored that of similar national movements elsewhere in the world; in 1937, artist Salvador Azuela announced that 'our vote is for the work of the Republic's artists to be more Mexican, to the extent of being more universal and human.'⁴¹ But Roberts also always saw herself as something of a 'stranger' within Wales and her chosen community, maintaining a posture summarized by the speaker of her poem 'Lamentation' as 'always observant and slightly obscure' (CP, 8). In 'The Shadow Remains', the national dream of full belonging and presence attached to the idealised rural 'folk' (or, in Wales, the 'Gwerin') is revealed to be more a dream than a readily

³³ (Fleure, pp. 265–69).

³⁴ (Evans 2010, p. 40).

³⁵ Evans maintains that as 'A fervent cultural nationalist, Peate sought to define both the history and the future of the Welsh nation by reuniting the 'folk' with its tradition—expressed through building, crafts, costume and folklore—and also with its identity in a revitalized Wales.' (Evans 2010, p. 55).

³⁶ (Gramich 2019, p. 56).

³⁷ (Mundye 2013, pp. 23–28; quotation from Lowe 1995, p. 27).

³⁸ (Gambrell 1997, p. 1).

³⁹ (Ibid., p. 3, p. 32).

⁴⁰ (Wheale 1994, pp. 4–19).

⁴¹ (Gambrell 1997, p. 58, Azuela, quoted in Tibol 1993, p. 102).

achievable reality. Moreover, it becomes increasingly untenable as the pressures of history, in the form of the war, begin to cast their 'shadow[s]' within the cottage:

And below, brazier fire that burns our sorrow,
Dries weeping socks above on the rack: that knew
Two angels pinned to the wall—again two. (CP, 4)

Unity and fragmentation, 'pair[ing]/And peel[ing]' (CP, 45) apart, are strong themes in Roberts's poetry, reflecting, perhaps, not only the 'doubleness' of her situation, but also the reality of separation and dislocation that marked many people's experience of World War II. She herself was separated from Keidrych Rhys when he was called up to serve as a gunner on the South coast in 1940, an experience that was a source of great suffering and loneliness for her. In 'The Shadow Remains' national dynamics of unity, community and disunity are explored through the physical objects that bear witness to a private history. The hanging socks by the fire signal the speaker's 'paired' domestic life; figures for the ordinary, bodily existence of herself and her partner, they are mirrored by a pair of decorative angels on the wall. These can be seen as images of the couple's poetic, transcendent selves: Roberts acknowledges the connection in her 'Notes for an Autobiography' when she remarks that '[t]he two angels were given me by Sonia Brownell symbolising Keidrych and myself who have not been acknowledged in the literary world for over 30 years' (DLR, 212–3). Angels and images of flight recur in Roberts's work; her painting of 'Llanybri Old Chapel', for example, includes an image of her neighbour Rosie Davies as a flying angel wearing 'her best harvest apron' (CP, 35). The painting of the old village chapel depicts both a space that she considered sacred and fields spread with manure, and her homely angels offer a similar synthesis of the material and the spiritual.

The socks depicted in 'The Shadow Remains' are not only terrestrial doubles for the angels; they are also 'weeping' for them as figures they once 'knew'. This suggests that while the domestic realm can sometimes act as a peaceful haven for the poetic self, it can also 'murder' it; indeed Robert often owns in her diary to feeling 'cramped and barred from life, imprisoned' by domestic labour and the 'ties of marriage life' (DLR, 9). '[P]inned to the wall', the angels could also be seen to foreshadow the persecution of 'outsiders' under fascism, a group with whom Roberts identified as a poet; the final part of *Gods with Stainless Ears* sees its central characters, the 'gunner and his girl', return from futuristic 'cloud in fourth dimensional state' to a dystopian landscape dominated by the sign '*Mental Home For Poets*' (CP, 64, 69). Like the 'society of outsiders' imagined by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, the homespun angels become suggestive of cross-gender solidarity and a shared struggle against totalitarian forces within the space of the home. Luce Irigaray defines angels as '[t]hese messengers who never remain enclosed in a place, who are also never immobile'. Neither male nor female, angels, for Irigaray, are 'endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history'.⁴² Roberts's angels, then, might also be understood as subversive images for that part of the self that can never be contained by gender or national/domestic ideology, indicating a desire to break out of the mental enclosures imposed and reinforced by war. We leave the interior of 'The Shadow Remains' as a kind of dramatic set-piece, peopled by ghosts—actors who remain somewhere just off-stage. Welsh culture and the domestic space that encloses it is thus revealed not as a 'natural or coherent [object]', in Rebecca L. Walkowitz's words, but as a 'construct', an 'achieved fiction'—though the narrative of this poem is, significantly, left open-ended.⁴³

3. 'You should want to know even if you/Don't want to know about my village': The Welsh Village as Centre for the Avant-Garde

Roberts's writing is concerned with survival—with what goes on after change and disaster. In her depictions of Welsh village life, she draws upon Fleure's idea of survivals—the concept that the rural

⁴² (Irigaray 1993, p. 15).

⁴³ (Walkowitz 2006, p. 9; Clifford 1998, p. 95).

west was a treasure-trove for lost ‘thoughts and visions’ that remained yet discoverable in material form. But while she sometimes identifies Llanybri with the timelessness attributed to the colonial periphery, telling Robert Graves that ‘rural villages in Wales are still so medieval in craft & manner’,⁴⁴ she also sees it as embodiment of a vibrant, living history, in which changes wrought by modernity (war, the aeroplane, ‘galvanised sheds’, the chemical factories at Llandarcy) constantly ‘break before us’ to ‘[change] its contour’ (CP, 44).⁴⁵ The Welsh village thus emerges as a ‘centre for the avant-garde’ in her poetry—a space of experiment in which art and life coalesce.⁴⁶

But Roberts’s relationship to her village community was often vexed and always complicated. Gill Plain asserts that ‘wartime women [during the Second World War] were assumed to be performing rather than inhabiting the identity of public citizen’;⁴⁷ this paranoia—which laid bare the instability of women’s relation to nationhood—made itself felt in Roberts’s relations with Llanybri; she was, for a while, suspected by her neighbours of being a German spy, an experience that she encodes in her poem ‘Raw Salt on Eye’. Her poetry thus explores the difficulties, as well as the regenerative potential, of the woman poet’s attempt to assume a place in society during wartime. Like fellow Anglophone Welsh modernists Brenda Chamberlain and Margiad Evans, Roberts found herself situated on the borders between different cultures, and all three occupied the overlap between disciplines, as practicing artists as well as writers. As I have already noted, Tony Conran has suggested that Roberts, Chamberlain and Evans should all be seen as “‘primitives” in the sense that we use the word of painters—poets without a training in literature, whose work therefore involves problems in appreciation.”⁴⁸ Citing the facts that Roberts was extremely well-read and artistically trained, McGuinness prefers to use the term ‘naïve’ to describe her work, ‘in the specific sense of the naïve painters’ such as Henri ‘Douanier’ Rousseau, but he concurs with Conran’s statement that, in Roberts’s poetry, ‘the clear boundaries most poets with literary training make between private and public worlds are frequently transgressed.’⁴⁹

Village craft becomes a touchstone for Roberts’s interest in the relation between art and artlessness. Furthermore, she shows how ‘home-made’ art can serve to bridge divisions between the private and public, thus allowing the outsider woman writer to participate within communal life. In ‘Earthbound’, the making of a wreath is transformed into a public ritual that serves to integrate the solitary artist within the circle of her village community. A diary entry from 1941 explains that the poem was inspired by the poet’s act of making a wreath with a female evacuee friend for ‘a village death’ (DLR, 32):

We made the wreath standing on the white floor;
Bent each to our purpose wire to rose-wire;
Pinning each leaf smooth,
Polishing the outer edge with the warmth of our hands.
The circle finished and note thought out,
We carried the ring through the attentive eyes of the street:
Then slowly drove by Butcher’s van to the ‘Union Hall’.
We walked the greaving room alone,
Saw him lying in his upholstered box,
Violet ribbon carefully crossed,
And about his sides bunches of wild thyme.
No one stirred as we offered the gift. No one drank there again. (CP, 10)

⁴⁴ (Roberts 2008d, p. 170).

⁴⁵ (Roberts 2008c, pp. 133–38). All references to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁶ (Harris 2010, p. 169). Harris notes that ‘It seems counter-intuitive to describe English villages as centres for the avant garde’, but, in the context of the late 1930s, ‘it certainly cannot be left out of the account.’

⁴⁷ (Plain 2009, p. 168).

⁴⁸ (Conran 1997, p. 165).

⁴⁹ (Roberts 2005, p. xxxiv; Conran 1997, p. 165).

Roberts was an expert in flower arrangement, for she had trained as a florist with Constance Spry, and once set up a flower-arranging business named Bruska in her private rooms in London. This wreath, therefore, represents a home-made art (or decorative craft) that is at once local and traditional—constructed, we could presume, from wild flowers—and avant-garde: Spry was well-known for her edgy designs that pioneered mixed materials and the unusual decorative use of vegetables, such as kale or rhubarb leaves.

Over the course of the poem, the wreath becomes, in Conran's assessment, 'a symbol of participation; almost a symbol of the poem that has been made of it.'⁵⁰ The text foregrounds how the artists' bodies, infused into their craft through the 'warmth of our hands' become integrated, through their sacrificial gift, into the body of the community. The concept of the poem as gift or offering suffuses Roberts's work, gesturing to bardic Welsh conventions such as the *cywydd gofyn*, where the poet traditionally petitions a friend for a gift, and the *llatai*, the poem as love-messenger (the word comes from the word '*llad*' meaning gift), it emphasises what David Jones called the 'gratuitous' in literary production.⁵¹ The 'gratuitous' for Jones is that making which is not 'merely utilitarian' or 'simply functional'; it is defined by absence, as the 'extrautile', and is connected by the poet to humanity's religious impulses as 'the preserve of saints—lovers, and all kinds of unifying makers'.⁵² Kicking against the unequal exchanges of capitalism and imperialism, the poem-as-gift thus suggests a different way of structuring the relations between the poet and her readers (or audience); home becomes the sacred site for the creation of a gendered communal art that serves to mediate between public and private experience. During her time at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, Roberts designed and made printed textiles, carved wooden panels, 'made a traditional table of my own design', and learnt gesso work and gold leaf application (DLR, 197). This experience seems to have influenced her lifelong interest in material and decorative surfaces—both of language, and of a culture. It is relevant to note here that the ideas of William Morris, proponent of the Arts and Crafts movement, would have been in the air at the time Roberts was studying; for socialist Morris, as for Roberts, traditional crafts—invented as much as reclaimed—became an avenue for reclaiming art and beauty for the community.

Similar to Dorothy Wordsworth, Roberts used her diary to note down detailed observations on the flora, fauna, birdlife, geology, customs, and speech of Llanybri, raw data that she drew on and transformed in the making of her poems. We can see this most clearly in her 'Poem from Llanybri', a text that, in Gareth Evans's view, presents itself as a kind of storehouse or 'synecdoche of traditional local culture'⁵³:

If you come my way that is. . .
 Between now and then, I will offer you
 A fist full of rock cress fresh from the bank
 The valley tips of garlic red with dew
 Cooler than shallots, a breath you can swank
 In the village when you come. At noon-day
 I will offer you a choice bowl of cawl
 Served with a 'lover's' spoon and a chopped spray
 Of leeks or savori fach, not used now,
 In the old way you'll understand. (CP, 3)

Roberts was an avid student of cultural traditions, but here the speaker portrays herself as something of a teacher, too.⁵⁴ The poem was initially written as an invitation to Alun Lewis, whom Roberts met

⁵⁰ (Conran 1983, p. 130).

⁵¹ (Jones 2001, p. 126).

⁵² (Jones 1959, pp. 176, 181; Hague 1980, p. 93).

⁵³ (Evans 2010, p. 59).

⁵⁴ (Gambrell 1997, p. 65).

in Longmoor in the spring of 1941, and the speaker here takes the role of a guide or ethnographic ‘informant’, welcoming her reader into the village and offering a bridge to its cultural otherness.⁵⁵ As Alice Gambrell explains, women artists and writers were often subject to ‘the expectation that they would serve as containers, transmitters, or translators of the very forms of experiential immediacy’ whose loss in war is lamented by Walter Benjamin in his essay ‘The Storyteller’.⁵⁶ This intimacy of experience is indicated by the speaker’s breezy use of vernacular names and ‘private allusion[s]’, a technique which some readers have perceived as deliberately ‘riddling’.⁵⁷

... The din
Of children singing through the eyelet sheds
Ringing smith hoops, chasing the butt of hens;
Or I can offer you Cwmcelyn spread
With quartz stones from the wild scratchings of men:
You will have to go carefully with clogs
Or thick shoes for it’s treacherous the fen,
The East and West Marshes also have bogs.

The ‘valley tips’ of wild garlic are so described because, according to John Pikoulis, they reminded Roberts of lilies of the valley; ‘wild scratchings of men’ is possibly an allusion to traces of bronze age settlement in Cwmcelyn, a bay on the western marshes overlooking Laugharne (Roberts was a member of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society).⁵⁸ Again, we find Roberts inscribing a sense of place that is rooted in her personal experience, and elucidating a national culture that finds expression in particular details whose opacity except to the most local of readers subtly resists the politics of coherent representation they seem initially to support.

Echoing Katherine Mansfield’s contention ‘I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World’, ‘Poem from Llanybri’ seeks to imbue this ‘undiscovered country’ with ‘a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow’.⁵⁹ Llanybri’s utopian, dream-like dimension is mirrored by the temporal structure of the poem. Placing itself in a conditional time ‘between now and then’, it is orientated both to an imagined past and an imagined future, and the speaker’s gendered role as hostess and conserver seemingly enables her to participate in a (still conditional) project of national reconstruction:

You must come—start this pilgrimage
Can you come?—send an ode or elegy
In the old way and raise our heritage. (CP, 3)

‘Poem from Llanybri’ also poses as a homespun ‘offering’ designed to alleviate the stress and anomie of the homesick soldier, and in a sense this is what it is: Bill Ashcroft et al., have shown how, in postcolonial literatures, the imagination, like the magical worldview of folk culture, can offer an enabling escape from the violent dialectics of dominance and subservience that is exposed by *Gods with Stainless Ears* as a primary feature of the war machine’s encroachment on west Wales.⁶⁰

The portrayal of the village here also speaks to traditional textiles in the ‘naïve’ style, such as the *arpilleras* that emerged from Peru in the 1980s. Made by proletarian women in mothers’ clubs in towns and cities, the *arpillera* drew on ancient traditions of Andean dollmaking and textile art to depict scenes from rural life.⁶¹ As Mary Louise Pratt notes, these representations set out a kind of

⁵⁵ (Pikoulis 1983, p. 13).

⁵⁶ (Gambrell 1997, p. 5).

⁵⁷ (Conran 1983, p. 125; Pikoulis 1995, p. 205).

⁵⁸ (Pikoulis 1983, p. 15).

⁵⁹ (Mansfield 1954, p. 94).

⁶⁰ (Ashcroft et al. 2002, pp. 33–34).

⁶¹ (Pratt 1992, p. 141).

‘atemporal mapping’ of place that ‘celebrate[s] plenitude, variety, and detail’, while also depicting ‘a social space teeming with people and domestic animals whose activities contribute as much to the variety as the plant world does.’⁶² Like these fabric pictures, ‘Poem from Llanybri’ fills its entire canvas with detail and plays with perspective so as to represent a ‘whole way of life’. Pratt holds that the *arpillera*, while aimed in part at an Anglo-European consumer, is also ‘an autoethnographic gesture, transculturating elements of metropolitan discourses to create self-affirmations designed for reception in the metropolis’. In these kinds of representations, ‘subjugated subjects engage, and seek to engage, the metropolis’s constructions of those it subjugates’, and ‘Poem from Llanybri’ can be seen to perform a similarly transcultural ‘mirror dance’.⁶³

Roberts’s depiction of Llanybri walks, as it does in many of her poems, a gossamer line between clarity and opacity, ‘cultural “revelation” and cultural “silence”’, an effect seen by Pikoulis as willfully teasing.⁶⁴ Indeed, tropes of evasiveness are not uncommon in ‘insider-outsider’ modernist women writers and artists; Gambrell notes that the ‘textual elusiveness’ of figures such as Hurston, Leonora Carrington and Kahlo signals their resistance to being construed as transparent containers or transmitters of exotic otherness.⁶⁵ In Roberts’s poetry, an ‘incomplete intimacy’ signals a gendered appreciation of cultural (and linguistic) difference that cannot be grasped within the knowledge structures of metropolitan scrutiny.⁶⁶ This we see in her poem ‘Plasnewydd’. As in ‘Poem from Llanybri’, the speaker playfully adopts the role of Clifford’s ethnological ‘informant’:

You want to know about my village.
You should want to know even if you
Don’t want to know about my village. (CP, 4)

The village is initially presented as a small, static location to pass through: ‘You could/Pass it with a winning gait. Smile.’ (CP, 4) Moving from the general (the whole village) to the particular, the speaker effects an abrupt shift of perspective, focusing in on a village cow:

WAR. ‘There’s no sense in it.
Just look at her two lovely eyes
Look at those green big big eyes
And the way she hangs her tail.
Like a weasel. Ferret. Snowball
Running away on the breast of a hill.
WAR. There’s no sense in it. (CP, 5)

While the passage perhaps invokes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a more important source is surely the ‘Hanes Taliesin’, as collected in Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the *Mabinogion* (1838–45), in which Gwion Bach, sought after by a shape-shifting witch Ceridwen, is chased for his poetic powers, with both characters becoming subject to a dizzying array of metamorphoses into different animal forms. The legendary narrative of Gwion’s transformation is used by Roberts in order to provide the effect of viewing the village through a kaleidoscopic range of changing perspectives: the cow’s anthropomorphic presentation serves to blur the division between human and animal, while the gaze of her ‘big big eyes’ on the viewing subject (the reader) blurs divisions between the viewing subject and her ethnographic ‘object’. The cow’s sudden movement away over ‘the breast of a hill’ suggests the impossibility of fully ‘knowing’ the ‘other’ that is Llanybri. In this respect, the position of Llanybri

⁶² (Ibid., p. 142).

⁶³ (Ibid., p. 143; Taussig 1987, p. 305).

⁶⁴ (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 58; Pikoulis 1983, p. 15).

⁶⁵ (Gambrell 1997, p. 32).

⁶⁶ (Ibid., p. 56). Daniel G. Williams explores similar dynamics of linguistic difference in relation to Margiad Evans’s writing in his chapter on (Williams 2010, pp. 810–13).

and the Welsh culture it represents is shown to mirror Luce Irigaray's conception of the 'feminine' as 'already elsewhere than in the discursive machinery where you claim to take [it] by surprise'.⁶⁷

Patrick McGuinness has suggested Roberts's literary style emulates the 'naïve' painting in its intricate harmoniousness, its eclectic combination of images (*Gods with Stainless Ears*, for example, gives us 'euclidian [. . .] air', 'sprockets of kale', 'Women titans [as] weathervanes' in the space of a few stanzas (CP, 47)), and in its tendency to '[play] fast and loose with [scale and] proportion'.⁶⁸ Her naïve style is also evident on the level of tone, contributing to the 'problems of appreciation' noted by Conran: in a review of *Gods with Stainless Ears* in 1951, a *Times Literary Supplement* critic dismissed 'the contrast between the high tragic tones of the poet and the naivety of her incidents' as 'irresistibly ludicrous'.⁶⁹ Indeed, in 'Plasnewydd', the seriousness of the subject matter—'WAR'—is belied by the speaker's comic levity. This is not down to Roberts's lack of understanding of literary conventions, however: rather, as Walkowitz has shown, a tone marked by naturalness and triviality can be seen to challenge the principles of proportion and literary 'decorum' that writers like Joyce and Woolf portray as supporting the imperial project.⁷⁰

Although Roberts was a skilful formalist, critics have observed that there is a 'calculated awkwardness' to her poetry—a contention borne out by the image, in 'Poem from Llanybri', of walking 'carefully with clogs'.⁷¹ Patrick McGuinness has insisted that 'Some of her alleged obscurity, and much of her oblique or inverted syntax' can be attributed to her 'tendency to transcribe, unaltered, the idioms and phrases she hears all around her'.⁷² She shared George Orwell's association of the metropolitan political establishment with a corrupt language that, detached from any shared referential value, served as an instrument of power and oppression. Like Orwell, she thought clarity and democratic representation might be achieved only through public recourse to the 'vivid, homemade turn of speech' that she recognized in the inhabitants of Llanybri.⁷³ she opined in her diary that 'the officials speak at their own low level, and do not understand the wise and simple minds of the agricultural community', adding, 'And if we do not listen to the rural wisdom of the common man we shall be a lost Nation.' (DLR 17) Many of the villagers were Welsh speakers who used an accented, idiomatic English, and, as Laura Wainwright observes, 'Roberts seems to revel in the linguistic oddness and expressive potency of this vernacular mode'.⁷⁴ But rather than constructing a 'synthetic vernacular', as does Hugh MacDiarmid, poems such as 'Plasnewydd' use the oral vernacular 'to signify the insertion of the outsider into the discourse'.⁷⁵ Nineteen of 'Plasnewydd's thirty-nine lines are taken up by direct speech quoted more or less verbatim from Roberts's friend Rosie Davies, a local farm worker then in her forties. The conversation is described in Roberts's diary (note the class distance inherent in the use of her married name):

'Well you see, it's like this, Mrs Rhys' . . . and Rosie stands on one foot with her hand on her hip, she licks around her mouth, then begins talking again, and it is always the same, 'Well you see, it's like this, Mrs Rhys. I can't imagine the war or fighting at all, I've never travelled at all, only to go to Cardiff, so I can't imagine this war at all. She's very wrong mind you (meaning the WAR), and what I feel is they're all flesh and blood like you or I Mrs Rhys, aren't they? If you were to be stabbed you would feel it just as much as they, wouldn't you? WAR there's no sense in it. We're simple people we all get on. War there's no sense in it'. (DLR, 16)

⁶⁷ (Irigaray 1988, p. 103).

⁶⁸ (Roberts 2005, pp. xxxiv–xxxv).

⁶⁹ Review of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 November 1951, quoted in (Roberts 2005, p. xxxiv).

⁷⁰ See (Walkowitz 2006, p. 56).

⁷¹ (Goodby and Wigginton 2013, p. 175).

⁷² (Roberts 2005, p. xxi).

⁷³ (Orwell 1946, p. 252).

⁷⁴ (Wainwright 2018, p. 62).

⁷⁵ (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 55).

One of the things that lends Roberts's 'naïve' style its uncanniness—its sense of the familiar in the strange, and vice versa—is its tendency to place objects or literary styles within unusual contexts; *Gods* sees a tiger-like 'striped rhizome cat' escaping over the waters of the estuary (CP 57), while modern-day town mayors wear the 'torques' of princes as they wade out to sea after a plane crash (CP, 50). By re-placing the language of war within the realm of the female and oral with the refrain 'WAR. "There's no sense in it", 'Plasnewydd' estranges and deheroizes the rhetoric of conflict, robbing it of its engrained meaning and power. While the technique has something in common with Surrealism's 'simulations' of voices of madwomen, in Roberts's work, the ventriloquized voices of Welshwomen are eminently sane.

The 'calculated awkwardness' of Roberts's style calls attention to the fact that 'Hers is an impressive impersonation—for such it surely is—of cultural authority'.⁷⁶ As in 'Poem from Llanybri' where the reader must 'go carefully with clogs', or 'The Circle of C', whose vatic investigations culminate in the prosaic lines: 'Heard Rosie say lace curtained in clogs/I've put a Yule log on your grate' (CP, 7), the sense is projected of the speaker walking and *talking* in Rosie's shoes (stuffing bits of lace in them to make them fit?) to achieve a practical understanding of her point of view. Following the ideas of Sianne Ngai, it can be suggested that Roberts's poetry thus shows how thinking through and about powerlessness can generate new modes of thought.⁷⁷ Indeed, her work often emphasizes the centrality of copying and mimicry within a culture's formation, but this inherent performativity does not, for her, seem to be antagonistic to authenticity. Her sensuous recollections of Argentina in 'Royal Mail' include 'peacock struts and nets mimicrying butterflies' (CP, 27), while the notes to *Gods with Stainless Ears* include a reference to Romantic 'poet Iolo Morganwg in particular, who forged numerous parchment poems' claiming to be ancient texts of the Welsh tradition (CP, 72). Understood in its composite dimensions, as mimic/cry, the word informs the 'naïve', tragi-comic tone of Roberts's poetry.

4. Make do and Mend: Fabricating Self and Society

Early on during her time in Llanybri on 20 March 1940, Roberts was already mimicking the Llanybri villagers: 'I drew my scarlet cape around me and walked leisurely, as village people do.' (DLR, 9) Although the vibrant apparel signalled Roberts's love of colour, a statement of her proud individuality within the 'damp and stony stare of a village' (CP, 27), it was made, as her daughter, Angharad Rhys recalls, of Welsh wool (she later gave it to her friend, the writer Celia Buckmaster, as a gift) and was well designed for keeping the cold winds at bay. A practical item that served both as a disguise, a means of adaption and a revelation of Roberts's personal self-identity, it often appears, in a mythic guise, within her poetry.

Although the extent and complexity of Roberts's engagement with tropes of costuming and textile in her poetry are beyond the scope of this essay, similar to Kahlo, she uses clothing and disguise to present a self perpetually in motion, as in 'The Circle of C' where 'I walk and cinder bats riddle my cloak' (CP, 7).⁷⁸ Playing on the desire on the part of her readers that she disclose her 'real' self, she instead calls that 'self' into question. This we see in her poem 'Low Tide', which depicts Roberts's experience of miscarriage, also in March 1940:

Every waiting moment is a fold of sorrow
Pierced within the heart.
Pieces of mind get torn off emotionally,
In large wisps. (CP, 5)

The text seems to establish itself in the confessional mode, but all we really see are layers of a fabricated ('sewn-together') self and its fraying edges, only hinting at the pain that is felt within. This

⁷⁶ (Thomas 2019, p. 26).

⁷⁷ (Ngai 2005, p. 14).

⁷⁸ (Gambrell 1997, p. 54).

questioning of the 'true' subject of disclosure through images of veiling and costuming extends to her representation of Welsh culture: take, for example, her use of Rosie's patterned apron as a border for her painting of 'Llanybri Old Chapel', or her description of a neighbour's cottage:

Here an old widow of eighty-four lives. She always seems to have a pink geranium flowering at her window throughout the year. I cannot tell you more about her as I pass, as today she has fussily put up a lace curtain right across the lower window frame, drawn two citrine curtains towards the middle of her window, which she told me she had dyed with her own water. She has at the side of these two dark blue hangings of baize. Then there is as well the navy-blue blind just inside the small frame of the non-opening window. Such are the window dressings of many in the village. (DLR, 5)

Here we have an image of the 'periphery' as excess and 'gratuity'; an idea of Welsh culture, glimpsed from a female perspective not in synecdoche or totality, but in a series of ever-proliferating decorative details. The window coverings signal Roberts's exclusion as outsider, while alluding to a collective reticence that she ascribed to the 'continual subjugation of the Welsh by conquerors' (DLR, 68) which meant that they 'never failed to exercise the flexibility of their wit to conceal their thoughts'.⁷⁹ The impression is given, though, that cultural identity is revealed in the layered materiality of the window displays, not behind or before it, even as the elderly woman's difference is hinted at, yet left in shadow.

As Gambrell, following Jean Franco, has shown, Kahlo's self-portraits trouble masculinist-imperial fantasies about female interiority by portraying her interior as broken and pierced, thereby collapsing the boundaries between inside and outside.⁸⁰ In a similar manner, Roberts harnesses the naïve mode to present the Welsh 'heart' as an item of home-made craft; pierced; on display; but always, rather like the English language in which it is written, obscuring as much as it reveals. This we can see in her description of a typical coracleman's house: 'a great pride, just now I am thinking of one home in particular, a pincushion in the shape of a heart, studded in design with glass coloured beads, and set in a glass box.' (DLR, 138) Again, 'pointedly incomplete intimacy' inscribes a difference that yet exceeds the capacities of the English language to contain it.⁸¹

Through her development of a unique late modernist 'naïve' style, Roberts seeks to create visibility for Welsh culture *and* gendered experience by transforming the consciousness of her readers. Using the idea of the 'naïve', the 'amateur' and the 'home-made', she reformulates our conceptions about literary art in order to give women writers a stake in national culture. The folk practices she portrays, while seeming to comply with the centre's constructions of a 'primitive' periphery, are somehow always in excess of metropolitan norms, and are used to assert the importance of cultural difference in the face of Fascism and totalitarianism. Although Roberts's work is concerned with continuity, she is no nostalgist; rather, in her adoption of a naïve style, she shows a desire to move away from patriarchal ideas of tradition and heritage in order to explore multiple forms of affiliation. The oral vernacular becomes embedded in Roberts's exploration of language as a malleable, heterogeneous entity, without unified origin. Using sewing and craft as model and metaphor for the lines of entanglement linking people across disjuncture and difference,⁸² she weaves her own story as female outsider into new patterns of Welsh culture.

⁷⁹ (Roberts 2008e, p. 128). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁸⁰ (Gambrell 1997, p. 72).

⁸¹ (Ibid., p. 56).

⁸² (Anderson, p. 227).

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