

## REVIEW

Review of “Minority Language Writers in the Wake of World War One. A Case Study of Four European Authors” by Jelle Krol, *Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages and Communities*. Palgrave Macmillan 2020, 346 pp.

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Jelle Krol’s book “Minority Language Writers in the Wake of World War One. A Case Study of Four European Authors” offers an interesting comparative perspective on four major vanguard authors who began their literary careers during or shortly after WWI and promoted the use of their minoritized languages as a medium of expressing important intellectual and cultural values. The four men of letters are Douwe Kalma (1896-1953) from Frisia, Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) from Wales, Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) from Scotland and Roparz Hemon (1900-1978) from Brittany. The term “vanguard” suggests that these writers “saw themselves as leaders at the forefront of a movement” (p. 4) in the time of emerging national movements in post-war Europe. The book is based on a PhD project, which, as the author states in the acknowledgements, began as a study on Frisian literature and was extended onto three other literary fields. The volume falls within the scope of comparative studies of minority language literatures, and its novelty lies in a cross-national study of authors whose countries did not gain recognition as separate entities after the First World War.

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters containing the case studies, and a conclusion chapter. The introductory part effectively presents the historical and cultural background of the post-WWI movement towards national identity in Europe. The beginning of the chapter explains how the emergence of new states and autonomous nations translated into intensified feelings of nationalism in the young generation of European writers. Krol convincingly prepares the ground for the subsequent discussion, by noting cultural phenomena such as literary antiquarianism, fresh productivity, and propagandist proclamation, referring to Miroslav Hroch’s phases of national movement towards autonomy (Hroch 1992). From this base, the author goes on to introduce the theoretical principles for his study, choosing as the main premise the notion of “combative literatures” (*littératures combattives*) coined by Pascale Casanova (Casanova 2011). According to this French researcher, “marginalisation, suppression and/or negation of languages inescapably leads to engagement in politics by those who

choose to write in dominated languages” (p. 10) Using Casanova’s argument, Krol focuses on the political and nationalist engagement of the four men to examine the influence of their commitment on their writing. He argues that Casanova’s perspective can be applied to identify ways in which the writers attempted to realise their ambitions to create a distinct literary field for their minority language literature. The term literary field is used in the Bourdieuan sense of a theoretical, autonomous space in which various agents interact to build and strengthen a separate literary production (Bourdieu 2005). Secondly, Krol refers to Casanova’s “Irish Paradigm” described in *The World Republic of Letters* as a general pattern of literary revolts, consisting of five phases: the invention of tradition, the recreation of a national language, the realist opposition, assimilation and autonomy (Casanova 2004). The author acknowledges Andrew Webb’s criticism of the applicability of this model to countries other than Ireland (Webb 2013), but nevertheless proposes to use it in his case studies as a “looser set of critical tools”. Using these concepts, the author states his overall aim to seek parallels and patterns in the development of post-WW1 minority language literatures.

The book’s structure shows as orderly approach in that the next four chapters, analysing the life and work of the selected authors, are organised according to a consistent pattern. First, Krol presents the historical and cultural background and the literary field relevant to the given language. This is followed by the writer’s biography, with a focus on the early formative years, preparing the ground for the subsequent description of his “combative entrance” on the literary scene. At this point, Krol selects and analyses texts that could be considered as manifestoes of the visions of the four authors. He then describes the writers’ leadership engagement in the form of political activity or language activism and identifies their strategies. Finally, each case study ends with an analysis of one (or in the case of Hemon, two) texts that are to exemplify the combative element in the author’s literary work. The main purpose of these sections is to examine the ways in which the authors attempted to establish a separate literary field for their languages. Overall, the structure of the book is very effective in alerting readers to points of comparison and revealing parallels between the life and work of the four men. The most striking similarity concerns the efforts of the four authors to introduce new literary genres (particularly drama, but also modern novel, modernist poetry) and their connection with European cultures other than the dominant culture that surrounded them.

Having studied Saunders Lewis’ dramas and translated them into my mother language, I was particularly interested in Chapter 3, which discusses this Welsh author. Krol’s presentation of Lewis’ background and ideas is impressive in depth and depicts the writer and politician from a fresh, broad perspective. However, the critical description of Lewis’s opus is not entirely without fault. This may

stem to some degree from the fact, acknowledged by the author in the introduction, that in his study he relied by necessity on English or French translations of the discussed works. My points of criticism are mainly related to the use of the play *Blodeuwedd* (1948) as the main example of Lewis' "combative literature". Although the issues are minor in general, it might be worthwhile to briefly discuss them here.

The first refers to the complex history of the creation of the drama. The first two acts were written in the 1920s and published in a literary periodical, but the whole play – as Krol rightly notes – was finished and performed only in 1948. This atypical case of a text written in two very different periods of the playwright's life and career makes it rather problematic to use it as an exemplification of Lewis' vision and ideas in the interwar period and to discuss it alongside the other selected "combative" works: Kalma's play *Kening Aldgillis*, MacDiarmid's long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and Hemon's plays *Eun Den a Netra* and *Meurlarjez*, all written in in the 1920s, except from *Meurlarjez* from 1938. For example, Krol inserts a lengthy passage on the use of blank verse and elevated language in the drama to point out that this strategy added capital to the Welsh literary field. Although this is certainly correct, the reference to language misses several important points. The author does not note that Lewis made numerous changes to *Blodeuwedd*'s language when he rewrote the first two acts in the late 1940s, making it actually less elevated. Before that, in 1936, Lewis wrote in the preface to his drama *Buchedd Garmon*, undoubtedly referring to *Blodeuwedd*: "Years ago, I wrote two acts of a metrical drama in blank verse. I became then discouraged to use blank verse as a mode of expression in a modern drama" (Lewis 1937: ix, translation mine). In addition to problematising the two stages of the drama's creation, the discussion of Lewis' language could be placed in a wider context, paying attention to its development over the decades, from highly artificial metrical verse, through free verse (used, for example, in *Siwan*), to rhythmical prose (in dramas such as *Brad*, *Esther* and *Cymru Fydd*). Placing this information in a separate section earlier could strengthen the argument about the linguistic versatility of the Welsh writer.

Another slightly problematic aspect is that in his efforts to describe *Blodeuwedd* as a combative work, the author at times presents a slightly distorted image of the drama as a whole. The opening paragraphs contain a synopsis of the story in the *Mabinogi* rather than the play, thus omitting the way in which Lewis creatively modified the medieval tale. Next, after describing the origins and language of the drama, Krol states that the heroine "unsettles court life in Ardudwy and, finally, causes it to lose its independence; a parable for the dependent Welsh situation" and presents Blodeuwedd's remark about her subjects (Act III): 'Be savage and fearsome tomorrow: the rest of your life/They will run like little dogs to kiss your hand', as a provocative comment referring to

Welsh politics (p. 134) While the quoted lines certainly can be interpreted as Lewis's ironic allusion to his fellow countrymen, it should be noted that they are absolutely marginal in the context of the whole play. Further on the same page, the author draws attention to Biblical references, pointing to similarities in the secret of Llew's death and the story of Samson and Delilah. I find the claim that Lewis deliberately used Biblical imagery to bring attention to the "collapse of power" of Llew's people rather unconvincing. The depiction of the hero's death is after all taken directly from Mabinogi – although the details of the scene are very creatively modified by Lewis – and there is little evidence in the text to suggest biblical references in view of the fact that the motif of special conditions of a hero's death can be found in other European stories, most famously in the myth of Achilles, as well as Siegfried's death in *The Song of the Nibelungs*. The next paragraph states that: "With no tradition as a human being, she [Blodeuwedd] can hardly be held responsible for her behaviour. She belongs to nature and, in the end, is given back to nature. Again, Lewis seems to draw a parallel with the exploited situation of the Welsh, or indeed any other exploitative situation". This claim is slightly obscure – it would be helpful to explain in more detail what the suggested parallel is between the heroin's situation and the state of Wales with respect to "belonging to nature" and holding responsibility for one's behaviour. As a whole, the analysis of the drama creates an impression of *Blodeuwedd* being first and foremost a political parallel, which is little grounded in the text itself. One might ask if, with the focus on combative literature, it would have been more productive to analyse a piece such as *Buchedd Garmon* (1937) or even much later *Esther* (1960), where the political allusions are much more visible. Indeed, in the conclusion chapter Krol refers to *Buchedd Garmon* and not *Blodeuwedd* when summarising Lewis' combative stance. I presume that the reason for choosing this particular text for the analysis was the popularity and reverberation of *Blodeuwedd* throughout the decades, which the author highlights several times. However, I should argue that the appeal and value of the play do not lie in its vague and scant political allusions but in the artistic mastery of language and multiple universal themes, such as the love triangle, femininity and patriarchy, the tension between passion and responsibility, the question of free will and, last but not least, the motif of men's control over nature. In other words, I suggest that it is the *uncombative* element of *Blodeuwedd* that assured its success in comparison with more overtly political and less popular dramas by Lewis, such as *Buchedd Garmon* or *Cymru Fydd* (1967).

The final chapter of the book brings together the evidence collected in the four case studies. The author effectively summarises his findings, presenting similarities in the writers' background, motivations and the sense of mission which went beyond the status of their languages and literatures. Then, discussing the writers' actions and schemes, Krol identifies four strategies they used:

distancing, which aims to separate the minority language from the dominant language influences; connecting, which looks for connections with the glorious past and tradition or with kindred languages and cultures; unifying, which strives to create one standard language; and mobilising, which involves activism or political commitment to rally fellow countrymen. Next, the author accumulates evidence for the novelty of the writers' approach: their efforts to fill the literary lacunae, focus on translation and producing valuable literary criticism. He also pays attention to their role in the distribution of literary works and symbolic production. In the latter section, one might occasionally notice a slight stretching of the argument. For example, the claim that all four authors were involved in promoting and distributing literature is not sufficiently grounded in Lewis' biography, as the only activity in that field that he undertook mentioned by the author was his job as a librarian, which lasted less than a year (p.314).

In the final sections of the conclusion chapter, the author refers back to the theoretical assumptions presented in the introduction. He states that the gathered evidence demonstrates that Casanova's Irish Paradigm cannot be straightforwardly or chronologically applied to Frisian, Welsh, Scots, or Breton literature. It would be interesting if the author discussed this conclusion in more detail. He then refers to the models of Hroch and Hutchinson, stating that the process of national movement in Frisia, Wales, Scotland and Brittany during the interwar years coincides with Hroch's phase B, that "of patriotic agitation, where cultural claims such as language recognition are tied to political demands by national organisations, led by middle-class intelligentsia, and attempts are made to awaken the masses" and that "the pattern discerned in the work of the four writers was one of oscillation between traditionalism and modernism and the inevitability of making the past present in the expansion of their languages and the creation of new literary space", which agrees with the analysis of John Hutchinson regarding cultural nationalism. Once again, one wishes that the author went further from this point and offered more explanation about the significance of his findings. After offering a fresh cross-national perspective and identifying important points of comparison between the four men, the conclusions read like a bit of an anti-climax. An interesting question that could be addressed is whether the efforts of the authors discussed had a long-lasting effect on their minority languages and literatures. It would be instructive to refer back to the wider context of national movements towards independence after the First World War in Western Europe and discuss the role of the authors in the success / failure of the movement toward autonomy from a historical perspective.

Krol's book is a soundly researched and readable account. The author draws on a wide range of sources and in doing so goes into formidable depth. The details of the authors' biographies and the description of their work are extremely interesting to read, although the minuteness might sometimes make one lose track

of the main purpose of the work. These well-written portraits of four fascinating individuals could be made even more academically valuable with a clearer statement of the author's purpose and more focused conclusions. Overall, however, the central case of the "combative" element in work of the four vanguard authors is very convincingly made. Notwithstanding its minor flaws, the book represents a worthwhile contribution to the scholarly literature on minority literatures in the early twentieth century.

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