

Forefronting Welsh Through English Translating and Translanguaging in Alys Conran's *Pigeon*

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Abstract Alys Conran's first novel, *Pigeon*, (2016), relates the misadventure of a disaffected young Welsh boy, partly through the eyes of his friend and accomplice Iola, who, like Pigeon, comes from a broken family. Both are growing up in a bleak post industrial village in North Wales, never named, possibly Bethesda, the setting for one of the finest novels ever written in Welsh, Caradog Prichard's *Un nos ola leuad*, which also charts the psychological undercurrents of a pre-adolescent boy trying to make sense of the world in which he finds himself, as he wanders innocently along a path of self-destruction. Prichard's novel, written half a century ago, is in Welsh. Conran, a native speaker of Welsh, writes in English. In choosing to do so, she offers insights into the way in which the two languages of Wales have been brought together through the media, through a bilingual educational system, and through changed attitudes towards both English and Welsh in the wake of devolution, more functional and less emotively charged. Pigeon and Iola are Welsh speakers, but they resort to English not just to interact with Pigeon's monolingual step-sister, brought to the village by a violent Englishman who moves in with Pigeon's mother, but also to play out their own fantasies, fueled by the language of films and social media. In short, *Pigeon*, with its continual reference to the language use of its protagonists, can be seen as an exploration of 'translanguaging', a term that first appeared in Welsh as *trawsieithu* (Williams 1994) and has been defined by Canagarajah (2011) as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system".

Keywords Welsh. English. Language Attitudes. Translanguaging.

Over the past two decades, the term 'translanguaging' has grown in popularity, especially in the field of bilingual education, to indicate the exploitation of a shared resource – the knowledge of two or more languages – to promote learning in formal educational settings. The benefits, it is claimed, include gaining competence in the 'weaker' language, as well as learning curriculum content. Above all, it is seen as a dynamic alternative to a more traditional classroom approach towards bilingualism, that of keeping languages separate (García 2009, Baker 2010), with more potential advantages, such as avoiding the pitfalls of translation.

But 'translanguaging' is not simply a classroom phenomenon or an educational trend. As Lewis et al. (2012) point out, the promotion of translanguaging is premised on the idea that in a bilingual context "children pragmatically use both of their languages in order to maximize understanding

and performance in the home, street, and school" (643). Nor is it confined to children; Canagarajah (2011) usefully defines translanguaging as the "ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system". This, presumably, is a more holistic phenomenon than code-switching, a rule-bound language activity variously interpreted as a form of language deficit, as an accommodation strategy, or (more commonly) as an identity marker (Wei and Hua 2013).

The term itself appears to be a literal translation of the Welsh *trawsiathiau*, a word first used by education researcher Cen Williams in the 1980s (Williams 1996), to refer to emerging practices in the burgeoning phenomenon of bilingual education in Wales. The development of Welsh medium schools from the 1980s, to include English speaking parts of the country as well as the Welsh-speaking heartland, offered parents almost everywhere in Wales the chance of a bilingual upbringing for their children. Many English speaking parents availed themselves of the opportunity. But this brought with it heterogeneous situations in which pupils would be more competent in one language, and in which the stronger language might usefully be employed to scaffold the weaker one. Thus, for Williams, a class might study a text (such as a video, or written input) in one language, and then discuss it in another, working across languages, or 'translanguaging'.

For Wales in the 1980s, this approach marked a new departure in language attitudes. In the previous century, Welsh had been banned in schools, and pupils caught speaking their mother tongue in class would be beaten at the end of the lesson as part of the infamous 'Welsh Not' campaign (Davies 1994, 443). In the twentieth century, Welsh medium education had become prevalent in the heartland (*Y Fro Gymraeg*, which included large swathes of north and west Wales), while Welsh as a foreign language became a statutory, but minor, part of the curriculum in the English speaking part of the country, especially in densely populated South Wales. The two languages were kept apart in most walks of life; this held true for literary production throughout most of the last century, since Welsh native speakers, conscious of their role as guardians of *yr hen iaith* (the old language) would only write in Welsh, and English mother tongue writers (whose parents may have themselves been Welsh speakers, Dylan Thomas being perhaps the most obvious example) could only write in English.

But the introduction of Welsh medium education in English-speaking South Wales, the establishment of a Welsh television channel, *Sianel Pedwar Cymru* (S4C), and the route to devolution that resulted (after two referenda) in the creation of the Welsh Assembly, has led to a noticeable shift in language attitudes, and a new confidence that Welsh and English can co-exist and in some contexts complement each other without necessarily threatening the survival of Welsh. An emblematic example of the dynamic

relationship between the two languages can be seen in the much-acclaimed S4C noir series *Y Gwyll* (hinterland), which first appeared in 2013, and which was shot back-to-back in English and Welsh, with both versions featuring snatches of dialogue in the other language. Leading actor Richard Harrington, a second language Welsh speaker who grew up in South Wales, and who plays a morose detective who has been relocated to Aberystwyth from Cardiff, says that his Welsh improved greatly during filming.¹

One of the most significant indicators of a change in attitude towards the two languages can be found in the number of writers from Wales poets, such as Gwyneth Lewis, and especially novelists (Jon Gower, Fflur Dafydd, Llywd Owen), who use both languages, often translating or rewriting their own work. Some of these acquired Welsh through Welsh medium education; Gwyneth Lewis, the first poet laureate of Wales, author of the massive-lettered bilingual verse that adorns the millennium building in Cardiff,² and Llywd Owen, who won the Welsh language Book of the Year award in 2007 with *Ffydd Gobaith Cariad* (Faith, Hope, Love), both went to Welsh medium schools in Cardiff.

This is the background against which *Pigeon*, the debut novel by Alys Conran, has appeared. Conran grew up in Welsh-speaking North West Wales, and it is here that the novel is set, in a small town that resonates strongly with the slate mining town of Bethesda. Bethesda is also the setting of Caradog Prichard's *Un Nos ola Leuad* (1961), possibly the greatest - and bleakest - novel ever written in Welsh, and one of the few to have been subsequently translated into English (as *One Moonlit Night*, by Philip Mitchell in 1995). Like Prichard's novel, *Pigeon* charts the psychological undercurrents of a disaffected pre-adolescent boy (Pigeon, a name we will return to) who tries to make sense of a world of domestic violence in which he finds himself. He shares the journey with Iola, his streetwise soul mate, who like Pigeon comes from a dysfunctional family.

Pigeon's life takes a battering when his submissive single parent mother Mari remarries and a violent Englishman moves into his crooked two-bedroomed house on the hill. His stepfather (Adrian, but for Pigeon he is always just *He*) brings with him his daughter Cher, who is just a few months older than Pigeon, and who is given the second bedroom. Pigeon is moved into the shed in the garden (just for the weekend, Mari assures him, unconvincingly). Adrian, *He*, soon asserts himself as a wife beater and a domestic tyrant, and Pigeon is left to brood on revenge in the shed.

A frequent visitor to the shed is Pigeon's schoolmate and partner in

1 Reported in *Wales on line*. URL <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/actor-richard-harrington-talks-nordic-6464483> (2016-08-05).

2 The text in Welsh reads *Creu Gwir fel Gwydr O Ffwrnais Awen* (Creating Truth like Glass from the Furnace of Inspiration); the English text reads *In these stones horizons sing*.

truancy, Iola. Together they identify a scapegoat, a peripatetic ice cream vendor, who in their joint imagination becomes a child molester and a murderer. Inexplicably, Gwyn the ice-cream-man is seen as the root of all their troubles. But a plan to punish him goes horribly wrong when Cher (half privy to the plot, and fully convinced that Gwyn is a murderer) jumps into the van, and in the ensuing scuffle the handbrake comes off. The van runs down the hill and Cher is left permanently injured in the crash.

The central moment in the narrative comes when Adrian confronts Pigeon after finding out what has happened to his daughter. Adrian is shot and killed, and Pigeon, who confesses to the murder, is taken away to a Borstal near Liverpool. When he returns, several years later, he and Iola pick up the pieces of their existence, new truths emerge, and in the empty slate quarry above the town where Pigeon retrieves the gun which killed his stepfather, Iola reflects upon the lost years:

- (1) “How can I get back what you’ve lost?” I ask him again.
 He’s still smiling, just a bit. Considering. You can feel something building.
 “Geiria”, he says. *Words*.
 He shrugs his eyes searching the ground for them.
 “Only words”. (252)

These closing lines of the novel, with the single, glossed, Welsh word *geiria* to remind us that the conversation is taking place in Welsh, confirm what a close reading of the text has gradually uncovered; *Pigeon*, more than a coming of age novel, more than a portrayal of dysfunctional family life in a depressed part of Wales, is a novel about language; something that the novelist herself only realized as she was writing. In an interview given to the *Wales Arts Review*³ Conran recalls:

when I came to Pigeon, finally, and he had a friend, and they started on their journey together through the story, from the moment they started speaking to each other, I knew they needed to speak in Welsh or else it would be all lies. Fiction isn’t a lie. I couldn’t write Pigeon speaking English. From that point on, the novel developed into being one about language. About losing language.

But language loss – Pigeon’s partial loss of Welsh in the English Borstal, and his reluctance to use Welsh when he comes back to his home town – is only part of the story. His is a personal itinerary, set against the wider

3 «The art of translation: Alys Conran and Sian Northey in Conversation» [online]. *Wales Arts Review*. URL <http://www.walesartsreview.org/the-art-of-translation/> (2016-08-05).

picture of language use in the Welsh heartland, the dynamics of interaction between Welsh and English, and Welsh speakers and English speakers, and the mechanisms behind language choice and language attitudes. In her attempt to record these mechanisms, Conran needs to make the reader aware of what is happening linguistically at any moment in the narrative, and thus to constantly supply information about the language being used. As a result, there are numerous phrases in Welsh, as well as reporting phrases such as “she said in English” or references to the kind of language being used, like “funny chapel Welsh” or “posh English”.

Most of the time the characters are using Welsh. But they are portrayed using it through English. This, of course, is a familiar problem for any writer wishing to represent a language community that uses a language different from the one that he or she is writing in, and which Tymoczko (1999, 25) calls the “struggle to translate the cultural metatext”. Are culture-specific terms left intact, translated, or glossed? Are readers encouraged to infer meaning from context? To what extent is the dialogue made to reflect syntactical or lexical features of the language characters are supposed to be speaking?

In what now appears to be a bygone age, Anglo-Welsh⁴ writers made use of syntactical features that had been transferred from Welsh, such as fronting of predicates (“From Llanelli he is”), invariant tag *isn't it*, and the ubiquitous *there's* + adjective to introduce an exclamation, as in ‘there's kind of you!’. These forms, amply documented in Thomas (1985), Coupland and Thomas (1989) and Penhallurick (2007), were typically used to characterize the dialogue both of English speakers from the South Wales valleys, but also presumably Welsh speakers, such as the West Wales peasants created by Caradog Evans in what is sometimes referred to as the first Anglo-Welsh text, *My People* (1910). Anglo-Welsh texts might also offer a few cultural concepts (*hiraeth*, *eisteddfod*) or terms of endearment (*nain*, *bach*, *boyo*), to guarantee a Welsh colour to the writing, which, without making excessive demands on the English reader, also served to create a distance between standard English and the linguistic situation in Wales.

Conran uses a different strategy. Her young Welsh-speaking protagonists are given fluent, streetwise, contemporary English:

(2) “How'd you know he'll be in anyways?” I ask Pigeon. (40)

Anyways? The unmarked form *anyway* would have passed unnoticed. But *anyways*, which the Cobuild dictionary has as an example of colloquial American, has only recently become common with British youth. Iola, the

4 In the classic definition by Glyn Jones (1968), an Anglo-Welsh writer is “someone who writes in English about Wales”.

narrator, is of course bilingual, and this presumably is the term she would have used had she been speaking English. But Welsh is her and Pigeon's default language, and this is the language they use together, unless we are told otherwise. When they do shift into English – when they translanguage – it is always for a reason, as we shall see, and we are made aware of the reason. Thus *Pigeon*, if it is a novel about language, as we have suggested above, it is not through highlighting specific structures, but rather because of its insights into the language attitudes and communicative strategies of a generation of post-devolution teenage bilinguals.

Iola is a convincing and at the same time precocious child narrator. She provides the structural backbone to the novel, and a running commentary on the unfolding drama. Every other chapter, from first to last, is seen through her eyes and prose; the even numbered chapters resort to a third person narrator that tracks Pigeon when he is not with Iola. The language she uses is simple, even disingenuous:

- (3) When Pigeon and me get off the bus, we're on a flat street where all the houses are separate and white, and they all have small gardens and its nice. (40)

or vague:

- (4) We did the funeral thing again. (56)

But it is interspersed, frequently, with arresting similes that illuminate the world view – and the moments of heartbreak – of a ten year old:

- (5) Number seventeen is one quarter of one of the big houses; a big house split up like a chocolate bar into little flats. (41)
- (6) I cry for Pigeon so much it's like tearing paper. (108)

Iola's inner voice transcends the language choices that need to be made in any spoken interaction. But when it comes to reporting dialogue, it is crucial to Conran's purpose that we understand which language is being used. Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Gwyn's Ice Cream van chugs up the hill with a tape blaring out the lyrics of an old song in English, but when the van stops and Gwyn sticks his head through the window to serve his customers, Pigeon and Iola, it's Welsh that he stutters:

- (7) "Iawn, b b bois?" he asks us.
 Together Pigeon and me breathe "Iawn" back, although everyone knows I'm not a boi, any more than Pigeon is a prissy Hogan – but I quite like being called a boi by Gwyn.

“B b be ‘dach chi isio heddiw ‘ta?” Gwyn’s question goes up at the end, really high, as high as here; but we still haven’t decided. (2)

This is the first snatch of dialogue in the novel, and there are more than a hundred to come, each one potentially creating a problem of reception for the monoglot English reader. Conran adopts a variety of strategies. The default response is to offer a clue, or rather a reinforcement of the message, which make inferencing possible. Thus the premise for “we still haven’t decided”, in the extract above, is that Gwyn has asked the children what they want. Similarly, when we read:

- (8) “Iola, be ti’n gneud?” asks Efa, standing in the doorway of the room now, seeing all the piles of papers I’m making. (80)

We infer that Efa is asking what Iola is doing, or in the following longer exchange (complete with the metalinguistic aside) that Gwyn has asked Iola why she and Pigeon have come to his house:

- (9) Gwyn, crouched on the toilet seat, can still hear whispering outside the door, and the girl’s occasional sniffing sitting low, the sniffing sound about halfway up the door. After a while, he decides to try talking to her.
 “Sut mae??” says Gwyn shakily.
 The sniffing quietens.
 “Be ydach chi’n ei wneud yma?” His Welsh is even more formal than usual. Asking the questions, there’s the sinking feeling that he doesn’t want to know why they’re here after all. (91)

Conran also resorts frequently to translations, which may be italicised:

- (10) “Wel bore da, Efa Williams!” says Anti Gladys, as soon as we walk in through the heavy door of the chapel the second Sunday. “Ers talwm iawn”, *long time no see*, she says, licking her pink lipstick, sour-puss mouth. (28)

Or put into parallel quote marks:

- (11) ...he tells her slowly, tells her slowly what he’s done, tells her as if she can understand.
 “Dwi ‘di brifo dyn Mam” he tells her. “I’ve hurt a man”. (95)

Or simply absorbed into the narrative flow:

(12) Anti turns and catches me in the act. “Un o’r teulu?” she asks Efa, syrup sweet. One of the family is she? (29)

(13) We get to the bus stop and hide inside. Pigeon stands looking out of it down the road. Ydi Gwyn yn dwad, Pigeon? Is he coming? (43)

Reinforcement of translation, through repetition or extension, is common:

(14) “Bydd Gwyn yn iawn, Pigeon?” she asks him. Her eyes are big and blue and there are no ideas in her eyes. *Will Gwyn be alright?* She asks him over and over. *Will Gwyn be alright, Pigeon? Will Gwyn be alright?* (93)

(15) “Fi nath o” says Pigeon, pointing at Him. “Fi”.
It was me. It was me. It was me. (103)

(16) She tries to get off too. “Ddim fanma, Iola”, he says. “Y nesa”. *The next stop*, he says. Get off at the next one. (94)

Only rarely do we get no translation, and no assistance with inferencing:

(17) How old are you love?
I lie. “Deg” I say. (27)

But the high number of anglicisms in Welsh makes it possible for some exchanges in Welsh to be transparent:

(18) Afterwards, on the bus, counting the streets back home from Gwyn’s, Iola’s not speaking to him. She sits next to Pigeon, shaking. “Stopia”, he says. “Stopia”.
“Sori”, she says. And then, “Sori, Pigeon”, again. She keeps shaking. (93)

Welsh spellings of English words (*sori* for *sorry*, *seksi* for *sexy*, etc.) indicate a closer relationship between phonology and writing than is available in English, and Conran exploits this, giving insights into the north Wales accent, but also, at the same time, language attitudes and the nature of translanguaging. When Cher, English mother tongue but now a second language Welsh learner, asks Pigeon why he’s taking home a microscope from school, and carrying a bag of dirt, we read:

(19) “Wha you going to do with tha?” Cher catches Pigeon and me on the way into the shed with it.
“Anna lice it”, says Pigeon.

“Snot anna lice, stewpit, it’s analyse”. (13)

This exchange has to be in English. Pigeon’s final devoiced consonant /s/ (instead of voiced /z/) is ‘corrected’ by Cher, but as she does so, she calls him *stewpit* (stupid), indicating a devoiced final stop consonant, and her own linguistic development as an English speaker growing up in north Wales.

The Welsh – English contrast is subtly evident in the minimalist exchange between Pigeon, Mari and ‘He’ when his mother first brings her new partner-to-be home:

(20) “O”, she said.

“Oh”, said the man.

“O”, said Pigeon.

“Pigeon this is Adrian”, she said in English. (18)

Flagging the language is frequent, especially to indicate a language shift:

(21) Cher’s come to meet us on the road asking in English, “Did you get him, did you get him?”, and Pigeon just answers, “I will” (44)

And it often carries a narratorial judgement on the kind of language being spoken:

(22) “What are you dressed up for, dear?” Anti asks Efa in her snobby Welsh. (29)

(23) “Sad isn’t it? So sad”, says Efa all quiet in her slate Welsh “It’s in a language called Yiddish”. (50)

(24) Norwegian is when you sing through your nose the same way Mrs Thomas at school speaks posh English for show. (50)

Language shift typically occurs to facilitate comprehension in an interaction in which one or more people are not familiar with a specific language; it can also be used exclusively to prevent comprehension. But in *Pigeon* we find instances of Pigeon moving from Welsh to English with his bilingual interlocutor. Rather than code-switching, this is translanguaging, a means by which Pigeon and Iola maximize the language resources available to them.

Over the last decade, translanguaging theory has had a significant boost in the work of Ofelia García and colleagues (2009, 2016), especially with regard to the US Latino-american context, and the language behavior of young bilinguals, for whom having recourse to a second language in a peer interaction, they maintain, indicates an enrichment rather than a deficiency in one or the other language. In a 2016 interview, García de-

finest translinguaging as “more than going across languages; it is going beyond named languages and taking the internal view of the speaker’s language use”.⁵

There are parallels here with Pigeon and Iola. They both take a functional approach to language use that transcends language choice as confined to a cultural imperative, and that comes to the fore when Pigeon and Iola switch, together, and unquestioningly, to English. It allows them, for example to tune into a make-believe world of stereotypes and associated subtexts and clichés that they have absorbed (in English) through TV and cinema:

- (25) Gwyn is a psycho and kiddy fiddler, knife carrier, mask wearer, pain-lover, torturer, and all the other things that come from those programmes on the TV that Pigeon watches, and I don’t because of Efa, and which make him speak English like cowboys and say things like “Rho dy hands up or I’ll shoot” and “Rhedeg i ffwrdd on the count of three, neu dwi mynd I make mincemeat of you!” (12)
- (26) “He’s planning”, says Pigeon in Welsh, and then changes to English like in the films “Planning his next terrible crime” says Pigeon. (41)
- (27) “We go there”, says Pigeon, in English like in the films, “and we give him a... a...”
 “Taste of his own medication?” I finish it. (38)

Mutual support (such as co-constructing the sentence in 27) is part of the process of translinguaging. Pigeon is struggling to find the words in English, and Iola comes to his aid, although the expression she creates is slightly different from the English idiom ‘a taste of his own medicine’. In this sense, perhaps, the speakers are ‘going beyond named languages’, but at the same time Iola and Pigeon are ‘language aware’ and anything but indifferent to the language they are using. They have language attitudes and preferences that are culturally engrained, but these are probably less static than in previous generations. This is especially true for Pigeon, whose personal development is intimately linked to his evolving attitudes towards Welsh and English, as we shall see.

Iola thinks English is “sludgy” (8), but she nonetheless enjoys providing the key words to describe the revenge scenario gradually taking shape inside Pigeon’s imagination. Difficult, long words, whether in English or Welsh, are key to Pigeon’s plan of teaching Gwyn a lesson:

5 Grosjean, François (2016-03-02). «What is Translinguaging? An interview with Ofelia García». *Psychology Today*. URL <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual/201603/what-is-translinguaging> (2016-11-02).

(28) Sometimes, when he and Iola are in the shed, planning, he'll throw a good word out of the shed door as if he doesn't care about it and watch through the window as Cher grovels on the ground to pick it up, the sounds of it almost slipping through her clumsy lovely sieve fingers, Pigeon likes it when Cher says one of these words, slips it into a sentence about something else. Cher's mouth is warm and soft; the words sound different in her mouth. "Pijin", she says, nervous. "D'you reckon Gwyn's psych-co-logical?"

Pigeon's tried to give his mam some of the words too, when she sits by his side on the bed, when she strokes his hair. He talks, saying the words, "atten-tive", "apa-thetic", "list-less", or, in Welsh: "di-fa-ter", "di-sby-ddu", "brth-io"... (23)

Pigeon, we are told is a "collector of words" (196), and in this sense the novel is a logbook of language acquisition, of both lexis and attitudes. In the Borstal (now known as a 'youth detention centre') in England where Pigeon spends several years for the crime he did not commit (it was Iola, we learn later, who pulled the trigger on Adrian), he is made to reflect on Welsh, on English, and the relationship between the two languages. Initially, he is seen as different by the English inmates, and an easy prey to bullies because of his Welsh accent:

(29) "Fucking Taffy", says Big Neil again as they're going into the Education Block. "I heard you're all related. Mum and dad brother and sister are they? You can tell by the look on you. Ugh. And that language's so ugly it makes me want to puke. Say that sound again. The one that sounds like you're going to be sick".
Pigeon looks at Neil, and says it: "CH".
"Say a word with it in".
"Cachwr", says Pigeon.
"What's that mean?".
"Arsehole" says Pigeon. (119)

Pigeon comes to reflect on his own relationship with Welsh, the language "he'd got smart with", and which he can "twist and turn" to say just what he wants; all of which just evaporates into "an accent" in the English medium institution of which he is now a part (131). But after an initial refusal of English, and after the encouragement of a teacher who recognizes his potential, he comes to realize that it can be part of his armour against a hostile world:

(30) Pigeon pretended he couldn't read Allan's English words until Allan almost gave up, stumped up by Pigeon's slow, painful reading.

“C’mon, lad”, he said once, looking at Pigeon. “You can do better than that”.

“I can in Welsh”, was what Pigeon thought. I can in my own fucking language.

But slowly Pigeon learnt that English was a weapon, and could be a shield. You needed it in pristine condition, and you needed the tricks of it, so you could defend yourself. Your own language was a part of your body, like a shoulder or a thigh, and when you were hurt there was no defence. When the kids argue in Welsh at home on the hill it was a bare-knuckled fight. But English. With English what you had to do was build armour, and stand there behind our shield to shoot people down. (131)

But when Pigeon comes home to Wales it is Welsh that he refuses, so that when Iola tries to get him to tell her about his time in the Borstal, he will only answer her in English, much to her dismay and disorientation:

(31) “So be nes di’n Lerpwl?”

“In Liverpool? Nothing. We were shut in. I didn’t do anything”.

Pigeon, in English?

I try again. “Maraid nes ti ‘wbath”.

“Nope, not much”. This Pigeon’s a book full of blank pages.

“O” I say.

There’s a long silence. I want to go back to mine, pretend he never came back.

“You stayn’ at your mam’s?” I ask him.

“Yep”. (152)

Redemption, of sorts, comes with a grey-haired farmer-cum-community worker called Elfyn, who teaches Pigeon how to build stone walls in the hills above the village and gently coaxes him back into using the *hen iaith*, greeting each word that Pigeon produces “as if it’s made of gold, or purple slate” (224).

Pigeon is thus about acquisition as well as loss, about repossession as well as dispossession. As such, it is tempting to see this episode as an extended metaphor for the survival of a language community, with the wall reasserting the rights of ownership, and consequently identity, of that community. But at the same time, a wall establishes a point of contact with a neighbouring community, and at the same time the communities it separates are part of a wider shared landscape. Conran claims that she couldn’t have written *Pigeon* in Welsh, because she needed the tension between

the two languages to be able to write it in the first place;⁶ a tension that is evident in the space between the two languages, and that is constantly exploited in the translating and translanguaging, in the attitudes of the characters, and even the orthography.

Nor did Conran (unlike the bilingual novelists we referred to earlier) feel able to translate her work. But in what appears to be unique publishing venture, *Pigeon* has been released (by the Independent Welsh publishing house Parthian) simultaneously in English and in Welsh, with translation by Sian Northey. The Welsh title is *Pijin*, which is simply a phonetic rendering of the name.⁷ But what sort of name (in any language) is *Pigeon*? For the protagonist it is simply an English nickname that stuck at an unknown point in his childhood. For the linguist, it is homophonous with *pidgin*, a contact language that refuses to develop into a fully fledged creature and take flight.

Conran herself offers two prefatory quotes to the novel (one from *The Bad Birdwatcher's Companion*, the other from the *Tin Drum*) both underlining the nondescript nature of the creature. The (non) description spills into the narrative; Pigeon is “grey” (14), he “scuffs around the town” (14), he is a “scavenger” (14) (for comfort); he is the sort of boy who passes unnoticed anywhere. And yet (like the bird he is named after) he is a survivor, an evolutionary success story. “With Pigeon”, reflects Iola, “everything is bright and big and better than you’d think it was” (8). His shoulders, we read, are “delicate as eggshells” (14), and yet, at the end of the novel, we feel that they can bear the weight of an uncertain future. Pigeon has come to terms with language, with the power of words, and with his own identity; and on the way, and in his interactions with his world, he has provided a glimpse into the ongoing development of a bilingual community in Wales, in one of the most linguistically interesting corners of the British Isles.

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6 URL <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/actor-richard-harrington-talks-nordic-6464483> (2016-08-05).

7 The Welsh word for ‘pigeon’ or ‘dove’ is *colomen*.

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