

# OLIVER REYNOLDS' CHOICE OF WORDS



Just because a writer uses English it does not mean they inhabit only English language culture or that the concepts, ideas and history they draw upon will only be that of 'standard' English.

**Carl Tighe**

A writer's choice of words from the total *lexis* or vocabulary available to them is conditioned by (amongst other things) education, class, social status, reading, environment, geography, family, personal relationships and political position. It is also conditional upon the other languages and cultures available to them. Just because a writer uses English it does not mean they inhabit only English language culture or that the concepts, ideas and history they draw upon will only be that of 'standard' English.

All these considerations combine to form a writer's personal language or *idiolect*. One of the most challenging developments has been the blending of English and Welsh cultures and languages which has been taking place since the late 1960s and early 1970s, but which, since political devolution, has accelerated.



Oliver Reynolds (born 1957, in Cardiff) is a poet and critic. He studied drama at the University of Hull before returning to Wales to work as an assistant to the Director for Theatre Wales. He won the Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition in 1985 for his poem 'Rorschach Writing' and the following year he won the Eric Gregory Award.

Reynolds has held writing residencies at universities in England, Scotland and Sweden, and has contributed to various literary publications including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Granta* and *The London Magazine*. His books include: *Skevington's Daughter* (1985), *The Player Queen's Wife* (1987), *The Oslo Tram* (1991), *Almost* (1999) and *Hodge* (2010).

Writers are involved with developing language, and with the meanings that lurk in particular words, but often language does not develop in quite the ways we assume, and meaning is not quite what we thought it was. Often a writer – and particularly a poet – identifies an ambiguity or uncertainty in the language and does something unusual with it. When we look up words in a dictionary we may have difficulty pinning down the exact meaning of a word, but sometimes the word in the dictionary is not part of current creative use, and new words do not always appear: after all, a dictionary is a record of previous uses and on its own it cannot develop any new meanings or applications. Only

in use can words do that. In his collection *Almost*, Oliver Reynolds asked: 'How could writing not be about difficulty...?'

Here for example is a poem written in the mid-1980s by an English-speaking Welsh-learner, where he blends in a very ironic way, what he is learning of the Welsh language with what he intuits from history – the day to day history of the language and the people who speak it. As you read ask yourself, in what ways is the poet developing language here, how is he blending two cultures, and what exactly do these words mean?

### **Asgwrn Cefn y Beic<sup>1</sup>**

A while now since he dismounted.  
Foraging, his fingers assess  
The length of her still-tacky spine.

She is leaning against the wall,  
Absorbed in *The Third Policeman*.  
One of his knees nudges her seat.

Giving in taut waves, folded flesh  
Hummocks above the knuckling bones'  
Smoothed and stubborn crenelation.

Castling, he skims the long hollow.  
Mated, grinning, she shuts the book.  
His fingers, Marcher Lords, push south.

### **Follow-up Work**

- What is the language of the title?
- What does the title mean?
- What does the word 'dismounted' conjure up for you?
- What is *The Third Policeman*?
- What does the reference to *The Third Policeman* mean?
- Why does the poet use the word 'foraging'?
- What does the word 'foraging' suggest?
- What does 'crenellation' mean?
- What does the word 'crenellation' suggest?
- What does 'Castling' mean?
- What does the word 'castling' suggest?

---

<sup>1</sup> From: Oliver Reynolds, *Skevington's Daughter* (Faber & Faber: London, 1985).

- What does 'Mated' mean?
- What does the word 'mated' suggest?
- What are 'Marcher Lords'?
- What does the phrase 'Marcher Lord's suggest?
- 'The main line of the poem is the seduction of the female cyclist by a companion.' True?
- 'The third verse offers us the sensation of fingers along the girl's spine and her response.' True?
- 'The poem is simply about a young man having sex with his girl-friend for the second time - 'A while now since he dismounted. / Foraging, his fingers assess / The length of her still-tacky spine' - while she continues to read her book.' True?
- Or is he really referring to his bike?
- The title of this poem is 'Asgwrn Cefn y Beic'. Do you know what that phrase means? Can you guess what it means? Do you think it is important? Why does the poet use it?
- Why do you think a poet might use a phrase that is just 'hard work' for the reader?
- Is this opportunism? Is it chauvinism? Is the writer exploiting his knowledge of another language? Why? In doing so is he disregarding English readers? To what purpose?
- The poet is writing in English. Is it right that he should attempt to find favour with the speakers of another language without making direct and substantial commitment to write in that language for the speakers of that language?
- Flann O'Brian's *The Third Policeman* (1967) suggests that as dogs are often said to be like their owners, so riders become like their bikes. Is Reynolds' suggestion that Anglicisation, though presented in military terms, is rooted in a process of seduction and complicity? How, in what ways and with what words, does he suggest this?
- Think about the word 'ride' for example in a film like *The Commitments*. Are you aware of a sexual connotation?
- Is Reynolds suggesting that she is like a bike to him? That she is a bike to his rider? What does that suggest about the relationship between the Welsh and the English?
- Why is she grinning in the last stanza? Is there an element of complicity in her surrender?
- The poet looks at what, in this other language, is a dead metaphor - the name for the bicycle cross-bar – literally 'astride the spine of the bike'. He develops a florid and exuberant conceit, linguistically playful, yet with a serious social and political side to it. Do you think his linguistic playfulness could be a result of some sort of artistic legacy from that other language?
- What do you know about Welsh history and culture? How do this poem and this poet fit into what you know?