Review of Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch’s Not in These Shoes

Citation for published version:

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Tower Poetry Website

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Not in These Shoes by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch
Miriam Gamble, September 2008

Not in These Shoes, the second collection from Welsh poet Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, charts a variety of issues, from the imminent disappearance of a beloved local community to the empowerment of (Manolo Blahnik wearing) ‘modern woman.’ Wynne-Rhydderch writes predominantly in free verse and, whilst some poems display considerable technical skill, others fall embarrassingly short, displaying little logic in their choice of line and stanza breaks. Louis MacNeice describes free verse as something which, in order not to be ‘dead’, ‘must be conforming to some order which we do not immediately notice’: when, on a third reading, such an order has still failed to reveal itself, one might well conclude that it simply isn’t there. The poems oscillate between short, sassy sentences and long meandering clauses, neither of which displays much feel for the ‘necessary tension’ between freedom and shape constitutive of the energised poem. Additionally, even the best pieces are often lessened by the inclusion of banal or throwaway turns of phrase: I’m no enemy to the conversational in poetry, but there’s a knack to it, and Wynne-Rhydderch has yet to master its nuances.

The blurb to Not in These Shoes introduces its author as a notable poet of ‘voice,’ capable of assuming any number of different personae, and it’s true the collection displays considerable imaginative range. From the confession of a gay photographer snapping his male subject to the narrative journey of a ship’s figurehead, the choice of speakers confirms Wynne-Rhydderch as a writer with an eye to the interesting perspective. Her execution of monologue is, however, more often than not disappointing: in ‘Matador,’ a well-achieved octave is let down by a sestet that fails to deepen or develop imaginative empathy with the photographer’s silenced passion. And in the sequence ‘The Naming of the Storm’ (the monologue of the figurehead ‘Anna-Louise’), the poems are beset by a disappointing tendency to substitute sass for substance and significance – leaving aside the fact that the sequence ends with the inadvisable move of quoting a Bob Dylan lyric (and thus appears to be asking the wind to come and shelter from, well, the wind), there is little within this series of four poems to stimulate or grasp the reader’s imagination.

We spend more time being pouted at by the eponymous heroine than we do, for example, finding out what it’s like to spend a hundred years on the sea floor or to be nailed to the front of a ship, or what the world looks like from either of these positions.

It is not the case that Wynne-Rhydderch lacks the imaginative equipment to engage convincingly with otherness. The sonnet ‘Shaved,’ which takes as subject matter the brutal murder of the Romanov children in the wake of the Russian revolution, is a perfectly achieved commingling of delicate pathos and relentless bureau-speak, image and statement: interweaving extracts from Anastasia Romanov’s diaries with the ‘bald facts’ in ‘The Executive Archive for that year’ it captures simply and concisely the precise quality of horror contained within this crash between historical event and private history. Understatement serves her well here, as it does in the lovely elegy ‘Brighton West Pier’ which, with shades of W. G. Sebald, mourns the ‘reclaiming by sea of our/ tentative steps.’ Placing its focus on ‘a telephone receiver’ swinging ‘from the tangled guts of the bar,’ the speaker of the poem traces her own disappearing Youth with syntax as ‘precarious’ and fragile as the ‘staggering’ pier itself:
… this reclaiming by sea of our tentative steps leaves me precarious: those Saturday nights when I would catch my breath outside its stuccoed façade, stilettoed,
tiptoeing between strips of sea foaming below, a note from a saxophone thrown to the wind, hearing his voice on the line half a century ago, still swaying there.

(This, incidentally, is free verse as it should be, with the structure displaying coincidence with the subject.) Rather, it seems that Wynne-Rhydderch has been poisoned or led astray by the very thing for which she has been most lauded: that obsession with ‘voice’. In the introduction to the American published *New British Poetry* (2004), Don Paterson is right to describe ‘voice’, ‘that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of our age’ as ‘an extraliterary issue’. As the monologues are afflicted by a tendency to posture rather than relate or imply, so too many of the poems in Wynne-Rhydderch’s own voice lean heavily towards the over-demonstrative verbal gesture. Usually delivered in conjunction with an unlikely self-presentation as ‘great artist’ (as against the failure-man-artist to whom this poem is addressed), these appear both unappealing and irrelevant:

Your words interrupt the lines in my head, bisecting a life of art …

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holiday homes in her native New Quay), as elegist for the disappearing communities of the Welsh sea-board she displays a painterly exactitude comparable to that of Michael Longley, and capable of a similarly hard-hitting, brittle beauty. Sharing Longley’s taste for (and ability to handle) the mnemonic ‘trace’ – the pegged long-johns in Cook’s bunker, the mother’s ‘sequined gloves/ in love with each other in a pool of light’ – she evokes with exquisite delicacy that which has departed or faces imminent demise, providing, in the latter case, vital if painful documentary of a world on the verge of immolation. Her knowledge of this world is intimate – the sea, and the dangers of sea life (and life threatened by the sea), loom large in a collection which charts with journalistic relentlessness the encroaching forces of erosion and unemployment: although the poem ‘You Can’t Get Away From It All’ asserts that ‘There is always an edge/ to the land that you cannot go beyond,’ that line seems blurred in poems where boats are living spaces, and gardens the playground of a tide which ‘now greets us with its frothy laugh/ at the front gate.’ Depictions of interiors are also striking: Wynne-Rhydderch is an impressive mistress of domestic space, and it allows her to produce the kind of poem in which the narrative is embedded in the details rather than brandished up front. Whilst ‘A Pair of Antlers’ and ‘Stately Home’ concern themselves with houses which have already been left – have fallen into the past tense – ‘The Sea Painter’s House’ focuses on one which, like the community itself, teeters on the brink of disappearance: a kind of fossil or preservation in aspic, home to a fox who ‘walks rigid in his display case’ and outside of which the water waits, ‘locked out/… its rough tongue whitening the chairs.’ The brushstrokes are perfectly incremented here, each individual image part of a larger picture which is both familial and public; which speaks volumes without having to say a word about its underlying thrust. Wynne-Rhydderch also achieves this on a larger scale: even to an Ulster reader, the (almost) haiku ‘Titanic’ strikes with poignancy and assurance on a subject on which it might be thought there couldn’t be anything left to say:

As her painterly affinities suggest (paint being the medium in which things are consigned to stasis, and also in which they best maintain the illusion of being preserved), Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch’s imagination prefers living in the past to the present, stilled to kinetic scenarios. A risky choice, perhaps, but it’s this reader’s opinion that she ought to let it stay there if it wants to: there’s room for anything in poetry, fashionable or otherwise, so long as you have the requisite skills to pull it off. If you don’t, fashion-consciousness seems somewhat beside the point.

Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, Not in These Shoes, Picador, 2008.
£8.99. 978-0-330451-46-8

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