Extract from work on the poetry of Rhian Edwards: Language Matters

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(The analysis extracted here follows on from a consideration of Rhian Edwards's use of accentual verse.)

Two-beat accentual rhythms are possibly the most immediately apparent of Rhian Edwards's strategies on the level of linguistic music. However, in his important and detailed review of *Clueless Dogs* on Todd Swift's *Eyewear* blog,[1] Ben Stainton has suggested a capacity in Edwards's poetry for what he calls 'witty half-rhymes', identifying the brief poem 'Eyeful' as an example of this:

> Looking me dizzy
>
> licking me drunk
>
> in the face of our nudity
>
> I am not nearly naked enough.[2]

Presumably, Stainton sees this as a half-rhyme *abab* structure (*dizzy/nudity*; *drunk/enough*). However, in terms of its linguistic music, there is manifestly more going on here than just half-rhymes. The first two lines, for example, are structured strictly in parallel in terms of each word's initial consonant, creating a sort of delayed (and visually vertical) type of alliteration. Of course, alliteration is also the driving musical force of lines three and four, with *nudity*, *not*, *nearly*, *naked*, and *enough* tying the lines tightly into a sort of sonic unison. But across these two lines, we should also note the assonance of *face* and *naked*. Indeed, to turn back once more to the first two lines, there is a strongly figured architecture across the vowels of the stressed syllables moving from low

[1] Ben Stainton, 'Guest Review: Stainton On Edwards', *Eyewear*, 30 August 2012, <http://toddswift.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/guest-review-stainton-on.html>, accessed 19 June 2015.
[2] Rhian Edwards, *Clueless Dogs* (Bridgend: Seren, 2012), p. 32.

to high then high to low: *Loo*king [low vowel] – *dizzy* [high vowel]/*lic*king [repeated high vowel] – *drunk* [variant low vowel]. And this, I would suggest, creates precisely the rise and fall of a musical phrase – an important notion for a poet who has said that 'As a musician, the rhythms and the musicality of the language in poetry are key for me.'[3]

In a similar way, 'Sea of Her'[4] – the poem that follows 'Eyeful' in *Clueless Dogs* – adopts half-rhymes of *belly*/*gently*, *flesh*/*breath*, *dreamed*/*drowned*. But it also makes clear play with a strong sequence of both alliteration and long vowels, in the lines 'There, I d**o**zed and I dr**ea**med, / I l**a**zed and I l**ou**nged' (the long vowels here rendered in bold), with *dozed* and *lazed* also linked together through an internal consonance. Indeed, in the final two lines ('In her pool of milk skin / this man practically drowned'), there is both the repetition of an initial 'p' sound across the lines (***p***ool/***p***ractically) and the repeated internal 'k' of 'mil**k** s**k**in'. Moreover, just taking the first stanza of 'Tiptoe', the same sort of sonic multiplicity is again on display:

> I wander dreamless through your dialogues
>
> the ephemera of affection.
>
> I traipse shoeless through these dialects
>
> these contentious claims to passions.[5]

Once more patterned predominantly on a two-beat accentual line,[6] this stanza begins with alliteration on the stressed syllables: ***d***reamless/***d***ialogues in line one and *ephemera*/*affection* in line two. There is then a break from alliteration in line three, but it returns in line four with

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[3] Kittie Belltree, 'Interview with Rhian Edwards', *New Welsh Review* online, 100 (summer 2013), <https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=538>, accessed 19 June 2015.

[4] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 33.

[5] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 57.

[6] Edwards's May 2011 performance of this poem indicates that the first three lines here are clearly based on two stresses per line; the fourth line is a little more ambiguous, with 'claims' holding a stress alongside the stresses in 'con**ten**tious' and '**pass**ions' – although 'claims' is arguably a lesser stress than that of the other two syllables. Depending on interpretation, this stanza is thus either constructed out of three two-beat lines and one three-beat line, or four two-beat lines. Given the importance of three-beat lines in the stanza that follows, my sense is that the former interpretation is probably more accurate within the broader rhythmic context here. See 'Rhian Edwards "Tiptoe"', *YouTube*, 27 March 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2zUoDgxPCE>, accessed 22 June 2015.

contentious/c*laims*. Lines one and three contain a double echo in the repetition of the '-less' suffix in

dreamless and *shoeless* and in the intial 'dia-' of *dia*logues and *dia*lects. Similarly, lines three and

four are tied together by the triple repetition of the 'sh' sound in *shoeless*, *conten*t*ious*, and

passions.

However, Edwards's rich linguistic patterning by means of such strategies of repetition is not

restricted to just a phonetic level. She also uses parallelism on the level of the phrase in order to

create structure. Thus, in 'The Welshman Who Couldn't Sing',[7] the poem's stanzas all begin with a

first-person present continuous statement, in which the poem's speaker is doing something either to

or in relation to the poem's eponymous subject:

> I'm sketching his sound [. . .]
>
> I'm scratching off a smile [. . .]
>
> I'm mimicking his canon now [. . .]
>
> I'm fattening up his bones [. . .]
>
> I'm giving back his limbs [. . .]

The same technique – in other words, marking stanza beginnings by means of syntactic parallelism –

is also used in 'Quotidian',[8] with each of the four verses of the poem beginning with the phrase 'It's

all about' – variously continuing with 'the habits', 'those minutes', 'disarray', and 'the hush'. Indeed,

a related strategy is used as the poem 'Girl Meats Boy' draws towards its bravura rhythmic

conclusion, with one twelve-line stanza bound together by concluding each line with the words 'of

you' (seven instances), 'on you' (once), 'in you' (once) or just 'you' (three instances, each preceded

by a present participle):

> Lips fell apart for kiss of you,
>
> bled puddled spit for scraps of you,

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[7] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, pp. 16-17.
[8] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 35.

> gouged cheeks of meat to feast on you,
>
> tore threads of flesh in teeth of you,
>
> licked marrow, bone and pulp of you,
>
> let belly swell with fat of you,
>
> pigged pregnant with the pith of you,
>
> gut, liver, spleen digesting you,
>
> my newborn blood absorbing you,
>
> my pulse, my veins, heart pumping you.
>
> No flies on you, no worms in you,
>
> no scavenge bait, no urn of you.[9]

In other words, across rhythm, various phonetic ploys, and phrasal repetition, Rhian Edwards's poetry displays an array of distinctive linguistic features that collectively constitute an emphatic deployment of linguistic musicality.

Before I move onto the second part of my overall analysis in this chapter, there is one more linguistic issue that I want to address. This is to do with what Hugo Williams describes as the 'distinctly un-English sound' and 'Celtic bass-line' of Edwards's poetry.[10] This notion is something that Edwards herself argues for when she suggests, in interview, that:

> There is definitely *a very Welsh sound to my poetry* and I think that derives from the lilting
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> intonation of the dialect and language and also because I am a musician and singer. The
>
> sounds of the words are very important to me. (Emphasis added)[11]

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[9] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 61.

[10] Cited on Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, back cover. Also cited, unattributed, on the back cover of Rhian Edwards, *Parade the Fib* (n.p.: tall-lighthouse, 2008).

[11] Greg Freeman, 'The Write Out Loud Interview: Rhian Edwards', *Write Out Loud*, 13 August 2012 (first posted 27th July 2012), <http://www.writeoutloud.net/public/blogentry.php?blogentryid=30994>, accessed 22 June 2015.

Leaving aside the question of an identifiably Welsh (specifically, Bridgend) accent within her poetry performances, it seems to me that Edwards's words on the page are overwhelmingly written in language patterns that are broadly free from localising qualities: in short, and as the quotations I have cited so far I would suggest make clear, my sense is that this is poetry that is predominantly constructed in Standard English. Nonetheless, in the poem 'Going Back for Light' in particular, there are instances where Wenglish very definitely makes its presence felt[12] – 'Wenglish' being *The Dialect of the South Wales Valleys*, as the sub-title of Robert Lewis's important study of this language-form describes it.[13] On the level of subject-matter, 'Going Back for Light' – which Edwards explains 'is about a great-grandfather' whom she 'never met'[14] – suggests its rootedness in South Wales history in the opening reference to the experience of the poem's subject as a miner who 'Got blacklisted at the colliery for making ructions' and in the reference in stanza three to the sourcing of a dance floor from Caerphilly Hall. However, such familiar cultural-historical and geographical references to one side, it is in the *language* that the poem's South Walian rootedness is most strikingly apparent. Robert Lewis's study of Wenglish makes clear that the Bridgend of Edwards's childhood falls in the 'Western Area of Wenglish',[15] and distinctive Wenglish language-forms are apparent throughout the poem. Thus, the final line of stanza one observes that 'His coughs had been turning red for a while mind' – that final 'mind' being listed in Lewis's extensive glossary as a feature in Wenglish which 'adds little to the meaning but acts as an intensifier or to ensure the listener's full attention'.[16] Indeed, stanza six sees a recurrence of this linguistic feature ('Daft over him, women were. His dark looks that was, / mind').[17] Moreover, the use of 'compo' for *compensation* in stanza two is also cited

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[12] Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, pp. 14-15.
[13] Robert Lewis, *Wenglish: The Dialect of the South Wales Valleys* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2008).
[14] Freeman, 'The Write Out Loud Interview'.
[15] Lewis, *Wenglish*, pp. 11 and 12.
[16] Lewis, *Wenglish*, p. 152. Lewis gives the example of 'He's handy round the 'ouse, mind.'
[17] This feature also occurs in the poem 'Alison', albeit at the start of the sentence: 'The day is frayed and it's barely begun. / Mind, I've been picking at the thread, / unribboning the weft / with a long-drawn out sigh': Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 28.

by Lewis as part of Wenglish vocabulary.[18] But it is in the syntactic form of 'Loved that dance hall, he did' (stanza two), 'Always smoking he was' (stanza three), 'Getting ready for no good, we reckoned' (stanza four), 'Pair of chocolates, those eyes' (stanza five), and 'Daft over him, women were' (stanza six) that the poem perhaps most clearly identifies its linguistic allegiances. Robert Lewis argues that:

> The word order of Wenglish can differ markedly from that of Standard English. [. . .] In cases of emphasis, the element to be emphasised is generally placed first in the sentence. For example:
>
> **Miner he is, not a builder.**
>
> rather than the Standard English:
>
> *he is a* miner, *not a builder*.
>
> **Blue it was, not green.**
>
> In general there is greater flexibility in word order in Wenglish than in Standard English.[19]

It is this quality of Wenglish emphatics that 'Going Back for Light' captures in the word order of the phrases that I have just cited – and which mark this poem out as distinctively Welsh (and particularly South Walian) precisely in its *linguistic* forms.

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[18] Lewis, *Wenglish*, p. 82. For another instance of distinctively Welsh vocabulary, see the phrase 'cwtched under covers' in 'Fruition': Edwards, *Clueless Dogs*, p. 45. For 'cwtch (transitive and intransitive verb)', see Lewis, *Wenglish*, p. 88.
[19] Lewis, *Wenglish*, p. 294; emphases in original.