Extract from Work on Meirion Jordan's *Moonrise*: War and Conflict

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[In this extract I discuss aspects of Meirion Jordan's debut volume, *Moonrise* (2008), which was shortlisted for the 2009 Forward Best First Collection prize.]

As 'Home, 1919' might suggest,[1] and as both W. S. Milne and David Wheatley observed in reviews,[2] war is a significant thread within *Moonrise*. Indeed, Milne argues that, while eight poems in the collection 'take war as their primary theme', there is – just as importantly – a *general* engagement with conflict which means that the 'motif of war is woven into the texture of Jordan's poetry'. Milne identifies only four of what he sees as the 'primary theme' war poems in the volume ('Poppy field', 'Scharnhorst', 'At Srebrenica, and 'Dream #7912'),[3] but it is clear that war and conflict, or their machinery, figure in poems as diverse as 'The Nuclear Disaster Appreciation Society', 'HMS Ark Royal in Action', 'Hinterlands', and 'Dead Reckoning'.[4]

The first of this latter-named group is arguably the most outlandish, figuring characters who have an obsession with the iconography and history of both nuclear power gone wrong and of nuclear weaponry in use. Thus, alongside a sort of fandom related to events such as Windscale, Three Mile Island and Chernobyl[5] – a fandom that shows itself in nuclear power-related sight-seeing trips and associated news-related get-togethers – the speaker and his friend see beauty in the video of 'Hiroshima / go[ing] up in forty-five', as the poem puts it, and similarly take pleasure in viewing the after-effects of nuclear weapons testing: 'We love to watch / the palm trees beating in the thorium breeze, / the rising heart of the cloud / like sunshine in our eyes'. Indeed, in its rendering of an atomic explosion as a crucially aesthetic event (a thing of dynamic movement, a *heart*, *sunshine*), this description notably recalls the writing of William Laurence, the science journalist who was an observer during the mission which saw the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki on 9 August 1945 and

[1] Meirion Jordan, *Moonrise* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 35.
[2] W. S. Milne, 'Omnium Gatherum of Welsh Books', *Agenda*, 44/2-3 (spring 2009), pp. 133-149: pp. 144-5; David Wheatley, Rev. of *Moonrise* by Meirion Jordan, *Times Literary Supplement*, 5559 (16 October 2009), p. 27.
[3] Milne, 'Omnium Gatherum', p. 144. See Jordan, *Moonrise*, pp. 8, 47, 55, 57.
[4] Jordan, *Moonrise*, pp. 15, 36, 39-42, 56.
[5] For brief summaries of these three disasters at nuclear reactor sites (variously from 1957, 1979 and 1986), see 'Major nuclear reactor disasters', *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*, <https://www.cnduk.org/campaigns/nuclear-power/major-disasters>, accessed 6 October 2015.

whose account of the event emphasizes, precisely, the colours, shapes and movements of the explosion. For example, towards the end of a narrative that becomes increasingly awe-struck, Laurence tells how, as part of the mushroom cloud moved away, 'it changed its shape into a flower-like form, its giant petal curving downward, creamy white outside, rose-colored inside'.[6] Whilst there is thus an identifiable heritage to the sort of aesthetic response to nuclear explosions that Jordan imagines here, it is – at least initially – much harder to detect the 'Welsh-inflected' element that David Wheatley sees in what he calls the 'quirky fantasy' of this poem.[7] There is, for example, no overt Welsh reference in the piece, nor is there anything which suggests a Wales-rooted form of language in Jordan's mode of expression. However, it might conceivably be possible to ascribe to the poem a sensibility which is based in a broad cultural awareness that *Wales itself suffered significantly from the fallout of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster*: as a 2011 CND briefing explains, 'In Britain, the areas worst affected were the hill farms of North Wales, Cumbria and South Western Scotland, where the sheep were now eating contaminated grass' as a result of which, even in 2011, CND could report that 'there are still restrictions on sheep in some areas of North Wales and Cumbria'.[8] Whether or not such a Wales-based association is viable – and it is certainly the case that nuclear fallout is part of Wales's material history in the period of Merion Jordan's own life – Wheatley's assessment that this is a poem of 'bitter ironies' is immediately easier to appreciate: in Jordan's vision here, disaster and the potential for mass destruction become a form of entertainment. However, I would suggest that Jordan takes this approach not to mock his poem's characters in some simplistic way, but rather as an attempt to explore how human beings may respond to and attempt to cope with the horrors of catastrophe – in this case, by turning such horrors, precisely, into entertainment. Indeed, the poem *itself* arguably constitutes just such an attempt to deal with the spectre of technological terrors – specifically by framing them within, and thus by associating them with, the absurdities it portrays. In other words, and to put it simply, in the ludicrous behaviour of its central characters, this poem moves to make a joke out of terror (or death) itself.

[6] Quoted in Craig Nelson, *The Age of Radiance: The Epic Rise and Dramatic Fall of The Atomic Era* (London: Scribner, 2014), p. 218.
[7] Wheatley, Rev. of *Moonrise*, p. 27.
[8] *Remember Chernobyl: A Continuing Nuclear Tragedy* (London: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 2011), <https://www.cnduk.org/campaigns/nuclear-power/remember-chernobyl/item/download/225>, accessed 7 October 2015, p. 3. The CND website provides an updated text which notes that 'The final restrictions on sheep movement in England and Wales were only lifted in 2012, twenty six years after the disaster': 'Remember Chernobyl: A Continuing Nuclear Tragedy', *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*, <https://www.cnduk.org/campaigns/nuclear-power/remember-chernobyl>, accessed 7 October 2015.

By strong contrast, the four-poem sequence 'Hinterlands' is a far more immediately serious engagement with notions of conflict.[9] Here, then, an unspecified and ambiguous conflict (that is suggested over the course of the sequence as a whole) sees the (likewise unspecified) protagonists of the sequence called away from their 'valley' – a hint there, perhaps, of Jordan's south Wales origins? – to some 'eternal city'. The first poem of the sequence ('The Radio') suggests some sort of call for support, from the centre to the 'provinces'; the second ('Hinterlands') gives sight of 'the enemy flocking in dark clouds / on the horizon'; and the third ('Artifacts') looks 'Ten thousand miles down' to where 'our city bathes in radiation' (an interesting return, in itself, to motifs of nuclear destruction). The fourth poem ('Inscriptions') then seems to acknowledge the speakers as 'invaders', and suggests their existence within a highly administered, war-focused society in lines that seem to offer up a degree of political satire on a state's willingness to sacrifice both freedoms and citizens to the prosecution of its military engagements:

> All mail is now administered
> by the war graves commission:
> only the dead may send
> or open letters. Our young
> are shrink-wrapped and delivered to war
> in a distant country, to think of them
> condemns the soul to auction.

With their reference to a shipping-off of the young to conflict in 'a distant country', these lines could very readily be contextualised by their emergence in a decade which saw major UK armed involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan.[10] But like the possible material context of Wales's Chernobyl fallout for 'The Nuclear Disaster Appreciation Society', there is no overt textual evidence for such an assertion and it is thus wise to bear in mind John Redmond's recent caution against too-ready critical reliance on reading poetic texts within the context of what he calls 'public narratives'.[11] Against this, however, there are, in this final poem of the 'Hinterlands' sequence, strong hints of a

[9] Jordan, *Moonrise*, pp. 39-42.

[10] 'US troops led the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, in coalition with the UK and other nations. [. . .] British forces peaked at 46,000 during the invasion phase and then fell away year on year to 4,100 in May 2009 when the UK formally withdrew from Iraq': 'Iraq War in Figures', *BBC News*, 14 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11107739>, accessed 7 October 2015. UK involvement in the Afghanistan War (in which around 140,000 UK troops served) ran from the start of the conflict in 2001 until the formal end of 'British combat operations in the country' in October 2014: 'UK Ends Afghan Combat Operations', *BBC News*, 26 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29776544>, accessed 7 October 2015.

[11] John Redmond, *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), p. 14.

notion of Wales in the geographical iconography of characters waiting 'along the sides / of green hills' – as well as what can be read as suggestions of Valleys mining villages ('it is all two up, two down') and traditional Welsh dress ('the inhabitants parade in period dress'). The country of this poem, in other words – the country from which the 'young / are shrink-wrapped and delivered to war / in a distant country' – may suggest a familiar, real-world one. But to reiterate: none of this is explicit and exists only at the level of potential inference. Indeed, the overall sense, in this final poem of the sequence, of producing political, cultural, and geographical landscapes that are possibly but not definitely familiar suggests that Jordan here is rooting this particular rendition of warfare in a distinctly uncanny space: in a space that is, to quote Nicholas Royle, 'a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar'.[12]

[12] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.