

Mapping Poetic Emergence Devolved Voices: Discussion Document

Version 1.0

A. Stages of Emergence

One of the aims of the Devolved Voices project is to chart the emergence of poets in Wales since 1997. As a preliminary to doing so, we here attempt to describe some of the significant stages which are usually observable during the process of poetic emergence.

Every poetic career is different, of course, and no single map can cover every possible case. However, certain ‘milestone moments’ will seem to be evident in the case of very many poets, whether they are still ‘emergent’ or have already achieved prominence.

As researchers on a generously funded project, we need to have a public framework against which the judgements we make about which living writers we should devote most attention to can be justified and will carry weight. We suggest, therefore, that the notional stages of an individual poet’s emergence might be mapped as follows.

Stage 1

A poem (singular or plural) by a hitherto unknown poet appears in a magazine. After an interval, another appears in the same magazine, and after another interval, another poem. This pattern may continue for as long as the magazine exists, but few or no poems by the same author appear in any other magazine. Such a pattern probably indicates the presence of a serious writer, who may be attached to a workshop or local grouping linked to the magazine, but is probably not making any significant break-through beyond the bounds of a well-defined ‘scene’ or grouping.

Stage 2

A poem appears in a magazine. After an interval, another appears in the same magazine, and after another interval, another poem. Then a poem appears in another magazine, and then another, probably moving beyond the confines of an immediate locale. Again, such a pattern probably indicates the presence of a serious writer, able to interest several editors (possibly acquiring their distinct advocacy), and very probably hoping to get together the kind of track record which might make her/him a serious contender for publishing a pamphlet/chap-book, booklet, or full-scale collection in due course.

Stage 3

The same pattern as in Stage 2 is observed, but the magazines in which the poet’s work appears begin to include the best-known ones of the period. A list of such magazines is clearly subjective to some extent, but the main criterion would be that people who regularly read poetry would probably know them – currently, for example, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry*

Wales, Poetry London, Agenda, The Rialto, New Welsh Review – the list at any time being period-specific. In addition, appearance in ‘non-poetry’ outlets which publish some poetry would, in each period, represent a distinct movement towards further prominence, such as (again currently) the *TLS, The New Statesman, The London Review of Books*, etc. There may also be an appearance, or appearances, in notable anthologies of newer/younger poets at this stage. Moreover, a poet at this stage will often begin to work as a reviewer, or even an essayist, in the kind of magazines in which their own poetry is being published. The first invitations to do readings are also likely to be received at this stage.

A poet at this stage may go on to have a booklet or pamphlet published. The press in question may well be quite specialised (in terms of region, type of material published, etc.), and the pamphlet may feature more than one poet (with a title such as *Three New Poets from the Valleys*). It may be reviewed, but probably fairly briefly, and in a review which also covers other items. This may be the ‘plateau’ stage of this poet’s career, representing a serious and sustained writing life, but that of somebody likely to be largely unknown (beyond a small local or generic circle), even to most people who are regular poetry readers.

Stage 4

After a period of placing poems regularly in magazines, and/or of attaining the sort of anthology / pamphlet appearances described in Stage 3 above, a first collection appears, either with a ‘commercial’ imprint, or with an ‘independent’ press, and is reviewed in poetry journals, again perhaps as one of a number of collections under consideration in a single review. If reviews also appear in places other than poetry magazines – for example, in national newspapers – this would be a distinct sign of growing interest in that poet’s work. Academic affiliation, as a tutor or lecturer in creative writing, may begin to take place at this stage, and invitations to do readings are likely to be well established. Indeed, such readings may well be part of the organised promotional activities surrounding the launch of a first full collection. In a Welsh context, a first full collection may also be marked with invited Full Membership of the Welsh Academy.

Stage 5

By this point, the poet is likely to have a well-established profile in terms of giving readings – over a wide/national geographical area – whilst requests to lead workshops may be developing (although, again, this is dependent on period). Furthermore, the poet may well be an established essayist or reviewer. Note, however, that reviewing by a poet is not necessarily the product of the poet’s reputation as a poet; poets may solicit reviewing as a way getting better known as a poet, or because they have a career as an academic before they become (or become known as) a poet. This might usefully be seen as a sort of ‘multi-model’ emergence phenomenon.

In due course, a second collection may appear, often from the same press as the first, and then another. The poet may be invited to fulfil other significant cultural roles, such as judging poetry competitions, conducting writers’ weekends, serving on arts committees, editing poetry journals, etc. Reviews of new outputs by the poet will become increasingly prominent and widespread. Other indications of the development of Stage 5 status are that poetry

magazines may occasionally have articles about the poet's work, and even some academic journals too. Invitations to read at notable festivals, etc., are received, and/or to participate in British Council events abroad. Specialist books on contemporary poetry would include some mention of the figure, and possibly a dedicated chapter, or a chapter in which the name of this poet is one of the two or three names mentioned in the title. Poets at this stage may also have a growing media presence, thus acquiring the position and influence of cultural communicators of their practice to a mainstream audience. The figure (according to period) may also have a high-status academic affiliation (for example, a Readership or a Professorship). In a Welsh context, Fellowship of the Welsh Academy may be offered to a poet at around this stage.

Stage 6

At this stage, a new level of prominence is reached: the poet might be on the syllabus for GCSE, A Level, and degree-level study; there might be academic conferences with papers on their work, or PhD students writing on it (not necessarily as a single-author study). There might even be an academic book entirely devoted to this poet's work. The poet would have a distinct cultural presence nationally (Wales/UK) or even internationally, and a degree of media presence. For instance, following the publication of a new collection, there might be radio interviews, appearances on TV book-shows or arts programmes, invitations to be featured as a major 'draw' at literature festivals, etc. At the most developed version of this stage, not to know of this poet would seem anomalous for 'well-read' people, even for those who are not self-identified poetry-readers.

Notes

The six stages described above give our basic framework for the consideration of poetic emergence. However, this model of emergence should take into account the following important notes:

- Note 1 Poetic emergence is distinct from poetic development: it is entirely to do with becoming known or becoming prominent as a poet, rather than becoming a poet of better quality or worth.
- Note 2 Poets sometimes jump stages, and sometimes go into reverse, but most reach what is called here a 'plateau' and remain thereafter at more or less the same point. In some cases, however, a plateau may be a vital career caesura from which a new direction will emerge at a later date.
- Note 3 The indicators given here are essentially pre-internet. Following the take-off of broadband around 2005-6, many new indicators of an electronic kind swiftly became important, and these need to be factored into the descriptions of the different stages of emergence.
- Note 4 Deciding that a poet is at a particular stage of emergence recognises that the characteristics exhibited by that poet may actually be scattered across different

stages, so the judgement is based upon the notion of *preponderance*. Thus, a poet would be considered to be at (say) Stage 5 if the preponderance of observable characteristics seems to be in this stage. In this sense, a poet with just one collection – perhaps from a very high-profile publisher – may be considered a Stage 5 figure if s/he has nonetheless received particular critical attention, has a nationwide reading profile, and is a notable presence in terms of editorial work or literary commentary. Conversely, a poet with a number of collections from, say, a very local press may only gain prominence in a particular geographical area, and important Stage 5 characteristics – such as an established pattern of geographically diverse readings – may not be attained. Moreover, distinctly idiosyncratic emergence patterns are also possible: a poet may publish poems in magazines and anthologies on a regular basis, and over a sustained period of time, but not achieve a first collection (for whatever reason). Nonetheless, the poet in question may receive comment and may (for example) have developed a reading, reviewing or essay-writing profile over many years which mean that s/he could be suitably considered a Stage 4 figure.

Note 5 Of the stages listed above, we consider 1–3 as describing a poet who is ‘emerging’ while 4–6 describe a poet who has ‘emerged’.

B. Bands of Emergence

The six stages outlined above may, in addition, be over-mapped into three broader ‘bands’ of emergence, so that poets can further be described in terms of three broad categories. These are:

Band A: pre-collection poets, meaning those who have yet to publish a full collection: a ‘full collection’ means a book of 64 pages (or thereabouts). Chapbooks, booklets, or pamphlets are smaller, probably 32, 16, and 8 pages, or thereabouts, respectively. Publishing one of these would still mean that a poet is ‘pre-collection’, and is likely to be at Stage 2 or 3. (At Stage 1, little emergence has taken place, so evidence at this level merely shows a figure’s existence as a poet.) Note, too, the recent rise in the number of anthologies of younger poets, many of whom will be pre-first-collection, so appearance *in* a book will often pre-date the appearance *of* a book.

Band B: first-collection poets, meaning poets who are still in early career, or whose plateau has proved (or has so far proved) to be that of the single-collection poet. This is most frequently Stage 4 on the emergence scale.

Band C: multi-collection poets, meaning those who are in mid or later career, typically corresponding to Stages 5 and 6, and representing a wide variety of different degrees and levels of prominence

Note

The point of identifying both ‘stages’ and ‘bands’ is that these two categorisations are of different kinds: ‘staging’ is established by making a judgement on the basis of the presence or otherwise of varied indicators, but the same set of facts might be interpreted somewhat differently by different observers. It is also the case that, in terms of stages, the same indicator may have a different significance in different periods. For instance, a poet appointed writer-in-residence to a university department in the 1980s or 1990s would unambiguously be a well-established figure. But appointment as Lecturer/Fellow in Creative Writing, made post-2000, might well come early in a career, and could be based on such indicators as perceived potential, publishing contracts held, or prior academic experience. Banding, by contrast, is purely objective – a poet either has or has not published a collection, and either has or has not published more than one.

C. Stages of Emergence: Other Relevant Factors

1. Prizes, short-listings, and the award of fellowships or bursaries (examples include such awards as an Eric Gregory Award or a Literature Wales Bursary): these can rapidly advance the process of emergence, tipping the publication see-saw, so that publishers and magazines actively solicit the figure’s work, even in the case of pre-collection poets, rather than the poet needing to solicit publication.
2. Mentoring or promotion by prominent poets or editors: similarly, rapid advancement may also take place for poets who are mentored or promoted by prominent poets or editors. Thus, a poet at a relatively early stage (e.g. Stage 2) may gain levels of exposure more commonly associated with a later stage – through extensive reviewing, by writing high-profile articles, or by frequent appearances at literary festivals – especially if the poet in question is good at self-promotion, or emerges in socio-cultural circumstances in which there are not many other poets working. (Indeed, the role of poet-mentors needs to be recognised as a factor in emergence. These figures may be journal editors who give a regular outlet to certain young or starting poets whom they admire; some editors may have a policy of offering such poets space every year or so, so that readers can follow their emergence and development, rather than just giving one-off spots to a larger number of poets. Many editors want to be more active, attending readings, launches, workshops, etc., and spotting likely contributors.)
3. Prominence as a reviewer or critic: ‘emergence indicators’ – such as invitations to review or write articles – may multiply as a result of doing those tasks very well, rather than as a direct product of the perceived and continued emergence of the poetry which prompted the initial invitation. Also, a poet’s speed and stage of emergence may also be affected by pre-existing work. For example, a scholar or public figure may have in place a related body of writing which immediately enhances the prominence of the individual’s poetic endeavours. A related situation is that of the poet whose pattern of emergence is notably

affected by a related role which s/he takes on – typically a ‘cultural gatekeeper’ role, such as working as the editor of a significant poetry magazine.

4. Over-promotion: the question of whether over-promotion of promising talent prior to substantial achievement is a particular characteristic of contemporary poetic emergence seems to be an important issue to bear in mind. For example, here in Wales, is there such an eagerness to identify the next Dylan or R. S. Thomas, Gillian Clarke or Gwyneth Lewis that premature anointing is frequent?
5. Creative Writing degrees: the speed of emergence for more recent poets may also be affected by the pursuit of creative writing degrees (especially higher degrees), through which exposure to publishing opportunities is typically enhanced. The opportunity to develop profitable and strategic poet-mentor relationships is also enhanced when writers take this route. So there is ‘academic’ mentoring, in which tutor-poets adopt new talent into a kind of apprenticeship role and help to shepherd it through the stages of emergence, as well as ‘poet’ mentoring and ‘editor’ mentoring.

Devolved Voices

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