

THINKING THROUGH WELSH PHILOSOPHY: A SPECULATIVE APPROACH

Martin Ovens¹

Wolfson College, University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

It is commonly assumed that there is no distinctive, originating tradition of "Welsh" philosophising. On this view we cannot discover an "-ism" that is undeniably Welsh, or a unique way of thinking that derives from, or has developed within, a Welsh cultural or historical context. In response to this situation, a standpoint of "creative scepticism" (or "aesthetic skepsis") is introduced and adopted, and a concept of "art as a mode of philosophising" is applied. This leads to the possibility that Welsh thinking is represented or communicated more effectively and meaningfully through diverse media and a range of aesthetic and cultural forms. At the same time, the compatibility of "aesthetic skepsis" with elements of Welsh movements and traditions is described, especially with reference to Radicalism and Dissent (both religious and political) and Romanticism. A creative correspondence or association between skepsis and Welsh cultural expression is revealed through a dynamic of empathic dialogue with Wales and Welsh culture.

1. Introduction: A Particular Background and Meaning to the Enquiry

In this essay, we attempt to shed light on "Welsh Philosophy" from the standpoint of "aesthetic skepsis." Let us first introduce this notion of *skepsis*.²

If we become acquainted with the "philosophy of the academy,"³ then, at least in the English-speaking world, we might struggle to recognise styles of philosophising and educational structures beyond the "Analytic" tradition. Schooled in Anglophone philosophy, we will combine narrowness of focus with techniques and procedures of linguistic analysis and formal logic; we will pursue, value and prioritise rigour, precision and clarity in our enquiries and expression; we will seek to advance and defend particular theses; we will identify forms of valid reasoning and critically assess arguments and so on. However, it is conceivable that philosophy or modes of philosophising might exist in different or unfamiliar forms. In fact, we may identify the possibility of "philosophy embedded in literature" or even "literature as a mode of philosophising."⁴

¹ Born and educated in South Wales, Martin Ovens teaches a range of courses in Philosophy and Religious Studies for OUDCE, having previously taught for Cardiff University. He is Associate Editor of *Culture and Dialogue* with research interests in comparative philosophy.

² In this essay, use of the word "*skepsis*" deliberately invokes its Greek heritage and context as including seeking, looking, considering, examining or enquiring, see R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

³ That is, the professional academic discipline of philosophy as practised in university departments.

⁴ See for example, Ole Martin Skilleås, *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

Rousseau's *Émile* is an example of a text largely ignored by professional philosophers. According to Matthew Simpson, one reason for this "is that the only accepted literary genre for philosophical writing is thought to be the thesis-driven article or book." Plato's dialogues form an exception "but even they are often treated as if they were really thesis-driven essays struggling to shake off their literary form."⁵

If we allow the possibility of "philosophy as literature" or philosophising through literature, then we might be led to seek out its manifestations, characteristics and potential significance in a variety of literary forms, from Shakespeare's plays to novels of Thomas Hardy, Dostoyevsky and Kafka.

Similarly, if we allow "philosophy as art" or art as a mode of philosophising,⁶ then we could explore how diverse media such as abstract art, music and dance might relate to the possibility of nonverbal, non-linguistic or nonlinear forms of philosophic contemplation and expression.

Is there a philosophical tradition that could encompass the linear and nonlinear, which could manifest, or find expression, in heterodox media? Let us suggest a form of *skepsis* (i.e. a "sceptical" way of thinking) as an example of a tradition that could embrace a variety of media in its enquiries and modes of expression. This might not seem surprising if we appreciate that *skepsis* may entail a sceptical attitude to traditional forms of philosophical discourse. For the purposes of this essay we shall assume a sceptic stance (or "sceptic ego"), in particular a form of experiential, intercultural *skepsis* that resists dogmatic attachments.⁷ We shall also assume "aesthetic *skepsis*" (or "*skepoiesis*") as artistic creativity or productivity associated with the sceptic ego's cultivation of states of detachment (and its "emptiness" of theoretical beliefs).⁸

2. Welsh Philosophy

"Although it makes sense to speak of Scottish philosophy, there has been no equivalent philosophical identity in Wales"⁹

"I think it is fair to say that any new visual art there was in medieval Wales came from outside. Nor were the Welsh remarkable for abstract thought: there is no Welsh philosophy, theology or science."¹⁰

It may not be difficult to acquaint ourselves with a variety of distinct philosophical traditions, from Anglophone Analytic philosophy to "Continental Philosophy," "Chinese Philosophy" and "Indian Philosophy." But what do we understand by "Welsh

⁵ Matthew Simpson, *Rousseau: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), 108.

⁶ See for example, A. Michel and A. Oksiloff, "Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy," in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. and trans. J. Schulte-Sasse et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 157-179.

⁷ That is, a "*skepsis-as-lived*." See Martin Ovens, "The Sceptic Pilgrim: Seeking Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Patterns in the Philosophy of Creativity," *Culture and Dialogue* 1 (1) (2011): 45-90.

⁸ For an exploration of *skepoiesis*, see Martin Ovens, "Why Sceptics Paint, or Imagining *Skepoiesis*: Un-knowing and Re-knowing Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 1 (1) (2014): 33-62.

⁹ Andrew Belsey, "Welsh Philosophy," in *The Continuum Encyclopedia of British Philosophy: Volume 4*, ed. A. Grayling, A. Pyle and N. Goulder (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰ Anthony Conran, *Welsh Verse* (Bridgend: Seren, 2003), 44.

Philosophy"? A key attraction of "Welsh Philosophy" is that it may not exist, at least "officially." This may appear quite striking in view of the apparent distinctiveness of Welsh culture generally.

So can we discover an "-ism" that is unmistakably Welsh, a "Cymrophone" tradition or way of thinking,¹¹ in the manner that we may identify, say, "French" or "Francophone" philosophy?

The emphasis here is beyond enquiries concerned with identifying professional philosophers based or born in Wales, or considering whether, if distinctive forms of Welsh thinking do exist, they stop at the border with Shropshire. Rather, *skepsis*, initially by virtue of its "emptiness" or detachment, is attracted to the apparent lacuna or "nothingness" of "Welsh Philosophy" and the concomitant problems concerning the "lack" that corresponds to the phrase. A logical possibility is that Welsh philosophic texts or thinkers have been marginalised or neglected or have received little attention, but many Welsh thinkers have been studied, though they may remain little known.¹²

Among more prominent figures identified as "Welsh philosophers" are Edward Herbert (1538-1648) and Richard Price (1723-91).¹³ Price was a mathematician, moral and political philosopher, and Presbyterian minister renowned for his support of American Independence and the French Revolution. Among later Welsh philosophers are Lewis Edwards (1803-87), Henry Jones (1852-1922), R.I. Aaron (1901-87), Hywel D. Lewis (1910-92), J.R. Jones (1911-70), Rush Rhees (1905-89) and Dewi Z. Phillips (1934-2006).¹⁴

So do any of these figures represent a philosophy that may be identified as peculiarly "Welsh," or a singular philosophic tradition, way of thinking, or "-ism" that originates in a distinctively "Welsh" cultural context (in the sense that we may talk about "German Idealism" for example)? At first glance, we may not discover an originating Welsh tradition of philosophising: Henry Jones is associated with Hegelian Absolute Idealism; Lewis Edwards was a theologian influenced by Kant; Aaron, Hywel Lewis and J.R. Jones are associated with empiricism; Rhees and D.Z. Phillips are associated with the "Swansea School of Philosophy," a centre for Wittgensteinian studies.

We might now respond with the difficult and subtle task of exploring the work of these philosophers with a view to identifying a Welsh signature or a characteristically Welsh trajectory in their Hegelianism or empiricism.¹⁵ But we will resist this narrow avenue

¹¹ That is, an "athroniaeth cymraeg" culturally distinct from other recognised traditions.

¹² See "Philosophy," in *The Welsh Academy Encyclopedia of Wales*, eds. J. Davies, N. Jenkins, M. Baines and P.I. Lynch (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 672-3. The journal *Efrydiau Athronyddol* (beginning in 1938) is a Welsh language philosophy journal, containing many studies of Welsh thinkers, as well as a variety of topics in philosophy generally. Interestingly, early issues contain some studies in non-western and comparative philosophy, with titles such as "Y Buddha a phroblem y drwg" [Buddha and the problem of evil] appearing in 1941 and "Dharma a Logos" (involving Buddhism and Stoicism) appearing in 1946.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 672, 366, 708. There are many scholarly papers and books on Price. See for example: D.O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); H. Laboucheix, *Richard Price as Moral Philosopher and Political Theorist* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1982).

¹⁴ See J. Davies et al (eds.), *ibid.*, 2, 425, 457, 672-3, 744.

¹⁵ Regarding Bertrand Russell, we find: "Although he was born and died in Wales," Russell, "can hardly be considered a 'Welsh philosopher', having made his career in an entirely non-Welsh context." *Ibid.*, 785.

of enquiry in order to reflect more broadly on Welsh cultural production in accordance with *skepsis*.

Wales is culturally rich. The literature of Wales (written in Welsh and English) and Welsh literary studies form an extensive phenomenon: "Wales, like Ireland, can lay claim to one of the oldest unbroken literary traditions in Europe."¹⁶ Perhaps, then, we should look here for "philosophy" or philosophic themes.¹⁷ Theology has also been significant: "Very many more Welshmen have left their mark as religious thinkers than as philosophers...Nevertheless, over the centuries, theology and philosophy have intertwined. There were philosophers among medieval Welsh ecclesiastics and Renaissance scholars, but most of them were primarily theologians."¹⁸ Another important consideration is Welsh art, including painting and music.¹⁹

It may seem that the task now is to extract "philosophic" ideas, themes or preoccupations from these various aesthetic and cultural forms, in order to identify or construct any distinctive Welsh tradition or way of thinking. On the other hand, we might infer that these forms, in part or in aggregate, are themselves the Welsh way of "thinking," and that this might account for the apparent absence of "philosophy." For example, we find: "...the Welsh have long regarded music making as one of their primary means of expression and communication, and...the modes and media of that expression have always been extensive and diverse."²⁰

This invites the possibility that Welsh thinking is differently or non-uniformly distributed across the "cultural matter" of Wales, and therein lies its interest for *skepoiesis*: alternative modes of philosophic thinking via diverse media or arts, or "philosophy *as art*." The task is not to reconstruct "philosophy" from the "cultural matter," fashioning a linear mode of academic philosophising from it, but to discover its ways of speaking more effectively or meaningfully *as art*, and adapting it for *skepoiesis*. In this sense, "Welsh Philosophy" is a power against dogmatising about the nature of philosophy itself.

On this approach, Welsh philosophy might "in-sist" rather than "ex-ist": we might regard it as latent, immanent, unseen, "unconstructed," or it consists in an ongoing process of "self-deconstruction" such that "Welsh philosophy" will not arise identical as "Welsh philosophy" by virtue of its nonconformity with, or non-participation in, the modes or categories of explicit, linear philosophising that are familiar to us in their traditional,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁷ See Meic Stephens (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): a new edition appeared in 1998. Among many examples of literary criticism is D. Williams and Alyce von Rothkirch (eds.), *Beyond the Difference: Welsh Literature in Comparative Contexts* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004). This contains studies of the relations between the Welsh- and English-language literatures of Wales, nationhood, gender, and relations between Welsh literature and Jewish, Irish and African-American literary traditions. We may also mention the academic journal *Almanac: The Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*; Catherine Brennan, *Angers, Fantasies and Ghostly Fears: Nineteenth-century Women from Wales and English-language Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003); David T. Lloyd (ed.), *The Urgency of Identity: Contemporary English-language Poetry from Wales* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994); D. Johnston (ed.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature c. 1900-1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998). This book surveys Welsh-language literature, including poetry, the novel, the short story and drama.

¹⁸ J. Davies et al (eds.), *op. cit.*, 672, 859-60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 579-86, 645-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 579.

academic forms and contexts. In other words, as hidden, or devoid of explicit definition, Welsh thinking is non-identical, and, as growing and manifest in different directions and in a multiplicity of cultural forms, it is non-linear.²¹ Considered in these ways, it represents a form of *skepsis* itself, or is instructive in terms of possibilities for *skepoiesis* (for example, cultivation of music as a form of philosophising in accordance with the requirements of the sceptic ego).

There are several characteristics of Welsh movements and traditions that create a potent mix for *skepsis*, including Radicalism or “dissent” (religious and political) and Romanticism²²: these are key factors in the originating constitution of the sceptic ego itself.²³

Relating to Romanticism in Wales, we might construct a category, “Welsh Mysterianism” as a phenomenology of “mysterious Wales,” of interest to *skepsis* as an aesthetic site of the hidden or occult, ancient, unknown and unknowable. This may involve Welsh folklore, myth and mysticism.²⁴ Thus we find that roots of Romanticism in Wales “are to be found in the work of antiquarians at the end of the 17th [century], with their enthusiasm for the remote Celtic and druidic past.”²⁵ A key figure in this connection is the poet and antiquary Edward Williams (“Iolo Morganwg,” 1747-1826) who founded the *Gorsedd* (a society of poets and musicians).²⁶ He developed a metaphysical philosophy involving *Annwn* (the Celtic Otherworld).²⁷

In this connection, we do not necessarily imply that (professional) Welsh philosophers are unrelated to Welsh movements, traditions or ways of thinking or that they are non-cognisant of the possibility that any distinctively “Welsh” mode of thinking manifests non-identically and non-linearly in diverse cultural forms. For example, D.Z. Phillips was interested in the Welsh dramatist Gwenlyn Parry and the poet R.S. Thomas, and, if we regard Wittgensteinianism as a radical philosophical development, then Phillips chimes with the Welsh “radical” tradition.²⁸

²¹ This situation may be comparable to the notion of “rhizomatic thinking” or the idea of a “rhizome” due to Deleuze and Guattari. See B. Massumi (trans.), *A Thousand Plateaus* (New York: Continuum, 2004) and Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd, 1998), 350.

²² J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit., 724, 777; Meic Stephens (ed.), op cit., 503, 534. A key figure in Welsh neo-Romanticism was T. Gwynn Jones (1871-1949).

²³ See Ovens, “The Sceptic Pilgrim,” op cit., 67-71, 75.

²⁴ The sceptic ego may be associated with the rhetoric of “darkness and light” (see Ovens, “Why Skeptics Paint,” op. cit., 35-38). Henry Vaughan (1621-95) is also relevant to the darkness/light metaphor: “The light-darkness paradox is one of the influences on the mysticism of Henry Vaughan.” We also find: “Nature-mysticism was one of the aspects of the Romantic experience and coloured the other-worldly longings of William Thomas (Islwyn).” See Meic Stephens (ed.), op cit., 420. See also J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit., 206 for John Dee’s (1527-1608) Welsh associations. .

²⁵ J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit., 777.

²⁶ Ibid., 326-7, 952.

²⁷ See G. Jenkins (ed.), *A Rattleskull Genius: the Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005); J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit., 26.

²⁸ A Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion, Phillips was enthusiastic about the Welsh language and Welsh culture. See D.Z. Phillips, *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (London: Macmillan, 1986). We may also mention that J.R. Jones is “known for his contribution to the debate on the crisis of Welshness”: see J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit., 425.

The speculative constructivist might configure aspects of, say, Welsh Romanticism and Radicalism in an effort to fashion or formulate philosophic attitudes, or ways of thinking, that qualify as uniquely or distinctively Welsh. For *skepsis*, however, “Welsh Romanticism” signifies “dialogue with Wales”: “dialogue” in the sense of the sceptic ego’s empathic engagement with the “cultural matter” of Wales (its music, poetry, painting etc), and “dialogue” as raw, direct, experiential contact with the “land of Wales,” in particular its “uniqueness-of-time-and-place.”²⁹ Here, a unique “one-to-one correspondence” between the sceptic ego and a specific time and place signifies contemplation “in a moment in time in Wales.” That is, while, say, walking along a coastline in Pembrokeshire, the sceptic ego can contemplate Wales’ geological time and space, its material structure, historicity, environment, landforms, landscape, topography and enclosures; in short, the significance of Wales’ material aesthetics in relation to the construction of its character and identity as “Wales.”³⁰ “Dialogue” also involves Wales’ cultural time and space: Celtic and pre-Celtic imaginings or the ancient “other,” Roman settlements, megaliths,³¹ the origin and development of the Welsh language, Wales’ cultural geography and history (especially its relation to England, and the construction of its identity in relation to the “idea of England”)³² and so on.

One possibility of empathic engagement with modes of Welsh thinking and expression is to discover “philosophy” in the way of life of the Welsh, perhaps a more “realist” dimension of the Welsh experience: its industrial past, especially coal mining, and the agricultural way of life.³³ In Wales and other coal producing countries, art, photography, oral history and poetry have developed around themes of coal mining as a way of life, including art produced by miners themselves. The aesthetic dimensions of coal mining in literature, film and art have been explored.³⁴ Coal mining is particularly apt in the phenomenology of *skepsis*, especially in the sceptic ego’s use of the rhetoric of light-and-dark.³⁵ The miner’s labour brings the dark fuel of coal from the black depths of the earth, yielding light and warmth. The process is repeated like the endless journeys of the sceptic ego - from the dark depths of unknowing, *skepsis* seeks, and aims to communicate, the light

²⁹ For ideas about the relation of empathy and dialogue to *skepsis*, see Ovens, “The Sceptic Pilgrim,” op. cit., 72-76.

³⁰ This might be construed as an element of the sceptic ego’s relation to “environmental aesthetics.”

³¹ See G.T. Hughes, “Llef y Cerrig: Daeareg Rhamantiaeth [The Cry of the Stones: The Geology of Romanticism],” *Efyrdiau Athronyddol* 41 (1978): 3-12.

³² See J. Davies et al (eds.), op cit, 259-60. Regarding England, cultural and historical spatiality and borderland, and the creative tensions between “Welsh-language writing” and “Welsh writing in English,” become key issues. On the English/Welsh language issue leading to creativity, see L. Peach and A. Burton (eds.), *English as a Creative Art: Literary Concepts Linked to Creative Writing* (London: David Fulton Publishers, 1995), 58-60.

³³ One of the defining themes of R.S. Thomas’ poetry is rural life, hill farmers and so on. See C. Morgan, *R.S. Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

³⁴ W.B. Thesing (ed.), *Caverns of Night: Coal Mines in Art, Literature, and Film* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2000); K. Light and M. Light, *Coal Hollow: Photographs and Oral Histories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); see “Poems and Stories,” <http://www.welshcoalmines.co.uk/Poems.htm>, accessed 1/10/13.

³⁵ See Ovens, “Why Sceptics Paint,” op. cit., 35-38.

of peaceful detachment; it seeks to illuminate, or ignite, vital sources of creativity in the pursuit and production of knowledge.³⁶

3. Concluding Remarks

The phrase “Cymric *skepoiesis*” may be used to represent the creativity of the sceptic ego associated with its empathic dialogue with Wales and Welsh culture, including the excavation and explication of “Welsh thinking” as oriented to the nature and goals of intercultural *skepsis*. The problem becomes “how” Welsh philosophy exists, not whether it exists. It is possible to visualise how a concept of “art as a mode of philosophising” might shed light on the quest for an understanding of Welsh thinking and cultural expression. Moreover, it is possible to speculate on the compatibility of “Welsh Philosophy” and *skepoiesis*. From discussion of Welsh philosophy, *skepsis* might derive the symbol of a black daffodil³⁷ made from coal but, strictly speaking, it may not be possible to produce such an object because coal is too brittle.³⁸ Thus, like “Welsh philosophy,” it may not officially exist, and the nature and dynamics of Welsh thinking are under cover of darkness.

³⁶ See Ovens, “The Sceptic Pilgrim,” *op. cit.*, 82-88.

³⁷ The daffodil is a famous national symbol of Wales. See J. Davies et al (eds.), *op. cit.*, 189 and Meic Stephens (ed.), *op. cit.*, 118.

³⁸ There is a market in “coal” figures and ornaments but these can derive from manufacturing processes involving the use of resins etc.