



Award-winning poet and playwright Menna Elfyn has written the libretto for our new oratorio *Gair ar Gnawd* which explores themes around translation. Menna's most translated poem is *Cusan Hances*. Here she talks about its translation in an exclusive feature written for WNO Extra monthly.

Handkerchief Kiss

El mundo es un pañuelo – the world is a handkerchief – is a wonderful metaphor for our globalised world today. The world indeed is only one small handkerchief. This metaphor stayed in my mind when the late R. S. Thomas chastised the idea of translation – he pulled out a big man's hanky and put it to his lips. At the time, I laughed, enjoying the fun-loving side of this wonderful poet in his later years. The image stayed, however, and that's what poetry is all about—it's a cooling game, put in cold storage, ready to be taken out and put into poetic use years later.

After he died, I wanted to write a tribute poem to him and the metaphor had an urgent appeal. It seemed fitting to write a poem that explored this premise. Wasn't kissing through a hanky part of my everyday life as an itinerant writer by now? The poem begins with a question – asking myself about the whole notion of caressing in the dark. This too echoes back to D.J. Williams, a Welsh language writer who was a kind of hero for us language campaigners in the sixties. The Welsh, he claimed in his autobiography, *Hen Dŷ Farm* (Old Farmhouse), were good at singing during the day and canoodling by night, implying that the Welsh did their 'loving' literally out of sight. That's where the 'tame lot' comes to the fore. How very different from today's greetings of one, two, even three kisses on the cheek or the hugging which at times, coming from a very puritan background, I found troubling.

That of course, was also in sharp contrast to the kind of political kissing that is dubious at the best of times. The poem then delves of course into the fact that the poet is a lover of words, regardless even of any language divide. It's why poets too cross borders, their poems are their passports held up to the light to make sure they are valid and genuine. I end the poem with the assertion that it's better to kiss through a veil than suffer from unrequited love.

It's only after I wrote the poem that I was reminded that it was indeed another Russian writer, Belinsky who coined a similar phrase – when he said that translation was like kissing a woman with a veil on, so in fact R S, whether he knew or not, was making his own metaphor out of another. And isn't that life? Metaphor is what gives language meaning, it's how we get out of the maze of speech, we'd be lost 'in a maze' according to Lennart Bruce who also echoed the late Gaelic poet Ian Crichton Smith who asked 'Were you ever in a maze? Its language fits your language'.

Vualiutas Bucinys (Veiled Kiss) is the title of my Lithuanian collection, published in 2005, which again reminds me of the other life the poem has in another culture. Now translated into many languages, including Arabic and Panjabi, it's a fitting reminder of how small the world is, or how a metaphor finds its own magnitude. I love reading both poems wherever I go, as it's now

become a part of who I am – its weight and its lightedness, both hidden within and a symbol of revelation. St David is said to have put a small cloth on the ground – I like to think of it as a handkerchief – which, when trodden made him rise above the ground so that everyone could hear and see him. That perhaps is a step too far for a poet but when I read this poem aloud I do feel my five foot frame levitating somewhat...

Menna Elfyn

Cusan Hances

*Mae cerdd mewn cyfieithiad fel cusan
drwy hances*

R. S. THOMAS

Anwes yn y gwyll?

Rhyw bobl lywaeth oeddem

yn cwato'r gusan ddoe.

Ond heddiw ffordd yw i gyfarch

ac ar y sgrin fach, gwelwn
arweinwyr byd yn trafod

hulio hedd ac anwes las:
ambell un bwbach. A'r delyneg

o'i throsi nid yw ond cusan
drwy gadach poced medd ein prifardd

minnau, sy'n ymaflyd cerdd ar ddalen
gan ddwyn i gol gariadon geiriau.

A minnaf hyn. A fo gerdd bid hances
ac ar fy ngwefus,
sws dan len

Menna Elfyn