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# Mary Price's Renaissances in John Fuller's Work

*Les renaissances de Mary Price dans l'œuvre de John Fuller*

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Sometimes all quiet places seem as populous as graves. I got up to go, feeling conscious of every inch of my stature, almost unwillingly alive to my finger-ends, my boots crushing the grasses. I could think of myself as the very picture of a woman in a wood, one of those you'd be pleased to guess why she was there or what she was waiting for.

'Woman in the Wood' (FULLER 2001, 217–218)

- 1 In 1969 John Fuller purchased a cottage called Galt-y-ceiliog<sup>1</sup> close to the village of Llanaelhaearn on the Llyn peninsula in Wales. From the 1970s onwards, Mary Price—the former occupant of this house, the 'Woman in the Wood'—has steadily imposed herself as a haunting shadow in Fuller's work. In order to study the various forms of renaissance related to Mary Price, this paper will primarily offer close readings of texts alluding to this mysterious muse ('one of those you'd be pleased to guess why she was there'), be they poems or extracts from novels or short stories published between 1975 and 2015.
- 2 In these analyses, we will develop a three-level approach to the notion of 'renaissance.' Firstly, 'renaissance' will be studied as a revival or renewed interest in classical forms or genres. Fuller indeed defines himself as a consolidator of traditional forms: 'I belong to the school of consolidation rather than that of revolution. But I do believe in advancing the practice of poetry through formal experiment' (Saby 2019b). Of course, consolidating implies much more than imitating or pastiching. It means appropriating forms to give them a new breath, which Fuller has a knack for: 'Mr Fuller's very contemporary sensibility offers resistance to the inherited verse forms he appropriates. The contemporary note that is sounded in his poetry is the acknowledgment of

subjective points of view' (Richman). Secondly—and concurrently—'renaissance' (from the French *renaître*: to be born again) will be more broadly considered as synonymous with rebirth, resurrection, new life or even spectral return following natural or symbolical death. Thirdly, it will also be examined as the outcome of transformation processes bringing out close correspondences between humans, matter and nature (for example, when a tree is cut to be turned into a piece of furniture, it is 'born again' and has a 'new life' in the form of this piece of furniture).

- 3 Through Mary Price's startling rebirths in verse and fiction, this article aims at highlighting the sense of loss and failure underpinning Fuller's poetics of renaissance. The more the poet fails in reviving his muse, the more unexpected connections his creation fosters. In order to grasp who Mary Price was, Fuller both harnesses and resists old forms and genres like the elegy, the *ekphrasis* or the pastoral, which lead him to dead ends: there is no capturing this ever-elusive dead character through words. Nonetheless, the flaws of writing also hold the key to its renewal. The less the poet succeeds in figuring out Mary Price's traits, the more fruitful mirror and double effects are triggered, thus analysed by Freud:

The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, 'an energetic denial of the power of death.' . . . But . . . the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (142)

- 4 In Fuller's work, not only is the tension between irretrievable loss and uncanny returns palpable when the codes of the elegy are challenged, but also through the faults of metonymic portrayal resurrecting Mary Price as a mere hollow spectre. Nevertheless, this tension also foregrounds deeper complicity between the poet, the reader and the dead Welsh woman. Besides, whenever Fuller attempts at resuscitating her through fictionalisation, we surprisingly end up learning more about his own *ars poetica* through intertextual echoes than about her characteristic features. And once reborn as the poet's double, Mary Price forcefully ventriloquizes his own eco-poetic beliefs and stances about man's place in relation to his habitat through various rebirths played out in nature: 'I got up to go, . . . almost unwillingly alive to my finger-ends, my boots crushing the grasses' (Fuller 2001, 217).

## Renewing the Elegy as a Genre

- 5 In *Gravel in My Shoe*, the section 'Down to the Wood' is clearly introduced as an elegy to Mary Price, headed by the inscription engraved on her headstone in the churchyard of Llanaelhaearn: '*Er serchus gof am Mary Price, Gallt-y-ceiliog, 1869-1944*'<sup>2</sup> (DW 21).<sup>3</sup> One should bear in mind that 'Down to the Wood' is not Fuller's first tribute to Mary Price, though. Fully aware of the limits to writing when it comes to remembering someone, the poet first opted for the pseudonym of 'Annie Lloyd' in the novel for children *The Last Bid* (1975), and simply 'Annie' in the poem 'Annie Upside Down' (1979), while the Welsh muse remains anonymous in the poem 'Photograph' (1991) and the short story 'Woman in the Wood' (1993):

I think at the time of her earlier manifestations in my work I felt that real but private people should be fictionalised. In 'Down to the Wood,' which was a kind of memorial to her, I felt that I could, and probably should, put her real name and dates (and indeed, her photograph on the cover).<sup>4</sup>

- 6 Whether the twenty-one poems of 'Down to the Wood' are truly elegiac remains a moot point. 'Since the seventeenth century, *elegy* has typically been used to refer to reflective poems that lament the loss of something or someone' (Murfin and Ray 102). Jahan Ramazani specifies that most canonical English elegists deemed mourning compensatory:

In the paradigmatic elegy of English tradition, a shepherd 'successfully' mourns his dead friend. . . . Analogous with the shepherd's lament is, of course, the implicit work of mourning carried out by the poet himself; *he finds recompense . . . in making this very poem, redirecting his affection from the lost friend to the brilliant artifact that is in some measure a replacement for the man it mourns.*<sup>5</sup> (3)

- 7 However, compensation is problematic in 'Down to the Wood,' first and foremost because there is no direct loss—and hence no direct mourning or grief—insofar as Fuller never met Mary Price (who died in 1944). This likens the poems to disenfranchised grief, the loss seeming too small to justify grieving. Besides, none of the twenty-one texts gives any biographical details about the woman they mourn, thereby failing in offering 'artifact[s] that [are] in some measure a replacement.' Instead, she imposes herself as an absent presence, a ghost, through the rhetorical ploy of *prosopopeia*. The speaker indeed is not the poet but the spectre of Mary Price herself, introduced *in medias res* in a wood scene in the present tense as early as the very first lines of the sequence—'To penetrate the coloured wood / I mustn't stand too tall' (DW 22). She is one of those 'spectral apparitions'<sup>6</sup> (Bernard 139) haunting British literature and arts as overwhelming absences: '*prosopopeia* is often associated to the way writing expresses *absence*' (Bernard 146). The more she advances into the wood, the less we learn about her, up to the fifteenth poem where the sense of loss reaches a climax:

And here I am, never at rest,  
Wearing an ever-questioning mask,  
A stranger to myself at best.  
(DW 38)

- 8 In this tercet, the speaking 'I' oscillates between two antithetical movements of self-assertion and dismantlement. On the one hand, authority is emphasized by the domination of 'I' as a grammatical subject enhanced in the foreground of the scene by deixis ('here'). On the other hand, the subject is caught up in processes of negation ('never') and fragmentation ('an ever-questioning mask, / A stranger to myself') turning it into an anonymous<sup>7</sup> hollowed out voice. The effect of the double rhyme between 'at rest' and 'at best' is twofold and contradictory. For one thing, it rather conventionally suggests that Mary Price is probably better where she is now she is dead after suffering in old age (*requiescat in pace*: 'at best at rest'). For another, it denies death ('never at rest') while stressing that the dead keep coming back as fleeting shadows, 'stranger[s] at best,' uncanny doubles of themselves. Like other modern elegists, Fuller refutes facile recompense:

Modern elegists represent themselves as more frequently dogged by melancholic anxieties about redeeming loss as poetic gain. Wary of the religious and psychiatric norm of 'healthy mourning,' they see it as urging the exploitation and *betrayal of the dead*. Contemporary elegists as diverse as Seamus Heaney and Michael Harper *refuse a facile poetic therapy—namely, the transfiguration of the dead into consolatory art or heavenly beings.* (Ramazani 6–7)

- 9 Concerned about not betraying Mary Price, Fuller renews the elegy as a genre by refusing laudatory biographical consolation. In the meantime, this resistance to the

classical elegiac form allows him to establish deeper connections with the dead character who tends to become his doppelganger:

As the sequence 'Down to the Wood' progressed, it was clear to me that *I was simply using these lyrical forms to impersonate Mary Price, and to set up a kind of dialogue between my own feelings and the feelings I bestowed on her*. You might say that the motives and sympathies of the elegist exist in this kind of reanimation of the dead. *We understand the dead through sharing experience with them*, even though in this case there is little to remember and celebrate because she left so few actual traces of her hidden life. I suppose I wanted to give her a life on the page.<sup>8</sup>

- 10 As a double of the poet, Mary Price is often portrayed in a position of weakness in old age—a 'harbinger of death' (Freud 142)—; and to illustrate this shared experience we will take a closer look at the ending of 'Machine' and 'Portent at Sunset':

Although a trouble to maintain,  
 It earns my gratitude.  
 Some parts will never work again  
 And few will be renewed.  
 Somehow this limit to renewal  
 Brings no unnatural fear:  
 The blood is still my measured fuel,  
 The pulse my engineer.  
 'Machine' (DW 23)  
 Striding with the light full in my face,  
 And gravel in my shoe.  
 'Portent at Sunset' (DW 31)

- 11 Those lines are fraught with tension between form and feeling. Fuller declared in *The Times* that, for him, form could be 'the be-all-and-end-all of art . . . . Feeling never' (Fuller 1967, 726). Formal virtuosity does seem to be the 'be-all-and-end-all' of 'Machine.' The ABAB rhyme scheme, iambic metre, repetitions ('renewed' / 'renewal'; 'Some parts' / 'Somehow'), inner echoes ('will' x2; 'still') and assonances (notably in [Λ]: 'trouble,' 'some,' 'unnatural,' 'blood,' 'pulse') coupled with self-derisory humour (Mary Price compares her body with a mere faulty machine) somehow keep time and the feeling of decay at bay. The tone is far from maudlin or wistful. And yet, mortality is not denied, and the intimation of infirmity is all the more moving as it is stated bluntly: 'Some parts will never work again.' This verse 'glitters with . . . seemingly effortless coinages, images at once surprising and inevitable, casting their light back and forth within the atmosphere of frail mortality and ebullient living' (Ryan): 'The blood is still my . . . fuel, / The pulse my engineer.' However much feeling may be contained by wit and technical agility, by no means is it rejected<sup>9</sup> in those lines. For example, although fear (notably of sickness and decrepitude: 'few will be renewed') seems to be discarded ('no . . . fear'), the double negation cancels this denial: 'no unnatural fear' actually implies 'natural fear' of approaching death. Likewise, Mary Price appears in a very uncomfortable position at the end of 'Portent at Sunset' with 'light full in [her] face, / And gravel in [her] shoe.' She is introduced on jerky rhythm ('Striding with . . .': trochee / anapest / trochee / iamb) underscoring her frailty and vulnerability, along with the poet's . . . and ours. Here is how Fuller accounts for the line he chose for the title of his collection:

'Gravel in my shoe': all it represents in that poem is the reminder, in any excitement about 'portents' or about our sense of 'adventure' in confronting our destiny, that we are *human*. It is the irritant in the pilgrim's journey that qualifies

his hope. Perhaps it is something like those thistles that saints wore beneath their shirts.<sup>10</sup>

- 12 So, although Fuller fails in providing us with artifacts that would yield information about Mary Price's personality and daily routine in 'Down to the Wood,' his elegiac verse finally connects us to the spectral muse, easing identification with her through a sense of loss due to degradation with time. Such is his stance about the contemporary renaissance of the elegy in his work, as he explained in an interview with Alan Hollinghurst:

J.F. If you feel as I do, that poems are a way of retaining the sense of how one has felt in life about things, much as some people take photographs, to write poems is to preserve something of what life has been, then *obviously the sense of losing must be very much a part of how one writes this sort of poem. I suppose there is an elegiac feel to a lot of it.* (Hollinghurst 51)

## Resurrecting Ghosts by Digging Mary Price's Garden

- 13 Before 'Down to the Wood,' the 'few actual traces of [Mary Price's] hidden life' had been integrated into a very different—and more clearly autobiographical—poem entitled 'Dug Buttons and Plates' (1975). This text relates a holiday scene in the early seventies in the Fullers' cottage garden where the characters are digging the ground. The ghost of the previous occupant—who is never mentioned (not even as a pronoun)—is unexpectedly exhumed through objects: 'shirts leaving / Their skeletons of buttons . . .' (Fuller 1975b, 22). The valueless dug treasures soon become metonymies of both Mary Price and her day-to-day tasks in Gallt-y-ceiliog, further suggested in the third stanza:

All the dead meals dwindle to their seeds,  
Cuffs unfastened and rolled back for the heat,  
The spade working not at random but in rows,  
Sweat wiped on forearms and the soil lying  
Choiceless, uneager, for what it will receive.

- 14 The present tense projects us *hic et nunc* into two overlapping scenes: the British family in their holiday house as well as the former dweller toiling on her property. This superimposition points out both the strength and the faults of metonymy when portraying someone. Of course, the objects used by Mary Price ('the spade,' 'cuffs'), as well as her limbs associated to past participles ('unfastened,' 'rolled back,' 'wiped') bear witness to her determination to fend for herself, but the poem fails to give further details about her. Fiction will be necessary to make up for the shortcomings of this lacunary portrait, and more particularly the descriptions of Annie Lloyd (Mary Price's fictional pseudonym) in *The Last Bid* published in the same year as 'Dug Buttons and Plates': 'She embodied an old spirit . . . of pride, industry and persistence which must have belonged to all their forebears' (Fuller 1975a, 64). In parallel, metonymy allows for new connections, and more precisely a new form of filiation between the poet, his family and the former owner of their home as they reproduce her gestures while treasuring relics of hers.
- 15 Although unrelated in many respects, Heaney's and Fuller's works mirror each other on the topic of digging, and studying the third section of 'Kinship' (also published in 1975) will enlighten other facets of Fuller's verse<sup>11</sup>:

I found a turf-spade  
 hidden under bracken,  
 laid flat, and overgrown  
 with a green fog.  
 (Heaney 1975, 35)

- 16 Adolphe Haberer notes that these lines ‘refer to the personal context of the generations of peasants that lived before the speaker’ (249). They call to mind poems such as ‘Digging’: ‘My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner’s bog’ (Heaney 1980, 10). The spade in ‘Kinship’ is later ‘erected as a monument (“As I raised it”, “as I sank it upright”) whose phallic dimension is particularly put forward’ (Haberer 249)—hence changing it into a symbol of fertility and rebirth. Similarly, in Fuller’s conclusive lines the dug buttons become paradoxical emblems of rebirth:

These buttons will not grow. . . .  
 But come, let us gather them for this reminder:  
 The drill of seeds, the hill coming down.

- 17 Comparing ‘Dug Buttons and Plates’ with Heaney’s lines helps emphasise the ‘kinship’ ties developing between Fuller and the former inhabitant of Gallt-y-ceiliog resuscitated as a kind of foster Welsh ancestor through her buttons. Not only does the ‘drill of seeds’ refer to the tool mechanically making holes to insert seeds, but ‘drill’ should also be understood here in the sense of a rehearsed process, a routine, whereby you expect the seeds to come up as whatever they will grow into. There is an irony in that ‘these buttons will not grow’ into anything, and cannot be expected to since they are not organic and were planted accidentally. And yet, like the spade in Heaney’s poem, their discovery is a rich form of ‘growth’—or renaissance—in the mind of those who found them, and an unsuspected source of inspiration to the poet. But why should these findings also be a ‘reminder [of] the hill coming down’?

The ‘hill coming down’ seemed to me a fact of life at Gallt-y-ceiliog: the earth is always on the move, brought down with stones dislodged by sheep, covering driveways. Grass grows freely, covering everything, and beneath it the soil accumulates. Old rubbish tips are covered. Bits of old iron (ploughshares, etc.) are covered up. I sometimes uncover them with a metal detector. We know this from archaeology: you uncover the past by digging. So, the ‘reminder’ tells us that what has existed and been lost can still be harvested as though deliberately planted, and that you can still do it while there is time to do it. I felt that ‘the hill coming down’ was a somewhat apocalyptic and admonitory way of putting it. Something smothering that will eventually come down on all of us, consigning us to oblivion.<sup>12</sup>

- 18 These explanations throw light on the contrary forces of destruction and renaissance underpinning the fruitful metaphor of ‘the hill coming down,’ on a par with the bog in Heaney’s poetry. Given the fact that we all are fated to become ruins ‘consigning us to oblivion,’ rebirth may seem mere wishful thinking. Nevertheless, history, archaeology—and poetry—help slow down the process of oblivion. Uncovering relics partakes in recalling lost souls. Beyond the ghost of Mary Price, Fuller’s verse indirectly celebrates newly found Welsh forefathers, chiming with the strange music made by the wind through the wires of John Lloyd’s abandoned mine in *The Last Bid*:

Some of the wires were still there, though long disconnected, and the wind that always seemed to blow through the *bwlch* made a strange kind of music in them. . . . It sounded like a lament for all the dead lives of Llanbadrig, all the men of the village who had set out in the winter dawns with lanterns to trudge up for a long day’s work in John Lloyd’s mine, all the women who had worked at their ranges and tubs in the valley, . . . (Fuller 1975a, 143)



- 19 By and large, although the dug objects give few elements about Mary Price's life in 'Dug Buttons and Plates,' the final metonymy of 'the hill coming down' uncannily relates us to 'all the men . . . all the women' that peopled the place in the past.

## *Ekphrasis* and Flawed Renaissances

- 20 Similarly, the poem entitled 'Photograph'—in which the name of Mary Price is not indicated either<sup>13</sup>—fails to supply further personal information while reflecting on the problematic correspondences between viewer and sitter in a photographic portrait. The first stanza of this *ekphrasis* pictures her as a mystery:

The image of a possession, possessing and being  
 Possessed by a mystery, stares from this face,  
 One finger at the cheek, the eyes searching.  
 There is a double distance: hypothetical  
 Space, our space; and the studio's.  
 (Fuller 2012, 29)

- 21 This opening stages a crisis of deixis. The TH- marker (in '*the*,' '*this*' and '*there*') first operates as a lure making us believe we have already seen the photo, which is nonetheless not published in the collection. Its repetition (six occurrences in five lines only) soon conveys an impression of lack: whose picture is referred to, when and where was it taken? None of these questions will be answered in the following lines, so that curious readers are invited to either imagine the scene or look for clues elsewhere. Two passages from *The Last Bid* prove useful in this investigation insofar as they mention a similar portrait, thus adding a possible context to the later poem:

On her mantelpiece was a photograph of her as a young girl in very fine clothes,  
 taken in Liverpool. . . . He looked again at the photographs on the mantelpiece.  
 Annie (on her twenty-first birthday?) with one finger pensively against her cheek  
 and an aspidistra prominent in the studio setting, a handsome jaw and a bold look.  
 (Fuller 1975a, 12 and 64)

- 22 No matter how much the prose portrait may complement the poetic one, the context given by *The Last Bid* stays hypothetical.
- 23 All in all, Fuller's poem puts forward the limits to photography when endeavouring to seize someone's essence. The photographic portrait is unmistakably estranged from the original model, and so is its poetic extension through *ekphrasis*. As Diane Arbus would say, 'a photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know' (278). This contradiction is endorsed in Fuller's lines by the triple declension of the word 'possess' (in the forms of noun, present and past participles) blurring the description of the photo from the onset. The woman portrayed is possessed both by the camera which fails to convey an authentic image of who she was ('She was not often much like this,' l. 21) and by a mystery inhabiting her. In brief, the photo dispossesses her of herself while offering a faithless uncanny double, a flawed photographic renaissance. According to Susan Sontag, a portrait is 'both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence' (Sontag 16), fostering an upsetting relationship between the viewer and the sitter:

Someone looking at a portrait photograph has a relationship with it of some kind,  
 analogous (as the poem suggests) to the relationship between the sitter and the  
 photographer, but much more open to the distances of time and knowledge which a  
 'reading' of the image attempts to overcome. My feelings about the young Mary in

this photograph were, I felt, worth teasing out. The mystery behind it is the impossibility of knowing her.<sup>14</sup>

- 24 Significantly enough, the very 'impossibility of knowing' the person photographed is precisely what motivates the poem, thereby defying the codes of the *ekphrasis* traditionally meant to embrace and extend the content of a picture. In words evocative of Sontag's, Arbus declares that photographs 'are the proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain. And the stillness of them is *boggling*. You can turn away but when you come back they'll still be there looking at you' (226)—'The image of a possession . . . *stares* from this face.' The strain emanating from the absent presence in 'Photograph' triggers a creative quest doomed to end in failure, as is implied by a vertical reading of the lines through the rhyme in '-ing': 'the eyes searching' (l. 3) for a 'being' (l. 1) will find 'a silent *thing*' (l. 15). But at the same time, a new poetic artifact and a poet's voice emerge to resist the deadly silence of the picture.

## Renaissance Through Fictionalisation?

- 25 The only solution for the poet to get more information about Mary Price is to invent it. But then, it is up to the reader to find it, and the task is all the more challenging as clues are scattered in a number of texts spanning over forty years. Fuller claims that 'poetry is a form of writing that deliberately employs puzzles as *a means of engaging the reader* in the pleasurable business of solving them' (Fuller 2013, vii). Mary Price is indeed a riddle, but the various made-up biographical elements that can be gleaned to complete the jigsaw puzzle prove unsatisfactory in many respects. For instance, the villagers do not know how old she is, and while some value her motherly benevolence ('once I was there and I cut myself. She gathered all these plants very carefully. . . . And it had healed by the morning,' DW 21), others regard her as a scary witch worthy of fairy tales like 'Hansel and Gretel' or 'Rapunzel':

Largo was put in mind of his fears of Annie when he was a boy, for she had seemed old even then, and at school they had played a game in which one of them with his back turned pretended to be *a witch stirring a pot of human soup . . . , imitating Annie's distinctive straddling gait.* (Fuller 1975a, 33)

- 26 On the other hand, in 'Annie Upside Down'<sup>15</sup>, Mary Price is portrayed as a modern feminist shepherdess ahead of her times, having declined a proposal that might have deprived her of her freedom:

Why should he think it sinful not to marry?  
As if I belonged to him  
One bit more than I belonged to Peter or Harry.  
(AUD, ll. 40-42)

- 27 In *The Last Bid* we learn that her father, John Lloyd, was a wealthy mine owner whose fortune Annie never made the most of as she preferred to live a simple life as a peasant in her wood (Fuller 1975a, 65-66). As an anti-capitalist, she even stands up to the unscrupulous London property developer Edgehandler who pressures her to sell her land: 'Tell them I'm too old to give up' (Fuller 1975a, 66). No more information is to be found about her day-to-day life, though.
- 28 On the whole, these scarce, sometimes contradictory, fictional elements do not provide the reader with a full-fledged portraiture of Mary Price. Conversely, the failed attempts at fictionalising the mysterious woman indirectly disclose crucial aspects of Fuller's *ars*

*poetica*, as illustrated in 'Annie Upside Down' where the old shepherdess, snagged and turned topsy-turvy by a wire fence, takes stock of her life:

Surely someone will come and fetch me and gather  
 Me up and set me down  
 And all the escaped sheep will come running with their blather  
 From their green town?  
 And the mountain will surely swing back in a while  
 To point in the right direction  
 And I stagger about on the grass with a dizzy smile  
 At my resurrection?  
 (AUD, ll. 112-119)

29 'Pastoral life has been associated by many poets . . . with a variety of eras supposed to have been the Golden Age of humankind' (Murfin and Ray 270). Ironically enough, in Fuller's renewed version of the pastoral, this Age has not been found yet. The shepherdess is in a very uncomfortable position, her sheep have escaped and her calls for help remain unanswered. The double rhyme between 'direction' and 'resurrection' evidences that Annie's quest for regained happiness ('the right direction') will imply death and possibly rebirth elsewhere, although the question mark leaves room for doubt. Annie may have trouble finding the 'right direction' as time and age keep reminding her that she has 'nowhere to fly to' (AUD, l. 91). And yet, Fuller's poem is based on underlying networks countering the passing of time and bypassing the *memento mori*.

30 For example, ideal worlds are hinted at through intertextual correspondences with Tennyson's poetry. By borrowing its form from 'The Poet' (1830, stanzas of 5/3/6/2 feet), Fuller's verse subtly evokes the 'golden clime' in which Tennyson's character was born, and which could be one of the destinations of Annie's flights:

The poet in a golden clime was born,  
 With golden stars above;  
 Dower'd with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,  
 The love of love.  
 He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill,  
 He saw thro' his own soul  
 The marvel of the everlasting will,  
 An open scroll,  
 Before him lay: . . .  
 (Tennyson 11)

31 This opening sketches an ideal world protected from evil by a poet whose penetrating vision (spotlighted by anaphora: 'He saw thro') allows him to send forth 'winged shafts of truth' (l. 26) that will propagate themselves in other poems, as exemplified by 'Annie Upside Down' aiming at a dream realm where 'all the elements weave in / A strange stillness and mysterious excellence' (AUD, ll. 133-134). But John R. Reed remarks that this 'golden clime' remains a myth:

This is the original myth of the poet and his office, the pure version of the ideal, not the reality as it might exist in England in the nineteenth century. Even in the contemporary world the poet is half-sacred. . . . *But the modern poet may not have as pure a source of inspiration or as confident a purchase on truth as his forebears.* (Reed 211)

32 The renaissance of Tennyson's stanzaic pattern in Fuller's verse prompts questions about the poet's mission in his world. The answers provided in 'Annie Upside Down' point towards a compromise between the bard's duty to recreate the lost Golden Age of

humankind (epitomised by the 'secret' awaited in the last lines) and the doubt (instead of 'shafts of truth') cast on the achievement of such a goal:

Such a secret would be worth the wait  
As birdsong after a night  
Of horrors. There's hope for things to happen, though too late.  
And they might. They might.  
(AUD, ll. 136–139)

- 33 The prospect of restored harmony symbolised by the birdsong is thwarted by markers of uncertainty concerning the disclosure of the secret world ('would be,' 'though,' 'might').
- 34 Altogether, as a Welsh woman of her time aware of her weaknesses, Annie becomes yet another uncanny double of the modern poet who may not have 'as confident a purchase on truth as his forebears.' On this point, Fuller's stance meets Auden's<sup>16</sup> against Shelley's claim that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Shelley 762):

How glad I am that the silliest remark ever made about poets, 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' was made by a poet whose work I detest. Sounds more like secret police to me. (Auden 2002, 348)

- 35 Annie's conclusion in her monologue shows that the poet would rather express doubts —'they might. They might'—than universal truths. Eventually, 'Annie Upside Down' unveils a shadow self-portrait shedding light on Fuller's own views about his role as a poet in his world.

## Towards an Eco-poetics of Renaissance

- 36 Fuller's personal poetic beliefs and convictions are further expanded through Mary Price's voice in 'Woman in the Wood' and 'Down to the Wood' where the speaker is placed at the heart of her habitat. The *incipit* of the short short-story likens the wood to a trap:

I could almost have imagined you were with me in the wood the other day. It felt like virtue and steely resolve not to do so, almost noble, as though such a belief were a trap waiting for me. (Fuller 2001, 216)

- 37 The trap consists for the narrator in being forced to recognise that she is in mourning for an absent person, the 'you' of the first line (who remains anonymous). She senses that the associations of the wood will trigger this emotional confrontation, which is something she is trying to avoid. But she does go to the wood. She needs to challenge her feelings, and the wood is such a place for that since its creatures turn out to make up for the absent 'you.' She actually soon discovers that nature is not solitary—'I think I must have been the only solitary creature there' (Fuller 2001, 217)—, which leads her to find out who she is:

Perhaps that's why we like going into woods. They draw us in. They contain us. And inside them, we find out who we are.  
I was nothing but myself. I felt unique. (Fuller 2001, 217)

- 38 The woman's rebirth of herself is enhanced in a one-sentence paragraph (from 'I was' to 'felt unique') which also makes up a pentameter. The blurred boundaries between poetry and prose mirror the close connections between the woods and the woman who is acted upon by nature, not unlike Gweno in *Flying to Nowhere*:

'I'm dying. . . . I'm wrapped up in a leaf very quiet and still. . . . It's beautiful and there's the breath of the wind turning me slightly. . . . And now I've died and got wings and I'm flying away. . . . I'm flying to nowhere. I'm just becoming myself.'  
(Fuller 1992, 31)

- 39 David Pascoe states that Fuller is 'the great contemporary poet of reversion and retreat, and his writing both emerges from and celebrates the retrogressive trajectories all must learn to accept' (Pascoe 309). This is typified by these extracts where retreat in the wood ('They draw us in. They contain us'; 'wrapped up in a leaf') situates the reborn character at the core of her natural environment. Such a regressive dynamics towards our habitat also characterises ecopoetic approaches to the world:

Ecopoetics extends this art form (poetry) with the intention of foregrounding an investigation into *ecology*: a word derived from the Greek *oikos* (home) and *logos* (word, reason, thought). As a discipline ecopoetics investigates how the human is situated within its habitat; how 'home' is defined and built; where (or whether) borders exist between body and world, human and other, space and place; and how sense activities, physical presences, memory, and moments of thinking locate and assist the human desire to navigate the self in the world. (Mambrol)

- 40 Other poems from 'Down to the Wood' showcase the ecopoetic dimension of Fuller's work by questioning the borders between body and world, for instance 'The Branch' (DW 32):

The tree was once a ladder.  
The lavish branch a rung.  
. . .  
My shelves have wooden bowls  
On them, with plums and pears,  
And though the tree cries loudly,  
The tree is cut for chairs.  
And I creak on until  
My growing's had its fill.

- 41 Trees surround us as soon as we were born (as children, we play in trees and use them as 'ladders' to climb up) and provide us with what allows us to live: food ('The lavish branch'), useful objects and furniture ('shelves,' 'wooden bowls,' 'chairs'), shelter, etc. But these lines also remind us that we are much closer to trees than we may think. The analogy between Mary Price's body and the tree is indeed humorously orchestrated through a double device of pathetic fallacy ('the lavish branch,' 'the tree cries') and reification ('I creak') narrowing the gap between nature and humans.

- 42 In 'Down to the Wood,' Mary Price also encourages us to explore nature in order to find—or come back to—'the heart of things,' notably in 'Tracks' (DW 24):

In that mouldering dell  
Where the impudent stinkhorn  
Rises from its jelly  
To tell how we were born,  
*Finding the heart of things,*  
A buzzard's prize:  
Stiff bloodied wings,  
The smirk of flies.

- 43 So far, Dylan Thomas's influence on Fuller has been underestimated. The stakes at work in poems like 'Light breaks where no sun shines' are nonetheless worth probing to better grasp those of 'Tracks':

Light breaks on secret lots,  
 On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;  
 When logic dies,  
 The secret of the soil grows through the eye,  
 And blood jumps in the sun;  
 Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.  
 (Thomas 24)

- 44 Fuller's own comments on these lines could perfectly apply to 'Tracks':

Curiously enough, Thomas does not seem to think that the death of logic . . . is a real and final death, for though the last stanza invokes a landscape of detritus, on its rubbish tips is a strange richness and burgeoning. It is the soil's secret that grows through the eye. . . . This is a very different waste land from Eliot's, and it is no doubt due to Thomas's feeling that man is only a small part of a larger and stranger organic whole. The dawn halts, because the individual's reason and consciousness are dead, but the decaying body mysteriously rejoins the life-cycle of the planet. (Fuller 1972, 203–204)

- 45 Similarly, in 'Tracks' the waste ('that mouldering dell') morphing into 'a strange richness and burgeoning' 'jelly' becomes a matrix engendering the rise of the phallic 'stinkhorn,' so much so that 'finding the heart of things' also means realising and accepting that all bodies—including ours—'mysteriously rejoin the life-cycle of the planet.' Such views on natural cycles as series of births, deaths and renaissances in new forms<sup>17</sup> (the buzzard's prey is turned into a 'prize,' and the flies feed on its 'bloodied wings') can be traced back to Lucretius:

Death does not destroy things so completely that it annihilates the constituent elements: it merely dissolves their union. Then it joins them in fresh combinations and so causes all things to alter their forms . . . (Lucretius 60)

- 46 'Finding the heart of things' is finding out and stoically acknowledging that we come from matter, our *oikos*, will go back to it and rise again from it—like the stinkhorn—in 'fresh combinations':

Surely *matter is where we are*  
*And where we always were,*  
 . . .  
 But longing says this isn't true.  
 Though matter may not die  
 It wanders far enough, and you  
 May wander. So may I.  
 (DW 30)

- 47 'When' (DW 44), the last poem of 'Down to the Wood,' further investigates how we 'wander' through matter and how 'sense activities, physical presences, memory . . . locate and assist the human desire to navigate the self in the world' (Mambrol):

These old oaks,  
 All wrists and elbows  
 Decaying busily  
 But slower than  
 The eye can ever see  
 You know them  
 As I have known them.  
 We are both themes  
 From one song-book,  
 Leaves from a single tree.

- 48 The 'old oaks' symbolise both stability (because of their old age) and impermanence ('decaying busily'), just like Mary Price herself, whose ageing body is winked at in the second line as it appears on the cover of *Gravel in My Shoe*, 'all wrists and elbows.' 'You' and 'I' may refer to the poet and Mary Price, but also Mary Price and the reader as well as the poet and his readers, all gathered in a renewed family tree. Sounds circulate, notably through an assonance in [i:] relating 'we' to the 'leaves,' the 'tree' and the 'themes' in accordance with the cyclical patterns that drive the poem forward. The oaks will die, but the wood will be used to make 'leaves' of paper and eventually a 'song-book' in which the poem will be printed, thereby preserving the memory of the 'theme' of the song—i.e. Mary Price. The poet, his muse and the readers themselves become comparable to 'lyric woodcutter[s] singing in the dark wood of the larynx' (Heaney 1989, 95), bearing witness that '*poiesis* is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself—a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat—is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself' (Bate 76).

## Conclusion: From the Open Portrait to the Myth

- 49 In Fuller's work, Mary Price's various rebirths through renewed forms give rise to what might be called an 'open portrait' reminiscent of Rodin's aesthetics of *non finite* (admired by Fuller in 'The Sculptor': 'none of these extraordinary works is finished,' Fuller 2014, 65) as well as Umberto Eco's definition of the 'open work':

'Open' works, insofar as they are in movement, are characterised by the invitation to make the work together with the author. . . . There exist works which, though organically completed, are 'open' to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli. Every work of art . . . is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality. (1989, 21)

- 50 Eco lays stress on the active role of the addressee invited 'to make the work together with the author,' corroborating Fuller's claim that poetry should 'engage the reader' (Fuller 2013, vii) in 'uncovering' new facets of poems once free from their creator:

A poem has broken loose from its creator, but still represents the nexus of thought and feeling which went into its creation. This is art's claim to transcend death, isn't it? You preserve something of the transient human character in words that have a longer shelf-life. . . . The poem that notionally survives the dead poet can certainly reveal new facets of itself, just as a person can. (Saby 2019)

- 51 As an unsolvable riddle, the character of Mary Price transcends death while inviting us to ponder over our own place in the world: 'The only peace: to know my place / And what I now must do' (DW 31). Each reading aimed at seizing the ungraspable muse generates 'internal relations' bringing us closer to our place of origin—i.e. our earth—by actively embarking us on a never-ending quest to find 'the heart of things' (DW 24). Because this 'ritual return to the sacred time of creation is the essential characteristic of myth' (Mounic 7), one may conclude that completing the open portrait of Mary Price through reading also contributes to her renaissance as a myth.

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## NOTES

1. Gallt-y-ceiliog means either 'nestling in the hill' or 'cock of the hill' in Welsh. This is the place where John Fuller hosted a number of poets including Mick Imlah or James Fenton: 'What could be more highly ag- / reeable than four months sabbatical / In Gallt-y-ceiliog' (Fenton 69).
2. 'In loving memory of . . .'
3. Henceforth, we shall use DW as an abbreviation for the section 'Down to the Wood' in *Gravel in My Shoe* (Fuller 2015, 21–44).
4. John Fuller sent me this information in an e-mail dated 22.04.21.
5. From now on, the italics in the quotes will be mine. They are intended to stress a specific point.
6. Henceforth, the translation of remarks by French critics will be mine.
7. The name of Mary Price is only mentioned in the prose introduction to 'Down to the Wood,' but not even once in the poems.

8. John Fuller sent me these remarks in an e-mail dated 03.06.21.
  9. For further discussion about contained emotion in another elegy by Fuller, see the part entitled 'Star-Gazing: A kind of deference to [the father's] shade' (and more particularly the comments on the word 'shuttlecock') in Saby 2017.
  10. John Fuller sent this clarification to me in an e-mail dated 11.12.2019.
  11. A parallel study between Heaney's and Fuller's texts is all the more legitimate as the two poets read each other's work. Besides, Heaney praised Fuller as 'one of the most stylish poets around' (Heaney 1984).
  12. John Fuller sent me this explanation in an e-mail dated 05.08.21.
  13. One can only know for sure that the poem is about Mary Price if one interviews the poet, who even sent me a photograph to prove his point.
  14. John Fuller sent these clarifying notes to me in an e-mail dated 24.07.21.
  15. From now on, we shall use AUD as an abbreviation for 'Annie Upside Down' (Fuller 1979, 9–13).
  16. Auden is one of Fuller's mentors. As a critic, Fuller is known for his masterful *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (Fuller 1998).
  17. For further discussion about the poetics of transformation in Fuller's work, see the part entitled 'About transformation' in Saby 2019a.
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## ABSTRACTS

This article looks at the various forms of renaissance related to Mary Price, John Fuller's enigmatic Welsh muse. This ungraspable peasant has indeed haunted the contemporary British writer's poetry and prose for more than forty years. Not only does he resort to a number of ploys like metonymy or *prosopopeia* to stage her rebirths, but he also revives classical forms and genres like the pastoral, the elegy or the *ekphrasis* while challenging their codes. Nevertheless, this gives rise to flawed lacunary portraits giving little information about Mary Price who becomes a spectre of herself. Fuller's poetics of renaissance is uncannily based on a sense of loss and failure highlighting and strengthening other connections between the living and the dead, men and matter. The more the poet endeavours to capture his muse, the more she escapes him—even when he fictionalises her—, until she imposes herself as his double. Whenever Mary Price is given a voice, the ventriloquism effects are all the more forceful as they evidence an eco-poetic approach to the world replacing man at the heart of natural cycles of death and rebirth characterising his habitat.

Cet article étudie les diverses formes de renaissance de Mary Price, muse énigmatique du poète britannique contemporain John Fuller. Insaisissable, cette paysanne galloise hante sa poésie et sa prose depuis plus de quarante ans. Pour la faire renaître, il use non seulement de stratagèmes aussi divers que la métonymie ou la *prosopopée*, mais il convoque également des formes et genres classiques comme la pastorale, l'épigramme ou l'*ekphrasis* avant de les renouveler en interrogeant leurs codes. *In fine*, les portraits de Mary Price restent néanmoins lacunaires, ne livrant que peu d'informations sur un personnage qui devient spectral. Dans l'œuvre de Fuller, la poétique de la renaissance est étrangement animée d'un sentiment de perte et d'échec soulignant et renforçant en parallèle toutes sortes de rapports étroits entre les vivants et les morts, les hommes et la matière. Plus le poète s'emploie à cerner sa muse, plus elle lui échappe — y compris

lorsqu'il la réinvente dans des récits fictifs —, avant de renaître comme son double. Lorsqu'il donne une voix à Mary Price, les effets de ventriloquisme sont d'autant plus saisissants qu'ils révèlent une approche écopoétique du monde remplaçant l'homme au cœur des cycles de mort et de renaissance propres à son habitat.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** doubles, ecopoetics, ekphrasis, elegy, John Fuller, open portrait, pastoral, renaissance, Wales

**Mots-clés:** doubles, écopoétique, ekphrasis, élégie, John Fuller, pastorale, Pays de Galles, portrait ouvert renaissance

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