

Hand Grenades in the Kitchen: a commentary on *The Murenger and Other Stories* and *Rebel Rebel*

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Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Work

Swansea University 2020

Summary Sheet

The two works being submitted are:

Rebel Rebel (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2016).

The Murenger and Other Stories (Newport: Three Impostors Press, 2019).

Abstract

The published works being submitted, *The Murenger and Other Stories* and *Rebel Rebel* are, respectively, collections of 15 and 21 short stories. They form part of a substantial body of almost ninety short stories, gathered in five collections over three decades by the author. They represent a contribution to the short story in both English and Welsh and offer evidence of experiment with the form.

The critical review examines some of the technical aspects of crafting these short stories and considers some of the disparate themes in these volumes, such as Brexit, nature and David Bowie. It also sets the collections within the context of both the writer's other outputs and the work of other authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, John Updike and Kevin Barry whose influence has made its mark. It also considers issues arising from being a bilingual writer and applies some ideas about literary cartography to the two volumes under consideration.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to Professor M.Wynn Thomas for stimulating conversations and insightful comments about the critical review and to Dr. Alan Bilton for his usual enthusiasm and support during its submission. Diolch o galon i chi'ch dau.

Declarations

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Statement 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in the footnote (s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Hand grenades in the kitchen: a commentary on *The Murenger and Other Stories* and *Rebel Rebel*.¹

Definitions.

The short story has been described in many ways, all hinting at some of the requirements of the form, both technical and imaginative. It is 'A flash blub. A thunderclap. The whisper. The rumour.'² Dangerously, it can be the hand grenade on the kitchen floor.³ Culturally, it has been 'declared the very first modernist literature.'⁴ Allusive, compressed and contained, the short story form is perhaps the point at which prose almost becomes poetry, thus often requiring the same concisions and precisions of language.

In the preface to *The Collected Stories of Rhys Davies*, this dedicated and prolific practitioner of the short story notes that:

the instinct to dive, swift and agile, into the openings of a story, holds, for me, half the technical art; one must not on any account loiter or brood in the first paragraph; be deep in the story's elements in a few seconds.⁵

These have become watchwords as I write my own short stories, acting as a maker's mantra. Each story in these two collections *has to* observe the above dictat, plunging into the story's elements without too much splash and without necessarily describing the pool.

¹ Jon Gower, *The Murenger and Other Stories* (Newport: Three Impostors Press, 2019) & *Rebel Rebel* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2016).

² Dai Smith, *Story: The Library of Wales Short Story Anthology, Volume 1* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2014), p.viii.

³ Deirde O'Byrne in <https://www.litromagazine.com/literature/the-hand-grenade-on-the-kitchen-floor-the-irish-short-story/> (Accessed 20.10.20)

⁴ Lorrie Moore (ed.), *100 Years of the Best American Short Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), xi.

⁵ Rhys Davies, quoted in David Rees, *Rhys Davies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), p.30.

It's what Raymond Carver advises too when he barks out, like a lifeguard, 'Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on.'⁶

The sentences at the opening of 'Short Stay' follow Rhys Davies's plunging arc and certainly don't linger, going straight into an account of two men's adventures when they get caught in the disputed territories of the Golan Heights:

The brothers were skirting the foothills, where the road curves through low juniper when they heard the whoosh of rockets. They hit the brakes, skidding in a skittering shower of gravel before hurling themselves off the bikes.⁷

Another example, taken from the opening of 'Fire With Fire', ignites the story's subsequent action:

As anyone who plays with matches knows a fire simply wants to grow. Even the smallest has ambitions – to graduate as an out of control conflagration, devouring all. But each one starts small, with a spark, a light, a breath of flame. Ask any arsonist.⁸

So in this tale we clearly know it's about a fire, even if we don't know where it is precisely.

Meanwhile, in 'The Full Treatment' we don't know where we are but know for certain that something major is afoot and again we swallowtail right in:

'You want the Yorkston?' asked the man with the ferocious tattoos. 'Nobody asks for that, not unless they don't want to live to see teatime.'⁹

And of course Davies does this himself, time and time again:

⁶ Quoted in David Miller, *That Glimpse of the Truth* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), p.125.

⁷ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.17.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.53.

⁹ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.125

While he was busy burying a woman one June afternoon, Lewis the Hearse's wife left him forever, going by the 3.20 train and joining her paramour at Stickell junction, where they were seen by Matt Morgan waiting for their connection. ('Gents Only')¹⁰

At this time, when Pollie had the religious mania, she was twenty-five and a sturdy young woman with a well-developed body. But in her head she was a bit wrong, and she squinted. ('The Lily')¹¹

In a *New Statesman* review of Rhys Davies's nine tales, *The Darling of Her Heart*, Naomi Lewis wrote that 'Mr Rhys Davies has all the craft you would want: briskness, implication, surprise, and an artfully casual pace in which none of the detail is to be missed.'¹²

To accord with that list of craft items a story such as my 'Fire With Fire' should therefore move briskly on, adding detail as it does so. In the second paragraph we find out *in some detail* how the fire started, as a casually discarded cigarette lands in a tuft of dry grass where it torches 'neighbouring stalks. Soon there was a purple fuse running along the hedge base, snuffling around, seeking oxygen, dry understory, blaze fuel.'

The element of 'surprise' comes hopefully with the big reveal of the third paragraph, which states, quite categorically that 'this is how The Great Fire of Surrey started'. This, then, is the size of the pool, about the length and breadth of a southern English forest and in the case of this particular story it is going to take all that water to put out the wildfire flames that torch through it.

My reaching for the Rhys Davies testing kit, a sort of litmus test for short story beginnings, is ongoing testament to his abiding influence. To date my output lags behind his a little, as he penned 100 tales and I am up to a total of 86, but this still attests, in numbers, to my love of

¹⁰ Rhys Davies, *Collected Stories, Volume II* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1996), p.54.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.46.

¹² Rhys Davies, quoted in Meic Stephens, *Rhys Davies: A Writer's Life* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p.280.

the form. We also share some other things. We have both written a book called *The Story of Wales*. Our work often has a dark, funereal humour. We both fell hopelessly in love with short stories and wrote them with no profit in mind:

Short story writers are saints. Their revenue is not much of this earth. They work largely for love. While great poets continue to be born, all fiction-writing is unnecessary, but if the prosy activity cannot be dropped, then the short story approximates closer to poetry than the noisy and dense novel.¹³

Davies suggests that short stories are a luxury

which only those writers who fall in love with them can afford to cultivate. To such a writer they yield the purest enjoyment; they become a privately elegant craft allowing, within a very strict confine, a wealth of idiosyncracies. Compared with the novel, the great public park so often complete with draughty spaces, noisy brass band and unsightly litter, the enclosed and quiet short story garden is of small importance, and has never been more[....]Another virtue of the short story is that it can be allowed to laugh.¹⁴

The title tale of *The Murenger* is more than a nod in the direction of Kevin Barry and in particular his superb 'The Fjord at Killary', which has more than its fair share of laughs as it depicts the plight of some redoubtable drinkers who find themselves stranded in a harbourside pub besieged by a climate change-driven rising tide. Barry is another of those writers, like Rhys Davies, who supply the gold standard by which I can measure the quality of my verbal smeltings, comparing their sometimes leaden-ness to their impossible lustre. He has been a particular and abiding influence on my own writing and it is not surprising therefore that I have written about him in *Taliesin* magazine and also persuaded my friend

¹³ Ibid., p.69.

¹⁴ Rhys Davies, quoted in Stephens, *A Writer's Life*, p.261.

Tony Bianchi to translate a Barry story for the same issue. His story, however, operates in a world which is real and possible, whereas my story about people in a pub strays beyond the realm of possibility, as Crystal Jeans has noted:

Some stories go beyond absurdity, entering into the realm of magic or witchcraft, especially so *The Murenger* itself, my favourite, which is affectionately based on Ye Olde Murenger House in Newport, a pub where probably most Welsh writers have done a reading at some point in their career. In this story the pub is a bizarre, tripped out place with a portal for time travellers ('We're talking sidereal time here'), a witchy physic garden full of herbs and plants, and a 'spectral butler' who floats around the catacombs having 'unbutlery thoughts'. Oh, and a pub cat that might or might not exist, 'brought in by a sailor who had sailed six seas and had traded the twisting cat in a hessian sack for intercourse with a monk'.¹⁵

The Murenger bends the laws of physics and stretches the credulity of the reader even as it has its fun. The origin of the story lies in a collaborative site-specific theatre piece I performed at Insole Court in 2018 called *Mysterious Maude's Chambers of Fantastical Truth* under the direction of choreographer Caroline Sabin. Having created a spectral butler for the show it was hard to let him go, so I extended his monologue into a short story, thus making an already extraordinary pub into something mythological.

List Making

The voice of an author, equivalent to his or her style is in part the product of a particular author's idiosyncracies. In *The Murenger and Other Stories* and *Rebel Rebel* some of those idiosyncracies manifest themselves in the form of lists. Lists work quite naturally in the novel, a baggier, more capacious form which can carry such extra verbiage. There are many

¹⁵ <https://nation.cymru/culture/review-the-murenger-and-other-stories-is-full-of-blazing-imagery/>

instances from, say, the contents of the creaking shelves of Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* through to Thomas Pynchon's stocktaking of twentieth-century technology in *Against the Day*:

The shelves and bench-tops were crowded with volt-ammeters, rheostats, transformers, arc lamps whole and in pieces, half-used carbons, calcium burners, Oxone tablets, high-tension magnetos, alternators store-bought and home-made, vibrator coils, cut-outs and interruptors, worm drives, Nicol prisms, generating valves, glassblowing torches, Navy surplus Thalofide cells, brand-new Aeolight tubes freshly fallen from the delivery truck, British Blattnerphone components and tons of other stuff Chick had never recalled seeing before.¹⁶

Lists can concertina huge amounts of information into a brief body of text, such as the detailed history of 1950s Scotland contained within a mere two pages of James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still*, wherein he depicts the land of 'old folk in Harris and Wester Ross and Sutherland with no electricity yet and barely a word of English; the land of tatties and herring, of oatcakes and shortbread, of anthrax on Guinard and no hedgehogs in the Uists....'¹⁷ But such parataxis, a near Biblical litany of names, does not sit so easily in the short story. It slows down the telling, removing some of the necessary briskness of narration, placing roadblocks in the way of the reader. As the novelist and critic Michel Butor says, the appearance of a list in an otherwise narrative or polemic piece of prose introduces—more or less violently—a sudden verticality into the horizontal flow of text: 'An enumeration, a vertical structure, can be introduced anywhere in a sentence; the words which compose it can have any function, as long as it is the same one.'¹⁸

Yet despite this tendency of the list to impede plot progress it is a device in constant use in both of the volumes under consideration, thus introducing both verticalities and

¹⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (New York: Vintage, 2007), p.1164.

¹⁷ James Robertson, *And the Land Lay Still* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p.200.

¹⁸ Michael Butor, *Inventory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p.59.

idiosyncracies. The opening and eponymous tale in *Rebel Rebel* contains many such lists – and therefore interruptions to the flow – such as the literal stops on Berlin’s U-bahn underground train network, or the various species of trees that exist in the damp woodlands of the Pacific Northwest of the United States. So too in *The Murenger and Other Stories* there is a plethora of lists, such as the range of skin colours available in a tanning parlour such as ‘Bermuda Blush,’ ‘Old Church Door’ or ‘Deep Teak.’ There is also a thawing litany of sea-passes opening up in the pack-ice as the Arctic sun strengthens into summer, places such as Unimak, Umnak, Amukta and Seguam. Indeed there is hardly a story in *Rebel Rebel* or *The Murenger* which does not include a list, even if it’s only the briefest trio of words or triad – a structure, of course, with a distinguished history in Welsh-language literature.¹⁹ There is a list of Welsh nationalist organisations such as The Free Wales Army, Adfer, Meibion Glyndŵr, and MAC (Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru); a list of alternative names for the devil; a roster of Hollywood male leads such as James Stewart, James Mason, Robert Mitchum, and John Wayne; and a catalogue of albums by the musician and record producer Brian Eno. This last connects explicitly with *Rebel Rebel*, as Eno was one of the two producers of David Bowie’s so-called Berlin Trilogy, as is discussed later in this essay.

The only exceptions, list-less stories if you like, are ultra-short or fragmentary tales such as ‘Smocio sigârs yn Charlotte,’ ‘Nodyn Bach am Gariad,’ and ‘Nodyn i Helpu’r Academydd.’ These are included in the collection *Rebel Rebel* as fripperies, much as Graham Greene saw some of his books as entertainments and some of his novels such as *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Power and the Glory* as, well, novels. One can trace back this fondness for the list to one specific instance, namely the list of Khasi names in Nigel

¹⁹ See Meic Stephens, *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), where he notes a ‘fondness for triple groupings which appears from the earliest times as a characteristic of the Celtic cultural tradition in Britain and Ireland’.

Jenkins's *Gwalia in Khasia*, including the names of Khasi siblings 'which often rhyme and alliterate: Karen and Sharon; Sufficiency and Efficiency; Edify and Mollify – known to their pals, of course, as Edi and Modi.' When, in turn, I turned my hand to travel writing in *An Island Called Smith*, this device was often employed, from listing the native names for rivers such as the 'Chesapeake, Potomac, Patuxent, Patappsco, Susquehanna, Choptank, Nanticoke, Wicomico, Pocomoke, Manolin and Chincoteague' to the names men give their boats in Chesapeake, which collectively sound like a mid-life crisis: 'Serenity, Obsession, Osprey, Fantasea, Liquid Asset, Therapy, Seduction, Happy Hours, Solitude and Wet Dream.' There is even a list of the contents of the shop on Smith Island, comparable with Silas Wegg's junk pile in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. A part of the list runs like ticker-tape at an all-American parade:

There is some 'White House' cherry pie filling, a china mallard duck, a Lilliputian child's desk so small the seat is only a foot above the floor, a white lifebelt, a large preserved crab, a table made of eighteen pieces of driftwood, a miniature oyster dredge, a brass deer, a model wildfowler....²⁰

This taxonomical tendency reaches its apogee in *An Island Called Smith* with the marshalling of the names of creatures that live in the Bay:

Whole galaxies of species are revealed; lunar dove shells and moon jellyfish, sun sponge and fossil moon snail, the star coral and the milky ribbon worm, burrowing brittle star, a sunfish called pumpkinseed, a golden star tunicate and the northern stargazer.

There are also macabre hints of death on the mud – the skeleton shrimps, bloodworms, dead men's fingers, the coffin box bryozoan, a ghost crab and even a requiem shark.²¹

²⁰ Jon Gower, *An Island Called Smith* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2001), p.135.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.7

This instinct to taxonomise finds its fullest expression in my fiction in the story ‘The Mind’s Menagerie’, which follows naturalist George Steller – who named many species – into the Arctic. In the moments when hypothermia leads to his having visions, they form as images that seem to prophesy the advent of television. In his delirium he sees the sea eagles that will eventually be named after him, the sea-cows too and, finally, a group of birds which ‘swinging among the cones were Steller’s jays. For he is Steller and these sleek, violet-plumaged crows with their punk mohicans were named after him.’²²

The novelist Owen Martell sees this urge to list and name as one of the most prominent hallmarks of the writing herein, which he characterises as ‘a sort of animistic onomatology... the seeming pathological inability to let things go unnamed or untold... combining the name-giving of the *cyfarwydd* in medieval Welsh tradition with an exuberant – and endearingly Victorianate encyclopaedism.’²³

Lists can also be something more than systems of ordering: they can be touchstones for the work itself. My novel, *Y Storiwr* (2011), derives its opening from reading Lloyd Jones’s *Y Dŵr* (2009), which begins by itemizing the contents of a farmyard on Mynydd Hiraethog:

Deg iâr. Saith buwch. Dwy gath. Un buarth. Pedwar bedd.²⁴

²² Gower, *The Murenger*, p.39.

²³ *Ibid.* p.2.

²⁴ Lloyd Jones, *Y Dŵr* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2009), p.5.

The appeal of this simple opening led to my generating a list of trees from which grew, in turn, a 400-page novel, listing the ingredients of a young man, Gwydion McGideon's life in a version of the classic bildungsroman.

Where Do Stories Come From?

A story doesn't begin with the opening sentence, or even with the title. It begins with the impulse, the compulsion to begin writing it in the first place, and many things can act as triggers. Going back to Greene's distinction between 'novels' and 'entertainments', there is only one 'serious' story among the 36 gathered together in these two volumes, namely 'Short Stay.' It resembles in content the first and title story in *Big Fish*, my debut collection, in that it takes two brothers and puts them in a place of danger. Both were written when my brother, Alun Geraint Gower was actually in danger. In the case of 'Short Stay', it was written when he had just been sectioned, and my reading at the time consisted of such material as the Care Quality Commission's reports into conditions in the psychiatric ward in Essex where my brother was housed, where there was 'inadequate staffing' and, most troublingly, in the case of a man who had tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion, a lack of staff training about ligatures.

This was the context in which I wrote the story, an act of concern, or maybe hopelessness. As chance would have it, I had already decided to place the two brothers in the Golan Heights; by sheer coincidence I found myself sitting on a train bound for north Wales with someone who had just come back from there, who was able to supply some

unexpected detail, such as the cave system that runs under these politically disputed highlands, and the wealth of butterflies to be found in its open country. This would be the element of 'surprise' Naomi Lewis notes in Rhys Davies' work and an opportunity to celebrate them with a list of 'painted ladies, leopard butterflies and Turkish meadow browns.'²⁵

The ending, as the two brothers emerge from the cave into Syria, even as explosions cause the surrounding countryside to tremble, is an optimistic one, the two brothers laughing like drains. We once found ourselves laughing whilst caught in cross-fire during a holiday in El Salvador, so here the story lurches briefly into auto-fiction. One of the brothers, Lee, even ponders which war zone they could choose as the next holiday destination. By bringing this version of my brother to a place of safety I was using the explorations of the short story to somehow bring myself some comfort: not art as therapy, but something akin to that. It's a mysterious art: as a critic said of a John Banville story, it's equivalent to bringing a hand grenade into the kitchen, full of danger and possibility. In the case of my story there was a real danger in the form of a mad Chechnyan with a range of contemporary armaments to add to the impact and tension.

'Short Stay' connects very clearly with the title story of my collection *Big Fish*, in which two brothers, Brog and Stig, spend time in a riparian landscape not only redolent of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, but directly inspired by the swift-running trout streams of Montana depicted in these three autobiographical tales. The men's connectedness is shown by their acts of fishing together, and the way they connect with the river:

²⁵ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.18.

Daybreak was a silk swirl of red and dark blue rags of leftover night. Barn swallows scattergunned across the surface of the river. Stig and Brog felt primitive, wading in the shallows, alive to the pulse of the river.

‘There’s a legendary pool in one of those big pools up ahead. The old people round here call it the Spirit of Bright Water.’

‘I’d be loath to catch a fish like that. Sounds like bad luck,’ said Brog.²⁶

As the story progresses, the river is poisoned by chemical leaching from an upstream gold mine and this, in turn, connects with Brog’s illness, so that the sickness that courses through the brother’s poisoned veins equates to that which is killing life in the river.

Themes

1. Nature

Nature is a constant theme in my work, obvious even in the titles of the collections *Big Fish* and *Breision*²⁷ (Buntings), with a sturgeon and flock of little finches adorning the respective covers. This is certainly true for the two collections under discussion, even when that nature is imperilled by fire:

All over the Surrey Hills trees turned fierce lanterns as boughs and branches flared – from piney twigs through knotted growths to arthritic limbs, all catching light and flaring like phosphorus flares. Even the prickly mass of evergreen foliage in the hollows caught fire quickly despite the seeping damp of early summer, with its torrents of rain. Three weeks of punishing sun had been dry enough to dry out the countryside. The arboreal blaze incandesced as every green leaf, moss beard and

²⁶ Jon Gower, *Big Fish* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2000), p.15.

²⁷ Jon Gower, *Breision* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2013).

crabapple was consumed. The rising sap converted into rocket fuel and berries, such as the black pips of the elder, boiled swiftly before bursting with a fizz. Acorns and beech mast simply exploded, scattering tiny shrapnel of hard shells across a wide area.²⁸

A similar delight in describing an arboreal setting – and tendency to list its constituent parts – is to be found in ‘Y Meudwy yn y Coed’ (The Hermit in the Woods), which is set in an imagined Oregon:

Mae’r tawelwch yn gyson, yn gyflawn – sŵn mwswg yn tyfu, neu sŵn y nen yn llenwi a glasliw a thuswau o gymylau uwchben y canopi pin. Ambell waith mae diferyn o law yn cwmpo gyda phlinc, fel nodwydd yn taro rhywbeth caled, neu sŵn tebyg i draed llygoden fawr yn sgrialu dros garegos, sy’n disodli’r tawelwch. Ac os digwydd i wiwer wibio dros lawr y fforest mae’n ddigon i raccio’r tawelwch, ei phawennau carlamus yn debyg i rhywun yn bwrw tympani.

Ond, am y tro, mae’r lle’n dawel: mae’r lle’n *diffinio* tawelwch, a’r mwswg yn ddwfe trwchus, a’r coed yn ymestyn, ymestyn: y canghennau’n ymarfer yoga, left to right, yin i yang, dde i chwith. Y manzanita’n hapus ymhlith y gwlybaniaeth; y pin ponderosa yn gefnsyth fel byddin ddisgybledig; y coed derw duon yn taenu cysgodion tua’r llawr; y gedrwydden yn bersawrus fel orenau’n pydru; y madrone’n dal; y ffynidwydden Douglas yn teyrnasu dros y chydig lecynnau tawel, a’r sypwellt yn wenfflam. Gallech ddweud bod hyn fel darlun. Gallech wir. Darlun gan Caspar David Friedrich. Y lliwiau olew’n sôn yn syml am natur ac am ddyn, rhyw eglwys werdd, neu Grist yn gwaedu yn y mieri.²⁹

The silence is constant, complete – the sound of moss growing, or the sound of the sky filling up with blueness and tissues of cloud above the pine canopy. Sometimes a raindrop might fall with a plink, like a needle striking a hard surface, or a sound like rat claws skittering across scree, sounds enough to dislodge that silence. And should a squirrel scamper across the forest floor it is enough to tear the fabric of that silence, its scampering like the beat of tympani.

But, for now, the place is quiet: the place defines silence, the moss a thick duvet and the trees stretching, stretching; the branches practising yoga, left to right, yin to yang, right to left. The manzanita happy in damp hollows; the ponderosa pine standing straightbacked like a member of some disciplined army; the black oaks spreading shadows before them; the cedar scented like rotting oranges; the madrone standing tall; the Douglas fir lording it over the few empty glades, and the grasses ablaze as the sun goes. You could say that this was a picture: you surely could. A picture by David Caspar Friedrich. The oil colours

²⁸ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.63.

²⁹ Gower, *Rebel Rebel* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2016), p.64.

talking of nature and about man, some green church, or of Christ bleeding among the thorns.

Both story collections display an array of nature, from the bats being sonar-detected in 'Mamaliaid ganol nos' (Mammals at Midnight) through the unexpected gibbon in the birch woods of Llansamlet in 'Gwlad y Mwnci' (Monkey Country) to the rare birds and their eggs in 'Oology.' This is biography leaching through: I am by training an ornithologist and a custodial interest in nature is apparent in all my writing, in all the different forms in which I have tried my hand, such as the novel, travelogue and the psychogeography of *Real Llanelli*, as well as in the short story.

2. Brexit

Much of *The Murenger* was written during the political wranglings over Brexit, and it was somehow inevitable that the subject should rear its very ugly head. 'Fire With Fire' deals with the seeming haplessness of an isolated UK to deal with major problems, in this case a fire raging through the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Beauty. The origin of the story was very simple: travelling through the extensive woodlands on the train to Gatwick Airport, one wondered about the extent of them. It transpired that 40% of this notably green county is covered with trees. At the time, UK newspapers were carrying stories of Californian

wildfires breaking out in many places, their progress whipped along by the seasonal Santa Ana winds. The story took shape by melding the two things, thus creating 'The Great Fire of Surrey' with all its attendant problems for the Government. A thinly disguised Theresa May is clearly not coping with the heat:

The Emergency Cobra meeting was chaired by a Prime Minister who looked drained before it started. There was enough political catastrophe to be getting on with, electoral landslides and the fervid spread of populism without natural disasters.

'Anyone know what to do about this?' she asked in a plaintive voice, an appeal like a heart surgeon who'd found something the size of peanut in an aorta and had forgotten everything she'd been taught in medical school.³⁰

As a critique of Brexit's isolationist bent, the UK in the story finds itself unable to deal with the fire, so has to turn to Spain, and to the firefighting experiences of Asturias, along with its specially adapted helicopters, 'a dozen Airbus choppers equipped with Bambi buckets that could scoop up a huge litre-age of water at a time and these could make use of village ponds at places such as Buckland, Chiddingfold and Coleshill, taking away a payload complete with tadpoles and fish.'

While 'Fire With Fire' did not start out as a Brexit or an anti-Brexit tale, the closing story of the same collection, aptly entitled 'Bowling Out', was consciously an attempt to ponder one aspect of this divisive issue, namely how to bridge the divide once the increasingly disunited kingdom left the EU. One model for reconciliation which came to mind was Daniel Barenboim's and Edward Said's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, whose musicians are drawn from Israel and Palestine and other countries in the Middle East in an effort to promote understanding and defeat ignorance.

³⁰ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.55.

To explore this it was necessary to create characters who were musicians, namely Gruff and Catriona, who find themselves at the end of the story playing in a concert of reconciliation, conjuring ‘a stream of sound into being, flowing, commingling, one coming together with the other, finding harmony where there was no dissent.... And the cellist from Sarajevo drew out notes from the earth, sonorous sounds from the planet’s mantle.’

There is another connection between Edward Said and the collection *Rebel Rebel*. The main inspiration for the collection is apparent from both the title, referring to David Bowie’s song of the same title from the album *Diamond Dogs*, and the cover art, which is a visual shorthand for Bowie’s character or alter ego, Ziggy Stardust, who he created during the same period. Edward Said, writing about Theodor Adorno’s ideas about late style in Beethoven in the *London Review of Books*, examined the works of writers such as Lampedusa and Cavafy. He found what he suggested is ‘the prerogative of late style: it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist’s mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile.’³¹

David Bowie’s final four albums and in particular his piercing and profound expression of humanity in *Black Star*, seemed to match if not amplify Said’s notion of late style. Bowie was 69 years old when *Blackstar*, his 25th and final studio album was released. Two days later he died of liver cancer, an illness that had been kept secret up until then, underlining the fallibility and indeed frailty that he overcame in order to record a sort of crowning glory to his incessantly restless and outrageously creative career. ‘Rebel Rebel’ is a

³¹ Edward Said, ‘Thoughts on Late Style,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol 26, No. 14 (5 August 2004), p.22.

two word summation of that career, and might be even be an instruction, explaining how an artist such as Bowie should proceed, rebelling against norms.

The three Bowie-related stories in *Rebel Rebel* – ‘Rebel Rebel,’ ‘Mick yn caru David, David yn Caru Mick’ (Mick loves David, David loves Mick) and ‘Seren Ddu’ (Black Star), which closes the collection – each explore an aspect of Bowie’s life and output. The first concentrates on his creativity and in particular the recording of three landmark albums in succession after he took up residence in West Berlin in 1976: *Low* (released in 1977), *Heroes* (released in 1977) and *Lodger* (1979) act as a sort of soundtrack to these three stories. The first two tales were written before Bowie’s death, while the last followed news of his passing and is in some sense an elegy to the singer, who appears in the form of Major Tom, the astronaut stranded in space, and thus marooned in silent and complete loneliness. It’s the same loneliness, the same sad loneliness as that described by Frank O’Connor, one that applies as much to the author as to his characters:

The saddest thing about the short story is the eagerness with which those who write it best try to escape from it. It is a lonely art, and they too are lonely. They seem forever to be looking for company, trying to get away from the submerged population that they have brought to life for us.³²

The image of Bowie’s Major Tom adrift in the blackness of space chimes with the quotation from Blaise Pascal chosen as the epigram for O’Connor’s seminal book:

The eternal silence of those
infinite spaces terrifies me.

³² Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New Jersey: Melville House, 2004), p.165.

3. Language, language

For a bilingual writer, every story or novel has a key choice at its heart: which language to choose, which terrain to explore. One of the features of recent writing in Wales is the appearance of writers who write with equal facility in both Welsh and English, such as Fflur Dafydd, Lloyd Jones, Siân Melangell Dafydd, Owen Martell, and Llwyd Owen and, more recently, Welsh learners such as Sarah Reynolds and Myfanwy Alexander, who publish in both languages.³³

The emergence of such writers is in part due to the consolidation of Welsh language education. I went to the first-ever Welsh primary school, Ysgol Dewi Sant, half a century ago and since then there has been an exponential growth in Welsh language education, with a concomitant growth in bilingual speakers and thus writers gifted with the ability to bridge languages, which can lead to a sense of common ownership of a culture. This is as true for writers on, say the Llŷn peninsula as it is for my native Llanelli as Welsh language education has consolidated and expanded. As Ned Thomas puts it:

There is every reason, in Wales as elsewhere, to prefer a view of culture which allows for plurality, fluidity, dialogue, interaction and even conflict, over a definition that is totalizing and static and essentialist.³⁴

Choices about which language to use in a story or a collection can come about for many reasons. *Rebel Rebel*, for instance, started life as an unsuccessful entry for the Prose Medal at the National Eisteddfod – where even losing has its benefits, in that three critics

³³ <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2010/09/the-dynamism-of-switching-between-languages/>

³⁴ Quoted in Entwistle, Alice, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), p.43

discuss, or sometimes expose, any weaknesses which can then be addressed if one decides to pursue publication at a later stage. *Breision* (2013), on the other hand, was a straightforward commission by the publisher, with the support of the Welsh Books Council. Other collections accrete one by one, with individual stories appearing first in publications and then, when sufficient critical mass has been achieved, they can appear collectively, as was the case with *Big Fish* (2000).

But when I write in Welsh it's for a combination of two principal reasons. The first is emotion. Welsh is *fy mamiaith*, my mother tongue, and so I first heard its cadences, probably filtered through some nursery rhyme sing-song in my mother's voice. So in this language I hear Morwena, the woman from Cwmgwrach who adopted me and gave me unequivocal love, even though I wasn't her own child. That connection runs as deep as can be. In the same way my love of Sibelius's music can be traced back to the LP featuring *Finlandia*, which was one of her favourite pieces, often played on the Dansette portable record player at home. Fanciful as it may sound, I can hear her love of the music in the music itself, just as I can hear *her* in the Welsh language. Tristan Hughes puts this rather beautifully in his story called 'ENE':

Dafydd bach, she says. Dafydd bach.

John and Emma he can see, they have many faces, but he has none. Only a voice, a voice that has crept into his own: year by year a bit stronger, a bit thicker. He remembers her in accents and syllables and inflections. That is all and everything she is. She is his voice.³⁵

The second reason for choosing to write in Welsh is political. Everything you do, say or even think in a minority, endangered language is perhaps a political act, no matter how small. In

³⁵ Tristan Hughes, *Shattercone* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2020), p. 98

my own case I not only write in Welsh but also campaign on behalf of the language, recently as editor of Cymdeithas yr Iaith's magazine *Tafod y Ddraig*. Writing in Welsh brings with it extra responsibilities and, in a sense, every sentence is a small contribution to the life and longevity of Cymraeg, the Welsh language.

Writing in a minority language has many excitements, not least the feeling that a piece is pioneering in some small way. In English a description of life in a fire-watching tower in the United States would take its place within a small sub-genre of American literature that includes works by Jack Kerouac, who wrote about his time as a U.S. Forest Service fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the summer of 1956 in novels such as *The Dharma Bums*, *Lonesome Traveller* and *Desolation Angels* and poet Gary Snyder's *Back on the Fire*. One can be pretty confident that writing about the same sort of experiences in Welsh – as I have done in the novel *Norte* – is to do so for the very first time, which means the subject has a newness for the reader while the writing benefits from the unexpectedness of the subject *in this language*. This also means the lexicon available to the writer is expanded, and the energy or colour that derives from setting unfamiliar words into a text written in a familiar language is increased.

Thus the Arizona landscape described in my 2015 novel contains *arroyos* and *el tren de la muerte*, while a brushfire crackles like Chinatown firecrackers at New Year – ‘*craclodd y brwgaets fel clecars dathliadau'r Flwyddyn Newydd yn Chinatown...*’ Even though elements of *Norte* such as the road trip which forms its backbone, or descriptions of working in a fish-packing factory such as that found in John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* might be familiar to readers of American fiction they are decidedly uncommon, exotic even to a reader of fiction

in Welsh. It thus allows an author to be both a custodian and usurper in one and the same breath, both protecting a language and adding to its territories.

4. Translation

Like increasing numbers of my compatriots I now not only work in Welsh and English, but also translate back and fore between the two. It can have its frustrations. Fflur Dafydd, pondering the paucity of swear words and words for sex and sexuality in Welsh asked:

And with this in mind, how does one then begin to translate a text from Welsh into English? How does one make the shift from this highly literary language, albeit one with many limitations and boundaries, to a vaster, broader language, where no word, no phrase, is unutterable?³⁶

As language is a basic tool, or toolkit for a writer, my first forays into writing in Welsh were characterised by a certain anxiety about the paucity of tools, of choice when it came to words. In Welsh the word ‘prophetic’ is ‘proffwydol’, and there are few synonyms, or near-synonyms for it; yet in English there is a veritable array such as fatidic, oneiric, oracular, and vaticinatory, all with their own shades of meaning. My debut Welsh-language novel was criticised for not having the full range of literary Welsh at its disposal (pace Fflur Dafydd’s reference to a ‘highly literary language’), which suggested I simply hadn’t read enough Welsh literature and that my lexicon was too skeletal – or perhaps it was my skin that was

³⁶ https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/2009_DAFYDD_Fflur_ICPL_translation.pdf

too thin. My response was to reach for my inner James Joyce and invent a welter of portmanteau words, whipping up a literal storm:

Daw hyrddwynt, corwynt, trowynt, stormwynt, chwythwynt i geisio’i thafllu hi oddi ar ei llwybr. Bydd y peryglwyntoedd yn chwythu’r cwch i bob cyfeiriad, ac o bob cyfeiriad – caswynt yn troi’n llymwynt, oerwynt yn plethu ‘da glaw-wynt, niwlwynt yn cuddio gwallgofwynt, ond hyd yma, dim diwedd-y-byd wynt, yr un sy’n chwythu unwaith ac am byth.³⁷

Such neologising was an incredibly empowering act, making me realise that even if my vocabulary was deficient, I could make it up for it by invention, by just making words up: this an act that brings its own energy and of course freshness to things. In Welsh a noun is often qualified by adding a prefix before it (a lark, *ehedydd*, shrinks down to a pipit by adding ‘cor,’ the diminutive to the word, thus *cor-ehedydd*, or similarly *corgi*, a small dog). This is something I now do fairly constantly, and is in the very opening sentence of *Rebel Rebel* as a moth, a noun, mutates into a verb:

Ambell waith mae stori fel breuddwyd, yn cyrraedd ganol nos, yn gwyfyndu’n dawel drwy ffenest a sŵn pitw....

Sometimes a story arrives as a dream, arriving at midnight, mothing quietly through the window with the tiniest of sounds....

5. A little bit of mapping

Literary cartography is an area that seems to be developing, and it might be interesting to assess the terrain covered by these two collections. Some writers are associated with a

³⁷ Jon Gower, *Dala’r Llanw* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2009), p.62.

particular area, such as Alice Munro finding the universal in the particular, and in the particulars of Huron County, south western Ontario, while Annie Proulx signals her allegiance to place in the very title of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. Similarly, a writer such as Claire Keegan is pretty synonymous with south-eastern Ireland, and those stories in her collections in which she writes about Louisiana – even though she lived for some years in New Orleans – seem somehow slightly less authentic. Welsh writers also write about where they know, so Ron Berry and Gwyn Thomas write about what the latter described as the ‘riven gulches’ of the south Wales valleys, or Jane Fraser the edge of land on the Gower peninsula in her collection *The South Westerlies*.³⁸

Collectively, stories by a range of Welsh writers hold up a mirror to Welsh life, even if at times it can be a crazy, distorted fairground mirror. One of the most interesting mapping exercises was *A Fiction Map of Wales*,³⁹ which commissioned 21 writers to ponder and reflect the places they lived or places of import to them. In his introduction, the editor John Lavin set out his stall, explaining the intention to do with Wales what Joyce did with his native city in his collection of stories, *Dubliners*: that is, ‘to give Dublin to the world.’

Unlike Joyce, rather than seek to solely describe the country’s capital city, we sought to give as many of the constituent towns and villages that make up the country of Wales ‘to the world’, as was possible. We did not, as Joyce did with Dublin at that time, see Cardiff as ‘the centre of the paralysis’ (even if the story that is set there does take place in that city’s prison) but simply as one other place on the map (albeit clearly a highly significant one, considering the size of its population). Besides, in contemporary Wales we saw a lot to be positive about and a lot to be proud of too; as Joyce would perhaps have done had he written those Irish stories at a later period in his life (in a letter to his brother Stanislaw he reflected that he had not, in

³⁸ For more general thoughts about the short story in Wales, my Gwyn Jones lecture of 2012 is a useful gloss. See <https://www.walesartsreview.org/longform-between-caradoc-and-rachel-whats-been-going-on-in-the-welsh-short-story>.

³⁹ John Lavin (ed), *A Fiction Map of Wales* (Cardiff: H’mm Foundation, 2014).

Dubliners, given enough time over to the warmth of his native people and to the beauty of their landscape). But, of course, we also saw a lot to worry and alarm, and a lot indeed to mourn.⁴⁰

My own contribution to *A Fiction Map of Wales* was set on the Gwendraeth estuary and is included in *The Murenger*. The salt-marshes and runnels of this place are often evoked in my fiction, one of the twin geographical epicentres (if one can have two epicentres) in my writing, along with Bardsey Island. But usually my fiction ranges wide and far. Llŷr Gwyn Lewis, building on Simon Brooks's suggestion that the decade following devolution was a golden age for Welsh prose, suggests that:

Perhaps one result of devolution was to free Welsh authors to write of a wider array of subjects, people, and situations. Increasingly, the Welsh experience in the wider world is a viewpoint which is being explored and mined for the benefit of literature. A particularly gifted marauder through space and time is the virtuosic Jon Gower, whose heady combination of fantasy, travel, and touches of postmodernism in texts such as *Y Storiwr* (2011) and *Dala'r Llanw* (2009) ensures that his readers never know what to expect from one work to the next.⁴¹

If one quickly sketches the map of these two named books, or at least their narrative routes, one sees that *Dala'r Llanw* is set in three port cities – Buenos Aires, Oakland, California and Cardiff – while *Y Storiwr*, ostensibly set in Wales, often embeds geographical references, or even sometimes small, complete stories in the main text. These take us to China, Emily Dickinson's Massachusetts, the Antarctic, Scotland, the United States, Greece, and the Netherlands. In another novel, *Norte*, the action spans most of Central America, and includes all of North America, with a road trip across the US and a long *Cannery Row*-style

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.13.

⁴¹ Llŷr Gwyn Lewis, 'Amlhau Lleisiau'r Llên': Birth and Rebirth in Welsh-Language Literature, 1990-2014' in Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (eds), *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.681.

section set in the salmon processing camps of Alaska, before ending in Arctic whiteness.

Along the way it does more than nod in the direction of a fascinating sub-genre of American writing, namely books by fire-watchers, whose skills might have been useful in Surrey.

A Welsh writer can of course take Wales as either the subject of, or backdrop to, a story, or set a tale elsewhere. Some, such as Thomas Morris, may choose to set all of the stories in a collection such as *We Don't Know What We're Doing* in Caerphilly, John Williams palping the seedy underbelly of Cardiff Bay in *Five Pubs, Two Bars and a Nightclub*, or Rachel Trezise taking the Rhondda valleys as her backdrop. By comparison *Rebel Rebel* has 21 stories in total and of these six are set in Wales, while the others two are set in the English Midlands, one each in West Germany, Uruguay, Syria, and Argentina, and a total of eight in the USA, while one, 'Heskyn ar hyd y lle' (Heskyn about the place), rather lives up to the title and wanders around an indeterminate and unnamed city. *The Murenger and Other Stories*, on the other hand, has four stories set in Wales, one in the Middle East, one in the Arctic, five in England, one in Scotland, and two in unnamed places. In that simple analysis they do not take Wales as their subject matter.

This mixture of geographical locations can contrast sharply with other Welsh writers, those working in Welsh in particular. Lleucu Roberts's collections, *Saith Oes Efa* (2014) and *Jwg ar y Seld* (2016), are set entirely in Wales. This is not a criticism: they are both superb collections, but *Rebel Rebel* and *The Murenger and Other Stories* are certainly informed by the author's own extensive travels and very broad taste in books. Or it may well be that writing *in Welsh* tends to direct the writer towards Wales as a subject. This is borne out by looking at my collection *Breision*, in which all of the stories, bar two, are set in Wales, and

often very definitely so, with the country being clearly the manifest subject in a story such as 'Gwlad y Beirdd' (Land of Poets), and, in passing, challenging the idea of its being the Land of Song.

6. Influences

Writing is in so many ways the consequence of reading. The literature of Latin America has been a constant and invigorating influence on my work, ever since an epiphanic night in 1981 when I read Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for the first time. I finished it at about four in the morning and re-read it straight away, finishing by noon, an experience that has neither been repeated nor demanded of me by any other volume. This led to decades of exploring the works of Carlos Fuentes, José Donoso, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Márquez himself of course, the five-man, so-called 'boom' in Latin American literature.

The literary debt to such writers is sometimes present in a sort of postmodern playfulness, apparent in 'Nodyn i helpu'r academydd' (A note to help the academic), in *Rebel Rebel*. This shard of prose – one hesitates to call it a short story – has a title which is in itself a third as long as the rest of the text: in translation, 'A note to help the poor academic when he is trying to understand the references in the preceding story to Che Guevara as he studies for his doctorate under the title *A spaghetti of ideas: an examination of the work of a forgotten writer of the twenty first century, namely Jon Gower.*' Even the spaghetti is another act of playfulness, referencing a forgotten review of a novel of mine by Mary-Ann Constantine, who compared some of the prose within it to alphabetti spaghetti. It's a joke reserved just for the author.

One constant technique employed in my work is collage, splicing material from elsewhere without necessarily acknowledging its provenance. A story such as 'Bunting', in *Too Cold for Snow*, includes a description of a nightingale lifted directly from a field guide, something which happens all the time in the writing of W.G. Sebald, such as *Rings of Saturn*, where he quotes from other people without attribution. The same story has an oblique reference to R.S.Thomas's poem 'The Refugee', and 'the shy bird in the nest of welcome' in the description of the author's concern for his mother:

I wanted her to find herself a bower, a shaded settlement among dark leaves where she could build a nest of comfort about her...⁴²

This tendency towards collage is a hallmark of the times, possibly the result of Google and the fluid ability to cut and paste. David Shields, in his provocative *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, suggests that collage, 'an accentuated act of editing,' is an 'evolution beyond narrative', and that 'Everything I write, I believe instinctively, is to some extent collage. Meaning, ultimately is a matter of adjacent data.'⁴³

Perhaps my most successful story, and certainly the one that has been most anthologised, 'Bunting', derives much of its strength from making data adjacent, splicing an account of my mother's dementia, which includes a period when she whistled exactly like a nightingale, with President Mitterand's last meal as head of the Fifth Republic.

⁴² Jon Gower, *Too Cold for Snow* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2012), p.4.

⁴³ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p.115.

Glyn Jones suggested that 'Humour...is one of the most notable and constant qualities of Anglo-Welsh stories from the beginning. Satire is common too, or at least fun-making, and so is a sense of poetry, or a sense of language.'⁴⁴ 'Sioe Flodau' (Flower Show) is a soft-hitting satire on some of the Welsh nationalist groups, and includes a visit by one such outfit to visit a blind medium who puts them in touch with Che Guevara. And the long note which follows the story playfully explains the origins of some of Guevara's purported links with Wales, based on a tranche of his letters contained in La Plata University, all dating back to his time as a student in Buenos Aires. It's all made up, of course, and reads like something Jorge Luis Borges might have formulated, an attempt to make the made-up seem material, using the tools of the historian (documents, archives, accredited sources) to present fiction as fact. Yet the genesis of all this playfulness was one interesting fact, that Che Guevara played and wrote about rugby. This was sufficient enough a germ from which the story could grow.

The links to Latin American literature are much more explicit in the story 'Y Glustog', which is both inspired by and a repost to 'The Feather Pillow', a story by the Uruguayan author Horacio Quiroga. Quiroga, in turn, was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, and was subsequently an influence on Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, and on the surrealist novels of Julio Cortázar in Argentina. In my case, I was drawn to this story simply because it is far and away the most frightening tale I have ever read, causing a physical reaction in the reading of it, much as Chuck Palahniuk's story, 'Guts', has had on student audiences. 'Y Glustog' is an attempt to re-present the story by transposing the characters so that Horacio Quiroga takes the place of his own main character who, on the night of his wedding, finds his new bride growing wan and pale before dying. The doctor who arrives to examine her

⁴⁴ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p.51.

corpse finds two puncture marks on her neck, suggesting to the reader that this is a vampire story. But the impact of the tale comes in the last lines, which informs one that ‘there is a creature that lives in feather pillows, and its favourite food is warm, fresh blood. That, thickening like treacle, is a supper it enjoys.’

Years of reading American fiction and travel in the US shapes the eight stories in *Rebel Rebel*, with some taking their cue directly from American books. This is certainly the case with ‘Y Dean ei hun’ (The Dean himself), which has its roots in the biography of James Dean, and ‘Y Meudwy yn y Coed’, which borrowed its setting from David Vann’s 2011 novel, *Caribou Island*, even if I’ve never visited the Aleutian islands which it describes. John Updike is a life-long influence right down to the level of commas and sentences, so that the balanced cadence of his mini-portrait of the busyness of a small town in America – ‘A Saturday then, of small sunlit tasks, caretaking and commerce’⁴⁵ – directly shapes a line of my own on a very different subject: ‘A slinky psychopath, adept with piano-wire, could work wonders for his table manners.’ I’ll admit that my third phrase is clunkier than his, but the fact remains that I can consciously take my cue from the way he arranges his words, not to mention the encyclopaedic range of his subject matter. I have profiled ‘The Man from Shillington’ in *Planet*,⁴⁶ which describes a day in his most amiable company, when he even demonstrated a knowledge of *The Mabinogion*, describing them as tales of Celtic superheroes.

Another US writer who has been a direct influence is Richard Ford, whose e-mails telling me to work hard and not slacken chimed well with my strong Protestant work ethic. I

⁴⁵ John Updike, *Rabbit Redux* (London: André Deutsch, 1971). p. 303.

⁴⁶ Jon Gower, ‘The Man from Shillington’, *Planet* 168, December 2004/January 2005, p.75.

read Ford's comments about my collection *Too Cold for Snow* as both praise and mini critique, melding both blurb and a little craft lesson to me:

Gower's tales possess a primal, almost savage formality that's far removed from the calmer precisions and interiority of the mitred short story. They are also exhilarating and lush and knowing and in all ways bespeak authenticity.

That exhilaration comes sometimes from the headiness of the rhythms employed, as I seek more than anything to make the words euphonious, and this sometimes leads to the triumph of sound over sense. If Walter Pater was right in suggesting that 'All art aspires to music', then this failed musician wants more than anything to make the language sing. In this I fall under the long shadow of Dylan Thomas, who intrigued me as a young man to the point of reading all the work and all the biographies. You can see the influence very clearly in the beginning of *Uncharted*:

Listen! Like a million small, slippery wet kisses on muddy shore and hard escarpment, on pebble beach and marshy reaches, the enormous river meets the land and sings to it, a song of love, water to earth. It is a polyphonic symphony with a chorus of aqueous voices – sucking seductions, rippling percussion, and millions of swamp frogs looking for a wet date. This is the river song. *Canción del Río*.⁴⁷

The river Plate may not be bible-black in this novel but it certainly ripples with echoes of Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*:

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jon Gower, *Uncharted* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2010), p.7.

⁴⁸ Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), p.4.

Rhythm, the cadence of sentences, can drive a story, as Richard Ford attests, although he is not 'utterly commanded' by it, unlike myself. Ford is, after all, a precision engineer when it comes to prose:

I'm always interested in words, and no matter what I'm doing—describing a character or a landscape or writing a line of dialogue—I'm moved, though not utterly commanded by an interest in the sound and rhythm of the words, in addition, I ought to say, to what the words actually denote. Most writers are probably like that, don't you think? Sometimes I'll write a sentence that sets up an opportunity for say, a direct object or predicate adjective and I won't have a clue what the word is except that I know what I don't want—the conventional word: the night grew dark. I don't want dark. I might, though, want a word that has four syllables and a long a sound in it. Maybe it'll mean dark, or maybe it'll take a new direction. I'll have some kind of inchoate metrical model in my mind. One of the ways sentences can surprise their maker, please their reader, and uncover something new is that they get to the sense they make by other than ordinary logical means.⁴⁹

Ford, like Updike, *works* at the art of surprise, one of the key components of the short story, and they both work within a long tradition of the American short story going back to Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving in the early 19th century, a period that includes the development of the 'long short story' which is often favoured by American writers. My own work is more aligned with the older and maybe cruder craft of storytelling, ranging away from the literary tradition, and I have often been compared with *y cyfarwydd*, the ancient, traditional Welsh storyteller. It might be useful to see how one of my fellow writers, the novelist Wiliam Owen Roberts, traces my literary lineage:

In terms of style you are a successor to Elis Wynne from Lasynys, and he, in turn was heavily indebted to Francisco de Quevedo. I will not detail the work of the Spaniard ... but if you do you will be sure to encounter the term *conceptismo*, being the quality that defines his writing. In short, this is a style that belongs to the baroque tradition – playful, humorous, very satirical on occasion, piling up hyperboles in order to underline or undermine a position, delighting in puns, full of mischevious rhythms and an unexpected punch at the end of a sentence, or placing oppositional

⁴⁹ Richard Ford, *The Paris Review*, issue 140 (Fall, 1996), p.42.

sentences next to each other in order to make a profound point, or just have a funny punchline. These are also the hallmarks of *Gweledigaethau'r Bardd Cwsg* right throughout, although the Welshman has gone further by availing himself of additional decorations of style which are indigenous to our culture, such as alliteration, *cynghanedd*, creating compound words, and drawing on metaphors and comparisons which have long antecedents and are significant in terms of our literary inheritance. This is all an integral part of the originality and splendour of Welsh prose.⁵⁰

In keeping with the *modus operandi* of the dreamer Elis Wynne (1671-1734), much of my writing process happens as I sleep, or at least, like many other writers, when I'm not consciously writing. Most notably, the first 10,000 words of *Dala'r Llanw* were written or poured out pretty much in a single day, coming out fully shaped: what's on the printed page was directly formed by the subconscious mind. Yet it doesn't read like stream-of-consciousness writing. It is as arranged as blocks, complete stories as digressions and entire paragraphs. That's the mystery of it all, or as Niall Griffiths said when he once showed me his study, 'this is where the magic happens.'

7. Endings

'An intense awareness of loneliness' was seen by Frank O'Connor as a characteristic of the short story form, and Heskyn's death in my story 'Heskyn at Large' is perhaps as lonely as it gets.⁵¹ Certainly the old con Heskyn is not alone on the roster of lonely people in the two collections. There is that spectral butler, doomed to wander the cellars of The Murenger public house, and George Steller, dying in his frozen cave in 'The Mind's Menagerie'. Then in

⁵⁰ William Owen Roberts, pers comm, December 2019 (my translation)

⁵¹ O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, p.19.

'Candles' there's the character Daniels waiting to see a corpse candle – reputed in folk tales to appear after someone's death – who then realizes he's seeing the light of his own life about to be extinguished. In 'The Full Treatment' the eponymous therapy turns out to be nothing less than euthanasia, while 'Only the Lonely' signals its subject in the title, and at the same time evokes the haunting Roy Orbison pop song of 1960, in a tale that sees a sickly medical orderly helping a cancer sufferer meet his end sooner than he should. Meanwhile, in *Rebel Rebel*, 'Y Meudwy yn y Coed' depicts the life of a hermit in a forest cabin dealing with the death of his wife, and the subsequent loneliness, while 'Yr Heretig' chronicles the dying moments of Pelagius, the British or Irish theologian who denied Augustine's theory of original sin. It's as if loneliness is contagious.

In a review/interview in the *Western Mail* it was suggested that *The Murenger and Other Stories* showed a mastery of the satisfying ending. When I was asked by the journalist to explain what made a satisfactory ending, the explanation I gave was that 'a successful story has the sort of ending where you exhale satisfaction as a reader when you get there, like squeezing the last air out of a piano accordion, a beautiful lingering sound. I try to create that sort of effect and the more stories I write the more I can trust instinct to help me do so.'⁵²

You can hear that sound, that desperate wheeze of a final breath at the end of 'Heskyn at Large', when this lonely man takes his own life:

Back in his cell of a room Heskyn ate a final maple flapjack laced with light Dominican rum, then he plumply placed his lips to the little silver trumpet of poisonous material from Porton Down. The lonely man then sounded one, long searing note, chiming out human loneliness.

⁵² 'A irresistible collection of strange tales,' *Western Mail*, 25 January, 2020, p.26.

The note, so unexpectedly high in its pitch and so painfully sustained, blew out over the desiccated lands of no succour, before circling the planet like a plangent banshee moan, or maybe an old-fashioned police-whistle, before settling, then into a deep and permanently troubling silence.⁵³

That silence, into which all life and literature finally fall, is what we work against with the quiet musics of the short story. It's no brass band, as Rhys Davies avers, but insistent in its singing; the short story still manages to make its melodies heard above life's clangour. It's that sound, you know, of the pin slipping out of the grenade, when you listen expectantly because your life depends on it, that palpitating, poised and vital kind of *hush*.

⁵³ Gower, *The Murenger*, p.136.

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