The Ex-centric Voice: The English-Language Short Story in Wales

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I.

While the poetic tradition is at the heart of Welsh writing in both languages, it is striking how frequently and how successfully English-language writers in Wales have chosen to express themselves in the form of the short story. After poetry, the short story is their major form of expression. It is interesting to reflect on why this should be. Firstly, it is perhaps, in its linguistic concentration and potential for lyric intensity, the closest prose form to poetry. And, of course, a number of poets have also been outstanding short story writers: Glyn Jones, Dylan Thomas, and Alun Lewis, for example. Secondly, with the exception of Rhys Davies, none of these Welsh authors were full-time, professional writers: Glyn Jones and Gwyn Thomas were school teachers, Gwyn Jones was a university teacher, Alun Lewis was briefly a teacher before joining the army. Even Dylan Thomas spent much time doing other things in order to earn money: writing for the BBC and, indeed, for film companies. In other words, one might argue that to write short stories was perhaps easier than to attempt a novel, given the time and the imaginative energy involved.[1] And, of course, thirdly, there were magazines in which to get one's short stories published; even before the launch of Keidrych Rhys' Wales in 1937 and Gwyn Jones' Welsh Review in 1939, one could publish in the London magazines: in Life and Letters To-day, in New Stories, in The Adelphi, and so on--and in the war years there was, despite restriction on paper, a growth in the market for short stories.[2] However, in addition to these factors, I want to argue in this paper that there may be more subtle reasons why the short story as a form has been such a potent means of expressing Welsh experience in English.

But before doing so perhaps one ought to point out the remarkable fact that as yet there is no full-scale study of the Welsh short story in English; some of the points we'll be considering in a preliminary way in this paper will, perhaps, have to be addressed when that study comes to be written. Indeed, in general--if we cast our eyes wider to England and America--there has been relatively little theoretical, or even critical, work done on the short story as a literary genre, certainly if you compare it to the amount of theorizing which has

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[1] On this point, see Glyn Jones, The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing (London: Dent, 1968) 52.

[2] In fact Life and Letters To-day, under the editorship of Robert Herring, published several special issues devoted to English-language writing from Wales. See Meic Stephens, "The Third Man: Robert Herring and Life and Letters To-day", Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays 3 (1997): 157-69.

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been applied to the novel: there is hardly anything of significance, in fact, until the 1950s and 1960s. In 1963, Frank O'Connor published his influential book The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story.[3] O'Connor was not only, of course, himself a distinguished short story writer , but was Irish, the significance of which will become evident in a moment. O'Connor argues--to abbreviate somewhat ruthlessly--that in its fragmentariness, its concentration on the discrete, disconnected episode rather than the social perspective of the novel, in its concern with the small detached group of characters or the individual, rather than the communal, the short story characteristically articulates the experience of what O'Connor calls "submerged population groups" (here we might recall O'Connor's Irish roots):
I am suggesting strongly that we can see in [the short story] an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups whatever these may be at any given time--tramps, artists, lonely dreamers, and spoiled priests. The novel can still adhere to the classic concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community--romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.[4]

In other words, the short story, according to O'Connor, tends to articulate the experience of the marginalized, the isolated, the lonely: ". . . in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society".[5] Not always, clearly--not all short stories are the same (O'Connor's key writers in his introductory chapter are Gogol and Chekhov)--but one might argue that it is a thesis that fits short story writers as different as say, Conan Doyle and John Cheever, Thomas Hardy and Joyce Carol Oates.

Interestingly, an American critic, Thomas Gullason, writing contemporaneously with O'Connor, comes to a strikingly similar conclusion, that "the novelist has been called the 'long distance runner', and he is not lonely. The short story writer has been called a 'sprinter', and he is lonely".[6] Ian Reid, writing in the 1970s, seems to echo O'Connor: "The short story seemed especially suitable for the portrayal of regional life, or of individuals who, though situated in a city, lived there as aliens".[7] In other words, the short story has been constructed by a number of critics as a form which frequently deals with what Clare Hanson sees as the "ex-centric", the experience of those individual and groups "not part of official or 'high' cultural hegemony"--in other words marginal groups or individuals who are outside the main centers of power. Hanson refines O'Connor's view, again relating the form to the subject matter:

> The formal properties of the short story--disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity--connect with its ideological marginality and with the fact that the form may be used to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature.[8]

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[3] Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story (London: Macmillan, 1963).
[4] O'Connor, 20-21.
[5] O'Connor, 19.
[6] Thomas H. Gullason, "The Short Story: An Underrated Art", Studies in Short Fiction 2 (1964): 13-31.
[7] Ian Reid, The Short Story (London: Methuen, 1977) 24.
[8] Clare Hanson, ed., Re-Reading the Short Story (London: Macmillan, 1989), 2.

And she extends O'Connor's perspective to include later developments in the form, on both side of the Atlantic; the short story is for her a form which lends itself to the experience of losers and loners, exiles, women, black writers, who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological framework of their society. . . .[It is] the chosen form of the exile--not the self-willed émigré, *but the writer who longs for a return to a home culture which is denied him*.[9]

I first read that passage a couple of years ago while supervising a Ph.D. student working on Thomas Hardy's short stories--and of course it fits Hardy's short fiction perfectly: all those lonely, marginalized figures outside the village communities, those communities themselves far away from the new urban centers of power in Victorian England. But when I read it, I also related it to the situation of the Welsh short story writer writing in English and the passage--and especially that last phrase ("the writer who longs for a return to a home culture which is denied him")-- started to resonate with significance. Not only has Wales been for centuries geographically but (more importantly) politically and culturally away from the centers of power--especially London--but the Welsh writer in English (what some critics still call the "Anglo-Welsh" writer) is of course doubly marginalized. He or she is not English, not writing in the English literary tradition (though he or she will of course be very aware of that tradition, and writing within earshot of it). But the chances are that he or she will not be Welsh-speaking; aware of the rich and continuing cultural heritage in the Welsh language, he or she will be shut out from it. In the words of the poet Harri Webb, the Welsh writer in English is "caught between two languages" and two cultural traditions.[10] "The writer who longs for a return to a home culture which is denied him".

I'm suggesting, in other words, that, as well as those other social and economic factors mentioned earlier which led Welsh writers in English to express themselves in the short story, there is this other, underlying factor, of which the writer himself may not be fully aware, but of which, I want to argue, we see the evidence in the stories themselves: that the form loans itself to some of their most profound intuitions of marginalization, of loneliness and detachment, or at best an ambiguous relation to the culture and society that surrounds them.

II.

"...a home culture which is denied him," writes Hanson. Or denied her. For while it has been received wisdom that Welsh writing in English is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon, the product of profound industrial, economic and cultural changes in South Wales in the early years of the century--factors which *were* obviously crucial--in the last couple of years attention has started to be be given to a number of neglected figures writing in English in Wales--and about Wales--in the nineteenth century and earlier, especially women writers. I found it interesting, for instance, to apply the theories suggested by

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[9] Hanson, 2-3. My emphasis.

[10] Harri Webb, "Thanks in Winter," Harri Webb: Collected Poems, ed. Meic Stephens (Llandysul: Gomer, 1995), 84.

O'Connor and Hanson to the stories which Jane Aaron has collected in the fascinating collection Across the Valley: Short Stories by Women from Wales, c. 1850-1950 .[11]

The women writers whose work is collected in this anthology were, of course, throughout the period, doubly marginalized: Welsh and women. Moreover, they were by definition educated and middle-class--or they wouldn't have been writing at all and certainly not in English. The biographical notes in the collection underline the point: Sara Maria Saunders, writing in the late nineteenth century, was born in Cardiganshire, the daughter of a magistrate, and married a Methodist minister; the immensely popular "Allen Raine" [Anne Adaliza Puddicombe, née Evans] was the daughter of a solicitor and married a banker; Bertha Thomas' father was a clergyman. Other writers in the collection were from Welsh landowning families. So by definition these women writers were detached from the main body of Welsh experience in the period, the life of the farms and of the industrial valleys. Indeed, Jane Aaron carefully subtitles her book "Short stories by Women from Wales" because a number of these women moved away from Wales to England on marriage or, this century, to work. Again then, detachment.

This detachment, this distance, culturally and in some cases geographically, seems to manifest itself in the stories in a number of ways. A significant number of the stories, for instance, are told by a first-person narrator and a number of these narrators are portrayed as visitors to Wales, who relate stories they have supposedly heard from local characters. In "The Madness of Winifred Owen," for instance, by Bertha Thomas, published in 1912, Mrs. Trinaman, "landlady of the 'Ivybush' [an inn] at Pontycler , in the heart of South Wales," tells her story to the narrator who is a young woman visitor staying at the inn while on a cycling holiday. Interestingly, Bertha Thomas' narrator sees Wales as a "strange land": "Wales, the stranger within England's gates, remains a stranger still."[12] Wales is portrayed as "other", a place indeed where supernatural things may go on.

In fact, the Wales these stories construct --right through from 1850 to about 1950--is remarkably consistent: it is almost invariably rural (only one story out of the twenty is set in an urban environment); Wales is portrayed as a place of small villages and remote hillsides, often bathed in sunshine. Here, for example, is Ellen Lloyd-Williams, writing in the 1920s: Ty Bach . . . stood close beside the bank of Ayron river. The ripple of water echoed all day long in every wall of that little, thatch-roofed house. It whispered the folk to sleep at nightfall, and woke them again next day with the glancing sunlight that danced from the little waves to the leaded panes and back again.[13]

In a recent essay, Linda Adams writes as follows--she is writing specifically about the image of Wales that we get in neo-Romantic writing in the 1940s epitomized in the Caseg Broadsheets, but what she says seems to be true of the Wales constructed by many of the women writers in this collection:

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[11] Jane Aaron, ed., The View Across the Valley: Short Stories by Women from Wales, c. 1850-1950 (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1999).
[12] Bertha Thomas, "The Madness of Winifred Owen," in View Across the Valley, 70.
[13] Ellen Lloyd-Williams, "The Call of the River," in View Across the Valley, 91.

> The *hiraeth* they express is a timeless . . . nostalgia for an Edenic landscape, or sexual longing for an absent lover in the context of anxiety or dread, so that feelings for the body merge with feeling for the land.[14]

In Hilda Vaughan's story "A Thing of Nought" (1934), Megan's meeting with her old love, Penry, after his years of absence in Australia is, indeed, closely linked to the landscape. As she looks down the hillside, Megan sees Penry reappear, emerging into her sight out of the landscape: "As she lingered in the mellow golden sunlight, a speck appeared upon the road and grew presently into the figure of a man."[15] Penry, described earlier as "tall, broad-shouldered, wind-tanned, blue-eyed" with "the sun on his bright hair," is associated with the life of the natural world.[16] But their love must remain unfulfilled--Megan is now married to the local minister, grim and repressive--and Penry leaves, once more merging with the landscape: "as Penry disappeared from sight, the last glint of sunlight vanished from the tops of the hills"; the landscape of Wales becomes the site of Megan's loneliness.[17]

And remembering the O'Connor-Hanson thesis, and given the sense of detachment these Welsh women seem to be expressing in their English-language stories, unsurprisingly we find in several other stories figures who are lonely outsiders or isolates, not all of them women: the preacher in Mallt Williams' "David" (1896) becomes marginalized by his choice of religion; Mr. Bracchi, in Rhian Roberts' "The Pattern" (1947)--the only story with an urban setting--is isolated by his nationality as an Italian living in South Wales in the Second World War; in Allen Raine's "Home Sweet Home", published in 1908, old Nancy Vaughan is dispatched to the workhouse by her cold-blooded son and his wife, from the old farm house where she has lived all her life; one night she escapes from the workhouse, and disappears. One of the other women assumes "Well, she's gone home, of course . . . to that place she was always bothering about. But I don't believe there was such a place; but 'tis there she's gone, be bound! Oh! course, she's gone home."[18] In fact--in tones of late-Victorian sentiment--Nancy is found dead on the road in the snow, alone: "...with the pure white snow for her winding sheet, and the big grey boulder for a headstone, and on her face a smile of peace and content, for she had reached Home."[19]

"I don't believe there was such a place"--the "Wales" of these stories in fact tells us much about the women that wrote them. One remembers again Hanson's line about the writer "who longs for a return to a home culture which is denied him"--or her; but here it is a longing for a place, for a way of life, that scarcely ever existed. In many cases, we might suggest, the portrayal of Wales in these stories articulates a longing for roots and identity by these women whose connections with the actual social life of Wales in the period was socially and/or geographically tenuous. Indeed, these stories tell us very little about the actualities of Wales itself between 1850 and 1950. There is nothing here, for instance, of industrialism, nothing about the huge shifts from the boom years at the end of the

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[14] Linda Adams, "Fieldwork: The Caseg Broadsheets and the Welsh Anthropologist," Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays, 5 (1999): 69.
[15] Hilda Vaughan, "A Thing of Nought" in View Across the Valley, 150.
[16] Vaughan, "A Thing of Nought," 134.
[17] Vaughan, "A Thing of Nought," 154.
[18] Allen Raine, "Home Sweet Home," in View Across the Valley, 58.
[19] Raine, "Home Sweet Home," 58.

nineteenth century to the disasters of the 1930s, nothing of the struggle of working-class families to survive.

III.

For those realities we have to go to the novels and stories of Gwyn Thomas, some of the stories of Glyn Jones, to Lewis Jones' novel Cwmardy (1937) and Gwyn Jones' Times Like These (1936). But the line of demarcation is not simply one of gender. In Gwyn Jones' short stories we find a "Wales" that is as rural and as remote as that which we find in the stories written by these women writers. Of the thirty stories in the Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, only two are set in the industrial valleys which Jones portrays so vividly in his novel Times Like These, and in which he grew up, the son of a collier.[20] However, the Welsh countryside we find in Jones is not the gentle, lyrical place presented in most of the women writers. It is harsh, it is dynamic and it can be violent, a point the stories seem to insist on.

In "Shining Morn" (published in the 1940s), a boy out with his dog finds a rabbit with its leg in a trap; the boy is too frightened to put it out of its misery; later, when he comes back along the path, the rabbit is gone, but the leg is still in the trap. In its agony and desperation the rabbit has gnawed it off. Again, in "A White Birthday", in deep snow the farmer finds one of his ewes on a ledge; she has given birth to her lamb but has been helpless to protect it:

> A couple of yards away two ravens had torn out the eyes and paunch of her new-dropped lamb. They looked at the man with a horrid waggishness, dribbling their beaks through the purple guts.[21]

Then comes a message that the farmer's wife has herself just given birth; characteristically the animal and human worlds are brought together--the child has been born into a world which is harsh and rugged and unrelenting to the individual human being. Indeed repeatedly in the stories the violence of the natural world informs the narratives through the imagery, associating the humans with the animal world: "the idea . . . bit into him like a ferret into a rat's brain"; "he advanced . . . like a plump and splayfoot pigeon approaching a hawk"; "The men drank from two-handed tankards . . . but the boys from Pwll-hobi swung each on a bottleneck like hedgehogs on a full udder."[22]

In his Introduction to Collected Stories, actually written in the 1970s, Gwyn Jones describes rural West Wales, in somewhat more lyrical terms-- "gorsebloom headland, drift of sheep on the hillside inland, soft blue slumber of the summer sea, noontide swoon of islands" --and then he goes on:

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[20] Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998); Some of the points made in this section are developed in my short essay on Gwyn Jones, "Separate, different, individual", New Welsh Review 48 (Spring 2000): 20-22.
[21] "A White Birthday," in Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 204.
[22] Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 41, 46, 85.

> And animals--no need to invent those. Or the people, recurrent Adam on the green land, silent, watchful, enduring, carrying you and me and the whole world on his back; and the recurrent woman, Lilith or strong Eve, blackberry-haired, foxglove-tongued, sleek in her smooth black dress as a seal in water. No need to invent those either.[23]

"No need to invent. . . "? Were Cardiganshire women ever like this? (Lilith occurs in Isaiah: she is an Assyrian demon, associated with the night, a sort of vampire; in Rabbinical literature, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, displaced by Eve.) We notice that word "sleek," with its connotations of sensuousness--sexy but perhaps treacherous. Mrs. Bendle, the Welsh farmer's wife in "The Pit" who is tempted by the man staying with her and her taciturn husband, is "a fine sly-faced woman, smooth and supple . . . her hair raven black."[24] And again there is the association with the natural world: Mrs. Absalom in "The Green Island" is as "sleek as a cat"; in "Death on Sistersland" Mrs. Yorath has a "strong, lithe, cat-like body"; the young woman who arrives at the farm of the loner, Craddock in "Shepherd's Hey" is seen by the narrator as "a tricky stranger" with a "snake supple torso."[25]

The only exception to this recurring--and rather odd--portrayal of women is the mother in "All on a Summer's Day", set on a Welsh farm in wartime; the mother is keeping the farm for her son who is away in the forces. "A farm needs a man" says this mother, although she is herself tough and resilient, physically and emotionally.[26] Indeed she shares many of the qualities of the farmers we see in the stories, the enduring "Welsh Adam" that Gwyn Jones refers to in his Introduction: hard, resilient, taciturn, unconcerned with things of the modern world, determined above all to ensure the continuity of the farm. In "All We Like Sheep," Cadno farms the harsh uplands: "something in the unyielding land dowelled with his own temper."[27] Craddock in "Shepherd's Hey" lives alone on his upland farm. Craddock--who wears a tunic from his old army battle dress-- is originally from the South Wales valleys but he has build up the hill farm, fighting land and weather. He watches his sheep and, the narrator tells us, "It was thus Abraham felt, and Isaac, and Israel's seed in Gerar and Hebron."[28] Into this patriarchal place comes the tricky young woman we have already seen, with her snake-supple torso. She is from the town, and bored by the farm, but intrigued by the muscular, taciturn Craddock and she seduces him; called "Sally", we learn that her name is in fact "Salome". When her weasely husband arrives, Craddock tells him to leave; in revenge the man burns down Craddock's barn. At the end the urban intruders both gone, Craddock is alone with his beasts, preparing to rebuild his barn.

One does not need to spell out the point: Gwyn Jones' narrative assent, his imaginative endorsement, seems to be repeatedly for the figure of toughness and resilience, struggling against the adversities of nature and climate, and struggling alone. (And it is essentially a masculine struggle; male integrity and achievement can, it seems, be undermined

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[23] "Introduction," Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 5.
[24] "The Pit," in Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 9.
[25] Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 162, 377, 283, 287.
[26] "All On a Summer's Day," in Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 333.
[27] "All We Like Sheep," in Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 44.
[28] "Shepherd's Hey," in Collected Stories of Gwyn Jones, 284.

by the tempting female.) Here is Gwyn Jones in an essay, written in 1981, describing a contemporary Welsh hero:

> He has been a life-long fighter, braced by the knowledge that you must not take on only those battles you expect to win. That would be the easy satisfaction of fighting for glory. . . . You must fight for your cause because it is your cause, even though it may carry with it the bitter lesson that the majority of your fellow-countrymen neither approve your struggle nor want your sacrifice.[29]

This is Gwyn Jones' view of Saunders Lewis. But again we notice the concern with individual integrity, the image of lonely unflinching battle. The reference to battles and unflinching heroes should remind us, of course, that from his working-class roots, the son of a collier, Gwyn Jones became not only a distinguished writer and editor but a professor of English in the University of Wales, and a world authority on the Vikings. Is it too fanciful to suggest a connection between the admiration for lonely heroic (and essentially masculine) struggle--the subject of the Norse literature on which he wrote so extensively--and the drive necessary to go from that collier's house to the world of scholarly success?

And again we notice how he has moved outside his home community in the South Wales valleys: he is no longer working-class; he is Welsh but not Welsh-speaking, he is a distinguished academic but in Wales, not London or Oxbridge. He is, wherever you position the center, outside, ex-centric. "I am," he wrote in an essay in 1981, "a convinced believer in what, within the law and the bounds of regard, is separate and different and individual in us all."[30] This is far from the notion of social community and socialist politics that we find in several of his contemporary writers.

IV.

The world--and the Wales--of Rhys Davies' fiction is very different. He is one of the few Welsh writers in English who is an exception to the point I made earlier about Welsh writers always having another job: Davies was a fulltime writer and indeed he wrote some eighteen novels as well as publishing over hundred short stories. He was born in 1901 in Blaenclydach in the Rhondda, a working-class community, of course. Lewis Jones (who was to be not only a Marxist activist but one of our most significant working-class novelists) was growing up just a couple of miles away. But Davies' father didn't work in the colliery; he owned and ran a small grocery shop, "The Royal Stores"; in other words, again, Rhys Davies was *in* a Welsh working-class community but not quite *of* it.

Indeed he was ex-centric in other ways too. His parents were both Welsh-speaking, but Rhys and his brother and sisters were not taught the language--characteristic in that time and in that class (one thinks of Dylan Thomas not only not being taught Welsh by his Welsh-speaking parents but being sent to elocution lessons): English was the language of social advancement, the language to make money in.

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[29] Gwyn Jones, "Three Poetical Prayer-Makers," Background to Dylan Thomas and Other Explorations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.
[30] Jones, "Three Poetical Prayer-Makers," 54.

And Rhys Davies gradually discovered as he grew up that he was homosexual. To be gay in the Rhondda in the early years of the century was indeed to be marginalized; not only was homosexuality illegal, of course, but the community in which Davies lived was one in which gender roles were very clearly demarcated and in which there were very clear ideas as to what constituted masculinity; in his autobiography Davies remembers "our heavily masculine world": men worked down the pit, men played rugby, and, perhaps, they sang in male-voice choirs.[31] And the chapel, too, of course--and the Davies family as respectable small business people were certainly chapel-goers--had clear views about sexual irregularity of any kind.

Thus Rhys Davies was a member of a very special "submerged population"--to use O'Connor's phrase again. Unsurprisingly, in his early twenties he left for London: "The London lack of concealment in everything intoxicated me," he wrote later. "Homosexuality--a term I did not know till I went to London--was not a thing to shut away."[32] At the same time, of course, being in London, the "cultural capital," did not make him any the less an outsider: he was still gay and he was Welsh, and continued to write about Wales. Indeed his whole life in bohemian London--and he lived there until his death in 1978--was lived in a series of rented flats and bed-sits, usually alone. At first, he writes "I had felt myself a foreigner in London, more *en rapport* with European exiles there than with English people. I found among the English an indulgent dismissal of Wales."[33] In the late twenties Davies spent a winter living cheaply in the south of France where he met and became friendly with another outsider, D.H. Lawrence. "He spoke", wrote Davies, "of the way those elders of England had tried to curb him--how, indeed, they had curbed him. "I know I'm like a monkey in a cage," he rapped. . . ."But if someone puts a finger in my cage, I bite--and I bite hard."" Davies goes on: "Sometimes he reminded me of all I had learned of Dr. William Price, the burning prophet and early socialist in nineteenth century South Wales."[34]

In fact, Davies devotes a whole chapter of his autobiography to William Price--rather an unusual thing to do in one's autobiography, if one thinks about it. He also devotes a section to Price in his non-fiction study <u>My Wales</u> (1937). William Price was an extraordinary figure: a qualified doctor, he lived all his long life near Pontypridd, dying in 1893 just before Davies' birth. Price became fascinated by the pagan rites of the ancient druids, carried out his own rituals around a supposedly ancient stone on the hill, above Pontypridd, dressed frequently in a fantastic costume of green and blue and capped by an animal skin. Things came to a head when, in 1884 on the death of his little son, whom he had christened "Jesus Christ," Price attempted to cremate him up on the hill outside Pontypridd and was arrested. In the ensuing court case he was acquitted, the landmark judgment being that cremation was not illegal in Britain. Given all this, and given Price's penchant for sunbathing in the nude and for his non-respectable sexuality--Price fathered a large number of children on a variety of women, right into old age--he clearly becomes something of an iconic hero for Rhys Davies, who wrote of him:

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[31] Rhys Davies, <u>Print of a Hare's Foot</u> (1969; Bridgend: Seren, 1998), 106.
[32] Davies, <u>Hare's Foot</u>, 106.
[33] Davies, <u>Hare's Foot</u>, 112.
[34] Davies, <u>Hare's Foot</u>, 131.

> He tried to stand outside his period, he made an attempt to escape the herd. But Dr Price's mistake perhaps lay in his attempt to go back, an attempt to return to that mysterious druidic life whose savour remained in his ancient Welsh blood.[35]

The last point we shall return to, but we can see why, when Davies meets D.H. Lawrence, he is reminded of Dr. Price.

As we might expect, when Rhys Davies sits down in his lodgings in London in the late 1920s to begin his career as a writer, the stories of Wales that are produced show evidence of his own outsiderdom, his being ex-centric. In the first story in the recent Collected Stories for instance, "Arfon," the boy, Arfon, born to a respected, chapel-going business couple, is odd in appearance and in behavior:

> He never grew beyond the stature of a small boy of ten, but his head was ridiculously large, and the expression on his heavy grey face was of such gravity that no one felt at ease in his presence.[36]

"He doesn't seem to belong to this world at all," Arfon's headmaster tells the boy's parents. "He didn't ought to be allowed to mix with other boys. . . . He's not Normal."[37] The boy's parents turn for assistance to all the community's authority figures: the minister, the policeman, the school master and the doctor. The boy, as he grows, longs to get away from the village.

But the overt autobiographical echoes of this early story are not typical. Although when Davies writes of his "policy of bringing some needed flesh tints" into Anglo-Welsh writing, the personal roots of such a policy are clear.[38] And flesh tints are what we see in the splendid 1930s story "Revelation"; Gomer, the recently-married young miner, is asked by Mr. Montague, the chief engineer--who is English, of course--to take a message home to Montague's wife. Gomer knocks on the door: Mrs. Montague (who we are told is half-French) assumes it is her husband, calls to him and throws open the door:

> Gomer's tongue clave in astonishment to his mouth. The gaping silence lasted several moments. A naked woman stood before him, and then slowly, slowly retreated, her fist clenched in the cleft between her breasts.[39]

In fact, when she reappears, wrapped in a "loose blue garment", Gomer realizes she is not at all ashamed. As he walks home, Gomer "suddenly made a decision that it was quite natural for a woman to meet her husband naked. It was lovely too."[40] Of course, when he suggests to his new wife, Blodwen, that he should see her naked, she is appalled; the respectable, chapel- going girl--she is desperate keen that they buy a piano for the parlor, as a

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[35] Rhys Davies, My Wales (London: Jarrolds, 1937), 175.
[36] Rhys Davies, Collected Stories, ed. Meic Stephens, 3 vols. (Llandysul: Gomer, 1996, 1998) 1: 17.
[37] Davies, "Arfon," in Collected Stories, 19.
[38] Davies, Hare's Foot, 149.
[39] Davies, "Revelation," in Collected Stories, 60.
[40] Davies, "Revelation," in Collected Stories, 60.

sign of their getting on--rushes home to her mother. In due course the mother-in-law arrives to tackle Gomer about the unnatural suggestion he has made: "For forty years I was married . . . and never once was I obliged to show myself in that awful way."[41] But the incident with Mrs. Montague has given Gomer a glimpse of what might be, of another way of responding to life, different to the chapel-governed attitudes of the Valley, but there's no place for that in this community; his glimpse of a more open, natural life has in a way isolated him.

But Davies is far from hostile to women; indeed--and here there are parallels with other gay writers like Oscar Wilde and especially E.M. Forster--in many ways he makes sympathetic common cause with women, identifying them as fellow victims in a society whose codes are defined by, and in the interests of, heterosexual men. Women are, in other words, another "submerged population" in Davies' stories. The image Davies draws of women's emotional and sexual frustration is both convincing and unique in Welsh writing. In a story called simply "A Woman" the female protagonist, pregnant by her collier lover, faces the wrath of her parents and decides to flee to be with him at his lodgings: "All her life she had felt that she never really belonged [in her family home], and all her instinct had been urged to the flowering of this moment."[42] In "Glimpses of the Moon," Ellen stands in her garden watching the birds and calls out "Those swallows got wings, but us poor women be buried like beetroot."[43]

In the well known story from the 1940s, "Nightgown", the female protagonist, whose name we never know, is married to a collier and has five sons all of who also go down the pit. Her whole life is spent in the drudgery of cleaning up after these six men, washing their clothes, and feeding them, that her own, feminine, identity is submerged: ". . . the house became so obstreperously male that she began to lose nearly all feminine attributes and was apt to wear a man's cap and her sons' shoes, socks and mufflers to run out to the shop. . . .[S]he seemed extinguished by the assembly of big males she had put into the world off her big husband."[44] Then one day she sees a beautiful silk nightgown in a shop window; she scrimps and saves from her housekeeping in order to buy it, and then puts it secretly away in a drawer. It has taken her a year, and her work and her self-starvation have taken their toll; she falls ill and dies. A woman neighbor lays her out and then the men are allowed into the bedroom to see her: there she is, transformed, wearing the beautiful nightgown:

> A stranger lay on the bed ready for her coffin. A splendid, shining white silk nightgown flowing down on her feet, with rich lace frilling bosom and hands, she lay like a lady taking a rest, clean and comfortable.[45]

It is at one level a grim echo of a bridal gown, perhaps, but the scene is also a final triumph of her femininity--though of course she has died in the process of asserting it.

Finally in "Blodwen," the young woman in the title is attracted to Pugh Jibbons, the young man who comes around the Valley village selling vegetables. Pugh lives up on the

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[41] Davies, "Revelation," in Collected Stories, 64.
[42] Davies, "A Woman," in Collected Stories, 53.
[43] Davies, "Glimpses of the Moon," in Collected Stories, 144.
[44] Davies, "Nightgown," in Collected Stories, 237.
[45] Davies, "Nightgown," in Collected Stories, 244.

mountain. "Perhaps there was a gipsy strain in him. *He was of the Welsh who have not submitted to industrialism*" (my emphasis).[46] Blodwen is virtually engaged to Oswald Vaughan, a local solicitor and thus a good prospect. The prim, inhibited Oswald does not like to walk on the mountain, as Blodwen does; when they do go for a walk, the narrator tells us her eyes are "blue and deep as the sea, and old and heavy, as though with the memory of lost countries."[47] Perhaps predictably, she is increasingly drawn to Pugh, despite her ostensible distaste for the swarthy, impertinent outsider: "Your mind is stupid," he tells her in one confrontation, "because you won't be what you want to be."[48] At the climactic close of the story while Oswald sits in her parents' parlor, with her mother apologizing for her daughter being late, Blodwen is up in Pugh Jibbons' old house: Pugh is "laying a flower on the white hillock of her belly, with tender exquisite touch, a wide flat white marguerite flower . . . his mouth pressing it into her rose-white belly, laughing."[49]

The Lawrentian echoes are obvious; indeed Davies quotes Lawrence as saying to him:

> What the Celts have to learn and cherish in themselves is that sense of mysterious magic that is born with them, the sense of mystery, the dark magic that comes with the night, especially when the moon is due, so that they start and quiver, seeing her rise over their hills, and get their magic in their blood. . . That will shove all their chapel Nonconformity out of them.[50]

Davies immediately comments: "It made me think again of our moonstruck pagan Dr William Price." We remember that reference in "Blodwen" to the "Welsh who have not submitted to industrialism"; what Davies seems to be constructing is a notion, a myth, of a pre-industrial, pre-Nonconformist Wales, a place where, supposedly, men and women lived more naturally, more sensually, more authentically. Where one could be oneself, "be what you want to be"; it is this notion of a Wales in which one might live more authentically to which Davies is gesturing in describing Blodwen's eyes as expressing "The memory of lost countries." Again one thinks of Hanson's comment about "the writer who longs for a return to a home culture which is denied him."

But in the present Davies could only be an outsider. The detachment is there indeed in his style, in the tone and register of his narrators, who stand apart from the working-class community. For example, in "The Two Friends", as the two housewives, Eunice and Gwyneth, toil up the hillside above their valley, Gwyneth stops to pull up her stocking: "I forgot my garters"; Eunice comments, "String I use. It keeps 'em up even though it cuts into the flesh and raises the veins."[51] Nothing could be more down to earth; but just a few lines further on the narrator comments that Eunice possesses "a long, austere nose that had a constant amethystine drip." "Amethystine" is from another world than that inhabited by

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[46] Davies, "Blodwen," in Collected Stories, 81.
[47] Davies, "Blodwen," in Collected Stories, 86.
[48] Davies, "Blodwen," in Collected Stories, 89.
[49] Davies, "Blodwen," in Collected Stories, 80.
[50] Davies, Hare's Foot, 133.
[51] Davies, "Two Friends," in Collected Stories, 110.

Gwyneth and Eunice; it is the arch, slightly camp tone of Rhys Davies, clearly detached from the registers of the Welsh working-class community.

V.

That community was one very familiar to my final author, Glyn Jones. But in Glyn Jones' stories, whether set in the sun-filled landscapes of West Wales or the scruffy streets of his native Merthyr, the relation between the individual and the community is again invariably a problematic one and is at the heart of many of the stories. In fact, as I have argued in my edition of Glyn Jones' stories, there are hardly any real villains in Glyn Jones' fiction, but the characters who are seen negatively are consistently those who cut themselves off--or isolate others--from the community, usually for material gain or out of pride.[52] In the extraordinary story "The Saviour", there is the grotesque mother who imprisons her daughter in a remote cottage until she is rescued by one of the handsome, gentle workmen that recur in several of the stories. In "Robert Jeffreys", one of Glyn Jones' best stories, Hannah, the grasping wife of Dafydd Morris, who keeps the local shop, isolates both herself and her husband from the local Valley community by threatening to prosecute a local character, who is something of a simpleton, for stealing half an ounce of tobacco from the shop; the young man kills himself with a shotgun and Dafydd feels himself an "Ishmael" in the village, and is an isolate for the rest of his life. In "Price-Parry," one of the humorous stories, Rev. Price-Parry holds himself coldly aloof from his poor parishioners, out of pride of his descent from the Welsh princes, until the ghostly reappearance of one of his most unrespectable parishioners, whom he has just buried, melts his pride and reconciles him with the humblest of his flock.

In "The Water Music" the young narrator, a poetic teenager in love with words, stands alone on a rock above the hillside pool where his mates are swimming, and he watches them detachedly before he ultimately decides to dive, to immerse himself in the group's play. That position--apart, watching--is the stance we get over and over in Glyn Jones' early poetry in the 1930s; wide painterly landscapes of the hills and valleys of South Wales, from a narrative point of view high on a hill. They are poems that ache with loneliness and, on occasion, with longing to be part of the working-class community. In "Hills" for example, the speaker on the hillside thinks of the miners he has seen coming off shift and remembers:

> . . . the sound of their boots
> like chattering of tipped hail over roofs;
> I can remember like applause the sound
> Of their speech and laughter, the smell of their pit-clothes.[53]

He is evidently aware of the male comradeship of the miners, and of how he is outside it. In

> "Dedication" the poet addresses his own work:
> My first choice for you, I must confess it,
> Is the hard hand, and the finger that reads slowly.

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[52] The Collected Stories of Glyn Jones, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: U. of Wales P., 1999), lvi.
[53] "Hills," in The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: U. of Wales P., 1966), 41.

> He wants his poems, he says, to be as welcome
> . . . to the workmen sitting on the new drain-pipes
> Eating their breakfast at the side of the street,
> As the smell of their bacon coming over the fire-bucket.[54]

In other words there is a concern in Glyn Jones' work with reconciling the isolate with the community, and a profound longing in several of the first-person narratives and poems to be at-one with the ordinary, working-class community, a longing again for that "home culture that is denied him."

Why this should be we can only speculate. But again one would point to the fact that like Rhys Davies, and Dylan Thomas, Glyn Jones was the son of Welsh-speaking parents but he too lost the language, although in his case he did re-learn it as an adult. Perhaps more importantly Glyn Jones, born and brought up in working-class Merthyr, was the son, not of a miner or steelworker, but of a post-office clerk and a mother who had been a teacher, who was a pillar of her chapel and was evidently fiercely aware of middle-class notions of respectability. (The narrator of one of Glyn Jones' early stories, "Eden Tree", reflects that, as you grow up, you are gradually prevented from playing games in the grimy streets and local canal with the other boys: " . . . bit by bit they got you clean--leave that alone, come away from there, don't dirty yourself.")[55] In other words, Glyn Jones seems to feel the cultural displacements not untypical of his generation in South Wales with particular urgency, to the point of an alienation that I see as one of the driving forces of his writing. In 1937--he is now in his thirties and living in suburban Cardiff as a school teacher--he writes in his unpublished journal:

> Tonight I felt full of anger and hatred, in coming back to this house. . . . I walked in the middle of the road in order not to feel the 'smugness' which was coming out of the houses on every side. . . . I constantly feel like some kind of Ishmael, excluded from everything. This feeling has become part of my nature, worst luck.[56]

In another entry in the same year he writes:

> I'd like to give up all these things---house, my bourgeois life, and go down to Bute Street to live simply, without bothering with neighbours . . . possessions or anything else.[57]

There again is "the culture that is denied him"--working-class life, this time in Bute Street in Cardiff's dockland, where he feels he can live more authentically.

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[54] "Dedication," in Collected Poems of Glyn Jones, 201.
[55] "Eden Tree," in Collected Stories of Glyn Jones, 77.
[56] Glyn Jones, journal entry, October 1937, Glyn Jones Papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; The journal is amongst the uncatalogued portion of the Glyn Jones Papers. This entry and the one cited in the next note are both written in Welsh, the language in which Glyn Jones wrote his most personal journal entries. The translation of both passages is my own.
[57] Glyn Jones, journal entry, July 1937, Glyn Jones Papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

The apartness, the position of the watcher on the hillside, also manifests itself in the style of Glyn Jones' writing. We see this in the poetry, the sense there of detachment, of defamiliarization from the world, especially in moments of high emotion: in the early poem "The Death of Prince Gronw," for example, after stabbing his brother the narrator looks up:

> I saw across the bank outside
> Grass, like thin hairs along an arm.[58]

Those who know Glyn Jones' work will recognize the vividness of the simile: such graphic, even bizarre similes are one of the stylistic features which give his work such energy: in the story "Explosion," the little boy describes his teacher as having a "bald spot at the back of his head surrounded by his black fuzzy hair like the pink spot of flesh under a dog's tail."[59] In "The Last Will," a candle splutters "like a pinch of toenails thrown on the fire."[60] This sense of the strange otherness of the world outside the self also, it seems to me, accounts for that other characteristic of Glyn Jones' fiction: the extraordinary, unflinching way some of the people are described, complete with warts, birthmarks and bad teeth: here's how the little boy sees his auntie in "An Afternoon with Ewa Shad"; she was:

> . . . a fat woman wearing a black flannel bodice with grey pinstripes and a wet sack apron that hurt you when she wiped your nose with it. On her forehead she had lines across like you use for music, and her grey hair was coming down out of her combs like the feathers of an untidy hen. Her nostrils were black and big enough for her to put her thumbs up them, and there were three or four little round lumps of shiny purplish skin growing on her face, each very smooth and tight-looking and with a high polish on it. And one of those lumps . . . had a long brown hair curling out of the top of it.[61]

"People do look odd, very often if you look carefully," Glyn once said to me. But it is a view of people and of the world that is born of apartness, the world as odd, the world as other.

VI.

Clearly, this paper has considered only a small sample of the work published in the short story form by the English-language writers of Wales. But the sense of being an outsider, of a longing for rootedness in the security of a "home culture," might be further demonstrated by considering, to take just two examples, the short fiction of Alun Lewis--where the anguish of displacement, socially, then geographically and metaphysically, provides much of the creative pressure of the writing--and of Dylan Thomas, where the surreal otherness of the outer world in the early stories is replaced in the later work by an impulse away from the stresses of the present to the lost world, the lost "home culture" of childhood.[62]

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[58] "The Death of Prince Gronw," in Collected Poems of Glyn Jones, 172.
[59] "Explosion," in Collected Stories of Glyn Jones, 128.
[60] "The Last Will," in Collected Stories of Glyn Jones, 155.
[61] "An Afternoon with Ewa Sha," in Collected Stories of Glyn Jones, 133.
[62] On this point see Jeni Williams, "The Place of Fantasy: Children and Narratives in Two Short Stories by Kate Roberts and Dylan Thomas", Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays 6 (2000): 45-66.

Nor is the short story in Wales restricted to the cultural experience, the shocks and displacements, of previous generations. Welsh writers in English, it is evident, still find the short story a natural mode in which to express their experience of contemporary Wales. This is certainly suggested by the fact that four anthologies of new short stories have been published since 1994, including the recent volume Mama's Baby (Papa's Maybe) from Parthian which contains fifty five stories in its 500-plus pages. Stylistically, these recent stories are for the most part less distinctive than the work of the 1930s and 1940s and are located more firmly in a realistic present. But it is still evident that the form continues to appeal to the expression of the experience of the displaced or rootless or "submerged"; the Parthian volume includes stories about junkies and about homosexual experience, and one might argue still for the presence of a a more fundamental sense of social and cultural insecurity as an undertone to such writing. Two of the recent anthologies collect work by women--it is perhaps not entirely a coincidence that Jane Aaron's collection appeared between them--and a reviewer of the second of these, Catwomen from Hell: Contemporary Short Stories by Women from Wales (Honno), makes a comment that firmly, and strikingly, locates this contemporary writing in the conception of the short story we found in O'Connor and Hanson, a sense of the loss of a "home culture," which has particular resonance in English-speaking Wales; in these stories, the reviewer notes,

> . . . we find people outside the mainstream, a Jew, a black Cardiffian, uncomprehending children, and the deranged and senile. . . . If the country is like its writers, marginalisation is perversely central to our psyche.[63]

[63] John Harrison, review of Catwomen From Hell: Contemporary Short Stories by Women from Wales, ed. Jan Thomas, New Welsh Review 49 (Summer 2000): 88.

Appendix: Collections of Welsh Short Stories in English

Welsh Short Stories (London: Faber & Faber, 1937)

Welsh Short Stories, ed. Gwyn Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1941)

Welsh Short Stories, ed. Gwyn Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956)

Welsh Short Stories, ed. George Ewart Evans (London: Faber & Faber, 1959)

The Shining Pyramid, ed. Sam Adams and Roland Mathias (Llandysul: Gomer, 1970)

Twenty-five Welsh Short Stories, ed. Gwyn Jones and Islwyn Ffowc Elis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971)

The Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories, ed. Alun Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)

Pieces of Eight: Contemporary Anglo-Welsh Short Stories, ed. Robert Nisbet (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982)

The Green Bridge: Stories from Wales, ed. John Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 1988)

The New Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories, ed. Alun Richards (London: Viking, 1993)

Luminous and Forlorn: Contemporary Short Stories by Women from Wales, ed. Elin ap Hywel (Cardiff: Honno, 1994)

Tilting at Windmills: New Welsh Short Fiction (Cardiff: Parthian, 1995)

A View Across the Valley: Short Stories by Women from Wales, c. 1850-1950, ed. Jane Aaron (Cardiff: Honno, 1999)

Mama's Baby (Papa's Maybe), ed. Lewis Davies and Arthur Smith (Cardiff: Parthian, 2000)

Catwomen from Hell: Contemporary Short Stories by Women from Wales, ed. Janet Thomas (Cardiff: Honno, 2000)