After Writing Back: Owen Sheers, Welsh Writing in English and the Paradigm of Postcolonial Literature

Hywel Dix
University of Bournemouth

***Abstract*:** This paper will evaluate the work of contemporary Welsh writer Owen Sheers in the light of a number of arguments about Welsh culture, colonial history and postcolonial theory. It will argue that Sheers engages in the practice of 'writing back', a practice commonly associated with postcolonial literatures, but does something slightly different with it. His texts *The Dust Diaries* (2004), *Resistance* (2007), *White Ravens* (2009) and *The Gospel of Us* (2012) 'write back' not so much to the imperial powers, but to Wales's own distant literary traditions in order to rediscover and re-affirm them. That is, Sheers takes the paradigm of writing back from his reading of the anti-colonial literatures of the 1960s and 1970s and uses it in a different context. This reveals that the resources provided by the 'writing back' model of postcolonial writing have been fruitful to Sheers as a Welsh writer in the years since Wales received a degree of devolved political autonomy from the United Kingdom as a whole, which has also been a period in which Welsh culture more generally has been attempting to articulate its own voice.To make such a claim is not necessarily to suggest that Welsh Writing in English is a postcolonial literature in any reductive or simplistic sense; but to suggest that some of the practices normally associated with decolonising cultures have provided fertile ideas to Welsh writers as they attempt to express that voice.

***Keywords* :** Welsh Writing, Textuality, Counterfactual history, Orality, Writing back

Introduction: Is Welsh Writing in English a Postcolonial Literature?

There is a significant irony about Welsh writing in the English language: Wales is often seen as a land of garrulous, eloquent and poetic people yet in the canons of English literature very few if any Welsh writers can be found. Indeed, possibly the single greatest contribution of the Welsh to English literature is the word *bard,* from the Welsh *barddoniaeth* meaning poetry. At the annual Welsh-language cultural festival known as the Eisteddfod, the winner of the prize for best poet is awarded the title of *bard* and symbolically chaired, or enthroned, for the duration of the coming year. In English, however, the word *bard* is used often synonymously with Shakespeare, rather than referring to any Welsh writer. This underlines the extent to which Welsh writers, especially in English, have tended to be marginalised in the canons of literature. It also has a very particular secondary effect, creating the impression that Wales is a nation of poets – without any. In other words, the marginalisation suffered by Welsh writing in English with regard to the canon of English literature has a metonymic function, symbolically de-peopling the Welsh landscape of its poets and hence rendering it symbolically empty.

The notion of empty space played a significant part in the development of colonialist discourse during the period of European imperialism from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. This is one of the many reasons why Welsh writers and the Welsh academy have tended to identify themselves as belonging to a colonised culture, and more recently, to a postcolonial one. This identification has gained emphasis in the years since the Welsh people voted in favour of limited self-government in the referendum of 1997, the opening of the Welsh Assembly – Wales's first elected national legislature for six hundred years – in 1999, and the extension of the Welsh Government's powers with a further referendum in 2007.

Very rapidly in the years after political devolution the idea within Wales that it was a postcolonial culture came to be the dominant critical position. Thus in specific response to the

colonialist construction of the Welsh landscape as symbolically de-populated and therefore amenable to colonisation, Kirsti Bohata has written that 'the erasure of place (as space which has been imbued with meaning through language, history and human occupation)... is, of course, associated with the postcolonial concept of exile.'[1] In a similar vein Stephen Knight, writing from Cardiff University though not himself a Welshman, has been able to argue that most fictional representations of Wales produced in London prior to the 1930s 'in some way validated the colonial presence of the English and their language in Wales by shaping the views given of Wales and the Welsh people in terms of English attitudes and varying forms of condescending curiosity.'[2] Gwyneth Tyson Roberts has argued convincingly that the so-called 'Blue Books' of 1847, ostensibly a report into standards of education in Wales, functioned as a de facto colonial document that 'attacked not merely educational standards in Wales but everything that made Wales and Welsh people distinctive – in short, Welsh identity.'[3]

Perhaps the most nuanced articulation of the colonial aspects of Welsh history and hence the extent to which contemporary Wales can be considered a postcolonial culture is to be found in Jane Aaron and Chris Williams's provocatively entitled manifesto on the subject, *Postcolonial Wales.* Aaron and Williams set out with the question 'Is it feasible to think of Wales as postcolonial?' and explore that question in an open-ended way that 'does not presuppose that the relationship between Wales and England (or the British state) should be conceptualized as equivalent to that between a (former) colony and an imperial power, although there may be areas in which precisely that view is appropriate.'[4] In the same volume, Alys Thomas acknowledges that '[p]arallels between the political system of post-devolution Wales and postcolonial independent nation-states are spurious' and that 'the post-devolution political system in Wales, therefore, presents a complex picture which does not have obvious resonance with post-independence states.'[5] Nevertheless, she suggests, 'the

language of colonialism has been part of the discourse surrounding devolution in Wales.'[6] This opens the possibility that whether Wales is seen as a postcolonial nation or not, the conceptual vocabulary provided by the rich field of postcolonial theory provides a number of potentially fruitful critical resources for understanding the field of Welsh writing in English.

This paper will evaluate the work of contemporary Welsh writer Owen Sheers in the light of such complex arguments about Welsh culture, colonial history and postcolonial theory. It will argue that Sheers's texts *The Dust Diaries* (2004), *Resistance* (2007), *White Ravens* (2009) and *The Gospel of Us* (2012) can be seen as examples of the postcolonial practice of 'writing back.' In postcolonial literatures, this has been defined by Richard Ashcroft as a series of texts concerned to interrogate the discursive strategies deployed during the period of European imperialism from their own position within and between two worlds: part coloniser, part colonised; and thereby to participate in the 'rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record.'[7]

If writing back is a corrective to the cultural representations of otherness created in and by the European powers during the period of imperialism, however, Sheers does something slightly different. He 'writes back' not so much to those powers, but to Wales's own distant literary traditions in order to rediscover and re-affirm them. That is, he takes the paradigm of writing back from his reading of the anti-colonial literatures of the 1960s and 1970s and uses it in a different context. This reveals that the resources provided by the writing back model of postcolonial writing have been fruitful to Sheers as a Welsh writer in the years since Wales received a degree of devolved political autonomy from the United Kingdom as a whole, which has also been a period in which Welsh culture more generally has been attempting to articulate its own voice. To make such a claim is not necessarily to claim that Welsh Writing in English is a postcolonial literature in any reductive or simplistic sense; but

to suggest that some of the practices normally associated with decolonising cultures have provided fertile ideas to Welsh writers as they attempt to express that voice almost for the first time.

The Dust Diaries (2004) and the Non-said of the Text

Owen Sheers's 2004 book *The Dust Diaries* can be seen as something of a hybrid literary form. Part historical novel, part factual reconstruction, part travelogue and part research record it takes on a dual time frame. First, it is a narrative of a journey undertaken by Sheers's direct ancestor, the Reverend Arthur Cripps, to Mashonaland in modern day Zimbabwe in the early years of the twentieth century. Second, it records the experiences whereby Sheers himself came to read about this ancestor in his dead father's papers in the early years of the twenty-first. He records his attempts to learn more about this ancestor by carrying out library and archival research, and then by travelling to Zimbabwe even as its infrastructure is being dismantled and neglected by the dictator Robert Mugabe. The dual time frame is therefore held together both by the fact that the research carried out by Sheers in one period enables his narrative of Cripps's life in the other, and more significantly, by the high symbolic equivalence suggested by each man's journey. The fact that Cripps's voyage out takes place in 1901, almost exactly contemporaneously with publication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, is enough to cultivate a strong sense of the importance of the journey as a process of discovery. Moreover, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that occupies a position of some prominence within the field of postcolonial studies, especially since Chinua Achebe's description of it as 'bloody racist.'[8] It has elicited numerous examples of 'writing back' to the discursive strategies and power relationships of imperialism, most notably in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966).[9] Setting up a structural parallel with the journey undertaken in *Heart of Darkness* therefore from the beginning suggests that *The Dust Diaries* too will perform the gesture of writing back to it. This expectation is then fulfilled partially, and in unexpected ways.

First of all, it seems surprising that Sheers makes no overt reference to Conrad even though a sensitive reader is likely to see the congruence. The Conradian structure thus functions as an example of what Tony Bennett refers to as the 'non-said' of the text.[10] That is, its absence from *The Dust Diaries* if interpreted retrospectively can be used to inform our interpretation of the whole text. As the narrative advances, Cripps witnesses military action on Lake Victoria during World War One and having retired from it to establish his own mission becomes known as a defender of African rights – especially in the matter of land settlement. This alienates him from the European rulers, but earns him deep respect and love from his congregation. In this way, the narrative partly reverses the land grab and unequal power relationships existing during the period of imperialism and portrayed discursively in *Heart of Darkness.*

Having dedicated his life to the mission and its school, Sheers portrays Cripps as eventually exhausted through his constant struggle on behalf of the congregation he has fostered. His death occurred in 1952, the same year that King George VI died while Princess (subsequently Queen) Elizabeth was herself travelling in East Africa. While Sheers notes the date of his ancestor's death, however, he chooses to say nothing about the king's. This is another example of the non-said of the text: a sensitive historical reader is likely to be struck once again by the temporal coincidence. That Sheers decides not to advertise it overtly is perhaps his way of declaring his solidarity with the people in an egalitarian and populist sense, precisely by not proclaiming the contrary. It is very unlike, for example, the relationships portrayed in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1974), another work of postcolonial 'writing back' to European drama, in which a crisis in the Yoruba community is juxtaposed with a visit to the African continent by the then Prince of Wales in order to suggest a fundamental difference between the monarchic culture of the imperial power and the communal struggle of Nigerian society against it in 'the African encounter with Europe.'[11] In this sense,

and despite the downplaying of the Conradian comparison, Sheers too seems to 'write back' to that culture by overlooking the coincidence of Cripps's death with the accession of Elizabeth II and hence placing himself and his ancestor on the side of the communal culture in contrast to the monarchic.

Sheers records how as his health declined, Cripps lost his sight and was read to by a volunteer, Noel. No longer able to write, he dictated letters for his surviving contacts in England to his secretary (and head of the mission school), Leonard Mamvura. Indeed, the sections where Sheers tells us how he read these letters years later and writes about his own actions in pursuit of his ancestor are the most moving in the book:

> Today, reading your ideas, your hopes, your aspirations, I realised that your talent was one of disassociation: an ability to stand aside from the ideas and codes of the day and see them in the long view of humanity. Despite the prejudices of those about you, you maintained the capability to see anyone as everyman and it is this, above all, that has impressed me, and once again I feel I want to know more about who you were, about how you lived and why. Because now I have disturbed the dust of your life, I know it will not settle until I do.[12]

Sheers draws on a controlling metaphor of dust to convey the process of tracking his ancestor: the now long dead man has turned to dust just as seeking him on the pages of archive material involves sifting through dusty books. It is also a profoundly ambiguous metaphor. On the one hand it symbolises the dust storms of violent land grabbing first by the imperialists from whom Cripps had detached himself, then by Mugabe's henchmen years later. On the other, dust also calls to mind the Zimbabwean veld – where Cripps lived for fifty years. In the face of this ambiguity Sheers is forced to conclude that looking for the facts of Cripps life in written documents is rather meaningless, as though the real diaries of Cripps's life were only written in dust

– rather than ink on parchment – and as if now that the dust has now blown away, it can never be fully filled in.

In other words, there is an element of mystery in the structure of *The Dust Diaries* and this perhaps explains why the most important things in the text are left unsaid. Sheers continually wonders what had driven Cripps to his missionary work in the first place. He gradually discovers that although Cripps never married and was believed to be chaste, he had had a lover at home, Ada, and had only been driven away to his missionary work by her disapproving father. Too strong an insistence on this rather squalid cause of Cripps's spiritual vocation to help the people of Mashonaland would perhaps undermine the strength of its heroic narrative. This Sheers is reticent in doing.

There is also a more fundamental problem. Despite the text's portrayal of Cripps as antagonistic to the imperial powers in his defence of indigenous land ownership, and despite Sheers's assertion that Cripps was able to dissociate himself from the dominant ideas of the time, the uncomfortable truth remains that in his missionary role Cripps was also a part of the imperialist intrusion in Africa. In other words, in his attempt to discover and reveal a historical antecedent for his own writing, Sheers is forced to confront the inapplicability of the postcolonial model of writing back that his narrative mode nevertheless seems to cultivate. This is why the structure of *The Dust Diaries* offers to 'write back' to *Heart of Darkness* on the one hand, but then diverts readerly attention away from that same gesture on the other. That is to say, it writes back without writing back and in the end falls silent. To find his way out of the impasse, Sheers would try his hand again, in *Resistance.*

Imagining Counterfactual History: *Resistance* (2007)

Resistance, Sheers's first entirely fictional prose work, is a historical novel set some time after the end of the Second World War. Its conceit is to imagine what life would have been like in the Black

Mountains between England and Wales if Britain and its allies had been defeated by the Nazis. Imagining a counterfactual European history along these lines is not necessarily innovative in itself: writers with the critical, populist and intellectual kudos of Philip Roth, Robert Harris and Stephen Fry have all taken a similar approach in their novels *The Plot Against America, Fatherland* and *Making History* respectively. But the attraction of such a number of novelists to the Second World War is significant for two historical reasons.

Firstly, Paul Gilroy suggests that the war remains a recurring and popular reference point for the British cultural imagination because of the opportunity it affords for the popular narrative genres of both action and romance. Fictional narratives of British resistance to a powerful military machine tend to posit an image of British heroes as brave underdogs – an image that directly contradicts Britain's role as an imperial power during the same period. In other words, Gilroy suggests, the Second World War remains a cornerstone of the British imagination because it enables a comforting nostalgia, looking back to the time of Britain's imperial strength on the world stage, without pressing home too firmly the contrasting truth that Britain was more coloniser than colonised.[13] Owen Sheers in *The Dust Diaries* was unable to confront the truth that despite his humanitarian commitment as a missionary, his ancestor Cripps belonged to the imperial structure rather than being one of the victims of imperialism. The text deflected into a mystery structure to compensate for this fact. The popularity of war narratives in Britain presents a different version of the same dilemma again, and Sheers is not immune from responding in a similar way in *Resistance,* as we shall see.

Secondly, in postmodern literary theory, history as a universal teleological narrative if often both problematized and critiqued.[14] However, an increasing number of critical theorists are starting to suggest that the moment of postmodernism is itself coming to an end.[15] Richard Evans has suggested that the imagining of

alternative histories of the kind we find in Roth, Harris, Fry and others has burgeoned in recent years.[16] It seems likely that this development is related to a larger process whereby postmodern fictional practice, and its propensity to play ironic historical games, is gradually being resolved into something different. Counterfactual histories are typified not so much by the ironic critique of history's grand narratives, but by a return to history as explanatory code for how things are in the present.

In *Resistance,* the men of the Olchon Valley in the remote Black Mountains have all left their farms to join the vestiges of Britain's imagined partisan movement against the occupying Nazi forces. This means that the women of the valley are left alone to run the farms and have no choice but to work together to keep their livelihoods going. When an army unit is sent to the valley under the leadership of Captain Albrecht Wolfram, the German men help the women of the valley on the farms. Gradually it becomes clear that their real task is to find the valuable medieval *Mappa Mundi*, or Map of the World, which was supposedly moved from Hereford Cathedral to some caves in the valley at the start of the war, and which the Nazi leader Himmler wants for his private art collection.

The Welsh women and German men form a kind of world apart, each helping the others hide out from the rest of the war. Only when Maggie and the German officer Alex go to the County Agricultural show do people in the outside world discover that they have been living together. This creates trouble for both of them because the occupying soldiers have neglected their duties and the women are perceived as collaborators. Wolfram flees, urging Sarah, the woman with whom he has had an affair, to come into hiding with him. But instead she burns the *Mappa Mundi* – her real act of resistance – and wanders out onto the valley ridge, allowing herself to be taken prisoner. As in *The Dust Diaries,* the real climax of *Resistance* occurs not at this dramatic conclusion, but at a surprising point elsewhere in the plot. The most moving section is a chapter in which Wolfram brings his

gramophone to Sarah's house so that she can listen to classical music on her birthday:

> It was beautiful but she could not bear it. The music seemed to know. About her hours on the hillside, the wind like the sound of her own blood in her ears, the long nights lying awake in her abandoned bed. It was as if the notes of her heart over these past three months had been dictated directly to the hand that drew this bow over these strings to describe, so perfectly, the complex yet simple geometry of her damaged soul.[17]

As with the dust in the earlier text, the emotions provoked in response to the music are deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, it inspires a certain jubilation in Sarah because it brings her joy in an otherwise frozen, harsh and lonely landscape. On the other, it also inspires a crisis in her own self image, foregrounding as it does the fact that she has been tempted to develop an intimate relationship with a captain of the occupying army while her own husband is missing in action, hence throwing her loyalty and solidarity into question. Moreover, Sheers also draws a distinction between Sarah, as a working-class and naïve woman, and Wolfram as a better educated, culturally refined and socially mobile officer. For this reason, she is portrayed as enjoying the music but also as being both driven to self-hatred by it and feeling patronised by the man who gives it to her. Thus Sheers puts into her mouth a defiant assertion that she does not need Wolfram to introduce her to high art: 'I know what you think… Just because we live out here, because we spend our days with animals, that's all we are…. Think I've never heard music before? Well I have, like you'll never know, too. From people, not from a record either.'[18]

The stress Sheers puts through this portrayal of Sarah on the innate normalness of culture directly recalls the work of another Welsh writer, Raymond Williams (1921-88). Williams was among the most influential literary critics and cultural theorists of the twentieth century, a 'towering figure' who was revered

'across the world for the contribution he made to the generation and sustenance of socialist thought and to the cause of innovative scholarship in literature, cultural studies, politics and sociology.'[19] He devoted his career to extending the educational franchise and hence to democratising both educational institutions and cultural practices. Significantly, he was born and brought up in the same Black Mountains region that Sheers portrays in *Resistance.* Moreover, in a famous essay entitled 'Culture is Ordinary' in 1958 he had talked about the same cultural artefact that Sheers places at the heart of the novel: the *Mappa Mundi* in Hereford Cathedral.

Williams opened 'Culture is Ordinary' by describing a bus journey from the village of Pandy on the Welsh border where he grew up to the English medieval city of Hereford, a city historically associated with the exercise of military power by the English over the Welsh, and also with a high level of cultural capital.[20] By making a connection between a provincial village such as Pandy, which had not tended to feature in the major accounts of Britain's history or culture, and a more significant cultural centre such as Hereford, which had played a prominent part in both, Williams challenged the then-current idea that culture is mainly the property of a socio-economic elite. He showed that members of the ruling class had historically exerted a disproportionately strong influence in defining artistic beauty and cultural value. This gave members of that class a gatekeeper role with regard to cultural practices, so that the cultural preferences of that class had frequently been imposed on the rest of the society and generalised as if they were universal.

Presenting the cultural practices of the elite as universal had in turn had the effect of symbolically legitimising the elite's status as such, while also justifying the exclusion of the working class (as well as different ethnicities; and almost all women) from the cultural and historical record. Yet as Williams asserted elsewhere, 'English middle-class universality is something of a contradiction in terms.'[21] Accordingly, in 'Culture is Ordinary' he challenged

the dominant cultural position of the elite by arguing that cinema posters visible from the top deck of the bus were equally important in the cultural life of the border region as an ancient historical artefact such as the *Mappa Mundi* hanging in the Cathedral. Making this assertion liberated the definition of 'culture' from too narrow an emphasis on the fine arts and aesthetic tastes of an elite, and 'transformed cultural studies' into a 'marvellously rich, resourceful body of work' which 'irreversibly altered the intellectual and political map of Britain' and hence contributed to the extension of cultural democracy that was Williams's long-term commitment.[22]

This questioning of the assumption that culture is mainly defined through the aesthetic preferences associated with members of a ruling elite is precisely what Owen Sheers portrays in Sarah's mixed emotional response to the gramophone records played for her by Wolfram in *Resistance.* Although the novel was written almost fifty years after 'Culture is Ordinary,' by projecting back into the past Sheers is able to create an imaginative work that is in some respects contemporaneous with the work of Williams. It is located in the same mountainous border landscape between Pandy and Hereford as Williams depicted; and it uses the same object – the *Mappa Mundi* – as an object of resistance to a ruling order. In other words, although the class structure in Britain has changed to some extent in the decades between the work of Williams and that of Sheers, Sheers seems to have found the work of Williams still relevant in the twenty-first century. The congruence that exists between the two enables Sheers to identify and align himself with a significant precursor in the field of Welsh Writing in English, and also in the wider field of cultural politics and the democratisation of culture.

If Sheers identifies his work with the same historical outlook as Raymond Williams, Williams had in turn already aligned himself with an even earlier precursor: Thomas Hardy. 'Culture is Ordinary' was written two years before the publication in 1960 of Williams's autobiographical novel *Border Country* which draws

on Williams's own experiences of moving from a working-class background in the Welsh borders to Cambridge University and of becoming alienated both from his family and friends and from his bourgeois contemporaries at the university. This is exactly what we find in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Hardy had portrayed the tragic consequences of a working-class man's aspiration to study at a thinly-disguised Oxford, and of the savage refusal of those aspirations. Williams's *Border Country* expands on the themes both of the Hardy novel and his own 1958 essay by again exploring the assumption that culture is best understand through the machinations of a social elite. The commitment to extending access to education and using it as a tool for redefining cultural democracy amounts to a shared solidarity between Hardy and Williams, prompting Williams to declare later, 'Hardy is our flesh and our grass.'[23]

If Williams is an important precursor to Owen Sheers, and Hardy is an important precursor for Williams, it seems likely that Hardy will also be an important figure for Sheers himself, and this is what we find. Not only is the interplay and collision between a rural society and a more metropolitan governing elite common to all three writers, but there is also a section in *Resistance* that cultivates an affinity between Sheers and Hardy. During the long harsh Winter in the Olchon Valley, when the women must work together and with the occupying soldiers in order to survive, a strong snow fall threatens disaster by burying most of the farms' livestock alive.[24] This is important at the level of plot, for the desperate attempt to save some of the animals for the farm brings Wolfram and Sarah together. Moreover, it directly recalls a similar event in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd,* where Gabriel Oak's sheep are driven off a cliff by an inexperienced sheepdog, threatening both his livelihood and his courtship of Bathsheba.[25] In this common portrayal of the precariousness of rural working-class life (also a major theme in Williams) we find a shared commitment to challenging the dominant cultural representations of an elite.

Resistance was written after political devolution granted Scotland and Wales a degree of political self-determination in 1997 and in a period when the unity of the United Kingdom appeared to have been somewhat called into question. It might be stretching a historical point to relate Sheers's imagining of British wartime defeat to the symbolic demise of the unitary British state after that period, but we can perhaps say that a new found sense of Welsh autonomy enables Sheers to do something different: identify (in Raymond Williams) a valued precursor in the nascent field of Welsh Writing in English and hence to declare his own sense of Welsh difference.

However, the overall picture is complicated by Sheers's involvement in the fields both of Welsh Writing in English *and* British literature more generally, and this complexity makes any simplistic opposition between Welsh and English untenable. In *The Dust Diaries,* Sheers attempted to engage in the postcolonial practice of 'writing back' to the dominant cultural and political assumptions of empire, but the implicit critique of imperialism was slightly undermined by the discovery that his missionary ancestor was part of it. In *Resistance* he tries something different: counterfactually imagining British defeat in the Second World War. Yet the war itself remains a common reference point for British popular culture because it offers the comforting nostalgia of symbolically returning to a period of Britain's imperial strength. This means that as with *The Dust Diaries, Resistance* cannot easily be seen as a successful example of 'writing back' to British imperial history because it again shares many of the assumptions that characterise that history. Perhaps for this reason, and as with *The Dust Diaries,* the identification of a figure who can be seen as a historical antecedent then emerges as an end in its own right. This rediscovery of historical example would also typify Sheers's next two works.

Orality and the Bardic Tradition: *White Ravens* (2009)

Like *Resistance, White Ravens* is set in a rural community in the mountains of the Welsh borders during the Second World War.

It is the first work of a series called 'New Stories from the *Mabinogion*' commissioned by Seren (formerly *Poetry Wales Press*), in which contemporary writers use the medieval Welsh myths known collectively under that name as a starting point for short novellas of their own. This is not simply a matter of updating the myths, or merely of translating them from Welsh poetry into English prose. This would in any case be difficult, given that the characters in the legends behave with a visceral power, indifference to bloody violence, and lack of complex psychological coherence that we would typically associate with modern fiction. Writers in the series therefore do no so much transplant the legends from one language and setting to another, as focus on one or two details suggested in the legends and then take their inspiration from those details in order to see how the mythic structure might resonate in an entirely different historical period. In other words, *White Ravens* follows on from *Resistance* in the sense that it too identifies an important literary precursor in the field of Welsh writing and consciously aligns itself with it. It therefore follows the practice of 'writing back' that has been defined within the scope of this paper: not so much as addressing the balance of power in the imperial period, but writing back as a means of gathering past cultural resources for the articulation of a tremulous Welsh voice in the process of (re-)discovering itself.

White Ravens is inspired by the tale of Branwen, Daughter of Llyr in the *Mabinogion.* In that tale, Bendigeidfran, King of the Britons, is visited in his court in North Wales by Matholwch, King of Ireland, who asks for his sister Branwen's hand in marriage. Bendigeidfran agrees to the marriage, but during the ceremony their angry younger brother Efnysien savagely maims Matholwch's horse. To compensate Matholwch, Bendigeidfran gives him a magic cauldron capable of bringing dead soldiers back to life. Matholwch and Branwen then sail to Ireland where they rule for a time and have a son before their relationship deteriorates and Branwen sends a starling across the Irish Sea to ask her brothers to rescue her. When they arrive, Efnysien throws

the young boy into the fire and fighting breaks out. Every Irish soldier who is killed is replenished by the magic cauldron, and realising that he cannot defeat them Efnysien throws himself into the fire too. Branwen dies of a broken heart and Bendigeidfran orders his followers to cut off his head and place it on the site of the Tower of London, facing towards France, where it will ward off threats of invasion for eternity.

These last aspects of the legend are the ones Sheers uses for his inspiration in *White Ravens.* The warding off of potential invaders to ancient Britain suggested the more recent context of the Second World War. During his research, Sheers has noted that he came across the superstition that for as long as there are ravens living at the Tower of London Britain would remain unconquered. He also came across the enigmatic possibility that this myth was exploited for propaganda purposes during the war.[26] In Sheers's re-telling, therefore, Matthew is an Irish soldier invalided out of the army and working for the Political Warfare Executive in London on campaigns of propaganda and misinformation. When the ravens of the Tower die in the bombing of London, this is a threat to public morale and so he is sent to the Welsh countryside to bring six more ravens to the Tower before their deaths become known. He travels to collect them from a Welsh farmer, 'Ben' (Bendigeidfran) and meets and marries Ben's sister Branwen. Branwen and Ben's brother Evan is unable to share the family's joy at the marriage, however. He has been injured in the war himself and appears to be suffering extreme emotional repression and psychological disorder, which culminate in his maiming Matthew's horse. The rest of the action then happens approximately as in the *Mabinogion*, with the exception that Matthew and Branwen's son is not killed. He is rescued from the fire and brought up by Ben after the deaths of Branwen and Evan. Matthew returns to Britain, vowing never to return to Ireland until he has found a way of expiating his guilt.

By linking Evan's hostility to Matthew and Branwen's wedding, his asocial behaviour and his casual violence to the

experience of trauma suffered during war, Sheers succeeds in addressing one of the biggest challenges identified above: namely, how to give his characters a sophisticated psychological profile and consistency of emotional motivation that are required in a modern novel. This is unlike the myth of the *Mabinogion*, where those same facets of Efnysien's character remain unexplained in psychological terms; they simply *are*.

The principal innovation Sheers brings to the story is to use a frame narrative, casting it as a story-within-a-story. It opens with a girl, Rhian, visiting the Tower of London having run away from the farm where she lived in the Welsh borders because during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease of 2001, her family's flock of sheep has been entirely wiped out, and worse – her brothers have become rapacious thieves of other farmers' livestock as a result. As she sits outside the Tower of London contemplating her next move, an old man approaches her and tells her the story of Matthew and Branwen. The two different stories then merge when it becomes clear that the old man is Matthew himself, still waiting for an opportunity to atone for what he has done more than fifty years later, and that Rhian is his granddaughter, having been born to the son that Ben had rescued.

This frame narrative in *White Ravens,* which has no direct equivalent in the tale of Branwen, Daughter of Llyr in the *Mabinogion,* has two advantages. It enables Sheers to give the mythical structure a contemporary resonance that would otherwise be absent, by moving from the Second World War to the early years of the twenty-first century as suggested by its setting during the foot and mouth outbreak. Again we notice the potentially disastrous consequences for a fragile rural economy of the loss of a flock of sheep, and as in *Resistance* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* this again reveals Sheers's kinship with both Raymond Williams and Thomas Hardy. Moreover, Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan suggests that despite the contemporary setting, the device of having the older Matthew narrate the tale

of his younger self to Rhian in the frame narrative 'retains the essential nature of the medieval tale which would have been recited or read aloud.'[27] In other words, the legends of the *Mabinogion* exist in the Bardic tradition of Welsh poetry which is a mainly oral – as opposed to a print-based – form of literature and its tones are intended to be spoken aloud in a shared cultural experience rather than read silently by an individual.

This commitment to an oral form which is also a communal relationship is one reason why the model of postcolonial literatures has been a suggestive one for Welsh writers.[28] In anti-colonial literatures too, there is often a commitment to oral storytelling in which the privileging of the written word over the spoken, and hence of a competitive individualism over communal experience and solidarity, is reversed.[29] To achieve it in *White Ravens,* however, Sheers had to exercise considerable sleight of hand. The magic cauldron which brings dead soldiers back from the grave unable to speak in the *Mabinogion* is re-conceptualised as a pocket watch (shaped like a cauldron) that saves Matthew's life when Evan tries to shoot him. So far so good, but if Sheers followed the structure of the legend too closely, after having his life saved by the 'Cauldron', Matthew would be rendered forever unable to speak. This would militate against the creation of a frame narrative in which he tells his story to Rhian decades later. But Sheers cannot afford to sacrifice the frame narrative without losing also that commitment to the oral tradition. To enable Matthew's later storytelling, therefore, he is forced to compromise: Matthew is not rendered permanently speechless by the shooting; he merely loses his voice for a few days.

The questions remain however: how far is it possible to accord with the view that *White Ravens* ratifies a commitment to oral forms of literature; and how fully can we see it an example of an oral form? Given that the novella remains a work of prose fiction, it is more likely to be read silently by an individual than it is to be experienced aurally in collective communion. Despite its innovative use of the frame narrative which foregrounds the role

of the storyteller as such, therefore, it is hard to see *White Ravens* as a work belonging wholly to the oral tradition that it nevertheless endorses.

Towards a People's Theatre: *The Gospel of Us* (2012)

If *White Ravens* shares with certain postcolonial literatures an attempted commitment to oral forms of literature, then the most recent work by Sheers to be considered here, *The Gospel of Us* (2012) shares some of the practices of postcolonial theatre. It exists in that most unconventional form of literature: the 'novelisation' of material originally developed in another medium. Specifically, *The Gospel of Us* is a short novel in three slim volumes written by Sheers to accompany the National Theatre of Wales's 2011 *Passion Play*– for which Sheers had also written the script.

2010-11 was the inaugural season of productions by Wales's English-language National Theatre (it already had a Welsh language one), which is an itinerant theatre company without a permanent home. For this reason, its artistic director John McGrath was committed throughout the opening season to performing productions all around Wales, in a way that recalls the travelling theatre of Nigerian playwright Hubert Ogunde or the Caribbean drama of Derek Walcott in those nations during the period of decolonisation.[30] Moreover, McGrath also signalled his commitment to bringing theatre to the people by performing in unconventional locations. Thus the opening season included productions in a library; a pub; a beach; a military range in the Brecon Beacons Mountains range and others.

The *Passion* written by Sheers and directed by and starring Michel Sheen was set in Sheen's heavily industrial hometown of Port Talbot – a town also notable for having produced the actors Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins. Rather than being staged in a conventional theatre building, it too took place on the streets and public places of the town. Though clearly adapted from the Gospel accounts of the Passion of Jesus Christ, and staged over three days of the Easter weekend in 2011, the *Port Talbot Passion*

was not a simple re-telling of the Biblical story. As with the development of *White Ravens* via a process of loose affiliation with the *Mabinogion,* the *Port Talbot Passion* is perhaps best understood as having been inspired by the Gospel as a starting point for a contemporary dramatic narrative, rather than being a mere translation of it from one language and place to another.

When looked at in this way, many of the elements familiar from Sheers's earlier works are also present in his *Passion.* It is notable, for example, that despite its Biblical inspiration, the play and the novel cultivate a Pagan – as opposed to a Christian – sensibility. This directly recalls the mythical ancient Britain depicted in the *Mabinogion* and which Sheers appears to think more attuned to Britain's post-Christian present than its own official, Protestant, religion. Indeed, not only does the Anglican Church remain the state religion of England, but its disestablishment in Wales via the Welsh Church Act as early as 1914 has been seen as one of the early stages of an assertion of Welsh cultural and political difference from England, and distinctiveness from Britain as a whole.[31] For this reason, it has also retrospectively come to be identified as one of the important historical fore-runners of the political process by which Wales has more recently come to govern itself.[32]

The ironic evocation of a post-Christian sensibility in the *Passion* is one way in which Sheers contributes to that process through his writing. A second, and perhaps stronger, way of doing so is through the radical political agenda he cultivates. Thus his Christ figure is no religious saviour; he is a 'Teacher' who brings people together in opposition to the power of a multinational corporation that is planning to evict the people of the town from their homes in order to enable greater commercial exploitation of the land. As he convinces more and more people to oppose such arbitrary manipulation, they form what is tantamount to a political resistance movement that cannot be tolerated by the corporation in question so they have him arrested for sedition and executed. In other words, Sheers switches from the spiritual

realm to the more explicitly political so that as Rachel Trezise says, 'It is about *us,* the proletariat, against *them*, the bourgeoisie; socialism versus consumerism.'[33]

In *The Gospel of Us,* the 'novelisation' written to accompany the original 'staging' of the play, Sheers makes use of a similar frame narrative to the one we find in *White Ravens.* There, it represented an attempt to re-connect with the oral tradition which has existed in Welsh poetry since the Middle Ages and which arguably is one of the facets of contemporary Welsh culture that can properly be considered postcolonial. On the other hand, the efficacy of the oral device was undermined in *White Ravens* by its use in linear prose fiction which is neither communal nor oral.

The frame narrative in *The Gospel of Us* by contrast is a record of a cultural experience that was both of those things. The culmination of the performance came on the third day when Michael Sheen, as the messianic 'Teacher,' carried a wooden cross for two miles from the centre of Port Talbot to the sea front where he was symbolically executed. During the several hours that this procession lasted, the people of the town had been asked to display photographs of loved ones in the windows of their houses; to decorate the streets with images and items that made them proud; to provide food and drink and hospitality for each other; and also to participate in impromptu performances of song, dance and poetry of their own.

In this sense, although *The Gospel of Us* uses a frame device that appears to be individualistic and silent, it records a process that can be seen as one expressive of anti-capitalist, anti-imperial cultural solidarity in the most genuine way. The *Port Talbot Passion* was not so much an example of script-based drama as it was an instance of what Augusto Boal calls a 'theatre of the oppressed.'[34] It brought people together to show them that they too can participate in cultural production and in politics. The effect of the play was thus a raising of critical consciousness among its audience who were also in the most literal sense its protagonists. It showed them, as Trezise put it, 'As a collective we are mighty.

And there is breath in us yet.'[35] In this staging of the Christian Gospel in a non-Christian setting and of an anti-capitalist political outlook in a town dominated by heavy industries Owen Sheers appears to have found his most effective way of 'writing back' to date.

Conclusion: After Writing Back

This paper has evaluated four different works by Owen Sheers written during the period of devolution in Wales, when it was beginning to develop a new sense of its own political and cultural autonomy. The devolutionary process itself has led the major theorists and critics of contemporary Welsh writing to consider how far Welsh Writing in English can be seen as a postcolonial literature, and in the case of Sheers, there is a clear use of the practice of 'writing back', which is in turn a practice that is normally associated with both anti- and post- colonial cultures.

What differentiates Sheers's practice from that of the earlier generation of postcolonial novelists around the world is that his work challenges the established literary tradition from the inside as opposed to the outside. This means that specifically as a Welsh writer, his practice of writing back ends up locating and situating itself in a tradition of other Welsh writers that it actively uncovers and creates. It is tempting to see the growing sophistication in his work as evidence of a general increase in the level of cultural self-confidence and the re-articulation of a new Welsh voice during the years of increasing Welsh autonomy. The case of *The Dust Diaries* shows that this cannot be seen as a straightforwardly postcolonial practice because the text reveals the involvement of Sheers's own ancestor in the structure of imperialism – even though it tries to assert the opposite.

The gesture enacted by *The Dust Diaries* is rather one of identifying and asserting a historical fore-runner than of discursively challenging the power relationships that typified the period of empire and in which the discipline of English literature participated historically. That uncovering of historical antecedent

is then a recurring feature in the rest of Sheers's work. *Resistance* reveals the writer declaring a literary and historical solidarity with Thomas Hardy and Raymond Williams; while *White Ravens* enables Sheers to yoke a Pagan Welsh myth to Wales's own post-Christian present. That process is then taken to a logical extreme in *The Gospel of Us,* where Sheers starts with the Christian Gospel and ends up asserting a radical political anti-capitalist agenda that is properly the property of the people of the community he depicts. Coming a generation after the postcolonial novelists of the 1960s and 1970s Sheers is less concerned to write back to the fictional and historical record of the European empires than he is to gather resources for the construction of a new literary record that he situates himself within.

Notes

[1] Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p.81.

[2] Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction: From Colony to Independence,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), xi.

[3] Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: Wales and Colonial Prejudice,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p.216.

[4] Jane Aaron and Chris Williams, *Postcolonial Wales,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), XV, XVI.

[5] Alys Thomas, "'Maîtres Chez Nous'? Awaiting the Quiet Revolution in Wales" in *Postcolonial Wales* ed. Jane Aaron and Chris Williams, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), p.85.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Bill Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures,* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.196.

[8] Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *Massachusetts Review*, 18, 1977. Rpt. in *Heart of Darkness, An Authoritative Text, background and Sources Criticism*. 3rd ed. Ed. Robert Kimbrough, London: Norton, 1988, pp.251-61.

[9] Saree S. Makdisi, 'The Empire Renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the Reinvention of the Present' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1994), pp.535-50.

[10] Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism,* (London: Routledge New

Accents, 1979), p.114.

[11] Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/ Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.49.

[12] Owen Sheers, *The Dust Diaries,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) p.67.

[13] Paul Gilroy, 'Two World Wars and One World Cup' in his *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture,* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.116-25.

[14] See for example Linda Hutcheon, "'Total history de-totalized'" in her *Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.29-40.

[15] This argument is advanced, for example, by George Myserson, *Ecology and the End of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001) and Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, Colarado: Davies Group Publishers, 2008).

[16] Evans discusses the novels by Sheers, Harris and Fry in his *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History,* (London: Little, Brown Publishing, 2014), p.110; pp.112-15; p.126.

[17] Owen Sheers, *Resistance,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.229.

[18] Sheers, *Resistance,* p.230.

[19] John McIlroy, *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Education,* (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1993), p.3.

[20] Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary' (1958). Rpt. in his *Resources of Hope* ed. Robin Gable, (London: Verso, 1989), pp.3-18.

[21] Raymond Williams, 'Decentralism and the Politics of Place' (1984). Rpt. in his *Who Speaks for Wales?* ed. Daniel Williams, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003) p.206.

[22] Terry Eagleton (ed.), *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p.9.

[23] Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence,* (London: Hogarth, 1970), p.118.

[24] Owen Sheers, *Resistance,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp.149-54.

[25] Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994; first published 1874.), pp.41-45.

[26] See Sheers, 'Afterword' in his *White Ravens,* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), p.194.

[27] Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Clever Relocation: *White Ravens*' in

Planet: The Welsh Internationalist, 197, Winter 2010, p.133.

[28] See Jane Aaron, 'Bardic Anti-colonialism' in *Postcolonial* Wales, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp.137-58.

[29] This is discussed by Robin Ikegami in 'Knowledge and Power, the Story and the Storyteller: Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*' in *Postcolonial Literatures: Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott* ed. Michael Parker, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

[30] See Martin Banham, Errol Hill and George Voodyard (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.91; p.181.

[31] See Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales 1536–1990*, (Harlow: Longman, 1992), p.314.

[32] This is implicit, for example, in M. Wynn Thomas's discussion of the Welsh novelist Emyr Humphreys, which argues that 'rivalry between nineteenth century denominations is repeatedly highlighted' in Humphreys's novels as part of a 'rebellion…against the Anglicized world.' See M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p.295; p.297.

[33] Rachel Trezise, 'Death or Glory? *The Passion* in Port Talbot' in *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist,* 203, August 2011, p.129.

[34] Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* trans. Charles A. McBride, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), *passim.*

[35] Rachel Trezise, 'Death or Glory? *The Passion* in Port Talbot' in *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist,* 203, August 2011, p.135.

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