

## THE "CARADOC AFFAIR": AN ARGUMENT FOR AN ETHICS OF PLACE

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### *Abstract*

*This article develops an ethical reading of the work of Caradoc Evans focusing on My People and Taffy. My aim is to show that an ethical reading which assumes a microcosmopolitan perspective can show that the 'Caradoc Affair', the outrage with which Evans's early work was received in Wales, arose from a misreading of My People. The 'Caradoc Affair' then acquired a life of its own and was at least partly determined by the commercial interests of the daily press, particularly the The Western Mail. Moreover, an ethical reading can show why Evans's texts ultimately fail to engage with the Wales of his time in a meaningful way despite the great impact he had on generations of Welsh writers that followed, most notably on Dylan Thomas.*

Much ethical literary criticism discusses literature as if it existed in a space strangely free from the influence of culture, place, history, society and all the other determinants influencing writers and readers. In one sense this is not surprising: the project of ethical literary criticism after its resurgence in the 1990s was often directed against postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory. Theorists such as Marshall Gregory and Wayne Booth accused postmodern literary theorists of being unable to admit to ethical positions and of engaging in critique without establishing their own commitments – unless that be the commitment to critique. Furthermore, Gregory rightly points out that the social constructionist view of identity as constructed by outside forces is not wholly convincing: "We are not selves just passively molded or shaped by cookie-cutter forces of language or history. We actually negotiate our selves through time by forms of individual resistance, acceptance, and suspension of judgments" (Gregory, 2005, 55). However, as his phrasing suggests, it is unwise to ignore these outside forces altogether. Perhaps the advantage of returning to ethical criticism now is that aspects of postmodern and social constructionist thinking can be incorporated into ethical criticism. An awareness of the specificity of experience, of unequal power structures, of the fact that writing and reading occur under particular conditions, which at least partly determine how a text is created and perceived, should be at the heart of good ethical criticism (see Eagleton, 1997).

My critical position is based on what Michael Cronin has called a 'microcosmopolitan' perspective, which, using Benoît Mandelbrot's metaphor of fractal geometries, describes how place becomes ever more complex the closer the observer gets:

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"by situating diversity, difference and exchange at the micro-levels of society" (Cronin, 2003, 193) this view can challenge stereotyped perceptions of 'author', 'reader' or 'critic', who in ethical criticism are often apparently genderless, ageless and without cultural, social or national affiliations. The example I am going to discuss – what I have called the 'Caradoc Affair' – will show the value of the microcosmopolitan approach to ethical criticism.

Of course, my title refers to the more famous 'Rushdie Affair' of 1989. As Nicholas Murray noted in 1990, the 'Caradoc Affair' foreshadowed what was going to happen to Rushdie, although Evans seems to have received no serious death threats (Murray, 1990, 51). However, he was just as combative as Rushdie and relished confrontation with his detractors who, in turn, threatened to burn his books, ban them from public libraries, who threw bricks through his windows ("The Banned Book", 24 January 1916, 7) and caused disturbances on several occasions. The scandal was caused by the publication of Evans's first collection of short stories, *My People*, an event which overshadowed Evans's entire career. The fact that *My People* is often considered the foundational text of Welsh literature in the English language means that the 'Caradoc Affair' acquired an importance that went beyond the people immediately concerned in it, partly because it initiated a debilitating cultural split between English-language culture and Welsh-language culture in Wales. It therefore warrants an ethical examination (see M. Wynn Thomas, 2010, 120).

What had happened? In 1915 Andrew Melrose published a collection of short stories by the unknown journalist and former draper (David) Caradoc Evans. The provocative title was *My People* and the dust jacket promised stories telling the unvarnished truth about the people the author had grown up with in the heart of rural, Welsh-speaking west Wales. A master of PR, Melrose conceived of a blurb which drew potential readers in while appearing to warn them of the book's contents: "These stories of the Welsh peasantry, by one of themselves, are not meat for babes. The justification for the author's realistic pictures of peasant life, as he knows it, is the obvious sincerity of his aim, which is to portray that he may make ashamed" (quoted in Harris, 1987, 33 and 34).<sup>2</sup> *My People* caused outrage in Wales and among Welsh people living outside Wales, particularly in Oxford, Cambridge and London. It astounded, appalled and disgusted in equal measure because it represented rural Welsh people as backward, cunningly devious, violent and money-fixated. Evans's characters are also deeply hypocritical when it comes to their faith and in their ethical relationships with each other. Everyone is portrayed negatively in these stories: whether they are victims or perpetrators, they have no redeeming features. Moreover, the stories are written in a pseudo-biblical style that heavily ironises the way in which the characters construct their identity in terms of a sham religiosity. The language they use is a "'see-through' English designed to give the illusion of direct access to the underlying Welsh actually spoken by the characters" (M. Wynn Thomas, 2010, 150), a mixture of word-for-word translation of Welsh sentence structure, odd figures of speech, invented words and archaisms which made the Welsh language and, by implication, the people using it seem hopelessly backward (M. Wynn Thomas, 2010, 150, see also Hopkins, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> Harris believes that Melrose had genuine objections to the way religion was represented in the stories and was persuaded to publish them on the condition that he was allowed to warn potential readers of the contents of the book and by pricing it distinctively, thus distinguishing it from other books. I tend to think that the 'warning' was cleverly phrased to engender curiosity about the book and that the fact of his accepting the book for publication meant that Melrose's scruples did not overpower his business acumen (see Harris, 1988, 25).

Evans followed up *My People* with the similarly divisive collections *Capel Sion* (1916) and *My Neighbours* (1919) and fanned the flames of controversy anew by allowing his characters a life on the stage in *Taffy* (1923, revised 1925). By the 1920s, however, Evans's fiction had lost its bitterness. In *Taffy* characters were no longer nasty and outright evil: they had become figures of fun. Audience reactions, too, had changed: while some of the disturbances at the performances of *Taffy* were doubtless expressions of genuine anger, they also had something staged about them as if members of the audience had come to the theatre prepared to be outraged.

In the following I shall develop an ethical reading of the work of Caradoc Evans focusing on the two most incendiary texts, *My People* and *Taffy*. My aim is to show that an ethical reading which assumes a microcosmopolitan perspective, i.e. one which takes into account the specific conditions under which the texts/performances were produced and received, can show that the 'Caradoc Affair' arose from a misreading of *My People*. The 'Caradoc Affair' then acquired a life of its own which was only imperfectly controlled by the author and by his original critics and was at least partly determined by the commercial interests of the daily press, particularly the conservative daily *The Western Mail*. Moreover, an ethical reading can show why Evans's texts ultimately fail to engage with the Wales of his time in a meaningful way despite the great impact he had on generations of Welsh writers that followed, most notably on Dylan Thomas.

There are many interesting approaches to reading *My People* and *Taffy*. For my discussion of the text, I will focus on the main bone of contention, namely the depiction of nonconformist religion and its preachers. 'Nonconformism' is short for the bewildering number of dissenting sects and groupings that formed the de facto 'official' church in Wales (Hempton, 1996, 50; see also M. Wynn Thomas, 2010, 42). During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the larger nonconformist groups and the Liberal Party increasingly shaped public opinion and political reality: indeed, they seemed indivisible (Hempton, 1996, 51). Welsh religious dissent was "part of a wider European tradition of resistance to the religious, political and cultural encroachments of the established churches" (Hempton, 1996, 52). It thus neatly dovetailed with a cultural nationalism mediated through the Welsh language which was fast becoming a political nationalism, culminating in the foundation of the *Cymru Fydd* (Young Wales) movement in 1886 by O.M. Edwards, T.E. Ellis, Beriah Gwynfe Evans and others and which David Lloyd George joined at a later date. Caradoc Evans was deeply critical of the interrelationship between politics (Liberal Party), nonconformist religion and Welsh language and the main force of attack in his work was reserved for nonconformity and the culture it engendered. His opposition to the Liberal/nonconformist alliance was such that he believed himself personally victimised by Lloyd George, whom he suspected to be behind the police action against *My People* (Harris, 1992, 17). The substance of his critique emerges from a letter to the editor written to the *Western Mail* shortly after the publication of *My People*:

Wales would be brighter and more Christianlike if every chapel were burnt to the ground and a public-house raised on the ashes thereof. Such are the preachers – the rulers of the pulpits of West Wales – a people given to many vices, a people of much religion and of no Christianity, a people who are careless that the way from Nazareth is lost in the godless wilderness of their country, and that the voice of the Carpenter is hushed by the brawl of their preachers. (Evans, 27 November 1915, 4)

This extract shows how Evans mixed calculated insult – here against the temperance movement within nonconformity which had successfully lobbied for the Sunday Closing (Wales) Act in 1881 – with serious criticism of nonconformity, and how he couched that criticism in the style and register of the preacher. It is also a class-based argument: the Socialist sympathiser Evans argued that the culture of the public house, a mostly working-class culture which was identified with the anglicised urban culture of the industrialised areas of Wales, was preferable to the culture associated with the chapel. Most importantly, though, he thought that nonconformism had become mere ideology without heart and soul, pose without substance. According to Hansjörg Bay, ideology can provide meaning for communities through shared stories and communal practices. However, if these stories and practices become detached from real life and are merely ritually invoked, they become lifeless 'ideological shells' which protect individuals from external challenges but which also prevent change (Bay, 1995). In Evans's view, nonconformism had become such an ideological shell. No longer did the individual have to make ethical choices as the ideology provided all necessary explanations. Indeed, he argued that nonconformity served as a cloak for all kinds of unethical behaviour.

Evans's criticism is illustrated by his characterisation of the powerful within chapel society, the ministers and deacons, and by their relationship with the people of the ironically named Manteg ('fair place'), a fictional village based on Rhydlewys in Cardiganshire. The people of Manteg are simple folk: As Mary Jones has noted, "Evans is conveying a mentality bound by the immediate physical world, incapable of imagination or abstract thought": God is the 'Big Man', deacons are 'Big Heads', Heaven is the 'White Palace' and Hell the 'Fiery Pool' (see Mary Jones, 1985, 91). This is not merely homely terminology used to clarify abstract concepts: the characters have replaced belief with idolatry. An example is Nanni, the old midwife who had helped deliver Manteg's minister, Josiah Bryn-Bevan: "Unconsciously she came to regard Josiah as greater than God: God was abstract; Josiah was real" (*My People* 109). Bryn-Bevan's greatest failing is that he does not discourage this perversion of belief. Indeed, in his vanity and to increase the hold he has over his congregation he deliberately fosters the belief that God's will and his own are one and the same: when the old rogue Twm Tybach, who had once failed to greet him, falls ill, Bryn-Bevan, the "Judge of Capel Sion, declared that the Lord was smiting His enemy, a just fate for all that offendeth Him" (*My People* 82).

One of the deacons, Sadrach, is a man who seems to lead the blameless life of the true believer. However, beneath the holy veneer lies a hypocritical, self-serving and downright nasty nature. Having married a wealthy but considerably older woman, Achsah, and fathering six children by her, he tires of her. To get rid of her he declares her mad and locks her in an attic. Achsah 'escapes' on the day of her son's wedding and really becomes mad through the realisation that all her children except Sadrach the Small have perished through their father's neglect. Indeed, as Simon Baker has argued, Sadrach's actions are half-disguised by the narrator, who allows the reader to think that Achsah managed to escape her attic: in reality, only Sadrach could have opened the trap door himself in order to allow her to witness proceedings and be driven insane, thus giving him an excuse to send her to the madhouse in Carmarthen and be free to marry again (Baker, 1990, 48-49). Thus the extent of Sadrach's cunning evil are only manifested to the most discerning readers.

The satire becomes more biting still when one considers the significance of the names of the characters. Sadrach (or Shadrach) is a biblical character renowned for his exclusive devotion to God, who appears in the Book of Daniel. Evans's Sadrach, on the other hand, strictly prioritises his own financial and sexual interests but hypocritically presents these as inspired by religious belief. Achsah who appears in several books of the bible, including Joshua and Judges, is an assertive woman, whose demands are usually granted. Evans's Achsah, on the other hand, is the quintessential victim who loses her identity on marrying Sadrach and is reduced to the status of animal after he has falsely declared her mad, passively complicit in her fate.

The substance of Evans's criticism is that the characters engage in a type of religious performative speech act: the mere act of saying they are good makes them good. No proof in the shape of actual belief or good actions is required. This point emerges clearly in "The Talent That Thou Gavest", a story about Eben, a young shepherd who is genuinely inspired by God to preach and who is educated at the theological college in Carmarthen where he learns the gift of the *hwyl*, the emotional evangelical preaching style here seen exclusively as a kind of religious showmanship. As his convictions and the message he gives diverge, Eben becomes unhappy. He tells his deacons:

'Listen to me now . . . I have not preached to you at all the real religion. I offered you the White Palace or the Fiery Pool. Men, men, that is not right. If you don't live in Heaven here you won't live in Heaven when you perish. Look you at Roberts of the Shop Grocer. Did he not make his servant Mari very full barely a year after he stood up in the Seiet and said that he prayed each night to be taken to Mistress Roberts? Did he not cry 'Halelujah!' and 'Amen'?

'Man, man, wrong you are to speak so about Roberts of the Shop Grocer,' said Ben. 'Poor Roberts bach was sorely tempted, and he is forgiven. And has he not sent the bad bitch about her business?' (*My People*, 77)

Again the religious performative speech act stands in for actual ethical behaviour: religious speech - praying in public - serves to draw a veil over Roberts's deeply unethical behaviour. The characters' dismissive stance towards the powerless female servant underscores their unethical behaviour. What they want from Eben is not ethical instruction. They want pulpit theatre, a preacher who scares them with vivid images of hell on a Sunday so that they can return to their ordinary lives emotionally purged and morally undisturbed. In the end Eben is seduced by offers of money, dismisses his moral doubts and gives the community what they want.

Mary Jones has convincingly argued that the special effect of the stories are predicated upon "the ironic discrepancy" between the literalness of an understanding of the ethics of behaviour which seems to stem directly from the Old Testament - it is no coincidence that most of the characters bear names taken from the Old Testament and resemble its often mad, bad characters and its vengeful God before whom they tremble - and the ethics promoted by the New Testament, a true Christian spirit, which makes Evans's characters appear backward and hypocritical (Mary Jones, 1985, 91). Moreover, this hypocrisy is not presented as an aberration within an isolated community. Manteg symbolically stands for the rural heartland of Wales, the bedrock of Welsh national identity. Evans was attacking a certain self-image of Wales as the most religious and hence

morally good nation in the British Isles which itself had been a response to the *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* ('Treachery of the Blue Books') of 1847. The 'Blue Books' were a government report on the state of education in Wales. The commissioners made some valid points about the haphazard and often bad provision of education but the fact that they saw fit to pass judgment on a predominantly Welsh-speaking nation without being able to speak Welsh and, crucially, the way in which they overstepped their brief by making derogatory remarks on the Welsh national character, Welsh morals and the apparently bad influence of the Welsh language made the report a national scandal. The Welsh "were prepared to hear that they were poorly educated; they had not expected to be told that they were drunken, dirty, superstitious and sexually promiscuous liars and cheats" (Tyson Roberts, 1998, 209). Not surprisingly, Victorian Wales reacted by dismissing the report (cf. the rebuttals by Jane Williams (Ysgafell) and Sir Thomas Phillips among others, see Tyson Roberts, 1998, 210). And although the controversy was not the first "awakening of Welsh Nonconformist self-consciousness" (Hempton, 1996, 54), it became a highly symbolic turning point (Morgan, 2012, 93). A new national self-image was devised based on the inter-relationship between language, place and belief, a self-image modelled on the story of Israel (see Donahaye, 2012). Welsh opinion formers characterised the nation as inherently more spiritual and therefore more ethical than 'worldly' and 'commercial' England and pointed to the many chapels which had been built at the rate of one chapel a week in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a tangible sign of the nation's religiosity (Hempton, 1996, 54; see M. Wynn Thomas, 2010, 148). More importantly, this all-pervasive culture offered "a shared vocabulary for large numbers of people", a means by which an identity could be constructed (Hempton, 1996, 59). By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this vigorous religious culture began to crumble.

Not only Evans realised that this national self-image, which had helped to restore national self-respect after 1847, had become an 'ideological shell' by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the atmosphere in 1915 made national self-criticism difficult given the atmosphere of somewhat jingoistic national pride in the first year of the Great War, Wales's hopes for devolution which seemed possible after the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales (Welsh Church Act 1914), the worries about the survival of the national culture in the face of increasing numbers of Anglophone Welsh areas, the incursions of mass culture mediated through the English language (e.g. the cinema), secularism and the rise of a Labour movement, which was international, not national, in character. To Evans's critics he was a traitor, somebody who gleefully undermined Welsh culture from within at the moment when it had become vulnerable. It is difficult to agree with Knight who argues that Evans was writing against a "triumphalist ideology" (Knight, 2004, 33). It was perhaps an occasionally self-righteous ideology. But the very hysteria of the response to *My People* suggests that this was a culture which perceived of itself as being under threat.

Press reactions to *My People* were mixed. By no means all reviewers were offended, as John Harris shows (1987, 37-41; also Harris, 1988). The main reason why some reviewers took offence is directly related to the ethical function of literary realism in Welsh writing in English at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For reviewers like A.M. (*Western Mail*) literature on Wales and the Welsh national character was only ethical if it made a genuine attempt to represent Wales and Welshness realistically:

Gifted with a certain facility of expression, we feel that Mr. Caradoc Evans has missed a great opportunity. He might have given us a realistic and faithful picture of rural Welsh life, and instead we have – this! It is not alone that the Welsh spoken by characters is oddly garbled in Mr. Evans’s version, but that he would appear to have raked in the garbage of the countryside for his characters. Male and female, they are all of a piece, either whining hypocrites or vulgar, lecherous creatures of a kind that in real life we instinctively avoid. And all this is supposed to be a true picture of Nonconformity in West Wales! . . . Welsh Nonconformity has its faults, but to call this a realistic picture is a cruel abuse of words. . . . (A.M., 13 November 1915, 7)

It does not seem to occur to A.M. to read the stories as satire and evaluate their aesthetic effectiveness. By contrast, reviews in the English press do not read the stories ethically but favour aesthetic categories. The anonymous reviewer in *Punch* wrote: “I can best compare *My People* to the grimest passages from Hardy, told in the language of the Old Testament” (Anon, 1915, 439-440). Similarly, the *Daily Mail* called it “a book of great literary merit” in which “each story is . . . a triumph of art” (24 November 1915, quoted in Harris, 36). Indeed, as Harris shows, English critics specifically point out the difference between *My People* and realistic texts despite some speculation about the factual truth behind the stories:

The *English Review*, a periodical well acquainted with the modes of traditional and modernist fiction, judged Evans a realistic writer using non-realistic techniques. Norman Douglas writes: ‘The book stands apart . . . What Mr Evans tells us in his archaic language is too stark and austere to be realistic’. (Harris, 36)

If ethical points are made, English journalists refer to the author rather than the text, or rather to his celebrity status. The Bristol *Western Daily Press*, for example, printed a syndicated short piece in which Evans is cast in the role of prophet, an intellectual gadfly (3 December 1915, 9). The English reaction is one of studied impartiality, doubtless to form a favourable contrast with the emotional outcry in Wales which seemed to confirm established national stereotypes of the rational, level-headed English and the hot-tempered, potentially irrational Celt – something which in itself may have fuelled Welsh fears.<sup>3</sup> The *English Review* editor Austin Harrison’s remark about the “great and distinctive literary merit” of *My People* and his derisory comment that he could “only suppose that the banning of the book is due to one of the periodical waves of prudery which afflict the gentlemen who control the circulation of books” were reprinted verbatim in several Welsh newspapers (“My People Banned”, 22 Nov 1915, 6; “My People”, 27 November 1915, 2).<sup>4</sup> Elevating aesthetic concerns over ethical ones allowed Harrison to display a superiority of taste over the rather more mundane-seeming concern over issues of representation and potential offence to readers.

Despite Harrison’s lofty dismissal of ethical concerns, ethics and the aesthetics are, of course, inter-related. In the case of *My People*, readers had certain expectations that had

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<sup>3</sup> Harris argues that those reviewers who thought Evans had a point worried about what the English would think about Wales and rejected him on those grounds (Harris, 1992, 16).

<sup>4</sup> According to Chris Hopkins, this comment responds to the prosecution of D.H. Lawrence for *The Rainbow*, which libraries *had* stocked (2009, 108).

been set up by the publisher as well as by their cultural conditioning. They expected realism, not satire, and a specific kind of realism at that: not the searing, naturalist prose of a Zola but the "strongly established pastoral narrative that underpinned Welsh national identity", such as Allen Raine's fiction (Hopkins, 2009, 119; see also Aaron, 2010, xvi). The more gritty realism associated with Anglophone Welsh industrial fiction, e.g. by Lewis Jones or Jack Jones, was written later in the 1930s. Fictional representations of Wales and Welsh people were influenced by O.M. Edwards's vision of the *gwerin*: of a simple, pious, cultured 'folk', who valued education and which formed the foundation of the Welsh nation (Johnston, 1998, 5-6). A non-fictional example of this type of narrative is D.J. Williams's autobiographical sketch *Hen Dy Ffarm*, which was published in 1953 but which is set in the kind of rural community of *My People* and which at least implicitly responds to Evans's caricature. The style of *Hen Dy Ffarm* could not be more different from *My People* because this doubtless romanticized and sanitized collection of the author's childhood is written with such apparently impeccable commitment to realism and truth-telling. As Dewi Z. Phillips has noted, the literature of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – whether in Welsh or in English – was meant to be uplifting. "Its humour should be 'healthy' humour and its criticisms reserved for the enemies of religion" (Phillips, 1991, 86). Welsh readers of *My People* expected realism of a certain kind: they expected to see a rounded picture of Welsh life, a world and characters they recognised, narratives in which ethically good characters and actions were clearly identified as such, and in which Welshness was identified with praiseworthy ethics. What they got was a multifaceted, difficult narrative, characterised by Simon Baker in the following way: the

deeper structure [of the narrative] actualises different kinds of language and literary conventions by juxtaposing a variety of genre, thereby conditioning the reader to different kinds of intellectual and emotive response. The biblical tone and rhythm have the didactic force of a parable whilst the basically 'flat' characters categorise themselves into Good and Evil. The deaths and dramatic dénouement, and the choric speaking voice between set scenes of dialogue all reproduce the effects of pantomime and melodrama. There are elements of realism in the unity of place and in the sense of community, but these are inextricably linked to the sense of folk and faerie tale, the characters acting out roles that both parallel and parody that genre. (Baker, 1990, 47)

If the narrative is so markedly multi-faceted and complex, why did reviewers read it as realistic? Many reviewers took their cue from Melrose's blurb and subsequent defence of the book as 'realist' (Harris, 1988, 26). Secondly, Caradoc Evans himself presented himself as a 'reporter' (Harris, 1992, 13), a 'social realist' (Harris, 1988, 27) and, through his reaction, invited a realist reading. But most importantly, as Katie Gramich has noted, "[t]here is . . . a patent and troubling 'effect of the real' conjured up for us in *My People*. It is as if the bogus and the real coalesce in an unsettling mirage" (Gramich, 2009, 26). Expecting a simple tale of rural Wales, readers reacted against his uncanny and "unsettling mirage" by voicing their discomfort in ethical terms: they felt cheated and lied to. I would not regard this reaction as excessively naïve. As Lilian R. Furst argues, literary realism "depends closely on the establishment of a sound, trusting relationship between narrating voice and readers, a secure narrative contract that disposes readers to persuasion by the rhetoric" (1995, ix). Given that the publisher himself set up an expectation of *My People* as a realistic text, the



seeming violation of this narrative contract served to hurt and anger readers as private individuals as well as members of a nation whose survival seemed in danger.

Interestingly, the 'Caradoc Affair' only really began after the Great War in the 1920s following the first performance of Evans's play *Taffy* in London on 27 February 1923. The excitement it engendered was out of all proportion and a good deal stage-managed by those who had an interest in it. As John Harris points out, the *Western Mail* had its own reasons for keeping the flame of controversy alive: deriding Caradoc Evans evidently made for good sales.<sup>5</sup> At the height of the 'Affair' the newspaper printed Evans's name in quotation marks as if he were no longer real and used increasingly hyperbolic language, for example in the headline "'Caradoc's' New Spasm. Amazing Address in London. Bitter Attack on His Own Countrymen" (31 October 1924, 10). Caradoc Evans had become a media celebrity and the work had become secondary.

This becomes obvious when looking at *Taffy*, a play that was written in a matter of weeks, performed in 1923, revised in 1925 and performed again. In it much of the bitterness that had suffused *My People* had disappeared in favour of a more humorous treatment of his subject.<sup>6</sup> Characters speak in Caradoc Evans's distinctive style but the work has none of the peculiar power of Evans's prose and is a work of comparatively little distinction. The fact that preachers and deacons are figures of fun in the play and are treated without deference is not revolutionary in the context of Welsh drama. Many of the plays written in English and in Welsh from ca. 1912 onwards deal humorously with a nonconformist culture that was perceived as too solemn, self-righteous and stifling, e.g. in Ada Edwards's *Serch Hudol* (1920). Especially the figure of the deacon became the butt of many jokes in plays such as J.O. Francis's *The Poacher* (1913) or Jeannette Marks's *The Deacon's Hat* (1913). Thus *Taffy* ploughed an already well-worked furrow. The problem was that Evans seemed to be writing in what was an established genre by the 1920s: the 'play of Welsh life', which was realistic in style and which sought to represent scenes from the life of ordinary Welsh people.<sup>7</sup> There were "social issue plays by a generation of young writers, such as W.J. Gruffydd, D.T. Davies and R.G. Berry, keen to dispose of a sclerotic, spiritually bankrupt Nonconformist establishment" (M. Wynn Thomas, 2002, 37), or comedies which with gentle humour poked fun at the social mores of small Welsh communities. *Taffy's* subtitle "A Play of Welsh Village Life" suggests that it was just such a realistic play of Welsh life, whereas it is better described as a farce in which characters are made to look as ridiculous as possible in rather stereotyped situations: the preachers Ben Watkins and Spurgeon Evans vie with

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<sup>5</sup> Harris also notes that "the *Western Mail* was trying to forge a sense of Welshness amongst a readership increasingly divided and exposed to anglicisation. [Its editor William] Davies recognised plurality, the complex Ways of being Welsh. . . . [Even] if the *Mail* thundered against treacherous authors, again it allowed a right of reply. Here was a focus for cultural debate, something sorely needed in turn-of-the-century Wales" (Harris, 1992, 11). That is certainly true, but I would argue that considerations of sales and influence might have been more important for the *Western Mail* than its cultural role.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Jones's description of Caradoc Evans's early short story "Taffy at Home: the Humour and Pathos of Welsh Village Life" suggests that it was a sympathetic and humorous account, much more in tune with stories and plays 'of Welsh life' published at the same time. Perhaps *Taffy* was, in this respect, a return to an earlier, less bitter way of writing about the Welsh (see Mary Jones, 1985, 92).

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the 'play of Welsh life', see Rothkirch, 2014.

each other for a call to Capel Sion, the deacons, who are meant to chose a minister based on spiritual and ethical considerations, cannot look beyond their immediate profit, and Ester, the daughter of one of the deacons, is comically keen to marry Spurgeon to better herself socially. Evans's critique of nonconformity consists in the now familiar attack on hypocrisy which is personified by the elder preacher Ben Watkins. Spurgeon, by contrast, soon emerges as a moral man who eventually resigns the ministry to become a farm labourer. His 'conversion' is aided by his infatuation with Marged, the morally upright daughter of Twmi, the chief deacon. Marged and Spurgeon clearly are Evans's mouthpieces and give voice to his critique of nonconformism: they remind the audience of the 'real religion' that Eben did not dare preach in *My People*. Thus Marged, in what seems an impromptu sermon, calls out:

You have no regard for the first Capel Sion that was Bensha's mud-walled hut on the moor. Every night a candle burnt at the window to guide the folk who came on the narrow path to read the Beybile in Welsh or seek Bensha to go and read the Beybile to the dying. And however black and stormy the night no one lost his way or went in vain. The Sion that you want to pull down was built by love. . . . All worked in the sure belief of another God than the God of the English-speaking parson who shot calves and lambs for sport and whose horses trod the corn and tore the hedges. Their love and sacrifice are nothing to you. (*Taffy*, 72)

This is a thinly disguised attack against those who had accused Evans of being anti-chapel. Evans goes out of his way to demonstrate that he thinks the chapel should be at the heart of Welsh communities. His critique is neither that of an atheist nor that of a progressive Christian: his view is conservative (Mathias, 1987, 82). And Spurgeon, a character whom one might be tempted to call Evans's alter ego, although he did not succumb to the temptation of taking the role himself when he appeared in a walk-on role in the well-received Aberystwyth production of *Taffy* in 1936 ("Mr. Caradoc Evans Acts in *Taffy*", 4 August 1936, 7), is given the following speech:

I abhor the righteousness of the capel, whose tears are less a sign of godliness than a donkey's braying is of bravery. Our works have cornered even God, and He has put us apart in a room for our strange misbehaviours. And the room is Wales. . . . Our religion has been made by the ministers, who teach us how they are God's photographs and the Big Heads His Apostles. The minister's god wears a frock coat and heaven is a Welsh capel where he preaches on the Sabbath in Welsh. The pulpit is a sorry lamp. It guides us to the polling booth. It turns our joy into sorrow. It gives the right to the bad man to pursue the timid man and the praying man to spoil the maid. The people are become like the preachers—mouthy in their protestations. . . . The name God is ever on a Welshman's lips, yet he only prays before performing a sin, and he does not repent afterwards in the fear that he will not sin again. I go abroad with only half a talent. But it is spotless. And the holder of it is a man—a man with nothing. And the capel, thank God, has no pew for the man with nothing. (*Taffy*, 82)

This quotation confirms that Evans's critique is that of a conservative who condemns the chapel for not being as pure of spirit as he believes it once was. He criticises what he thinks

of are aberrations: the close link between nonconformity and the Liberal Party and the way in which ideology provides a convenient ethical cloak to hide immoral behaviour (see Phillips, 1991, 87-88). Voiced in this way, his critique is robust but doubtless would not have caused such offence if Evans had not chosen such an insulting title for the play, which refers to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century rhyme 'Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a Thief',<sup>8</sup> if the play had not been performed in London in front of an high-society audience, and if the 'Caradoc Affair' had not already overshadowed his work.

A main effect of the 'Caradoc Affair' was that for both defenders and critics Evans remained the author of *My People*. Later work was reviewed but never on its own terms. The reviews of *Taffy* published in 1923 and in 1925 employ superlatives of disgust, which the play simply does not warrant. John D. Lewis called the play a "monstrosity", concluding his review with: "it is a damnable libel on Welsh life" (*Western Mail*, 27 February 1923, 6). Confidently assuming widespread consent, D.E. wrote that in the play "everything we hold in reverence, and all that we have ever felt to be sacred, are burlesqued, ridiculed, and mocked" (*Western Mail*, 1 March 1923, 9). And after the revised version was staged in September 1925, J.E. Thomas shrieked: "In his latest work 'Taffy,' a new 'comedy' of Welsh life, he puts all his previous performances in the shade. It is the most vitriolic attack on certain features of Welsh national life that has ever been penned" (*Western Mail*, 9 Sept 1925, 7).

Presumably in an effort to keep the controversy alive, the *Western Mail* sponsored one of its journalists, J.T. Jones, to go to Rhydlewis on a fact-finding mission – nearly nine years too late. Jones wrote four articles, Caradoc Evans made use of his right of reply and Jones wrote a final reply. A letter to the editor from an inhabitant of Rhydlewis was printed as well. The tenor of Jones's articles is easily summarised: he travelled to Rhydlewis, compared the hellish vision created in *My People* with the rather more tranquil reality, and concluded that the author was not telling the truth. This approach is so strikingly naïve that one suspects deeper motives. After all, even literary realism is "not a faithful, objective replica of actuality as it 'really' is, but a subjective interpretation of things as they seem through the refraction of the perceiving mind" (Furst, 1995, 9). However, the articles served to artificially create the kind of outrage which sustained the 'Caradoc Affair'.

If one puts to one side the media spectacle of the 'Caradoc Affair', the central crux of the misunderstanding between author and his critics is the way in which the way reality is represented in his fiction and whether the 'reality' of the text tells the truth. From the beginning, both critics and Evans confused literary realism with representing factual reality and the dark satire of *My People* with literary realism. Thus, when Melrose attempted to defend the stories he argued that "[s]incerity is not always a successful argument for the publication of books, but in this case it seems convincing", a defence of the author's motivation and inherent truthfulness, which, however, does not mean that the text had to be documentary. However, he immediately assured the readers that the stories were, indeed, based on fact by referring to the "records of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children" (*Western Mail*, 16 December 1915, 7). Evans's many letters to the editor of the *Western Mail* only served to muddy the waters. On the one hand he claimed that his characters are realistic representations of the people of West Wales, going so far as to

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note Evans's preoccupation with thieving as a supposed characteristic of Welsh people in many of his *Western Mail* letters and articles, which seems to be an odd echo of similar accusations in the 'Blue Books'.

include himself in the negative picture he draws: "We West Walians are accursed even among our own race; none has regard for us. . . .These are the men and women I have written about: can one make a savoury from an unsavoury?" (Evans, 27 November 1915, 4). In another letter, Evans, soaring high on the currents of his own rhetoric, claimed spiritual brotherhood with none other than Christ himself, implying that his stories are parables that reveal a deeper truth:

They revile me and close their doors against me, and they are forgetful of saying from a book in which they have no faith: 'Am I become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' And truth is always violent. When Jesus cleared the Temple of the money-changers He used scornful words. I am astonished that Sion of the period did not suppress Him. (Evans, 22 Dec 1915, 4)

Both Evans and his contemporary critics thus confused the extra-textual reality with realism of representation, arguing that truth can only be communicated by strict adherence to the first. It is an interesting ethical misreading which arises from the specificities of the cultural situation in which Evans worked. 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century critics beg to differ: *My People* has variously been read as satire (Knight, 2004, Baker, 1990), as anti-pastoral (Hopkins, 2009), as pastoral satire/satiric pastoral (Baker, 1990, 47), as anti-romance (Knight, 2004, 31), as Chapel Gothic (Aaron, 2010, 283-284) and as an early example of Welsh modernism (Gramich, 2009, Harris, 1992, M. Wynn Thomas, 1987). Perhaps influenced by my own cultural background, I am inclined to read *My People* as an example of literary Expressionism, although it must be noted that there is no evidence that Caradoc Evans read Expressionist literature which in 1915 mainly meant Continental European literature. I would argue that Evans's early work shares central characteristics with that of writers like Alfred Döblin, Salomo Friedländer (Mynona) and Ernst Toller and with the work of Wyndham Lewis in England. Evans also shares the left-wing political views of the German Expressionists, but not the radical conservatism of Lewis. In terms of style, Expressionism moved away from traditional realistic models of storytelling and promoted a narrative mode which stressed personal rather than seemingly objective truth. Form (particularly syntax and style) became an expression of a profoundly personal vision: Expressionist use of language often entailed a radically altered syntax, which made the everyday appear grotesque. The German Expressionists shared an anti-authoritarian stance with Evans, rebelling against a parent-generation which seemed complacent as well as complaisant and unwilling to challenge authority – in Germany the authority of army and state, in Wales that of the chapel (Wilpert, 1989, 279-280; Paulsen, 1983, 42-43). Given that the Expressionist writers were the children of the bourgeoisie they were criticising and that their actions fell short of actual rebellion ("one shied away from the open and in the final instance hopeless struggle against the existing order and escaped into the realm of the aesthetic")<sup>9</sup>, their fiction betrayed a certain self-hatred in the very viciousness of their satirical attack. And even though writers developed very different styles there was common ground: "They all shared, openly or implicitly, one thing: negation/negativity. On smashing their 'heritage' the pieces flew in very different directions, however" (Paulsen,

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<sup>9</sup> "man wich doch vor dem offenen und letztlich aussichtslosen Kampf gegen die herrschende Ordnung ins Aesthetische aus" (my translation from the German).

1983, 13).<sup>10</sup> Mynona's work, for instance the collection or *Das Eisenbahnunglück oder Der Anti-Freud* (1925), is characteristic of the sharp satirical depiction of the German bourgeoisie, particularly through ridiculing their dialect, making them sound self-satisfied and stupid. Mynona presented an image of 'his people' designed to challenge the existing ideological order. But, unable to escape from the ideology he was criticising, Mynona's work is characterised by the kind of bleakness and self-hatred that can be found in Evans's work (see Roberts, 2007). Evans also shares the broadly reformist attitude of the Expressionists towards the church: "Their 'no' to the church was clearly influenced by the reality of the church in those years, or more correctly: by the image of a church that was self-satisfied, even self-righteous and that was making common cause with the powerful" (Rothe, 1979, 212).<sup>11</sup>

It is thus suggestive to think of Caradoc Evans's early prose as similar to literary Expressionism, although his later work, *Taffy* included, uses a much more conventional realistic style with his now familiar creative misrepresentations of Welsh speech as a kind of coloratura. The point I want to emphasise is that the Expressionist writers' relationship with reality and truth is also characteristic for Evans's work: they look sharply and critically at factual reality and produce work which is an expression of their relationship with that factual reality. The visual artist George Grosz looked at Berlin street scenes and created hell painted in oil - Caradoc Evans did the same using words. The truth represented in literature is always to an extent influenced by the author's interpretation of the world: but in the case of Expressionism the distortion involved can make that reality unrecognisable to others. It is thus a pure expression of the author's ethical relationship with the world he or she depicts.

The rejection of Caradoc Evans's work on ethical grounds was mainly due to his contemporary critics feeling unable and unwilling to deal with the challenge it represented. This assessment, too, cannot be divorced from its cultural context. One must not underestimate the impact a publication in English had at the time. Harris notes that

Welsh novels in English were potent new vehicles for projecting national identity, the more so since Wales to the outside world lacked any kind of literature, her Welsh-language writing being almost entirely untranslated. In these circumstances a single English-language author could offset the entire vernacular output" (Harris, 1992, 17).

But, as Dewi Z. Phillips has argued that "[i]t is often said that Wales, a small country, struggling to retain its language and its cultural distinctiveness, cannot afford to be critical of itself. There are plenty all too ready to deride it. Yet, understandable though that reaction may be, it will not do. Protectiveness kills the very culture it seeks to preserve" (1991, 85). To dismiss Evans on the ground that he dared criticise his own nation from within at a moment at which that nation felt under threat is understandable but not valid.

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<sup>10</sup> "Einig war man sich, ausgesprochen oder unausgesprochen, in der Negation. Bei der Zertrümmerung des 'Erbes' aber flogen die Stücke in die verschiedensten Richtungen" (my translation from the German).

<sup>11</sup> "Das Nein zur Kirche orientierte sich . . . entscheidend an der kirchlichen Realität jener Jahre, oder richtiger: an dem Bild, das eine selbstzufriedene, ja selbstgerechte, mit den Mächtigen im Bunde befindliche Kirche bot" (my translation from the German).

However, I would argue that if Evans was, indeed, motivated by a reforming spirit as Humfrey suggests (2003, 42), *My People* and, to a lesser extent, *Taffy* fail on ethical grounds. To support my point, I would like to draw on the long and dispassionate review essay written by the playwright D.T. Davies, which appeared at the same time as J.T. Jones's series of articles in 1924. Davies was critical of what he thought of as the Welsh tendency to "subordinate artistic considerations to ethical ends", which he, in a different context, ascribed "to the almost exclusively ethical exercises of a kind that have occupied the Welsh mind for the last two centuries" (WM, 30 July 1920, 9), referring to the setting of ethical problems in Sunday Schools and as essay topics, for example, for the National Eisteddfod. Thus, when he came to discuss *My People* he was quick to stress the aesthetic aspects of the work: "The truth about Rhydlewys has nothing to do with the intrinsic artistic value of 'My People' or 'Capel Seion'" [sic]. Art has a different task: "in art one *can* make a silk purse from a sow's ear. . . . The justification for the choice of a sow's ear is the resulting silk purse". In other words, ugly material can yield a beautiful and worthwhile outcome. But as he applauded Caradoc Evans's style, the discipline and the way in which he made the form of the short story his own, he did not think that Evans was successful:

Art seeks to establish the identity of truth and beauty; or, at any rate, it indicates that the beauty of truth are but two sides of the same coin. By this canon Caradoc Evans falls. His work is unlovely. Technically excellent, it lacks, at almost every point, that element of human sympathy which alone can transmute the sordid dross of life into something which is acceptable.

Davies recognises Evans as an artist who grew up in an atmosphere that was "uncongenial, if not antagonistic, atmosphere" and whose work was testimony to a deep resentment. But his 'sow's ear' did not become a 'silk purse' because it lacks the ingredient of human sympathy. There is no indication of the kind of Wales he would prefer to the one he despises, nor is there a glimmer of humanity in his characters that could indicate any potential for redemption or change. By contrast, the realistic play *Change* by J.O. Francis (1913) also presents the beliefs of an older generation as sterile and meaningless for their children who, naturally, rebel. But both parents and children are drawn sensitively and with empathy: even the father, whose inflexibility of mind drives his sons and, in the end, his wife from him, is given sympathetic qualities. He is a tragic character, not a villain. *My People* may have a multi-layered, complex narrative structure, but in its meaning it is of one piece. It is entirely satirical, and satire, although a valid and necessary genre, cannot promote an alternative vision except by implication. If he really saw himself as a reformer, Evans was content to show the elements of his nation which needed reforming, but we do not get a sense of what his vision of a reformed Wales was. D.T. Davies's review reveals that he understood the ethical function of literature in surprisingly similar terms to Booth: it is to engage the reader in a co-creation of meaning, which can potentially change the reader's life. Evans's work encourages reaction but not necessarily engagement as Francis's play, for instance, does. Thus, despite the sometimes ill-considered anti-Evans hysteria, the initial revulsion is understandable: met with no sympathy, Evans's readers were unlikely to show sympathy in return. Oddly, neither the attitude of the author nor that of his readers did the narratives justice.

Evans's work never incorporated this idea of sympathy. There is a disconnect between his public pronouncements, which record a return to hope for Wales through the work of Young Wales expressed in an article in 1925 (*Western Mail*, 22 September 1925, 6) and his fiction: this prophet failed to show a vision which 'his people' were to strive for. Unless anger itself is seen as a productive emotion, which might engender change – as it had done in the aftermath of the 'Treachery of the Blue Books' – the ethical effect on readers affecting notions of the 'good life' was limited.

The 'Caradoc Affair' is so tremendously interesting to study because of the way in which the reception of a controversial text engendered such enormous hurt and outrage, and coloured the reception and production of Welsh literature in both the Welsh and the English language for generations afterwards. But it also demonstrates that an ethical reading of any literature must take into account the specific context in which work is written, read and reviewed. Discussions which assume ethical categories are disconnected from such specificities are dishonest and can serve to support existing power structures in ways rightly challenged by postmodern critics like Catherine Belsey, who argued in *Critical Practice* that there is no such thing as 'Common sense criticism' (2002, 1-2) which soars above the trappings of history, culture and the critic's personal commitments. Incorporating a microcosmopolitan perspective into ethical criticism is necessary to remain intellectually honest and, indeed, ethical.

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