Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru
University of Wales Press

Open Library of Humanities

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

Lost in Alignment: Alun Richards in Japan

How to Cite:
Yuzo Yamada, 'Lost in Alignment: Alun Richards in Japan', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 6 (2019), 1, 10.16995/wwe.372

Published:
June 2019

Peer Review:
This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of the *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, which is a journal of the University of Wales Press.

Open Access:
International Journal of Welsh Writing in English is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:
The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The University of Wales Press wishes to acknowledge the funding received from the Open Library of Humanities towards the cost of producing this open access journal.

LOST IN ALIGNMENT: ALUN RICHARDS IN JAPAN

Yuzo Yamada

Abstract

Like Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation*, Alun Richards seems to have spent the whole year of 1984 in Japan. Although he found it fascinating to live a life in a totally exotic location, it is also clear from letters and correspondence that he also found it unbearably baffling. If that is the case, we cannot but wonder what he was actually baffled by in his encounter with Japan. Indeed, references to Japan and its culture are everywhere in his writing, but they are too stereotypical to communicate his upset to readers: 'a little bald Japanese', 'exotic Japanese' (*Plays for Players*) and even 'a case of constipation on a Jap' (*Ennal's Point*). Presumably humour is his defensive strategy whenever he comes across 'Others', especially those of a different tongue. Richards constructs Japan as an 'Other', before proceeding to break down the barriers. My working assumption in this article is that Richards in Japan failed to 'align with' the unknown Others, that is, the Japanese. Also, Richards in the 1980s seems not only to have lost sight of his own community due to Thatcher's drastic post-industrial politics but also to have evaded an emergent movement of nationalism that was quite new to him. The unbearable bafflement he experienced in Japan was arguably similar to this failure of alignment on his side. On this basis, this article will contend that Richards's responses to Japan may offer important clues to understanding his controversial responses to cultural divisions and difference in his native Welsh context and more broadly.

Keywords alignment, dominant/ emergent/ residual, cultural Others, sense of belonging

1.

According to Dai Smith, there are over one hundred surviving letters that were exchanged between the two Anglo-Welsh writers Ron Berry and Alun Richards. Among them is a letter from which we can get a glimpse of the latter's circle of friends in Japan, where he lived in 1984. In the letter dated 18 April 1994, they corresponded about some famous writers' predilection for wearing disguises, and having discussed William Faulkner and John O'Hara, Richards added:

> Also when I was in Tokyo I knew this writer Nicols, born in Neath, but emigrated to Canada. I called on him unexpectedly – he was dressed from head to toe in a Scottish outfit, complete with dirk in his stocking. He told the Japs, it was his evening dress! It's called being someone else if only for a moment.[1]

This description may remind us of Captain Bellamy's snobbish party in Richards's short story 'Beck and Call', which was like a Welsh Burns Night where 'the Welsh MacGregors, MacTavishes and McCalls got out their kilts', and enjoyed the tunes of the bagpipes.[2] If the embrace of an identity involves disguise and performance, so, of course, does story-telling. This is a proposition that both of the writers half admitted and half rejected, for it seems that they were committed to the realist imperative of holding up a mirror to the nature of their contemporary south Wales, even when they were writing pieces of fiction.

Who is the writer Richards made fun of in his letter? Richards misspelled his surname: not 'Nicols', but C. W. Nicol. He is very popular all over Japan because of his nature writing. Born in Neath in 1940, he became interested in wildlife under the influence of his Welsh grandfather, a former miner and First World War veteran. Since 1970 he has taken up residence in a valley in Nagano, Japan, which is now named Afan Woodland after Afan Argoed, a forest near his hometown, Neath. He is an active environmentalist who works against deforestation and is also known as a vigorous writer who has published more than ninety books including non-fiction and novels. He became a Japanese citizen in 1995 and describes himself as 'Celtic Japanese'.[3]

Whereas Nicol embraced Japan, Alun Richards's approach to the country was more like that of Bill Murray as Bob Harris (an ageing actor) in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003). There is a

memorable hospital scene in the movie where Bob tries to talk to an elderly woman sitting next to him. Although she wants to ask how long he has been in Japan, she cannot make herself understood to him because her English vocabulary is limited to only two words: 'Japan' and 'after'. Baffled by this, they end up drawing a circle in the air (which stands for the cycle of a year, at least for the woman).

Richards recalled a similar episode in *A Day in the Country*, one of his programmes for BBC Radio Four, broadcast in January 1989. This episode starts with a phone call Richards got from a Japanese journalist. The communication problem here is that the latter tries to communicate only in a couple of words: 'Okay, we go picnic?', 'Yes, we go canoe?', 'You like canoe?', 'Like ship. You like ship, I know'. There is an added incentive for turning up when the Japanese journalist promises to 'bring Playboy girl'. This triggers a romantic fantasy on Richards's part, but, to his disappointment, 'Playboy girl' turns out to be a babysitter who looks after the journalist's small boys.[4] Although Richards admitted that it was fascinating to live a life in a totally exotic location, it is also clear from his letters and essays that he also found it unbearably baffling.

My working assumption in this article is that Richards in Japan failed to 'align with' the unknown Others, that is, the Japanese. Alignment is a difficult word, but can be safely defined as the grouping of parties on the basis of shared concerns and goals. As it is Raymond Williams who first uncovered an inextricable connection between alignment and writing, it would be worthwhile to turn our attention to Raymond Williams's essay titled 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment' (1980). In 1980, when Thatcherism was on the rise and the intellectual's commitment or engagement (in the sense Sartre had once emphasised) was no longer thought to be relevant to society, Williams dared to rethink this issue and wrote this essay. (It is also noteworthy that Williams came up with this analysis of becoming a writer while he was struggling with his Welsh trilogy.) Admittedly, 'alignment' is just another word for 'commitment', but Williams emphasises that 'there is another sense of alignment, which I take very seriously and from which, any serious contemporary argument about commitment must begin'.[5] Writers are born into a language and this is the very medium they will have learned naturally. Hence:

> [O]ur own actual alignment is so inseparable from the constitution of our own individuality that to separate them is quite

> artificial. And then for a writer there is something even more specific: that he is born into a language; that his very medium is something which he will have learned as if it were natural . . . To be aligned to and by that language, with some of its deep qualities, is inevitable if he is to write at all. So, born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives, and into a language, the writer begins by being aligned.[6]

In other words, as Williams stated in the seminal essay 'The Tenses of Imagination', no writer can spell any single word on a blank page without being attentive to 'active presence – assisting and resisting – of the wider forces of a language and a society'.[7] On the other hand, Alun Richards in the 1980s seems not only to have lost sight of his own community due to Thatcher's drastic post-industrial politics but also to have evaded an emergent movement of nationalism that was quite new to him. The unbearable bafflement he experienced in Japan was arguably similar to this failure of alignment on his side. On this basis, this article will contend that Richards's responses to Japan may offer important clues to understanding his controversial responses to cultural divisions and differences in his native Welsh context and more broadly.

2.

In 1983 Richards was elected professional fellow of the Japan Foundation (JF). Accordingly, he must have been conscious of his obligation to it when he left the Mumbles for Tokyo. It is clearly recorded in the JF's annual report of 1984: 'Richards, Alun Morgan (UK), Writer (from 27 Jan. 84 to 26 Jan. 85) "Sea Stories of the Far East" (Anthology of Facts & Fiction)'.[8] It is evident from this description that the JF keenly expected Richards to write and edit a volume of 'Sea stories of the Far East' in English. In the 1980s, Japan was expanding its overseas markets for automobiles and high-tech electronic appliances. That inevitably caused some friction with its trading partners to the degree that footage of 'Japan bashing' was broadcast almost every day in the media. (The scene of some angry factory workers in the US burning Japanese cars and flags was repeatedly broadcast on TV and quite a few Japanese commentators reacted to it hysterically.[9]) Nicol himself wrote an essay called 'Bread and Sushi' on behalf of Japan, in which he

wondered: 'why is it that Japan is so incompetent to make its good side, or its genuine culture understood in the world while it is very good at selling its cameras, tape-recorders and automobiles overseas?'[10] Under these conditions, the JF was keen to make Japanese culture respected worldwide so that it might evade criticism for trade imbalances. It is therefore natural that the JF had its eye on Richards's career not only as a script writer of the long-running BBC TV series *The Onedin Line* (1971–80) but also as an editor of *Against the Waves* (1978), an anthology of sea stories. This anthology consists of two parts: 'fiction' and 'fact' (non-fiction), and it covers a wide range of sea writings from Joseph Conrad to Captain Joshua Slocum. All of the pieces are so deliberately selected and so organically arranged that there is no doubt that he was totally committed to this anthology. In its introduction, he admitted this in a reserved manner, stating that 'you cannot, I have found, complete one anthology of sea stories without wanting to begin another!'[11] With this enthusiasm in tow, he came over to Japan in 1984. During his stay, Richards cruised around Japan, boarded a fishing boat and went all the way to Iwo Jima and Saipan with a party of war widows and veterans.[12]

In spite of these field trips and beneficial experiences, the outcome of his visit in terms of written work was almost nothing. He must have been not only homesick but also in a slump. He wrote in a letter to Berry (dated 3 October 1984):

> How are you, my old mate? I have been in a state of limbo since Helena [Richards's wife] went back, deaf, anti-histamine tablets reducing me to a somnambulistic state for about a month, living in a biscuit-box flat as big as a small garage, hiding from authority and waiting for the money to come in every month – just like laying low in the forces.[13]

'Lying low' suggests depression, a helpless apathy in which he hides himself from the 'authorities' enquiring whether he has made any progress with his anthology. This depressive mood was in clear contrast with the positive attitude he had shown to his friends before he arrived at Tokyo. He had written to Berry in November 1983: 'It's a year's money guaranteed and God know [*sic*] what. I'm not supposed to work at anything but my anthology of sea stories of the Far East (!) when I'm out there, but I'm going to moonlight – that's why I'm going!' [14] But,

once he was settled in Tokyo, he was not going out to moonlight but stuck in one of the 'biscuit-box flats' called 'Lions Mansion', surrounded by 899 Japanese lions (as there were 900 flats he referred to as lions), all of whom shut their heavy doors with the same 'woomph' sound.[15] His life in Tokyo was, as he confessed in a letter to Berry dated 2 May 1984, 'like being inside a watch, every part working', but inside it he had not 'begun to understand the Japanese'.[16] His autobiographical writings suggest that he struggled to break down these cultural barriers while he was staying in Tokyo. He described how he won table tennis matches with his Japanese colleagues by his own 'highly idiosyncratic service' (which he had mastered in his childhood): '[I]t won me games and was the subject of much discussion, all a step towards breaking down barriers. In my childhood there were few barriers.'[17] By idealising his own childhood as a time of few barriers, he emphasises that there are too many barriers that need breaking down in Japan. If barriers were hard to break down, Richards would find the furniture to be eminently breakable. Whenever he clumsily broke room fittings or crushed furniture with his bulky body, the Japanese came up smiling.[18] Greeted with seemingly polite but inscrutable faces in Japan, Richards also seems to have built invisible defensive barriers between his surroundings and himself.

'A Confession of an Elderly Rider – from Tokyo' is the title of an essay he wrote for Japanese readers in 1984. It appeared in *Ushio* (*The Tide* in English), a general interest journal which sold around 40,000 copies monthly, and for which C. W. Nicol was a regular columnist. Presumably Nicol was the contact person who introduced Richards to the editors of *Ushio*, because Richards was on visiting terms with Nicol as we saw above. In this essay, Richards humorously tells us how he was made the butt of ridicule by his family when he was caught speeding for the first time on a motorway in south Wales. As his four children were working overseas when this happened, they spent as much as twenty pounds for a series of overseas calls to share this 'sensational news'. There are no Japanese characters in the essay, and though written for a Japanese journal, there does not seem to be an implied Japanese reader. One of Richards's stylistic characteristics is his tendency to greet his readers as if the narrators of Conrad's novels – Richards seems to have greatly admired Joseph Conrad as a pioneer of sea stories – occasionally digressed from their main stories and spoke directly to their readers.[19] The most remarkable example can be found in *Ennal's*

Point: 'If that does not mean anything to you, let me tell you to raise your head from the page and look ahead. Presumably you are sitting, your face four or five feet from the floor. Now imagine a fifteen foot wave.'[20] But there are no such gestures in 'A Confession of an Elderly Rider'. Instead, he wistfully lists the motorbikes he once owned, including a BSA, Honda, Kawasaki and his favourite, a Suzuki Lodestar that 'dazzled him with its black luster, foiled with ivory touring fairings'.[21]

This essay gives its readers an impression that Richards is lost in reverie, especially when he talks about his family outings in the past. He says he used to select one of his four children by lot as a companion for bike riding, for 'the companionship with more than one child did not mean much to him'.[22] This reminds us of the way he fondly recollects his late best friend, Carwyn James, who often 'fell asleep on the pillion seat of a motorcycle which I was driving, a hazardous experience'.[23] Talking about riding pillion in the essay, he emphasises that there is a lot of truth in the proverb that 'two is company, three is a crowd', and he reuses it as a section title in 'A Confession of an Elderly Rider'. This seems to be perfectly in line with his defensive style. He seems to have been hesitant about settling into any community wholeheartedly. He admitted this in his autobiography:

> Perhaps my luck was that I was never wholly contained in any one world and when I began to discover in the pages of Sinclair Lewis and John O'Hara the complexities of the small-town life which I also had led, I found myself nodding in agreement, becoming in the process an outsider myself and subtly withdrawing from the most extreme pressures of the life around us. There was thus always a part of me that did not believe, would not be swallowed wholly, and although in my other everyday pleasures I was ordinary enough, there was another self in the making during all these years of adolescence.[24]

There was always a part of him that would not be swallowed wholly, although there was another part of him that desperately needed the community he belonged to. This characteristically defensive attitude of Richards can be seen everywhere in his writings about Japan.

Since there is neither an R-sound nor an L-sound in the Japanese language, Bill Murray as Bob Harris is dumbfounded when a Japanese

prostitute utters: 'lip my stocking, lip them'. In the same way, Richards wrote about this sound-trap in *The Tokyo Horrors*, another talk programme for BBC Radio Four in January 1989. In his version, it is Mrs Fardew-Ingleton, a veteran English 'Japan Hand', probably forged out of some real models, who advised Richards to clearly enunciate his R-sound when he was making an appointment on the phone to see a dentist at the Tokyo Medical Centre. She says, 'It's your voice, you see. Something funny with your "r" as well. You have a lazy continental "r", you see? It's true.'[25] In addition to his Welsh accent, he had trouble with a loose tooth. This gave a comic edge to his communications with a receptionist:

> 'I am a vi-sit-or to Tokyo. I have . . . a filling . . . loose. I would like to make an appointment – one appointment . . . to see . . . the dentist. No, I am not registered, but I will register tomorrow. Mrs. Fardew-Ingleton suggested . . .'
>
> It was the magic name.
>
> 'Certainly, sir. What is your name and address?'
>
> I half expected them to say, 'And your relationship to Mrs. Fardew-Ingleton?' – when I would have replied, 'Pupil'.[26]

It is extremely funny when we hear Richards himself reproduce this scene, being very much conscious of his pronunciation in the recorded source. However, it is still the relationship between Richards and Mrs Fardew-Ingleton that is the source of laughter. Undoubtedly, this relationship is awkward, yet still there is a strong bond between Richards and Fardew-Ingleton. This is how they strive to 'survive' in Japan, because it is a place of survival as Fardew-Ingleton told Richards at their first meeting that 'many people do not survive in Japan at all . . . not at all, they simply collapse'.[27] Here again 'two is company, three is a crowd', and the third party (that is, the Japanese) is out of focus, unknown Others who live in a kind of cultural wilderness.

3.

Perhaps we can surmise that Richards's inability to reach out to the Japanese, his inability to approach this third party, was the main cause of his depression in Japan. Otherwise, he was always so adept at

handling each Japanese stereotype that it worked effectively as a punchline. Indeed, references to Japan and its culture were made in the style of cultural stereotypes (or flat caricatures) and we can find them everywhere in his writing. Here are some typical examples that show how Richards handles Japanese stereotypes in his writing: 'a little bald Japanese', 'exotic Japanese' (*Plays for Players*), 'The Japanese Goodnight' ('The Scandalous Thoughts of Elmyra Mouth') and even 'a case of constipation on a Jap', 'lined with camphor wood in Kobe, Japan' (*Ennal's Point*), 'It's like being inside a watch, every part working, but I haven't begun to understand the Japanese' (letter to Dai Smith, 2 May 1984), 'living in a biscuit-box flat as big as a small garage' (letter to Ron Berry, 31 October 1984), 'to wear a white bandana around the forehead with a red sun in the centre, like the Japanese suicide pilots' (letter to Ron Berry, 6 November 1996).[28] As far as these descriptions are concerned, they are all contained in the Far East oriental discourse in which Japan is a society of its own compact mechanism operated by its faceless members. That is why he asserted in *Miyuki and the Yo-Ho-Ho* (1989): 'Walls of politeness greet the visitor to Japan. There are, you feel, invisible barriers that line up as effectively as road blocks.'[29] In the 1980s Japan was not so accessible a site for tourists as now. We can find the same kinds of stereotype in the writings of Richard D. Lewis who founded the Berlitz School of Language in Tokyo in 1966. His *When Cultures Collide* was a convenient (and therefore widely read) guidebook for any visitors to Japan. For, Lewis made it easier for Western tourists and businessmen to understand Japanese culture by emphasising its stereotypical images and manners. For example, he advised readers 'to nod in agreement, smile quietly, avoid opinionated argument', lest they should be considered impolite.[30] When we notice that Richards's description of Japan was not far from *When Cultures Collide*, we cannot but wonder if Richards was so deeply immersed in this kind of oriental discourse that he could not look the Japanese in the face during his stay in Tokyo.

However, things were not that simple. Before considering his slump fully, it is necessary for us to closely examine how he described the third party, the Japanese 'extras' positioned outside the 'two is company' that formed his main interactions. As we have already seen in *The Tokyo Horrors*, he vividly depicted the relationship between Mrs Fardew-Ingleton and himself. How, then, did he describe the

relationship between himself and the Japanese? There is a description where he portrayed a Japanese nurse in whom he took a sexual interest.

> The pearliest smiler, with an elegant white cleavage and smelling of pears, showed me the appointment book. There were the Tokyo Horrors. They'd got me down for the doctor all right, and a gynaecologist at that![31]

Very cleverly, Richards introduces that pearly smile with a white cleavage that smells like pears as a red herring. Like the Playboy girl in *A Day in the Country*, the nurse plays the function of leading Richards into another strange experience in Tokyo, or another Tokyo horror. Nonetheless, she is portrayed as if she were an attractive but faceless decoy.

Thus, Richards employs the presence of the third party as a turning point of his storyline, where feelings of relief and stirrings of sexual interest give way to 'horror' at the approach of another awkward situation in a foreign land. This way of handling the Others as a turning point of the stories is remarkable in *Air Tight in Tokyo*. While stuck in the 'biscuit-box flat', surrounded by the 'invisible barriers' of the Lions Mansion, he is determined to get to know one Japanese man whose name turns out to be Mr Konishi. Richards imagines that he must be the porter of the Mansion, 'a crushed man' who looks ugly with protruding teeth, condemned to servility and ignored by all the madams of the Mansion as if he were the model of Jehoidah Wetter in 'Jehoidah's Gents'. Since Richards feels a secret sympathy towards this man, it gives the reader an impression that this is another story of 'two is company, three is a crowd'; but at the climax of the story it turns out that Richards has been deceived by the disguise of the 'porter'. Richards concludes the story with the reversal of the plot.

> But the following afternoon, I found him round the corner in an Arnold Palmer Tee-shirt demonstrating his golf swing with a silver club to the Manager of a Sports Store. He also wore an elegant studded golf glove whose price I checked, a mere thirty-seven quid the pair. He gave me a social nod and then ignored me, and soon after I entered my anti-Japanese phase. They hid everything from you, I thought.[32]

This was a moment of revelation for Richards. Here, for the first time, he recognised that this apparently humble man was, in fact, the owner of the Lions Mansion. For that purpose, the porter/owner's predilection for brand name items (Arnold Palmer t-shirt) played an effective role in Richards's writing strategy. For here, the porter's familiar figure becomes all of a sudden that of an unknown Other for Richards. It is because Mr Konishi turns out to be a smug bourgeois rather than a crushed working-class man that Richards feels disillusioned. Thus, Richards ends up describing Mr Konishi not as his companion but as a representative of the inscrutable Japanese people.

4.

Richards was a complicated man in terms of his sense of belonging: not only did he cruelly deride petit-bourgeois snobbery in Cardiff suburbia, he also laughed at the revival movement of Welsh nationalism. More often than not, Richards's satirical humour is turned towards the latter. It is worth noting that he regards this emergent movement as 'fetishism', an attitude of adhering not to human relationships but to cultural artefacts or stereotypes. Let us take another story, 'Bowels Jones', as an example. Since Bowcott Jones, a prosperous grocer, had no children, he blindly doted on his nephew Colenso. However, since going to university Colenso has become a different person, whom Bowcott cannot understand:

> [Colenso] had got into the wrong set at one of the lesser Welsh universities and emerged a rabid Welsh nationalist with Honours Welsh and an interest in his country that amounted to fetishism, in Bowcott's eyes. Despite all the gifts, the golf clubs, the fishing rods, the use of a salmon stretch, the wretch had become one of the interrupters of Her Majesty's judges, a demonstrator, a non-road-tax payer who disappeared for weeks on end to summer schools and folk festivals where they ate, slept, breathed and dreamed Welsh, a way of life and habit which Bowcott found incomprehensible and which irritated him more than he could say.[33]

The author of this story is a black humourist, defining himself against snobby, cosmopolitan Bowcott as well as pretentious and patriotic

Colenso. Besides, in a removed location in Portugal (where Mr and Mrs Jones annually spend holidays), Bowcott and Colenso's pseudo-filial relationship is paralleled with that of a politically subversive youth (Vivaldo) and his father, who is a local celebrity. Undoubtedly, the narrative is brilliantly organised with this calculated distance, but what is more at issue, for us, is its ambivalent attitude towards home and emotional belonging. At the climax of this story, Bowcott is totally baffled when Vivaldo is violently removed from the bar where they drink together by his father and several policemen. Immediately after this incident, the author makes Bowcott indulge in nostalgia for his home so that he can protect himself from this shocking affair:

> He had a sudden intolerable nostalgia for grey skies, grey faces, grey terraced streets, the bustling conviviality of teeming football grounds and men's four-ale bars, and as if to salute them, he suddenly removed the cork from the medicine bottle, up-ended it, and drank copiously from the neck.[34]

Indeed, the communities imagined by Colenso and Bowcott are distinguished via a different set of symbols for each, such as folk festivals for Colenso and terraced streets for Bowcott. However, the author implies that even a non-political snob like Bowcott is apt to resort to nostalgia for the community in his memory. Whereas one character's nationalistic predilection is mockingly branded as 'fetishism', the author admits that there is a consoling force in any given community, however differently it is imagined. In other words, whether it is imagined nationally or class-based, its consoling force is so powerful that Bowcott cannot be exempt from it.

When we take into consideration that Richards's attitude towards the third party is also ambivalent in his Japan stories, there seems to be a close relationship between his sense of belonging and his handling of unknown 'Others'. Whatever it might be that Richards cannot understand, whether it is the bourgeois suburban lifestyles or Welsh nationalist culture, to make it a fetish was his defensive strategy whenever he came across unknown Others. Here is a striking contrast with Raymond Williams, another Welshman, in terms of the contact with unknown Others. Or more precisely, Williams is more careful in his evaluation of something unknown or emergent. That is why he could confidently assert that the Welsh-language revival movement would be

an authentic alternative to the crisis of the wider society. In the brief talk 'Who Speaks for Wales?', he states:

> Black Power in the United States, civil rights in Ulster, the language in Wales, are experiences comparable in this respect to the student movement and to women's liberation. In their early stages these campaigns tend to stress as absolutes those local experiences which are of course authentic and yet most important as indices of the crisis of the wider society.[35]

Alun Richards was different from Williams in his defensive attitude to any emergent movements. Rather, he adhered to his working-class community so devotedly that any new movement seemed to be an intrusion on it under his eyes. In fact, in the preface of *The Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories* (1976), he admits that the Welsh language freed writers from painful attempts to emphasise their nationality in English, but he nonetheless insists:

> Ironically this freedom seems to be in danger of ending and, judging by some of the stories made available in translation, appears to have been replaced by the aim of political conversion, to the detriment, in my view, of the storyteller's art.[36]

For Richards, the freedom brought about by the Welsh-language revival movement was rather an infringement on the wider community he had tried to maintain by aligning with (that is, writing with) its people via 'their' English. Although the sense of community that he favoured was no longer dominant but residual in south Wales, he tended to stress it as an absolute to such a degree that all other senses of community, including that espoused by Welsh nationalism, were regarded as fetishism. We may infer that this is one of the reasons why his writing about nationalism generated such controversy, still one of the greatest paradoxes of his writing career.

5.

Alun Richards seems to have been always conscious of being a professional writer who makes his living by writing for Wales. But what kind

of alignment did he attempt through writing? Although Richards must have recognised that there are different languages and social perspectives, whether Welsh or Japanese, there is no doubt that the language he shared with his own people in Pontypridd had entered his constitution before he started to write. His relentless attack on anonymous suburbia might bear testimony to his sense of alignment, as he states in his autobiography:

> Small towns, I was to find, were discoverable in an intimate way whereas the vast anonymous deserts of suburbia produce only anonymity and a grey sense of unbelonging. When a distant relative described my home town as ugly, I felt my gorge rise.[37]

No more keenly will the reader feel 'his gorge rise' than when he sardonically portrays the vainglorious attempt of a would-be Welsh artist to 'truly' represent south Wales. In the following quotation from 'The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil', that narrative tone can be felt acutely.

> [B]ut recently Melville's discovery of the Welsh streets in his imagination had set his feet moving along ancient trails. There was not a terrace or a pit shaft that escaped him now, it seemed, and his best-known study, a group of lads playing dick-stones outside a blacksmith's shop with a haulier and blackened colliers in attendance, had been bought by a famous London Welshman who'd described it as 'indicative of the true spirit of our people'.[38]

The author emphasises that these two characters are in fact detached from (therefore unfamiliar with) 'the true spirit of our people', even though they pretend to belong to them. In other words, the forged alignment (or collusion) of the two characters' own making is underlined to the detriment of the real alignment of 'our people', that is, a whole neighbourhood of working people. This ironic handling of alignment cannot be persuasive, however, if there is no confidence of true alignment on the side of the writer. Richards was such a writer, and was not able to write without being aligned with 'his own people'.

However, to align with one's own community is one thing, but to keep on aligning with it is another because any given community will never cease to change. Williams is deeply conscious of this fact. In 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment', he adds the following qualification to the quotation cited above:

> Now these are alignments of a deep type, and really I think the most serious case for commitment is that we should commit ourselves far enough to social reality to be conscious of this level of sociality. It means becoming conscious of our own real alignments. This may lead to us confirming them, in some situations. Or it can often lead to changing or shifting or amending them, a more painful process than it sounds.[39]

Williams contends that in 'the most serious case for commitment', the writer should become 'conscious of our own real alignments'. And what the real alignments require of any writer is to look squarely at whatever change people in his community may suffer, and to discover 'social relationships which are in any case there'.[40] Williams underlined this 'discovery' at the end of the essay, and this is what Richards seems to have recoiled from. During his stay in Tokyo, Richards finished reading Dai Smith's *Wales! Wales?* (1984) and was impressed by the word Smith employed to describe the history of Wales – that is, 'evanescence'. Richards confessed in a letter to Smith (2 May 1984) that he was haunted by this evanescence, saying that 'in ourselves, we haven't abandoned anything – and yet there's no going back, and it can't be reproduced'.[41] Symptomatically, it is neither change nor discovery, but evanescence that still haunts him. As Williams himself experienced, 'becoming conscious of our own real alignments' must have been a more painful process than it sounds. For, this process inevitably involves a very difficult discovery of social relationships that are knowable but yet unknown. Alone in his Lions mansion, Richards's isolation can be doubly felt by his readers. Not only did he physically separate himself from the emergent movement in Wales but was also unable to discover any good relationship with ordinary Japanese people.

6.

Unlike Ruth Benedict's famous work of anthropology, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), Richards never attempted to generalise the patterns of Japanese culture. Nor did he speak for any Japanese minority such as whale-hunters, as C. W. Nicol did. Only once in his stay in Japan did he begin to write by being aligned with a small fraction of eccentric Japanese people. This happened when he went to

the Solomon Islands on a liner with a party of war widows and veterans. We can now read it in one of his drafts for BBC Radio Four. A set of three bizarre human beings – Richards, a very big foreigner and the former 'emperor's enemy', Miyuki, his spinster translator and Mr Noguchi, a good-looking ('an oriental Humphrey Bogart') but impossibly unsociable veteran – comprised that odd fraction. Throughout the tour, this peculiar group was isolated from almost all the war widows and veterans, probably partly because they were disgusted with Mr Noguchi's caustic tongue.

> When a middle aged woman said she would even now die for the Emperor and fight the Emperor's enemies, Mr. Noguchi said she should be locked up in her cabin. And finally, Mr. Noguchi began to work on me. 'I know you', he said grinning evilly one night, poking me in the chest. 'Like me, you have a predilection for bad company!'[42]

But that was not the only reason why the war widows and veterans hated this bizarre company. They must have also been upset when Richards attempted some interviews with the war widows so as to gather material for his sea stories. For, they knew that he was 'a guest of the Company', officially invited aboard; while he was an interviewer self-conscious of having been the enemy, 'to all intents and purposes', in the post-war period.[43] That is why Noguchi became interested in Richards and decided to keep company with him during the course of the cruise.

One day, following the itinerary, these three eccentrics visited a long tunnel deep inside one of the Solomon Islands, led by a local guide. It is the very place where Mr Noguchi, the former lieutenant, lost almost all his men, and was, to his disgrace, rescued from mortal danger. He goes into the cave alone and starts mumbling a mantra in the manner of Buddhism. Then, unexpectedly he sheds his skin of cynicism, and loses his usual composure.

> When he returned, there were tears and insect bites on the disgruntled Bogartian face.
>
> 'Rain', he said.[44]

To our surprise, this pathetic scene is followed by something like a pleasant chorus. All together they sing a Japanese nursery rhyme

('Hello, Mr Turtle, why do you run so slow?') and an old English song ('Will the Angels Play their Harp for Me?') that Richards teaches the others:

> 'A million miles I've travelled,
> And a thousand sights I've seen,
> Now I'm ready for the glory that's to be . . .'
>
> It was a sentiment that pleased him immensely, but later, it depressed me since it contained within it the dismal thought that life can provide experiences from which you never really recover.[45]

Even if Richards may perhaps have dramatised this scene while reproducing it, this is a remarkable combination of themes in the two songs: a slow runner who dares not to catch up with the current of the times and a lone traveller who is in his twilight years. Although some veterans indulge in nostalgia for the days when they were youthful soldiers and some widows avow their loyalty to the emperor, almost all the participants of this cruise seem to have recovered from the post-war experience. By comparison, Richards and Mr Noguchi are relics of a bygone age. Like Mr Noguchi, who lost his men under his leadership in the Solomon Islands, Richards was still obsessed with the fact that he had 'learned to fire small arms at caricatures of Japanese soldiers', as if revenging himself on his 'lost friends in the Pacific War'.[46] Through the shared war-time experiences from which they never really recovered, these two eccentrics seem to be aligned with each other, even if temporarily. It seems that Richards is again underlining the saying 'two is company', while keeping company with his oriental Bogart, irrespective of the third-party presence of the other veterans and war widows. He ends this story with the following observation: 'I thought of him finally as a man who all those years ago had given too much.'[47]

In hindsight, it is clear that Richards was living in the wrong place at the wrong time in the Tokyo of 1984. Tokyo was in a fever from its booming economy and almost 80 per cent of the population identified themselves as middle class. (It was an extraordinary year amidst the frantic bubble economy of late twentieth-century Japan.[48]) In his letter to Ron Berry (dated 31 October 1984), Richards himself admitted that he was out of place, finding nothing to commit to: 'Japan is – I dunno – OK for Japanese – no poor people in evidence, little unemployment,

prosperous, a world of things, groups, rules – can't see the savagery there is at home from which all news seems dismal.'[49] Richards was right as far as Tokyo was concerned, the prosperous city where there was no knowing the porter from the owner of the Lions Mansion. Shut up in a biscuit-box flat in Tokyo, he was understandably in a dismal mood, embarrassed with the depressing news coming in from his home country that the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) strike in protest against Thatcher's attempt to close down the pits was ruled illegal, its campaigns overpowered by police violence, so that its defeat seemed likely.

Surrounded by consumer-seducing goods such as Toyota's luxurious Crown, Sony's portable headsets and Cannon's stylish autofocus, Richards was nonetheless susceptible enough to be influenced by some residual or 'evanescent' side of Japanese society. He wrote to Ron Berry in a miserable mood on 31 October 1984:

> I saw a picture of a wolf in a deserted colliery winding room in a Jap magazine and went cold – but it was in the north of Japan – company went bankrupt after a big disaster and couldn't pay the compo. It made me feel cold . . . Apologies for not writing. I'm getting to hate writing![50]

'The north of Japan' mentioned here is the region that is, as Eluned Gramich observes, 'the vulnerable, extraneous limb of the body of Japan . . . removed from the heart of traditional, high Japanese culture' and 'hardly considered a part of the body any more'.[51] Gramich is a recent winner of the New Welsh Writing Award with *Woman Who Brings the Rain*, a memoir based on her experience of Hokkaido in the early 2010s. Admittedly, her poetic prose style beautifully depicts how people in the region live out their lives, tightly embraced by its landscape; but it cannot grasp the residual aspect of Hokkaido. Coal and miners are almost invisible throughout the memoir, though the region was originally developed by coal industries.[52] The landscape she observes is post-industrial, tourism-dependent Hokkaido, which is to a remarkable degree akin to south Wales after coal.

On the other hand, Richards was in a different mood when he referred to Hokkaido. It is meaningful that he was convinced that he saw a wolf in the picture, a species that had died out by the early twentieth century due to Japan's rapid industrialisation.[53] It must have been

a dog deserted by a villager of Yubari, a mining town 'in the north of Japan'. While living in Tokyo in the 1980s, Richards knew exactly what had happened to the place in the picture. In Japan it is known as the Yubari Pit Disaster of 1981. A methane gas explosion at Yubari took the lives of ninety-three miners, which struck a final blow to the waning coal industry in Japan. And locally, it was a fatal blow: Hokutan, one of Japan's biggest mining companies, was bankrupted and could not pay compensation to the victims' families. It still makes the Japanese people feel cold when we remember that Yubari remains an industrial leftover, suffering the agonies of depopulation and a meagre income.

We cannot but wonder what difference it might have made if Richards had lived in Hokkaido, instead of Tokyo. Possibly he may have committed to the widows of the Yubari Pit Disaster, for war widows and the widows of miners were often the focal point of his concern in his writing career. In *Dai Country*, which includes his memoir 'Days of Absence', Richards wondered why the women of Pontypridd (including his grandmother) were all so reticent about how they suffered during the First World War. He wrote:

> As it happened, my grandmother never told me of these things as an ordered body of facts, and now when I attempt to bring them together, I can see inconsistencies which passed undetected – largely because so many of the things she said came as an aside . . . I suspect, that the first war brought with it a time that was too awful to recollect. Everything changed after that.[54]

Also, in Richards's memoir of Carwyn James, we can find an impressive quotation from Carwyn's own memoir. Carwyn wrote about the wife of a miner who is fatally ill because of the working conditions underground.

> He was 36. We leave the chapel and stand outside and while my father lights his Woodbine I listen to two miners I had never seen before.
>
> 'Pity. Full of silicosis, poor chap, and so young'.
>
> 'Let's hope his wife gets Compo'.[55]

This sensitivity, which is prevalent in much writing from south Wales, is of great importance, because it encourages readers to consider the conditions of production in modern industry.

In an essay titled 'Between Country and City' (1984), Raymond Williams points out that to lump together miners who have lost their jobs due to redundancy and labour accidents under the descriptor 'sub-product' is nothing but pure ideology at work. It is, in his words, 'an attempt to separate out the often unwanted but usually predictable and even necessary results of a whole productive process, keeping only the favourable outputs as real "products"'.[56] Unfortunately, Richards was not able to write about the widows of Yubari because he had no chance to align with this residual side of Japanese society. Nor was he able to write about the widows of the Pacific War because he found the widows he met on the cruise had apparently recovered from their sufferings in wartime. However, that Richards did not write about Japan in the 1980s was inevitable all the more because the dominant ideology of capitalism tried to consign those inconvenient remnants to oblivion by repeating the phrases such as 'no longer post-war but a new era' and 'new clean energy' in chorus. It was also keen to represent Japan as a globally oriented, post-industrial nation in the Far East. Indeed, this was why Richards was invited and asked to write 'Sea Stories of the Far East' by JF; but he was destined to fail in this project from the beginning. He was the writer who could not write without looking back to the past.

7.

As we have seen above, Alun Richards seems to have failed to align with those inscrutable Others who were outside his small coterie, whether in Wales or in Japan. Why was he destined to fail in his struggle for alignment? Undoubtedly, language was an immense obstacle for him; Japanese is obviously not a language he was born into. Richards admitted in a rather depressive mood in *The Veteran* that: 'My knowledge of the language did not improve much.'[57] However, the language barrier only partially explains his failure. Another important factor was his predilection for a small group of companions, which can be connected to his unique position in relation to alignment and writing practice: 'Two is company, three is a crowd'. With this motto always in mind, Richards was able to get along with a residual fraction of each society he lived in, and this type of alignment enabled him to palpably record the residual aspects of society the dominant ideology tried to

make invisible, whether they were wartime leftovers or industrial ones. This was his greatest performance as a writer, in that he sardonically reminded us that we are all guilty of historical amnesia, being contented with current affluence and wishful revivals of nationalist myths. But there was a downside to this kind of alignment. His tendency to align with the smallest number of people led him to assume an air of defensiveness, so much so that he regarded some unknown aspects of society not as being pre-emergent but as merely superficial. In the worst cases, he branded such social movements disparagingly as instances of fetishism. Seen from this perspective, Richards was not able to live out the painful process of 'becoming conscious of our own real alignments', as Williams proposed. Complacent alignment and cultural defensiveness co-existed uncomfortably in his writings.

Let me end this article by reconsidering the strange relationship between Richards and Mr Konishi in *Air Tight in Tokyo*. Although Richards suspects that Mr Konishi could be the owner of the Lions Mansion, their strange relationship continues with the help of Richards's wife who briefly visits him in Japan. (She and Mr Konishi were on good terms because of their shared interest in old postal stamps.) However, Richards himself keeps his distance, for his suspicion always makes him take up a defensive posture toward Mr Konishi, his former 'companion':

> My knowledge of the language did not improve much and for all I know, Mr. Konishi might have owned the building, dropping in between gold and sorting out his penny blacks. Only one thing is certain. I would pay money not to have him broadcast about me. 'This is about a foreigner who thought he was airtight and unlovely, hairy fellow, who could not read or write . . .'[58]

Indeed, it is strange that Richards was so ashamed of his 'illiteracy', but this inferiority complex towards people who speak other languages reveals a lot about his difficulty in alignment. We may conclude that this tendency coincided both in Wales and in Japan of the 1980s, whenever he was on his guard not to be 'swallowed wholly', even when intrigued by the unknown Others.

[1] Dai Smith, *In the Frame: Memory in Society 1910–2010* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 244–5.
[2] Alun Richards, *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 332.
[3] C. W. Nicol, *Hokori-takaki Nihonjin de Itai* [I want to be proud of being Japanese] (Tokyo: Ato Deizu, 2004), p. 65. Translation mine.
[4] Alun Richards, *A Day in the Country*, Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University, Box 18, 18/7/4. I owe a tremendous debt to Prof. Onuki Takashi's transcription from Alun Richards's original data at the Richard Burton Archive. I am also deeply grateful to the Richard Burton Archive and its archivists, Elizabeth Bennett and Katrina Legg, for their kind permission to reproduce material from Alun Richards's typescripts.
[5] Raymond Williams, 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment', in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 216.
[6] Williams, 'The Writer', p. 216.
[7] Raymond Williams, 'The Tenses of Imagination', in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 261.
[8] *The Japan Foundation Annual Report 1983–84* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 1984), p. 70.
[9] See Ishihara Shintaro, *The Japan That Can Say No*, trans. Frank Baldwin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 26–32. Originally published in Japanese in 1989.
[10] C. W. Nicol, 'Bread and Sushi', *Ushio*, 9 (September 1984). Translation mine.
[11] Alun Richards (ed.), *Against the Waves: An Anthology of Sea Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1978), p. 9.
[12] Alun Richards, *The Veteran* and *Miyuki and the Yo-Ho-Ho*, Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University, Box 18, 18/7/4; Smith, *In the Frame*, p. 226.
[13] Smith, *In the Frame*, p. 226.
[14] Smith, *In the Frame*, pp. 219–20.
[15] Alun Richards, *Air Tight in Tokyo*, Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University, Box 18, 18/7/4.
[16] Smith, *In the Frame*, pp. 224–5.
[17] Alun Richards, *Dai Country* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2009), p. 137.
[18] Smith, *In the Frame*, pp. 224–5.
[19] Joseph Conrad's 'Karain' is a typical example of this narrative. See Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Unrest* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).
[20] Alun Richards, *Ennal's Point* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 117.
[21] Alun Richards, 'A Confession of an Elderly Rider – from Tokyo', *Ushio*, 9 (September 1984), 66. Translation mine.
[22] Richards, 'A Confession of an Elderly Rider', 66.
[23] Alun Richards, *Carwyn* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2015), p. 135.
[24] Richards, *Dai Country*, p. 145.
[25] Alun Richards, *The Tokyo Horrors*, Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University, Box 18, 18/7/4.
[26] Richards, *The Tokyo Horrors*.
[27] Richards, *The Tokyo Horrors*.
[28] Alun Richards, *Plays for Players* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1975), pp. 76, 365; Richards, 'The Scandalous Thoughts of Elmyra Mouth', in *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 243; Richards, *Ennal's Point* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 128, 212; Smith, *In the Frame*, pp. 224, 226, 264.
[29] Richards, *Miyuki and the Yo-Ho-Ho*.

[30] Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1996), p. 14. See also Steven L. Rosen, 'Japan as Other: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict', *Intercultural Communication*, 4 (October 2000), 17–24.
[31] Richards, *The Tokyo Horrors*.
[32] Richards, *Air Tight in Tokyo*.
[33] Richards, *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 257.
[34] Richards, *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 269.
[35] Raymond Williams, 'Who Speaks for Wales?', in *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 4.
[36] Alun Richards (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 9.
[37] Richards, *Dai Country*, p. 51.
[38] Richards, *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil*, pp. 323–4.
[39] Williams, 'The Writer', p. 217.
[40] Williams, 'The Writer', p. 217.
[41] Smith, *In the Frame*, p. 222.
[42] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[43] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[44] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[45] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[46] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[47] Richards, *The Veteran*.
[48] See Ishihara, *The Japan That Can Say No*; and Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Revisited* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986).
[49] Smith, *In the Frame*, p. 226.
[50] Smith, *In the Frame*, p. 227.
[51] Eluned Gramich, *Woman Who Brings the Rain: A Memoir of Hokkaido, Japan* (Aberystwyth: New Welsh Review, 2015).
[52] See Kamata Satoshi, *Zenkiroku Tanko* [A general record of coal-mines in Japan] (Tokyo: Soshin-sha, 2007).
[53] See *The Red Data Book of The Ministry of Environment, Japan https://ikilog.biodic.go.jp/Rdb/zukan?_action=rn001* (accessed 30 November 2018).
[54] Richards, *Dai Country*, pp. 32–3.
[55] Richards, *Carwyn*, p. 44.
[56] Williams, 'Between Country and City', in *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 229.
[57] Richards, *Air Tight in Tokyo*.
[58] Richards, *Air Tight in Tokyo*.