

**Resoundingly Neo-Victorian Biofiction in Paint:
Review of Anthony Rhys's *Notorious***

Marie-Luise Kohlke
(Swansea University, Wales, UK)

Notorious / Drwg-Enwog
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The thing one remembers most about Anthony Rhys' paintings is the mouths of his tormented figures. When not twisted, or else grinding or ferociously baring their teeth, most of his subjects' mouths gape open wide in a silent scream of protest, rage, and despair at the unfairness of life. Yet while each portrait depicts an actual nineteenth-century life, it also invites us to reflect on present-day issues and iniquities.



Fig. 1: Anthony Rhys, *John Forrester* (2015)

“Forrester put 2s in his mouth and defied the police to take the money from him. He was tattooed all over his body.”
South Wales Daily News. November 30th 1883.

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Although Rhys cites Francis Bacon as a major influence,¹ many of his grayscale portraits are just as likely to recall Munch's versions of *The Scream* (1893-1910), albeit transposed to an indefinite bleak background setting, which contributes to the sense of figures straining against their confinement within the frames. Unlike Munch's iconic depersonalised and sexless abstraction of modernist alienation, however, Rhys's variously raging, sneering, or cringing images are both gendered and individuated through the detailing of hair and dress. Currently on show at the Oriel Myrddin Gallery, Carmarthen, Wales, the portraits in the bilingual *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog* exhibition represent particular historical subjects, yet the effect of their collective display is one of curious conformity due to the limited range and obsessive repetition of expressions.

All of the portraits depict individuals grounded in but having fallen foul of their local Victorian communities, thereby inviting public condemnation, judgement and sanction. For some of the more serious offences, including infanticide and assault, the wrongdoers and their punishments were recorded in the Carmarthen Goal Felons Register, kept from 1844 to 1871, now held in the Carmarthenshire Archives.² The register briefly noted prisoners' crimes, their admission to the local jail, any issues concerning conduct during confinement, and their eventual discharge. After 1860, once photography had established itself, these notes were sometimes supplemented with small photographic vignettes pasted into the register, which is on display at the gallery, opened at a different page each day for visitors to view. The Felons Register and the theme of wider Victorian transgression provided the artist's inspirations for the *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog* exhibition,³ which follows earlier shows by Rhys with similar representational approaches but on different themes, including *Born of Pain and Iron* (Penarth Pavilion, April 2014), *God Forgive Us* (William Foy Cell, Redhouse Cymru, Merthyr Tydfil, November 2014 – May 2015), and *Dark Valleys* (February – March 2015). A self-taught Welsh artist, Rhys's painting is strongly situated within the regional nineteenth-century rural and industrial history of South Wales, where he lives and works. What might be termed his 'painterly biofiction' or 'biofiction on canvas and paper' has won him several prestigious Welsh prizes, including the Ifor Davies Art Award at the National Eisteddfod in 2012.

Rhys confesses to being fascinated by Victorian photographs and *cartes-de-visite* (or cabinet cards), which he has been collecting avidly for a

number of years, amassing several hundreds. In particular, he is intrigued by the subjects' typically formal demeanour and vacuity of expression, which give no indication of their emotional lives. As he remarks in a Facebook posting on an earlier exhibition, "I have always been taken by the imagery of Victorian photographs, the sepia tones, vignetting, clothes, poses and the faces, those blank staring faces that only give tiny little hints of a person's life and character" (Rhys 2014a: n.p.). His oil paintings thus reinstate and dramatise this missing feeling, filling in the blanks – much as writers of neo-Victorian biofiction imaginatively fill in the gaps in the life-stories of their historical subjects. The process clearly involves a sensationalising, even voyeuristic element, already hinted at in the exhibition's title, *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog*. (The literal translation of the Welsh is 'bad celebrity'). It is not ordinary or bland Victorian lives, but those which figuratively 'came off the rails' that interest Rhys, and it is these lives' hidden secrets, vices and misdemeanors, but also their trials and tribulations that his portraits seek to capture and expose. In his own words, he paints "individuals caught in an emotional state [...] baring themselves to us by expressing their darkest, most troubled hour. I wanted to pinpoint those times in their lives that the camera didn't catch" (Rhys 2014a: n.p.). His artwork's themes and emotional intensity thus align closely with the "quintessentially Gothic" nature of neo-Victorianism in general (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4), as evident in literary and filmic practice also, where tropes of nineteenth-century crime, trauma, and injustice tend to predominate, producing comparably dark and oppressive atmospheres. The same keynote pervades Rhys's monochrome paintings.⁴

Rhys portrays the Carmarthen felons on twenty, smallish, oval wooden panels, numbered as per their register entries rather than titled by name, displayed in parallel rows on one of the venue's walls. The arrangement recalls both the art of miniature painting – a tradition that reaches back much further than the nineteenth century, of course – and the grouped family portrait and photograph displays popular in Victorian homes, which commonly included images of the dear departed. Yet it also replicates the Victorians' collectivising and categorising impulse; as in the Felons Register, the individuals are once again exhibited as a quasi 'Rogues Gallery' or group illustration of nineteenth-century 'deviance' and 'criminality', even as Rhys' emotional re-humanising of the subjects tries to resist and deconstruct such generalisations. These portraits, he said, he

found more difficult to paint, as the scarcity of the available information in the Felons Register entries offered only limited pointers as to personal qualities or narrative elements for him to expand on. Similarly, the tiny official photographs in the register lacked detail and definition to exploit.

Rhys's portraits of local 'criminals' are complemented by a wider array of 'aberrations' and oddities that caught the Victorian public's attention. Featuring as items of interest in the local newspapers of the time, these range from workhouse inmates through disgraced officials, destitute vagrants, suicides, lunatics, and fathers of illegitimate children to fallen women – indeed, they encompass all the best-loved 'patent' tropes familiar from neo-Victorian fiction. In contrast to those of the felons, these further thirty portraits, most of them named, are painted on paper in A5 size.⁵ Arranged in a single row running around the rest of the gallery space, they tend to be more fully fleshed out and expressive, but also more appropriative in biofictional terms. This is due to the fact that these images are amalgams of snippets of newspaper coverage of scandals and offences, which fired the artist's imagination, and of period photographs that are not necessarily of the historical subjects themselves. As no period images of the subjects were available,⁶ Rhys drew on the photographic records of Usk Jail or on his collection of anonymous Victorian photographs to quite literally give a neo-Victorian 'face' to the faceless – because visually unrecorded – real-life individuals.⁷

This *modus operandi* does, however, raise potential ethical problems concerning the deliberate distortion of subjects' identities or the misleading of the audience, since these arbitrary combinations are not explicitly acknowledged in the portrait descriptions or the exhibition catalogue. Put differently, a number of the real-life subjects recorded in the photographic traces are arbitrarily 'attached' to selected textual traces, in each case producing a tripartite biofictional 'new' identity. The third and fictional element of this identity is contributed by the artist's imaginative conjoining of different kinds of traces and his deliberate alteration (or supplementation) of the photographic image he reworks. At times this also allows for self-reflexive ironic humour, as when he smuggles a self-portrait into the picture of his Victorian almost-namesake, P.C. Rees.

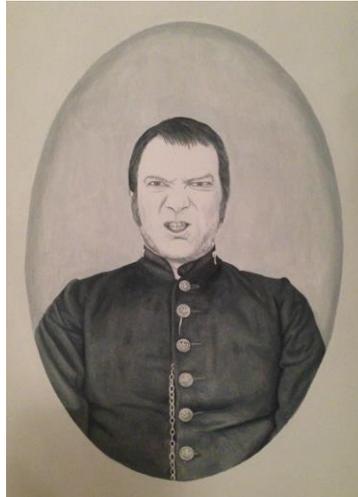


Fig. 2: Anthony Rhys, P.C. Rees (2015)

“He said that the policeman who locked him up was so drunk that he left the keys of the cell behind.”

South Wales Daily News. January 3rd 1877.

Fittingly, on the exhibition’s opening night, Rhys was kitted out in a Victorian policeman’s uniform – though not inebriated on duty, as his nineteenth-century counterpart was accused of being by one drunk and disorderly John Owens, whose cell he forgot to lock. The accusation was deemed unfounded and the prisoner eventually fined 20s (Rhys 2016b: 5).

Nonetheless Rhys also engages in a more serious, ethical recovery project of the historically marginalised. His portraits seek to restore significance to ordinary Victorian people and commemorate – if only in fragmentary form – their unique life-stories. This applies especially to those individuals whose identities were all too often subsumed into generalised social groupings, such as ‘workhouse inmates’, ‘vagrants’, or ‘the criminal class’. His resort to the Victorian photographic and journalistic mediums for inspiration for this project is highly apt on several counts. Firstly, the journalistic endeavours of Victorian social reformers, such as Thomas John Barnardo, Charles Dickens, Henry Mayhew, W.T. Stead and others, strategically employed personalised stories of tragedy and suffering in the service of philanthropic endeavors, namely to elicit public sympathy and attention for marginalised groups, and thus attract support and donations for their respective causes and crusades. In these campaigns, images – including

deliberately staged or manipulated images, as in the case of Barnardo's pictures of slum children – also came to play a significant part. In this sense, the 'provenance' of Rhys's art pays oblique homage to the Victorian ethos of public service and philanthropy as well as to the importance of a more inclusive social history. Both of these are once again assuming growing importance in today's increasingly divisive and unequal capitalist society, which arguably leads to greater rather than lesser marginalisation. This potential 'consciousness-raising' is a typical quality of the best of neo-Victorian art in all its multiple media.

Secondly, Rhys's portraits could be regarded as echoing Victorian composite photography. For nineteenth-century photography did not necessarily aim at objectivity, as evidenced by the popularity of photomontage and combination printing as well as composite photography, most notably practiced by Henry Peach Robinson and Oscar Rejlander in England or William Notman in Canada. These innovators in photographic techniques experimented with recreating seasons, settings, and genre scenes, aiming for (albeit manufactured) effects of photographic realism and seeking to circumvent the limitations of the new technology.⁸ Their creative manipulation of photographs thus drew attention to the constructed malleability and framing of the image for the particular context in (and purposes for which) it was reproduced, while also foreshadowing much later advances in airbrushing, photo shopping, and digital enhancement. As Mia Fineman explains, "[b]y the 1850's [sic] people were manipulating photographs for artistic reasons: to exert more control over the medium and to imitate other art forms like painting and printmaking", and the latter part of the century saw a growing interest "in staged or manipulated photographs that blurred the line between truth and fiction" (Fineman qtd. in Hirsch 2013: 54, 53). Accordingly, Jeanne Willette argues that the Victorian composite photograph "can be understood as a step toward the idea that a photograph could be a work of art" (Willette 2013: n.p.), and hence toward the recognition of photography as a legitimate art form. From one point of view, Rhys's work could be regarded as a further development in this process, albeit in reverse: he recycles photographic traces back into the raw material for his paintings, which imitate the now established art form of photography.⁹ But like the medium he emulates in his work, the portraits' very verisimilitude underlines their expert artificiality as neo-Victorian simulacra.

Willette describes the “hybrid entity” that was the Victorian composite photograph as an admixture in another sense also, since frequently “combining, not just photographic elements but also narrative – story telling, moralizing, and poetry” (Willette 2013: n.p.).¹⁰ Again, Rhys’s paintings do something similar, tantalising viewers with an evocative story-fragment to imaginatively ‘complete’ the subjects’ stories for themselves or even conduct further research into the facts of their lives, for instance via the supporting documentation of the Felons Register, Victorian newspapers and other period textual sources that Rhys drew on. This makes for a more interactive and vital engagement with history, with the viewer called upon to act as ‘co-producer’ of the larger picture and reflect on how history never simply presents itself as a ‘given’, but is strategically shaped and re-interpreted by those who come after through the privileged foregrounding of some traces rather than others. As one reviewer remarks, “It’s rare to have an art exhibition which feels more like a performance” (Williams 2016: 3).

Yet arguably, this is a tripartite act, involving not just the artist and audience, but also the historical subjects – who crucially have no choice to give or withhold their consent to the command performance. Rhys repeatedly speaks of his portraits as if they were living people rather than depictions of the dead, for example when he writes of his *Dark Valleys* exhibition that “[t]he paintings rage and shout to you and tell you their troubles, even if you do not want to hear them” (Rhys 2016a: n.p.). Yet one might equally argue that these emotional ‘confessions’ are coerced and that the portraits’ subjects rage against their reduction to the single performative pose into which each is interminably frozen: the visceral reaction to public shaming and others’ pity. Whether a Victorian shoemaker, for instance, would have wished to be commemorated in paint not for his honest work or life, but only for his desperate suicidal drowning, deemed to have contaminated the local water supply, remains a moot point (see Fig. 6 below). Quite possibly both he and other of Rhys’s real-life subjects might have preferred to fade quietly into historical oblivion. But death, of course, also suspends rights to privacy. Nonetheless, it is vexing issues like these, centering on the ethical impossibility of the subject’s consent to her or his representation, which lead some critics to attribute metaphorical ‘grave-robbing’ tendencies to neo-Victorian biofiction (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 20).

Rhys's artwork deliberately blurs fact and fiction, life and death, commemoration and coercion, in its search for a poetic truth about his subjects' lives which cannot, finally, contain or do them full justice. The portraits in the *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog* exhibition all end up somehow resembling each other, producing a cumulative effect, with individual images blending into a larger composite. Together, they constitute a sort of representational fugue of agonised Victorianism, of repetition with variation. The resulting obsessional quality of Rhys's portraiture signals both the imperative and impossibility of his recovery project vis-à-vis ordinary historical subjects. Yet at the same time, awareness of Rhys's composite technique effectively draws attention to the fact that the Victorians today are always at least in part an imaginative construct created in the light of our own concerns, anxieties, and fascinations. Put differently, we choose to represent the Victorians or to 're-presentify' them – that is, draw them back into presence – in ways that are most readily consumable and compelling, not least in terms of contemporary resonance.

As much is illustrated by one of the most striking images of the exhibition, depicting an asylum inmate being force fed through a nasal tube.



Fig. 3: Anthony Rhys, *Unknown* (2015)

“Forced alimention was required in four cases where perfect abstinence was persisted in: three of these recovered and one died.”

Asylum Report. 1874.

The portrait illustrates both the composite nature and selective present-day topicality of Rhys's creations. The woman's resistance (rather unrealistically) is concentrated into her howl, presumably of pain and resistance, rather than in the struggle against physical restraints, which are deliberately left out of the picture. Still more uncannily, the gaping mouth could almost be that of a laughing child having stuck a balloon string up its nose, since the feeding apparatus too is not depicted in full.

Paradoxically, the lack of restraints emphasises the all-pervading panoptic control of the institutional regime, in which the voyeuristic viewer becomes inadvertently implicated.¹¹ The omission also enhances the performative and stylised aspect of the portrait, as does the woman's costume, especially the beaded necklace (and what may be a bracelet on her left wrist), which seems much too fine for an asylum inmate, let alone a rebellious one refusing nourishment. Indeed, I initially took the portrait to depict an imprisoned suffragette rather than a madwoman – although Victorian authorities, of course, did not always differentiate between the two. Moreover, the narrow outline of the dress struck me as more Edwardian than Victorian, reinforcing the initial impression. Upon my enquiry, Rhys admitted that the textual snippet that inspired the work had indeed brought the suffragettes' plight to his mind, so that he had taken deliberate liberties with tweaking the dress in order to strengthen the analogy between the two groups of imprisoned women. Here the retrospective witness-bearing to historical trauma serves not so much to individuate a particular case study as to render the individual representative of a wider social injustice deserving critique. Yet the image still resonates powerfully on numerous levels, not least in the context of current UK public and political debates surrounding the poor NHS provision for mental health patients. It also intersects with an upsurge in commemorations of the women's suffrage movement (for instance, the 2015 *Suffrage* film), in the lead-up to the centenary of British women's partial attainment of the vote in 1918, with 2014 also having marked the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Women's Franchise League in Britain in 1889.

Rhys's own experience of working full-time in a special needs school, alongside his artistic practice, in part explains his particular interest in institutional contexts and their potentially devastating effects on the individual. As he has remarked in an interview, "Given my day job, I'm also naturally drawn to the history of institutions like the asylum and the

workhouse where a lot of my pupils would have ended up 150 years ago” (Rhys qtd. in Matthews-Jones 2013: n.p.). He is currently vacillating between the suffragette movement and institutional abuse, especially in children’s homes, as the theme of his next large project. The latter, of course, is another highly topical concern in the wake of the recent Rotherham and Jimmy Savile child sex abuse scandals in the UK, as well as more historic cases, including that of physical and sexual abuse against children in North Wales care homes between 1974 and 1990.

Again, Rhys’s inclusion of two child portraits in the exhibition is intriguing in this respect, in particular the one entitled ‘Unknown’,¹² showing the screwed-up crying face of a little girl, a workhouse inmate, returned from a failed work trial in the community by her dissatisfied new master (see Rhys 2016b: 3).



Fig. 4: Anthony Rhys, *Unknown* (2014)

“He said she was too wicked, but it appeared that her greatest offence was a fondness for cream.” *The Welshman*. July 16th. 1875.

If the recreation of Victorian moments of extreme emotion discomfits the viewer, then the distress of the child subject, who appears no older than six or seven (if even that), applies another turn of the screw. Even the humour of the subheading from the sympathetic newspaper report fails to attenuate the image’s disturbing aspect, which places the observer in a double voyeuristic bystander role, as evidently there is no opportunity for

intervention. For that same subtext carries subtle sinister connotations, since not only is ‘wicked’ taken to derive etymologically from ‘wicca’ or ‘witch’, a figure often linked with immorality and deviance, but historically the term has often been associated with sexual transgression as well as criminality. For an adult to condemn a child as “too wicked” might thus be taken to imply something far worse than the possible theft of cream, ringing more like a perpetrator’s reverse projection of guilt onto the victim.

Such deliberate unsettling throws us back self-consciously on our desire to consume Victorian suffering in its most Gothic forms. This process is foregrounded in another memorable portrait, namely that of Miss E.H. Lewis, an asylum matron. When a naked violent patient tore her jacket, Lewis retaliated by viciously beating the woman with her key ring and a stick, before spitting in her face and kicking her in the chest, an assault for which she was fined £10 (Rhys 2016b: 6).



Fig. 5: Anthony Rhys, *Miss E.H. Lewis* (2015)

“Miss Lewis turned around, spat in her face,
kicked her twice in the chest, and called her a nasty old brute.”
Cardiff Times. September 14th 1867.

The twisted sneer with which Rhys endows Lewis seems to resist the judgmental gaze, throwing viewers’ condemnation back in their faces and questioning their own assumed moral superiority – almost as if to say, ‘I’d

like to see what *you* would have done in my place'. Yet even in the case of such a far from likeable character, Rhys's art still manages to evoke an uncanny empathy for the offender, asking what build-up of pressures might have provoked such a violent outburst by a respectable Victorian woman. Even the large feminine bow of Lewis's collar seems tied tight enough to half strangle her. While interrogating stereotypical notions of nineteenth-century restraint and repression, Rhys's portraits thus also invite visitors to contemplate how their own failings might have been viewed in an earlier century. They demand a preparedness to immerse or project ourselves into a different time-frame and ideology, and to respond emotionally to the excess emotion captured in paint.¹³ It is this interplay of emotion that bridges the temporal divide and makes the two-dimensional figures on paper come alive once more as living, feeling, human beings, however inconsequential they may have been in the Victorian scheme of things.

In the terms of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, the face of the Other appeals to the viewer on an intersubjective level. Indeed, Rhys's work might be viewed as a painterly version of Levinasian philosophy, which is likewise resolutely centred on the human face.¹⁴ The historical Other addresses and calls to us from Rhys's portraits, imposing an obligation of embodied recognition and response; this summons is enacted through affect, vulnerability, and (re-)lived immediacy in intense moments of being caught in paint. Yet at the same time the Other's irreducible alterity defies full representation, as Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*: "The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp" (Levinas 1969: 197). As much is signalled in the textual trace of the Other's life-story, which forms an integral part of each portrait, even as it redefines that portrait itself as an inconclusive partial and fleeting emotional trace of the subject. Put differently, this is only one face of the Other's many faces that we glimpse.¹⁵ The self-consciousness exhibited by many of Rhys's subjects (such as Miss E.H. Lewis in her evident resentment of being looked at, objectified and categorised as an 'offender') thus produces a reciprocal, typically neo-Victorian self-consciousness in the audience. We are confronted with the improper appropriateness and potential transgressiveness of our gaze, when it becomes intent on penetrating, defining and consuming – rather than respecting – the Victorian Other's unique alterity.

In other ways too, Rhys's biofictional portraiture is distinctly neo-Victorian, as the mode is commonly conceptualised. Viewers may discern a spectral and haunting quality in his works, identified by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham as characteristic of much neo-Victorian fiction (see Arias and Pulham 2010). The mostly featureless, blurred gray backgrounds of Rhys's paintings, their simple rectangular black frames posed against the stark white walls of the lofty gallery space, at times convey an effect akin to Victorian mortuary or post-mortem photographs. This impression is further enhanced by some of the subjects' tightly closed eyes, as if they were unable to face the world's opprobrium and contempt; so too by a sort of aura or penumbra around the head (as in Fig. 6 below),¹⁶ or else a sort of vaporous ectoplasmic emanation (as in Fig. 4 of the sobbing child).



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 6: Anthony Rhys, *William Edwards* (2015)

“It was resolved to empty the reservoir although the town can ill afford to lose the water.”
South Wales Daily News. February 8th 1872.

Fig. 7: Anthony Rhys, *Thomas Rees* (2015)

“I was so drunk, I did not know what I was doing.”
Carmarthen Journal. February 3rd 1859.

Indeed in the shoemaker Edwards's case, the spectrality trope is especially apt, since he drowned himself in a local reservoir, which was subsequently drained to avoid eventual contamination by his corpse (see Rhys 2016b: 4). Indeed, the *William Edwards* and *Thomas Rees* portraits could quite easily be misread as re-imagined mortuary or post-mortem photographs; however, this is not the case.¹⁷ Arguably, it is mainly the energy of the screaming mouths that imbues Rhys's paintings with virtual life; in contrast, that motif's absence in these two paintings (combined with the closed eyes) makes the subjects almost appear as though already dead. Inadvertently, the resulting effect is to replicate the Victorian impulse behind the photographic registration of felons, which served not only to classify them as 'bad celebrities' but also, in a sense, to declare them 'dead' to respectable society.¹⁸

The ghostly impression of some of Rhys's portraits is also attributable to the vagaries of Victorian photography. As the artist explained to exhibition visitors on opening night, bleaching was common in nineteenth-century photographs, since the camera reacted to white, with the equipment not sophisticated enough to deal with nuances of shading. Frequently, light reflections would cause a 'white-out' in the print, which Rhys sometimes reproduces; see, for instance, the lower edges of the *Miss E.H. Lewis* (Fig. 4) and *Eliza Thomas* (Fig. 8 below) or the right-hand side of the face in the portrait of Edwards above (Fig. 6).

These spectral qualities of Rhys's art also link to the trace, another important emergent strand of neo-Victorian theory. Focusing on the interplay between presence and absence, for instance, Rosario Arias privileges the trace as a particular mode of the present's apperception in terms of the Victorian past: "The hybrid nature of the trace, which partakes of both absence and presence, past and present, facilitates the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries between the Victorian and the contemporary age" (Arias 2014: 111). Founded as it is on literal visual and textual traces, Rhys's art clearly works within a similar paradigm, as he creates new kinds of simulated alternative traces of Victorian historical subjects in and for the present. Rhys has stated that "I am [...] acutely aware that a photograph can be all that remains of a person's existence after the memory of them has passed" (Rhys 2014a: n.p.), but what he does with these photographic 'remains' or 'remainders' further contests the limits on physical presence. Through his portraiture, the subjects are granted both a

material after-life (albeit in non-fleshly form) and an on-going commemoration in the present. Rhys's paintings allow them to manifest their presence and make it *felt*, akin to mournful or shrieking ghosts, only that these neo-Victorian 'spirit paintings' cannot be as readily dismissed as superstitious nonsense. Rhys's painterly biofictions become their affective and tangible 'marks' *and* 'markers'. Yet they also carry an ironic sting in the tail: for arguably, the Victorian urge to catalogue deviance resulted in a far greater number of photographs of Victorian 'Others', such as criminals and lunatics, being made, collected, and preserved for posterity than those of their ordinary counterparts, the Victorian men or women in the streets going about their everyday business and sometimes also falling victims to crime.¹⁹

The artist's focus on historically obscure subjects, whose notoriety or 'bad celebrity' was limited to their local communities, further aligns Rhys's work with postcolonial concerns. Many of his subjects, such as workhouse inmates, the disabled, and fallen women (as well as felons), might legitimately be described as members of society's 'internally colonised', so that Rhys's selection of them as appropriate subject matter for art could be read as a form of 'writing back' – or in this case 'painting back' – to the centres of power. There is, however, one difficulty in defending this reading of his work, namely the absence of race in the *Notorious / Drwg-Enwog* exhibition, which is also evident in his oeuvre as a whole. This oversight is curious in view of the fact that Wales' capital city of Cardiff, a major international seaport for the nineteenth-century coal trade, had one of Britain's most well established multi-cultural communities, including many Black Victorians, in the Butetown and dock areas, colloquially known as Tiger Bay. Similarly, the 'Copperopolis' Swansea, centre of the nation's copper smelting industry, was a vibrant seaport, again attracting immigrants and Black and Asian sailors, and Carmarthen too had docklands, being an important river port only eight miles from the sea. Some of the marginalised groups depicted by Rhys, such as prisoners in Welsh jails, are known to have included non-whites, as per the example of James Thomas Peterson, Prisoner No. 125, sentenced to fourteen days' hard labour for stealing two keys in 1871, and Rhys was certainly aware of both Peterson and another Black Victorian prisoner included in the online digital archive of Usk Prison.²⁰ Rhys readily acknowledges the representational gap; however, in this case, it seems to derive more from the artist's research findings and the exhibition's local focus than "any conscious effort" on his part (Rhys

2016c). For contrary to his anticipations, his extensive trawling through local period newspapers discovered no references to any ethnic subjects, and Rhys notes that “there is [only] one ‘creole’ prisoner listed in the whole of [the] felon’s register’s 2,400 odd entries – and that without a photograph!”; thus to incorporate ethnic subjects would have seemed like doing so “just for the sake of it” (Rhys 2016c).²¹

A wider, more urban or national scope to the exhibition, especially one exploring Wales’ nineteenth-century global connections, would likely have furnished different results, and hence a different ethnic make-up in the portraits. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, for instance, “African-American or ‘Nigger Minstrelsy’ [...] took Wales by storm”, precipitating what has been described as “a socio-cultural collision on a vast scale”; visiting artists included the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and on some occasions “rival companies” of African-American entertainers “would be performing at various Swansea venues during the same week, feeding an insatiable audience” (Jazz Heritage Wales n.d.: n.p.). Presumably, some of these acts also visited Carmarthen. Similarly, the Welsh branches of the non-conformist churches were also strongly involved in the Abolitionist movement, and African-American escaped or ex-slaves would have appeared as public speakers in Welsh cities or in other roles. The one-time slave and mesmerist showman Henry ‘Box’ Brown, for instance, appeared in Merthyr Tydfil in 1864 (Chater 2016: n.p.), and the Black herbalist Frederick Dennison “was fined for stealing an umbrella in Rhyl, North Wales in the summer of 1889” (Green n.d.: n.p.). Clearly, this multi-cultural aspect of Welsh Victorian social history also deserves Rhys’s deft biofictional treatment, and the ethnic dimension is one that he fully intends to develop in future.

In spite of the painstaking detail which goes into Rhys’s tireless resurrection of real-life Victorians in paint, the portraits afford us only fleeting glimpses rather than fully rounded pictures of these historical Others – as though caught in the momentary flash of a camera that freezes them both in and out of time, their own as much as ours. Simultaneously appealing and discomfiting, the faces’ emotional extremity makes it difficult to withhold a response. To cite Levinas once more: “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal” (Levinas 1969: 200).

Yet there is also a good dose of black humour in Rhys's work, which makes his deliberate unsettling of the viewer more digestible and palatable. Often, the comic element derives from the composite technique and the appended textual traces. The frequent obliqueness of the latter seems almost intended to spark off weird and wonderful speculations in the viewers' minds, as in the case of Eliza Thomas's portrait (see Fig. 8 below). Indeed, the first thing that sprang to my mind upon reading the portrait's subtext – "No amount of abuse would justify the use of the umbrella." – was Alexia Tarabotti, the feisty steampunk heroine of Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009–) who at the start of *Soulless* (2009), expertly but controversially dispatches a predatory vampire with her parasol. Thomas' 'real' story is hardly less engaging: "Eliza assaulted a man, his wife and a few bystanders with her umbrella sometime after 11pm in Johnstown after a Saturday night out at the Three Horse Shoes. She accused the man of calling her a whore and trying it on" (Rhys 2016b: 3).



Fig. 8: Anthony Rhys, *Eliza Thomas* (2014)

"No amount of abuse would justify the use of the umbrella."
The Welshman. March 12th 1875.

There is an obsessional quality to Rhys's tireless mining of the same themes, as insistently idiosyncratic as his subjects' unapologetic self-

assertion in their emotional excess, but this same quality is also strangely appealing. His portraits invite a gourmet's approach: the savouring of each delectable detail, rather than a thoughtless 'fast-food' consumption. Rhys prepares a never-ending spectacle of Victorian oddities for us to feast our eyes upon – only for us to have to admit that they are not, finally, all that different from ourselves, that deviance, then and now, is first produced by our own hungry consuming gaze for the spectacle of Otherness.

Notes

1. The screaming mouth motif also recurs in Bacon's paintings, for instance in his engagements with Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (ca. 1650) in *Head VI* (1949) and *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), or his *Study for the Nurse (detail)* (1957). For the prevalence of the motif in Rhys's painting, also see the gallery on the artist's website (<http://www.anthonyrhys.com/>) and the paintings from the *Born of Pain and Iron* exhibition, viewable on <https://vimeo.com/77348575>, with an evocative soundtrack by Tom Ware. Rhys further credits the Welsh writer Caradoc Evans's *My People* (1915) as the major literary influence on his work, explaining how "his characters literally screamed out at me from the pages" of the "brutal short stories about hypocrisy, greed and religion in rural Cardiganshire", making him take up painting again and arrive at his current style (qtd. in Matthew-Jones 2013: n.p.).
2. The Carmarthen Jail Felons Register is now searchable as a digitised database; see <http://www.welshlegalhistory.org/carms-felons-register.php>.
3. More specifically, Rhys drew inspiration from the life-story of "[t]his notorious person known as Anne Awberry" (as per her portrait's subtext), a habitual vagrant, drunkard, and occasional prostitute, whose death in the local workhouse was reported in *The Carmarthen Journal* in August 1863. During the course of her life, Awberry had also been imprisoned an incredible 141 times (Williams 2016: 2).
4. Rhys's monochrome preference mirrors Victorian photography's restriction to black-and-white prints (bar hand tinting) for most of the nineteenth century, with more advanced technology and equipment for colour photography only becoming commercially available at the fin-de-siècle. However, he also admits that colour blindness has so far made him reluctant to experiment with colour in his painting.
5. Although Rhys used to paint on canvas textured paper, he moved to paper in early 2015 finding this better for getting finer detailing.

6. According to Rhys, the local period newspapers that he consulted, such as the *Carmarthen Journal*, contained only advert graphics, but neither photos nor illustrations of the ‘notorious’ subjects who were written about, with photos only being introduced into local Welsh papers in the 1890s (Rhys 2016d).
7. Held in the Gwent Archives, the Usk Prison records too are digitised and can be viewed online at <http://www.newportpast.com/gallery/photos/uskgaol/>.
8. A classic example was the necessity to combine prints of sea and sky or sky and clouds (i.e. cloud effects), since bright skies were commonly overexposed, so that bleaching occurred as it would on reflective surfaces. Hence combination printing was especially prevalent in landscape photography (see Willette 2015: n.p.; Fineman qtd in Hirsch 2013: 55).
9. Similarly, Rhys’ work can be understood as a step toward the idea that a work of art can be more, rather than less ‘realistic’ in capturing the essence of a person and his/her consciousness in time than the camera – that what might be termed heightened or stylised ‘emotional impressionism’ may convey through affect (both the subject’s and the observer’s reciprocal emotional reaction) what ‘objective’ un-doctored photography alone cannot necessarily achieve. Interestingly, recent documentary photography, both of armed conflicts and of the migration crisis, repeatedly hones in on suffering faces in extremes of emotion to make its point about the horrors of war.
10. Perhaps not coincidentally, Rhys claims that his portraits “all have fact at their source but I try to write them like poetry – short, succinct and leaving a lot unsaid” (Rhys qtd. in Matthews-Jones 2013: n.p.).
11. Significantly, however, the portrait is in no way eroticised, in part due to the absence of the third parties administering the violating penetrative ‘treatment’, and in part due to the woman’s neat and proper clothing. Whether or not this was a conscious choice on Rhys’s part, for me it underlines the ethical impulse that moderates the Gothic tendencies in his work.
12. The other child portrait is of one William Wilson, perhaps eight or nine years of age, presumably picked up for loitering. The subheading, taken from an 1879 item in the *South Wales Daily News*, indicates that, having been sent out to sell goods by his mother but having failed to do so, the boy was too fearful to return home. The snippet encourages the reader to imagine the child’s physical castigation, which has merely been postponed by his arrest.
13. It is this emotional “reaction” that constitutes one of the artist’s main objectives for his portraits, as he explained when asked by an interviewer what he hopes his audiences takes from his work: “A reaction! I hope they react emotionally to them. I don’t mind what form that reaction takes really. To me there’s nothing worse than going to an art gallery and seeing paintings

that are neutral and passive. If people say they don't like them, if they find them creepy or disturbing then that's fine, they're not meant to be pretty, these people are showing you how they are feeling and in real life we find extremes of emotion uncomfortable as well don't we?" (Rhys qtd in Matthews-Jones 2013: n.p.).

14. Levinas, of course, discusses the living rather than represented face of the (already dead) Other, but I would argue his ethics can be extended to the trace of the face. Admittedly, Levinas's argument that "[t]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. [...] It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (Levinas 1969: 194) would seem to mediate against such a reading of Rhys's painting, which crucially relies on the sense of vision. Yet I propose that the very malleability of the face in Rhys's paintings as both-the-face-and-not-the-face of the historical Other enacts just this resistance to containment.
15. This sense of the partial glimpse is especially pronounced in the portraits of authority figures, whose moment of disgrace seems strikingly 'out of character' with the rest of their public lives in their communities. Examples include the subjects of *Governor Westlake* (2015) and *Rev Edwards* (2015). A former policeman serving during the Rebecca Riots and then governor of Carmarthen Goal, Westlake was suspended from his post in 1847 on account of having absented himself from duty to get drunk (Rhys 2016b: 4), while Rev. Edwards was exposed as the father of an illegitimate child and ordered to pay weekly maintenance for its upkeep, as per the portrait text.
16. The aura effect is also clearly visible in *Michael Wheelan* (2015) from *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog* and particularly prominent in Rhys's earlier paintings *Abel* (2011) and *Lewis* (2011), both from the *Pillars of Sion*, a group of five portraits framed together, viewable on the Gallery on the artist's website: <http://www.anthonyrhys.com/>.
17. Rhys explains that he does not "consciously base any painting on post mortem [sic] photos" and has only one such image (from the Liverpool-based John Thomas's studio) in his collection, in part because such images tend to be particularly expensive (Rhys 2016d).
18. I am grateful to Mark Llewellyn for bringing this point to my attention.
19. Again, I am indebted to Mark Llewellyn for this observation. In the case of some high profile crimes, especially late Victorian ones such as the Jack the Ripper murders, of course, there are extant photographs of victims also. These only became more prevalent around the fin-de-siècle, however, once police forces had begun using photography for forensic purposes.

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20. For Peterson's record and photograph, see http://www.newportpast.com/gallery/photos/uskgaol/photo_page.php?search=%20&search2=yyyyyy&pos=31. Also see the record for Prisoner No. 84, George Brown from Nassau New Providence, Bahamas, who was convicted for stealing a pair of trousers: <http://www.newportpast.com/gallery/photos/uskgaol/search.php?search=george+brown&search2=&Submit=Submit>. Rhys had considered the latter "as possible source material" for a portrait, but found no background material and hence "no story to attach to him" (Rhys 2016c).
21. Rhys also thought it curious to find no reference to Coracle men, "given their prominence in Carmarthen and also their lodgings and houses being in the 'rougher' dock side area", nor for that matter, any famers either (Rhys 2016c), in spite of the importance of farming to the Carmarthenshire economy. Hence these too do not feature in the exhibition.

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