From *Trainspotting* to *Filth* – Masculinity and Cultural Politics in Irvine Welsh's Writings

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> Men still have everything to say about their sexuality. You still have everything to say about your sexuality: that's a challenge. (Alice Jardine and Hélène Cixous, in Chapman & Rutherford 1988: 21)

This powerful challenge, I am going to argue, is taken up in Irvine Welsh's work. What turns this work itself into a challenge is that it combines the search for sexual identity with aspects of the wider contexts of contemporary cultural politics. It critically reflects the transition from Thatcherite to Blairite Britain. From *Trainspotting* to *Filth*, Welsh's texts have been gravitating from Scottish marginality to mainstream British culture and economic and cultural thirdwayism. This development is reflected and find its (displaced) articulation in the crisis of masculinity which has increasingly become the focus of his writings. Welsh writes about social exclusion and individualism; the local, national and global; neoliberal economy and the commodification of drugs; but maybe, above all, about the dissolution of patriarchy and the de(con)struction of masculinity, about the erosion of gender categories and the family.

Welsh's male working-class and subcultural (anti)heroes have to come to terms with the social changes of their roles and their relationships to their "mates", partners and children. As individual subjects, they are portrayed in their psychotic world of self-destructive masculine sexuality and identity, and, as members of post-industrial society, in their parasitic and anachronistic position within contemporary "postfeminist" and "post-gender" culture.

Cultural Politics

> It’s coming back to me. It’s all coming back. I wish it wasn’t but it is. I don’t suppose any of us stopped being on trial. It was her own fault; she fuckin well asked for it. (Welsh 1996b: 177)

Irvine Welsh is rapidly developing into a cult writer. It is not so much the undeniable quality of his writings than their "social message" that seems to appeal to his readership which, as he claims, is not merely the average middle-class fiction addict whose "culture" Welsh, in fact, "challenges", but people who identify with the kind of *milieu* he describes. As Welsh believes "half the people who have bought the books have never bought a book before, never even read a book before (...) obviously it's no challenge to them, because it's an affirmation of their culture" (Welsh, in Berman 1996: 58). The affirmation lies in the doubly marginalised position from which Welsh writes: from a regional, Scottish position against the hegemonic centre of "English" Britishness, in a time of political devolution; and from a variety of oppositional subcultures against hegemonic middle-class values. In the face of this double threat it is no wonder that Welsh's texts are primarily concerned with identities and cultural politics. They dramatise at once "the repressive processes of post-industrial individualism" (Freeman 1996: 251) and the "anger and volatility of post-Thatcherite Britain" (Berman 1996: 56). The legacy of Thatcherism and the rise of New Labour communitarianism and thirdwayism serve as the political backdrop for representing the destruction of working-class identities, the effects of new social exclusion and the forms of subcultural escapism in the absence of any serious possibilities for radical social change. Welsh describes the resulting social dynamic of his characters in the following words:

> There are two kinds of working-class philosophies, a radical or revolutionary one that sees the middle and upper classes as enemies; and another more individualistic desire to escape from the working class and assimilate into the upper classes. That antagonism is always going on in a working class head. It's wanting to be in a different situation. (Welsh, in Berman 1996: 57)

Welsh's characters thus play out the drama of self-destructive identities in an alienating environment. At once against a nostalgic return or the preservation of a mythical and archaic working-class Scottishness and deeply skeptical of New Labour's politics of communitarian inclusion Welsh's texts invoke a radically different scenario to a "third way" which believes that "[n]o one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism" (Giddens 1998: 43). Rather than comply and accommodate, Welsh's anti-bourgeois rebels spitefully announce: "I think I'll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism" (Welsh 1995: 240).

Thus, Welsh's texts muster the devastating effects of neoliberalism in relation to questions of identity and difference. With growing disillusion, they are both a reflection of post-Thatcherite society and of New Labour politics. Chronologically, they demonstrate the failure of metropolitan politics to face rampant individualism, as seen from the Scottish margins. From pre-New Labour *Trainspotting* (which developed out of a number of short stories written from 1991 onwards, first edited as a novel in 1993):

> ... the socialists go on about your comrades, your class, your union, and society. Fuck all that shite. The Tories go on about your employer, your country, your family. Fuck that even mair. It's me, me, fucking ME, Simon David Williamson, NUMERO FUCKING UNO, versus the world, and it's a one-sided swedge. (Welsh 1994: 30)

and:

> In the kitchen, two guys are arguin aboot the poll tax. One boy's sussed oot, the other's a fuckin spineless Labour/Tory Party servile wankboy. "You're a fuckin arsehole oan two counts. One, if ye think the Labour Party's goat a fuckin chance ay ever getting in again this century, two, if ye think it would make a blind bit ay fuckin difference if they ever did," ah jist butt in and tell the cunt. (Welsh 1994: 237-8)

to *The Acid House* (first published in 1994):

> He launches into a long and bitter attack on the politics and personalities of Scottish Labour Militant. I'm thinking, what can I do, really do for the emancipation of working people in this country, shat on by the rich, tied into political inaction by servile reliance on a reactionary, moribund and yet still unelectable Labour Party? The answer is a resounding fuck all. Getting up early to sell a couple of papers in a shopping centre is not my idea of the best way to chill out after raving... I think I'll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism. (Welsh 1995: 240)

and, after New Labour's election, in *Ecstasy* (1996):

> ...responsibility-oriented society. That's why people should be free to choose the sort of health care and education they want.
> – That's just Tory rubbish, my dad says.
> – I think we have to face facts – that old-style socialism, as we used to perceive it, is long dead. It's now about appeasing different interest groups in a more diffused society; about taking what's best from both traditional right and left philosophies.
> – Well, I'm afraid I'll always be a Labour man...
> – I'm Labour as well, always have been, says Hugh.
> – You're New Labour. Tony Blair Labour. Which is the same as Tory, only Major's probably further left than Blair. Blair's just a snidier version of Michael Portillo, which is why he'll do better that Portillo will ever do... Labour and Tory are now both exactly the same, I tell them. (Welsh 1996: 190)

However, if Thatcherism and New Labour are rejected and a return to "old-style" socialism is also impossible, what kind of alternative is 'left'?

> You don't have to decide that culture should be only for the middle classes. (Welsh, in Berman 1996: 58)

Welsh's work certainly is political rather than escapist in that it engages with the negotiation between marginalised and hegemonic cultural identities in late capitalism. Strategic "Scottishness", working class and subcultures, masculinity and parenthood, "weak" and strong femininities are some of the main subject positions that are being explored in Welsh's fictional discourse.

Alan Freeman, who gives a post-structuralist interpretation of *Trainspotting* and its place in Scottish literature sees the originality of Welsh's texts in their "playful" distortion of realism and their displacement of the ubiquitous struggle between realism and antirealism (Freeman 1996: 251-62). This is also what places Welsh's texts within the wider context of postmodern literature. According to Freeman, the "trainspotters" represented in the novel "exemplify Late Capitalism's replacement of work with leisure, of action with consumption, of meaning with system, of life with lifestyle" (Freeman 1996: 256). They expose the myth of individualism and the privatisation of experience through consumption. The downsides of late capitalist individualism – social exclusion, the destruction of the family and traditional forms of employment and work-based identities, changing of drug cultures (from heroin to ecstasy), sexuality and masculinity, and English colonialism – are dwelled upon in a "non-judgmental way".

> With its allusion to pop culture and junk fads, to chemically altered consciousness and artificial lifestyles, in its form, language and action, *Trainspotting* dramatises the desperate margin between meaning and being, between possession and creation, between the repressed and the expressed in human life". (Freeman 1996: 261-62)

If *Trainspotting* still "grieves for selves that cannot be", Welsh's later work constitutes the representation of the complete breakdown of identity. Sexuality and masculinity become the main focus. Whereas *Trainspotting* can be read as a negotiation of sexual identity and difference that explores the variety of identity positions available within the realm of sexual consumption, in his most recent work, *Filth* (1998), Welsh zooms in on the extreme masculinist position in order to further dissect and advance its psychotic self-dissolution. The sexist psychopath figure (*Trainspotting's* Frank Begbie) is

singled out and becomes the analysand of a more psychologised introspective narrative: the 'strange' and deranged Roy Strang of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (first published in 1995) and the (male chauvinist) 'pig' Bruce Robertson in *Filth*. It seems as if the later texts are playing mindgames with the obsessive sexual self and its self-hatred, projected onto others. The absence of a moralising social realism is by now a familiar feature in the contemporary representation of violence.

You're Filth!

> My father. It was my brother. It was the coal, the dirt, the filth. The darkness. I hate it all. (Welsh 1998: 339)

Filth is the story of a police detective (D.I. Bruce Robertson) who is gradually spiraling into insanity while leaving a trail of violence, murder, verbal and drug abuse, and general hatred behind. The novel starts with a "Prologue" that contains Robertson's inner "dialogue" commenting on the reasons why he murdered the black lover of his wife, who has left him:

> The trouble with people like him is that they think that they can brush off people like me. Like I was nothing... You've pushed me away mister. You rejected me. You tricked me and spoiled things between me and my true love. I've seen you before. Long ago, just lying there as you are now. Black, broken, dying. I was glad then and I'm glad now. I reach into my bag and I pull out my claw hammer. Part of me is elsewhere as I'm bringing it down on his head. He can't resist my blows. They'd done him in good, the others. (...) There's no fear or regret but no elation or sense of triumph either. It's just a job that had to be done (Welsh 1998: 1-2).

Gradually, the reader discovers that the first person narrator has committed a murder he is going to investigate himself, in his function as a detective: the police's and the press's hypothesis that the victim, a black journalist, was subjected to a racist attack, is only half the truth. Although Bruce's act itself was not devoid of racism it was mainly a re-enacting of the key scene in his traumatic childhood.

The story is narrated through Bruce Robertson's eyes with regular short interruptions and comments by his wife, Carole. The third perspective of narration is that of Robertson's tapeworm – visually set off from the main text by the superimposition of

speech bubbles represented in the form of bowels. It is the worm – Bruce's "Other" – who reveals the background to his unhappy childhood. But the worm's speech bubbles also contain a parallel story of the parasite's physical and psychological coming into being through consumption and the exploitation of its host (it could be argued that the worm here re-enacts the rise of bourgeois capitalism). The worm is developing a Self which is mainly concerned with its own survival and gradually takes over the place of Bruce's Me (Welsh 1998: 98) – a process which in psychoanalytical terms corresponds to the definition of psychosis, an ego's idea of "being lived by the Other". According to Laplanche and Pontalis, psychosis is a "primary disturbance of the libidinal relation to reality", "leaving the ego under the sway of the id". The ego thus has to reconstruct a "new reality in accordance with the desires of the id". Psychotic delusional behaviour is the result of specific mental mechanisms like "*Verwerfung*"/ foreclosure and projection (Laplanche & Pontalis 1985: 369-72).

The worm begins a psychological exploration of its host (Welsh 1998: 130) while Bruce is sinking ever more deeply into paranoid states of persecution and schizophrenia (170). On its identitarian journey, the tapeworm begins wondering about significant others to confirm its sense of self (191) while starting to develop a critical distance from its "friend", the host – complaining e.g. about his "proletarian habits" (192). The worm's bulimia – "eat... eat for the Self... consume for freedom..." (219) – is coupled with the realisation that its external reality is becoming hostile ("the host is now aware of my presence" 230) and with the knowledge of "not being alone" any longer, of falling in love due to the presence of a "significant other", a second tapeworm:

> I can feel the one that I must now refer to as The Other. I am not alone. My soulmate is here... We engage with one another in that most delicious and intimate of congresses, that exchange of the chemicals through our bodies as our means of the joining of the souls... to merge... to become one with our universal identity..." (230-1)

The rejoicing in a humanist idea of unified universal identity in turn spurns the 'religious' gratitude for the Host (or God): "We feed each other through our breathing, eating, excreting bodies, intwined infinitesimally through the intestines of our most glorious Mine Host" (231). The worm gains more and more scope despite Bruce's "chemical warfare" against it; it starts "internalising Bruce's ghosts" (242), a process which finally sets off the analytical reading of Bruce's repressed past (242).

The worm-narrator's insistence on exposing Bruce's childhood creates a parallel commentary for Bruce's 'current' social behaviour and his anti-union and anti (New) Labour outbursts. The parasite's narration thus serves to link Bruce's personal with his political:

> But there are people in the unions now who don't give a fuck about democracy. Maggie sorted them out, but they're still there, just waiting for that Tony Blair spastic to show signs of weakness and let them back. That was why things got so messed up with the last Labour government. These bastards held sway. Scargill and the likes. That's why we had to sort them out (245).

When Bruce's anti-worm treatment causes the death of the worm's soulmate, its "significant other", the worm starts with Bruce's (psycho)analysis proper. The first revelation is Bruce's identitarian reliance on – and his love-hate relationship to – his work as a policeman:

> You need to be at work. You need the job; hating, yet at the same time thriving on it, its petty concerns. These concerns are enough to distract you from the Self you must only face up at night between the extinguishing of the television set and the onset of a jittery and fitful descent into a physically bruising sleep. How can I forgive you Bruce, after the ruthless shedding of my most significant Other? That creature of sublime beauty, that purest of souls who trusted you, our Host, who didn't want to hold on grimly for life, here in those exploding gaseous bowels. That soul who believed that you had the purest of intentions towards the Other, just as the Other did to all the others in this world of ours... How can I forgive you? But forgive you I must. I know your story... (260).

The worm's theodicy mirrors that of the host in his own society. Bruce's loss of his loved one, Carole, his traumatic experience of 'being shed' by his adoptive father, Ian Robertson; but also Labour's and the British public's 'shedding' of the mineworkers' cause under Thatcherism.

Bruce comes from a mining family but he joined force with the "other" side, the side of the police who enforced the new "anti-union laws on behalf of the state" (261):

> You were on the other side. Power was everything. You understood that. It wasn't for an end, to achieve anything, to better one's fellow man, it was there to have and to keep and to enjoy. The important think was to be on the winning side; if you can't beat them join them. Only the winners or those sponsored by them write the history of the times. That history decrees that only the winners have a story worth telling. The worst ever thing to be is on the losing side. You must accept the language of power as your currency, but you must also pay a price. Your desperate sneering and mocking only illustrates how high the price has been and how fully it has been paid. The price is your soul (261-2).

Socially and historically, thus, Bruce's story is combined with the 1984-85 miners' strike and with Thatcherism's destruction of the last traditional working-class communities in Britain. For Bruce, being rejected by his mining family and the mining village community

causes injustice and self-hatred that push him towards revenge. He joins "the other side" in the strike and becomes part of the police force whose main aim it was to divide the strike support within the mining communities.

In political terms these specially trained police forces were the instrument of the Conservative Government to combine the idea of the "rule of the law" with the justification of their liberal economic programme, the inescapable "law of the market" (Fine and Millar 1985: 2-3). Both 'laws' served crucial roles in Conservative paternalism and authoritarianism, to perpetuate the 'law of the father'. Cathie Lloyd (in Fine and Millar 1985: 65ff) gives an account of how this police force threatened many mining villages:

> Wherever these substantial police reserves were held, nearby villages felt their oppressive and intimidatory presence. Away from the picket lines key people in the strike were harassed as squads of police pursued them in raids on pubs and clubs, creating tension in villages which sometimes erupted into street fighting. All members of the community felt themselves to be 'fair game' to the police when these clashes took place. (Fine and Millar 1985: 68-69)

The (b)latent police racism – which recently regained public attention in the controversy about the Stephen Lawrence murder case – is an omnipresent feature in Bruce Robertson's discourse and his policing practices. As Paul Gordon remarks, the miners' strike riot policing "had been developed in the 1960s and 1970s largely in response to the presence of black people in Britain" (Fine and Millar 1985: 161).

But the socio-political background is only the field in which Bruce's psychological reality is subjected to the repetition compulsion brought about by a repressed trauma. Bruce's first rebellion against his mining father was acted out by a resistance to eat which in turn provoked his "force-feeding" on the coal his father had dug up – the filth – to earn the family's living (292). "Can you taste the filth, the dirt, the oily blackness of that fossil fuel in your mouth as you choke and gag and spit it out? (...) Now you can consume to your heart's content or your soul's destruction, whichever comes first. So eat" (295). When his little brother Steven – the father's favourite – is born Bruce is made to understand that the reason for being rejected, hated and stigmatised – by his father and the people of his mining village – is that he is not his mother's legitimate child. During the strike Stevie and Bruce steal coal from their father's pit. Bruce pushes Steven after having

been provoked by him and Stevie dies buried by coal – "battered, broken, lifeless and... [black]" (354) – the traumatic scene that is being repeated at the beginning of *Filth* (quoted above). In his rage the father spells out the 'truth' to Bruce and the community:

> This thing killed [Steven], your father screams, this bastard spawn ay the fuckin devil killed ma laddie! You look straight at him. You want to deny and affirm his assertions all at once. You're no ma son! You've never been ma fuckin son! You're filth! (355).

Bruce's uncanny and threatening Other takes on internal and external representations. Internally, the "enemy within" is the growing parasite that weakens Bruce physically (anorexia – Bruce's refusal to eat) and mentally (by forcing him to face his sexual bulimia and his self-hatred that expresses itself in his violence against others). Of course, the "enemy within" is also the phrase used by Thatcher to describe the cause of the miners – a political ploy to combine the exclusion of political 'others' and to legitimate their policing by employing techniques of "moral panic" (Samuel, Bloomfield & Boanas 1986: 2ff). Ironically, since the miners' strike was in fact inspired by "radical conservatism" – "a defence of the known against the unknown, the familiar against the alien, the local and the human against the anonymous and the gigantesque" (Samuel, Bloomfield & Boanas 1986: 22) – the Conservative Government helped accelerate the destruction of moral values, especially those associated with the traditional family, that subsequent governments have come to deplore.

The paternalistic ideology Bruce paradoxically makes his own as the very reaction against his adoptive and biological fathers, is itself based on the psychotic exclusion and oppression of others (as demanded by the omnipotent threatening Other) – a process which feminist theories have come to perceive as the fundamental mechanisms of hegemonic Western heterosexual masculinity.

The Psychosis of Masculinity

> Scotland is one of the most repressed societies. It completely sustains (…) misogynistic behaviour. The pubs, dark inside… a completely masculine environment. And then there is this militaristic, football thing, and adults in positions of trust. (Welsh, in Berman 1996: 60)

While in 'real time' Bruce Robertson's social disintegration continues – he is suspended from duty after having been attacked by a gang of thugs while dressing up as Carole; he has to withdraw his application for promotion; he lives in a state of complete apathy in the mess of his flat – the narrator-worm grows increasingly "worried" about his host. As Bruce's story of his past fully unfolds the attention turns to an analysis of his sexual identity. Bruce gradually comes to use the pronoun 'we' instead of 'I' referring to himself while the speech bubbles begin to merge with the main text (352ff, 367ff) and begin to prompt Bruce's main narrative (368). His psychological reality progressively invades his social reality. The remaining boundaries between Bruce's real and psychological world begin to fuse.

The worm recounts Bruce's first love, for a "lassie in a caliper" named Rhona, and how his inferiority complex about his difference turns into the opposite by affirming his masculinity:

> You started to thrive on this difference. You had always felt different but inferior, but now you were coming to feel yourself to be different but superior. This was how you were coming to be seen as well. All you needed to do was to assert that difference and accept the consequences (370).

The beginning love story and sexual education is brutally interrupted by lightning. Rhona is killed – another accident for which Bruce is responsible:

> She was your first love but you never really knew her as well as you wanted to. She liked music and she looked and smelt nice and she wore a caliper and your heart used to and still does break, if you're honest with yourself, every time you think of her (376).

Later, when Bruce finds out the identity of his real father – a convicted rapist with a series of pathologies: acute schizophrenia, depression, anxiety attacks (381) – his sexual identity turns sour. As the offspring of a sexual perversion, fathered by "The Beast" – the Other – Bruce goes to see his 'real' father in jail looking for some reassuring essential difference:

> You had to tell yourself that you were nothing like him. But the women. You wanted them. You always wanted them. But so did all the young men. It was normal. (...) You left the pits and joined the force. Then got married. You settled down. You had a child. You were normal. Only, there came the anxiety attacks. The depressions. The desires (381 and 386).

The worm's narrative from this point is struck by an anxiety of its own. It becomes more and more desperate in reminding his host of his instinct for survival (385, 388ff) and it is indeed the insane Bruce who now threatens to invade the worm's world [in the guise of Margaret Thatcher!]:

> You are repulsed and proud. The urge to hurt, demean and control is great in you. To somehow get back at them. You consider politics as a career. How wonderful it would be to start a war. To send thousands of people to their deaths. You idolise Thatcher over the Falklands (389).

The last stage is the worm's frantic appeal for Bruce to desist his suicidal thoughts, but the story ends in a final closed speech bowel, the worm being shed at the point of death:

> I feel myself slipping out of my Host in a large pile of his excrement and sliding down his leg inside his flannels. Then I'm away from him. There's a piercing scream... somebody's in pain... like the Other was when the Host was disposing of it... the Other I loved... now the Host is gone and I cannot sustain this any longer. I can't sustain life outside of the Host's body... like the Other I am gone, gone with the Host, leaving the screaming others, always the others, to pick up the pieces... (393).

Filth can be read as a negotiation of repressive oedipal masculine identity. Bruce's *raison d'être* is his role as Don Juan, 'playing at being man'. He undertakes the sexual re-education of his 'effeminate' mate Bladesey, who is something like a New Man, deeply insecure of his manhood and the relationship with his wife. The not entirely altruistic plan is to teach his friend/rival a lesson in 'strong' masculinity by seducing his wife. Bruce's relationship with his mate(s) – just like the relationship among the group of mates in *Trainspotting* – is based on masculinity as "homosocial competition" (Kimmel, in Brod & Kaufman 1994: 121). Constant sexual activity and the permanent renewal of conquests serve as reassurance of Bruce's compulsive identity. After having achieved the conquest of his friend's wife he expresses his fundamental misogyny:

> What I usually do with a new bird is hole up with them for a weekend and spoil them with loads of foreplay, champagne, takeaways and undivided attention to all the preposterous shite they drivel. That usually does the trick for getting into them on a casual basis for months. The best thing to do is to give a new bird the very best possible time, and then she knows you have the capacity to do that again and she's always looking inwards blaming herself for not being able to reactivate that passion in you. The best lovers ken that you only need tae be a good lover once with one bird. Get it right the first time and then ye can basically dae what ye like. Eventually they tipple that you're just a selfish cunt, usually eftir a few years ay fruitless self-analysis, but by that time you've generally had your fill and are firing into somebody else (299-300).

Seen in perspective, Welsh's male psychos come at a time when masculinity has been forced out of its hegemonic silence. Feminism, the gay, lesbian and transsexual movements and postcolonial and postmodern theories have been attacking the hegemonic model of the white heterosexual patriarch as masculinity's natural 'norm'. Essentialism has given way to social constructivism and insistent questioning of male identity construction. The effect has led to a perpetuation of crisis, a 'demythologisation' and a destabilisation of patriarchal authority in general – provoking a series of male introversions and backlashes, the New Man and the New Lad (Chapman & Rutherford 1988: 17).

In academic but also increasingly in popular discourses identity is being represented as a social and historical construct rather than as static and essential given. While this affects all forms of identity the hegemonic identification process within white heterosexual patriarchy has been scrutinised for its violent exclusions of 'others' and its projections of anxieties and desires outside of itself. Difference and otherness play a key role in these processes of self-identification. Significant others serve as touchstones and anchoring points of self-assured, internalised identity, while difference remains necessarily ambivalent. Otherness as a structural and ontological 'void', is usually projected as a passive space that constitutes an inversion of the self – the other side of the mirror, so to speak. However, by definition, this otherness remains other or mystical like death. The taming and manipulating of otherness which is at once threatening and desirable is assured by the epistemological process of differentiation, a process which is subject to pre-existing value systems and hierarchies. Power struggles are fought out on the terrain of difference while necessarily ignoring or repressing the always preceding (structural) otherness that cannot and must not be articulated.

A Bit of the Other?

> Even his anti-sexism was therefore overlayed with sexist self-interest. Men are pathetic cunts, [Renton] thought to himself. (Welsh 1994: 141)

Bruce's scornful male chauvinism in a sense is 'sanctioned' by its inverted other: traditional femininity. Carole's interspersed comments in which she claims to "really know [her] man" and his "sexual aura" (42) represent woman conspiring in her own oppression, thus illustrating Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as *man's* other. "I feel a need and an aching for him, I'll have to get back to him soon" she says (43). It has to be said that Welsh's text leaves open the possibility of Carole's interventions actually being projections or discursive appropriations by Bruce's imaginary.

Bruce's imagined impact on women is greatly exaggerated: at work for example he is being outdone by a new female colleague, a specialist in "equal opportunities". It is indeed Amanda Drummond who comes closest to Bruce's true identity:

> Bruce, you're an ugly and silly old man. You're very possibly an alcoholic and God knows what else. You're the type of sad case who preys on vulnerable, weak and stupid women in order to boost his own shattered ego. You're a mess. You've gone wrong somewhere pal, she taps her head dismissively (338).

Carole, on the other hand, in her intervening chapters sticks to "her man" despite everything, waiting for "true love" beyond sexuality:

> Bruce knows that our wee games and flirtations only serve to strengthen a true love, by making it confront the depths and heights of itself. He did it for me, and it worked. I'm a different person now. A better person (122).

In her own state of delusion, Carole embraces patriarchal oppression, including Bruce's political views which she sets within the context of the breakup of the traditional family:

> [W]hen I first met Bruce's parents... They were good people, from a mining village in Midlothian. This was before they were corrupted by that Scargill, who split up families and turned everyone against each other. Bruce doesn't bear any grudges though, even though they were cruel to him and rejected him, their own son. That's what these people want though: to split up the family. It's not important to them but the way I see it, if you haven't got family then you haven't got anything (165).

Carole represses the profound dysfunctionality of her traditional family and Bruce's abuse of their daughter Stacey: "It's so unfortunate that Stacey's said those horrible things, but we don't blame our little girl, all children go through a phase when they tell silly wee lies" (166):

> I'm looking forward to seeing Bruce again, so we'll be back together as a family; me, Bruce and our little girl Stacey. She has got to accept the wrong she's done and the hurt

> she's caused everyone with her silly little lies. I often feel guilty, I feel that I should have taught her better, taught her the difference between right and wrong. She's a good girl really though and it's important for her to know Bruce and I forgive her. All families go through these kind of traumas and it's important not to make more of these things than is necessary. It's a complicated world enough to grow up in these days (211).

Carole's last intervention in the story, "More Carole?" (following the chapters "Carole", "Carole Again", "More Carole", "Carole Remembers Australia"), however, is in fact Bruce's narrative displaying his delusion of going out 'with'/as Carole, him being dressed as her. The pronoun used for narration is again the schizophrenic "we" descending further into mental delusion:

> We're remembering how this all started: that when Carole first left with the bairn we used to set the table for two and then we started wearing her clothes and it was like she was still with us but no really... Carole... Carole, why did you dae it, with that fucking nigger, those whores they meant nothing tae me... you're fucking big-moothed hoor ay a sister... fanny like tha fuckin Mersey tunnel... and the bairn... oh God... God... God... we want to live... all we're asking for is some law and order... it's the job... (343).

Bruce manages to escape the cruel death the gang of thugs had prepared for him but his self seems beyond repair. Carole and Stacey return too late and find Bruce after he has just hanged himself:

> ...I want more than anything for Stacey not to be there and see this and I'm trying to shout No go away and I hear her screaming Daddy and I want to live and make it up to her and Carole, I can hear her now too, screaming BRUCE because I care and I've won and beaten the bastards but what price victory
> STACEY PLEASE GOD BE SOMETHING ELSE SOMEONE ELSE... (393).

The inescapable and incurable psychotic masculinity with its constant use of violence against others and its Self with which *Filth* engages seems to be driven by a fear of the absolute power of the malevolent Other. It is thus impossible for Bruce to form intersubjective relations with others that are not based on anxiety and (self)hatred. *Filth* is to be read as an illustration of the self-destruction of masculinity. The protagonist is eaten up from inside by an unspeakable Other, symbolised by the tapeworm who speaks Bruce and fills him with voices: "If only I could sleep, but I get the voices in my heid at night and then I start thinking of that thing inside me, eating my guts out" (274). "We hear voices... Aw the time. Do you hear them? All our life we've heard them. The worms. (...) We say this, they say that... I, we, I hear myself singing in a low, tuneless voice, – Why not take all of me..." (333). "I'm hearing the voices and I'm pressing the buttons on the

handset to change the channels but it's the voice in my head. That same, insistent soft voice, eating me up from inside..." (381).

Bruce's story represents the psychotic's loss of control over his reality. This control is the product of an identity strongly related to his work and the power with which it invests him. Sexuality, violence and the way they are 'encouraged' by and exploited through his policework set the framework of Bruce's world, and this framework is being undermined by Bruce's 'worm': namely his past, his sexual bulimia, his nervous skin disease – on a psychological level – and his unsuccessful application for promotion and his losing out against a the new female generation – on a social level. The process is also mirrored in the transformation of Bruce's sexuality from his homophobic machismo on which his compulsive heterosexuality relies to his transsexual 'incorporation' of Carole.

Bruce has transposed the absurdity of the double law of the father – his abusive adoptive father who rejected him and his unavowable real father, the rapist and "Beast" – onto his work or vocation. As a policeman he used to be able to live out his "dreams of revenge against those who transgress the laws of the state [or the father]" (384). "My own father. The one who never abused me, never forced me to eat coal, never called me the spawn of the devil. But he was still the one I hated most" (387). The Beast or "Thing" constitutes the Other who governs the Lacanian order of Bruce's real, the repressed that conditions his imaginary and symbolic reality and forces his compulsive, repetitive, psychotic violence against others. In a final monologue, shortly before his suicide, Bruce seems to speak as the archetypal traditional patriarch on his exit from history. Trying to imagine how Carole would find him hanged and feeling the ultimate enjoyment and justification for his tortured self-hatred, his misogynistic masculinity Bruce explains:

> We wait and think and doubt and hate. How does it make you feel? The overwhelming feeling is rage. We hate ourself for being unable to be other than what we are. Unable to be better. We feel rage. The feelings must be followed. It doesn't matter whether you're an ideologue or a sensualist, you follow the stimuli thinking that they're your signposts to the promised land. But they are nothing of the kind. What they are is rocks to navigate past, each one you brush against, ripping you a little more open and there are always more on the horizon. But you can't face up to that, so you force yourself to believe the bullshit of those that you instinctively know to be liars and you repeat those lies to yourself and to others, hoping that by repeating them often enough and fervently enough you'll attain the godlike status we accord to those who tell the lies most fervently and most passionately. But you never do, and even if you could, you wouldn't value it, you'd realise that nobody believes in heroes any more. We know that they only want to sell us something we don't really want and keep us from what we really do need. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe

> we're getting in touch with our condition at last. It's horrible how we always die alone, but no worse than living alone... (392-3).

This description of the self-destructive process of masculinity echoes the death of the male psycho embraced at the end of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. The comatose Roy Strang, who is trying to escape from his violent masculinity by retreating ever deeper into his imagination, is castrated by his former rape victim. He conspires in his own mutilation with a kind of (masochistic) relief as he experiences 'woman's' revenge:

> She's looking into my eyes, my lidless eyes and we see each other now. She's beautiful. Thank God. Thank God she's got it back. What we took. I'm trying to smile. I've got this severed cock in my mouth and I'm trying to smile. I can't breathe and she's showing no mercy. I understand her... We both understand everything. (Welsh 1996: 263-4)

This parody of a romance displays the deep ambiguity and desire that still lurks even behind the self-destruction of masculinity as represented in Welsh's work. Desperate sympathy and cynicism seem to be inextricably linked. Already Renton in *Trainspotting* confessed that he "didnae know much aboot women" (Welsh 1994: 13). Asked why he is sometimes thought not to be able to effectively write female characters, Welsh replies:

> ...it's not so much that I can't write women characters, it's a question of being very wary of doing it. It's about acknowledging that you're not a woman, and acknowledging the other-ness... of how women characters think, feel, react and all that. I don't think women and men do think, feel, react differently. But again, it's this whole imperialist thing. You've got to be aware of the issues and acknowledge the possibility of other-ness. So, it's been a tentative process, for me, writing about women characters. (Welsh, in Berman 1996: 59)

Whether and how to "acknowledge the possibility of female otherness" constitutes the entire dilemma of 'men in feminism' with their irrepressible desire of "Getting a Bit of the Other" (Suzanne Moore, in Chapman & Rutherford 1988: 165-92) and the ambiguity of sexual difference.

Current (post)feminist thought has moved away from direct confrontation towards precisely this problem of difference. Some would say that this lack of political activism is deplorable and guilty of complicity with the 'enemy'. Others would see this development as a more effective and more 'subversively' cunning way to explain to men and women alike what a rough deal they get out of a patriarchy that relies on heterosexual masculinity as its norm that persists by constantly reconfiguring itself (cf. for example Faludi 1999). This development constitutes the cultural background against which Welsh's stories about masculinity have to be seen.

What becomes precarious in the postfeminist scenario is not so much (sexual) identity as such – there is rather an increase in possible identity positions and their commodification – but the otherness preceding (sexual) difference. In a post-gender society, i.e. a society in which gender difference is no longer the fundamental structuring device, the utopian ideal of androgyny can turn oppressive. (What would the 'other' of androgyny be?) It can serve as a conservative device for masculinsism's repeated "forgetting of woman" – an otherness that manifests itself in difference – and thus a renewed denial of woman (Chapman & Rutherford 1988: 169). Sexual difference cannot be forgotten as long as the process of working through masculine repression and oppression remains incomplete. In other words, as long as sexual politics is to have an emancipatory goal, an evaluation of differences must be possible.

Filth symbolically plays out this drama of utopian androgyny in Bruce's 'becoming woman', his incorporation of Carole by impersonating and dressing up as her. Internally this androgyny is mirrored by the parasite's sexlessness. Bruce's "male autism" (cf. Horrocks 1994: 107-24) is the price he pays for rejecting and incorporating the oedipal law of the father. His misogyny and homophobia express themselves in his violence and self-hatred, which are the two sides of the same problem. *Filth* reflects the cultural evolution of masculinity of the present. However, the text ultimately seems to opt against androgyny and for a redefinition of difference, and thus for a new way of constructing masculinity. It is quite revealing that Renton's memorable statement about the future 'indifference' of sexual identity occurs in John Hodge's script only and not in Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*:

> Diane was right. The world is changing. Music is changing. Drugs are changing. Even men and women are changing. One thousand years from now there will be no guys and no girls, just wankers. Sounds great to me. It's just a pity no one told Begbie... You see if you ask me, we are heterosexual by default not by decision. It's just a question of who you fancy. It's all about aesthetics and it's fuck all to do with morality. But you try telling Begbie that. (Hodge 1996: 82)

Conclusion: Literature and Cultural Politics

> …the disarray of the Left in face of the miners' strike is, in one aspect, part of a larger discomfort both about the alternative to Thatcherism, and of the very possibility of a socialism which is in any sense representative of popular desire and will. (Samuel, Bloomfield & Boanas 1986: xiv-xv)

Literature is certainly no straightforward or even less a 'true' reflection of society. But it is that aspect of social discourse that most obviously tries to mediate between individual imaginary and social symbolic. The interest it is able to raise and which thus continues to make it an important discursive formation to inform cultural analysis is its proximity to the 'real', which is never an entirely personal or social fact but always relates to the intersection of individual psychological reality and social history. Bruce's identity for example is the product of such an intersection. The only place where all levels of Bruce's reality cross – childhood, father figures and worms; sexuality and identity; politics and society – also constitutes the turning point in Bruce's story of decline:

> ... no signs of the alien monster. I know it's up there though, like an Arthur Scargill in the healthy body politic of eighties Britain, the enemy within (171).

Arthur Scargill, the miners' leader and president of the NUM, became the main scapegoat of the majority of Britain during and after the failure of the strike – the "enemy within" personified. He was the target of an "unprecedented campaign of vilification by the government and the national press" and the "symbolic object of national execration" (Samuel, Bloomfield & Boanas 1986: 26). The miners' strike has to be understood as the turning point in late-twentieth-century British history. As far as foreign policy is concerned, the Thatcherite "enemy within" strategy of moral panic was the reflective legitimation for fighting the "enemy without", morally justifying and politically exploiting the Falkland War against Argentina. On a party political level it led to the continuation of Thatcherite neo-liberal economic restructuring beyond return. For Labour the miners' strike "by its intransigence... threatened to expose the hidden doubts which gnaw at the Socialist project, and the absence of any clear left-wing or even Keynesian alternative to the economic policies of the [Thatcher] government" (Samuel, Bloomfield & Boanas 1988: xiv). It is thus the beginning of New Labour and its post-Thatcherist legacy (Driver & Martell, 1998).

Welsh's texts attempt to reconcile sexual identity with this legacy and its culminating point, the traumatic event of the 1984-5 miners' strike, in a way that situates

them in juxtaposition to New Labour and thirdwayism. Welsh's texts contain a (sexual and cultural) politics of their own. Against patriarchal exclusion and traditional (psychotic) masculinity, but also against neo-liberal commodification of identity politics; opposed to the individualism that lurks behind the "transformation of intimacy" thesis (Giddens 1992 and 1998) and communitarian models of equality as inclusion, they seem to invoke the impossible: dialogic romance beyond patriarchy and the destruction of oppressive oedipal masculinity. Is this incredulity towards patriarchy, as the greatest 'metanarrative' of all, a harbinger of the beginning or of the end of change and thus also of difference? Are justice and equality beyond 'apocalyptic' masculinity thinkable? This seems to be the way in which Welsh's work returns feminism's challenge to Cixous and Jardine (with interest).

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