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**Drugs, sex & rave parties : transgression and the carnivalesque in Irvine  
Welsh's fiction**

Irvine Welsh has probably by now become, whether one likes it or not, one of the most widely read Scottish novelists, outstripping Scott, Kelman or Banks. Welsh has so far written 5 novels and 2 collections of short stories<sup>1</sup>, but it is undoubtedly Danny Boyle's 1996 cinematographic adaptation of *Trainspotting* which gave his first novel the necessary impetus it needed in order to become a worldwide best-seller. It established Welsh as the most famous and outrageous author of a so-called youth 'subculture' and boosted his literary career. Welsh's narrative format is, it is true, particularly well suited to cinematographic adaptations : his prose is characterized by a succession of concise first-person narratives spoken by a wide range of narrators ; sharp and witty dialogues are uttered in an idiolect which helps identify characters and which gives them a particular status within a group ; a strong emphasis is also laid on music and popular culture.

The 'enfant terrible' of the British literary establishment has undoubtedly carved out his literary career around specific themes, namely drugs, sex and rave parties. Violence, related either to drugs or to sex but also to football hooliganism, is also very much part of Welsh's fictional world. However what I would like to address in this paper is neither the way Welsh has exploited these themes in his literary output nor the literary value of his writings : I'd like to consider his work and his style in the light of transgression. I'd like to show that Welsh's *écriture* actually belongs to a trend that Mikhail Bakhtin identified as a common feature of Western literature since Rabelais and which he called the 'carnival' or 'carnavalesque' : a complex system of representations and misrepresentations made of grotesque features, of dialogic and polyphonic discourses aimed at disrupting and subverting authority.<sup>2</sup> However, before discussing Welsh's use of sex and the carnivalesque, I'd like to consider the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London : Martin Secker & Warburg, 1993); – , *The Acid House* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1994); – , *Ecstasy* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1996); – , *Marabou Stork Nightmare* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1995); – , *Filth* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1998); – , *Glue* (London : Jonathan Cape, 2001); – , *Porno* (London : Jonathan Cape, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by H. Iswolsky (1968 ; Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1984).

which Welsh's use of transgression undermines most attempts to identify ideology in his works.

## 1. Welsh, ideology, and drugs

Welsh's relationship with ideological discourse is indeed paradoxical. For many of his readers, he has from the start embodied a radical force against power and authority. Welsh's first writings were published in the aptly named underground Edinburgh journal *Rebel Inc.* The pungency of his style seemed a direct blow aimed at the 1980s' British literary establishment and academic world. Welsh's objectives might have resembled those pursued by James Kelman, but Welsh's ideologies could not be more different than Kelman's. Welsh has indeed insisted that he does not want to appear as a 'spokesperson' for a cause, whatever that be.<sup>3</sup> Besides, Kelman's social realism cannot be compared to Welsh's fictional world where fantasy, for instance in *Filth*, in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* or in many of the short stories in *The Acid House*, rubs shoulders with urban realism, as in *Trainspotting* or *Glue* or in his latest novel *Porno*.

One of the *TLS* reviewers declared : «Welsh is a political writer : how, given his subject-matter, could he not be ? Yet his narrative breathed uninhibitedly, unstifled by any point-making ». <sup>4</sup> Strangely as it is, it is true to say that there is no ideological stance or particular point making in Welsh's urban realistic writings. He has for instance clearly distanced himself and his work from any nationalistic viewpoint. The following quotation from a short story entitled 'Eurotrash' might sum up what Welsh has ever written about Scottish Nationalism. When defined as 'British' in a conversation with a Dutchman, a Scotsman living in Holland reacts thus :

[I] was almost tempted to go into a spiel about how I was Scottish, not British, and that the Scots were the last oppressed colony of the British Empire. I don't really believe it, though ; the Scots oppress themselves by their obsession with the English which breeds negatives of hatred, fear, servility, contempt and dependency. (*The Acid House*, p. 17) <sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with *The Guardian*, 15/8/1993.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Clee, « The Lads of Leith », *Times Literary Supplement*, March 18th, 1994, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> See also : Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*, p. 78.

The notion of nationhood is in fact utterly rejected by Welsh's characters. They see in it only a sterile and reductive affiliation to a place which outstrips the familiar outlines of the local community. Nations and their symbols are, as Mark Renton puts forward in *Trainspotting*, « ugly and artificial » (*Trainspotting*, p. 228).

While nationhood is not to be trusted as a means of affiliation, the sense of community, of belonging to a particular Edinburgh district — Leith, Muirhouse etc. — or social group, is quite strong in Welsh's writing. It is however more a confrontational concept — ie us and them — and a loosely defined sense of belonging than a locus of identity for Welsh's characters. His tales, albeit firmly entrenched in the Edinburgh schemes with characters who use a language one could define as a 'sociolect', appear ultimately apolitical. His characters show no strong affiliation nor indeed any inclination for politics or Trade Unionism. Welsh made this clear already in *Trainspotting* where the egocentric Simon Williamson, aka Sick Boy, gives the tone of the novel :

... 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.  
(*Trainspotting*, p. 30)

This is obviously one of the many differences with Kelman's writings. The hazy political ideologies that the *TLS* reviewer tried to find are indeed nothing but political apathy and a strong belief in individualism. This observation should nonetheless be slightly qualified according to the age of Welsh's characters. Welsh shows in *Glue* that the older working-class generations definitely share a sense of social struggle and social empathy (*Glue*, pp. 19-21). Although disappointed by politics and politicians, their lives have been defined and ruled by a clear sense of class solidarity. Carl Ewart fondly remembers the 10 commandments that have guided his father's life and through which he gained the social awareness he needed. Welsh spells this decalogue in capital letters, as if to insist on its prophetic significance :

1) NEVER HIT A WOMAN

- 2) ALWAYS BACK UP YOUR MATES
- 3) NEVER SCAB
- 4) NEVER CROSS A PICKET LINE
- 5) NEVER GRASS FRIEND NOR FOE
- 6) TELL THEM NOWT (THEM BEING POLIS, DOLE, SOCIAL, JOURNALISTS, CENSUS, ETC.)
- 7) NEVER LET A WEEK GO BY WITHOUT INVESTING IN VINYL
- 8) GIVE WHEN YOU CAN, TAKE ONLY WHEN YOU HAVE TO
- 9) IF YOU FEEL HIGH OR LOW, MIND THAT NOTHING GOOD OR BAD LASTS FOR EVER AND TODAY'S THE START OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE
- 10) GIVE LOVE FREELY, BUT BE TIGHTER WITH TRUST. (*Glue*, pp. 407-08)

Even if the younger generations portrayed by Welsh are from working class backgrounds, they do not share any of their parents' working class values. They appear as resigned puppets straying in a post-Thatcher limbo. Welsh then recurrently implies throughout his work that drugs are the only way out. They will give somebody the necessary sense of social cohesion in a world where the key word is individualism. Drugs will allow him / her to locate themselves within a meaningful community which is not regulated by any kind of work ethics any more : « Junk fills the void », says Renton (*Trainspotting* , p. 186). Even if social and economic situations inform Welsh's urban realistic novels, they merely provide the bleak background from where one needs to escape.

Drugs end up creating the necessary social core which has been lost by a young generation which impassively witnessed the corrosion and the disappearance of political ideologies : « 'We are all acquaintances now.' It seems tae go beyond our personal junk circumstances ; a brilliant metaphor for our times » (*Trainspotting*, p. 11). Welsh does not pass judgement on the younger generations' lack of social and political commitment — after all he also admits to not feeling the need to do so himself. His depressingly apathetic message appears utterly resigned : rather than fighting social injustice and trying to influence society, people should enjoy life. Monolithic society will, by definition, never change. Rave music, with its necessary chemical complement MDMA, that is to say Ecstasy, is the only medium through which this can be achieved. The body, even though still at the very core of transgression since it has become both the subject and the object, has lost any kind of political involvement. It has become an expression, not the means by which transgression is put forward :

His pill was kicking in, and the music, which he had had a resistance to, was getting into him from all sides, surging through his body in waves, defining his emotions. Before it had seemed jerky and disjointed, it was pushing and pulling at him, irritating him. Now he was going with it, his body bubbling and flowing in all ways to the roaring bass-lines and the tearing dub plates. All the joy of love for everything good was in him, though he could see all the bad things in Britain ; in fact this twentieth-century urban blues music defined and illustrated them more sharply than ever. Yet he wasn't scared and he wasn't done about it : he could see what needed to be done to get away from them. It was the party : he felt that you had to party, you had to party harder than ever. It was the only way. It was your duty to show that you were still alive. Political sloganeering and posturing meant nothing ; you had to celebrate the joy of life in the face of all those grey forces and dead spirits who controlled everything, who fucked with your head and livelihood anyway, if you weren't one of them. You had to let them know that in spite of their best efforts to make you like them, to make you dead, you were still alive. (*Ecstasy*, pp. 26-27)

Although Welsh has always refused to be considered a spokesperson, one can say that his fiction comes out from the 80s and 90s youth subculture. Youth subculture by the 1980s and 1990s had indeed lost the rebellious edge some previous youth movements might have had. It also moved more towards a leisure industry very much linked to consumerism than towards any kind of ideological statement : travelling to sunny exotic places — no-frill packaged tours to Rave capitals like Ibiza and Rimini — and the consumption of what was to become the symbol of the Rave movement, Ecstasy. This in many ways corresponds to William Burroughs' dreary prophecy that « the drugs economy [is] the most pure and lethal form of capitalism ». <sup>6</sup>

This indifferent reaction might indeed well be an aftermath of the Thatcher years when Trade Unions were gagged and lost most of their political edge. The late 1980s and 1990s youth subculture's symbols, drug consumption, rave music and clubbing rapidly became an industry, or perhaps more precisely a trendy marketing device aimed at young consumers and operated by shrewd entrepreneurs. The drug associated with the rave music, ecstasy, has also been defined as the 'love drug'. However, it is not at all in an aphrodisiac or sexual term, but rather in an atmosphere of sharing and conviviality : that of creating a new way of life, a community, a

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Andrew O'Hagan, « *Trainspotting* : The Boys are Back in Town », in : Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film / Literature / Heritage : A Sight and Sound Reader* (London : BFI, 2001), p. 223.

bonding. This once again stresses the consumerist aspect of any need of or of any addiction to it. Alan Freeman puts it in a nutshell when he says : « The trainspotters exemplify Late Capitalism's replacement of work with leisure, of action with consumption, of meaning with system, of life with lifestyle ». <sup>7</sup> Welsh's junkies, whatever their drugs, are sometimes portrayed as victims. But they do not display a defiant or seditious attitude towards society. Drugs are their conscious reaction — escape — against a society which does not accept them or in which they do not want to fit. Renton's famous « choose life » scene (*Trainspotting*, pp. 187-88) haunts all Welsh's writings like a sombre refrain.

Drugs, as in the etymology of the word 'pharmakon', stand as the paradox of Welsh's youth communities : the chemical elements are perceived as both vital and lethal, nourishing and poisoning. <sup>8</sup> There is no drug justification in Welsh's novel, despite the often quoted « Take yir best orgasm, multiply the feeling by 20, and you're still fuckin miles off the pace » (*Trainspotting*, p. 11). In the same novel, drug addicts were also described in a very gloomy and despondent way by a third person narrator :

They emerge from the stairdoor into the darkness of the deserted street. Some of them move in a jerky, manic way ; exuberant and noisy. Others cruise along silently, like ghosts ; hurting inside, yet fearful of the imminence of even greater pain and discomfort. (...) They were like vampires, living a largely nocturnal existence, completely out of synchronisation with most of the other people who inhabited the tenements and lived by a rota of sleep and work. (*Trainspotting*, pp. 262-63)

It is not only addiction which prevents them from adopting a different pattern and changing their way of life — those who really want to, Renton for example, manage their detox — there is indeed a consistent refusal to face up to society. Drugs seem to have perverted their own sense of responsibility, of decision making, of feelings, even of senses.

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Freeman, « Ghosts in Sunny Leith : Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* », in : Susanne Hagemann (ed.), *Studies in Scottish Fiction : 1945 to the Present* (Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, 1996), p. 256.

<sup>8</sup> See : Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader. Between the Blinds*. Edited by Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead : Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 127.



Ironically, the only medical drug mentioned by Welsh, apart from methadone, is called 'Tenazadrine' and echoes the controversy which surrounded thalidomide. Like illegal drugs, like a *pharmakon*, Tanazadrine helps but it also has disastrous after-effects. In 'Fortune's always hiding : a corporate romance'<sup>9</sup>, the protagonist has stumps instead of arms : she is the victim of malformations caused by the medical drug her mother took when pregnant. She, and another victim, give up any legal resources as they know that the law will always protect the strong and oppose those on the physical or social margins of society. They then decide to take the matters into their own hands by murdering and maiming the chemists and industrialists responsible for the marketing of the drug, knowing perfectly well they will be caught and sent to prison. Individuality, individualism or individual pleasures are the key words for Welsh's characters.

## 2. Welsh, sex, and the carnivalesque

As far as Welsh's narratives are concerned, drugs, as we saw, also provide a social boundary between his characters and the rest of society. Sex is a much more problematic topos in order to establish boundaries : it is a far more common activity than drug-taking and it is common to all walks of life, whether or not you are on the margin of society. Therefore Welsh has to resort to using a very crude sexual vocabulary and to describing perverted or even sickening sexual episodes. This establishes the necessary boundary between characters and readers and alienates his characters even further, exiling them to depraved and sad margins of society.

Irvine Welsh's repellent sex and torture scenes have already been profusely discussed in various articles, book reviews and interviews. The horrific gang-rape which forms the crux of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, the abject sexual harassment and physical abuse of women by DC Bruce Robertson in *Filth*, or the torture and ultimate killing of dogs in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and *Glue* have all been at the centre of debates and controversies between the detractors and the proponents of

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<sup>9</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Ecstasy*, pp. 75-150

Welsh's literary or social value. This, I think, resembles the knee-jerk reactions that followed James Kelman's attribution of the Booker Prize in 1994 for *How Late it Was, How Late ...*<sup>10</sup>, with a plethora of dismayed voices from reviewers who could only bemoan the sad state of British contemporary fiction, some prudish reviewers even going as far as counting the number of times the words « fuck » or « cunt » were used in the novel. Those reactions were beside the point : Kelman's use of swear words marks a clear a boundary. It is both social, that is to say it isolates the protagonist and his idiolect from the rest of society, and linguistic, it breaks and punctuates the protagonist's speech ; it gives it a flow, a rhythm and a cadence.

Welsh's strategy resembles Kelman's : swear words, Welsh's phonetic English and his characters' idiolects establish a break with the reader and serve as punctuation and rhythmical beat. Spud's explanation, even though he misses the linguistic subtlety, is superb :

The high street's a wee bit nippy but. No been up here since the festival n ah miss aw they cool chicks smilin at ye n giein ye leaflets fir thir shows. It's pure radge but, they wey they sortay make a statement intae a question. They go : 'We've a show in the festival ?' 'It's up the Pleasance ?' 'The review was brilliant ?' N ye feel like sayin, hud oan a second, cool kitten-cat, cause if ye want tae dae that, n make a statement intae a question, aw ye need tae dae is tae add 'ken' oan the end. Ken ?  
(*Porno*, p. 144)

Gut reactions from readers and literary critics prove anyway that society still exerts a self-regulating and a self-policing behaviour towards what it considers to be obscene or even a threat to its morality. There is no law against swearing, nor a quota on the number of occurrences of F... or C... words, nor are there penalties for being too sexually explicit in literature. The power of the readers, of the reviewers, of the public moral gaze is however conspicuous. Authors who may be tempted to indulge in sexual liberties, to transgress society's code of morality or to write in a way that some might find obscene or sadistic, run the risk of being pillored by those who feel endowed with preserving moral scrutiny.

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<sup>10</sup> James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late...* (London : Seeker & Warbug, 1994).

Indeed, my point here is not to argue about how despicable some of Welsh's sex or torture scenes are, and they are, or how gratuitous and pointless his representation of violence is. I'd like to argue that beside the purely commercial argument that 'sex and drugs sell' or beside the author's pursuit of any elusive biographical myth<sup>11</sup>, Welsh has also put forward — unwittingly, if we are to believe him — a very superficial ideological agenda which questions both the notions of power and authority through provocations and transgressions, therefore prompting reactions from the moral majority. This clearly appears as a paradoxical statement : as we have already seen, there is no definite political agenda in Welsh's novels and he himself is keen to stress that point. But whether they occur in his fantasy novels or in his urban realistic novels, paradoxes and oxymorons — or maybe incoherences — are a common feature of his work and this should not foreclose any attempt at analysing it. Transgression is after all at the basis of sexuality, according to Foucault.<sup>12</sup> In a postmodern world which has lost any sense of the religious and of the 'sacred', sexuality is still easily associated with profanation : profanation of bodies, of morality, of laws, of societies. And this is why Welsh's use of sexuality in his writing is very disturbing. The reader is all the time aware of this act of profanation perpetrated by Welsh's characters. The reader is aware of them having crossed the boundary and standing on the margin, teasing him / her and moral scrutiny.

However, as Foucault also pointed out, the language of sexuality is both excessive and deficient. There is no adequation between language and the fundamental element of sexuality : desire. It is excessive because language uses its infinite permutations to try to describe desire, and it is deficient because desire — by definition — escapes any linguistic representation. There is however a third flaw directly related to desire in most of Welsh's sexual language : it resides in a void, a quasi total absence of the notion of desire. Welsh's sexual language cuts short and bypasses this basic notion of love and sexuality. Most of Welsh's characters are unable to express anything beyond the purely physical and sexual aspect of a

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<sup>11</sup> About the Irvine Welsh myth, see : Ron McKay, « Would the real Irvine Welsh shoot up ? », *The Observer*, 4 February 1996 <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,772792,00.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, « A Preface to Transgression », in : Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Selected Essays and Interviews. Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard & Sherry Simon (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 33.

relationship — or intercourse. One of the few exceptions is Robert Birrell in *Glue* : he confesses that his falling in love with a woman was certainly not what he expected when he decided to go out cruising with his friends :

Last night had been a disaster. The lassie saw him as a social worker when all he wanted was a ride ... well, a bit of love and romance really, but you needed a ride tacked on the end. It was essential. (...) I've fuckin well fallen in love, Rab thought. Ah came oot for a drink and hoping for a ride, and ah've fuckin well fallen in love. And he felt like a foolish god. (*Glue*, p. 487)

*Porno*, despite the pornographic element, shows a similar concern with love. This could well be the result of a slight change of direction in Welsh's work, or maybe it has simply grown more mature because of age. But in his first works, Welsh's world is a Male Chauvinist Pig world, and where the language of love is as far removed from romance as possible. Stereotypes are quite basic regarding sexuality. Sex, in Welsh's novels, is concomitant with power : physical power played to the detriment of women or sexual power which men braggingly boast about. Of course there has always been, by definition, a conspicuous link between sexuality and power. This is most clearly seen in *Filth* where DC Bruce Robertson uses and abuses his profession as a policeman in order to obtain all the sexual gratifications he strives for. Being ready to blackmail one of his female victims into sexual abuse, he declares : « (...) and I realise that I am (...) enjoying the twisted but undeniable sexuality which is part and parcel of the complete dominance over another human being. This is one of the things which makes poliswork such a satisfying career » (*Filth*, p. 91). Welsh's latest novel, *Porno*, brings about a transition in this cliched world of macho culture : the introduction of a new character and of a new state of mind in the Leith posse : a clever young English female student, Ms Nikki Fuller-Smith, who is clearly a cut above Welsh's usual female characters. Sex for her has become a means to manipulate and subjugate the Leith males in order to fulfill her ambitions, to their utter dismay. But Nikki Fuller-Smith, probably one of the finest of Welsh's creations, is a rare occurrence in the Welsh macho world of sexuality.

The link between sexuality and power and the significance of dialogues in Welsh's stories bring me to describe him not as the creator of a genre, whatever

some subculture proponent might want to think, but as the heir of a genre which dates back from the end of the Middle-Ages, namely the 'Carnavalesque'. The carnival is not only a particular moment in time. It is a spirit which celebrates a temporary liberation from the established order, from society as a whole. It is not like an official feast or celebration where ranks, roles and positions are fixed and clearly established from the start. On the contrary, there is a suspension of hierarchy, of rules and of morality in the carnivalesque. One of its tenets is what Bakhtin called 'Grotesque Realism' whose main feature is degradation<sup>13</sup>. The grotesque takes place in 'the lower stratum of the body' : the belly, reproductive organs, anus, but also in the face, and more particularly the mouth. The body and its organs are closely considered in its relations to other bodies and the outer world. They are magnified and bodily functions are derided. We move from a crude register to farcical dimension. Exaggeration and hyperbole are recurrent features of the grotesque imagery. The infamous toilet scene in *Trainspotting* the tapeworm in *Filth*, the shooting of a porn film in *Porno*, all belong to this sphere of degradation and humiliation, with a showy display of digestive or reproductive organs and a wide range of obscene and scatological dialogues. For Bakhtin however, degradation is not only negative : it heralds a conception, a new birth. This of course remains contentious in Welsh's writing : this new birth could be described as the emergence of individualistic values, as opposed to more social perspectives.

Renton's solution, both in *Trainspotting* and *Porno*, is to run away from the Leith crowd. DC Robertson's escape can only be from himself and from his perverted mind : he chooses to commit suicide. Rab Strang, one of the rapists of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, lies in a coma and is castrated and killed by his own victim. Contrarily to Bakhtin's positive and healthy rebirth through the grotesque, Welsh's postmodern avatars find themselves in a limbo where there is no escape for the wicked.

The Grotesque element is probably most obvious in *Filth*. The tapeworm which has taken possession of DS Bruce Robertson's innards provides us with his host's

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<sup>13</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 19-20.

unconscious voice, a genuine 'interior monologue'. It enables us to become aware of the traumas which still haunt him — namely the bullying he had to endure at school because of his father's identity, the taunts and gibes he was subjected to by his mother's husband, the death of his brother and the death of his first love, both of which he is responsible for. Welsh's choice of the tapeworm is a clear and potent metaphor of Bruce Robertson's repressed guilt feelings: it gnaws its host from the inside while bringing his past to light. The host's actions nurture the frustration and the resentment of the worm which grows stronger and whose voice gains potency day by day. The dialogical relationship between the two voices, another feature constitutive of the Carnival, is clearly visible in the narrative structure adopted by Welsh. Robertson's narration is sometimes unreadable as it is covered by the worm's own reflections. The reader is presented with a fragmented narrative illustrating Robertson's fragmented personality. The grotesque has taken over Robertson's life. The emphasis laid on oral sex in *Filth*, with detailed and crude descriptions of DC Robertson's activities, corresponds to the Grotesque by involving sexual organs and the mouth in the same account.

Welsh also uses the carnivalesque feature of order reversal : the beggar becomes King during a carnival. This reaches absurd proportions in « When the Debris meets the Sea » where Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Kim Basinger and Victoria Principal, fluent in demotic Scots spend the day recluse in their Santa Monica mansion, day-dreaming and fantasizing of ever visiting the high place of male sexuality, that is to say Leith :

A pile of glossy magazines lay on a large black coffee table. They bore such titles as *Wide-o*, *Scheme Scene* and *Bevy Merchants*. Madonna flicked idly through the magazine called *Radge*, coming to an abrupt halt as her eyes feasted on the pallid figure of Deek Prentice, resplendent in a purple, aqua and black shell-suit.

'Phoah ! Ah'd shag the erse oafay that anyway,' she lustily exclaimed, breaking the silence, and thrusting the picture under Kylie Minogue's nose. Kylie inspected the image clinically, 'Hmm... ah dunno... No bad erse oan it like, bit ah'm no really intae flat-toaps. Still, ah widnae kick it oot ay bed, likesay, ken ?' (...)

Victoria was enthusiastic. 'Total fuckin ride. Ah bet eh's hung like a hoarse. Like that photae ah goat ay Tam McKenzie, ken fi the Young Leith Team, original seventies line-up. Fuckin welt oan it, man, ah'm telling ye. <sup>14</sup>

Degradation and the absurd also feature in 'The Granton Star Cause' where Boab Coyle, the protagonist, meets God in a pub. God, fluent in the Edinburgh demotic, braids Boab for being so passive and resigned to his fate. When admonished for not preventing wars, epidemics, tyrants or famines, god (undoubtedly lacking divine mercy) transforms Boab into a bluebottle. From this ultimate degradation, Boab enjoys the voyeuristic pleasure of being literally 'a fly on the wall' and being able, for instance, to watch his former girlfriend's sexual antics with her new boyfriend, or his parents' S&M fantasies, but he also revels at the new sensations provided by this Kafkaian metamorphosis :

It wasn't all bad being a bluebottle. The power of flight was something he'd have hated to have missed ; there had been few greater pleasures than soaring around outside. He also gained a taste for excrement, its rich, sour moistness tantalising his long insect tongue. The other bluebottles who crowded onto the hot shite were not so bad. Boab was attracted to some of them. He learned to appreciate the beauty of the insect body ; the sexy, huge, brown eyes, the glistening external skeleton, the appealing mosaic of blue and green, the rough, coarse hairs and the shimmering wings which refracted the sun's golden light. <sup>15</sup>

Boab Coyle eventually recovers his human shape but dies of massive internal injuries after having been swatted by his mum against the front-room wall. Although before dying he voyeuristically delights in witnessing his parents' SM performance with clips, dildos, urine and faeces.

Welsh's sexual grotesque and scenes of degradation are certainly not to be taken at face value. They highlight transgression by breaking boundaries, moralities. It would however be totally unrealistic to claim that Welsh has created a language of transgression through his description of sexuality and through his use of Scots, therefore bringing an answer to Foucault's doubts about the existence of such a

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<sup>14</sup> Irvine Welsh, *The Acid House*, pp. 87-88. The title is taken from Iggy Pop's song « Kill City » : « Well I live here in Kill City, where the debris meets the sea / It's a playground to the rich but it's a loaded gun to me / The scene is a fascination man, and everything's for free / Till you wind up in some bathroom, overdosed and on your knees. »

<sup>15</sup> Irvine Welsh, *The Acid House*, p. 132.

language. As we saw, Welsh's sexual language has many flaws, amongst which the near total absence of the notion of desire. However, it does indeed participate in the transgressive nature of the carnivalesque and it sometimes, thanks to hyperbolia and exaggeration, underlines the grotesque elements or the grotesqueness of the situation. Welsh's style, made of abuses, curses, profanities, rudeness, transgresses the limits of conventional language. The dialogues or first person narrations in phonetic spelling also break linguistic boundaries. This, in turn, participates in Welsh's narrative structure where the same episode might be related by two (or more) characters, each one with his or her particular voice, idiolect and subjective understanding of the situation. This increases the temporality of the episode and contributes to the polyphony of his writing.<sup>16</sup>

A key to understanding the transgressive nature of Welsh's language is also in what Bakhtin called heteroglossia. Heteroglossia is not to be confused with polyphony. Heteroglossia is the struggle between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' language : « (...)a double-voiced discourse [which] serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions : the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author ».<sup>17</sup> Like in Kelman's novels, the characters' sociolect clashes with the official language,<sup>18</sup> underlining then the total lack of comprehension and the social abyss between those worlds. For instance with Danny Murphy, aka Spud, who calls a publishing house after having received a letter of refusal for the publication of his book on Leith :

- Aye... ah ken yi'll think ah'm daft, but ah wis jist, likesay, tryin tae work oot what ye meant in that letter ay yours, man.
- Well, I think it was fairly explicit.

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance : Irvine Welsh, « Across the hall », *The Acid House*, pp. 103-05.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhael Bakhtin, « Discourse in the novel », in : — , *The Dialogic Imagination : Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin : University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 301-31

<sup>18</sup> For instance the protagonist's visit to the Doctor's : « Mister Samuels, I have people waiting to see me. / Christ sake ! / I find your language offensive. / Do ye. Ah well fuck ye then. Fuck ye ! Sammy crumpled the prescription and flung it at him : Stick that up yer fucking arse ! » James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How late*, p. 225.



- Ah beg tae differ likes, mate. Cause ye says thit ye dinnae want it at the moment. So tae me that means thit ye might want it later. So, likes, when is it thit ye think ye might want it ? (...)
- I'm sorry if I seemed ambiguous, Mr Murphy. To be more frank , it's quite an immature work, and you're not really yet up to publishable standard...
- What dae ye mean, man ?
- Well, the grammar ... the spelling ...
- Aye, but are youse no meant tae sort aw that oot ?
- ... to say nothing of the subject matter being not right for us.
- But youse've published history books about Leith before... ah kin feel ma voice gaun aw high, cause it's no fair, it just isnae, it isnae fair, nowt's fair...
- Those were serious works by disciplined writers, the boy sortay snaps, — this is a badly written celebration of yob culture and of people who haven't achieved anything noteworthy in the local community. (*Porno*, p. 380)

Heteroglossia is also internalized and emphasized, for instance in *Trainspotting* with characters imitating ways of speaking (Sick Boy putting on a Sean Connery accent) : « *I admire your rampant individualism, Shimon. I shee parallelsh wish myshelf ash a young man. Glad you shed that Sean. Others have made shimilar comments* » (*Trainspotting*, p. 30) or adopting a way of speaking devoid of their Edinburgh parlance or copying the Edinburgh parlance.

There are indeed clear feelings of 'déjà-vu' or intertextual echoes in Welsh's fiction. It seems difficult for Welsh to get away from his first heroes, the *Trainspotting* crew and although this gives a feeling of stability to the reader, we know where we are (Leith) and who they are, there is a strange kind of 'addiction' on Welsh's behalf. Renton, Begbie, Sick Boy, and Spud all make a cameo appearance in *Glue* ; some of them are also mentioned in *Filth*. Welsh's latest novel, *Porno*, continues the *Trainspotting* story 10 years later with the same cast. After the consumption of illegal drugs and dealing for the twenty-something crew in *Trainspotting*, the thirty-something *Trainspotting* crew deal with sex and the shooting of a porn movie. Drug consumption also moved up the social ladder, the new trend being cocaine. It is quite easy to imagine a film being made out of *Porno* and also a third novel with the same characters (minus one, plus one) as the conclusion of the novel calls for a sequel. After drugs and sex, it is also easy to imagine that in 10 years time the forty-something Leith posse will make money out of music, and maybe from the rave scene as in the conclusion of *Glue*.

I have tried to show that Welsh's transgression has no clear ideological agenda, but that he has identifiable literary precedents. So the literary phenomenon called Irvine Welsh is not over yet, and he even has had many fallouts or clones on the Scottish literary scenes. The rave scene also became the topic of Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* and *The Sopranos* and it is actually difficult to name all the young Scottish novelists who draw their inspiration from Welsh, whose work indeed pursues that of Gray and Trocchi and, in a way, the linguistic experiments of MacDiarmid. After the 19th century Kailyard, the Urban Kailyard, we might well be witnessing the emergence of a Scottish movement, a School, what a critic once called a « satanic Kailyard ». <sup>19</sup> Well let's hope not...

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Welsh's transgression also stands for a literary contravention in the Scottish canon. His representation of working class ethics and life definitely breaks off the traditional urban writing from people like Kelman, Torrington, McIlvanney. Renton's sarcastic comment echoes Welsh's denunciation of what he once called 'the Glasgow Mafia' <sup>20</sup> : « 'Ah've never met one Weedjie [*ie Glaswegian*] whae didnae think that they are the only suffering proletarians in Scotland, Western Europe, the World. Weedjie experience ay hardship is the only relevant experience ay it'. » (*Trainspotting*, p. 191)

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<sup>19</sup> Zoë Strachan attributes this expression to Christopher Harvie : <[www.spikemagazine.com/0599queerspotting.htm](http://www.spikemagazine.com/0599queerspotting.htm)>

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Benjamin Arnoldy, see : <<http://flakmag.com/features/welsh.html>>