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Bodies of Evidence: Cities and Stories in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* and Irvine Welsh's *Filth*

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The city's surface is thick with its living citizens. Its earth is richly sown with its many dead. The city is a repository of narratives, of stories. Present tense, past tense or future. The city is a novel.

Cities are simple things. They are the conglomerations of people. Cities are complex things. They are the geographical and emotional distillations of whole nations. What makes a place a city has little to do with size. It has to do with the speed at which its citizens walk, the cut of their clothes, the sound of their shouts.

But most of all, cities are the meeting places of stories. The men and women there are narratives, endlessly complex and intriguing. (ES, 215)

Whether maimed, fragmented or dismembered bodies after explosions in central Belfast or the sexual antics of the outrageous and obnoxious Lothian police officer described by Welsh — and the etymology of the word "police"³ should be borne in mind throughout this essay — locations and the physique are to be considered together in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* and Irvine Welsh's *Filth*. Not only do they provide the scene and the substance of the

¹ Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (1996; London: Minerva Press, 1997). References cited hereafter in the text as (ES).

² Irvine Welsh, *Filth* (1998; London: Vintage, 1999). References cited hereafter in the text as (F).

³ From Latin *politia*, administration, government, from Greek *politeia*, citizenship, civil administration, from *polites*, citizen, from *polis*, city.

plots but they also contribute to a plethora of complex narratives and composite personal stories. Bodies and cities are entwined in an intimate dialogical relationship in both novels. This symbiosis highlights Wilson's and Welsh's concerns about life in a postmodern cityscape rife with doubts, contradictions and misconceptions and their commitment to postmodernism. In order to examine marginality and the city, I will study the (mis)representation of the city and the (mis)reading or the wilful distortion of the semiotic environment in *Eureka Street* and *Filth*. I will then examine as a conclusion how degradation, deformity and grotesque representations of bodies reflect the state of the urban network in McLiam Wilson's and Welsh's novels.

Stories and narratives

Eureka Street, whose title points at a precise location in Protestant Belfast, is set shortly before an IRA cease-fire and concludes after the announcement of a bilateral agreement. McLiam Wilson gives us a general spectrum of Belfast society, from severe Protestantism to uncompromising Nationalism, from the apology of a certain kind of capitalism to urban deprivation, from loutish behaviour to the unfathomable grief and vacuity caused by a terrorist attack. Protestant Chuckie Lurgan, who lives on Eureka Street, and his best friend and drinking pal, Catholic-born Jake Jackson, guide us through a journey describing the intricacies of the urban codes and social practices in a pre and post-ceasefire Belfast.

Meanwhile *Filth*, whose title indicates foul and offensive bodily or mental states, is set in Edinburgh in the last months of 1997.⁴ It takes place in the wake of the close national scrutiny of the state of the British police following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. A domestic introspection whose outcome was to be described as "institutional racism" by Sir William Macpherson in his scathing report. We are introduced to Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson, the police officer who has been assigned to lead the investigation of a racist murder in Edinburgh and who secretly covets being promoted Detective Inspector. We follow his antics and his downfall from the night of the murder to his suicide. His loathsome professional behaviour, his repulsive hidden agenda and his debauched sexual life amidst his crumbling marriage and

⁴ Welsh gives us a series of references enabling us to locate the novel in the second half of 1997, (*F*, 108; *F*, 207; *F*, 295).

health problems give us a glimpse of a repugnant law-enforcement professional gnawed by remorse and guilt-feelings.

Heteroglossia — double-voiced discourse expressing a whole range of intentions⁵ — but also displaced and confounded viewpoints are the staple narrative devices used by both novelists. Polyphonic narrative voices — Chuckie Lurgan's and Jake Jackson's — provide us with a more comprehensive picture of the city in *Eureka Street*. A third level is added in the guise of an extradiegetic narrator, therefore extending the scope of the novel and of the narrative frame towards the outer rims of Belfast and the outer frames of discourse. A multiplicity of voices is also to be found in *Filth*: Welsh intertwines Robertson's own depictions of his daily life, which mainly amount to a perusal of his sexual routine and his intrigues in order to become DI, with his estranged wife's observations and with accounts and comments made by the tapeworm DS Robertson is afflicted with.

The city's metanarrative

McLiam Wilson unmistakably portrays Belfast as a fragmented location, a patchwork of various religious and ideological communities with social class as the ultimate factor of division between people. Each person has to find their own voice while still being careful to abide by the prevalent praxis advocated by their community and acknowledged as "the norm" by others. This inevitably leads to communication problems, contradictions, misunderstandings and errors of judgement as codes of conduct and inferences are first and foremost dictated by the city's hierarchical and social constructions regardless of personal motives. Jake Jackson keeps falling victim to this social practice: his university education sets him apart from his colleagues, either when working in a recuperation agency or working as a bricklayer. However, it is religion which deepens his feelings of alienation. Jackson is afraid of appearing or saying something "too Catholic" (*ES*, 2) or "not Catholic enough" (*ES*, 18) or is even chided for "not looking very Catholic" (*ES*, 95) depending on the codes of behaviour expected from him by his fellow citizens. McLiam Wilson therefore implicitly alludes to a dominant metanarrative specific to Belfast which has influenced its

⁵ See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 301-31.

inhabitants' way of living and ways of thinking.⁶ This code is inherent and partakes in Belfast life: city planners and the city fathers have structured the metropolis according to strict social and ideological delimitations. It is made of all the urban codes, urban policy and religious or social prejudices which have been inscribed in the cityscape. It has rubbed off the richness of people's personal narratives which now lie dormant in the city's texture:

The merest hour of the merest day of the merest of Belfast's citizens would be impossible to render in all its grandeur and all its beauty. In cities, the stories are jumbled and jangled. The narratives meet. They clash, they converge or convert. They are a Babel of prose. And in the end, after generations and generations of the thousands and hundreds of thousands, the city itself begins to absorb narrative like a sponge, like paper absorbs ink. The past and the present is written there. The citizenry cannot fail to write there. Their testimony is involuntary and complete. (ES, 216)

By choosing not to challenge the city conventions, citizens sanction the respectability, credibility and potency of the metanarrative to the detriment of their personal stories. Some may even have inscribed these codes on their bodies by means of tatoos, or have visibly displayed them by means of clothing, therefore purposely or unintentionally participating in their diffusion. Belfast's metanarrative punctuates daily life as it is also present in the buzz of helicopters hovering over the city or the death toll announced on the radio, sounds which have rocked Jake Jackson to sleep since childhood and to which he has become so accustomed he barely notices them (ES, 5).

The point of view is radically different in *Filth* as DS Bruce Robertson stands as a representative of the state's metanarrative. Victim of abuse and discrimination as a child due to his birth after the rape of his mother and the criminal activities of his 'biological' father, Bruce Robertson has decided to become a law-enforcement officer. However his professional duties soon become a mere means to absolve his obsession with the body. Empowered by the prestige and the weight of his profession, he confesses more than once to a series of acts of sexual harassment and gratuitous violence

⁶ For definitions of metanarratives or "Grand Narratives," see: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), xxiii-xxiv.

perpetuated under the cover of his official functions. He shows an indisputable relish bordering on obsession for the physical implementation of the metanarrative:

It's that front-line feeling; that rush when you're at a picket-line or at a big game and you've got your truncheon and shield and the whole force of the state is behind you and you're hyped up to beat insolent spastic scum who question things with their big mouths and nasty manners into the suffering pulp they so richly deserve to become. It's a great society we live in. I hate them all, that section of the working class who won't do as they are told: criminals, spastics, niggers, strikers, thugs, I don't fucking well care, it all adds up to one thing: something to smash. (F, 160)

The image of an extensive power looming over the citizens and dictating their behaviour infuses both novels and is introduced from the beginning. En route to his flat, Jake Jackson shivers when at a checkpoint his potential girlfriend Mary is greeted by a policeman she knows (*ES*, 3). Cities are seen under the light of division, whether social, political or ideological. The partition of the city makes it easier to supervise and to govern, to keep tabs on its inhabitants and their daily occupations. It has however brought about feelings of atopia within the population: Belfast appears as a myriad of different sectors, and travelling from one place to another is made more complicated by security checks and by road diversions (*ES*, 135). The urban space where citizens circulate keeps being twisted and distorted for security reasons. Meanwhile their living space has been ghettoized. Characters are entrenched in their particular districts and their addresses provide them with an obvious means to assert their identity. Chukie Lurgan for instance lives in a Unionist district, a street "so firmly set in the red, white and blue epicentre of the Protestant Loyalist belt of the city" (*ES*, 32).

On the other hand DS Bruce Robertson confesses more than once to being his job, to being "polis" (*F*, 3; *F*, 72-3). He cannot shake off his role as a law-enforcement professional: it permeates his life and his relationships with people. Consequently, his vision of the city is that of an easily partitioned place where everybody has been assigned a particular role and location. This makes it easier to control and corresponds to Foucault's theories of the partition of a city and the exercise of power upon citizens.⁷ This also develops within the

⁷ For an analysis of power and the partitioning of a city, see: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Allen Lane, 1977), 195-228.

police force a contemptuous attitude for those who are on the sidelines, that is to say people who live on the margin of the city and on the margin of society, people Bruce Robertson keeps referring to as "spastics" and "scum." Welsh also insists on a further division, this time more perverse because of its invisibility: Freemasonry. Most of the people he knows, through work or as sex-providers, are Freemasons.

Edinburgh is clearly divided first between the city centre and the outskirts and, within the centre, between the Old Town and the New Town. The racist murder Bruce Robertson has to investigate took place in what his superior Toal describes as "(...) the city's umbilical cord (...)" (*F*, 7), that is to say stairs connecting the Old Town to the New Town. The apparently purposeless murder committed in the early morning hours of a young black man whose perpetrator is DS Robertson himself. If Welsh alludes to urban partition between different cultures, ways of life or along social divisions, this is not the main theme of his novel. Despite efforts from the Police to bridge the gaps, Bruce Robertson and most of his colleagues retain their dismissive attitudes towards those who are on the margins, i.e. those who do not belong to their exclusive society. As the city is seen through Bruce Robertson's corrupted eyes, this partitioning also exists in his loathsome mind: he, as a "law enforcer(s) of this society," (*F*, 73) is keen to keep it right:

This city of ours [Edinburgh] is truly beautiful and we like this part where there is not a scheme in sight. Why could we not simply move all the scum to the middle of nowhere, like Glasgow, where they would blend in more effectively? Come to think of it, that's exactly what we did do, when we built the schemes. Sent them far, but not far enough. (F, 327)

A well-partitioned city also ensures the safety and well-being of loyal citizens in our consumer age. Amsterdam, where Bruce Robertson takes his winter break with his fellow Lodge member Bladesey, offers the perfect example of what he wishes to find: the 'red district' where drugs and sex are easily available and the rest of the city.

It is in Edinburgh, in a street called South Bridge — therefore also acting as a connection between the two parts of the city — that Robertson performs his only positive and heroic action of the book: he tries to resuscitate a man who has suffered a cardiac arrest (*F*, 113). This acts as a counterpoint to the murder he committed on the

stairs, but does nothing to redeem him: even though he is praised by everybody around him and temporarily wins respect from some of his hostile colleagues, he does not manage to bring the man back to life.

(Mis)representation and (mis)reading

In *Eureka Street*, Jake Jackson, born a Catholic, lives in Poetry Street, a street whose name and location remind us of his former girlfriend's upper-class influence. Not being a native of Belfast, she never got used to the city and its metanarrative. Jake Jackson insists that Sarah left Belfast rather than him: as an English journalist, she could not endure the city's division mirrored in the mindless violence she was supposed to report. For her readers and for her English family, Belfast is first and foremost a place where murders and booby traps are a daily occurrence. Jake Jackson constantly had to distort the genuineness of the city in order to conform to her visitors' wishes and to present them with a hyperbolic picture of the cityscape. Upper-class, green and leafy Poetry Street does not correspond to what non-Belfast people seek to see in Belfast:

When her English friends or family had visited us they had always been disappointed by the lack of burnt-out cars or foot patrols on our wide, tree-lined avenue. From my downstairs window, Belfast looked like Oxford or Cheltenham. The houses, the streets and the people were plump with disposable income. From my upstairs window, however, I could see the West; the famous, hushed West. That's where I'd been born: West Belfast, the bold, the true, the extremely rough. I used to send Sarah's visitors up there. There were plenty of those local details up West. (ES, 13)

Names and surnames, an individual's first social markers in a society and the first device at a novelist's disposal in order to insist on characterization, are misconstrued in order to demonstrate the unsteadiness of Belfast's metanarrative. Pastiche and parody have always been means to oppose metanarratives. Names of characters who are ideologically committed thus become a pastiche of real political activists' names. This soon becomes one of the hyperbolic devices used by McLiam Wilson. Aoirghe Jenkins is an activist in the Nationalist movement. She repeatedly advocates violence and intolerance towards the British state: however, her first name of Gaelic origin offers an incongruous contrast with her Welsh sounding surname. Jimmy Eve, Mickey Moses (respectively the

leader and the public relations man of the "Just Us" Party), and Shague Ghinthoss (a poet whose aim is to win the Nobel Prize for literature) are clearly identifiable characters. Chuckie Lurgan's Catholic friends are also keen to point out that his name sounds like the Irish republican slogan "Tíocfaidh ar La" ("Our day will come") (ES, 150). Meanwhile, Bruce Robertson's behaviour in *Filth* is a parody of the police code of conduct and, as Sean O'Brien remarked, his first name is itself an almost perfect anagram of Ian Rankin's famous Edinburgh detective Rebus.⁵

Distortion and contravention may sometimes descend to farcical depths: in order to win the admiration of his Catholic friends, and also spurred by his quasi-maniacal pursuit of fame, Protestant Chuckie Lurgan displays a forged photograph representing him and the Pope sharing a glass of whiskey (ES, 32-5). Compulsive lying in order to win admiration and recognition is at the basis of Chuckie Lurgan's social and commercial behaviour: he manages to impress and win respect from his friends by committing forgeries or making spurious allegations. Bruce Robertson has no qualms about lying to his wife, his best friends, his colleagues or members of the public in order to enjoy himself, to improve his career or to spice up his sex life. Yet he blames his daughter's lies about his wife's extra-conjugal affair and this starts the process of self-destruction.

The misreading of signifiers also applies to what has been written on the body: Jake Jackson's bruises at the hands of a jealous RUC officer are immediately read as a clear case of police misconduct. "Amnesty International" is contacted in order to enquire into allegations of abuse put forward by the "Just Us" party members. It is however an ideological conspiracy: stigmas have been deliberately misinterpreted in order to be included in a propaganda scheme against the oppressive nature of the British state. Deliberate misrepresentations of the city and of urban life are prominent in McLiam Wilson's *Belfast*. The appearance of a new graffiti on the city walls reinforces the feelings of doubt, unsteadiness and unreliability some people have started to feel towards Belfast's metanarrative. Confusion at the real meaning of a new graffiti, "OTG," stresses their difficulty in interpreting any verbal or bodily discourses. They suffer from a kind of aphasia as they are incapable of linking a signified to the signifier in a discourse which takes place

⁵ Sean O'Brien, "Loathing in Lothian," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14/8/1998, 7.

outside the rules imposed by the city's metanarrative: they can only speculate on the meaning of the new label and this adds to their tendency to misrepresent reality. As McLiam Wilson reminds us, the history of Belfast has by nature been written on its walls (*ES*, 212). They do not offer a space for commentaries, insurrection or peripheral verbalization outside the city's metanarrative. The walls opposite Jake Jackson's house, scribbled on by "local kids [...] for the purposes of bravado or initiation" and then painted over by "some civic-minded old guy" (*ES*, 22), provide the palimpsests of Belfast's metanarrative. This writing expresses commitments to causes and contributes to the codification of the city: predispositions or prejudices are proclaimed and allegiances to principles or beliefs are thus set on stone. The "Just Us" party propaganda, whether written on the walls or spoken by its officials, participates in the metanarrative of exclusion and discrimination by a series of lies and exaggerations. It thus feeds in the very metanarrative it seeks to eradicate. Like the writing on the wall, Irish history has been erased and replaced by a version edited according to various ideological agendas:

It wasn't so much that real history was rewritten. Real history was deleted. Its place was taken by wild and improbable fictions. Ireland was the land of story and Just Us campaigners had always been the best storytellers. They told the world a simple story. They edited or failed to mention all the complicated, pluralistic, true details. It had always been thus and the world had always loved it.

Theirs was a narrative in which the innocent, godly CATHOLIC Irish were subdued and oppressed by the vicious English and their Protestant plantation spawn. (ES, 326)

However the new uncomprehensible slogan written on the walls is an important step towards the complete fragmentation of the city's metanarrative. By interrupting the familiar pattern of decipherable or guessable graffiti, by breaking thus the chain of signifiers, it disrupts and questions the signification of all the other signifiers. The logocentric organization of Belfast society, of actions and affiliations signified by the endorsement of one of the factions of the Northern Irish political or religious scenes, crumbles. This adds to the feelings of atopia and is conducive to the reinforcement of the schizophrenic atmosphere of Belfast. From now on graffiti will have to be read in the light of this riddle. Jake Jackson's protégé Roche succumbs to the graffiti frenzy and is caught red-handed writing on

a wall. However his action contributes to the thickening of the plot concerning the meaning of OTG as Roche, a dyslexic teenager, is incapable of spelling correctly the mysterious acronym (*ES*, 204).

Personal narratives vs. metanarratives

The bomb explosion on Fountain Street (*ES*, 218-31) faithfully corresponds to what non-Belfasters expect Belfast headlines to be. Dictated by hatred, misunderstanding and absence of compromise, it conforms to the city's metanarrative and brings all the victims' personal narratives to an end, leaving narratorial scars in the city:

They all had stories. But they weren't short stories. They shouldn't have been short stories. They should each have been novels, profound, delightful novels, eight hundred pages or more. [...] What had happened? A simple event. The traffic of history and politics had bottlenecked. An individual or individuals had decided that reaction was necessary. Some stories had been shortened. Some stories had been ended. A confident editorial decision had been taken.

It had been easy.

The pages that follow are light with their loss. The text is less dense, the city is smaller. (ES, 231)

This passage sharply contrasts with the very first sentence of *Eureka Street* which stands as an epigraph to the novel: "All stories are love stories" (*ES*, 1). *Eureka Street* is a novel where, in accordance with Lyotard's theories of the postmodern condition, the metanarrative is challenged and where personal stories, personal narratives, are invested with author-ity. Most people, apart from those who belong to the "Just Us" Party and to extremist groups, have also become disillusioned with what Jake Jackson calls "the dark mists of Ireland's past" (*ES*, 164). Nostalgia for the lost narratives of Irish history does not kindle the heart any more.⁶ The reaction to the Fountain Street explosion is consternation and incredulity: the city is in a state of shock as the justification for such a barbarous act eludes Belfasters. The OTG challenge and the Fountain Street explosion are followed by a ceasefire and this completes the dissolution of the city's metanarrative. Belfast, by the end of the novel, has eventually become what McLiam Wilson calls a "city of

⁶ This lack of nostalgia for the "lost narrative" also conforms to Lyotard's definition. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

love" (ES, 345) where people follow their own sentiments regardless of the conventions previously imposed by politics or religion. Belfast is now a utopian ideology-free city. The city's metanarrative is replaced by people's personal stories.

Against all odds, it is Chuckie Lurgan who overtakes the "Just Us" Party and who hammers the last nail in the metanarrative's coffin by bluffing his way into the Northern-Irish political arena. He achieves this by boldly announcing his appropriation of the OTG sign, therefore filling in the empty space of the signified:

With all the contempt he [Jimmy Eve] could muster, he asked Chuckie what his new party would be called. On the verge of actually passing out, Chuckie had gasped that his new party would probably be called the OTG, he had been having talks with that group and they would announce all the details at the press conference. The audience went crazy. Young women threw their underwear at him, and as the floor manager counted down the last five seconds Chuckie gracefully lost consciousness. (ES, 386)

Chuckie Lurgan has become the new hero of this post-ceasefire Belfast by appearing capable of answering the questions raised by the baffling signifier. *Eureka Street* fulfills Foucault's hypotheses regarding the struggle for power: only those who succeed in the appropriation of discourse are entitled to knowledge and eventually to power.¹⁰ Bruce Robertson is also aware of the power of knowledge and of the need to appropriate it. He knows that coming to terms with his past would help him towards recovery. However he chooses to disregard this road in order to follow his own physical instincts, much to his detriment: "Knowledge is power, or so they say. But fuck it. Keep your head down and your heart hard and you'll be okay" (F, 334). To Chuckie Lurgan it means successes in his professional and love lives. His capitalist ventures have eventually blossomed: Lurgan manages to turn everything he touches into Irish commodities for the American market. If his climb to wealth did involve exploitation and is therefore not to be promoted as the moral lesson of the novel, it also required a certain gullibility from his American partners. They have been ready to believe everything he has said, confirming thus the inconsistency between the discourse and the reading of the discourse. However, the mystery of the acronym OTG remains. A

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 6-9.

hint is nonetheless provided when Jake Jackson and Chuckie Lurgan meet their friends for the last time in the local pub:

'I have an idea what it means,' said Donal quietly.

'What do you think it means?' asked Slat.

'Nothing,' replied Donal.

Everyone pulled their disappointed faces.

'I'm serious,' said Donal. 'I think it's entirely random. It could be any three letters of the alphabet. It doesn't really matter what they are. This is the city of the three-letter initial written on walls. I think someone's satirizing us.' (...)

'So, it's ultimately pointless?' I suggested.

'Not at all, satire is never pointless. It makes us look stupid and besides it's just a pretty good wheeze.' (ES, 356)

Chuckie Lurgan might well have achieved what some critics held against Lyotard's theories of the postmodern condition.¹¹ He has merely substituted a metanarrative for another metanarrative. The extreme liberalism symbolized by his commercial successes has replaced the dictatorship imposed by creeds and ideologies. McLiam Wilson however offers other alternatives as OTG only seems to be the fragment of a longer sentence. Its author partly erases the rest as he covers the first letters — the definite article "The" — and the last letters with white paint (ES, 299; ES, 387-88). The meaning of OTG is therefore beyond the physical inscription on the wall and stands for more than the acronym it seems to be, or for more than Chuckie Lurgan's capitalist thirst.

In *Filth*, the tapeworm which has taken possession of DS Bruce Robertson's innards provides us with his host's unconscious voice. 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 real 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. Bruce Robertson is at first oblivious

¹¹ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 6-7; *ibid.*, 13; *ibid.*, 20.

to its presence and he remains oblivious to the worm's narrative voice until the end. The medical treatment he starts in order to relieve the rashes on his genitals and posterior gets rid of the first tapeworm. However, medical treatments are not sufficient to relieve Robertson from his mental traumas. The tapeworm outgrowth soon reappears, more articulate and more reflective than ever. Robertson only seems keen to satisfy and to protect his body from the outside. The sexual antics or heavy drinking sessions he indulges in or the medical treatment he undertakes but then later dismisses in order to fulfil his physical cravings do nothing to help him overcome his mental distress and his intestinal problems. Nevertheless, and there lies the paradoxical and cynical relationship between the tapeworm and his host, the former obviously needs the latter to survive. However, Bruce Robertson ignores his inner voice. The relationship between the two voices 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. By using this technique, Welsh also forces the reader to decipher, to interpret and sometimes to take a guess as to what Robertson's narrative could be. The tapeworm provides us with the only means of understanding Robertson's youth and his past actions (F, 242):

I'm driving out to see Rossi, but Carole's on my mind. I used to tell her a pile of shite when I was knocking off Madeline, this half-Abo bird I used to leg out there. I made up a lot of bullshit about working undercover down Kings Cross to put away a villain called Co. *00000000000000000000* the other boys got to Costas I had to *00000000000000000000* eat Bruce undercover as they were becoming *eat! I wish I could make you* er and Stacey involved. In fact, I had *eat more. You're a terrible man.* but moved in with Madeline.

There was somebody who could always make you eat. I sense this. Just moving around inside you I can feel all your ghosts. You've internalised

Then I to *them Bruce.00000000000000000000* safety couldn't be guaranteed *00000000000000000000000000* I can sense she had to go cause there was *one that looms large in your life.* on in the NSW police and I was *00000000000000000000000000* Costas, yes the cunt existed, in *000Ian Robertson was his name.00* at half-Abo cow Madeline was putting pressure on me to leave Carole. She was very headstrong and less easily controlled than Carole. The old country called.

The deciphering of Bruce Robertson's narrative sometimes gives us an insight into his story. As in this episode we learn that

what he told his wife Carole about Madeline, the Australian prostitute, and what Carole actually believes (*F*, 239-40) is a mere web of lies. Carole, like most characters in *Filth*, takes Bruce Robertson at face value and does not question what he tells her. Repressed and self-conscious, he hides his childhood scars behind a professional mask. She sums up his attitude and their relationship thus:

The problem with Bruce is that he keeps it all in. I know that he's seen some terrible things in his job and I know that, whatever he says, they've affected him deeply. [...] His hard front fools a lot of people, but I really know my man. They don't understand what a complicated person he is. To know him is to love him and I certainly know him. (F, 42)

Bruce Robertson admits that the professional mask he constantly wears distorts his vision. His profession as a police officer offers him a façade behind which he can get away with everything without arousing suspicion. It allows him for example to pretend to work "under cover" when he needs to explain his ragged look or when caught dressed as a transvestite.

Filth ends in despair as Bruce Robertson has not succeeded in listening to his interior voice, the narrative of his conscience provided by the tapeworm. The use of the pronoun "we" towards the end of the novel indicates Bruce Robertson's fragmented personality. He confides to a lover: "We hear voices Chrissie. Aw the time. Do you ever hear them? All our life we've heard them. The worms" (*F*, 333). However, if he has heard those voices all his life he has never paid heed to them. He has not managed to resolve his inner conflicts.

Grotesque Realism: physical degradation and deformity

What Bakhtin terms Grotesque Realism is an indispensable component of the two novels studied here. Even though Bakhtin coined the term in his magisterial study of Rabelais,² the spirit of carnival and its main component, Grotesque Realism, have always been a central motif of artistic representation and are particularly relevant to the postmodernist obsession with the body. The imagery of Grotesque Realism displays deformed bodies and exaggerated bodily acts: verbal abuse, copulation, ingestion, digestion, defecation. However, Bakhtin insists that, in accordance with what is

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky (1965; Cambridge, Mass. : M.I.T., 1968).

implied by these bodily acts, the grotesque body is first and foremost to be considered in the act of transformation, of metamorphosis, and of evolution towards another sphere:

*This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body; the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary (the nose can also in a way detach itself from the body). Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And the next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere.*¹³

Deformed organs, foul behaviour and lewd allusions are rife in the two novels studied here and the way the protagonists' bodies are exhibited certainly belongs to the imagery of Grotesque Realism. Their fragmented bodies — after brawls, punishment beatings, or as the consequence of states of intoxication — are also potent symbols of the division and fragmentation of the cities they live in. However the grotesque body in *Eureka Street* is a mere element of the theme of verbalisation central to the novel. Jake Jackson's sturdy body has firstly provided him with a means to work: "[...] I'd sometimes earned my living by fighting people, hitting people or just looking like I might do any of those things. Bouncer, bodyguard, general-frightener, all-purpose yob, I had had the full range" (*ES*, 61). If Jackson's bodily protuberances are mere consequences of pub brawls and professional behaviour, it is with Chuckie Lurgan that McLiam Wilson uses the imagery of the grotesque: "Chuckie was not handsome. His sandy hair had started to recede before his twenty-first birthday, his belly rolled like a full balloon and he had the breasts of a thirteen-year-old girl" (*ES*, 45). His attributes are also repeatedly collocated with the adjective "grotesque" (*ES*, 307; *ES*, 336; *ES*, 343; *ES*, 385). Chuckie is at pains to summarize his life's

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

achievements when he reaches thirty. The only conclusions he can come up with are his bodily actions:

*On my thirtieth birthday
I had been alive for:*

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| | 360 months |
| | 1,560 weeks |
| | 10,950 days |
| | 262,800 hours |
| | 15,768,000 minutes |
| | 94,608,000 seconds |

I had

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>urinated approx:</i> | 74,460 times |
| <i>ejaculated approx:</i> | 10,500 times |
| <i>been asleep for approx:</i> | 98,550 hours (11 years, 3 months) |
| <i>smoked approx:</i> | 11,750 cigarettes |
| <i>consumed approx:</i> | 32,000 meals |
| <i>drunk approx:</i> | 17,520 litres of liquid (approx: 8,000 of which contained alcohol) |
| <i>walked approx:</i> | 20,440 miles |
| <i>sustained an erection for approx:</i> | 186,150 mins, 3,102.5 hrs, 129,27 days |
| <i>grown approx:</i> | 5,40 metres of hair |
| <i>had sex approx:</i> | 175 times |
| <i>earned approx:</i> | no fucking money (ES, 50-1) |

However, Chuckie Lurgan possesses an invaluable gift in self-conscious Belfast: that of calling forth people's intimate narratives — to the astonishment of Max, his gorgeous American girlfriend (ES, 130). His appropriation of the graffiti OTG is therefore a logical outcome of his faculty to prompt verbalisation. His deformed body with his protuberances and his foul bodily actions is a representation of the multi-faceted Belfast which the announcement of the ceasefire has liberated and which explodes in a surreal excess of bodily enthusiasm. Physical love and promiscuity outstrip the metanarrative imposed by the city. Religious or ideological barriers have lost their credibility. Gay and lesbian couples are formed or come out. Races or religion do not impede love any more in a now unprejudiced Belfast. All characters have found love and have all been able to ascertain their own sexual orientations without fear of being excluded from the city's code of behaviour. The liberating spirit of carnival unleashed after the demise of the city's metanarrative has even made changes possible in a Belfast once torn by rivalry and intolerance. A dewy-eyed Jake

Jackson then concludes his narration of Belfast's story with a reassessment of what the city is composed of: "I think of my city's conglomerate of bodies. A Belfastful of spines, kidneys, hearts, livers and lungs. Sometimes, this frail cityful of organs makes me seethe and boil with tenderness" (*ES*, 396). Individuals, with their bodies and their stories, have eventually succeeded in imposing their specificity.

It is however in *Filth* that the hyperbolisation central to Grotesque Realism is most successfully displayed. Welsh has always put a major emphasis on bodies since his first writings. Drugs offer a means of escape from the predicament of urban environment or social poverty by granting users a mental freedom and a sense of exhilaration. However the consequences of drug-taking are dire: the subjection and the degradation of the body. Bruce Robertson's craving and dependency is however purely sexual to start with, even if he has also become addicted to drugs by the end of the novel. He is ready to do anything in order to fulfil his physical needs, including lying to his family and professional misconduct: "[...] a standing prick hath no conscience. And if that standing prick is attached to Bruce Robertson then it hath less than no conscience. You can't afford a conscience in this life, that has become a luxury for the rich and a social ball and chain for the rest of us" (*F*, 109). His narrative is replete with abuse and power struggles: but it soon becomes clear that beside physical gratification, police work and sex are means to assert ascendancy over bodies, either in a sexual or purely physical way.

The image of the tapeworm Bruce Robertson is afflicted with also corresponds to Bakhtin's Grotesque Realism: living in his host's digestive system, it is a link between swallowing and defecating, a link between the external world and Robertson's inner world. The worm, a parasite, nevertheless symbolises rebirth. Nourished by his host's food he grows and he adopts an autonomy of his own, developing thoughts and a survival interest in his host whose life he is by now forced to share. The worm is Bruce Robertson's articulate internal voice and conscience. Not only does it formulate Bruce Robertson's past but it also continually reminds him of his selfish motivations, his self-seeking decision to contribute to the enunciation of the state's metanarrative. The city — Edinburgh — is a boardgame where Bruce Robertson has decided to engage in propitious games. Districts, like squares, have been well delimited

and he is well aware that playing on the minority / margin side is to be on the losers' 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 thing 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. (F, 261)

However Bruce Robertson's story will not be heard. He will only be remembered as " [...] [a] sad case who preys on vulnerable, weak and stupid women in order to boost his own shattered ego" (F, 338). Contrarily to Chuckie Lurgan, Bruce Robertson's attitude is not conducive to narration. Not only does he remain silent about his internalized ghosts, but he tries to prevent the others' narration, physically destroying the screenplay his superior Toal wrote about the racist murder by wiping it from his hard disk or blackmailing his female victims into sex and silence. His interview techniques are based on threats and physical intimidation and he is unsuccessful in establishing trust and making people confess. *Filth* ends with Robertson's suicide after the realisation that he hasn't been able to resolve his emotional crises and his feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Only *Eureka Street* therefore corresponds to Bakhtin's carnivalesque as Bakhtin was adamant that the true sense of Carnival and Grotesque Realism was a positive one, a rebirth, a reflection of transformation and the discovery of new positive feelings:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place. Grotesque Realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

What Welsh has done in *Filth* is a parody of a fragmented cityscape where roles are reversed and the police appears through distorted lenses. Regeneration is not a possible outcome. Robertson's life has to end. He hangs himself, taking thus the sexual games he used to play with Chrissie — oxygen starvation (*F*, 116-17) — one step further. It is the only means to get rid once and for all of the Worm, of his memories, of the guilt-feelings he did not want to share with anybody. The last words of the novel are spoken by the Worm and bring an apt conclusion to Bruce Robertson's grotesque life: "I feel myself slipping out of my Host in a large pile of his excrement and sliding down his leg inside his flannels" (*F*, 393).

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