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**WRITING ON THE WALLS IN ROBERT McLIAM WILSON'S *EUREKA STREET*  
AND GEORGE FRIEL'S *MR ALFRED, M.A.***

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He began to compile a list of what he saw. The words weren't inspired graffiti. They weren't the poetry and pathos photographed and commented on by two young Londoners to make up a book at a couple of guineas. They weren't political or surrealist, they weren't witty or comic. They were only the monotonous evidence of a civic battology. [...] He became obsessed with the unending defacement of the city. He was angry nobody seemed to care, nobody did anything about it. The correspondence columns of the papers were filled with debates about the need for comprehensive schools and the technological education in a twentieth-century Britain, about the duty of adults to hand on a moral code and maintain the nation's cultural heritage, about the prevalence of bad language in television plays. But never a word about the writing on the wall<sup>1</sup>

The two novels I have chosen to present come from different parts of the United Kingdom. They both take place in major cities but there is a one generation gap between them and they also display disparate socio-cultural backgrounds. However, despite these obvious differences, both novels share many similarities which can be summed up by the title of my paper and by the title of the SAES conference. 'Writing on the wall' — or 'walls' — is indeed at the heart of these novels. George Friel's masterpiece, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, was published in 1972 and is set in Glasgow in the early sixties whereas Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street*, published in 1996, takes place in Belfast in a pre- and post- 1994 ceasefire era. Graffiti, and the communication and interaction which can develop between anonymous readers — the passers-by — and the writers who hide themselves behind their slogans, play a central rôle in both novels. Friel's novel was initially to be called 'The Writing on the Wall', but that title was turned down by the publisher because a novel bearing that name was published in the early seventies<sup>2</sup>. That title is nonetheless given by Friel to the second part of the novel where the protagonist discovers the social implication of a series of graffiti which has bewildered him for so long. For Belfast born Robert McLiam Wilson and for his characters, graffiti is a fundamental part of the structure and canvas of the city, labelling districts, identifying allegiances and moving politics to street level and to an open struggle of defiance,

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1 George Friel, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, introduced by Douglas Gifford, (1972) Edinburgh, Cannongate Classics, 1987, p. 125

2 See : Douglas Gifford, 'Introduction', in: George Friel, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

domination, and influence. The plot, in *Eureka Street*, also revolves around the quest for the meaning of a series of graffiti, but the graffiti becomes the pre-text for a narrative of the city. Both novels provide their authors with the possibility of commenting and reflecting about social situations in their home-towns and allow them to draw conclusions and forecasts regarding the future. As in the biblical parable, not only is the writing on the wall a narrative of past and present events but it also assumes a prophetic dimension.

*Mr Alfred M.A.* is the fourth novel written by the Glasgow-born novelist George Friel (1910-76) who died a few years after the publication of what many people consider as his masterpiece<sup>3</sup>. Partly autobiographical, it relates the disappointment and the growing sense of disenchantment and eventual professional and personal failure of a secondary school English teacher, or as the eponymous protagonist is keen to point out 'a teacher of English'<sup>4</sup>, close to retirement amid a world whose codes he cannot relate to or understand anymore. His infatuation with a young female pupil brings his final downfall and after having been severely mugged by some former pupils, Mr Alfred's career and life end in the geriatric ward of a hospital. Through Mr Alfred's stories, George Friel took the opportunity to reflect on the social situation of Glasgow in the nineteen-sixties and its flourishing gang culture<sup>5</sup>.

George Friel's depictions of Glasgow in what has been called his 'Glasgow trilogy' have often been considered too bleak and too pessimistic to be true, an accusation the author was however keen to deny. Rather than a presentation of Glasgow that would underline the legendary humane qualities of the city and its inhabitants — a common Glaswegian stereotype — Friel wanted to insist on the social realism of his descriptions and on their prophetic and educational values:

What am I going to do? Put my head in the sand and say that everything is lovely? Surely a novelist, even in Glasgow, if he is writing about contemporary life, must tell the truth as he sees it. If I could see a lot of sweetness and light in Glasgow I would be happy to write about it: this is life. If you say what is going on then something might get done. But if you play Mr Glasgow and pretend that it's a fine warm-hearted city then you are kidding yourself, kidding the public, and pledging the future to no reform<sup>6</sup>.

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3 George Friel, *The Bank of Time*, 1959 ; \_\_, *The Boy Who Wanted Peace*, 1964 ; \_\_, *Grace and Miss Partridge*, 1969 ; \_\_, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, 1972 ; \_\_, *An Empty House*, 1974.

4 George Friel, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

5 Gangs were, and still are, rife in Glasgow. Robert Jeffrey counted more than 180 gang names in Glasgow, mostly related to districts and areas (Robert Jeffrey, *Gangs of Glasgow. True Crime from the Streets*, Edinburgh, Black & White Publishing, 2008, p. 45-48) and identified a return to gang war, after a period of relative calm, in 2002.

6 In an interview in *The Guardian*, 24 March 1972. Quoted by : Gordon Jarvie, 'An Introduction', in : George Friel, *A Glasgow Trilogy*, Edinburgh, Canongate Classics, 1999, p. ix.

However, this statement probably needs to be qualified, as Friel, in at least 2 of his Glasgow trilogy novels, including *Mr Alfred*, does indeed introduce a slight shade of magical realism. It is true that it doesn't concern the descriptions of the city itself or its inhabitants: it is related to narratological devices, and it consists in the introduction of dissonant elements in the naturalistic background and descriptions, but these elements anyway prevent the reader from completely believing in a fly-on-the-wall documentary type of novel. In the case of *Mr Alfred M.A.*, there is an allegorical dimension with a somehow diabolic figure whose calibre does not correspond to what one would expect to find in a truly realistic account, but this is after all a classic Scottish theme from Hogg's *Justified Sinner* onwards.

Mr Alfred, the protagonist of the novel, is very unhappy about his work and his colleagues. His only relief is found in the occasional prostitute and in his regular addiction to alcohol.

He is also a very bitter man. A bachelor who cultivate high intellectual aspirations, but whose literary dreams have been confined to having a few poems published in a university students' magazine and whose later poems have always been turned down by publishers. "[...] he saw himself as a man tossed aside by a God who had given him the ambition to be a poet without giving him the talent"<sup>7</sup>. He lives in a literary world of his own — or more exactly he tries to convince himself that he belongs to such a world — his physical addictions allowing him to forget the dullness of his life. Mr Alfred is conceited enough to conceive of a distance between *him* and *them* :

Sometimes he thought he was making a mistake frequenting a common pub with common customers and a common barmaid when he had nothing in common with them. In every pub he went to he recognised anonymous faces. For besides being a bachelor and a schoolmaster, a Master of Arts and the author of a volume of unpublished poems, the only child of poor but Presbyterian parents and now a middleaged orphan, he was a veteran pubcrawler.<sup>8</sup>

This is in a way Mr Alfred's first misreading, a fallacy which is heightened by his inability to understand the series of graffiti which appears on the walls around him. One of Mr Alfred's passions is to quote poets, from Milton, Verlaine in French, Yeats or Wallace Stevens to Goethe in

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<sup>7</sup> George Friel, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, *op. cit.*, p 43.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5

German<sup>9</sup>, and to correct his pupils' or any of his interlocutors' English, an incorrigible trait which he cannot get rid of and which illustrates his pursuit of perfection and his need to show his intellectual supremacy. Language is the key element in the novel and Mr Alfred is keen to point out that because of his profession and literary interest, he ought to be considered as an expert of the English language, a medium which is now lost to most of the pupils he teaches : "He felt he was a foreigner trying to get across to people who didn't speak his language. The days when he enjoyed teaching seemed so far away he believed they belonged to somebody else"<sup>10</sup>.

Being shifted from one school to another because of his too close relationships with a female pupil and his dispute over corporal punishment with the mother of a male pupil starts his disgrace and his descent into the abysmal debacle. There again Mr Alfred cannot read the signs of the time. Even though it took a long time and despite the regular outcries from parents' associations, corporal punishments were finally banned in British state schools by an Act of Parliament in 1987. Being too close to a pupil, even if there was no indecency, was also more condemned in the 60s than it had been before.

However, the graffiti which spread on the walls of Glasgow shatter Mr Alfred's expectations about his knowledge and intellectual superiority. His understanding of the English language and his communicative skills, of which he is so proud, are dangerously challenged and Mr Alfred understands that he is losing his grip with the society he lives in. The seemingly arcane graffito "Tongs, ya bass" and the number of variations and interpretations it generates send Mr Alfred, and many of his colleagues, into doubt, despondency and self-consciousness. They are being manipulated into a position where they can only admit their failure to interpret the signs before them. The common people Mr Alfred likes to deride turn into the key holders of that linguistic and social conundrum. Graffiti assumes the topos of the Bakhtinian carnival, reversing the order of society and giving a voice to the plebeians who become both 'actor and spectator' of a social uprising, of a reversal of order. The graffiti and their undecipherable messages actually provoke violence and fights between rival gangs in the city which read them according to their own city codes and which construe them as direct verbal attacks or territorial aggression. Mr Alfred — deprived of the ability to intervene and to contribute to the debates — can only witness violent fights between gang members. "Every day from the top-deck he saw another gang-name on the

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9 *ibid.*, p. 7 ; pp. 16-17.

10 *ibid.*, p. 8

walls and hoardings. Every day he read of another boy of seventeen knifing a boy of eighteen or vice versa"<sup>11</sup>.

George Friel here documents a particular idiosyncratic Glaswegian phenomenon. Glasgow has been famous for gang wars and gangland killings from the nineteenth century onwards, the latest spate being in 2002. In the 1960s there was indeed a gang from the Calton district which called itself "Tongs ya bass"<sup>12</sup>. That baffling expression is taken from a 1961 low-budget film called *Terror of the Tongs*, the story of a Hong Kong merchant who avenges the death of his daughter at the hands of a secret society. The sentence "Tongs, ya bass" being actually screamed at his enemies by the protagonist<sup>13</sup>. Strangely enough, it became the rallying cry and graffiti of a violent gang in the 60s and 70s in Glasgow which made its money by terrorizing local shop owners and mugging people. Calton is also known as Tongland, and that particular gang was indeed active until quite recently<sup>14</sup>.

Mr Alfred's desire to understand the seemingly forbidden message brings him closer to the heart of the city, to districts where he had never ventured before, and like Dante's circles of Hell, each new stage — that is to say being shifted from one school to another — is the occasion to discover another world of suffering and hatred where his intellectual stance and intolerance mean that he cannot relate to the people trapped there.

Mr Alfred's last journey takes him to hitherto unknown parts, which appear as hellish and this is where he is mugged by 4 youths. In Dante's *Inferno*, Lower Hell is indeed represented as a city, the city of Dis, the stronghold of Satan, surrounded by walls and guarded by the Gorgons; once the walls of that city are crossed, Dante and Virgil find themselves in a violent and uncontrollable surrounding. Mr Alfred starts his ultimate journey alone before meeting a man aptly called Tod —

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11 *ibid.*, p. 123.

12 See : Robert Jeffrey, *Gangs of Glasgow. True Crime from the Streets*, (2002), Edinburgh, Black & White Publishing, 2008.

13 This was remarkably interpreted by a journalist from *The Scotsman* as a Gaelic war-cry : ? "Tongs, ya bass" became Glasgow's unofficial motto in the Sixties [...]. However, while many thought "bass" was short for bastard, it was, in fact, a corruption of the ancient Gaelic expression for "battle and die" ? Stuart Christie, *The Scotsman*, 2/9/2004. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/it-was-granarchy-says-stuart-christie-1-551467>

14 On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2011, the *Daily Record* published an article called 'How we ran Glasgow's biggest gang out of town': "The Calton Tongs, who caused mayhem for more than 60 years in the east end of Glasgow, have virtually ceased to exist thanks to Strathclyde's Community Initiative to reduce Violence (CIRV). The policy, which combines strong enforcement with pathways out of gangs, has seen murder rates in the east end plummet by 78 per cent. And it is now to be used as a blueprint by David Cameron in the "war on gangs" south of the Border. The Calton Tongs wreaked havoc in Calton throughout the 60s and 70s. Gang members ran protection rackets and marked their areas with graffiti as "Tongland" - a name immortalised in the film *Small Faces*. Their infamy meant that "Tongs, ya bass" became a ned slogan in the west Scotland".

death in German, and maybe an echo of Tod Lapraik, a warlock in Stevenson's *Catriona*<sup>15</sup> — who, being Mr Alfred's Virgil, takes him further into the darkest parts of the city before eventually giving him the key to the graffiti. Tod confesses to being one of his former pupils, and, more importantly, Tod claims to be the author of the wave of graffiti which has plunged the city into chaos. He defines himself as Mephisto, agreeing to Mr Alfred's quotation of Goethe's *Faust* :

'You think you're God perhaps ?' said Mr Alfred.

'No, the other One,' said Tod. 'The Adversary.'

'The devil seeking whom he may deflower,' said Mr Alfred. '*Der Geist der stets verneint.*'

'That's me,' said Tod. 'I say No to you and your likes. I'm nibbling away at the roots of your civilisation. I'll bring it down. The felt-pen is mightier than the sword.'

'You've made my city ugly,' said Mr Alfred. 'Apart from all the stabbings and fighting in the street, this writing on the wall everywhere — it's an offence to civilisation.'<sup>16</sup>

Tod has accomplished his objective with his graffiti: the communities are divided as never before. Gang war is rife in Glasgow as the message of the graffiti cannot be easily deciphered by those who do not belong to gangland culture.

This of course takes us back to the original meaning of the concept of the writing on the wall and to the novel's allegorical dimension: the Writing on the Wall is of course, in the *Book of Daniel*, the imminent announcement of the fall of Babylon made to King Belshazzar by fingers having written on the wall a message whose meaning has to be deciphered and explained to the dissolute King. The city will fall and the Babylonian empire will be divided between the Medes and the Persians. However Friel probably overdoes the allegorical dimension as he gives us all the clues to this interpretation: Mr Alfred, having left Tod and unsuccessfully trying to find his way home, is for instance caught in the act of committing the sin of writing on a wall by two policemen, named Quinn and King: "MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN"<sup>17</sup>. This, in the Bible, is the very writing on the wall that Belshazzar asks Daniel to decipher and which foreshadows his own death and the end of his Kingdom. Mr Alfred's demise is close and his antiquated world has already started crumbling. 'You're a right old fossil!'<sup>18</sup> had commented one of his young colleagues. His old-fashioned teaching methods and his refusal to acknowledge the new world he lives in lead to a complete break-up of

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15 Chapter 15, 'Black Andie's Tale of Tod Lapraik', in R.L. Stevenson, *Catriona*,

16 George Friel, *Mr Alfred M.A.*, p. 162. ['*Der Geist der stets verneint.*': *The spirit of perpetual negation*, Goethe, *Faust*, line 1338] + 'The Devil seeking whom he may devour' (Epistle of St Peter, I, 5)

17 *Mr Alfred M.A.*, p. 168.

18 *Mr Alfred M.A.*, p. 139.

communication between himself and the city, between himself and the younger generations. Mr Alfred understands at last that his world has to give way to a new one.

The approach and general mood is radically different in *Eureka Street* even though there are many similarities, as I have already mentioned. Graffiti starts appearing early in the novel in a pre-ceasefire Belfast still rocked with murders, beatings and blasts. Murals and graffiti are a common occurrence in Belfast and are part of the very fabric of the city, punctuating the rivalries and wars between the two communities of the city.

The city keeps its walls like a diary. In this staccato shorthand, the walls tell of histories and hatreds, shrivelled and bleached with age. *Qui a terre a guerre*, the walls say<sup>19</sup>.

The apparition of new graffiti on the walls of the city triggers a wave of assumptions over their meanings. The three letters painted on the walls throw the city and its inhabitants into utter bewilderment. They do not refer to anything the bipartisan communities are used to and they therefore cannot be deciphered easily. Belfast is a place where graffiti is a common occurrence, a well-defined ritual and protocol whose meaning is always clearly marked in the sectarian division of the city.

Before I closed the door [...] I noticed a new graffito on the wall besides the police station. The local kids would write things there for the purposes of bravado or initiation. But it was no big deal — the cops were too bored to hassle them. Every month or so some civic-minded old guy who lived nearby would come and paint it over. And then the kids would start all over again. It had become a ritual and it was how I told what time of the month it was. It was an epic and somehow touching battle, very Belfast. The kids wrote the usual stuff of both sides : IRA, INLA, UVF, UFF, UDA, IPLO, FTP (Fuck the Pope), FTQ (Fuck the Queen), and once (hilariously) FTNP (Fuck the Next Pope). But tonight's graffito was a new one on me. It was early in the month. The old guy had painted recently so the wall was nearly clean, and someone had chosen to write in white three-foot-high letters :

OTG

I was too tired to wonder what it meant<sup>20</sup>.

This graffiti starts a wave, comparable to what takes place in *Mr Alfred*, baffling both the Unionist and the Nationalist communities. They start appearing all over the place, irrespective of the

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19 *Eureka Street*, p. 212.

20 *Eureka Street*, p. 22.



boundary between religious communities, therefore blurring all sectarian lines in a city not accustomed to any infringement of century-old traditions.

The nature of the new graffiti itself, in both novels, throws the population into confusion. The writing on the wall has assumed a non-performative aspect and this is what looks strange and unfamiliar to passers-by. Instead of calling the readers to actually do something, instead of being an open call to arms, the exposure of a scandal or the denunciation of people or of a community, the graffiti in *Eureka Street* and *Mr Alfred* do not assume any obvious subversive message apart from the one that people *think* they understand and which then fuels violent reactions: territoriality, belonging and gang war in *Mr Alfred* and a terrorist act in *Eureka Street* which nobody can claim responsibility for. The public space has become a target and then a weapon in a struggle for attention by those anxious to be heard. It has been turned into a source of creativity and expression.

The graffiti in both novels appears as a subtext, another narrative which takes place alongside the protagonists' and which records the inhabitants' struggles, uprising and intentions, thus disrupting what appears as the official version. Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism are central to the analysis of both novels. Heteroglossia, as a linguistic description, stands for different speeches or voices entering the novel and interacting within its narrative discourse. According to Bakhtin, these different voices are to be considered from the author's point of view: he or she, by giving their characters a particular and distinct voice, by various narratological devices, or any kind of extra form of narration — such as graffiti — gives ideological or social points of view. Dialogism involves this multiplicity and the interaction of social voices within a novel. The voice of society, whatever the ideological content, is present in the novel through the narration, the style or the descriptions<sup>21</sup>. McLiam Wilson's and Friel's points of view regarding the future of their city should undoubtedly be taken into account in both novels. *Mr Alfred*'s world is on the brink of collapse and Friel's message may well be seen as very pessimistic about the future of education. However, he undoubtedly portrays his character in a very sarcastic manner : a dying dinosaur with intolerant and reactionary attitudes and concepts who will not survive very long. A man who sees the

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21 "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel ; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships [always more or less dialogized]. These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization — this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel." M. M. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, in : *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, Edited by Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 263.

emergence of a new society, of a new education and of the post 1960s world as the crumbling of civilisation : the gang wars will mean the end of a world and the birth of mere anarchy. On the other hand, post-ceasefire Belfast has become "the city of love" where old enmities are put aside, where new loves blossom and where people come out of their closets to declare their passions. The mystifying graffiti turns out to be devoid of any meaning, a simple expression open to any reading and interpretation by anybody who lived or wanted to live outside of political or social involvement in a city where letters on a wall were only associated to partisan struggles:

You want to know what OTG means ?

Almost everything.

That was the point. All the other letters written on our walls were dark minority stuff. The world's grand, lazy majority will never be arsed writing anything anywhere and, anyway, they wouldn't know what to write. [...] That's why OTG was written for them. It could mean anything they wanted. It did mean anything they wanted<sup>22</sup>.

Both novels therefore show that the Writing on the Wall, as in the Biblical parable, foreshadows a new era: major change is near at hand. However, the outcome is different for both novelists : whereas the future is bleak for George Friel and Mr Alfred, it is a new optimistic time which is forecast in *Eureka Street*. The 1994 ceasefire will herald a new era of peace and the message of the novel is undoubtedly positive and full of hope.

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<sup>22</sup> *Eureka Street*, p. 395.