

## Is Life Beautiful?

### Narrative Uncertainty and 'Literary anti-Trotskyism' in *Trainspotting*

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*You always mix in some little phrase that is not your own,  
And that disturbs because of the recollection it prompts!*

Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments<sup>[1]</sup>

For all its shocks and provocations, *Trainspotting* employs a remarkably straightforward and direct style of narration. There is plenty that is difficult for the reader, to be sure, and plenty of material incorporated that is explored only rarely in most contemporary fiction, but the manner of Welsh's presentation is, at this stage in his career at least, characterised by a sort of 'up-frontness' and immediacy that serves to reinforce a sense of his work's moral seriousness and of the importance of his representational project. His narrative raw material, whether disgusting yet disgustingly plausible (all that ferreting around in the unflushed toilet Renton does early on) or moving, sympathetically portrayed and disturbing (Dawn's sudden and unexplained death) is represented in a broadly realist manner: the horror, particularly when the reader learns of Dawn's death, is that we know quite precisely what is going on. Narrative uncertainty, writerly tricks, tension and so on: these modernist or detective fiction stock-in-trade devices are noticeably absent at this stage in Welsh's work, and it is their absence that gives us a sense, when reading *Trainspotting*, of authorial solidarity with his characters, an evident sympathy and bond. Against conservative critics' claims that the novel is using the details of addiction and drug abuse for sensationalist ends, Welsh's matter-of-fact presentation indicates instead the presence of genuine engagement and attention.

It is all the more difficult to cope, then, when the reader reaches this part of the 'Bad Blood' section:

— Basically this. I produced the first photo. It showed Kevin, bound to a kitchen chair. His head hung heavily to one side, and his eyes were closed. Had Venters looked at the detail, he may have noticed a bluish tint to his son's eyelids and lips, and the almost clownish whiteness of his complexion. It's almost certain that all Venters noticed were the dark wounds on his head, chest and knees, and the blood which oozed from them, covering his body, at first making it hard to know that he was naked.[\[2\]](#)

What follows is worse and, for a few minutes, the reader believes Dave Mitchell has tortured, raped and murdered a small boy. We later discover the murder has been staged — as part of an elaborately planned revenge fantasy of a kind that will re-appear later in Welsh's work[\[3\]](#) — but, for the moments one is reading, Welsh goes to great lengths to convince us the torture is a real narrative event. Mitchell tells us that 'afterwards I felt terrible...Bad as I felt then, it was only a foretaste of the horror that hit me when I developed the photographs...I shook with fear and remorse' (253). His is a cruelly detailed description, and my first reading of *Trainspotting* almost stopped with it. The excessive horribleness of it all, the images of a child hurt and made to suffer — images that stay in the mind even after one learns that they don't relate to the 'real world' of the novel — seemed so out of place with the tenor and register of the rest of the book that it was difficult to keep reading. Mitchell's narrative stands out not only for its use of suspense and uncertainty. It is also narrated differently from the rest of the novel, using far more 'standard' English. 'Bad Blood' seems to stand alone, but also to point towards something in the rest of the text: it has little to do with the plot of the novel, such as it is, but appearing just over half-way through the text, at the same time suggests a centrality or significance to its own sub-plot.

What are we to make of all this? The *nastiness* of Mitchell's narrative has stuck with me in a way that some of Welsh's other provocations have not and, after reading the novel many times, it is still that part of the text that makes me flinch, and hurry to turn the page. Welsh has outlined justifications for his use of shock tactics elsewhere, but these later developments are not my current focus.[\[4\]](#) I want to suggest here that the excessiveness of 'Bad Blood', its uncharacteristic use of narrative uncertainty and its subject matter, perform political functions. Their political function helps explain what might otherwise seem incongruous about the passage and also, I will argue here, helps explain the aesthetic failure of 'Bad Blood', its bad faith. 'Bad Blood' is, to my mind at least, the only section of *Trainspotting* that is unambiguously exploitative. The reason for this exploitativeness is Welsh's attempt, through Mitchell's narration, to substitute emotional for intellectual negation. What seems, on a first reading, so out of place about 'Bad Blood' — its narrative style; the use of 'standard' English; the deployment of narrative uncertainty; the subject matter itself — can be explained when placed by a reading that pays attention to the political

allusion the passage builds towards. 'Bad Blood' ends with a parody of Leon Trotsky's 'Testament', one of the key texts in the tradition of revolutionary socialism. Welsh has engaged in fitful polemics against the revolutionary tradition across the range of his writing: what makes 'Bad Blood' unique, and, I argue here, unsuccessful, is the way this polemical negation is carried out via literary allusion and narrative device.

To claim that *Trainspotting* makes an allusion to Trotsky might at first seem merely fanciful. Although it is a critical commonplace to refer to Welsh's writing in relation to working-class politics, socialism and the contradictions of so-called 'post-industrial' society, no critic, to my knowledge, has explored the political allusions at work in Welsh's first novel. Certainly neither of Robert Morace's two very useful books - *Trainspotting: a Readers' Guide* and *Irvine Welsh* - contain any references to Trotsky. But Welsh's work displays a detailed awareness of the specific trends within socialist thought and working-class politics, and examining how this awareness plays itself out can enhance our understanding of *Trainspotting*. Hearing the allusion to Trotsky in 'Bad Blood' enables the reader to come to terms with that section's out-of-place status within the novel, and suggests some reasons for later developments in Welsh's writing career. Robert Morace has noted how 'Welsh has been forced to up the violence and vulgarity quotient with each [new] work,' and suggests his work's incorporation into the mainstream of fiction as a possible reason for this.<sup>[5]</sup> The first appearance of this sort of material, though, carries with it very specific political baggage and, if the violence Welsh introduces into his narrative is a form of displacement, its increasing ferocity and regularity in later work may gesture back to this initial moment.

*Trainspotting* carries out an attack on two traditions in leftist thought, social democracy and revolutionary socialism. The first is represented and analysed throughout the text. The second is evoked and attacked through allusion, and it is this evocation that Mitchell's narration denigrates by proxy. By paying attention to stray words and phrases, and by examining a key political allusion commentators have thus far ignored, this essay seeks to explain the political purpose of 'Bad Blood's' narrative uncertainty, and to link it to what I will call Welsh's 'literary anti-Trotskyism.'<sup>[6]</sup>

### ***Trainspotting's Politics / Politics Out of Trainspotting***

Suggesting a politics for Welsh or *Trainspotting* is, of course, a notoriously difficult and contested exercise. *Trainspotting*, as Michael Gardiner puts it, 'either borrows from Thatcherite opportunism or critiques it, depending on whose account you read,' and the text has proven enormously productive of wildly varying and contradictory accounts.<sup>[7]</sup> Academic accounts of Welsh and

politics have divided into two main groupings, those who suggest a politics that can be produced *out of* the text, and those that consider the politics of *Trainspotting* itself.

Accounts of the politics that can be produced out of a reading of *Trainspotting* focus on its formal aspects, and their impact on potential readers. For Jeffrey Karnicky, 'the political power of Welsh's fiction lies not just in...representations but also in the creative potentials that the novels engender.' *Trainspotting*, for Karnicky, can 'provide a way of rethinking traditional notions of selfhood and its place in the world...[and suggest] new ways of living in the world.'<sup>[8]</sup> Karnicky's reading is suggestive, and carefully documented, but, when he argues that 'Welsh should not be read as providing case studies that point toward what has gone wrong with the world'<sup>[9]</sup> he keeps his argument at a needlessly high level of abstraction.<sup>[10]</sup> There are, as I shall show in a moment below, multiple 'case studies' and clear authorial arguments about what 'has gone wrong with the world' at work in *Trainspotting*, some of them very detailed indeed, and any account of the novel that aims to incorporate it into another political project needs to come to terms with them. It is the very specificity of Welsh's fictional situations that demands from us a criticism that is at once *Scottish* and *international*. Just as the novel offers detailed studies of particular Scottish settings and particular Scottish situations — almost a surfeit of detail in its reconstruction of sectarianism, class geography, work patterns, social habits — as well as locating them within an international set of concerns — de-industrialisation, working-class political tradition, the future of socialism — so too criticism needs to find a way, not of separating, but of integrating these twin sets of concerns. Welsh's work explores political and ethical questions of urgency and relevance beyond their immediate setting, one explanation, no doubt, for *Trainspotting's* extraordinary international success. At the same time, of course, it is a very detailed and precise depiction of a very specifically Scottish situation and dilemma: achieving a reading that explores these aspects of the novel together, and as complementary components of a political analysis, seems the most productive opening.

More richly detailed, and thus more useful, are the attempts to come to terms with the politics internal to *Trainspotting* and its narration, although these attempts are scarcely more unified. Welsh, according to Alan Freeman, performs a useful diagnostic and social role: 'focussing on social margins not only affirms their inhabitants but also illuminates the centre against which they are defined and...dramatises the repressive processes of post-industrial individualism.'<sup>[11]</sup> Other scholars have narrowed their focus from 'post-industrial' society in general to Scotland in particular, with Drew Milne calling Welsh's writing 'an acute portrait of the political confusions of Scottish self-representation.'<sup>[12]</sup> Alan Riach takes a more positive approach, claiming that 'at the heart of *Trainspotting* is the explanation of a defensive national strategy.'<sup>[13]</sup> But this approach is at once too broad and too narrow. That Riach's idea of a 'defensive national strategy' is too broad

a description is obvious in one basic sense: Scotland is a class-divided society like any other, and one doubts that the Duke of Buccleuch recognises his own strategies, whether defensive or otherwise, in Renton's and Spud's struggles with repressive welfare agencies and courts.

If a focus on *Trainspotting's* contribution to Scottish national strategies is too broad, though, it is at the same time too narrow in another way. Welsh himself has commented on how 'these tedious nationalistic issues that every Scottish writer is supposed to engage with are so limiting.'<sup>[14]</sup> When the nation is taken as the limit of the political, then it becomes not only limiting but also distorting as an analytic frame. Drew Milne claims that '*Trainspotting* folds over the incipient politicisation of the narrative voice into a series of localised expressions of inarticulate hostility to politics as such.' He quotes this passage from the novel:

Ah've never felt British, because ah'm not. It's ugly and artificial. Ah've never really felt Scottish either, though. Scotland the brave, ma erse; Scotland the shitein cunt. We'd throttle the life oot ay each other fir the privilege ay rimmin some English aristocrat's piles. Ah've never felt a fuckin thing aboot countries, other than total disgust. (228)

Milne goes on to call this 'characteristic of the reductive affirmation of apolitical cynicism that marks the limit of Welsh's supposed radicalism.'<sup>[15]</sup> The passage is apolitical, though, only if we accept the nation and national identity as the horizon and limit for Scottish political thought. It's hard to see how describing Britishness as 'artificial' is any more or less apolitical than unthinkingly accepting it as natural. There may well be a healthy and vibrant internationalism in never having 'felt a fuckin thing aboot countries, other than total disgust' or, indeed, Welsh's political interests may lie elsewhere. Riach and Milne, for all the differences in politics and focus in their analyses, share a narrowly defined national frame, preventing them from exploring other political possibilities. Michael Gardiner is closer to identifying the dual Scottish and internationalist range of *Trainspotting's* ambitions when he writes that the novel's key themes are 'sectarianism, Enlightenment and colonialism.'<sup>[16]</sup> Gardiner's own work is a sensitive exploration of these aspects of Welsh's work. What needs added to his list is *Trainspotting's* assault on the traditions of social democracy (in the Scottish context, Labourism) and revolutionary socialism as the novel seeks 'tae go beyond our personal junk circumstances; in a brilliant metaphor for our times' (11).

### **Leith as Spectacle**

Welsh's case against the twin traditions in the labour movement, although neglected by most academic criticism, has been hiding in plain sight. 'So many of the institutions,' he argues, 'by

which our morals were moulded in the past no longer are relevant...the old institutions by which the working class defined itself — socialism, trade unionism and so on — are no longer tenable means through which the working class can define itself.<sup>[17]</sup> This focus has perhaps eluded academic criticism because it draws on a different critical vocabulary and set of thinkers than those most academic critics are familiar with. So Robert Morace writes of *Trainspotting* oscillating 'between Nietzschean resentment and Bakhtinian drowning of all forms of monologic authority and tradition,' an insight useful in its way, but quite out of tune with the other allusions to other political thinkers and traditions infusing the book.<sup>[18]</sup> Welsh draws on many traditions and currents of thought, from existentialism to Nietzsche to the theories informing revolutionary politics. An internationalist critical focus becomes all the more important in this situation. In the same way that one needs to listen and look outside of Scotland and away from literary studies to draw on all the traditions informing *Trainspotting's* aesthetic — where Morrissey matters more than MacDiarmid, and Bowie more than Burns — the political traditions the novel engages with are ones that are, for the most part, outside of the world of academic criticism.

The clues to this engagement hover in the stray details of Welsh's prose style, in incongruous word choices or unusual phrasing he allows particular characters. In his short story 'The Granton Star Cause' Welsh has a policeman snarl 'ah don't want any lumpen-proletarian malcontents threatening ma investments.'<sup>[19]</sup> In 'A Smart Cunt' one character asks about 'that goth burd...oan some sortay Stalinist trip?'<sup>[20]</sup> 'Ma investments' are a familiar Thatcherite shareholder-democracy and individualist refrain; what makes the sentence jar, however, is the policeman's use of the term 'lumpen-proletarian', a specifically Marxist term. Similarly 'goth burd' is familiar young-man's sexism: 'Stalinist' is a very specific sort of terminology, and one usually limited to Trotskyist or anti-Stalinist leftists, whereas most 'everyday' speech makes no distinction between Communist and Stalinist. *Trainspotting's* narrators speak with a similar, strangely precise socialist inflection, with jargon interrupting at odd moments: 'Football divisions were a stupid and irrelevant nonsense, acting against the interest of working-class unity, ensuring that the bourgeoisie's hegemony went unchallenged. Stevie had it all worked out' (48). 'Spud could not be held responsible,' Renton reflects, 'for society's materialism and commodity fetishism' (343). Renton and Stevie's vocabulary should alert us to the way the novel is informed by socialist theory and sub-cultures, particularly the student left. Socialist activity and organisation is common as an aside or background detail across the range of Welsh's work and appears as recently as *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs*, where Skinner's father was a socialist and Skinner is surprised to encounter revolutionary socialists at an anti-war march in California. There is, of course, nothing unusual or striking about this sort of incidental appearance of socialism in the work of a writer from the land of Gallacher and MacLean. What is distinctive about these stray phrases in Welsh's prose is their incongruity, this mingling of dissident vocabulary into the speech

of characters designed to represent authority and capitalist order. Prose style — some 'little phrase that is not their own' that disturbs with the recollections it prompts — is here part of the way that Welsh advances a particular political argument.

*Trainspotting*, and Welsh's comments to Ian Peddie about the 'old institutions' being 'no longer tenable' for working-class self-representation, suggest parallels with autonomist critiques of reformist and revolutionary socialism informed by the work of the Situationists and, in particular, Guy Debord. There was, for Debord, nothing but 'impotence and mystification' in the old politics, and, for him

[the proletariat's] own externalised power conspires in the continual reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer merely thanks to the alienation of its labour, but also thanks to the form taken on by the unions, parties and institutions of State power that it had established in pursuit of its own self-emancipation.[\[21\]](#)

Debord links this conspiracy to a theme many critics have responded to in Welsh's work: 'wherever one looks, one encounters this same intent: to *restructure society without community*.'[\[22\]](#) What Welsh positions as the 'new salon of psychic insurrection' in his writing is a partial literary expression of this analysis.[\[23\]](#)

### **New Labour Nightmares**

Reformism appears, in *Trainspotting* and elsewhere across Welsh's *oeuvre*, as at best a deluded nostalgia 'no longer tenable' for self-representation or, at worst, as part of the society of the spectacle, busy maintaining capitalist order. Part of *Trainspotting's* hostility is generational, suggesting that the mythologies of Labourism are inadequate for dealing with the present:

He disnae need to say aboot how he nivir hud they chances growin up in Govan n leavin school at fifteen n takin an apprenticeship. That's implicit. When ye think aboot it though, it isnae that different fae growin up in Leith n leaving school at sixteen n takin an apprenticeship. Especially as he nivir grew up in an era ay mass unemployment. Still, ah'm in nae shape to argue, n even if ah wus, it's pointless wi Weedjies. (191)

Most of the time, though, Welsh's characters are relentless in their critiques, indicting Labourism as at best dated and at worst an ideology of the ruling order. In 'A Smart Cunt', reformist hypocrisy is presented as still somewhat shame-faced and apologetic:

— Listen, Brian, I know you think you're some kind of big radical and I'm some reactionary, fascist pig. Well I've got news for you: I'm a socialist, I'm a union man. I know you just see me as an Establishment figure in a suit, but if the Tories had their way, we'd have kiddies down the mines. I'm every bit as anti-establishment as you, Brian. Yes, I own my own home. Yes, I live in a desirable area. Yes, I'm married and have two children, I take two foreign holidays a year and drive an expensive car. But I'm as anti-establishment as you, Brian. I believe in public services, in putting people first. It's more than just a cliché for me. For me, being anti-establishment is not about dressing like a tramp, taking drugs and going to rave-ups or whatever they're called. That's the easy way out. That's what people that control things want: people opting out, taking the easy route. For me it's about knocking on doors on cold evenings, attending meetings in school halls to get Labour back in and Major and his mob out.

— Yeah...

This guy makes the term asshole redundant.[\[24\]](#)

In 'The Undefeated', a short story in *Ecstasy*, Heather sees her husband Hugh transform from left-wing activist into New Labour apparatchik, a supporter of partially privatising the NHS. His transformation leads her to re-examine her previous attraction to him: 'he was what I thought a rebel was: working class, into student politics...what a lot of fucking nonsense.'[\[25\]](#)

For the narrators of *Trainspotting*, however, even these residual apologetics or ideological differentiations have disappeared, and social democracy is presented as a fully integrated part of the repressive system. Witnessing 'two guys arguing about the poll tax', the division is clear: 'one boy's sussed out, the other's a fuckin spineless Labour/Tory party servile wankboy' (237-38). In fact it was action outside of Parliament — and in opposition to the strategic position advocated by the Parliamentary Labour Party — that led to the defeat of the Poll Tax and to Thatcher's eventual political demise, with events in Scotland playing a particularly important role in this campaign. In refusing to distinguish between the parties, Welsh suggests the real divisions in politics are between these parties and the world outside them. The integration of social democracy into the system has a particular sharpness for those parts of the novel set in Scotland, where the Labour party dominated political life through the 1980s and where a distinctive left Labour tradition was sustained longer than in England. During Spud's job interview he is assured by one of the interviewers that 'I can certainly put your mind at rest with regards to discrimination. That's all covered in our new equal opportunities statement' (66). But, as the interview itself goes on to make clear, snobbishness, discrimination and exploitation still structure class relations. It is



the way this material keeps re-appearing throughout the book, and the way it is incorporated into everything from party conversations to job interviews, that convinces me Karnicky is wrong when he insists that Welsh should 'not be read as providing case studies that point toward what has gone wrong with the world.' After all, as *Trainspotting* was published, and in the years surrounding it, a series of debates were going on around the Left about the nature of the Labour party; the chances for socialists winning political change inside it; the future of reformism in Europe; and the vocabulary of working-class politics after the collapse of Stalinism. Welsh is making a clear intervention into these debates, and an intervention directed against the contemporary salience of social democracy:

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. (30)

Social democracy, Labour politics, has been removed as an oppositional force needing to be considered. Welsh himself has claimed that ours is a 'post-democratic' age where voting in reality TV shows carries more weight than voting in parliamentary elections, something he no longer does.<sup>[26]</sup> Sick Boy's scorn for Conservative ideology ('fuck that even mair') has some resemblance to his author's position on the health of liberal democracy, but more significant for my purposes here is what has been left out. British politics was, especially in *Trainspotting's* pre-Devolution setting, essentially a two-party affair, and one would normally expect the opposition to be posed between Labour and the Conservatives. For Sick Boy, though, as for Renton later when he argues about the Poll Tax, the only ideological division remaining is between what he sees as the twin traditionalisms of socialism and conservatism. Labour has been fully incorporated into the ideology of tradition (rendered metonymically here as the Tories) and opposition, albeit opposition equally to be rejected, is represented by the socialists.<sup>[27]</sup> Sick Boy rejects both, in favour of an apolitical individualism and, while the novel itself never entirely endorses his choice, it shares his rejection of the socialist tradition. Welsh's staging of this rejection is more indirect than his engagement with social democracy, however, and involves a sort of polemic-by-stealth.

### **Life Isn't Beautiful**

The socialist 'little phrases' that run through *Trainspotting* mean that socialist resonances are never far from the aware reader's attention, and one is left anticipating a direct encounter with the revolutionary tradition. Renton is knowledgeable about Brecht (29-30) and Dave Mitchell spent time at Strathclyde University as a 'student revolutionary' (251); the novel is filled with the mannerisms and language of a particular kind of socialist milieu. Welsh suggests this milieu's

socialism is insincere and ritualistic, or at best drink-fuelled sentimentality: 'a fuckin great rebel, a fuckin great socialist and a fuckin great Hibby. James Fuckin Connolly, ya cunt, Gav said to Renton' (45-6). In 'A Smart Cunt', which acts in so many ways as a pendant to *Trainspotting's* polemical concerns, Welsh positions Trotskyism — what Debord calls the 'pseudo-revolutionary dregs'[28] — in the same relation to power and repression as Labourism is to the state. Brian's father Jeff is organising against a planned needle exchange on his estate:

Thir planning tae open a centre fir aw they junkies. Needle exchange n prescriptions n aw that. It's eywis the same; cater fir aw these bloody misfits, never mind the tenants that have been peyin their rent every single week regular as clockwork.[29]

Jeff, who fancied himself as something of a hard man in his prime, organises a petition against the exchange as well as a vigilante presence to drive addicts from the estate. In the process he attracts a radical activist, Donny, whose language and tactics strongly recall those of the Socialist Workers' Party, who tries to help his campaign and to win him to socialism.[30] Donny, who tells Brian that 'you can't skate over the surface of social reality all your life' (a statement which is, Brian believes, 'revolutionary speak for: Ye cannae be a smart cunt aw yir life') has an answer:

The answer, according to Donny, is to build the revolutionary party. This is done by militant political activity in the workplaces and communities at the point of oppression. I ask him how effective this has been, and whether the collection of students, social workers, journalists and teachers that seem to make the membership of his party constitutes a fair cross-section of the proletariat.[31]

Donny and Brian's exchange reads like a parody of political commitment and apathy:

— How is it, though, that Militant seem to be able to get ordinary punters while you lot get all those middle-class types?

— Look man, I'm not going to slag Militant, cause there's enough sectarianism on the left, but...

He launches into a long and bitter attack on the politics and personalities of Scottish Labour Militant. I'm thinking, what can I do, really do for the emancipation of working people in this country, shat on by the rich, tied into political inaction by servile reliance on a reactionary, moribund and yet still unelectable Labour Party? The answer is a resounding fuck all. Getting up early to sell a couple of papers in a shopping centre is not my idea of the best way to

chill out after raving...I think I'll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism.[\[32\]](#)

Incorporating this material — and allowing himself the space to have a character vent this hostility towards the revolutionary tradition, hostility quite disconnected from the rest of the novella — strangely distorts 'A Smart Cunt.' For one thing, it forces Welsh to break with the realist register of the rest of the piece. It is highly implausible, to say the least, that the Socialist Workers Party would be involved in a campaign against a needle exchange or in alliance with a reactionary figure like Jeff. At the height of the media-fuelled ecstasy and heroin scares of the 1990s, the party's theoretical journal, *International Socialism*, ran a main article that argued 'the idea that unemployed workers who take to drugs are no longer members of the working class is as insulting as it is silly. To identify the unemployed, whether drug users or not, as part of a semi-criminal underclass is to accept the divisive ideology of the right wing.' The article went on to state that 'socialists do not object to the use of drugs to ease people out of depression... [and, under a socialist society] drugs will be used to improve the quality of life, not destroy it.'[\[33\]](#) Of course, Welsh wrote a novella and not a piece of political history, and he was not obliged to fact-check his characters' claims against models in reality. The dense specificity of the story, though — its reference to animosity towards Militant, to 'the downturn', to paper sales — make this divergence between the fictional and the real worlds all the stranger and more unsatisfactory. The debates and passions of revolutionary socialist groups active in Scotland is very much a minority affair, and one most of Welsh's readers are bound to be unfamiliar with. Why, then, this level of detail in the story? Having gone to so much trouble to establish this local and realist detail, why then does Welsh attribute a political position to a character that can so easily be shown to be false? It is hard to avoid a sense that this is a form of polemic by dishonesty, resolving political arguments from real situations by assigning roles in fiction that do not correspond to real-life participants' stated positions. It gives the novella's patterning and paralleling forms — of Labour against SWP, amongst others — a forced feel.

These details of Welsh's treatment of revolutionary socialism elsewhere are important in order to establish more clearly the way the theme receives the same treatment, albeit indirectly, in *Trainspotting*. 'A Smart Cunt' uses realist form to place a political body in an implausible situation, and suffers aesthetically accordingly for breaking the 'mimetic contract', 'wherein writer and reader share an agreement about the conditions under which texts can be composed and comprehended.'[\[34\]](#) *Trainspotting*, in its 'Bad Blood' section, dispenses with this realist plausibility. Although Welsh, throughout the novel, manages 'to introduce some little word or phrase' from a socialist vocabulary that is not his own, socialism itself — in the form of

organisations, activity or convinced activists — is everywhere absent. What he offers in its absence is a more indirect, but no less explicit, form of rejection.

I began this essay with a quote from Dave's supposed confession and the question of what role his story, and the uncertain way in which it is narrated, plays in *Trainspotting* as a whole, and want to end by offering Welsh's relation to revolutionary socialism as part of an answer. Dave claims that 'obviously I had deceived Venters about the things I did to Kevin' (259-60) but, whilst the reader is learning about how 'it took him about twenty minutes to die, twenty screaming, miserable minutes' (259) it is far from 'obvious' at all that this scene of bestial cruelty and child torture is anything other than a real part of the book's story.

Consider, after those awful details, these two endings:

There's some kids playing out in the back, the strip of grass illuminated an electric green by the brilliant sunlight. The sky is a delicious clear blue. Life is beautiful. I'm going to enjoy it, and I'm going to have a long life. I'll be what the medical staff call a long-term survivor. I just *know* that I will be. (262)

Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full.[\[35\]](#)

The first is the last paragraph of 'Bad Blood', Dave Mitchell's self-reflection; the words of someone caught in the satisfaction of their own revenge fantasy and visions of evil, oppression, and violence. It is also a clear allusion to, and echo of, the second section. This is the last paragraph of Leon Trotsky's 'Testament', written just months before he was killed by an agent of Stalin. Mitchell, in a grisly parody of Trotsky's Testament, echoes Trotsky's phrases ('life is beautiful', the 'strip of grass', 'delicious blue', 'brilliant sunlight') and mocks his hopes that future generations will enjoy life by summing up a form of enjoyment motivated by cruelty and vengeance instead of justice or solidarity. *Trainspotting's* vocabulary, for most of the novel, hints at an engagement with revolutionary politics to come: 'Bad Blood', to those familiar enough with the tradition to recognise the allusion, offers instead denigration and reversal. Welsh's allusion is too subtle to be noticed by those not familiar with Trotsky's writing or Trotskyist politics but is, in the context of all the knowing asides and 'little words', impossible to miss by those who know the political context. Welsh does not extend an analysis of revolutionary socialism comparable to his

attacks on reformist Labourism. The political function that 'Bad Blood's' narrative uncertainty fulfils, instead, is to shock and upset, to denigrate and to deny. His emotive material — suggested child torture — and his use of allusion, substitute emotional evocation for political analysis. Mitchell's narrative serves a purpose, but it is a purpose quite separate from the rest of the novel. He is written in to the story in order to allow a suitably dramatic and grisly mocking of the revolutionary tradition. It is in this sense, then, that one can describe 'Bad Blood' as being in bad faith: its narrative devices, and its subject material, exist to manipulate a political shock effect that the rest of *Trainspotting* cannot produce. Welsh displaces a political dilemma into a moment for allusive denigration. It is a moment of *Trainspotting* as an example of literary anti-Trotskyism.

### Conclusion

One of the challenges of Welsh criticism has always been how to account for his inconsistency and contradictions. How to understand this figure who combines 'exploitation of sensationalism' with sensitivity and real anger?[36] How to understand the degeneration of a writer who wrote with such feeling for people, 'not Eurotrash, just people trying to get by'[37] to one who, in Liam McIlvanney's phrase, can now write a story that is 'a heartless blast of sadism, barren as its desert setting'.[38] Part of the answer to these questions is, perhaps, the pressure of commercialism, the lures of success and the temptation of writing to order.[39] These are all, to be sure, symptoms of a writing world dominated by corporate interests and priorities. But it is worth reflecting on 'Bad Blood's' role as the first such instance of the more exploitative vein in Welsh's writing. The strengths Gardiner recognises in *Trainspotting* — its treatment of 'sectarianism, Enlightenment and colonialism' — have, to varying degrees, been the constants when Welsh has been at his most successful. His first experiment in sadism, in narrative uncertainty in the interests of exploitation of suspense and discomfort, was produced as an alternative to political engagement. Welsh drew on, or echoed, autonomist thinking to reject reformism and revolutionary socialism as 'no longer relevant' to the modern world. But Debord, for all his hostility to the existing state of organised politics, recognised that 'no *idea* could transcend the spectacle' , and dedicated his own work to thinking through alternate options for action.[40]

Welsh is a novelist, though, not a political theorist, and so he is under no obligation to follow Debord in constructing his own theory. This is not *Trainspotting's* failure, though. St Just, at the time of the French Revolution, observed that 'those who make half a revolution dig their own graves'.[41] One could make the same observation of those who make only half an engagement with revolutionary theory. Welsh, in 'A Smart Cunt', tried a direct confrontation with revolutionary socialism through the character of Donny. *Trainspotting* involves the same confrontation, but

side-on, substituting the power of shock and disgust for characterised engagement or rejection. Half-purged, then, and half-revived, like the allusion to Trotsky floating amidst the pop-cultural referents of *Trainspotting*, the revolutionary tradition has stayed a half-visible part of Welsh's writing. Rejected but not exorcised, it hovers around the margins of his work, since his first response set a precedent and model. Initiating his technique of manipulation by shock in 'Bad Blood', Welsh has taken it to ever greater extremes in later works without ever being able to re-create the aesthetic impact or achievement of that first novel.

Part of *Trainspotting*'s appeal was the way it seemed to promise a fictional coming to terms with the crises that afflict the working class in the 'post industrial world.' The dilemmas Welsh turned to, in the era of Labour's disintegration as a vehicle for working-class political aspirations, and as deep uncertainties still afflict the revolutionary socialist tradition, are still our dilemmas. Some shocks force an audience into confronting an unwelcome fact or reality. Others manipulate an existing reality, and it is hard to read Welsh's treatment of Trotsky as anything other than this kind of manipulation. Trotsky's 'Testament' is hardly well-known enough to be an allusion recognised by most of Welsh's audience; for those that do recognise it — readers most likely involved already in some way in political traditions and commitments — the manner of its presentation is designed to shut down response, not encourage it. The allusion stands as a recognition of half an insight. Whatever position a reader takes in the various controversies and debates, it is obvious that, by the mid-1970s at the very latest, large sections of the Left in Scotland and abroad felt that their own organisations and traditions were in crisis. So much thought and action of the last thirty years has concerned itself with trying to overcome that crisis, whether through probing the limits of traditional socialist thinking, accounting for the failures of the traditions of 1968, or re-examining the national context of these debates. Welsh's mistake was not that he launched an assault on Trotsky and Trotskyism. No tradition should be immune from criticism and interrogation. What is frustrating, rather, is the half-measures with which Welsh undertook this criticism, half-measures that have developed from displacement devices in 'Bad Blood' into full stylistic mannerisms and affectations by the time of the violence of his later work. The allusion with which 'Bad Blood' ends, at once gesturing at its own obviousness and setting itself up for general obscurity, is a marker for those parts of Welsh's work that have not been developed, the political ambiguities unexplored.

Welsh has proven incapable, or unwilling, of taking his initial insights any further. It will be up to future Scottish novelists to take up that challenge. So much of *Trainspotting* can serve them as an inspiration, even if, as I have tried to suggest here, 'Bad Blood's' allusiveness and substitutions must, finally, serve as an example of an aesthetic and political dead-end.[\[42\]](#)

## NOTES

- [1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 105.
- [2] Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993; New York: Norton, 1996), p. 257. Page numbers subsequently given in parentheses in the text.
- [3] See Carole Jones, '[White Men on their Backs: From Objection to Abjection](#)', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 1, Autumn 2006.
- [4] "When we break taboos,..it doesn't mean we also break moral codes" Welsh argued in relation to his novel *Porno*, in Sally Vincent, "Everybody's Doing It", *The Guardian*, 10 August 2002.
- [5] Robert Morace, *Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting: a Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 85.
- [6] The New York Intellectuals were sometimes called 'literary Trotskyists' as a description of their engagement with Trotskyist political thought and activity. It would be foolish to press the similarities between these writers and Welsh too far; I am borrowing the term to highlight how, in his indirect and novelistic presentation of a political argument, Welsh shares an approach to Trotskyist thinking with the New York tradition. See Alan M Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: the Rise and Fall of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).
- [7] Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 89.
- [8] Jeffrey Karnicky, 'Irvine Welsh's Novel Subjectivities,' *Social Text* 21: 3, Autumn 2003, pp. 138, 149.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- [10] 'Welsh's fiction,' for Karnicky, 'is oriented toward the future, toward the creation of...new forms of identity...a Welshian subjectivity...[as characters] struggle to invent new ways of living in the contemporary world.' *Ibid.* p. 137. But without attending to the specific political legacies *Trainspotting* engages with, Karnicky's case never really develops why these *new* forms are demanded, nor considers in real detail the background against which they are being assessed, or against which other forms are being rejected.
- [11] Alan Freeman, 'Ghosts in Sunny Leith: Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*', in Susan Hageman (ed.), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 251.
- [12] Drew Milne, 'The Fiction of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh', in Richard J Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (eds.), *Contemporary British Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 163.
- [13] Alan Riach, 'The Unnatural Scene: the Fiction of Irvine Welsh', in James Acheson and Sarah C E Ross (eds.) *The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 38.

[14] Quoted in Riach, p. 41.

[15] Milne, p. 164.

[16] Gardiner, p. 89.

[17] In Ian Peddie, 'Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation', *Scottish Studies Review*, 8: 2, Autumn 2007, pp. 132, 135.

[18] Robert Morace, 'Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation' in Berthold Schoene (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 228.

[19] 'The Granton Star Cause' in Irvine Welsh, *The Acid House* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 126.

[20] 'A Smart Cunt', *The Acid House*, p. 222.

[21] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 85. Emphasis in original.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[23] *The Acid House*, Acknowledgements, n.p.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[25] 'The Undefeated', Irvine Welsh, *Ecstasy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 24.

[26] Quoted in Patricia Bickers, 'Oh Politics Schmolitics! Art in the Postmodern Age', *Third Text* 16: 4, 2002, p. 341.

[27] It might be objected that Sick Boy is referring to Labour when he refers to 'the socialists'. This is a plausible reading but not one which alters the essentials of my argument: in the present of the novel's narrative the Labour Party was in the process of removing the last organised socialist elements within it, via Kinnock's campaign to have the Militant Tendency expelled, and, in the present of the novel's publication, Blair had begun his, eventually successful, campaign to have the party's constitution revised in order to remove phrases associated with a commitment to socialism.

[28] Debord, p. 154.

[29] 'A Smart Cunt,' *The Acid House*, p. 189.

[30] Donny's membership is never stated explicitly in the novella, but internal evidence makes it likely that Welsh has depicted him with the SWP in mind. Donny describes the period as 'the downturn' (p. 240), a keyword for the SWP's account of capitalism in the 1980s, and Brian's account of the sociology of his party's membership accords with critics' views of the SWP, as does his negative view of selling newspapers in shopping centres. See Ian Birchall, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World* (London: Socialist Workers Party, 1981).

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 240.

[33] Audrey Farrell, 'Addicted to Profits: Capitalism and Drugs', *International Socialism*, 2: 77, Winter 1997, pp. 14, 41.



- [34] The terms are Barbara Foley's. See her *Telling the Truth: the Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 40 – 41.
- [35] Leon Trotsky, 'Testament', in Sarah Lovell (ed.), *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), p. 312.
- [36] Riach, p. 45.
- [37] 'Eurotrash', *The Acid House*, p. 31.
- [38] Liam McIlvanney, 'Under the Table', *The Guardian*, 21st July 2007, Review section p. 13.
- [39] See Morace, 'Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation' for an excellent discussion of these trends in Welsh's later writing.
- [40] Debord, p. 143.
- [41] Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), p. 18.
- [42] Thanks to Scott Hames and Eric Shelton for their comments on earlier drafts of this piece, and to Anya Tate-Manning, whose 2004 reading set the associations in motion.