

## **White Men on Their Backs – From Objection to Abjection: The Representation of the White Male as Victim in William McIlvanney's *Docherty* and Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares***

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'In his utter defeat there was an absolute power.'<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation from William McIlvanney's 1975 novel *Docherty* introduces concisely the subject of this article, the representation of men as victims and the complex resonances of such a depiction in the Scottish context. The notion of power in male defeat is, according to Ben Knights, an integral characteristic of a dominant western literary tradition where 'so much of the weight of the available narrative stock concerns male success, triumph, or triumph's counterpart, glorious defeat'.<sup>2</sup> The vaunted cultural kudos in this way attached to being overcome is demonstrated towards the end of *Docherty* in the scene of the eponymous protagonist Tam Docherty's death where, in a pit accident, he is buried by a roof-fall after saving a fellow miner by pushing him out of the way. This heroic demise saves Tam from an ignominious alcoholic decline that is beginning to creep into the narrative as he struggles to cope with despair and disillusion in the twilight of his working life. As the text describes it: 'They saw a hand projecting from the rubbish, fixed in its final reflex, Tam Docherty's hand. It was pulped by the weight of the fall. The hand was clenched' (p. 301). The clenched fist of defiance is testament to Tam's power in defeat.

It is compelling to compare this image of glorious defeat with the picture we are left with at the end of Irvine Welsh's 1995 novel *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. Here the protagonist and narrator, Roy Strang, lies in a hospital bed in a coma after an unsuccessful suicide attempt. At the end of the novel he is killed by Kirsty, the victim of a gang rape in which Roy was the leader. For her revenge she cuts off his eyelids, then cuts off his penis and chokes him with it. The novel approaches its close with 'the hysterical screaming of Nurse Patricia Devine. She's watching me smoking my own penis like a limp, wet cigar, staring with horror into my eyes that cannot shut'.<sup>3</sup> This is not glorious defeat; the text revels in the graphically presented image of a shamed and fatally wounded masculinity, irredeemably prostrate, disabled and murdered. Twenty years after *Docherty* the parameters of imagining the male as victim are drastically changed.

This paper explores the significance of this movement from glorious to inglorious male victimhood, from, as it were, the heroic masculinity of *Docherty* to the toxic masculinity of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. My interrogation of the transition from a more traditional representation of an oppressed working class to the portrayal of an abject masculine victim is grounded in the Scottish setting, but here I situate these texts in relation to a wider cultural context and employ interpretive paradigms from other locations. Such a reading is a productively reflexive process: the broader, international perspective promotes a movement away from the framing of a debilitatingly fractured culture characterised by an infamous doubleness, a conception that has 'constrained Scottish criticism in its insistence on the idea of a tradition defined by *internal* oppositions',<sup>4</sup> and of Scottishness as a 'damaged identity';<sup>5</sup> in turn, contextualising this writing in terms of international cultural processes brings into relief the complexities of the Scottish situation. Such a perspective favours the medium of the prism over the magnifying glass.

In particular, this essay reads these Scottish novels by way of certain critical approaches that examine and question the empowered, normative authority of masculinity and whiteness in western culture, categories highly relevant to these texts, and indeed the Scottish context. Firstly, the consideration of men as victims has been a framework for various studies of male identity within the most recent manifestation of the discourse of western masculinity in crisis.<sup>6</sup> Most pertinently, in *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (2000) Sally Robinson's central argument is that white masculinity in the North American cultural context often represents itself as victimized by 'inhabiting a wounded body', and she perceives a 'substitution of the personal for the political' in such representations.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, this analysis resonates in what I have pinpointed as a critical move from *Docherty* to *Marabou Stork Nightmares*.

Secondly, this article principally attends to how the construction of male victimhood in these novels, to a significant extent, is activated through themes and imagery of racial difference. Both texts employ discourses relating to race, from a colonial or postcolonial perspective, to associate Tam Docherty and Roy Strang with black identities, though certainly with differing effects. Such strategies are a significant detail in a context where 'the invisibility of black Scots both in contemporary culture and in the wider society' was not noted or critiqued until relatively recently.<sup>8</sup> As Gail Low writes, '[In] questions posed by an exploration of "Black British" [...] what has been missing from the fray in the era of devolution is any discussion of how "Black British" intersects with the production of Scottish identities.'<sup>9</sup> So the presence of these discourses in this writing is notable, signalling as it does that, although non-white subjects may be largely absent from the main body of Scottish literature, the issue of race is often a formative if marginalised

influence. Though rarely focussed on by Scottish creative writers and critics, the politics of racialised power relations can play a controversial role in the conceptualising of Scottish identity as revealed in these texts. In foregrounding and questioning the construction of victimhood through discourses of racial difference, this article explores the Scottish context to compose a critique of the cultural reproduction of the dominance of white masculinity.<sup>10</sup>

The male as victim is a common subject in contemporary Scottish fiction, and there are a fair number of wounded and even dead men in the writing of a variety of contemporary authors, such as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, Janice Galloway, and A.L. Kennedy. In his essay 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction' (1998), Christopher Whyte observes that, 'The reclining male, a hero who is incapacitated in some way and may even be hospitalised, recurs frequently [...] The reclining position is of course, traditionally and stereotypically, a "feminine" one. These fictional male figures are incapable of adopting an upright, "erect" pose and remain horizontal.'<sup>11</sup> This is significant in relation to an idea that Whyte puts forward earlier in that article. He describes a 'representational pact' where:

One may posit a demand on the part of the Scottish middle class for fictional representations from which it is itself excluded; a demand, in other words, for textual invisibility. This would connect with the widespread perception of the Scottish middle classes as 'denationalised', as less Scottish in terms of speech and social practice than the lower classes. The task of embodying and transmitting Scottishness is, as it were, devolved to the unemployed, the socially underprivileged, in both actual and representational contexts.<sup>12</sup>

If this is the case, that a Scottish establishment is happy to let Scottishness be represented by a more masculine (that is, stronger and more dominant) and purportedly more authentically and faithfully Scottish (that is, not 'denationalised') lower class, then why are these images so often of supine, defeated men?

One answer to this question is proposed by Sally Robinson. She points out that since the 1960s, in the 'post-liberationist' North American context, dominant masculinity, increasingly undermined in its cultural authority, has become increasingly visible as wounded in cultural representations, and she interprets this as a process of recentering through victimhood the displaced and discredited middle-class, white male who has traditionally defined normativity and led the establishment. Throughout western societies in the post-1960s era, what has become known as 'identity politics' has been successful in winning rights and equality for those marginalised and oppressed by that establishment, such as women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians. This has created a society that is, as Robinson terms it, 'so taken with the dynamics of victimization'.<sup>13</sup> In such a context the dominant white masculinity is brought into question and undermined in its authority, so that, as Robinson writes:

In order for white masculinity to negotiate its position within the field of identity politics, white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore claiming victimhood in a society that valorises victims is a way of claiming authority; on the part of white men, Robinson describes this as a process of 'recentering white masculinity by decentering it'. Can we read the wounded white men of Scottish fiction as part of a similar process?

Certainly the Scottish context complicates Robinson's thesis. These are representations of working-class men, and as such they constitute an 'other' against which a dominant middle-class male establishment traditionally defines itself. However, this difference has its advantages in that the discredited authority of the dominant masculinity attaches itself to these working-class men, as does the weakness and defeat that underlies these representations. In effect, middle-class masculinity benefits from this self-immolation, as in Robinson's thesis, while also being distanced from it.<sup>15</sup> However, in a further nuance I propose that it is easier to confer victimhood upon working-class men through discourses of race, as we will see. In the circumstances, it is worth analysing how these writers construct their male characters as victims, and by what associations they authenticate that victimhood.

William McIlvanney wrote *Docherty* in the early 1970s, publishing it in 1975, at a time of gathering industrial crisis and decline. To take just one instance, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, the bastion of shipbuilding on the Clyde, announced it was going into receivership in 1971, a collapse seen as a 'potentially mortal blow to the tottering edifice of the old industrial structure', as Tom Devine describes it.<sup>16</sup> McIlvanney's impulse was to represent the working class in his fiction, and in *Docherty* he set about writing a history of his community, or, as he termed it, a genealogy:

*Docherty* is in part an attempt to articulate in the context of a book on behalf of those who may be inarticulate in a literary way. Hence, the central paradox of the book: it is written for people most of whom will never read it [...] I wanted to write a book that would create a kind of literary genealogy for the people I came from, the people whose memorials were parish registers.<sup>17</sup>

*Docherty* is a historical novel, set in the first two decades of the twentieth century in a West of Scotland mining community and focuses on the family of central character Tam Docherty. Though it was written at a time when the contemporary mining community was threatened with redundancy, the narrative takes place in a period of hope centred on trade unions and the Independent Labour Party. However, the miners here are inevitably victims, principally of the untrammelled industrial expansion of the Victorian age, an unbridled and insatiable capitalism that produced inhuman working and living conditions. The miners comprised an invisible army of workers who provided the raw power for that industrial growth and, as a consequence, Britain's phenomenal imperial expansion of the late Victorian period.<sup>18</sup>

Industrial and imperial expansion went hand in hand, and were associated by more than just a causal, practical relation as in the construction of ships and railways. As Anne McClintock argues:

[I]mperialism is not something that happened elsewhere – a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. The invention of race in the urban metropolises [...] became central not only to the self-definition of the middle class but also to the policing of the “dangerous classes”: the working class, the Irish, Jews, prostitutes, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, the militant crowd and so on.<sup>19</sup>

Claude Rawson also points out that there was ‘a familiar equation of class and race which saw the domestic mob and inferior races as similar and as constituting a similar combination of useful labour and barbarizing menace’.<sup>20</sup> In the colonial writing of this period, the discourses of race, class and gender impinge on and intersect with each other and are articulated through each other creating realms of otherness against which the dominant classes identified themselves, inevitably justifying their superiority and privilege. In texts of the time the feminising of the non-white races accompanied the primitivising of the working class and the association of both ‘inferior’ races and ‘inferior’ classes in epithets like ‘white negroes’ and ‘Celtic Calibans’, the latter specifically applied to the Irish, for instance. The working class was often racialised: coal miners particularly were seen as a race apart as in this extract quoted by McClintock from *The Quarterly Review* in 1842 on the spectacle of female miners: ‘The earth seems now for the first time to have heaved from its entrails another race to astonish and move us to reflection and to sympathy.’<sup>21</sup>

This racialising of the miners is briefly but succinctly exposed in *Docherty*. Though sometimes expressed as a benign sense of their own difference (‘that sense of communal identity miners had, as if they were a separate species’ [p. 21]), this perception is more sinister when the miners are described through the eyes of the middle-class Miss Gilfillan as ‘a secret brotherhood of black savages’ (p. 14); or when Miss Gilfillan wishes to strike up a relationship with Tam’s youngest son she is attributed with the desire to ‘do some missionary work in darkest High Street. Just as natives are lured with coloured beads, so Conn was to be enticed with sweets’ (p. 81). In a related incident, a well-to-do family strolling down High Street is described as a common enough occurrence (p. 30), a reference to late Victorian social ‘explorers’ who ventured into the ‘terra incognita’ of the slums and working-class areas of the big cities, explorations they often described in terms of the imperial missionary enterprise.<sup>22</sup> On this occasion they are greeted by Tam Docherty saying ‘Why don’t ye bring fuckin’ cookies wi’ ye? An’ then ye could throw them tae us!’ (p. 31).

Smatterings of such references are sprinkled throughout particularly the early part the novel and signal McIlvanney’s deliberate engagement with these Victorian colonial discourses

and their construction and reduction of the working class as something less than human. They are deployed to outrage the reader at the implication of the uncivilised and savage nature of working-class men and women.<sup>23</sup> However, McIlvanney's novel strenuously resists and refutes this representation through several forcefully employed textual strategies. Firstly and most obviously, the author takes great care to write in highly literary language, full of rich metaphors and allusions, abstracting the lives of his characters into an often poetically nuanced tableau, as in the description of the scene of the youngest son Conn's birth at the beginning of the narrative:

The gas-mantle putted like a sick man's heart. Dimmed to a bead of light, it made the room mysterious as a chapel. The polished furniture, enriched by darkness, entombed fragments of the firelight that moved like tapers in a tunnel. The brasses glowed like ikons. (p. 19)

As Cairns Craig has written, McIlvanney's language is 'extravagantly erudite and literary [...] designed to elevate characters by [...] insisting on the complexity of their *feelings*'.<sup>24</sup>

It is not only their feelings but the social organisation of the community that is often described in detail, its order and complexity deliberately emphasised. Such an insistence constitutes a further rejection and refutation of the accusations of barbarity and uncivility: 'Underpinning the apparent anarchy of their social lives and establishing an order was a code of conduct complex enough to baffle the most perceptive outsider yet tacitly understood by even the youngest citizens of High Street from the time that they started to think' (p. 32). In this the novel is, at times, almost anthropological, setting out the communal rituals of the everyday as well as those grander ones of life and death such as birth, marriage and funeral rites which are all seen in the narrative. I use this term deliberately as it is a reminder of similar strategies employed by some postcolonial writers who set out to 'write back' to the metropolitan centre. For instance, the term 'anthropological' has been applied to Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* from 1958. This text similarly represents the detailed life of a community, the Igbo tribe, in all its complexity as a riposte to the reductive racist representations of Africans in colonial texts.

In reference to the anthropological conception of postcolonial writing, and with regard to what he calls the 'post-colonial exotic', Graham Huggan points out that there sometimes exists a 'misconceived notion that an African text offers unmediated access to an African culture, or even "African culture"'.<sup>25</sup> This is suggested, for example, in Douglas S. Mack's conception of Achebe's novel when he writes: '*Things Fall Apart* constructs an alternative view of that society [and] tries to give an honest, clear-eyed account of the *real* nature of the old culture, an account in which the old culture can speak in its own voice.'<sup>26</sup> Whyte points out that the same misconception can be levelled at readers of *Docherty*, as when, for instance, Beth Dickson claims that 'McIlvanney's fiction mirrors important aspects of Scottish life. In particular, the identity of the working class has undergone a number of recent transformations, and his fiction reflects, and reflects on, this historical experience.'<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Huggan argues that with certain African texts, 'anthropology is the watchword not for empirical documentation, but for the elaboration of a world of difference that conforms to often crudely stereotypical Western exoticist paradigms and myths of "primitive culture" ("primitive culture", "unbounded nature", "magical practices", "noble savagery", and so on).'<sup>28</sup> With *Docherty*, however, the opposite is true. It is not a world of difference, but a world of sameness that is asserted; in the nobility and complexity of language and feelings represented in this text it is a liberal and bourgeois sensibility that is promoted (in keeping with the classic realist novel of the late nineteenth century), particularly of the integrity, singularity, unity and self-sufficiency of the individual. This strategy aims to transcend allegations of inferiority and even savagery aimed at the working class and often embedded in the dominant literary traditions. In effect, though, this tactic leaves the binary categories of 'black and uncivilised' versus 'white and civilised' still in place as it asserts the equal humanity of the British working and middle classes in opposition to the savagery of blackness. This is the message of Tam's glorious defeat, his integrity as an individual whose 'hert goes fae [his] heid tae [his] taes, and that's a lot o' hert' (p. 324), as his epitaph has it at the close of the narrative.

*Docherty* is set in an age when these imperial and colonial discourses commanded authority. In contrast, in the post-1960s, post-liberation era these discourses have been discredited and predominantly rejected. The 1980s and 1990s setting of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* is a postcolonial era when national liberation for ex-colonies and civil rights for the marginalised have been won, apartheid has been defeated and racism fought on all fronts. The pathologies of domination indulged by the colonialists in the construction of their own identities have been recognised for the injustices that they propagated and the victims they produced.<sup>29</sup> In some controversial ways, Irvine Welsh aligns his central character, the working-class 'schemie' Roy Strang, with such victimhood; part of the shock value of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* lies in Welsh's engagement with these narratives of oppression.

The novel has three levels of narration: the present where Roy lies in a coma in hospital; his recounting, in a realist mode, of his life story up to this point, a portrait of the making of a young hooligan; and a fantasy narrative, parodying an imperial adventure story, in which Roy is a great white hunter, tracking down in order to kill the deadly scavenger/predator, the Marabou stork. In his self-narration Roy describes the economy of violence and emotional deprivation that defined his poor urban upbringing, a background that fosters the worst excesses of a pathological masculinity and leads to his role in a gang of 'casuals', indulging in recreational football violence and eventually the horrific gang rape of a young female acquaintance, Kirsty. Unable to cope with

his own culpability in this act, Roy eventually makes an unsuccessful suicide attempt which puts him in the coma where we initially encounter him.

In an effort to contextualise and explain Roy's pathologically violent identity, Welsh's narrative makes him a victim of his environment and social position, of the imposition of gender roles in this context which valorises an aggressively dominant 'hard man' masculinity. That Roy is a victim is suggested in one instance by way of a notorious parallel, one calculated to cause outrage in the reader. The Strang family spend a short time in apartheid South Africa where the young Roy, in contrast to back home in Edinburgh, does well in school and achieves a level of self-esteem previously unknown to him. When the family have to return to Scotland, due to his father being arrested for a drunken assault, he is bitterly disappointed:

I was gloomy in my resignation. Only a sick anxiety brought on by the dread of leaving occasionally alleviating my depression. Edinburgh to me represented serfdom. I realised that it was exactly the same situation as Johannesburg; the only difference was that the Kaffirs were white and called schemies or draftpaks. Back in Edinburgh, we would be Kaffirs; condemned to live out our lives in townships like Muirhouse or So-Wester-Hailes-To or Niddrie, self-contained camps with fuck all in them, miles fae the toon. Brought in tae dae the crap jobs that nae other cunt wanted tae dae, then hassled by the polis if we hung around at night in groups. Edinburgh had the same politics as Johannesburg: it had the same politics as any city. Only we were on the other side. I detested the thought of going back to all that shite. (p. 80)

This paralleling of the position of Scotland's urban poor with the plight of black South Africans under apartheid has certainly incensed many critical readers. This is an appropriation and a colonisation of the oppression and suffering of others for the purpose of inflating self-worth and 'subaltern credentials', as Aaron Kelly describes it.<sup>30</sup> Willy Maley and Ellen-Raisa Jackson write:

In this passage, social differentiation within Edinburgh is collapsed into racial differentiation in Johannesburg. We are urged to recognise 'the same politics'. A comparison implies parity, but Welsh's colonial comparison works by equating inequalities, racial and social [...]. Welsh claims a solidarity with Black South Africans through the naming of townships/new towns. The pun on Soweto and Wester Hailes develops the central point – that the 'only difference' is linguistic.<sup>31</sup>

As an attempt at insightful political analysis attributed to Welsh himself, this criticism is more than warranted. But taken as the view of Roy Strang, who is, after all, a notoriously, immorally unreliable narrator of his own life, the statement is more like a hysterical outburst at the prospect of the denial of the recently discovered power of his position in South Africa. It is a cry for attention by the disappointed rather than the dispossessed and as such exposes the hyperbolic and imperialist aspiration of the contention. Such exaggeration is similar to the violence in Roy's life, a self-aggrandizing gesture that falsely inflates his standing in response to the grossly deflated sense of self reflected back to him by the dominant culture.



So the outrage caused by the Welsh text is of a different order to that caused by McIlvanney's novel. There, the association with blackness is an occasion of a denigration of the working class; in Welsh's novel the association with blackness is sought after, black South Africans under apartheid being legitimate victims of a vicious white authority. The outrage here is caused by a white appropriation of black suffering.<sup>32</sup> But as I have demonstrated, this move does connect, albeit in an oblique way, with a history of the policing of the working class through the discourses of race; in the post-liberationist era, however, the moral authority is reversed making the association with blackness a positive aspiration. Unlike *Docherty*, then, Welsh's novel does disrupt the black/uncivilised versus white/civilised binary, if only to reverse the hierarchy and 'colonise', in Kelly's words, the category of blackness.

The irony of the reversal in the value of blackness is not lost on Welsh, a point signalled by another reversal the text enacts when Roy retreats into his fantasy, his 'African safari of the mind'.<sup>33</sup> In this Rider Haggard-style parody of an imperial adventure story Roy is transformed into a caricature upper-class hunter and stalks the Marabou stork. The highly stylized and absurd nature of this fantasy is captured in Roy's expert mimicking of a public schoolboy sociolect: 'Wizard!', 'How positively yucky!', and 'Gosh Sandy, you're a Hungry Horace today' (pp. 4, 7) are typical expressions of the pseudo-aristocratic diction Roy uses throughout this fantasy narrative.<sup>34</sup> In parodying the stereotypical colonial text, this adventure story is also outrageously racist, emphasising Roy's ability to 'access colonial Africa as a state of virtual power, freedom and authority', however cartoon-like the depiction.<sup>35</sup> However, access to power in the material world is not readily available to a 'schemie', even one as expert a mimic as Roy, and this is a source of tension throughout the novel, and a fact that underlies and intensifies the absurdity of Roy's fantasy transformation into an upper-class imperialist. In material reality it is not so easy to escape social classification, and this situation further suggests that, as social transitions go, his association with black South Africans is equally absurd. Roy exists somewhere in-between these two social poles, between oppressor and oppressed, a situation that can be said to reflect the complexity of Scottish-British identity.

Berthold Schoene-Harwood asserts that *Marabou Stork Nightmares* 'illustrates how alluring nostalgic fantasies of untrammelled power and superiority [...] are to many men'.<sup>36</sup> Certainly this parody of colonial discourse links the colonial past with the present, and signals our continuing reliance on models of identity, particularly masculinity, formed in that era. On the other hand, Roy's attempt to associate himself with the victims of a similarly racially defined and oppressive relationship is also an attempt to maintain a position of authority in a contemporary culture that is, as Robinson argues, 'so taken with the dynamics of victimization'. The tension between these two impulses is graphically present in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, particularly in

the fractured typography that represents Roy's tortured battles with himself. Roy's association of the Scottish urban poor and black South Africans under apartheid neatly frames this tension; it expresses his consciousness of the attraction and contemporary significance of victimhood while originating in his desire for privilege and superiority. It is an audacious parallel, and even while suggesting it Roy is quick to admit that his impulse comes from his privileged status which is enshrined in the social structures of South African society: 'I wanted to stay in South Africa. What I had gained there was a perverse sense of empowerment; an ego even. I knew I was fuckin special, whatever any of them tried to tell me' (p. 88). Roy's newfound ego is proof of the hysterical nature of his indignant 'So-Wester-Hailes-To' outburst. Though his claim to kinship in oppression is undermined, it is still an illustration, an alert even, of the appropriation of victimhood as one trend in contemporary culture, according to Robinson, that puts the white man back at the centre of the discourses of power as a victim.

Roy's fluctuating status between oppressor and oppressed in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* ensures that there is not the transcendence of barbarity that we have in *Docherty* with its assertion of a human and, ultimately, bourgeois individual equality. At the end of the novel Roy finally admits the extent of his crimes, that he was the instigator of the gang rape, not the reluctant participant he has led us to believe throughout the narrative. In his admission of his guilt and his 'badness' (p. 9), he effectively embraces the status of the 'other', specifically the other of that now discredited white male bourgeois individual; unlike Tam Docherty, he does not claim equality but repudiates it. Furthermore, in his graphic wounding and mutilation at the close of the narrative he is also, in totality, a victim, a status putatively invested with the cultural authority of the authentically disempowered.

One final parallel drives home this embracing of otherness: the image of Roy choking on his own penis is an echo of something particular – the lynching of black men by white mobs, an infamous practice in the southern American states and shockingly widespread from the end of the civil war into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These lynchings were often endorsed by allegations of sex crimes against white women; the mostly trivial nature of many of these charges meant that in essence lynching served the broad social purpose of maintaining white supremacy.<sup>37</sup> The victims were sometimes mutilated and body parts displayed and distributed as souvenirs. For Roy, a white man, to be murdered in this fashion signals another proffered association with an oppressed black minority, and through this his complete abjection. Instead of attaining or at least aspiring to the status of the central and dominant, he has become the abject, that which the social order deems impure and therefore seeks to expel in order to maintain secure boundaries of being. In fact, throughout the narrative he fulfils Kristeva's description of abjection as 'immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles [...] a friend who stabs you.'<sup>38</sup>

McClintock points out that 'abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on';<sup>39</sup> these are traditional others of the middle-class white man, though in the post-liberationist era they are now constituted as his victims. In this further, catastrophic association with otherness, then, Roy's victimhood is complete. Instead of resisting it, as Tam does in *Docherty*, Roy embodies the abject, and in contrast to Tam's defiant fist, clenched even after being 'pulped', it is not the similarly clenched fist symbolic of the Black Power movement that Welsh's text engages with here. Roy's body is passive and signifies the fragility of the boundaries of the embodied masculine subject, its insecure containment, its permeability. He is the disgraced symbol of leaky, soft and spoiled manhood.

Welsh's graphic portrayal complicates the image of the male victim. This is not an expression of *remasculinisation* in which the power of masculinity is reasserted through the demonstration of the manly endurance and overcoming of pain.<sup>40</sup> There is unmistakable pleasure in Roy's suffering; his reaction to his castration is an almost resigned contentment: 'aw what the fuck, the Silver Surfer never had a cock and the cunt seemed to get by as he soared on his board ... that's all I ask' (p. 263); and he even has an urge to convey gladness: 'I've got this severed cock in my mouth and I'm trying to smile' (p. 264). Robinson perceives that some narratives include 'an undeniable attraction to masochism on the part of white men attempting to come to terms with the feminist critique of male power and privilege', and such an impulse certainly complicates the representation of male subjectivity.<sup>41</sup> This is not the reassertion of an aggressive, active and appropriative male dominance, but of a masculinity finding pleasure in passivity and a certain feminised, non-appropriative inactivity. Such a representation points to the possibility of an area of negotiation that dominant masculinity is willing to enter into, subtle changes it is willing to undertake within shifting social relations. However, such changes are also engineered to maintain white men's cultural centrality and authority, and the move to claim victimhood has significant consequences. In Robinson's words, it serves to *personalize* the crisis in white masculinity and therefore 'to erase its social and political causes and effects'. A focus on the wounded individual signals a slide from political into therapeutic discourse, the 'depoliticized personal', that facilitates 'the erasure [in these representations] of systemic and institutionalized white and male privilege'.<sup>42</sup> The question we must ask, says Robinson, is, if the wounded white man comes to occupy the position of true victim, 'what happens when others get evacuated from that position?'<sup>43</sup>

Just such a situation is described at the end of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* when Kirsty tells Roy 'you've made me just like you' (p. 259), and he concurs with this assertion of equivalence between them: 'I'm not an exceptionally strong person. Nor is Kirsty. We're just

ordinary and this is shite' (p. 264). The personal is prioritised in this analysis of the events of the novel. Even though Kirsty recognises the culpability of the social structures ('you raped me once, and with the help of the judge and the courts you raped me again' [p. 259]), she takes a personal revenge, and not one that protests effectively against the oppressive social reality. As Schoene-Harwood argues, 'universalising the insidious dynamics of patriarchal power as some kind of irremediable, generic by-product of human nature, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* concludes with a total eradication of sexual difference.'<sup>44</sup> But even further, in becoming just like Roy, Kirsty is effectively masculinized, leaving him at the close of the narrative as the main, perhaps the only, victim. As Maley and Jackson insist, the novel focuses on the effect the rape has on him rather than on the woman he has raped.<sup>45</sup> His victimisation puts him back at the centre of the narrative and eradicates the structural social inequality.

I am suggesting, then, that these two narratives signal a change in the representation of men in Scottish fiction from the 1970s to the 1990s, that resonates with a more general and international cultural symptom, where, rather than glorious male defeat, abject male victimhood is displayed and embraced; the politics of objection are replaced by the embodying of abjection. This move has the effect of recentering dominant masculinity within a culture of identity politics that valorises the victim. The associations inspired by colonial discourses contribute to the construction of white male victims in these two texts and should alert us to how much late Victorian imperialist conceptions of masculinity, determined as they are by pathologies of domination, still inform our notions of what it is to be a man today. In addition, between them *Docherty* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* certainly reflect the breakdown in traditional class structures that has occurred in western societies like Scotland in the last 30 years, and the fading significance of a traditional, organised working class. Read together, they gesture towards a representational trend to substitute the public and social with the personal and bodily, a move that takes us from organised class politics to therapy, from the hard-bodied, selfless solidarity of Tam Docherty to the limp, supine, selfish catatonia and self-narration of Roy Strang. Paradoxically, both reproduce the cultural centrality of the middle-class white man at the expense of his others.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William McIlvanney, *Docherty* (London: Sceptre, 1987), p. 298. Page numbers subsequently given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 264. Page numbers subsequently given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew (eds), 'Introduction', *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 11 (my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Wallace, 'Voices in 'Empty Houses: The Novel of Damaged Identity', in Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (eds), *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 217-231.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of male identity being in constant bouts of crisis is one that is commonly expressed. For example, Abigail Soloman-Godeau has argued that, 'Masculinity, however defined is, like capitalism, always in crisis. And the real question is how both manage to restructure, refurbish, and resurrect themselves for the next historical turn' ('Male Trouble', in Berger, Wallis and Watson (eds.), *Constructing Masculinity* (New York/London: Routledge, 1995), p. 70). Other texts that consider the idea of masculinity in crisis include John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), and Arthur Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

Regarding the representation of men as victims, David Savran, for example, describes his book *Taking it Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) as 'a genealogy of the fantasy of the white male as victim' since the 1950s (p. 4).

<sup>7</sup> Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 20, 191.

<sup>8</sup> Andy Wood, "'The Affectionate Punch": Constructions of Identity, Masculinity, Race and Gender in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', in Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Johanna Archbold, John Gibney and Carole Jones (eds), *Beyond the Anchoring Grounds: More Cross-currents in Irish and Scottish Studies* (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2005), p. 340.

<sup>9</sup> Gail Low, 'The Challenge of "Black British"', in *European English Messenger* XI.2 (2002), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> There is an ethical dimension to my questioning of the use of racial discourses in these texts. This article aims to expose and challenge the appropriation and exploitation of categories of non-white identity and experience that result in the re-centering of white masculinity; however, through its focus on representations of white men does it inevitably repeat that cycle of representation evident in the texts under examination, and in effect marginalise and subordinate black experience? Is blackness here merely a vehicle for for an

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examination of whiteness? Is there a level, even, on which it contributes to an area of 'whiteness studies' that, in Vron Ware's words, 'is fraught with contradictions, not least of which are, first, that it tends to reestablish the first person firmly at the center of attention to whiteness [as opposed to the social structures and cultural reproduction of white domination] and, second, that it is in danger of reifying the whole notion of "race" as a system of human classification that can be understood outside the histories of its invention and brutal enforcement' (p. 26)? I wish to acknowledge here that, whatever the proffered transparency of my intentions, the line between exposure and exploitation of such a complex and contentious issue is a fine one, and differently located readers will judge my own negotiation of that line in various ways, to which interpretations I remain enthusiastically open.

For a critical account of the 'exponential expansion' of the 'new phenomenon of "whiteness studies"' (p. 21) see Vron Ware, 'Otherworldly Knowledge: Toward a "Language of Perspicuous Contrast"', in Vron Ware and Les Back, *Out of Whiteness: Colour, Politics, and Culture* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 15-32.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Whyte, 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 34: 3 (1998), pp. 279, 280.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> In reference to the demonising of the working class in recent popular culture and socio-political discourses Alex Law writes, 'The poor become negatively stereotyped as an undifferentiated, disgraceful, tasteless social group upon whom middle class fears of social disintegration and poverty can be projected and the ideological legacy of "whiteness" can be offloaded.' ('Hatred and Respect: The Class Shame of Ned "Humour"', in *Variant* 25 (Spring 2006), p. 28.

<http://www.variant.randomstate.org/25texts/nedhumour25.html>; accessed 23 May 2006

<sup>16</sup> Tom Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 584.

<sup>17</sup> William McIlvanney, 'A Shield Against The Gorgon', in *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991), pp. 220, 223.

<sup>18</sup> According to Eric Hobsbawm, the 'extraordinary economic transformation and expansion of the years between 1848 and the early 1870s' led to 'the era of a new type of empire, the colonial' when 'a systematic attempt to translate the military supremacy of the capitalist countries into formal conquest, annexation and administration partitioned most of the world outside Europe between a handful of states in the years 1880 to 1914.' (*The Age of Capital 1848-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997 [1975]), p. 29; *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 57.)

<sup>19</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Rawson, *God, Gulliver and Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 209.

<sup>21</sup> McClintock, p. 116. Chris Haylett, commenting on a similar practice in the 1990s, writes: 'The contemporary racialisation of the white working class is most apparent in underclassing processes which have cast the poorest sections of that group as a group beyond the bounds of "the British nation".' ('Illegitimate subjects?: abject whites, neoliberal modernisation, and middle-class multiculturalism', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19:3 (2001), p. 355.)

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of the attitudes and writings, both anthropological and the 'slum fiction' genre, of the Victorian middle-class journalists, philanthropists and 'missionaries' who made forays into the 'terra incognita' (p. 22) of the world of the working class, see Michael Collins, *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (London: Granta, 2004), especially chapters 5-7. [Thanks to Scott Hames for bringing this to my attention.]

<sup>23</sup> Gail Ching-Liang Low observes that the Victorian philanthropists' 'descriptions of the overcrowded conditions, destitution and exploitation which the urban poor had to endure is meant to provoke a sense of moral outrage [but often] also registers outrage and fear' (*White Skin/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 16).

<sup>24</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas S. Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 79 (my emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Whyte, p. 285. From Beth Dickson, 'Class and Being in the Novels of William McIlvanney', in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Huggan, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> As Hobsbawm summarises: 'The novelty of the 19th century was that non-Europeans and their societies were increasingly, and generally, treated as inferior, undesirable, feeble and backward, even infantile' (*The Age of Empire*, p. 79).

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<sup>30</sup> Aaron Kelly, *Irvine Welsh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 116.

<sup>31</sup> Ellen-Raïssa Jackson and Willy Maley, 'Birds of a Feather: A Postcolonial Reading of Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares*', in *Revista de Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, No. 41 (2000), p. 191.

<sup>32</sup> Arguably, a similar criticism can be made of the comparison Douglas S. Mack makes between the English attitude towards Scots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the racist attitude towards Africans: 'Those at the power-centre of British society in its Imperial heyday tended to use *Scotch* as a word (like *nigger* or *wog*) calculated to convey something rather different from respectful and affectionate acceptance of the persons so described. Manifestly, the "Scotch" were infinitely more comfortable and infinitely better rewarded under the Empire than the "niggers", but to be called either "nigger" or "Scotch" was to be reminded with some force that you were not "one of us"' (*Scottish Fiction and the British Empire*, p. 52).

<sup>33</sup> Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> The famous case of Emmett Till occurred in 1955 in Mississippi. Till, 14 years old at the time, was kidnapped and brutally murdered allegedly for saying 'bye baby' to a white woman. His death was instrumental in instigating the formation of the civil rights movement. (See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/index.html>)

<sup>38</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.

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<sup>39</sup> McClintock, p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, this is the argument of Savran's *Taking it Like a Man*.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>44</sup> Schoene-Harwood, p. 156.

<sup>45</sup> Maley and Jackson, p. 193.