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K. M. Newton

William McIlvanney's *Docherty*:
Last of the Old or Precursor of the New?

The recent resurgence in Scottish fiction has tended to be seen as having its beginnings in the early 1980s with the publication of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) and James Kelman's first book of short stories, *Not Not while the Giro* (1983). The work of William McIlvanney, arguably the most interesting Scottish novelist writing in the 1960s and 1970s, has not been regarded as a significant influence on later development; indeed, it is seen as exemplifying a "traditional" approach to representing the working class against which writers such as Kelman are reacting. Cairns Craig writes in an essay on Kelman: "The difference between Kelman's presentation of working-class life and the traditional version can be seen clearly if we compare his work with the major contribution to working-class fiction of the 1970s, William McIlvanney's *Docherty* (1975)." Whereas *Docherty*, argues Craig, focuses "on the heroism of a working-class survivor, a heroism based on a belief in a fundamental set of communal values...Kelman's central characters...are always those who see the illusoriness of such traditional modes of solidarity."¹ In this essay I want to question this judgment as it relates to *Docherty*, clearly McIlvanney's most significant novel, and in particular to challenge the view that McIlvanney's work belongs to an earlier phase of Scottish writing and has little in common with writing in the 1980s and 1990s.

¹Cairns Craig, "Resisting Arrest: James Kelman," in Randall Stevenson and G. Wallace, eds., *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 101. Henceforth *Scottish Novel*.

Three things stand out much recent Scottish fiction: its focus on working-class life; its use of urban Scots as a literary medium, with language being raised by implication as an issue; and its refusal to separate art from politics. All of these are at the center of *Docherty*. One can agree with Craig that "traditional modes of solidarity" are absent in Kelman's writing, but this is not the same as saying they are seen as illusory. If Kelman believed such values never existed or never could exist then this would make him a nihilistic and apolitical writer. I would argue that a belief in working-class solidarity as an ideal underlies the work of both writers, but whereas McIlvanney depicts it as a presence in the past, Kelman's predominant concern is with its absence in the present. McIlvanney, however, is also aware of this absence in the present, and one of the major concerns in *Docherty* is to examine why that solidarity broke down.

McIlvanney's work tends to be characterized as belonging to a realist tradition that offers little scope for innovation or experiment, another factor which is seen as separating it from the work of later Scottish novelists such as Kelman which breaks with classic realist forms of representation. But I want to suggest that *Docherty* exhibits a literary self-consciousness that previous critics have tended to ignore, that in particular it exploits myth and literary allusion in quite subtle ways. There is evidence of an agonistic relationship with various literary predecessors. Influence and allusion are not employed in an orthodox fashion; rather, the novel implicitly enters into conflict with certain classic predecessors and how they represent working-class life.

In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence, perhaps the greatest writer of working-class origins, had represented miners as crude and animalistic. The focus of his novel is on the developing consciousness of Paul Morel and his identification with the bourgeois aspirations of his mother. His miner father had been portrayed as brutish, speaking a crude dialect. There is little or no sympathy, ostensibly at least, for working-class life and values, with the middle-class mother having greater power over her children than the working-class father. McIlvanney reverses this Laurentian perspective: the author's sympathies are clearly with the working class and the Paul Morel figure in the work, Conn, remains true both to his father and to his class. Yet there is no sentimentalizing of working-class life or miners in the manner of a novel like Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*. *Docherty* is a revisionary account of the working class that rejects those forms of representation that had been dominant previously.

What is interesting about the novel is not so much that it gives one a credible and unsentimental picture of working-class life that challenges alternative presentations, both negative and positive, but that it represents twentieth-century working-class life as superior in a spiritual sense to the forms of life lived by those who belong to the middle and upper classes. Yet how could such a fictional strategy avoid idealization and sentimentalization, for how could people who are deprived of culture and civilization in the ordinary sense

possess the means of creating any tenable alternative to bourgeois values? Such a skeptical view is perhaps most forcefully expressed in a critical comment by George Eliot on Dickens's representation of the working class when she refers to "the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want."² But *Docherty*'s claim for the spiritual superiority of the working class does not rest on its possession of "high morality and refined sentiment." That would be to characterize the spiritually superior in bourgeois terms. Indeed it is arguable that one of the weaknesses of the dominant realist tradition in the novel is its failure to represent convincingly working-class life, working-class characters tending to be peripheral and represented in stereotypical terms. In *Docherty*, in contrast, a reversal takes place: working-class life is at the center and represented by characters with complex consciousnesses while middle-class life is placed at the periphery.

The novel sets up a conflict between the working class and the middle class right from the start. In the first chapter a respectable middle-class family walk down High Street while Tam Docherty and his family and neighbors are sitting outside. This family observe the people of High Street with a mixture of wonder, pity and disgust. The man pats Conn on the head causing the following reaction from Tam:

Looking up, Conn felt his father's hand fit tightly, like a helmet, over his head.
And his father's voice cleft the calmness of his play like a lightning-flash.
'Why don't ye bring fuckin' cookies wi' ye? An' then you could throw them
tae us!'
Conn's mother hissed, 'Tam!'
Immediately Conn had a feeling he would forget but would experience again.
It was a completely familiar and secure happening transformed instantly into
something foreign and frightening. He saw and heard but couldn't understand....
Some of the dust of that brief, explosive moment settled on Conn for good.³

This middle-class family consider working-class people to belong to a lower species like animals in a zoo, as Tam realizes. Some working-class people, such as Tam's friend Dougie, just accept this and are not bothered by it, but Tam Docherty rejects it totally and so does the novel. The basis of Tam's rejection is intuitive; the novel, however, explores the justification that underlies Tam's sense of his own dignity and attacks the view of those—such as George Eliot—who would reject such a claim to dignity on the grounds that since working-class people live a life of squalor cut off from culture in the conventional sense there can be no means of transcendence.

²George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford, 1992), p. 265.

³William McIlvanney, *Docherty* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 30-31. Henceforth *Docherty*.

Another incident which shows the novel's rejection of the idea of the superiority of bourgeois values over those of the working class is Conn's temptation by middle-class values. Again a classic novel's embodiment of a class conflict in which the working class loses out is put into reverse in *Docherty*. Miss Gilfillan, an elderly woman from a middle-class background whose economic circumstances have led to her living in a working-class district, decides that she will give Conn the benefit of her kind of culture as a reward for Tam's having come to her rescue when a man was looking through her window. There is an obvious literary analogy. In *Great Expectations* Pip is taken to visit the upper-class Miss Havisham and from that moment feels ashamed of his working-class background and longs to escape from it. Dickens's attitude to Pip's sense of shame is ambivalent: clearly the Havisham household is rotten through and through though the young Pip fails to see it, but Pip's working-class situation is also shown to be limiting and there is no indication in the novel that Pip would have done better to have remained a blacksmith all his life despite his later problems. In contrast to Dickens in *Great Expectations*, McIlvanney has his protagonist see through the emptiness of bourgeois values in the shape of Miss Gilfillan. The narrator does not disguise his negative view of her:

High Street was to her just the dregs of humanity, riff-raff, scum. Even living among them, she had remained a tourist, clinging to her past like a passport... She was going 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 (*Docherty*, p. 81).

It's significant that Miss Gilfillan says to Conn: "Wouldn't you like to be a gentleman?" (*Docherty*, p. 82), since in *Great Expectations* Pip is to be made into a gentleman and accepts it unquestioningly as superior to his situation as a blacksmith. Conn at first indicates his interest in becoming a gentleman, but Miss Gilfillan's means of tempting him into her home, giving him sweets, reveals the worthlessness of what she has to offer:

She gave him a couple now, and he didn't like them. They were chocolate on the outside, jelly-soft inside, mushy to the teeth the way he imagined snails would be. He liked hard sweets.... The small gift and what it meant to him epitomised their times together" (*Docherty*, p. 82).

The fact that there's a grandfather clock in her house that has stopped is another parallel with Miss Havisham's house where all the clocks have also stopped. Unlike Pip, Conn rejects what she represents: "Looking back on [his experience] much later, he had the feeling of having been in a mausoleum" (*Docherty*, p.83).

In *Docherty*, then, the middle class is associated with deadness and thus has little of worth to offer to the working class. On the contrary it is clear that working-class life is intrinsically of higher value. In his representation of life

in High Street McIlvanney shows that working-class people live a form of life imbued with the values one associates with a pre-capitalist type of society in which the community identifies with a value system based on honor which determines action and how people treat each other. This set of values is not worked out or justified on any rationalistic basis: it is quite instinctive. It is presented in the novel particularly through the imagery McIlvanney employs, most obviously in his depiction of the various fights that take place. The most significant of these fights are ritualistic in the manner of encounters in Arthurian legends or classic western movies in which the good guy always gives the bad guy the chance to draw his gun first before shooting him down. For example, when Tadger at the end of Book I, Chapter 4, deals with a drunk who challenges the group of men who assemble at the street corner, Tadger emerges as the groups' "champion." The group assembled at the street corner is like the community who meet in the Mead Hall in an Anglo-Saxon poem such as *Beowulf*: "The whole thing had the quality of a communal action, and had been conducted without rancour.... The corner was club-room, mess-deck, mead-hall. It was where a man went to be himself among his friends" (*Docherty*, p. 48).

Another incident of the same type occurs when Tam tackles the Irishman who has been looking through Miss Gilfillan's window. Again it is a ritualistic kind of violence in which certain procedures have to be observed. However, McIlvanney is aware that even for someone like Tam the violence can get out of hand and he almost goes too far:

The man had subsided against the wall, blood spattering from his nose and cuts on his face, and still Tam punched, following his head as it slithered to the ground, rabid with anger. As the man fell, Tam kicked him in the stomach and his leg was flailing back a second time when Jenny's voice screamed, 'Tam! Fur Goad's sake, stoap! Stoap!' (*Docherty*, p. 77).

Tam himself is shocked at the fact that he lost control and cannot understand how he could have done it. But though the novel shows the dangers of violence, this shouldn't divert us from noticing what is more important: the relation between violence and honor.

McIlvanney recognizes that working-class life is often violent, but the fact that he seems to see it as defining working-class manhood has caused problems for critics. James Campbell writes in a review of *Docherty*:

I am worried that McIlvanney enjoys his violent characters' encounters more than a conscientious novelist should; he displays an unwholesome relish for a face transformed to 'A bloody pulp.'⁴

⁴James Campbell, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 July 1983, p. 732. Henceforth Campbell.

And Beth Dickson takes a similar view:

McIlvanney has argued that, though people object to the depiction of physical violence, the violence of social structures depicted in his novels does not receive the same criticism, though it is the greater evil. Yet if the violence that society wreaks on its victims is worse, that does not *excuse* personal violence, even it is makes it understandable.⁵

The claim that violence in a personal sense can never be excused derives from middle-class moral assumptions, assumptions which the novel is challenging. Though the dangers of violence are apparent, it is undeniable that it is often presented positively in the novel. Fighting is something that virtually all working-class men have experience of, and of course this distinguishes working-class from middle-class life in which violence is conventionally viewed with abhorrence. But in *Docherty* fighting is not represented as a mindless giving way to destructive impulses. From a conventional middle-class perspective such violence and fighting can only be condemned as a form of atavistic behavior, but the novel sees it as being inseparable from an ethic of honor that one associates with traditional or pre-capitalist societies and which one finds embodied in Norse sagas, Arthurian legends, and traditional western movies of the John Ford type. In this working-class society to be a "man" is very important. And what counts if one is to be a man is not something quantifiable or specific, like having brains or talent or being successful, but something more spiritual. Boys are initiated into a concept of manhood: "With the gravity of a committee specially appointed for that purpose, they [Conn and his friends] worked on the definitive concept of a man" (*Docherty*, p. 147). This is intrinsic to "an order" and "a code of conduct" that underlies "the apparent anarchy" (*Docherty*, p. 32) of the social life of the working class.

This of course raises the question of the role of women in McIlvanney's fiction, which I shall discuss later. Tam immediately recognizes that the Irishman who is looking through Miss Gilfillan's window is performing an act alien to the code of honor Tam accepts, especially as Miss Gilfillan is, as Tam puts it, "a maiden lady," and Tam's concept of manhood demands that he take responsibility for the situation. Most other people in High Street are also aware that the Irishman's behavior is unacceptable but, being on a more ordinary human level, they fear confrontation with him. Of course, if something like that happened in a middle-class neighborhood the standard response would be to call the police. But working-class life, as McIlvanney represents it, retains contact with the heroic. Tam confronts the challenge personally and in vanquishing his foe reaffirms his status as hero.

⁵Beth Dickson, "Class and Being in the Novels of William McIlvanney," in *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 59. Henceforth Dickson.

Tam's status is not just a matter of his being good at fighting. People in the community recognize that though some of their number might have been able to defeat Tam in a fight, he would never give in if he believed he was in the right and therefore would eventually triumph. Tam is also special in recognizing that certain values are absolute and that consequently there can be no compromise with them even if one's personal circumstances seem to demand it. Thus when Tam's mother dies and the other members of the family are reluctant to take his father into their home Tam would rather accept him than let him go into an old people's institution, even though he is in a less favorable position to take him than any of the others.

One of the most powerful scenes in the novel is when Tam's sense of what is right is most seriously challenged, when the father of a girl whom his son Angus has got pregnant comes round to the house. Angus, who rejects his father's values for a more individualist philosophy, refuses to marry her, so that the conflict between them that has been building up all the way through the novel comes to a head. When Tam is challenged by his eldest son Mick as to what is to be gained by marrying this girl to someone who does not want her, Tam comes closest to articulating the code by which he and his working-class heritage live:

'Us an' folk like us hiv goat the nearest thing tae nothin' in this world. A' that filters doon tae us in shite.... The only thing we've goat is wan anither. That's why ye never sell yer mates.... That's why ye respect yer weemenkind. Because what we make oorselves is whit we are.... We're wan anither. Tae survive, we'll respect wan anither. When the time comes, we'll a' move forward thegither, or nut at all. That's whit Ah've goat against you boay.' He pointed at Angus. 'You're a fuckin' deserter. Ah don't harbour deserters. Ye're wi' the rest o' us or ye go elsebit' (*Docherty*, p. 277).

The drama of the novel lies in the fact that the code of honor by which Tam and the working class live is gradually crumbling. This is Tam's tragedy, and more generally a tragedy for the working class. And the forces that are causing that crumbling exist within Tam's own family. However, though the novel clearly values greatly the working class's code of honor, it also shows its limitations. First of all, it does not offer the hope of change. It is in some respects a conservative force which makes the working class preoccupied with its own sense of worth and value, and it also prevents working-class people attaining sufficient degree of self-consciousness to go on to make a critique of the situation they are in as a necessary prelude to changing it:

It wasn't surprising that the champions of reform, calling them to their cause, found them intractably engaged in inconsequential arguments over a pint, stealing a hare when they could have had the acres that it ran on, pursuing private vendettas. For they believed that the hare was all they would be needing till the next time. It was a fundamentalism frustrating to the more sophisticated, whether he was the owner

elevated by his interest in painting or the political theorist baffled by their reluctance to animate his theories. What the socially superior failed to see was that they were the least conditioned members of society (*Docherty*, pp. 243-4).

The last sentence here shows that McIlvanney even finds that this has its positive side, and his claim that they are “the least conditioned members of society” again emphasizes their superior spiritual status. Tam has an intuitive sense that things have got to change, thus his opposition to Conn’s going down the pit. Education for him is the way out. But education only offers a solution initially at the individual level, and in practice, as one sees from the case of Mr. Pirrie, the schoolteacher, it often only makes working-class people reject their own class and identify with bourgeois values.

Tam’s two eldest sons both reject their father’s code, one from a right-wing, the other from a left-wing perspective. Both admire their father but for different things. What Angus admires is the physical prowess of his father. Whereas Tam is disgusted at himself for getting carried away in the fight with the Irishman, it is the excess of violence that really appeals to Angus: “Angus lay talking about it for a time, paring everything that had happened to those moments of unleashed ferocity when his father had become a demolition machine. The rest appeared irrelevant to him” (*Docherty*, p. 70). It is the sheer power of his father that Angus admires. He perverts Tam’s status as hero, Tam as the heroic defender of the working-class’s code of honor, into a cult of personality in which he, Angus, feels that he is so physically powerful that nothing can defeat him. He thus comes to believe that he does not need anyone but himself. His own physical power is superior to the code.

There is an interesting scene in which Angus thinks he can take on the mantle of his father and use his physical power to deal with a problem that has arisen with his sister, whose husband is beating her. Normally, this is the kind of situation that Tam would and could have dealt with, but by this point in the novel Tam is in decline. Yet though Angus has the physical power to demolish his brother-in-law, he lacks the moral passion that Tam in his prime would have brought to bear on the situation:

In this place Angus’s words seemed empty, even to himself. The concept of some kind of morality that he had been stumbling towards, to which he had been trying to bring Jack, had seemed important, even impressive.... He lost his hold on what was happening. He felt that, in some way he couldn’t understand, it was Jack who was aggressing on him (*Docherty*, p. 251).

Though he hits Jack, he is only going through the motions. On its own, his physical superiority proves empty. Angus, unable to combine fighting with a code of honor, represents the unacceptable face of violence, and critics who condemn the violence in the novel *tout court* can be accused of a lack of critical discrimination in failing to draw distinctions between Tam’s violence and Angus’s.

We see Angus's individualism exemplified in two ways: when he refuses to marry the girl whom he has made pregnant, as already mentioned, and his rejection of solidarity with his fellow miners in order to adopt a kind of miniature capitalist procedure of forming his own little group of workers with himself as paymaster. For Tam this is a class betrayal, but from Angus's individualist perspective this is merely a means to exploit his physical advantages. Though Tam is the champion of his class he is also its prisoner: in refusing to desert his comrades, in sticking uncompromisingly to the code of honor, he is trapped in the situation in which the working class finds itself. Angus sees this and is determined to break out, to better himself even if that means rejecting his class and its code. One of the interests of the novel is its anticipation of Thatcherism and the divisions it created within the working class. Angus exemplifies workers so devoted to self-interest and their material well-being that they end up as Tories, identifying with ideas such as self-help, free-enterprise, getting on in life. The effect of this approach to change will be to disintegrate working-class solidarity and the code of honor that underlay it. Someone like Tam combined the individualistic, the heroic, with a communal ethos. Tam was superior to those who made up his community, but he used his superior qualities to serve the community's interests. Angus, in contrast, rejects community for an individualist ideology.

Mick, who has lost an arm and the sight of an eye in the war, also rejects what his father represents, though from a quite different perspective. What he admires his father for is his passionate commitment to the working class, but for Mick this commitment in the final analysis is a conservative force in political terms. Being disabled, and thus unable to assert himself physically, Mick achieves a sufficient degree of alienation from his working-class situation to stand outside it and to examine it critically. If things are going to change for the working class, he believes it has to acquire a greater degree of political self-consciousness. Mick commits himself to the politicization of the working class and becomes a Communist. But the danger of this solution is similar to the danger of Angus's individualism; in urging the working class to become analytic and politically self-conscious in order to further social change he will in the process undermine working-class communality. Mick's frustration with working-class passivity in the face of exploitation leads him to ignore the positive aspects of his father and his code of honor. He continually tells Tam he is wrong and he can't appreciate Tam's ethical attack on Angus for cutting himself off from his fellow-workers or his view of the situation in which Angus refuses to marry the girl he has made pregnant.

Mick and Angus appear to be opposites but they are more alike than they think, as is suggested in their responses to two typical examples of the communality of working-class life. Mick sees some men playing football with a cigarette packet and the following exchange takes place between him and his mother:

'Luk at them! Big grown men. Like wee lassies playin' at peevers.'

'They're dain' nae herm, Mick.'

'Are they no'? They'd make ye sick. They'll dae onythin' but think.'...

'Can ye no' see hoo stupid they've been a' their days, mither. Lettin' themselves be trampled oan? Dae they never get fed up waitin'? Can they no' see it's got to chinge? Fur Ah can see it. An' the quicker the better' (*Docherty*, pp. 267-8).

Mick's disgust is similar to the frustration Angus feels at the workers' absorption in Scottish dancing:

'That's whit they've been daein' a' their lives. Dancin' to whatever tune gets played. Whit's may feyther waitin' fur? They're no' gonny chinge. They're a' too guid a losers. That's whit they're best at. They've had that much practice. Well, no me' (*Docherty*, p. 291).

It is the youngest son Conn who is the main vehicle for hope in the novel, since he values what his father represents yet is also able to understand the reasons for his brothers' critical attitudes and to compete with them on their own levels. He can hold his own with Angus in a fight and also engage with Mick in intellectual debate. He articulates the novel's rejection of Mick's rigid communist philosophy that cannot accommodate what Tam stands for:

What Mick said was too simple. What had been a dialogue had turned into a pronouncement. It was as if Mick hadn't heard a lot of what had happened, had just missed out so much that was important—their father's respect for people, no matter who they were, their mother's patient persistence, the fact that they had only been able to reach this place because they had all loved one another (*Docherty*, p. 321).

Unlike Angus he can see beyond the physical power of his father to the moral force of the man; unlike Mick he strongly identifies with the communal solidarity of the working class, most strongly represented in the scene in Book II, Chapter 10, when the family goes away for the weekend:

People exploded on them from all sides and the week-end became for Conn a daze of impressions. He was poked and talked at, his hair ruffled, his biceps felt. Gusts of indecipherable laughter kept taking place. He met bizarre clusters of unknown features and was taught to call them Uncle and Auntie, only to find behind their formidable fronts unexpected recesses of kindness where shillings were kept for weans and sly jokes hoarded (*Docherty*, p. 183).

Unlike his father Conn realizes the danger of seeking to better himself through education and becoming only like Mr. Pirrie. Yet in having to function as a synthesizing force in the novel, without it being clear how the con-

flicts the novel so powerfully presents can be overcome, Conn's credibility as a character suffers, especially when compared to such powerful characterizations as Tam and Angus.

An obvious link between *Docherty* and later Scottish fiction, particularly that of Kelman and Irvine Welsh, is the uncompromising use of urban Scots and the implicit claim that the working class has been denied the right to literary representation because its language, with the habitual use of four-letter words, was seen as a bastardized linguistic form that could never have any claim to literary status. Arguably McIlvanney's use of Scots in *Docherty* is as powerful in literary terms as anything in Kelman or Welsh, as a passage such as that quoted above when Tam rounds on Angus illustrates. Also in the key scene when Conn refuses to translate the Scots word "sheugh" into the standard English "gutter" despite the threats of his teacher Mr. Pirrie, we have a rejection of the middle class's belief in the inferiority of the working class. Mr. Pirrie and the educational system, in refusing to accept that Ayrshire speech is proper language, implicitly devalues Conn's community, in which such language is intrinsic. The refusal of the middle class to recognize the vitality and power of working-class speech is a sign of its being trapped in a dead ideology. However, McIlvanney has been given little credit for anticipating later developments in Scottish fiction because he is seen as caught up in linguistic contradiction. James Campbell writes: "*Docherty* is written in two entirely different vernaculars—Tam Docherty's speech and William McIlvanney's commentary—which would not recognize each other if they passed in the street" (Campbell, p. 732). There does appear to be an obvious contradiction in the novel's attitude to language. Mr. Pirrie's belief that standard English is proper language and Scots is not is denied dramatically in the novel, but McIlvanney's use of standard English in his narration and his confinement of Scots to the speech of his characters could be said to be complicit with Mr. Pirrie's attitude; at a thematic level the novel is saying that working-class life based on communally shared codes is superior to middle-class values, whereas its rhetoric—in the wider sense of the term—in which standard English operates as a metalanguage that marginalizes Scots by confining it to speech would seem to convey the opposite message.

The root of this apparent contradiction lies in McIlvanney's adoption of classic narrative form in his fiction with narration clearly separated from the speech of the characters. McIlvanney is aware of the contradiction: "all I can do, it seems to me, is inhabit the paradoxes as healthily as possible and try to embrace the dichotomies." Writing the narration in Scots would be a false solution as his education has cut him off from Scots: "I spoke Scots until I was five, and I went to primary school, and I was taught English—what I resent is

that I was taught English to the *suppression* of Scots.”⁶ Writers such as Kelman and Welsh resolve this problem of language by rejecting classic narrative form in favor of various formal alternatives, such as first-person narration, stream of consciousness, or a radical use of the indirect free style.

The apparent linguistic dichotomy created by McIlvanney’s remaining faithful to classic narrative form⁷ is one of the main reasons he has been seen not as a major precursor of the new developments in Scottish fiction but as part of the past. Yet it is too simple merely to accuse him of formal conservatism. He has, I think, in *Docherty* made a conscious aesthetic choice, one which is defensible given his aims as a writer. Two aspects of his work are fundamental—his political commitment to socialism and his desire to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. Classic narrative form allows him to create a metalanguage that stands apart from the consciousnesses of his characters and thus to express his socialist vision clearly and unmistakably. No reader of *Docherty* could fail to notice the book’s commitment to socialism.

Beth Dickson makes the following comparison between McIlvanney and Kelman:

McIlvanney chooses to *tell* us about the character by using whatever language or level of discourse best reflects what characters experience... Kelman is happier to *show* his character’s consciousness, using only language which it is likely that a person in that situation would have used (Dickson, p. 56).

In an article entitled “Voices in Empty Houses: The Novel of Damaged Identity,” Gavin Wallace reinforces this position when he refers to the “polarity” between Kelman’s and McIlvanney’s work: “In the nihilistic labyrinths of repetition of Kelman’s minimalist monologues, narrative no longer renders but enacts,” and contrasts that with “McIlvanney’s more traditional naturalistic aesthetic” (*Scottish Novel*, p. 22). The New Critical tradition, influenced by modernist literary practice, elevated showing above telling. But for a writer as politically committed as McIlvanney, to abandon telling in favor of showing creates the problem that the reader may miss the political point. For example, it is possible that ordinary readers could read Kelman as a Beckett-like writer, whose work has no obvious political implication despite the fact that Kelman views literature “as a living art form, as a dynamic activity that might involve [ordinary people’s] friends, family and neighbours,”⁸ a declaration similar to

⁶*Scottish Writers Talking*, ed. Isobel Murray (East Linton, 1996), p. 137. Henceforth *Scottish Writers*.

⁷In one of the Laidlaw novels, *Strange Loyalties*, however, McIlvanney uses first-person narration.

⁸Cited in Craig, *Scottish Novel*, p. 100.

many of McIlvanney's. And though there is almost certainly a political subtext to *Trainspotting*, doubtless a substantial proportion of its myriad readers will have missed it.

Of course one can defend writers such as Kelman and Welsh who adopt modernist techniques with their basis in showing on the grounds that—as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin argued in debate with Georg Lukács and devotees of social realism⁹—any art which has a revolutionary political agenda must innovate aesthetically and stylistically and break with traditional forms. But though critics have generally sympathized with Brecht and Benjamin rather than with Lukács in this debate over modernism, such critics have seldom shown any interest in how actual readers respond to modernist texts, just as they are little perturbed by the fact that numerous twentieth-century writers have combined modernist techniques with extreme right-wing political views.

For McIlvanney these are matters of concern. He has been critical of the anti-democratic implications of modernism, accusing T. S. Eliot, for example, of championing “the aesthetics of elitism.”¹⁰ McIlvanney's move into detective fiction—“[s]ome critics felt that this move retrograde” (Dickson, p. 56)—was motivated partly by a desire to reach a wider audience: “What fascinated me was, here was a form which was popular, and therefore you had the chance that quite a few people might read it” (*Scottish Writers*, p. 142).

The point I wish to make here is that McIlvanney is essentially on the side of Lukács and the social realists—in his essay on Eliot he refers to the need to explore “a socialist aesthetic” (*Sacred Wood*, p. 193)—in the debate about modernism and that this is a position which is defensible despite the fact that the Brecht-Benjamin perspective has been supported by most critical commentators on this debate. Rather than consigning McIlvanney to a traditionalism that has been superseded by the formal innovations of writers like Gray, Kelman and Welsh, it would be more fruitful to recognize that there are advantages and disadvantages with the artistic choices any writer makes. With McIlvanney, classic narrative form creates a dichotomy in his fiction of which he is aware, but it allows him not only to depict the grim reality of working-class life but also to express a moral and political vision with a clarity and force that no reader of *Docherty* can ignore. Writers such as Kelman and Welsh avoid such a dichotomy and in consequence achieve a power of representation of working-class life unique in its intensity, but by banishing classic narrative form or telling they cannot prevent the possibility that their ordinary readers, if not critics, might interpret their texts as nihilistic, amoral, or apoliti-

⁹See Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1973), and *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London, 1977).

¹⁰William McIlvanney, “The Sacred Wood Revisited,” in *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh and London, 1993), p. 191. Henceforth *Sacred Wood*.

cal. Sophisticated critical intervention is necessary in order to control such responses. Thus Cairns Craig writes of Kelman:

Unity of voice replaces unity of political or social purpose as the foundation of solidarity: the text *enacts* at a linguistic level what it points to as absent in the world, a communality that transcends the absolute isolation of the individual human being. The fulfilment of working-class values that can no longer be completed in politics or in history is completed *textually*—resisting the arrest of solidarity and of political action by a linguistic substitution that insists on unity even as it presents disunity (*Scottish Novel*, pp. 103-4).

Here perhaps lies the dilemma for committed left-wing writers who adopt modernist techniques. Even a critical text such as Craig's which politicizes Kelman is unlikely to be accessible to the great majority of ordinary readers, most of whom almost certainly would find it incomprehensible. McIlvanney may be open to the accusation of compromising artistically—particularly in his decision to move into detective fiction—in order both to avoid the problems associated with modernism and to have a political impact on as wide an audience as possible, but critics have tended to ignore the fact that there is a tension between art and politics in modern writing. His way of resolving that tension—by rejecting modernist techniques in the interests of accessibility—should be respected. And as I have tried to show above, even if a novel adopts classic narrative form, this does not mean it is incapable of innovation, both formally and thematically. Indeed in *Docherty*, it can be argued, McIlvanney set the agenda for many of the preoccupations of the novelists who were to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s.

One more aspect of McIlvanney needs to be discussed since, like his use of classic narrative form, it has been used to question his relevance to contemporary writing—his depiction of women. Beth Dickson writes: "Two aspects of this depiction [of character] have disturbed critics: McIlvanney's descriptions of violence and his treatment of female characters" (Dickson, p. 59). I have already discussed the question of violence, but his work might seem even more vulnerable to the accusation that, in relation to female characters, it either creates salt-of-the-earth working-class stereotypes or else women who, as Dickson puts it, "are poisonous, brittle, materialistic, empty creatures who want to consume their husbands and whose aim is upward social mobility" (Dickson, p. 60). To deal with this question fully would mean going beyond *Docherty*, but this novel does give one some indication as to why the problem arises. As I have argued, *Docherty* stresses the importance of "being a man" in working-class culture and does not flinch from equating that with a code of honor that may require violent expression. Clearly this creates a problem for those women who may aspire to a similar level of self-realization to men. Working-class men can, potentially at least, achieve individual self-realization while remaining committed to working-class solidarity as one sees with Tam Docherty. Though a character such as Angus rejects working-class solidarity

for an individualism that takes account only of his own interests, he could have attempted to emulate his father and identified himself with the working-class code of honor, directing his physical power and strength to support his class as his father had done. However, for working-class women only one authentic role seems to be available, and that demands sacrifice of self; there is no acceptable role for a working-class woman who aspires to something beyond devoting herself to husband and family, with the result that those working-class women who aspire to self-realization inevitably gravitate towards middle-class values and life-styles, and in the process become, like Angus, class traitors. Angus, however, had a choice, since for a man self-realization is possible within the working class; whereas working-class women who desire self-realization have no choice but to desert their class. McIlvanney's negative portraits of women in his fiction reflect not misogyny but his detestation of the middle class, and as he sees it, its spiritual emptiness.

McIlvanney therefore exposes a problem both for the working class and for women—does the working class offer women any authentic role other than being a wife and mother in the manner of Tam Docherty's wife, Jenny? His regard for women who identify with that role is clear in his fiction, but his animus towards women who identify with the middle class, such as Ena Laidlaw in *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, is equally clear. It would be unfair, I think, to expect McIlvanney to come up with a solution to this problem, which is really one of female identity. It is for working-class women to find a solution, and perhaps more particularly for working-class women writers to confront it. Among contemporary Scottish writers are some women who are working class in background, such as Janice Galloway. These writers clearly are not in favor of the "salt-of-the-earth" wife and mother being the only identity available for working-class women, nor do they suggest that working-class women should forsake their class for the middle class. Rather a new identity for working-class women needs to be negotiated. One would not expect such women writers to be sympathetic to McIlvanney's depiction of women in his fiction, but at least he has exposed the fact that women have an identity problem within working-class culture and, though he seems to have no solution as to how it can be resolved, he has perhaps done both women readers and writers some service in opening it.

The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article—whether *Docherty* should be seen as the last of the old or the precursor of the new—is not clear cut. In terms of form and technique McIlvanney does look back to classic narrative form in which the discourse of the narrator and the speech of the characters are clearly demarcated but, as I have suggested, this does not constitute an unthinking conservatism; it is rather a conscious and defensible literary choice, given his commitment to socialism, and reflects a desire to communicate a clear and unambiguous socialist perspective to as wide an audience as possible. At a thematic level, *Docherty* clearly anticipates the work of later Scottish writers such as Kelman and Welsh. However, the power of its

representation of working-class life, its concern with the question of language, its refusal to see art and politics as separate, have not been sufficiently recognized as anticipating later Scottish fiction, not only because the use of classic narrative form links it with the traditional realist novel, but also because the treatment of violence and the depiction of women have tended to associate it with an outmoded conception of masculinity. But, as I have tried to show, the latter judgment grossly oversimplifies how violence and women are represented in *Docherty*. New literary developments never emerge from nowhere, and instead of too readily associating *Docherty* with the traditional novel and with outmoded ideas, Scottish critics should rather acknowledge its role as a major precursor of the resurgence of Scottish fiction in the 1980s and 1990s.

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