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David Leon Higdon

“Wild Justice” in the Works of Irvine Welsh

Without question, revenge has been a constant in Western literature, and the issues involved in revenge have provided audiences with both sensationally violent and bloody scenes as well as sublimely profound encounters. In the plays of William Shakespeare alone, we see this range from the ridiculous to the sublime. On the one hand, the raped, handless, tongueless Lavinia of *Titus Andronicus* holds a basin in her stumps to catch the blood gushing from the throats of her two ravishers as they are slaughtered by Titus and Publicus, and in the next scene, Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, is served flesh from these dead sons' bodies at a banquet. Before slitting their throats, Titus tells the sons, “I will be revenged” (5.2.196) and then declares his intention “To make this banquet...More stern and bloody than the Centaurs' Feast” (5.2.203-4). On the other hand, there are the anguished existential meditations of Hamlet before he accepts the ghost's demand for revenge and sweeps into actions, which leave the stage littered with the bodies of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and himself. Whether we are considering Aeschylus's *Orestes* or Seneca's *Thyestes*, Thomas Kyd's *Hieronimo* or Cyril Tourneur's *Vindice*, Mario Puzo's *Michael Corleone* or Stephen King's *Andy Dufresne*, revenge has remained an ever-present concern.¹ It is not the concern, however, that one ex-

¹These are the protagonists, respectively, of *The Oresteia* (458 BC), *Thyestes* (45-55 AD), *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), *The Godfather* (1969), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1982). Theodore Ziolkowski underlines the almost universal appeal of revenge stories when he comments, “Law as the foundation of civil society and as

pects to find explored in postmodern fiction, especially postmodern fiction saturated with the ecky, smack, shagging, acid house world of the skag boys Irvine Welsh has depicted in *Trainspotting* (1993), *The Acid House* (1994), *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995), *Ecstasy* (1996), *Filth* (1998), and *Glue* (2001). Indeed, much of the power of Welsh's works comes not from his realistic documentation of the contemporary "acid house," "eurotrash" milieu, or the novelty of the language, but from his corrosive exploitation of the very ancient and almost universal desire for revenge to repay perceived wrongs.

In filming *Trainspotting*, the screenwriters reassigned episodes from one character to another rather freely and also omitted episodes which could not be worked into the general tightening of focus on Mark Renton, Sick Boy, Tommy, Spud, and Begbie.² Two scenes in particular were omitted, perhaps not by accident since these scenes make powerful statements about revenge, so powerful that they would have significantly changed the tone of the movie. The scenes show the emotional and tonal range achieved by Welsh, in that one is a comic variation on a proverb—"never offend one's waitperson"—the other is a dark, horrific revenge of absolutely Jacobean nature and very possibly indebted specifically to *The Revenger's Tragedy* for some of its details. Both episodes show a wronged individual whom no institution will right; therefore, the individuals move fearlessly into a lawless realm to establish their own justice; moreover, they suggest the need to survey and evaluate the antithetical ways in which Welsh employs revenge in his short stories and novels.

"Eating Out," a chapter in *Trainspotting's* sixth grouping of episodes, presents a Scottish girl, Mark's onetime girlfriend, avenging herself on four male English tourists in a restaurant. She senses centuries of insults to her country and gender and very specific insults to herself in the boorish behavior of the four drunken men, colonials, she calls them, "white-settler types".³ They order a "couple of bottles of your best piss" (p. 302), leeringly appraise the waitperson as someone they "wouldn't kick...out of bed" (p. 302), affect accents in voices "ay arrogant, ignorant wealth unchallenged, untainted by sensitivity or intellect" (p. 303), and try to set up a date for later. The waitress's revenge is vulgar, crude, and absolutely, sickeningly thorough. She swishes her bloody tampon's "manky contents" (p. 304) through their tomato soup, pours her urine into their wine and over their fish, taking satisfaction in noting that the "pish

the embodiment of a people's ethical values resides explicitly or implicitly at the core of many of the world's greatest literary works, either as their theme or as their condition of ...being," *The Mirror of Justice: Literary Reflections of Legal Crises* (Princeton, 1997), p. 5.

²John Hodges adapted *Trainspotting* in 1995. The novel, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize, has now sold over half a million copies and has also been adapted as a play, which opened in March 1995 at the Citizens Theatre (Glasgow), later at the Edinburgh Festival and in London.

³Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (New York, 1996), p. 302. Henceforth *Trainspotting*.

has that stagnant, cloudy look, which suggests a urinary-tract infection" (p. 304). Finally, she places "a small runny turd" (p. 304) in the chocolate sauce for the profiteroles, and, as she watches the most obnoxious of the four men eat his ice cream laced with rat poison, she "feel[s] charged wi a great power, actually enjoying their insults" (p. 305). She decides that "in some circumstances, morality is relative" (p. 305), a subject to which she has been giving considerable thought lately since she must prepare a paper on this topic for her philosophy class. Just as one trusts the captain of a cruise liner, the pilot of an airplane, or the doctor in a clinic, one trusts a waitperson to place on the table well-prepared, uncontaminated food; otherwise, the guest-host relationship so valued in civilization will have been violated. The moment the men tell their joke, however—"What do you call a good-looking girl in Scotland?...A tourist!" (p. 302), the waitperson feels her honor and the honor of her culture at stake, and the excremental vision of the novel strikes home. (Welsh is tempted to reprise this scene in *Glue*, when Carl Ewart, watching Juice Terry ogle the waitress, thinks: "Ah didnae like the wey eh wis starin doon her cleavage. Ah've worked in restaurants n bars n ah hate cunts that think that yir just nowt, yir jist an object or a skivvy that's only pit oan this earth tae meet their gratification."⁴

Body fluids also figure prominently in an earlier episode, but revenge here is much darker, much more sinister, and definitely much more final. In "Bad Blood," a title which economically captures the nature of the vendetta code as well as the image of contaminated blood, Dave learns that he is HIV+, a life-shattering event in anyone's life, and he wants to know just how he became infected. He discovers the source is Donna, a former girlfriend, who has been raped and infected by Alan Venters—who just happens to be in Dave's AIDS self-help group. Dave's revenge is bone chilling in its destructiveness but highly imaginative in its calculations. How can he injure Alan, he asks himself, when Alan is already dying of an opportunistic infection? He decides that "[t]he disease could have his body; that was its victory, whatever malignant force it was. Mine would be a greater one, a more crushing one. I wanted his spirit. I planned to carve mortal wounds into his supposedly everlasting soul" (*Trainspotting*, pp. 242-3). When Davie discovers that Alan devotedly loves his five-year-old son, Kevin, by a woman he now rarely sees, his plot begins to take shape, with Dave imagining himself as "a semi-submerged crocodile eyeing a soft, furry animal drinking at the river's edge" (p. 243) and as an "avenging angel" (p. 248). Knowing that the boy is the only thing of value in Alan's life, Dave courts the boy's mother and, having established trust with her, begins to baby-sit the son. The climax is one a Jacobean revenge tragedian would have been proud to have written. Visiting Alan one night, Dave first makes him remember everything he did to Donna, then tells him how he

⁴Irvine Welsh, *Glue* (New York, 2001), pp. 234-5. Henceforth *Glue*.

contacted HIV through Donna. Next, he forces Alan to look at photographs of himself, Frances, and Kevin, and then one especially prepared photograph of Kevin, this after telling Alan, "Think of the worst possible thing I could do to make you pissed off.... Then multiply it by one thousand...and you're not even fuckin close" (p. 256). The photograph shows Kevin after he has apparently been tortured to death: "The blood was everywhere. It covered the lino in a dark puddle underneath Kevin's chair. Some of it shot outwards across the kitchen floor in squirted trails. An assortment of power tools, including a Bosch drill and a Black and Decker sander, in addition to various sharpened knives and screwdrivers, were laid out at the feet of the upright body" (p. 257). Dave tells Alan he sodomized Kevin to infect him with HIV and then murdered him during twenty minutes of excruciating torture with power drills before Kevin died, gasping "Daddy." With Alan in absolute despair and horror, David smothers him with a hospice pillow, thinking all the time, "[h]e'd checked out. More importantly, he'd done it in a state of tortured, agonized, misery" (p. 259). I should add that Dave cleverly staged the photograph and that Kevin is ironically still very much alive and totally unaware of the photo session. Indeed, Dave and Donna manage to reconcile, unusual closure for a revenge tale, but the revenge cycle is usually left quite open in the works.

Trainspotting ends with revenge postponed, perhaps indefinitely, because Mark Renton has "wronged" Begbie by stealing the take, which is to be split among the group. Given Begbie's propensity for physical violence, for crushing those whom he perceives have insulted him, and for his share of the money, Mark can be safe only through the exile he imposes on himself by traveling to Amsterdam, or through Begbie's being sentenced to prison. Mark is willing to run the risk, not only because of the size of the take but also because of the numerous wrongs he feels he has suffered from Begbie. Some accommodation obviously took place in Welsh's imagination, because in *Glue*, Renton appears momentarily. Carl Ewart recognizes him in Glasgow: "Renton, I think they call him.... I never thought much of that cunt, I heard he ripped off his mates. But I suppose we have to be strong enough to live with the fact that those closest to us will disappoint us from time to time" (*Glue*, p. 436). Renton has been free to return to Scotland only because Begbie is still in prison.

If placement of a story in a collection means anything at all, then "The Shooter," standing first in *The Acid House* (1994), tells the reader that revenge is a primary concern for Welsh. "The Shooter" is a bare, transparent narrative lacking the technical acrobatics of the collection's "Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel" and the title story as well as the thematic complexities of "The House of John Deaf" and "Eurotrash." It further stands apart from most of the other stories in that it is set in London, specifically the Dalston and Stoke Newington areas of North London, and deals with Scots who have come south, as do Mark Renton and others in *Trainspotting*. Marge, her husband Gary, his friend Jock, and Tony Whitworth make up the tangled quartet. Gary,

Jock, and Tony were involved in a robbery or scam some time in the past; Gary, captured and sentenced, has just been released from Wormwood Scrubs Prison; and Tony owes both Jock and Gary £1000 each as their part of the take. After eating the good dinner Marge has prepared, Gary and Jock visit Tony, intending to intimidate him physically through beating him into paying the money, but Gary kills him with a premeditated shotgun blast to his face.

What appears to be a simple contrast between the gullible, basically non-violent, trusting Jock, who has his doubts about the entire affair and almost refuses to participate when he learns that Gary has a gun, and the double-dealing Tony becomes a tale of crude revenge. In Jock's rooms after the murder, Gary justifies what he has done and how he has abused Jock by telling that while he himself was in prison, Tony had not only seduced Marge by flaunting his money but also "beasted little Lisa [Gary's daughter]... Made her go down on him, you know what I'm saying here,"⁵ and he further explains that to avenge himself, "I thought abaht hurting one of [Tony's] kids, *like an eye for an eye an all that bleeding cobblers*. I couldn't have done anything like that though, Jock, not to a little kiddie, that would make me no better than that fucking beast, that fucking nonce slag" (p. 8, emphasis added). Gary seems particularly concerned with the quality of his revenge and the morality of his action. His revenge must be commensurate with the wrongs against him and perceived by his mates as fully justified and fair. He himself has been loyal to the code operating throughout the story: he did not betray his mates; he served his time; and he expected to be treated fairly. Tony, on the other hand, has betrayed all three families by cheating on his wife, by failing to share money rightly with his mates, and by sexually corrupting a young girl simply because he had power over her. Also, Gary must operate outside the lawful institutions while being equally willing to accept whatever punishment society allots him for murdering Tony. Fredson Bowers reports a similar battle between the moral and the immoral encompassed in terms of revenge. After having his property confiscated and his wife driven mad by the actions of the Regent Murray in 1570, Hamilton shot Murray, then fled to France where he "liued certaine yeares after, protesting many times that he had taken priuate reuenge on *Murray*, for that his patience could hold out no longer against the iniuries he had done him," but he could not be persuaded to assassinate Admiral Coligny, "saying many times that he had been just a reuenger of his owne grieffe, whereof he repented him, but to a reuenger of another mans, he would never be drawn, neither by entreaty nor reward."⁶ Gary's standards may not be so

⁵Irvine Welsh, "The Shooter," in *The Acid House* (New York, 1994), p. 8. Henceforth *Acid*.

⁶Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940), pp. 18-19, quoting from William Camden. Henceforth Bowers.

nicely drawn, however, for the final ironic reversal in the story comes when Gary points the loaded shotgun at Jock and says, "I heard that you were seeing quite a bit of my missus when I was inside, mate" (*Acid*, p. 9): his finger tenses on the trigger in the final line of the story. His desire for revenge has become completely paranoid.

In *Glue*, Welsh repeated this plot line but muted its impact by attenuating its details through the novel's 469 pages where it becomes enmeshed with a secret protected for very ambiguous and selfish reasons by one of the novel's four protagonists. The protagonists of *Trainspotting*, now several years older, drift aimlessly through the world of *Glue*'s Terry Lawson, Carl Ewart, Billy Birrell, and Andrew Galloway, but as with most youth gangs in such novels, the foursome is isolated by age, school experience, and slang from Renton and the others, and, for many readers, will be set further apart because their angst is exhausted in nature. Rent Boy and Spud have shrunk in characterization, and the tone has changed. It is as though one has moved from the hectic pace of *A Clockwork Orange* to the ennui and melancholy of *The Last Picture Show*.

In *Glue*, Andrew Galloway, like Gary, loses his wife and daughter to another man while he is in prison. Released, the sight of his wife walking with McMurray, the sound of his daughter calling McMurray Dad, and the knowledge that McMurray and the Doyle gang helped put him in prison tear at Andrew's psyche. Early in the novel, Andrew thinks "about how many people git the chance tae settle auld scores before they go? No many.... So ah felt like the world had dealt me its worst possible hand and that, fuck it, ah wis still here" (*Glue*, p. 178). By the novel's end, Terry summarizes the situation for the now dead Andrew: "The wey eh saw it, McMurray took ehs liberty, ehs wife, ehs bairn. Made him hurt the bairn" (p. 458). When Terry, Carl, and Billy are unexpectedly thrown together by the death of Carl's father, they finally unburden themselves of secrets they have harbored about Andrew. Everyone in general believes that Andrew, in a final murderous assault on McMurray, crushed McMurray's larynx and then in utter despair committed suicide by jumping from the George IV Bridge in Edinburgh to the pavement of Cowgate Street below. Carl, though, confesses that he knew Andrew was HIV+ and quite despondent over his future. Unlucky as ever, Andrew had contracted the virus while sharing a dirty needle one of the first times he shot up. Terry's secret is even more striking to the others. He tells them he was the mystery person who accompanied Andrew on his furtive attempt to gain revenge by killing McMurray using a crossbow but that he, himself, shot McMurray to keep McMurray from revealing that he, Terry, had also had an affair with Andrew's wife, a fact which would have further crushed Andrew's spirit because of the revelation of his good friend's betrayal of loyalties. Carl, the most sophisticated of the four, philosophizes silently: "the world seemed as brutal and uncertain as ever. Civilisation didn't eradicate savagery and cruelty, it just seemed to render them less lurid and theatrical" (*Glue*, p. 462).

One other story in *The Acid House*, "The Granton Star Cause," also bears directly on revenge. In addition to the improbable unrealities of its action, the story has all the symmetries, repetitions, and abstractions characteristic of a fable. In a twenty-four hour period, Bob Coyle (Robert Anthony Coyle, a twenty-three year old mover) loses every tie which has given his life purpose, focus, and identity. He is pulled from his regular position on the soccer team, then dismissed entirely; his parents ask him to move out of their flat; his girlfriend brusquely dumps him for another man who gives her more sexual satisfaction; police arrest and beat him for vandalizing a public telephone; a restaurant owner kicks him out after he cannot pay for a meal; and his gaffer or foreman fires him from his job. Bob has been declared "redundant" in every way.

In a pub for a pint and "a toastie," Bob is joined at the bar by a stranger who tells him, "Yuv fucked this one up, ya daft cunt" (*Acid*, p. 128), summarizes his defeats thus: "Nae hoose, nae joab, nae burd, nae mates, polis record, sair face, aw in the space ay a few ooirs" (p. 128), and then introduces himself as God. God tells him, "Ah've fuckin hud it up tae ma eyebaws wi aw this repentence shite. Vengeance is mine, n ah intend tae take it oan ma ain lazy n selfish nature, through the species ah created, through thir representative. That's you" (p. 130). Calling him "a piece ay slime" (p. 131), God metamorphoses Bob into a bluebottle fly, through which to achieve his larger sense of revenge. During the next few days, Bob indeed "works God's will." He vomits cat feces into the curry Tambo (the player who replaced him on the team and in his girl's bed) and Evelyn eat, giving them severe food poisoning. He likewise puts rat poison in Rafferty's sandwich, leaving his former gaffer physically ill and tensely paranoid about his relationship with the workers. Interrupting his parents in their bizarre sadomasochistic revels, Bob buzzes around them, unable finally to avoid his mother's deft swat with the newspaper. He falls behind the sideboard and during the night metamorphoses back into a human being. Later that night, his groans attract his parents who find him with "massive internal injuries.... All his ribs were broken, as were both his legs and his right arm. His skull had fractured" (p. 136). Ironically, his parents have killed their own son, and the story closes with powerful echoes of E. M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus" and John Collier's "Thus I Refute Beelzy."⁷ If the story had ended here, it would have been a satisfyingly ironic

⁷In Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus" (1911), Mr. Bons' body is found, crushed, apparently having fallen from a great height. In Collier's "Thus I Refute Beelzy" (1941), only the dentist's foot and shoe are found, the dentist apparently having been eaten by his son's "imaginary" friend Beelzy or Beelzebub. God's decision to turn Bob into a bluebottle fly is reminiscent of the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach in Franz Kafka's "Metamorphoses." In "Catholic Guilt (You Know You Love It)," one of Welsh's most recent short stories, Welsh returns to the motif of cosmic revenge. The violently homophobic Joseph Hut-

fable of revenge and reversal; however, the story continues for one further paragraph in which Kevin, Bob's best friend and the only person who actually knows the truth about the metamorphoses, is so jolted by what has happened that he begins to recapitulate Bob's defeats with work, girlfriend, debts, and team. A chain has begun which might lead to his own metamorphoses.

Marabou Stork Nightmares (1995), Welsh's second novel, is both more tightly coherent and much more experimental than either *Trainspotting* or the short stories, and it is the only one of Welsh's works in which revenge almost totally dominates the work, supplying a breadth and stretch of topic not fully available in the vignettes. The coherence stems from use of a single narrative perspective throughout, the experimentalism from the intertwining of several levels of consciousness and the exploiting of the potentialities of the page so that any page may use three or four sizes of type to depict different levels of consciousness, may run sentences vertically up the page, or may even use boxes so that the page looks like a computer screen with several files open simultaneously. In brief, stream of consciousness has met hypertext.

The narrator-protagonist, Roy Strang, has rendered himself totally paralyzed and mute through a failed suicide attempt. He immediately tells the reader that "my memory is practically non-existent,"⁸ but that he still survives "deep in the realms of my own consciousness" (p. 7) to whose memories and fantasies he escapes from his visitors and reality. As the reader untangles realities from fantasies, pasts from presents, he or she comes to see that *Marabou Stork Nightmares* is a very dark revenge story hidden for a considerable time within an optimistic success story.

Roy Strange "grew up in what was not so much a family as a genetic disaster" (p. 19), a family of Muirhouse failures he later describes as "a houseful of sociopaths" (p. 36), but his narrative records his escape: his promising academic record in school leads his teachers to encourage him to go to university; his computer skills land him an excellent job; his common sense eventually moves him out of the world of the "cashie" or soccer hooligans.⁹ In many ways, he, like Alan Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton and Anthony Burgess's Alex, has

chinson dies from congenital heart failure while "shagging" his best friend's twin sister. An angel explains to Joe that, before he can "pass to the other side," he must be a homosexual ghost, an incubus, preying on his male friends until he purges his hatred.

⁸Irvine Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (New York, 1996), p. 4. Henceforth *Marabou*.

⁹Bill Buford has captured the essence of the cashie: "why do young males riot every Saturday? They do it for the same reason that another generation drank too much, or smoked dope, or took hallucinogenic drugs, or behaved badly or rebelliously. Violence is their antisocial kick, their mind-altering experience, an adrenaline-induced euphoria that might be all the more powerful because it is generated by the body itself" (*Marabou*, p. 217). Roy simply grows out of this stage, as he had his fascination with ecstasy.

"grown up," and biology has solved the social problem he represented.¹⁰ Guilt, though, pushes him into his suicide attempt. After reading Derek Humphry's *Final Exit*, Roy overdoses on paracetamol and pulls a plastic bag over his head as directed by Humphry's Hemlock Society guide.¹¹ It cannot be guilt over stabbing his schoolmate or over torturing his family's dog to death, because these actions are long past. Roy's guilt grows from his participation in the gang rape of Kirsty. Roy, Lexo, Demps, and Ozzy drug and abduct Kirsty from a dance at Buster's Club and systematically subject her to vaginal, anal, and oral rape throughout one night. Lexo instigates the rape and choreographs the abuse, but Roy is intimidated into participating. He hesitates, because he "wanted to save her" (p. 185), but does not. The four men are charged and tried for rape but are acquitted. The reader knows the rape has ruined Roy's life, but the reader only gradually comes to understand that the girlfriend who comes to visit Roy in the hospital is the young woman he and his friends have raped. She is the avenger, and he is the target; she is the Marabou stork of the title, and he is the carrion. She has him totally under her power, even more helpless than she was the night of the rape, and early in the novel, at a point when the information cannot be adequately assimilated by either Roy or the reader, she tells him, "It's your old pal Dempsey. Alan Dempsey. He's no longer with us" (p. 50). We later find out that she ran Dempsey down with a car. She tells Roy, "I've decided to get them all" (p. 229).

Primed for her mad revenge, she removes Roy's catheter and oxygen tube. Then with a serrated knife, she cuts off his penis, intending to choke him with it. She also cuts off his eyelids so that he will have to watch her stab him repeatedly. Ironically, in the midst of this torture, he understands why she is doing this: "I understand her hurt, her pain, how it all just has to come out. It just goes round and round, the hurt. It takes an exceptionally strong person to just say: no more. It takes a weak one to just keep it all to themselves, let it tear them apart without hurting anyone else" (p. 264). To find its horrific parallel, one must turn to the scene in Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*¹²

¹⁰In both *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), the protagonists simply "grow up." Age pushes them into, or into thoughts about, the socially endorsed solution of marriage and fatherhood. Many readers have found the final chapters of these two novels unsatisfactory because they submit the men to social pressures to conform rather than addressing the roots of their anger with society.

¹¹Humphry co-founded the Hemlock Society in 1980 in Los Angeles. The society has championed assisted suicide, euthanasia (parodied once as "Youth in Asia" by Roy), and the general questions of the "right to die." *Final Exit* contains such chapters as "The Hospice Option," "The Cyanide Enigma," "Self-Starvation" and "Self-Deliverance Via the Plastic Bag."

¹²Whether the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is Cyril Tourneur or Thomas Middleton or some as yet unrecognized Jacobean dramatist is irrelevant to the discussion or to Welsh.

in which Vindice achieves his revenge over the Duke first by hurrying him to a garden assignation with “a country lady,” who is in truth the skull of his fiancée coated with poison designed to eat away the Duke’s teeth and tongue, then ripping off his eyelids so that he must witness his Duchess being seduced by his illegitimate son.

In turning once again to short stories and novellas, Welsh has certainly not abandoned his interest in revenge. My final example comes from the second of the three “Chemical Romances” which make up *Ecstasy* (1996)—“Fortune’s Always Hiding: A Corporate Drug Romance.” The story is simple, the revenge taken is extraordinarily vicious and idiosyncratic, even more so than in the earlier works. Samantha, born in Wolverhampton in 1963, lacks arms because during pregnancy her mother had taken tenazadrine (known in America as thalidomide). Her father deserts the family, her mother has to be institutionalized; Samantha receives a monetary settlement from the company. She wants revenge, however, on the men in the corporation responsible for marketing the drug, and to secure this she kidnaps the infant son of the chief chemist, Gunther Emmerich. When she sends the child’s severed arms to him, he commits suicide. Benny Drysdale she traces to an isolated Welsh cottage and burns him to death. And with the assistance of Dave, her cashie skinhead boyfriend, she severs the arms of Sir Bruce Sturgess with a chain saw, as he lies bound to a table in a London car repair shop. Early in their relationship, Samantha told Dave: I ain’t whole, and I want to make them pay.... I want justice. I want Bruce Sturgess.... I want his arms. I want his limbs hacked off. I want him to know how it feels!”¹³ David loves her so blindly that she quickly turns him into her agent for accomplishing this revenge.

This catalogue of horrors could continue at length, because Welsh’s characters are most adept at what Francis Bacon, in probably the most famous sentence ever written about revenge, called “a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.”¹⁴ Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* depicts the crucial transition in civilization from what Bacon called the “wild justice” of a revenge culture based on honor and shame to a justice culture based on innocence and guilt, as responsibility for punishment of a crime shifted from the family to the community, from the *oikos* to the *polis*. In *The Mirror of Justice*, Theodore Ziolkowski makes the insightful observation that “lex talionis has often been misunderstood: these dreadful mutilations are

The debate is briefly addressed by Robert Ornstein in *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, 1960), p. 105.

¹³Irvine Welsh, “Fortune’s Always Hiding: A Corporate Drug Romance” in *Ecstasy* (New York, 1996), p.115.

¹⁴Francis Bacon, “Of Revenge” in *A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York, 1996), p. 347.

not so much as expression of bloodthirsty vengeance as, rather, society's attempt to legislate and restrict the degree of vengeance for specific crimes" (p. 112). Welsh's characters, however, consider themselves outside the *polis*; they feel betrayed, failed, and ignored by the larger community and its institutions. In *Trainspotting*, for instance, Mark Renton proves to the judge that he has some knowledge of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism by telling him: "it's also a liberating philosophy, because when such societal wisdom is negated, the basis for social control over the individual becomes weakened" (p. 166). Roy Strang first sketches an ideal from a past golden age: "in the past people had families, communities. There was a sense of living together. Through this they developed a shared understanding of the world, developed different cultures" (p. 45), but he later negates this with the antithetical realities of his life: "But nobody believed in that crap anymore. It was you against the world, every cunt knew that: the Government even said it" (p. 165). As we have seen, this viewpoint takes a particularly sardonic turn in *The Acid House*, when God tells Bob Coyle that, "Ah've fuckin hud it up tae ma eyebaws wi aw this repentance shite. Vengeance is mine, n ah intend tae take it oan ma ain lazy n selfish nature" (p. 130). And in *Ecstasy*, Samantha summarizes the battle between the self and the world, between money and power, to Dave thus:

It's all money and power. That's what I understood: power. I grew up learning about it. The power we ran up against when we tried to get our compensation, our justice from them: the industrialists, the Government, the judiciary, from the whole fucking clique of them that run things. The way they fucking closed ranks and stuck together" (p. 125).

As the sometimes narrator in *Ecstasy* concludes about characters such as these, "there was no chance of happiness, only opportunity for further revenge" (p. 142). This sense of individual helplessness has increased from work to work, and in *Glue*, Terry Lawson voices it emphatically:

The scheme, the government employment scheme, the dole office, the factory, the jail. Together they created a squalid stink of low expectation which could choke the life out of you if you let it. There was a time when [he] felt that he could keep it all at bay, when the weaponry in his social arsenal seemed substantial enough to just blow big Technicolor holes in it all.... But struggle, survival, they were a young cunt's game" (pp. 456-57).

In Welsh's narratives, revenge is very circumscribed. Almost never is the immediate family or even the extended family involved in the revenge.¹⁵ One

¹⁵Only once—in *Trainspotting*—does the family unit seem to spur thoughts of revenge. At Matty's funeral, his brother, Anthony, looks over the skag boys and thinks, "Revenge on all the scumbags who'd brought his brother down" (p. 294).

is not acting on behalf of the family's past, the clan's honor, or the tribe's ethos. Revenge has become very personal, very subjective, and very individualized. The individual feels himself or herself such a marginalized being, failed by family, deserted by institutions, and especially abandoned by Thatcherite Tory policies, that he or she must define law within a lawlessness. They move into that area Bacon described as "the most tolerable sort of revenge...for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy" (p. 385). Reviewing the motion picture adaptation of *Trainspotting*, Neva Chonin described the characters as "destitute scavengers...the bastard children of covert class war, the kind of human flotsam championed by the Oi movement in music and despised by the Tories,"¹⁶ but Welsh himself has cautioned readers in the Kevin Macdonald interview to be cautious, saying his book is

about the culture and the lifestyle in a non-judgemental way. It's about how people live their lives and how people interact. To see it as a just a kind of reaction to social oppression, to social circumstances, is to rip some of the soul out of it and to make the characters into victims. I don't think that they really are.¹⁷

His characters are not taking a psychotic revenge against the modern world as is B. S. Johnson's *Christy Malry*¹⁸ who starts his rebellion by scratching marks on a bank's exterior marble and ends up by putting cyanide in London's water supply (obviously, *Christy* is insane, while Welsh's characters are disaffected and alienated); rather Welsh's characters are people feeling driven to the wall, the very point Robert Ornstein makes in his description of the Jacobean culture which so fostered revenge tragedy:

social unrest accompanied rising prices and the destruction of feudal agrarianism. The plague was a yearly visitation and a daily memento mori. Fear of the unsettled succession reinforced fear of foreign intervention and of internal dissension between religious and political factions" (p. 16).

He later notes, as I am arguing here, that "we are made to feel how vulnerable are the walls—the political, religious, legal, and familial institutions—which seek to check or contain the uncivilized fury of civilized men" (p. 44). Perhaps some of the drive is culturally imbued by Scotland's own marginalization in British history. Thomas Wright in 1630 wrote "It is well knowne in Scotland

¹⁶Neva Chonin, "Trainspotting," [San Francisco] *Bay Guardian*, Arts and Entertainment, 20 February 1994.

¹⁷Kevin Macdonald, "An Interview with Irvine Welsh." *The Richmond Review* (9 August, 1998), p. 3.

¹⁸B. S. Johnson, *Christy Malry's Own Double-Entry* (New York, 1985).

how insatiable is the passion of Ire, the appetite of Reuenge, for their deadly flod wil neuer by quenched, but with the blood of al their enemies and their adherents."¹⁹ His observation may still have considerable validity, because the darker sides of revenge have been a prominent topic in much recent Scottish fiction. Rob Catto, the troubled protagonist of Duncan McLean's *Bunker Man* (1995), descends into madness through his drive to demonstrate his superiority over his wife's friends. Married to a successful, well-paid woman, Rob's feelings of inferiority as a school janitor hurry him into doubts about his wife's fidelity and quickly he desires to "kill the cunt...smash his head in! Aye, and be proud of it"²⁰ as he conjures up her imaginary lover. And, in the surprisingly well plotted *Oddfellows* (1997), Jack Dickson's Billy King, a double-dealing, blackmailing murderer with a keenly developed taste for sadistic pleasures, tries to culminate his revenge on a former lover/employee, Joe Macdonald, by forcing him at gunpoint to rape his [Macdonald's] own sixteen-year-old nephew. The victims in this tale of the Glasgow underworld, however, achieve their own peculiarly appropriate revenge on Billy. Like these authors, Welsh has no interest in the clan or family hostilities; he is interested in the individual's perception that he has the right to practice vengeance, that he can define himself and control his reputation through revenge, and that there is a large gap, a silence in the laws, within which the individual must act alone. Kirsty and Samantha are seized by authorities and will be charged with premeditated murder, but they feel so raped by their societies that they are willing to accept the risk and possible punishment since they feel that they have been avenged.

With *Filth* (1998), revenge has receded into the background in many ways, but its protagonist without question is the most repulsive one to date in Welsh's fiction. He is an utter misanthrope, completely within the system and yet corrupting it at every turn in his actions. A Detective Sergeant in the Edinburgh force, Bruce Robertson is repugnantly racist, savagely sexist, and deeply contemptuous of all his colleagues, even when he is transported by cocaine highs. His desire for promotion leads him to sabotage the opportunities of his colleagues, often in ways so clever that one must laugh at his successes. He is a parasite on society, just as he is host to his own very articulate tapeworm whose voice and intestinal environment dominate numerous pages of the novel (the intestine shape is suggested on numerous pages). Robertson is a failure in everything and surrounds himself with an excremental vision that expresses his opinion of the world and its citizens. The denouement raises questions about genetics and environment masked by hilariously funny episodes of genuine black comedy, as when his girlfriend and first sexual partner, a young girl with

¹⁹Bowers, p. 19, quoting from William Camden.

²⁰Duncan McLean, *Bunker Man* (New York, 1997), p.49.

cumbersome leg braces, is struck by a lightning bolt, attracted by the very braces she is wearing, while they are having sex on the golf green. One can see from this that the Welsh humor has not faded, but the act of revenge has merged with questions about why individuals desire revenge in the first place.

Early reviewers of Welsh's works rushed to align him with other novelists of the marginal and underground. The *Weekend Scotsman* wrote that his "gleefully warped vision has echoes of a mad, postmodern Roald Dahl"; the *Guardian* called him "the Scottish Celine of the 1990s,"²¹ and the names of William Burroughs, Charles Bukowski, and even Kurt Cobain were frequently mentioned. Maria Jerskey best captures the early response in her comment that "[r]eading Irvine Welsh feels like a window's been kicked open to the stench and noise and glare of sex, rugs and rock n' roll—no filtering power of language or denial or escapist fantasy here."²² Quite obviously, though, these works of the rave generation do exploit a filtering trope in revenge and its focus of validating the individual's sense of self. Iggy Pop, Elton John, and skag may be foregrounded on Welsh's pages, but the background is a sober confrontation with the primeval desire for revenge. Mark Renton speaks of Welsh's individuals when he challenges his world: "Why should ah reject the world, see masel as better than it? Because ah do, that's why. Because ah fuckin am, and that's that" (*Trainspotting*, p. 187).

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²¹The *Weekend Scotsman* and *Guardian* quotations are taken from a W. W. Norton 1995 republication advertisement.

²²Maria Jerskey, "Scotland Reads Irvine Welsh in Psychic Defense," *Oculus Magazine* (Sept. 1995), p. 1.