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Robert P. Winston

Travelers and Tourists: Rules of Engagement in William McIlvanney's Detective Fiction

William McIlvanney has written three mysteries which revolve around the Glaswegian police detective, Jack Laidlaw.¹ In each McIlvanney uses his versions of the detective novel to celebrate the continuing richness and diversity of Glasgow even as he depicts the struggles of his protagonist and his fellow citizens against a spreading anomie produced by Glasgow's battered economy and Scotland's anomalous position, both politically and culturally, in the pre-devolution United Kingdom. The passion of McIlvanney's social mission is clear from the terms he uses to describe his work. For example, in 1989, while discussing his collection of short stories, *Walking Wounded*, McIlvanney described himself as a "guerrilla," someone who reports "from the front line" about the continuing "Thatcherisation of Scotland" despite "over 50 socialist voices represent[ing] Scotland in Parliament."² McIlvanney casts himself, in other words, as an irregular fighting an independent war in which clear boundaries and sanctioned rules of engagement are impossible. His detective novels thus can be seen as a series of investigative forays on different fronts as their author challenges the forces of reaction in both the culture of Glasgow and the culture of detective fiction itself.

¹These are *Laidlaw* (1977), henceforth *Laidlaw*; *The Papers of Tony Veitch* (1983), henceforth *Veitch*; and *Strange Loyalties* (1991), henceforth *Loyalties*.

²D. J. Taylor, "Fist fights and Metaphors from Kilmarnock," *The Independent*, 28 Jan. 1989, p. 29.

As Detective Inspector Laidlaw investigates crime in Glasgow, he, too, wages a guerrilla war against an array of powerful forces intent on destroying the city; he comes to see that much of the crime he confronts is ultimately rooted in the inequities which drive Glasgow's inhabitants to abandon their shared identity as citizens of an impoverished but still vibrant community. All too often the lure of materialism tempts them to act according to a new coat-of-arms with the motto: "live high on the hog and don't give a shit about other people" (*Loyalties*, p. 13). To Laidlaw, though, to live such a life is to diminish oneself as a human being because it entails turning one's back on life's complicated diversity in order to live life within neatly constructed, and necessarily superficial, categories of the sort appropriate to a tourist's excursion—or a Tory Prime Minister. McIlvanney instead endorses traveling as a full participant in life's journey, whether one is a character in a novel, an author of detective fiction, or one of the genre's readers.

McIlvanney's rejection of the tourist mode of living is inevitably linked to his socialism. As he put it in an interview given in 1984, capitalism is a zero-sum game which produces

a society *framed* in terms of specific injustice. The chance to fulfil yourself in a capitalist society it seems to me depends upon the right to do so at the expense of other people.... Society can offend against its individuals in two simple ways: it can deprive them of necessary experience [by allowing them to evade experience through wealth].... And the second way is to inflict on your *unnecessary* experience; I think a lot of working-class people are simply given experience which is unnecessary; I mean, in a just society that experience wouldn't be something they had to go through.³

In the author's view, the inherent injustice of a capitalist society leads inevitably to violence, and the depiction of that violence is especially appropriate to McIlvanney's project since "violence does seem to me a very, very valid metaphor for a capitalist society" (Murray, p. 145). Of course, if McIlvanney's views point necessarily to a socially engaged literature, much detective fiction has been criticized as conservative and reactionary for the ways in which it deploys and then re-contains violence as a way of distracting the reader from the actual violence inherent in the society it purports to describe. That is, it raises the issue of criminality precisely in order to dispose of it, to reassure the reader that things will be all right in the end.

³"Plato in a Boiler Suit: William McIlvanney," interview by Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, in *Scottish Writers Talking*, ed. Isobel Murray (East Linton, 1996), p. 147. Henceforth Murray.

Dennis Porter finds just this “reassurance” in “the mythic landscapes that are Doyle’s London, Chandler’s Southern California, and Simenon’s Paris.”⁴ These settings amount to little more than “cultural references designed to trigger recognition by means of the same metonymic figure used by tourist brochures,” sites like the Houses of Parliament and the Eiffel Tower. Thus, “Detective novels provide reassurance...because they propose a world of fixed cultural quantities. They effectively suppress the historical reality that they seem to represent and draw for solutions to the problems posed on cherished, but frequently anachronistic, values” (Porter, pp. 217-8). At the end of *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, when Laidlaw explains that “the city wouldn’t leave him alone. Looking around him, he felt that maybe this was as near to home as he was going to get, the streets of this place” (*Veitch*, p.253), such an evocative description might suggest that McIlvanney himself seeks nothing more than a version of that reassurance. Relieving anxiety is, however, precisely what McIlvanney strives to avoid in the areas of both plot and genre. As McIlvanney himself has put it, “*Laidlaw* has been called a police procedural. It isn’t.... *Laidlaw* has been called a mystery. It isn’t.... It’s not a whodunnit. It is a whydunnit—only in that area does the book contain any mystery.”⁵ What makes the book interesting, then, is its crossing of boundaries, its escape from the confines of predictable conventions. Thus McIlvanney contends that both “the nature of the crime” at the heart of the novel and “the abandonment of the whodunit element...put the book at once into that area of creative hazard where for me all worthwhile writing must take place. Creativity is risk” (Courage, p. 161). In this willingness to take risks, McIlvanney opts out of the comfortable categories of detective fiction and challenges the reader to dare to confront this other form, to travel into unexplored territory rather than to settle for a few hours of comfortable literary tourism in a familiar sub-genre. The violence which McIlvanney does to the forms of detective fiction provokes in the reader a necessary awareness of the violence of contemporary capitalist Glasgow. In Jack Laidlaw he creates a character who will insist upon an honest look at Glasgow society: “if you want a character for a novel take anybody and push them to their limits. I wanted somebody who would, on our behalf, go to those limits of contemporary society and try to look honestly at it” (Murray, p. 142). In creating such a character, McIlvanney is going to the limits of contemporary detective fiction to enable that investigation.

⁴Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime* (New Haven, 1981), p. 217. Henceforth Porter.

⁵William McIlvanney, “The Courage of Our Doubts,” in *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 155. Henceforth Courage.

Still, a sense of the spirit of Glasgow is absolutely crucial to both the texture of McIlvanney's novels and, of course, the solutions to the crimes with which they are concerned. Detective fiction is, of course, an ideal medium for a detailed depiction of place because it provides a built-in excuse for a character to travel virtually anywhere in a particular society. (One need only recall the ways in which Raymond Chandler anatomized virtually all strata of California society.) The genre, then, gives McIlvanney both "a medium that would allow me to write about Glasgow and...the excuse for going into a lot of areas of the city" (Murray, p. 141). McIlvanney has, of course, been criticized for his depiction of Glasgow, particularly by other Glaswegian writers. He notes that "Glasgow people for a start are very proprietary about the city, and the sense of it and the image of it, and presumably writers with their self-consciousness of the place are more so (Murray, p. 144).⁶ In one of the most romantic paens to Glasgow in *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, McIlvanney records a vision of the city which at first glance seems designed to reassure. Laidlaw sees Glasgow as

a small and great city.... A city with its face against the wind. That made it grimace. But did it have to be so hard? Sometimes it felt so hard. Well, that was some wind and it had never stopped blowing. Even when this place was the second city of the British Empire, affluence had never softened it because the wealth of the few had become the poverty of the many. The many had survived, however harshly, and made the spirit of the place theirs. Having survived affluence, they could survive anything. Now that the money was tight, they hardly noticed the difference. If you had it, all you did was spend it. The money had always been tight. Tell us something we don't know. That was Glasgow. It was a place so kind it would batter cruelty into the ground. And what circumstances kept giving it was cruelty. No wonder he loved it. It danced among its own debris. When Glasgow gave up, the world could call it a day (*Veitch*, pp. 224-25).

The nostalgic appeal of the myth of Glaswegian hardness is here, but the doubleness of Laidlaw's language tempers it; the contradiction at the heart of being "so kind" as to "batter cruelty into the ground" pierces the reassuringly complacent myths of the sort Dennis Porter describes and calls the reader to become someone more than a tourist.

Rather than tourism, McIlvanney, through Jack Laidlaw, articulates a theory of traveling:

⁶For a full and useful discussion of shifting critical evaluations of McIlvanney's achievement and his place in contemporary Scottish fiction, see Keith Dixon, "'No Fairies. No Monsters. Just People.' Resituating the Work of William McIlvanney," in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*, ed. Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt, 1996), pp. 187-98.

There are tourists and travellers. Tourists spend their lives doing a Cook's Tour of their own reality. Ignoring their slums. Travellers make the journey more slowly, in greater detail. Mix with the natives. A lot of murderers are, among other things, travellers. They've become terrifyingly real for themselves. Their lives are no longer a hobby. Poor bastards. To come at them, you've got to become a traveller too (*Laidlaw*, p. 104).

In the course of opting for such traveling, McIlvanney necessarily shifts the reader's attention away from the "cherished, but frequently anachronistic, values" (Porter, p. 218) of a mythic Glasgow to the "terrifyingly real" in both the physical and the psychological lives of Glaswegians. That is, he invites us to participate in the transformation of the act of reading from a superficial, formulaic exercise we undertake willingly and somewhat casually into an exploration of the bonds between person and place which compel our attention. In other words, he asks us to focus not on the security we nostalgically seek in the reassuring forms of detective fiction—that is to be a literary tourist. Instead, he insists that we travel with him past the conventional boundaries of the police procedural in order to understand the complex and uncertain lives of those whose actions place them beyond the conventional boundaries of society.

By the end of the novel, then, it is the reader as well as Laidlaw whom, as we noted earlier, "the city wouldn't leave...alone" (*Veitch*, p. 253), and McIlvanney has succeeded in his attempt "to generate a more dynamic relationship between the writer and the reader through the story.... If the premise of a book is that there is a complete moral division between legitimate society and the underworld, the impulse of that book is liable to be reactionary. It will serve to shore up social preconceptions, unexamined attitudes, complacent assumptions" (*Courage*, p. 161). Such a book becomes

a cosy conspiracy between the writer and the readers.... But if that convention is challenged, if the perceptual barriers between the legitimate world and the criminal world are broken down, the assumed space between them can be infiltrated with doubts and readers may lose the bearings they started out with. Then their relationship to the material they are reading may become dynamic, as it should be. They have a chance of seeing both the criminal world and their own world from new angles, each one mirroring the other strangely. When that happens, the detective novel can become not a means of reinforcing unexamined prejudices but a way of undermining them (*Courage*, p. 158).

McIlvanney thus proposes to use detective fiction in ways which echo the work undertaken by the detective novelists Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. Their Martin Beck series was consciously intended as an intervention in Swedish politics in the 1960s and 1970. Likewise, Nicolas Freeling's Van der Valk series demonstrates the ways in which an author can challenge generic categories in response to cultural change. Like his Swedish predecessors,

McIlvanney is conscious of the mass appeal of detective fiction and, thus, its usefulness for political work:

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. Also it seemed to me a form which is frequently under-used. I mean, when I read somebody like Agatha Christie, I get reality starvation about page three—I just cannae believe it!... And I thought, here is a form which fights as a fly-weight, when it could at least fight as a middle-weight or maybe even a light-heavyweight. And I thought that was worth trying (Murray, p. 142).

I am not, therefore, suggesting that McIlvanney merely produces a gritty Glasgow which, according to some simplistic standard of realism, is inherently superior to the more romantic London of Conan Doyle. Instead, I wish to direct attention to the fact that McIlvanney insists upon a crucial element of community in Laidlaw's—and the reader's—sense of the world. His novels constitute a coded version of the political arguments which McIlvanney makes explicit in his non-fiction. In "The Shallowing of Scotland," for example, he analyzes the Scottish socialism in which he was raised and which he still endorses, arguing:

Socialism is a traveller whose destination remains uncertain. It seeks to explore the possibilities for social improvement. Conservatism is a tourist with the tickets bought and the tour operator waiting. One seeks to go forward en masse. The other is only interested in individual upward movement. One wants to move into unknown country, where things could be better. The other wants to travel only the established network of routes, where the restaurants are listed and the stopping-places mapped. One carries a dream of the future, the other only the luggage of the past.⁷

Consequently, he argues throughout his detective novels that it is only through one's shared sense of common humanity that one can travel towards anything remotely resembling a real solution to a putative crime, can unravel the social mysteries which lie behind behavior which the law identifies as unacceptable. Likewise, the reader must be willing to confront novels which transgress the expected conventions of detective fiction to avoid being trapped by the usual conservatism of the form.

It is no wonder, then, that when Laidlaw's young and rather inexperienced partner, Brian Harkness, argues in the first novel that the strangulation and anal rape of young Jennifer Lawson must be the work of a "monster," Laidlaw

⁷William McIlvanney, "The Shallowing of Scotland," in *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 133. Henceforth, *Shallowing*.

contends that such a claim necessarily implies the existence of “fairies” as well:

‘What I mean is, monstrosity’s made by false gentility. You don’t get one without the other. No fairies, no monsters. Just people. You know what the horror of this kind of crime is? It’s the tax we pay for the unreality we choose to live in. It’s a fear of ourselves.

Harkness thought about it.

‘So where does that leave us?’

‘As stand-ins,’ Laidlaw said. ‘Other people can afford to write “monster” across this and consign it to limbo. I suppose society can’t afford to do anything else, or it wouldn’t work. They’ve got to pretend that things like this aren’t really done by people. We can’t afford to do that. We’re the shitty urban machine humanized. That’s policemen.’ (*Laidlaw*, pp. 71-72).

From Laidlaw’s point of view, only by understanding—and, more importantly, accepting—what he shares with Tommy Bryson, the young man whose crime is motivated both by sexual confusion and religious conflict, can Laidlaw do justice to both lawbreakers and their victims on behalf of society.

This notion of acceptance is present in each of the three Laidlaw novels and is central to McIlvanney’s understanding of his enterprise. Without such understanding, not only policing but community itself would collapse, and it is the danger of that collapse that Laidlaw fights. In so doing, of course, he recognizes his common bonds with not only the criminal element but also with those good citizens who wish to deny that they are themselves implicated in the crime around them. He therefore must tame the impulse within him to flee the scene of a brutal crime:

Laidlaw himself had a simple shock-absorber he used to enable him to cope with some of the things he had to look at. He remembered [John] Glaister’s *Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology* [1st edn. 1892]—a quiet name for the most harrowing book he had ever looked through. Talking reasonably about horrifyingly exotic deaths, reproducing good photographs of decapitation, strangulation, genital mutilation, its depiction of accidental and compelled brutality made the Marquis de Sade look like the tourist he was. Once you knew that’s where we live, you had to accept the need to face what you would rather not see.

Laidlaw accepted (*Veitch*, p. 21).

It is the act of accepting the entire range of human behaviors as in fact human that sets Laidlaw apart from his colleagues in the police. Whereas a more narrow-minded policeman, like Laidlaw’s nemesis within the police force, “Big Ernie” Milligan, sees in Tommy Bryson only a perverted animal to be tormented into confessing his crime, Laidlaw brings the frightened young man a cup of tea and, in answer to Bryson’s pathetic “Why?” replies simply, “You’ve got a mouth, haven’t you?” (*Laidlaw*, p. 224). As McIlvanney puts it in “The

Courage of our Doubts,” “Laidlaw invites us to join him in a place where there is no them and us. There is only us” (Courage, p. 162).

In empathizing with Bryson, Laidlaw puts himself beyond the pale of official Glasgow’s tolerance, and he thus necessarily comes into conflict with the forces of the Law which supervise and nominally work with him. Big Ernie Milligan’s attitude is typical:

‘I’ve got nothing in common with thieves and con-men and pimps and murderers. Nothing! They’re another species. And we’re at war with them. It’s about survival. What would happen in a war if we didn’t wear different uniforms? We wouldn’t know who was fighting who. That’s Laidlaw. He’s running about no man’s land with a German helmet and a Black Watch jacket’ (*Laidlaw*, p. 52).

For Milligan, both criminals and their victims are archetypally “other” and thus merely counters in an ongoing struggle for promotion and recognition within the police force. He can reduce them to markers because he takes what amounts to a tourist board’s view of crime: it must be eradicated—or at least limited—so that business may go on as usual. Costs must be contained, but the underlying causes of crime need not be understood.

When Laidlaw arrives at the house containing the corpse of Tony Veitch, he finds Milligan on the scene before him. For Big Ernie, the significance of the moment is purely selfish; Veitch is essentially irrelevant because “He’s just a corpse to everybody now.... But I’ll tell you what I do know. I know I *found* him. First. That’s more than you did. Cock of the walk” (*Veitch*, p. 179). To Milligan, Veitch is merely a trophy in a banal game of one-upmanship, a souvenir from his latest excursion into the city. For Laidlaw the encounter is fundamentally different: “It’s over for [Tony Veitch]. But not for us. The dead are our responsibility, aren’t they? That’s what the job says” (*Veitch*, p. 180). Milligan’s insistence that Tony committed suicide reduces him to debris to be disposed of; Laidlaw’s insistence that Tony was incapable of suicide means that he must “crack the code” (*Laidlaw*, p. 72) that was Veitch’s life in order to understand his death.

This need to understand fully is most clear at the end of *Strange Loyalties*. Laidlaw is psychologically, if not legally, implicated in a crime when he discovers that his dead brother, Scott, was involved in the hit-and-run death of a man years before:

And his last gift to me from the grave had perhaps been a more intense vision of the blackness in myself. It gave me a proper fear of who I was. In trying to penetrate the shadows in his life I had experienced more deeply the shadows in my own. I was his brother, all right. The beast he had fought, that ravens upon others, slept underneath my chair. I would have to try and learn to live with it as justly as I could. Beware thyself (*Loyalties*, p. 280).

Like Tony Veitch, like Scott, and like the anonymous man in the green coat of Scott's past, the dead remain Laidlaw's moral and psychological responsibility, and he must try to live justly with both the impulses which lead to someone's death and the guilt which flows from it.

In taking on this sort of responsibility for the dead, Laidlaw adds a new dimension to his investigations. McIlvanney maps both the physical geography of Glasgow and the moral and psychological geography of Jack Laidlaw himself in order to plot the playing fields of his deadly game of cops and robbers, a fact which McIlvanney recognized as early as the first novel of the series:

The central mystery of *Laidlaw* is Laidlaw. It is a detective novel in which the detective is at least as mysterious, and as difficult to be comfortable with, as any of the criminals. Through him, the assumptive certainties the reader might want to depend on keep refracting into doubt.... At the same time as he is investigating the crime, Laidlaw is investigating the terms of his own life and is offering readers a paradigm for the investigation of the terms of their lives" (Courage, p. 159).

By shifting to a first-person narrative in *Strange Loyalties*, McIlvanney makes the centrality of the internal investigation even clearer and highlights the dynamic relationship between Laidlaw and the reader. "Beware thyself" exerts all the force of the imperative on both characters and readers and thus reverberates throughout both the plot and the culture which is the novel's context.

The official, external investigation occurs, of course, in explicitly public spaces, spaces in which the disciplinary surveillance of the populace by the state is embodied in the architecture of the buildings which house Glasgow's legal bureaucracies:

The High Court of Glasgow is at Jocelyn Square. It is an imposing building, its main entrance pillared and approached by wide steps, its side doors having carved above them 'South Court' and 'North Court'. The suggestion is vaguely Grecian, implying the long and formidable genealogy of justice.... The Court confronts Glasgow Green like a warning. The Green itself is gated and railed now, the city's commemorative window-box of a once wilder place. From that green root the miles of stone have spread,...still part of the same confrontation between nature and law, the Green and the Court (*Laidlaw*, p. 35).

McIlvanney's description initially sounds rather like the language one might find in any well-written tourist brochure, but the reassurance of the "imposing building" to be admired is undercut by the "formidable" lineage of justice suggested by the "vaguely Grecian" details; the reader, like Glasgow's citizenry, is finally left threatened by the "warning" and "confrontation" articulated in the placement of Court and Green. By surrounding the Green with gates and railings, the city's legal system puts Glaswegians on notice that it operates like Big Ernie Milligan, that an unbridgeable gulf between us—the State, its polic-

ing agents, and its Code—and them, the populace (temporarily) at large; a state of perpetual warfare exists between the legal code and the natural impulses of the people, and gates and railings demarcate the battle lines as clearly as trenches and barbed wire. The stylistic allusion to tourism in the description thus reminds the reader that the forces of law and order are, when all is said and done, intent on making and keeping Glasgow safe for a shallow, distanced, disengaged form of living. Paying particular attention to *Docherty* and *The Big Man*, Keith Dixon contends that “McIlvanney’s writing sits uncomfortably on the borderline between two distinct tendencies in modern Scottish fiction...[the work of the] ‘sentimentalists’ (or kailyarders)...[and] a denunciatory fiction, intent on revealing the seamy underside of Scottish social reality, the so-called ‘stunkin’ fush’ school.”⁸ As such, his work partakes of the post-war “preoccupation with the city and industrial life” (*Borderline*, p. 147). All of *Docherty* constitutes McIlvanney’s attack on a life based not on community but on economic upward mobility and class separation.

As Michel Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, the penal architecture of the High Court reminds us that punitive methods have evolved since the eighteenth century into a “political technology of the body”⁹ in which the ritual of public torture has been replaced first by hidden penal repression and then by a system of disciplinary surveillance which is general throughout social institutions. McIlvanney explicitly raises such possibilities only rarely, but their very rarity enhances their effectiveness. For example, he continues his generalizations about the penal architecture of the High Court in a passage which is so eerily Foucauldian that one wonders whether he had read the 1975 French-language edition of *Surveiller et Punir* before he published *Laidlaw*. The passage deserves quotation at length:

Adjoining the Court is a small, single-storey building, standing unobtrusively on a corner like a casual bystander. The lower parts of its walls are old weathered stone. The upper parts are red brick. It’s as if a workman were wearing spats. Above the doorway is the word ‘Mortuary’, discreet as a wink.

This is the police mortuary, the tradesmen’s entrance to the Court, as it were. Here are delivered the raw materials of justice, corpses that are precipitates of strange experience, alloys of fear and hate and anger and love and viciousness and bewilderment, that the Court will take and refine into comprehension. Through the double glass doors come those with a grief to collect. They take away the offal of a death, its privateness, the irrelevant uniqueness of the person, the parts that no one

⁸Keith Dixon, “Writing on the Borderline: The Works of William McIlvanney,” in *SSL*, 24 (1989), 146. Henceforth *Borderline*.

⁹Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), p. 26. Henceforth *Foucault*.

else has any further use for. The Court will keep only what matters, the way in which the person became an event.

To come in here is to be reminded that the first law is real estate, and people are its property. It was a reminder that always sickened Laidlaw (*Laidlaw*, pp. 35-36).

These corpses in the morgue are unimportant to the State except as sources of knowledge in the ongoing investigations of their deaths, and they are thus necessarily politicized by the state. As Foucault puts it, "This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination (Foucault, pp. 25-26.) The technologies used in performing autopsies on these properties enable the state to master the body, to appropriate it to its own investigative and ideological uses. The Law values sixteen-year-old Jennifer Lawson, the victim in *Laidlaw*, only because she is useful to the state apparatus; by investigating her death, the State can warn off potential murderers and simultaneously intimidate other young women seeking a life beyond the narrow confines of the family. To use Porter's terms, she becomes a "metonymic figure" (Porter, p. 217) embodying the sort of simplistic moral message that might well be associated with moralizing tourist brochures even while the arrest of her killer will reassure real tourists that Glasgow is a suitable venue for their leisure. For Jack Laidlaw, however, such an approach is horrific precisely because it dehumanizes both the victim and the murderer. Laidlaw denounces such tourism in favor of traveling—confronting directly the "alloys of fear and hate and anger and love and viciousness and bewilderment" (*Laidlaw*, p. 35) which tourist boards throughout the world do their level best to deny and thus challenging the social and economic boundaries and divisions upon which tourism depends. Just as Foucault understands that the architecture of a state demonstrates its methods of containing and controlling its citizens, so, too, the new elements McIlvanney introduces into his fiction, the insistence upon honesty and doubt rather than reassurance and certainty, signifies a variant architectonics for detective fiction, a symbolic announcement of the new role which the author insists his contributions to the genre play.

That McIlvanney's attacks on superficial categorization and mindless complacency are to be understood as applicable across the range of Glaswegian—and Scottish—culture is clear from an interesting aside in *The Papers of Tony Veitch*. McIlvanney suggests that the law acts on Glasgow in the same way that far too much literary criticism acts on literature. When Laidlaw and Brian Harkness visit the University seeking information on Tony Veitch, they are both struck by the fact that "Around them the heavy buildings and empty quadrangles seemed to shut out the city, giving them the feeling of being at the entrance to a shaft sunk into the past" (*Veitch*, p. 88). The thoughtless plati-

tudes of two lecturers in English confirm for Laidlaw why he had left the university after only one year:

He suspected that a lot of academics lived inside their own heads so much they began to think it was Mount Sinai. He disliked the way they seemed to him to use literature as an insulation against life rather than an intensification of it.

He liked books but they were to him a kind of psychic food that should convert to energy for living. With academics the nature of their discipline seemed to preclude that. To take it that seriously would have annihilated the limits of aesthetics (*Veitch*, p. 89).

Academics of the sort described here are merely intent on the worst sort of literary tourism, establishing and living within easy, reductive categories rather than confronting the “originality [which] is always the result of a compulsive commitment to a truth outside the work itself.”¹⁰ As McIlvanney has suggested about his own life and work, “you are what you are in relation to the society you live in,” and this in turn leads to his concomitant assertion that “writing is a social action, a way not of escaping from but of involving yourself more deeply with other people. *Ars gratia ars* has always seemed to me a con man’s slogan” (*Growing Up*, p. 171). It is this connection to a “truth outside the work itself” (*Growing Up*, p. 171) which constitutes the core of McIlvanney’s relation to his writing (and his reader) as well as his protagonist’s relationship to the law. Just as McIlvanney challenges his readers’ expectations of the genres of detective fiction in order to free them from the reactionary blinders of convention, so too Laidlaw always forces his inquiry past sterile legalisms to some deeper human understanding; Big Ernie Milligan is simply a cruder version of the self-absorbed academic—or the thoughtless reader who uses the “limits of aesthetics” for “escaping” the world rather than “involving yourself more deeply with other people.”

If a traveler like Laidlaw is sustained by the “food” of the streets and the people who live there as he seeks justice for criminal and victim alike, Milligan merely watches Glasgow pass by, functioning only as an agent of the law rather than as an agent of justice. As Jack puts it in *Strange Loyalties*, “Mr. Bumble got it wrong. The law isn’t an ass. It’s a lot more sinister than that. The law is a devious, conniving bastard. It knows what it’s doing, don’t worry. It was made especially to work that way” (*Loyalties*, p. 4). “That way,” of course, is in such a fashion that the accused can merely observe the legal charade going on around him: “You can watch his eyes cloud, panic and finally silt up with surrender. He doesn’t know what the hell they’re talking about. He can no longer recognize what he’s supposed to have done. Only they know what they’re talking about. It’s their game. He’s just the ball”

¹⁰William McIlvanney, “Growing Up in the West,” in Karl Miller, ed. *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* (London, 1970), p. 171. Henceforth *Growing Up*.

(*Loyalties*, p. 4). Thus the accused, like a corpse in the morgue or a text on the page, is only an object in a game being played by an elite who go on

with their private party, listening to precedents like a favourite song, playing word games, applauding one another. Occasionally, the voice of the accused will surface among the gobbledygook, small and often wistful and usually sounding strange, like a Scottish accent heard in the midst of Latin. It's a glimpse of pathetic human flesh, freckled and frail, seen through a rent in ermine robes, but quickly covered. Who's this interrupting our little morality play? He doesn't even know the script (*Loyalties*, p. 4).

Laidlaw therefore indicts the entire legal system for distancing itself from the public, for living behind carefully maintained railings which deny community of purpose and humanity. Judges in particular are singled out as kin to the shallow critics of academe. Whereas Laidlaw arrests people who live on the streets, judges live "as close to the world as the Dalai Lama":

Never mind having little understanding of the human heart, they often didn't have much grasp of the daily machinery of the lives they were presuming to judge. Time and again the voice had quavered querulously down from Mount Olympus, asking the question that stunned: "A transistor? What exactly do you mean by that?" "UB40? Is that some kind of scientific formula?" ("Not a formula, Your Honour. A form. An unemployment form.") "An unemployment form? And what is that?" (*Loyalties*, p. 5).

"Presuming to judge," indeed. It is no wonder that by the time of *Strange Loyalties* Jack Laidlaw is "getting disillusioned with [his] job" (p. 5). Indeed, it is the increasing loss of faith in his work which compels him to try so desperately to understand the loss of his brother and to attempt to come to grips with "the blackness" within himself (*Loyalties*, p. 280).

In doing so, Laidlaw comes upon pieces of evidence which will enable him to bring down Matt Mason, one of Glasgow's most vicious criminal bosses. The personal is, in McIlvanney's world, always political in its implications. The arrest of Mason cannot compensate Jack Laidlaw for the loss of his brother, nor will it, in and of itself, bring justice to the streets of Glasgow. It does, however, reassert Laidlaw's faith in "the possibilit[y] for social improvement...[in] a dream of the future...[which deserves]...exploration" (Shallowing, p. 133). Beth Dickson, too, notes that Laidlaw's explorations of people's "strange loyalties" link the two plots of the novel. She argues that the novel is an "extension from a socialist to an existential analysis" on McIlvanney's part, concluding that the novel asserts "There is no redemption and no

escape from the necessity of living up to standards which are humanly un-reachable."¹¹

When Detective Inspector Laidlaw struggles against the adamantine strictures—and structures—of the police bureaucracy, he answers at the individual and textual level McIlvanney's call for a broader, social resistance by Glasgow's populace to the shallow tourist values being imposed upon it by social Thatcherisation. At the level of plot, Laidlaw will never be more than a "shop-steward for neds" [petty criminals] (*Laidlaw*, p. 51), according to representatives of the State like Ernie Milligan. At the level of form, though, Laidlaw represents the tantalizing possibility that even a sub-genre as potentially conservative as the police procedural can intervene in a culture to subvert the very code whose existence makes the form possible.

Laidlaw, *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, and *Strange Loyalties* challenge from within, even if they finally don't explode, both the legal code which is their subject and the generic conventions which call them into being. As Laidlaw puts it after the almost wholly unsatisfactory investigations of Tony Veitch's death, "I'm still here because I think it's where it really matters. But only if you do it right. This time I haven't done that. I just came closer than some. That doesn't mean much" (*Veitch*, p. 235). Left to its own devices, the legal system will not solve crimes but merely "inter them in facts" (*Laidlaw*, p. 219), insisting that a form of justice suitable for a tourist brochure is all there can be. Police procedurals of the sort written by McIlvanney, though, need not do so. Instead, they are free to explore the "strange and questionable loyalties" (*Loyalties*, p. 186) which govern us all, detective and criminal, author and reader. As Laidlaw puts it, "In our haste to get to the places to which our personal and pragmatic loyalties lead us, we often trample to death the deeper loyalties that define us all—loyalty to the truth and loyalty to the ideals our nature professes" (*Loyalties*, p. 186). We are, in other words, unjust to ourselves. We see only what we wish to see.

In *Strange Loyalties*, Laidlaw stares into a painting done by his dead brother, Scott:

It was a big canvas dominated by a kitchen window. In the foreground on the draining board there were dishes, pans, cooking utensils. Though the window was a fantastic cityscape of bleak places and deprived people and cranes and furnaces. The people were part of the objects, seemed somehow enslaved by them. I remember a face looking out of a closed tenement window as if through bars. It was meant, Scott had told me, to be an echo of the face that was looking at this painting. I remember a man's face seeming liquid in the glow of his own blowtorch, as if he were melting down himself. The whole thing was rendered in great naturalistic de-

¹¹Beth Dickson, "Class and Being in the Novels of William McIlvanney," in Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson, eds. *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 67-8.

tail, down to recognizably working-class faces below the bonnets, but the total effect was a nightmare vision. On the left of the kitchen window, like an inaccurate inset scale on some mad map, was a small, square picture. It was painted in sugary colours in vivid contrast to the scene outside. It showed an idealised highland glen with heather and a cottage pluming smoke from the chimney and a shepherd and his dog heading towards it. Scott had called his painting "Scotland" (*Loyalties*, p. 26).

McIlvanney's detective fiction asks us to look past the "inaccurate inset" in order to see honestly and clearly the view outside the window, the landscape in which people are "part of the objects," reified and "enslaved" by the materials and institutions of capitalism. Books, we recall by analogy, like honest paintings, are meant to "convert to energy for living" (*Veitch*, p. 80), and "writing is a social action" (*Growing Up*, p. 171). Too much detective fiction, McIlvanney contends, has been filled with "sugary colours" depicting an "idealized" scene. If we, along with McIlvanney, are to avoid that trap, to avoid living tourist-brochure versions of our lives, then we, like his doubting but questing detective, must transgress society's nominal boundaries, must travel off the paths marked out by the law: "Who thinks the law has anything to do with justice? It's what we have because we can't have justice" (*Laidlaw*, p. 166). In the world of William McIlvanney's detective fiction, justice, for characters and readers alike, can only be pursued by becoming travelers rather than tourists in the literary streets of Glasgow.¹²

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