EMA JELÍNKOVÁ*
Faculty of Art, Palacký University in Olomouc, The Czech Republic

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THE CULT OF IRVINE WELSH'S *TRAINSPOTTING*: AN APPENDIX OF A CULTURE OR AN ALTERNATIVE *OSSIAN*?

Irvine Welsh described *Trainspotting* (1993), his literary debut, as follows: "It is like a bad curry after a few pints of lager. It keeps coming back" (Morace 2001: 15). His own tongue-in-cheek, wry comment resonated – quite unanimously – with the voice of the academia. Apparently, the book was not short-listed for the Man Booker Prize because it was considered abominable. Rumour has it that two female jury members felt deeply offended by the book and the three remaining male judges were too gentlemanly to try to override their objections. *Trainspotting* failed to win the Whitbread First Novel Award[1] for the same reason. Professor Philip Hobsbaum, a much-respected Glaswegian academic, voiced the opinion of many when he prophesied that "Irvine Welsh will be here today and gone tomorrow" (Morace 2001: 16). Yet, the growing popularity of the *enfant terrible* of the Scottish prose found him wrong: by mid-1996, Welsh was seemingly omnipresent, all his books were on the bestseller list, two adaptations were put on the stage and an eponymous film turned Welsh into a rising star of the new generation of Scottish writers and an international cultural icon.

The popularity of both *Trainspotting* and its author exploded into a cult. *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction* states that "the term cult fiction implies lengthy and irrational devotion probably, but not necessarily, by an ardent minority, to an author or book" (Simpson / Bushell / Roddis 2005: 5). Cult, however, remains hard to classify – it is often regarded as a phenomenon of limited, small-scale appeal which may be sustained by a relatively small group of dedicated followers that does not (or perhaps should not) have broad mainstream appeal. The element of protest and a wish to exclude the rabid crowd that merely "jumped the bandwagon" is high on the list of priorities of the truly devoted cult followers.

The idea of cult fiction should be perhaps reconsidered in terms of intense loyalty of the fans rather than their number. The loyalty of Irvine Welsh's fans (who frequently shared the "moral code" of his protagonists) was undisputed – *Trainspotting* soon became the most shoplifted book in Britain (Morace 2001: 25).

However, the "bad man" of Scottish literature and a writer of rebellious gestures was somehow domesticated and transformed into a seminal, essential cultural influence and his fiction insinuated its way into anthologies, textbooks and literary conferences.

* Kontakt podaci (Email): ema.jelinkova@upol.cz

Without any doubt, the real impact of Welsh extends the limits of the cult fiction definition. Carl MacDougall even suggests, somewhat extravagantly that "we may find ourselves with a psychopathic junkie or a soor-faced policeman[2] as alternative Ossians." (MacDougall 2004: 128).

Much to the detriment of conservative scholars, she has got a point. Ossianic ballads, too, appeared as a culmination of trends that formed the undercurrent of the eighteenth-century Scottish literature for many past decades and resurfaced just in time to meet the demand of the eager cult following. *Trainspotting* might be too perceived in terms of a conference call of many voices, many traditions – each taking its turn, each of them contributing to its triumphantly positively subversive effect.

However, what was there to subvert or redefine in the Scottish cultural context? Scottish culture of the second half of the twentieth century tended to perceive itself as a bad joke. These were hardly optimistic times; the Scottish literature was regarded as a mere appendix of a culture that is dead and that of a nation that failed, mentally as well as politically.

Truly enough, Scottish literature used to boast more than a handful of trend setters in the past: Macpherson, Hogg, Stevenson, Burns and Scott; all of these having had an enormous impact on the literary life south of the Scottish borders and even beyond Britain. However, much has changed over two centuries. Delusional attitudes to the national identity and culture in the historical perspective were only partly responsible for the prevalent bad mood. Back in the gloomy depths of 1980s, in the wake of the referendum about re-establishment of the Scottish parliament and devolution of political power, Scotland had to admit defeat: the nation seemed too weak even to will itself into autonomous existence. Dependent, insignificant and too passive to make any change, it remained a colony within Britain. In response, the stateless, language-less nation was cherishing and cultivating the vision of the past greatness and glory, hero worshipping *Ossian*, Burns, Scott and idolizing William Wallace the "Braveheart" – the typical Scottish hardened hero for every generation.

Scottish identity as it was represented in art oscillated between hope and despair, between delusions of grandeur and self-hatred. However, Scottish authors of the past two decades seem to have resisted the romanticized version of their past, because they comprehended it as only something that compounds the systematic erasure of self in the Scottish culture. Irvine Welsh appeared at the forefront of those who detested the "tartan myths" of bravery, nobility of spirit and heroic resistance and preferred to shatter them instead:

> It's nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don´t hate the English. The're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin' low, the scum of the earth. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots. (Welsh 1993: 78)

Mark Renton's emotional trauma has broader ramifications: inferiority complex and self-hatred, that manifests itself in this half-angry, half desperate rant, has a long literary

tradition. However, fighting the misery seems pointless. This "frozen" mental state of protagonists has broader ramifications – Scottish fiction has been both tempered as well as inflamed by the tradition of Calvinistic determinism and a notion of futility of all human effort. Those who are determined to fail, will do so. Welsh's protagonists seem to live with an apprehension that God (or fate) may have a very unpleasant surprise in store for all of them – and therefore act accordingly.

Trainspotting both the book and the eponymous hobby in the title become symbolic of this bleak vision. Both activities (trainspotting as well as writing about a group of addicts) are perceived as completely pointless; impossible and futile at the same time. Trainspotting and heroin consumption both fill in time, but otherwise nullify a person's existence – Welsh's addicts seem to be simply biding their time until the next "nasty surprise", because no effort ever matters. This is a symptom of a deep spiritual and social crisis, of shutting out life instead of reaching out. Gavin Wallace coined the term "novel of damaged identity" to describe the emerging literary trend of "hollow voices in empty houses" (Wallace / Stevenson 1993: 217).

Mark Renton, the main protagonist, claims freedom to fall and fail, breaking free from determinism. His "quest" for self-definition corresponds to freedom from the choice of life in one of the memorable quotes:

> Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends... Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pishing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life. (Welsh 1993: 69)

But Mark's nihilistic speech is a titanic rebellion attempted by a dwarf. Mark Renton chose freedom from conventions, hypocrisy of the society and its values, but his claim at freedom dissolves any time withdrawal symptoms catch up with him. Lamentably, he is ready to embrace his pre-determined fate by willingly succumbing to drug addiction and thus losing the freedom to make any other choices.

Trainspotting is a metanarrative of national identity capitalizing on its already spectacular tradition of despair. Novels of the previous decades rejoiced at cultivating this Scottish malaise, but they were playing off stereotypes of defiant hard men who are blessed – despite the terrible consequences they have to slog through – because they can always rely on each other and on the steadying hand of the community.

However, Welsh as much as James Kelman before him laughed at escapism of such vision and reported what they could see first-hand: disintegration of working class communities. "With destruction of the communities the values that sustained them were also weakened and any certainties disappeared" (MacDougall 2004: 62). People were no longer defined by their job or community and the sense of belonging, fitting in and finding solace has gone to be replaced by alienation and disaffection. Welsh identified a new underclass of redundant, practically invisible people, for whom loyalty to a group does not exist, whose "friendships" are defined by need and fear and whose

only wish is to shut the doors of perception and disappear into a drug-induced dream. Irvine Welsh depicted a decimation of traditional forms of community and collective life since the network of heroin users is based on the antithesis of communal values.

Some aspects of the novel attract much attention and resonated with the impression of so many people because the people in the post-Thatcher Britain found the crudeness of reality and a total lack of vision unbearable. This attitude gave rise to this dangerously seductive book that describes apotheosis of destruction or even self-destruction, it lectures people in the art of endless evasion, the art of not passing tests and avoiding any responsibility. But at the same time *Trainspotting* serves as a case study of addiction, warning people of its perils. The literary achievement of Welsh's prose is based on a paradox – notable silences in the book speak volumes and the most solitary gestures – such as taking a heroin dose – can be read as an attempt to reach out to the community of readers.

Without any doubt, this was an attempt destined for success. Irvine Welsh's fiction can be seen not only as a cult book but – given the positive way many Scottish young people responded to it – as a "cathartic reappraisal" (Wallace / Stevenson 1993: 222) of life. *Trainspotting* is firmly rooted in the ambivalent tradition of Scottish literature – in so called "Caledonian antisyzygy".[3] This term was popularized by Hugh MacDiarmid who saw it as the conjunction of opposites, a reflection of contrasts that may be applied to Scottish life and culture in general, because only Scots have such a large capacity for containing in themselves and their art elements that contradict each other.

Given the paradoxical characteristics of the "polar twins of the Scottish Muse" (Sassi 2005: 148), it is legitimate to consider the issue of empowerment *through* restriction as opposed to the empowerment despite restriction.

Considering the fact that the Scottish suffered from inferiority complex based on binary oppositions where Scotland became everything England was not (barbaric, parochial, insignificant etc.) it was hard to accept that Scotland could even give birth to contemporary Ossian. What is more, to give birth of an Ossian speaking the vernacular, swearing, copulating, abusing drugs and commenting on the most embarrassing aspects of life– this used to go against a lifetime's training of the majority of Scottish readers.

However, marginality was made central and a potential barrier proved a viable trend – both *Trainspotting* and its author stood the test of time. Figuratively speaking, even the description of smelly linen soiled with excrements[4] can be perceived as a gust of fresh wind – a window of change that was opened in the stuffy room of what Scottish fiction used to represent.

Irvine Welsh's voice is no *bel canto* in the Scottish literary context, but it is a voice that helped the Scottish literature to overcome self-imposed silence and blazed trails in new areas. Scottish literature has achieved a significant breakthrough, it escaped from solipsism and entrapment in inarticulacy.

1 The Costa Books Award. The prize sponsorship was taken over by the Costa Coffee in 1997.
2 MacDougall has made use of demotic Scots.
3 The term itself was coined by G. Gregory Smith in his 1919 book *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*.
4 One of the stories contained in the book describes (in very graphic terms) effects of a drunken night on the state of linen next morning.

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SUMMARY

THE CULT OF IRVINE WELSH'S *TRAINSPOTTING*: AN APPENDIX OF A CULTURE OR AN ALTERNATIVE *OSSIAN*?

This article comments on the way Scottish national stereotypes in literature – ambivalence, "tartan myths" and the tradition of despair – are exposed and employed in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*.

KEYWORDS: Scottish fiction, ambivalence, national myths, drug addiction in literature.