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## “A thrilling beauty”?: Violence, Transcendence and the Shankill Butchers in Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man*

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**Abstract.** The Shankill Butchers, a small group of UVF members based in the Shankill Road during the 1970s, acquired a reputation for indulging in pathological violence to a degree hitherto unparalleled in the annals of “Troubles”-related murders. Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man* has been accorded a great degree of critical attention regarding the contentious manner in which it has attempted to investigate the Shankill Butchers’ legacy. My article attempts to suggest that the novel’s metafictional universe and innovative generic hybridity represent an attempt to transcend the spatial borders of Northern Ireland in order to present the conflict as an allegory of existential, postmodern alienation. The violent psychopathology of the Shankill Butchers is, in McNamee’s text, of universal as opposed to local significance, and violence is controversially portrayed as a search for intimacy and transcendence in a world defined by virtual reality.

**Key Words.** *Resurrection Man*, Shankill Butchers, violence, transcendence, alienation

**Resumen.** Los Shankill Butchers, o carniceros de Shankill, eran un grupo reducido de miembros de la Fuerza Voluntaria del Ulster que, en la década de los setenta y con base en Shankill Road, adquirieron la reputación de regocijarse en una violencia patológica alcanzando un grado de crueldad sin parangón en los anales de asesinatos relacionados con el conflicto norirlandés. La novela *Resurrection Man* de Eoin McNamee ha recibido la atención especial de la crítica por el polémico modo de abordar el legado de los carniceros de Shankill. Mi artículo pretende sugerir que el universo metafictional de la novela, así como su innovadora hibridación de géneros, representan un intento de trascender las barreras espaciales de Irlanda del Norte con el fin de presentar el conflicto como una alegoría de la alienación existencial posmoderna. En el texto de McNamee, la psicopatología violenta de los carniceros de Shankill adquiere una relevancia universal, en lugar de local, y la violencia se representa, no exenta de polémica, como una búsqueda de intimidad y trascendencia en un mundo definido por la realidad virtual.

**Palabras clave.** *Resurrection Man*, carniceros de Shankill, violencia, trascendencia, alienación

The burden which the writer’s conscience must bear is that the horror might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing.

(Geoffrey Hill, quoted in *Governing the Tongue in Northern Ireland*)

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2011 a 4.7 metre high stainless steel triptych, created by artist Lesley Cherry, was unveiled by Peter Robinson, Northern Ireland's First Minister, on the Shankill Road, Belfast.<sup>1</sup> The sculpture, which replaced a contentious, military style mural originally painted by loyalist paramilitaries, had the words "Remember, Respect, Resolution", prominently inscribed onto its plain stone surface. The design, construction and erection of the sculpture represented the most recent initiative of the "Re-imagining Communities" programme launched in 2006 by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and its unveiling represented the latest attempt at transforming the reputation of a district that had become synonymous with social deprivation, irredentist loyalism and endemic paramilitary violence. Although such attitudes became, if anything, even more entrenched post-Peace Process, when the area subsequently became engulfed in murderous internecine feuding between the two most prominent Protestant paramilitary groups, the UVF (the Ulster Volunteer Force)<sup>2</sup> and the UDA

(the Ulster Defence Association),<sup>3</sup> it was ostensibly the actions of a small group of UVF members active in the 1970s – who subsequently became known as the Shankill Butchers – that made the Shankill Road a byword for senseless sectarian slaughter.

Although the UVF and their political representatives, the PUP (Progressive Unionist Party), have their headquarters on the Shankill Road, their membership is spread over virtually all Protestant, working class areas of Belfast and it is in Mersey Street, which resides in the East of the city, that a UVF mural carries the inscription: "We are the pilgrims, Master; we shall go always a little further".<sup>4</sup> Although the message has an almost Biblical or Bunyanesque ring to it, the phrase "we shall go always a little further" could undoubtedly be applied to the actions of the Shankill Butchers, who acquired a reputation for indulging in pathological violence to a degree hitherto unparalleled in the annals of "Troubles" related murders. Led by a prominent UVF member called Lenny Murphy, the Shankill Butchers became notorious for the kidnapping, torture and murder of randomly selected Catholic civilians. Believed to have been acting independently of the UVF leadership, Murphy used the Browne Bear pub, situated at the corner of Mountjoy Street on the Shankill Road, as a frequent meeting place for his "unit", and proved adept at exploiting his intimate knowledge of the city's sectarian geography when planning the ritual murder of at least thirty individuals. When eventually arrested and brought before the courts, eleven members of the gang – excluding Lenny Murphy himself<sup>5</sup> – were convicted of a total of

1. See the article "Shankill Sculpture Aims to Inspire Locals with Message of Hope", published by the *Belfast Telegraph* 10 December 2011. The Shankill Road, or Seanchill in Old Irish (meaning 'old church'), is an arterial road leading through west Belfast. It dates back to around the sixteenth century, when it existed merely as a paved road on the main route to Antrim. The area expanded greatly in the mid to late nineteenth century with the growth of the Belfast linen industry.

2. The UVF is one of the two major loyalist paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland. Originally formed in 1912 in opposition to the then current Home Rule Bill, it was initially a legal organization which became integrated into the British Army as the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division during the First World War. The modern UVF had its genesis on the Shankill Road and emerged in 1966 in response to Protestant fears relating to a perceived increase in republican activity. It drew on the original UVF's history, adopted its symbols and attempted to reap the benefits of legitimacy and public sympathy by association. According to Cusack and McDonald, "the existence of the UVF in both its original and modern forms, proves that there is an unbroken indigenous resistance to Irish nationalist designs" (Cusack and McDonald 1997: 1).

3. The UDA –the largest paramilitary group in Northern Ireland –was originally formed in September 1972. For a detailed analysis of the its genesis and subsequent development see Ian. S. Wood's *Crimes of Loyalty: The History of the U.D.A.* (2006).

4. The source of the quote is James Elroy Flecker's poem "The Golden Journey to Samarkand". See Stephen Howe's "Mad Dogs and Ulster Men: The Crisis of Loyalism (part I)" for an explanation regarding the UVF's appropriation of the poem.

5. Murphy, who had, together with two other -/-

nineteen murders and the forty-two life sentences they received were the largest combined prison sentences in the legal history of the United Kingdom. The judge who presided over the 1979 trial described their crimes as “a lasting monument to blind sectarian bigotry” (Dillon 1989: 12).

It was to be the appalling manner and nature of the Shankill Butchers’ killings, as opposed to their actual number, which left an indelible mark on the public consciousness. The unfortunate victims were invariably subjected to an almost unimaginable degree of violence, enacted principally through the extensive use of sharpened butcher’s knives, and death frequently resulted from multiple stab wounds. As Conor Cruise O’Brien has noted, the Shankill Butchers “remain unique in the sadistic ferocity of their *modus operandi*” (O’Brien 1989: xi), and as Dillon’s text contends “there is something particularly chilling about the close quarters butchering which was involved in so many of the Shankill murders” (in Dillon 1989: 279).<sup>6</sup> For Allen

Feldman, the extremity of such actions pushes all conventional notions of violence in Northern Ireland to the background and marks an “outer limit” in relation to what he terms “the symbolic of sectarian space and the radical reduction of the Other to that space” (1991: 59). Describing the relation of the executioner of violence and the body of his victim as symbolizing a “mythic representation”, Feldman writes how

In the oral culture of Belfast’s war zones, symbolic genocide impregnates particular violent incidents and emerges from particular personae that function as condensed symbols of historical possibility. These acts and figures mark an outer limit. This limit was invoked by the Shankill Butchers (1991: 59).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, as one commentator has put it, “Lenny Murphy and his gang of fellow killers were the ultimate bogey men for a generation” (in Shirlow 2012: 15).

Equally, the overtly sectarian nature of the Shankill Butchers’ killings seemed merely to confirm the then dominant view of Loyalism as being deeply dysfunctional, a kind of ethno-sectarian abnormality devoid of meaningful content. The actions of Lenny Murphy and his cohorts seemingly conferred legitimacy on the view that Loyalism, at least in ideological terms, is “hermetically sealed by its own criminal and violent enclosure” (Shirlow 2012: 2). The Butchers’ killings were often perceived as simply the most overt manifestation of an ideology that seemingly reveres antagonism and atavistic aggression over political engagement and dialogue. In its most extreme expression, it is, according to Fintan O’Toole, “an idiocy that comes from a fragmented culture that has lost both memory and meaning” (in Howe 2005: 4). At the very least it could be argued, as Peter Shirlow has, that “the sheer brutality of the Shankill Butchers narrowed the terrain upon which a positivist account of Loyalists could be centered” (Shirlow 2012: 1).

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5. ·/· leading associates, escaped prosecution, was subsequently assassinated by the Provisional IRA on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1982. See Martin Dillon’s *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study of Mass Murder* (1989). Murphy’s two most prominent associates in the Butchers’ gang, referred to simply as Mr. A and Mr B in Dillon’s text as their true identities could not be revealed for legal reasons, were actually Lenny’s older brothers, William and John, neither of whom was ever charged with any crime in relation to the Butchers’ murders.

6. The conventional view regarding the uniqueness of the Shankill Butchers’ killings has recently been challenged by, amongst others, Cusack and McDonald, who have argued that Lenny Murphy’s unit was by no means the only loyalist group who were engaged in ritual murder at that time. In support of this claim, they cite the activities of the East and West Belfast UDA who, they argue, “carried out some savage murders involving the use of knives and hatchets in the early 1970s” (1997: 87). Additionally, the association of the Shankill Road with so called “cut throat” killings could be said to predate the activities of the Butchers’ gang itself; a Belfast folk poem entitled “William Stoa”, relates the following story: “In a mean abode on the Shankill Road / Lived a man named William Stoa / And he had a wife, the curse of his life / Who ·/·

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6. ·/· constantly got his goat / So one day with her nightdress on / He cut her skinny throat”.

A great deal of the factual information relating to the Butchers' gang entered the public domain through the publication of Martin Dillon's journalistic account, entitled *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study of Mass Murder*, originally released in 1989. It is this canonical account of the events surrounding the murders that has invariably served as the source material for those literary texts that have sought to engage with, and reflect upon, the phenomenon of the Shankill Butchers. Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man*, while unable to lay claim to being the first literary investigation into the atrocities carried out by Murphy and his associates – the novel was preceded by the publication of two poems entitled “The Butchers” and “Crucifixus”, written by Michael Longley and Padraic Fiacc respectively<sup>7</sup> – is nevertheless the text that has been accorded the greatest degree of critical attention in relation to the controversial manner in which it has attempted to remediate the Shankill Butchers' legacy. The novel relates the story of Victor Kelly, the leader of a UVF unit on the Shankill Road, and the refracted narrative is relayed through the situated viewpoints of both Kelly and a Catholic journalist called Ryan. Victor is seen to have a psychopathic personality that leads him to indulge in extreme homicidal behaviour and he kills casually, frequently and without the slightest suggestion of remorse. His pathological behaviour is intimately linked to

7. “The Butchers” is the final poem in Longley's *Gorse Fires* collection. In an interview conducted by Clive Wilmer, Longley stated that the poem “is an account of Odysseus destroying the suitors when he returns home to Ithaca. Now one of the roots of that poem is the kind of tacky, sticky tribal violence in Northern Ireland and a particularly bloody case, the Shankill Butchers, so it's about the Shankill Butchers and it's about Northern Ireland” (1994: 117). In “Crucifixus”, Padraic Fiacc writes: “In all the stories that the Christian Brothers/Tell of Christ He never screamed/Like this. Surely this is not the way/To show a ‘manly bearing’/Screaming for them to ‘Please stop’-/And then later, screaming for death”. (Padraic Fiacc, *Missa Terribilis*, 1986) The gruesome details depicted here are based upon the killing of Thomas Madden, a victim of the Shankill Butchers who, according to information provided by Martin Dillon, was reported to have been heard screaming ‘Kill me, Kill me’ by a woman living in the vicinity of the area where he was murdered.

complexes concerning his own heritage – his father is commonly believed to be “a Fenian” (Catholic) – and, as a consequence, he strives to escape his overwhelming sense of “lack” by committing heinous acts of extreme violence against a religiously defined Other. His predisposition for violence eventually isolates him from leading figures from within his own terrorist group and he is subsequently viewed as an unpredictable and, indeed, undesirable element by his own community. He is eventually assassinated by paramilitary rivals working in collusion with prominent members of his own organization.

Both McNamee's fictional remediation of the Shankill Butcher's story and the subsequent cinematic adaptation of the novel – scripted by McNamee himself – initially received a somewhat mixed critical response.<sup>8</sup> Admirers of the novel praised the manner in which it avoided the undesirable designation of “Troubles Trash”, thereby destabilizing the crass stereotyping that has frequently bedevilled

8. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the film version of *Resurrection Man* received a much more lukewarm response than McNamee's original novel. As John Hill has noted, the film enjoyed the rare distinction of uniting staunch political opponents, when a Sinn Fein spokesman joined members of the Loyalist parties with paramilitary connections in denouncing the film as “irresponsible” (2006: 205). Michael Dwyer claimed that the film “bordered on the voyeuristic”, and Gary Mitchell, a Protestant Northern Irish playwright, stated that he was appalled by what he viewed as the film's “abundance of bloody, mindless violence and stylistic, still-frameholds on frenzied idiots” (in Alcobia-Murphy 2008: 32). Conversely, Jonathan Staines admired the number of “intellectual allusions competing for semantic significance in the film” and Shane Alcobia-Murphy has written that the film rather than glorifying violence, “presents a filmic critiques of it” (2008: 32). Interestingly, the cinematic version of *Resurrection Man* was not the first film to deal with the Shankill Butchers, Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* laying claim to that particular distinction. At a screening of O'Sullivan's film at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 1995, Ian Hart, who plays the psychopathic Loyalist gunman called Ginger, explained that his character was based on the “so-called Shankill Butchers” (McIlroy 1998: 146).

fictional representations of the Northern Irish conflict (Magennis 2010: 66). Others have commented positively on the text's use of metafictionality and admire the way it attempts to problematize the crisis of novelistic representation through the use of a self-conscious reflexivity, overt stylization and innovative generic hybridity. Dermot McCarthy, for example, has praised McNamee's attempt to examine the world of sectarian violence through poststructuralist tropes such as the "decentered self" and the crisis of signification (2000: 134). Dissenting voices were heard, however; Richard Haslam, for instance, expressed distaste for the manner in which the text displaces concrete atrocities with what he terms "sublime abstractions" and he argues that "By refracting the actions and beliefs of the Shankill Butchers through the lens of a 'dark thrilling beauty' the novel does further violence to the real life victims" (2000: 199).<sup>9</sup> The result of such an aesthetic approach is, according to Harlam, that "the pose obscures the corpse". This is just one example of a more widespread, general unease concerning McNamee's alleged exploitation of the Shankill Butchers' murders as a means to create a self-conscious and mannered fictional landscape in which a sensual and poetic prose style supposedly "beautifies" violence. The comments of Northern Irish novelist Glenn Patterson are particularly instructive in this regard: "I don't like *Resurrection Man*.... What I didn't like about the book was stylistic ... What I get is Eoin McNamee writing very florid descriptions of murders. There is something of the strange beauty of violence. Violence is not strangely beautiful" (Alcobia-Murphy 2008: 32).

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9. Other criticisms directed at the novel include accusations that its publication represents an abnegation of moral and ethical responsibility towards the victims and their families, and that it wilfully deviates from factual evidence. To be fair, the latter criticism ignores the fact that *Resurrection Man* is an example of what is termed historiographical metafiction, that is, a text which attempts to problematize the historical representation of events rather than deny their actual existence. As such, the falsification of the historical record can be considered to be a typical postmodern device.

McNamee has, on occasion, directly addressed such criticisms, defending not only *Resurrection Man*, but also the so-called "faction" literary genre of which his novel constitutes such a conspicuous example and within which he foregrounds so much of his writing. In an article entitled "Hand-Held Narrative", published in *The Guardian* newspaper, he reviewed a recently published novel by David Peace – a fellow faction writer with whom McNamee shares many literary affinities – and both acknowledges and rejects the somewhat moralizing tone that constitutes such an essential component of the critical condemnation directed at novels such as *Resurrection Man*:

There are dangers. A suggestion that there is something almost immoral about the enterprise. Playing with people's lives, that kind of thing. The taking of real lives and setting them down in a landscape of invention. But a writer isn't there to create morality tales or to give a good example. All that matters is that the work is good (McNamee 2004).

Given contentious and, at times, polemical responses to McNamee's novel, it is surprising that so little critical attention has been paid to the manner in which it extensively appropriates source material from Martin Dillon's account of the Shankill Butchers' phenomenon. Margaret Scanlan has noted how the novel "sticks surprisingly close to the public record" (2001: 38), and R.B. Tobin claims that "so similar are most of the characters and actions in the novel to those described by Dillon that one suspects that McNamee used his account as a source text" (1999: 132). As we shall see, both critics seriously underestimate how much material from Dillon's text has been incorporated into *Resurrection Man*. The following list of extensive "borrowings" is far from exhaustive and confines itself to the more immediately identifiable features relating to specific details of characterization and events reproduced in McNamee's novel. For example, in terms of Lenny Murphy serving as a prototype for Victor Kelly in *Resurrection Man*, there are numerous and significant similarities: both Murphy and Victor's families are commonly perceived as being Catholics, a misperception which causes them to relocate their place of residence on a regular basis in

order to avoid such suspicions; both are ashamed of the pathologically shy and retiring nature of their respective fathers, who are employed as dock labourers; both Murphy and Kelly come to the attention of the police at the age of twelve and for identical crimes (larceny and theft); both attend the Crumlin Road Magistrates Court as a means of extending their intricate knowledge of the criminal justice system; both are said to work in the prison pharmacy and subsequently exploit their occupation as a means of expediting an escape attempt; both men participate in a scheme to poison a fellow inmate with substances they have procured from the prison hospital; before they form their own paramilitary units, they are both said to “sit in” on several ritualized killings; their first murders are described in an almost identical manner and involve stabbings, strangulation and torture in a lock-up garage; both deliberately draw attention to themselves in an identification parade as a means of preempting a possible murder charge; finally, both men are requested by their paramilitary superiors to investigate the robbery and assault of an elderly woman on the Shankill Road, and both subsequently murder the perpetrator of the attack.<sup>10</sup>

Other prominent characters in *Resurrection Man* are similarly based upon real individuals depicted in Dillon’s text. Willie Lamb, Victor Kelly’s fellow terrorist, is immediately identifiable as the Shankill Butcher Willie Moore, and shares the latter’s singular love for his mother; Artie Shaw is a literary representation of Edward Paris in *The Shankill Butchers*, who was rumoured to have sold a shotgun to a Catholic priest and was subsequently murdered as a consequence. In *Resurrection Man*, Constable McMinn and Francis McCrea are based on real life RUC man Malcolm McConaghy and UVF member Stewartie Robinson respectively. Other noticeable “liftings”

or borrowings from Dillon’s text include McNamee’s first detailed pathologist’s report, which reproduces almost exactly the pathologist’s findings in relation to the injuries suffered by one of the original victims of the Butcher gang, and the manner in which the investigative journalists in the novel duplicate the detective work carried out by senior Police Officer Nesbitt and his team, who spent several years gathering sufficient evidence to incriminate the real life Shankill Butchers.

McNamee has defended such extensive borrowing of material by pointing out how “the overlapping of fact and fiction is an essential part of the public discourse”, and argues that “the traditional novel, which purports to be wholly fictional, is really the stranger form compared to what I’m doing” (in McGlynn 2008: 180). This latter comment, when sufficiently contextualized, alerts us to the fact that *Resurrection Man* embodies, as one of its central thematic concerns, a desire to interrogate the frequently unproblematized question of what constitutes “truth”. Indeed, it is the avowedly self-conscious manner in which the novel attempts to remediate the apparent veracity of the recorded history of the Shankill Butchers, in order to investigate other, more essential truths about the human condition, that makes *Resurrection Man* such a noteworthy text. It is therefore instructive at this junction to examine McNamee’s and Dillon’s differing approaches to the source material that comprises such an essential component of their respective texts in order to understand the literary impulse which lies behind McNamee’s desire to remediate Dillon’s primary text and extend its parameters beyond the purely factual.

In *The Shankill Butchers*, Martin Dillon states that, while his text should be seen as “an attempt to understand how and why terrible crimes have been committed”, at no point did he believe it was his responsibility to “go beyond the existing evidence or to indulge in fantasy or speculation” (Dillon 1989: 266). This explains why the evidence he presents in his book is based primarily on journalistic investigation, hearsay, police and medical records, contacts within the loyalist paramilitary world, and extensive testimony from individuals involved in the case. When presenting such material, he adopts the stance of an impartial investigator who discovers and

10. A typical example of the convergence of the two texts in terms of the characterization of Lenny Murphy and Victor Kelly is the following; on page 6 of *The Shankill Butchers*, Dillon mentions how “Murphy was beginning to behave as an adult rather than a teenager, keeping company with men in the Shankill District”. On page 7 of *Resurrection Man*, the reader is told that “Victor always took up with older boys, men sometimes, who were not concerned with his moral welfare”.

subsequently “reveals” the truth of the events surrounding the Shankill Butchers’ killings; there is no acknowledgement that a great deal of the evidence he uncovers could, or indeed should, be perceived as simply one version of a story that invites a multiplicity of interpretations. Unlike Dillon, McNamee openly foregrounds his lack of omniscience, stating in an interview that, in terms of his writing, “I’m trying to create the atmosphere of the event and examine it, but I can never reveal the whole thing” (“Interview”). In this respect, *Resurrection Man* is not simply a fictionalized investigation into recorded events, nor does it merely re-present such events and embody an artistic response to them; rather, it draws attention to the actual manner of their presentation and interrogates the contentious relationship that exists between “fact” and “fiction”. McNamee has suggested on numerous occasions that fiction literature offers an opportunity to redefine the fraught and often murky distinctions between the two genres. He compares contemporary fiction writers as being “akin to the first visual artists who put down their paintbrushes and picked up the real material of the world and started to wonder what they could do with it” (McNamee 2004). To McNamee, a novelist who situates his narrative within the public sphere, thereby taking real people and real events and placing them within a fictional landscape, can come closer to the “truth” of events than a more conventional, wholly fictional text or indeed, a work of journalism. He writes: “In fiction of this kind, you get a sense of a kind of truth being displayed. And you’re not going to get it any other way” (McNamee 2004). In relation to *Resurrection Man*, the “truth” McNamee is referring to here is that extreme, personalized violence nullifies our sense of personal alienation and acts as a portal to transcendence, and it is to this central thematic concern that we must now turn our attention.

When asked about his thoughts regarding the real-life Shankill Butchers, and the effects of the disturbing research material he collated as a necessary preparation for the writing of *Resurrection Man*, McNamee’s response is a revealing one: “If anything, the players anger you less ... than the refusal to admit that the discourse of that time is able to bear the kind of complexity that I’m working to identify”

(Russell 2007). The “complexity” referred to here is related, not only to McNamee’s intention to use the Shankill Butchers’ story as a conduit to the covert and psychic infrastructure of the period, but equally points to a conviction that the surface traumas of the “Troubles” are primarily a visible manifestation of a more elemental psychological and societal fissure; that of postmodern, existential, alienation. The central characters in the novel exude not only an overwhelming sense of territorial insecurity, but also an ontological confusion, born out of the sensibilities of the postmodern condition. Although *Resurrection Man* is suffused with a distinctive materiality, it is formally, stylistically and thematically categorically postmodern, a metafiction which through self-reflexivity and the intertextual use of disparate genres, such as film noir, the crime thriller, and the Gothic novel,<sup>11</sup> draws attention to the inadequacies of conventional fictional representations of violence. As Dermot McCarthy has noted, *Resurrection Man* “attempts to insinuate at a formal level the problem of alienation which would appear to be the text’s major theme” (McCarthy 2000: 139), and it deliberately displays its stylishness in ways that illustrate the vacuity of contemporary culture. The novel consciously replaces the ubiquitous perception of a specific Northern Irish identity based on the twin polarities of tribal warfare and historical obsession, with a cutting edge, postmodern dysfunctionality. McNamee studiously ignores issues relating to the social deprivation common to the working-class ghettos from which the paramilitaries draw their support, in order to depict a psychopathology that has universal, as opposed to local, significance. In such a world to be human is to be inauthentic, to lack will or agency and Victor Kelly, with his fragmented

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11. Apart from the fact that *Resurrection Man* consciously utilizes a number of literary tropes immediately identifiable as Gothic in nature, the novel itself can be viewed as a notable example of what Anthony Bradley has termed “Ulster Gothic”, which, he argues, occupies “an imaginative territory somewhere between Puritan New England and the Calvinist South” (in Pettitt 2001: 24). This is an aspect of McNamee’s writing that has been seriously neglected by critical commentators and researchers alike.



personality and love of cinematic icons such as James Cagney and John Dillinger, appears to be an allegorical figure for the postmodern, decentred self.<sup>12</sup>

Given the centrality of the novel's postmodern concerns, it is particularly apt that the narrative focuses exclusively on prominent figures within the loyalist paramilitary subcultures as opposed to Republican activists; a strong case could be made for claiming that in contrast to Republicans, who perceive themselves as embodying an inherited, deeply woven tradition, loyalism, at least in its modern manifestation(s), represents what Stephen Howe (2005) has termed an "untheorised postmodernism". Noting how contemporary loyalist visual displays utilize "heterogeneities" and "incongruities", Howe mentions how the fragmentary and discontinuous evocations of the past visible in loyalist cultural representations reflect what he terms "contemporary truths and images". He claims that loyalism is defined by "fragmentation, multiple unstable identities, pastiche, bricolage [and] promiscuous borrowings of all kinds" (Howe 2005: 9). Arguing that it currently expresses an "antifoundationist ethos", he suggests that "while few would wish to argue that militant loyalism is consciously inspired by postmodern theory, the instability of identity claims and the internal incongruities are often, in other contexts, thought characteristically postmodern" (Howe 2005: 9). Fintan O'Toole has also noted the hybrid *mélange* of loyalism's historical experience and adds that "the cultural influences at work ... are not Britishness and Protestantism, but Hollywood ... , the flotsam and jetsam of movies, pop songs, brand names and tabloid TV ... a jumble of commercial

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12. The novel makes frequent reference to cinematic images and the way in which many of the characters attempt to interpret their experiences through association with such images. The reporters Coppinger and Ryan relate the political situation in Belfast in the 1970s to what they have seen in the films about Chicago in the 1920s. In a scene towards the end of the novel, a paramilitary attack on the Shamrock bar results in the barman "tumbling down the stairs in a graceful cinematic manner" (1994: 140). After this particular attack, the perpetrators are said to feel like "heroes from a film with John Wayne" (1994: 140).

clichés and meaningless slogans" (in Howe 2005: 4). Indeed, the "untheorised postmodernism" implicit in the contemporary loyalist experience points to perhaps the most ostensible reason for McNamee's desire to interrogate the whole Shankill Butchers' phenomenon; that is, to posit the hypothesis that extreme and overtly personalized violence can be viewed as an expression, not of socio-economic inequities, sectarian hatred or ideological conviction, but of a search for transformation in a postmodern world defined by the collapse of grand narratives and loss of meaning.<sup>13</sup>

It need hardly be stated that, in terms of novels produced about "Troubles"-related violence in Northern Ireland, McNamee is certainly not unique in revealing an interest in so-called "psychopathic" behaviour, although, as Gerry Smyth has pointed out, most literary representations of such behaviour invariably reproduce elements of voyeuristic violence in which "stock characters are recycled in more or less disabling ways" (1997: 114). Such texts frequently situate paramilitary activity within the conventional paradigm of sectarian semiotics and institutions, thereby suggesting that the perpetuation of ideologically inspired violence is intimately linked to the Province's obsession with what can be termed "spatial symbolism". For example, Feldman has noted the "hostility of the Northern Ireland state to

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13. In depicting Victor Kelly and his gang as being driven primarily by postmodern alienation rather than political and ideological conviction, McNamee has been accused of perpetuating stereotypes of loyalist paramilitaries. Such an accusation has primarily been directed at the cinematic version of *Resurrection Man*; for example, Martin McLoone claims that the film "conforms to a dominant mode of representing loyalism – a fascism singularly prone to human depravity and signally deficient in even the pretence of political idealism" (2000: 82). In fairness, such stereotyping has frequently extended to Northern Protestants in general and loyalists in particular. Alan Bairner has written how "many Ulster Protestants, even those in the public eye ... appear repressed, wary of strangers and anally retentive" (2006: 38). Geoffrey Bell has famously stated that "by all normal standards, the behavior of the Protestants in Northern Ireland is peculiar" (1976: 11).

the formal equivalence of civil space”, and has pointed out how “Within Northern Ireland, the formation of the political subject takes place within a continuum of spaces” (1991: 9). The urban space of Belfast is frequently divided up into a clearly defined network of territorial allegiances and sectarian geography is bound up in social narratives of spatial belonging that both inculcate and perpetuate ethno-cultural identities. Murals and other sectarian symbols physically actualize constructs of identity by arbitrating inclusion and exclusion into sectarian geographies. This network of boundary lines charts a symbolic spatial order and the command of these spaces is achieved and sustained through ideology and violence. Feldman comments on how, in certain areas of urban Belfast, “violence emerges as mnemonic for historicizing space and spatializing history”, and claims that, “within such enclosed geographical entities, terror acquires “its own circuits of amplification that do not require material destruction on a large scale” (1991: 78).

*Resurrection Man* both acknowledges such realities while simultaneously transcending such material frames of reference. Certainly, the novel focuses attention on how sectarianism dominates the collective unconscious of the major protagonists, and Alan Kelly has commented that McNamee’s text is “suffused with the implication that a powerful, all-pervasive institutionalised sense of sectarian identification affects almost every aspect of the city” (2003: 176). This is made particularly explicit in relation to Victor; as a young boy he is said to listen attentively to the evocative speeches of firebrand Protestant Preachers, and is particularly alert “to their talk of Catholics. The whore of Rome. The Pope’s cells were plastered with the gore of delicate Protestant Women. Catholics were plotters, heretics, casual betrayers” (McNamee 1994: 9).

Equally, *Resurrection Man* attends very closely to the minutiae of urban geography, and the meticulous detail that McNamee bestows upon the localities in which the loyalist paramilitaries operate emphasise his awareness of how the sectarian geography of Belfast comprised an essential component of the Shankill Butchers’ murders. He reveals an intimate knowledge of the territorial affiliations

and geographical subtleties that were recognized only by Killers. Victor’s gang, for example, are said to “pick up their victims according to the street they lived in. Your address was a thing to be guarded as if the words themselves possessed secret talismanic properties” (1994: 85).

Nevertheless, *Resurrection Man*, despite recognizing such material realities, refuses to be confined by them; it suggests that chronic violence is not reducible to atavistic sectarianism or geographical affiliation; rather, it should be viewed as emblematic of the fragmented state of postmodern alienation. McNamee suggests that in an age of simulation and the concurrent spread of the “hyperreal”, extreme violence can be viewed as a search for intimacy and transformation, a performative act which conveys agency in a world defined by virtual reality. Whereas normative, conventional and formulaic descriptions of violence leave important realms of such experience essentially unnarrated, *Resurrection Man* depicts violence as a transformative practice that constructs intimate poles of enactment and reception. Writing how “parties of the conflict did not shy away from generating scenes of terrible intimacy (1994: 184), McNamee contends that, as the dyad of aggressor and victim is not mutually exclusive, such intimacy bridges the cognitive dissonance between events and our perception of them, thereby eradicating the distinction between violence and inaction, spectatorship and participation, self and other. We are told that “victims continued to emerge as being nothing out of the ordinary. It seemed that they had insisted upon it”, and it is mentioned how Victor “managed to convey the impression of something deft and surgical achieved at the utter limits of necessity ... where the victim was cherished and his killers were faultlessly attentive to some terrible inner need that he carried within him” (1994: 174). The implied symbiotic relation existing here between perpetrator and victim is a defining characteristic of what Feldman has termed “the pathogenesis of violence” (Feldman 1991: 69). Suggesting that, within the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the victim of violence can be said to have received “society’s excessive historical memory”, Feldman

surmises how, as the bearer of such memory “the traumatized victim is readily refashioned by a variety of forces and discourses into a violent actor”. Although we may wish otherwise on the ethical plane, within Feldman’s existing pathogenic logic of violence, he controversially claims that “anyone can be called victim and any victim can be marked as perpetrator” (Feldman 1991: 69).

In *Resurrection Man* there are clear instances where perpetrator and victim seemingly confront each other in a symbiotic dance that is both eroticised and sexually charged: “The killer was compelled to form a liaison with the victim. To wear their fear and disbelief like a garment of compulsive desire. It was the full-screen close up; the lips parted, the eyes half-closed, the rapt expression” (1994: 59). This theme finds further expression in a scene where Heather, Victor’s girlfriend, fantasises about his hands, which, she claims, “have a brevity of touch, skilled in nuances that made you feel he was executing a flawless sexual design” (1994: 75). In the midst of this reverie, she suddenly visualizes him, crouched over a lifeless victim and grasping a sharpened instrument; she notices “the same intentness on his face that she saw in bed, seeing the pattern, the deep-set grain, with dreamy inventive movements” (1994: 175). However, McNamee not only foregrounds the intimate, instinctual and symbiotic relationship existing between sex and violence; he also draws our attention to the performative and ritualistic nature of such violence. The actions of Victor and his gang can be viewed as performative practices enacted within the arena of social discourse and there is a strong suggestion that such practices are the symbolic representation and enactment of a range of diverse collective fantasies.<sup>14</sup> Ryan, an investigative journalist who follows the gang’s murderous activities with avid interest, notices people “pointing out bullet-marks and bomb sites. They added to the attraction of the city. Blood-spots on the pavement ... part of a

14. In relation to the idea of Victor and his gang being engaged in a series of performative practices, an example of life replicating art occurred on 24th November 2006, when Michael Stone, a well-known loyalist paramilitary, attacked the parliament ./-

dark and thrilling beauty” (1994: 34). Ryan himself is said “to wonder what private purpose was served by the fascination”, and it is implied that such violence is a visible manifestation of a collective desire to explore the psychic margins, a kind of iconic theatre involving the erasure of language-based discursive practices. Ryan notes how “there was someone out there operating in a new context” (1994: 16), and there is a strong suggestion that this “new context” is somehow inimical to linguistic representation. The psychic imperatives propelling such extreme violence are said to be “cast beyond the range of the spoken word” (1994: 174). It is noticeable, for example, that the character of McClure, one of the leading members of the gang, likes to physically torture inarticulate, mentally handicapped men because he is said to have “discovered in them the transcendent possibilities of *silent suffering* [my italics]” (1994: 174).<sup>15</sup>

Given that violent characters such as McClure, Willie Lamb and Victor find linguistic expression cumbersome, fraught and inadequate to their needs, they replace it with what could be termed “a literal writing on the body” (Feldman 1991: 65). Victor, in particular, could be said to “write himself into presence by inscribing himself in his victim’s flesh” (McCarthy 2000: 134). Moreover, such

14. ./- buildings at Stormont armed with home-made bombs and a hand gun. Stone subsequently claimed that he was not actually intending to hurt anyone as the assault was “a piece of performance art replicating a terrorist attack”. In a letter to the then Northern Ireland secretary Peter Hain, Stone wrote that he had been performing an “unfinished” work called “Never Say Never”, a confrontational item designed to highlight the need for political stability in Ulster by “embodying the spectre of our troubled past” (Walsh 2006).

15. Dermot McCarthy has aptly pointed out that McNamee’s deployment of the motif of language “expresses a postmodern psychopathology more than a Bakhtinian vision of a liberating heteroglossia” (2000: 141). Feldman has posited a similar perspective: “I would suggest that in Northern Ireland since 1968, political violence has been automatized as an in-situ historiographic apparatus, possibly even displacing and certainly functioning as a prosthetic for language-based discussions of history” (1991: 65).

“inscribing” is often performed in a self-consciously ritualistic fashion, almost as if they are participating in a grotesque, secular parody of a sacred, initiation ceremony McClure is said to be “familiar with forms of initiation ... it was a question of maintaining a ceremonial pace with pauses and intervals for reflection” (1994: 28). There are numerous instances in *Resurrection Man* when McNamee specifically alludes to religious and biblical frames of reference when describing Victor’s actions, as if suggesting that intense religious experience and the thrill of extreme, personalized violence emanate from an identical impulse and common source, that is, the desire to access a form of exalted consciousness where habitual frames of reference no longer pertain. For example, when he tortures Flap McArthur in front of an invited audience enraptured spectators, Victor is said to embody “the preacher’s formal madness” and is described as “an evangelist with burning eyes” (1994: 24). His associates sense “his fierce pieties” and those who find themselves in close physical proximity to him, swear “to a sour, monastic odour” (1994: 139). At times, when engaged upon a particularly premeditated act of close contact violence, he represents a parody of a priest performing a sacrificial ritual or purification and it is clear that his obsessive need to commit what can be termed “threshold” acts of appalling cruelty emanates from the same imperative to experience transcendence as that found in the evangelical Protestantism that has had such a formative influence on his life: He is said to be “deeply impressed by the possibilities of transformation” (1994: 60), a “seeker of fundamental truths” (1994: 24), who views violence as embodying a “redemptive quality”. Although at the beginning of the novel, he is described as “suffering from incomprehension. He was in pain because of life” (1994: 3), his subsequent immersion in what is termed “the discreet imperatives” of physical pain, transform his life into something “hedged with magic and the possibilities of renewal” (1994: 70). Such “renewal”, although by its very nature temporary and transient, is achieved when notional boundaries disappear and the ordinary sense of borders is transgressed. The normative patterns of conduct to which we subscribe and owe allegiance are perceived by Victor as a weight, a repressive apparatus permitting only certain kinds of experience. He experiences

extreme violence as a type of exalted consciousness, both thrilling and intense. His immersion in such actions not only exhilarate and excite him they preclude the possibility of any other realm of consciousness other than the experience itself. He perceives physical pain as an absolute of feeling within which the multiplicity of self and the insistent sense of alienation, cease to exist.

Victor’s ability to use violence as a means of connection with realms of experience otherwise inaccessible to him may strike the reader as both morally reprehensible and deeply disturbing; nevertheless, there do exist some accounts – principally autobiographical in nature – which attest to the veracity of such experiences. Bill Buford’s *Among the Thugs*, published in 1991, is perhaps the most pertinent contemporary example of such a text.<sup>16</sup> Buford, a former editor of the successful periodical *Granta*, spent several years befriending some of the most notoriously violent football supporters in England, with the aim of understanding the compulsion that seemingly lay behind their behaviour. At significant points in the narrative, he consciously steps outside the role of “objective” observer and, with increasing enthusiasm, participates in violent skirmishes involving literally hundreds of young and middle-aged men. His testimony, which includes various digressions relating to sociological, cultural and political explanations for both individual and collective manifestations of violence, shows a remarkable convergence with a great deal of what McNamee appears to be suggesting in *Resurrection Man*. According to Buford, to indulge in extreme violence is to “incinerate self-consciousness” and access what he refers to as “our flair for high temperature visionary obsession” (1991: 195). Reflecting on his own immersion in what can only be described as acts of gratuitous cruelty, he writes: “I am compelled, exhilarated

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by what I find on the other side – I am excited by it. I know no excitement greater”. He describes the experience as “transcendent” and admits being “attracted to the moment when consciousness ceases, the moment of animal intensity, of violence, when there is no ... potential for different levels of thought: there is only one – the present in its absoluteness” (1991: 207). Claiming that violence is one of the most intensely lived experiences available to us, and to those capable of giving themselves over to it, one of the most pleasurable”, he writes “what was it like for me? An experience of absolute completeness” (1991: 207).

This, presumably, is how Victor Kelly and, indeed, Lenny Murphy must have felt. It is a chilling thought. Perhaps no more chilling, however, than the facile rhetoric and emasculated vocabulary so readily identifiable in contemporary, media-based discourses relating to violence, where the latter is conveniently categorized as an expression of simple madness. Reading *Resurrection Man*, psychopathology, abnormality, deviance or one is forcibly struck by McNamee’s strong artistic impulse to confront the phenomenon of the

Shankill Butchers and redefine it in terms of literature. In doing so, he suggests that violence is not reducible simply to political, cultural or even sectarian factors; it possesses the ability to take on a life in, and for itself, as everything that resides beyond it appears lifeless, bloodless, meaningless and unreal. Although it can be argued, as Milan Kundera has done, that “knowledge is the novel’s only morality” (1986: 6), there are those who would claim that attempting to understand such murky areas of human behaviour comes dangerously close to authorizing, sanctioning and approving actions that are normally consigned to the fringes of psychology. Irrespective of whether one accepts or rejects such a perspective, it is undeniable that to read *Resurrection Man* is to be confronted with some extremely unpleasant aspects of the human condition. It is unsurprising, therefore, that some readers, while initially willing to engage with the text, choose to avert their eyes when confronted with such an unpalatable and uncompromising vision, while others would simply prefer not to look at all.

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