WILLIAM MCILVANNEY AND THE PROVOCATIVE WITNESS: RESISTANCE IN THE 'LAIDLAW' TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

My paper proposes the continuing centrality of McIlvanney's body of writing to the purportedly new trends and generations in Scottish prose fiction. Where, in *Remedy Is None*, *A Gift from Nessus*, and *Docherty*, McIlvanney makes use of canonical (English) intertextual devices to promote the centrality of his Scottish, working class communities, in *Laidlaw*, *The Papers of Tony Veitch* and *Strange Loyalties*, McIlvanney turns more directly to the American canon. His chosen author, Raymond Chandler, a fairly recently 'recuperated' writer in the United States, has held a long and forceful sway among British readers across class and academic boundaries. McIlvanney's intertexts from Chandler and Vidal are demonstrable (in spite of the slight critical treatment of them) in both the novels and the aesthetic 'manifesto.' Such mimicry is far from slavish, especially given the cultural politics that provide the most pertinent context for the works. Kennedy, Burnside, Warner, Welsh, McLean and Galloway are significant and important prose stylists. Their newness, however, is principally a repetition for a slightly different cast(e) of audience than that developed by William McIlvanney.

I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is the art of invoking terror in an individual or a group. The popular is ridden with terror, at least in the sense that it obtains mass support: "widely favoured or well liked by many people" (Storey 7), though because we buy in bulk does not mean that we read *en masse*; we *purchase* in that fashion. The view of popular culture

as political is a non-restrictive and useful definition: "popular culture [is] a site of struggle between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups in society and the forces of incorporation of dominant groups in society. Popular culture in this usage [...] is a terrain of exchange between the two; a terrain [...] marked by resistance and incorporation" (Storey 13).

If we take the literary artist's activities as twofold, a concentration on form, style, and a creation of imaginative worlds, then it is possible to see the artist as a terrorist,[1] for the form offers control of a subject matter that may evoke a fearful response in its readers or an implicit fear in some group that the readers are motivated against because of the work. Conversely, the form and style may be viewed as terrorism because of the way in which neutral material like that presented in Joyce's *Ulysses* or Kelman's *Busconductor Hines* obscures and appears to exclude. The point about literary terrorism is its ability at the least to initiate a response that contravenes accepted wisdom in either content or form. As such, literary terrorism is an early stage of liberation, where the writing upsets rules in need of refiguring. Still, one area of terrorism that cannot fit in the literary field is the attendant violence to all politically motivated terrorism. The bloodshed and deaths attributed to terrorist activities have no place in the realm of the literary. We can argue that terrorism is not strictly physical violence, but this aspect of the terrorist's activity is central. To this extent then, we must restrict literary terrorism to the psychological, emotional and perhaps spiritual realms. Similarly, terrorists are clandestine groups, small in nature, seeking publicity, often through physical violence, to cause change. An artist, when published, is hardly working in clandestine fashion. Yet states also perpetrate violence against their people or small groupings within the society, often openly —the condition of the Ogoni in Nigeria is a case in point. Writers frequently oppose such tyranny in unique formal and thematic ways —the magic realism of Márquez, the allegories of Coetzee, the syntax and dialect of Leonard, as well as the 'rotten' English of Saro-Wiwa. While these writers are in a minority, and while they are in opposition, they are not terrorists in the most inclusive sense of the term. They are witnesses, whose structure, style and themes, where unique, are strategies deployed to access a truth. The more popular the writer, the more the writing is likely to effect social change, if only in the consciousness if not the behaviour of the readers. It seems best to assume John Ralston Saul's title of "faithful witness" for such writers, witnesses whose work aims for truth and some form of emancipation. With this latter goal in mind, faith becomes a catalyst, a provocation. Their work writes back to many centres, not exclusively the old imperial centres.

Saul himself appears uncomfortable with the term "terrorist" and thus elides it into "faithful witness." The need to communicate and to make questions accessible to the largest number possible fits best with the role of the writer as *agent provocateur*: a faithful but questioning witness. For that reason, my examination centres on the more overtly popular literary works of William McIlvanney: the Laidlaw novels.

II. THE 'LAIDLAW' TRILOGY

What occurs in William McIlvanney's use of the detective novel is provocative witnessing. It is provocative because McIlvanney produces works that, in diverging

ways, go against the prevailing ideology. McIlvanney's novels usurp the "super-hero" of detective fiction in Jack Laidlaw's insistence on questions, not solutions; and usurps the hegemony of the state by denying the formulaic solutions and scientific rigour of the police procedural, where process diminishes individuality.

Jack Laidlaw's questioning is not a simple reversal of an established form: here's the answer, what's the question? From the communal third person voices that inhabit *Laidlaw* and *The Papers of Tony Veitch*[2] to the first person narrative of *Strange Loyalties*, McIlvanney seeks the harder option by attempting to make us see and question the forces that shape us, collectively (*Laidlaw* and *The Papers*) and individually (*Strange Loyalties*). The writer is provocatively witnessing because we are pushed by narratorial intrusion or satire to look, but are not given an explanation in full. The works' designs, variably, cause discomfort to their readers so that each "reader" must work out a position that allows self-satisfaction, communally, to return.

Laidlaw

What strikes the reader first with *Laidlaw* is the brevity of the chapters: an average of 4.6 pages per chapter. Part of the reason for the brevity may have been the initial serialisation of the book in *The Glasgow Herald.* Of the 49 chapters, 22 —less than half— centre on the titled character. The floating narrative perspective covers the third person presentation of the thoughts and feelings of major and minor characters alike: from Tommy Bryson, through a "man with a scar" (identified in *The Papers* as Hook Hawkins), to Laidlaw himself (22 characters), the city of Glasgow and many inhabitants spoken to or observed on the street. Voice is given to the police, the criminals, the victims, and members of the public seemingly uninvolved in the 'case.' That is McIlvanney's point, made repeatedly through Laidlaw —we (reader and character) are all implicated in events. The 'hero' is given no special privileges, as his character is unearthed in equal measure to the investigation of the case. McIlvanney develops his character experientially not summatively.

It is an important point because our entry into the world created is with the thoughts of an unidentified individual running. The anonymity and urgency in the opening passage create the question that will haunt the novel; not who did the crime, but who is he? What has caused the violence embodied in the "slapping," "battered," "crashed," and "drowning" atmosphere in which the person finds himself? The second question is subsidiary and more quickly answered than the first. McIlvanney's aim is to take us away from stereotypical journalistic preoccupations with the crime to the human being behind it, and ultimately to the social environment that contributed in equal measure to the crime. The foundational question is better stated as 'what causes a life to go awry?'

What is apparent from the outset is a disturbed mind struggling through labels of itself. Where his hand was "a riot, a brief raging [, during an unspecified act]. The consequence [of the act] was forever."[3] The act is serious; its results severe. The anonymity of Tommy Bryson (identified in ch. 5) and his act serve to focus attention onto the physical, immediate sense of events. A reader is more likely to have experienced one of these, albeit not to the extreme that Bryson has. Bryson slowly removes the sense of himself as a human, which further compounds our questions: "as if you were a person" (*L* 5-6), "You were a monster" (*L* 6), "Until it came to introduce itself. I am you" (*L* 7). These phrases show Tommy fulfilling society's role of labelling

criminals to distance themselves from the criminal and the type of behaviour involved. That Tommy sees the city against him (*L* 7) personifies the place and intensifies the expectation that his crime is of a particularly gruesome nature. Yet, Tommy's self criticism displaces our role, so that McIlvanney can end the first chapter with an implicit appeal: "Nothing to do. Sit becoming what you are. Admit yourself, the just hatred of every other person. Nowhere in all the city could there be anyone to understand what you had done, to share it with you. No one, no one" (*L* 7). We are being offered a new role, not that of judge, but the role of understanding and sharing the burden of what Tommy has done. If we are unable to, McIlvanney begins the second chapter with Laidlaw. He places a character we may identify with before us; one who will attempt to understand and share —not only Tommy's anguish, but also that of several other characters who would traditionally gain our sympathy (though not necessarily our understanding, as understanding is experientially based— a point the novel sets out to prove). McIlvanney, through Laidlaw, is a provocative witness who asks us to examine areas of society that we have probably ignored.

Laidlaw begins with himself and his role: "He was a policeman, a Detective Inspector, and more and more he wondered how that had happened" (*L* 9).[4] Not surprisingly, Laidlaw is inquisitive, though the nature of his reflections is surprising. The opening description of Laidlaw is predominantly one of gloom (*L* 8); this develops into an analysis of guilt, the necessity of the past, and a key idea in the character —"paradox" (*L* 9). The narrator offers us paradox and its synonyms (doubt, complexity, duality): Laidlaw "knew nothing to do but inhabit the paradoxes" (*L* 9). It is an inauspicious start. While the narration is close to Laidlaw, there is no demonstration (his predilection for Kierkegaard, Camus and Unamuno to the side) of Laidlaw inhabiting paradoxes. The narrator tells the reader; the state of mind gets indirect support. We are, then, wary of the character initially because of the method of narration; we want demonstration.

Part of the demonstration occurs in Laidlaw's "twinge of compassion for Bud Lawson" (*L* 11) where emotion, seeing the other in human not procedural terms, is present. Lawson is a father, albeit a bigoted one, whose "nature ran on tramlines" (*L* 16). His certainty about events raises suspicions in Laidlaw; the narrator confirms these suspicions when Lawson is "squaring up to a fog" (*L* 18) in his attempts to comprehend Jennifer's disappearance. Laidlaw's reaction, somewhat harsh, though compromised by his compassion for Lawson, eases our doubts about narratorial integrity; the juxtaposition of reactions to and thoughts of Lawson reveals a multiplicity of roles (father, bigot, chauvinist). With Laidlaw, Lawson begins to experience if not doubt and paradox, then miscomprehension; it is a beginning.

Tommy Bryson's physical and temporal distance from his act facilitate a mental distance: "Yet strangely it was still not a part of him. The feeling wasn't so much that of having done something as of having been part of an event outside himself" (*L* 19). Here, a dichotomy within Tommy (participant to spectator) is used to prove the lack of types in people and in these characters. The scene offers a non-participating distance that may lead to a critical distance where both action and review of the action can inhabit the same moment, displaying a paradox in individual behaviour. The reader encounters three characters in rapid succession (20 pages) who are circling Laidlaw's philosophy of what it means to be human.

Bryson's call to Harry Rayburn contrasts with the preceding scenes because Rayburn has certainty in his love for Tommy (*L* 22). Before that certainty manifests itself, the reader passes through Rayburn's uncertainties: "The room was a permanent hangover... The room was such a wardrobe of psychological drag" (*L* 21). We have the opportunity to sympathize with Rayburn before he reveals his homosexuality. Harkness, in not questioning Laidlaw's analysis of Rayburn, leaves the point uncontested for the reader. The reader has little option but to read on or to close the book. McIlvanney's structure illustrates Laidlaw's philosophy because each character has a different reading of what has happened to Jennifer Lawson: from the careerist interpretation of Ernie Milligan to the equally repugnant self-focus of Matt Mason. Language and its (ab)use is revisited later, when Laidlaw instructs Harkness (the reader's surrogate) in the politics of questions. The point underscores the existential nature of the reader's task, while also deconstructing language's (ab)use:

> 'It's the questions you don't ask that count. People don't give answers. They betray them. When they think they're answering one thing, they're giving an honest answer to something else. Our problem is we don't know enough yet to work out what they're saying. So we have to try to remember everything until some shape emerges.' (*L* 85)

He focusses interpretation on what people remember and how they construct the shape; it will never be complete, but will never be infinitely deferred; it is cumulative and causes speculation, correction, and further speculation. It is a unique use for the Hegelian triad of thesis/counter-thesis/synthesis, and an answer, however provisional, to the manufacture of meaning in a poststructuralist, postmodernist world.[5]

Foils for the police are Matt Mason and John Rhodes. In traditional detective fiction, that would be the end of the story, but, as we have seen in the contrasts between Laidlaw and Milligan, the criminal world has similar divisions. Mason is a foil to John Rhodes. The former is a recent arrival in Bearsden, who denies his past, in a struggle for legitimacy in the nether regions of the rich and powerful. Rhodes, by contrast, has never left his roots nor denied them; this 'purity of being' earns positive marks from McIlvanney (through Laidlaw) because it is honest, undisguised. Both Mason and Rhodes are from the criminal underworld in Glasgow, and both have reason to involve themselves in Jennifer Lawson's death. Mason's involvement is protectionist: Harry Rayburn (his second wife's cousin) blackmails him into helping (*L* ch. 15). Rhodes becomes involved through a curious mixture of masculine toughness, familial pride, homophobia, and compassion for Bud Lawson's "plight." As foils, as criminals, Rhodes and Mason's behaviour offers more understanding of motivations for their actions than standard detective fare. McIlvanney does not excuse them. As a provocative witness, McIlvanney gives reasons for liking criminals (and detesting them); he investigates the grey areas that statistics on crime will not reveal, but he also manipulates the form to usurp the usual victory of middle-class normalcy and its 'status quo.' These criminals represent the class war.

Matt Mason is an upwardly mobile monetarist; and John Rhodes is working-class, more earthy, more honest: "'... He could've been a much bigger crook. Only he won't do certain things. So he's settled for a level of crookery that still allows him the

luxury of a morality'" (*L* 93). McIlvanney offers neither side as an answer, though, as suggested earlier, Rhodes gets off the more lightly of the two. Harkness, as reader's surrogate, views Laidlaw and Rhodes in parallel, blurring good/bad boundaries for the reader: "Inhabiting opposed moralities, they could still appreciate each other. They were two different qualities of force, but evenly matched" (*L* 98). In a sense, they are alter egos. The socialised lines built between individuals and groups are being dismantled.

Laidlaw's injunction that "'... Travellers make the journey more slowly, in greater detail. Mix with the natives ...'" (*L* 104) is an appeal for each of us to take the time to become involved. The meandering of the story, with emphases on apparently inconsequential people (to the plot only) is a structural plan to make us travellers. Should that plan fail, then McIlvanney will play with his language a little. For example, Rayburn eventually encapsulates himself as follows: "He wasn't a poof, taking his identity from a failure to be something else. He wasn't gay, publicly pretending to a uniformity that had no meaning in private. He was a homosexual, *like everybody else one of a kind*" (*L* 112). The final line is arresting because it refuses to find a group: not "*his* kind." The flow of meaning also affects the reader because of his/her implicit inclusion: first (negatively?) "he was a homosexual, like everybody else," and then, the 'negative' defused, in that the reader is offered the opportunity of uniqueness ("one of a kind"). The linguistics of reading force attention, exclusion, inclusion, resistance, and inclusion in the broadest offering (we can all belong to the group called "unique individuals"). If we can see the varying degrees of identification and opposition, then we are privy to the destabilisation of certainties in language, outside provisional, relative truths. It is Rayburn who makes this most explicit in two related thoughts: "A lot of people had been present at that murder. Why should one person answer for it?" (*L* 113) and "He wondered at his own ability to bury a dead girl in indifference, and every other scruple with her. But then he had been well taught" (*L* 114). The first thought is sound, clear, and raises a serious question. The second is self-serving, particularly given that Rayburn recognises what he has been taught, and thus can start making changes, not perpetuating the wrong. That social responses to homosexuality made life difficult for Rayburn and Bryson does not seem in doubt, but doubts increasingly are. The analysis of paradox has lead in this instance to a glib acquiescence and conformity.

Laidlaw, however, maintains his role as idealist of doubt: "'I mean if everybody could waken up tomorrow and have the courage of their doubts, not their convictions, the millennium would be here...'" (*L* 134). Harkness voices the reader's concern with the philosophy: "In their short acquaintance he recognised a trait in Laidlaw that was beginning to get him down. In certain moods, you could say hullo to Laidlaw and he'd have to analyze it before he gave you an answer. That could be wearing" (*L* 132). Wearing, yes, but possible, not unreasonable, if the purposes to which it is put are valuable. And one way that this novel is valuable is in the questions it continually throws out to readers. Harkness bemoans the fact that a day with Laidlaw "baffle[s] your preconceptions and make[s] you unfamiliar with yourself. [That] in trying to adjust to his complications you rediscovered your own" (*L* 142). If that lesson —being aware of oneself, in all its complexity— is all the reader takes from the book, then McIlvanney's effort at introducing the concerns of a serious novel into a popular form has been worth it.

Where McIlvanney cannot escape criticism is in the depiction of women. The novel centres on a violent crime done to a woman. No amount of greater understanding about social forces and their effect on individuals, whether homosexual or otherwise, is worth the depiction of that one piece of violence, unless the woman's position is fully examined, considered, valued. Even then the appearance of yet another novel where a woman has been violated, then killed, while it might reflect social actuality, needs to be seen to be changing actuality. What is Jennifer Lawson's story? Where does she fit into the analysis of contradictions, doubts and paradoxes? Is she treated with the same respect as other (women) characters in the novel?

Jennifer Lawson's story is a commonplace one, in that her parents' "values" hinder her need to experience life directly and openly. While Jennifer is passing through the stage where she meets boys and discovers additional aspects of being, Bud Lawson's blinkered views on Catholics and his role as controller of her life leads Jennifer to deceit. Jennifer continues to experience life, but through a veil of deceit that is a direct consequence of her father's attitude and her mother's weakness. Laidlaw's earlier compassion for Bud Lawson is honourable; Lawson's reason for going to the police is less honourable —he went to them (*L* ch. 2) because he could not believe that Jennifer would wilfully deceive or disobey him. Bud Lawson's concern then is with a loss to himself. When Laidlaw visits the Lawson household after he has identified Jennifer's body, his mood contrasts that of Bud. Mrs. Lawson is obviously distraught, and in her human response to the tragedy, Laidlaw's compassion is evident: he will deal with people and the effect of events on them first, explanations and questions can come later. Therefore, his concern is to allow Mrs. Lawson to absorb what has happened, to comfort her (*L* 33). Bud Lawson immediately involves himself in procedures —a family identification of the body, followed by revenge for what has been done to him, not Jennifer. Bud Lawson is comparable to Ernie Milligan, in that Milligan interrogates Mrs. Lawson (*L* ch. 12) in spite of her grief. A solution to the crime under investigation, no matter how many further crimes (like maliciousness and lack of compassion) occur, is his route. Promotion, not understanding of the forces at work, is his goal.

Laidlaw's return visit to Mrs. Lawson (*L* ch. 36) offers further contrast with Milligan and Bud Lawson's attitudes; it underscores the need for compassion and assistance to the living as much as the dead. In his approach to Mrs. Lawson, McIlvanney rewards Laidlaw with information that will help the investigation. Maggie Grierson, Bud's sister, can supply the name of the boy Jennifer was seeing. The moment is not merely about information gathered, for, through Harkness, we become aware of what has been hidden in these people's lives: "... Harkness saw why it had been hard for her to tell them. The rest had been only attitudes and so could be reneged on. This was a fact that they would follow up and Bud Lawson could hear of it. She had said something that she would have to stand by against her husband" (*L* 170). In her production of meaning before others, witnessed by others, Mrs. Lawson has rebelled against the tyranny of her husband. Like Camus' Rebel, Mrs. Lawson has taken a stand, is aware of the potential cost of the stand, but is prepared to suffer the consequences. The import is in the ability to move beyond safe, if undesirable positions and thus give hope (for the reader, in his/her exposure to the stand). Not only does Mrs. Lawson rebel against her husband, but her comment is also an elegy to her daughter, an expression of love.

Laidlaw's earlier assessment of the case is apposite here: "'Maybe the only answer to a crime like this isn't arrest and conviction. Maybe it's for the rest of us to try and love well. Not amputate that part. Just try to heal the world in other places'" (*L* 166). If love is ultimately what the book is about, what of Tommy Bryson's crime against Jennifer? It is on par with Bud Lawson's treatment of his daughter, as Laidlaw's deconstruction of that 'love' emphasizes (*L* 215). Laidlaw deciphers Bryson's relationship with Jennifer thus:

> It was a page of writing that had been almost entirely scored out with great care. Holding it against the light, he tried to make out some of it. It was virtually impossible but, *speculating* on the fragments of letters he could see, he thought he deciphered 'I think she thought she knew who I was.' But you couldn't be sure. All that was clearly left of whatever he had written was one small statement near the bottom: 'I tried to love her.' (*L* 220)

The de Saussurean echo here is forceful. Speculation, deciphering, interpretation all lead back to the import of this book: the paradoxes of life, not least the one embodied in the attempt to communicate (Tommy with Jennifer after the dance) and the failure to communicate (Tommy killing Jennifer); the attempt to love and its failure. We can never know who we are or who others are definitively. Love, like other emotions, is provisional and contextually based. It is a hard lesson, given Jennifer's murder, but McIlvanney uses the harshness of that death meaningfully to underscore and give focus to a serious issue. Laidlaw taking Tommy Bryson a cup of tea at the book's close is a demonstration of continuing compassion and attempts to understand (*L* 224). And, we, the readers, can speculate on what follows, but are more likely to turn the questions the book has posed inwards, upon ourselves, our lives, our values. To close the book before completion is an abdication of the responsibilities it holds. To close the book as a piece of entertaining detective work is to have missed the point that "'... Maybe the papers are what we should be trying to live with our lives'" (*L* 252).

Strange Loyalties

The third Laidlaw novel opens 28 months after the Lawson case; significantly, time is tracked through the lives of children. McIlvanney announces his intent through an epigraph and a dedication. The epigraph, from Keats, speaks to the book's literary pretensions. McIlvanney's Laidlaw will take us through the allegory of his brother Scott's life, but also has the skill and patience to show us other lives on the way. Life, in this literary mode, is something that can be interpreted like a book. With the dedication, McIlvanney offers a caution, drawn from experience, to an idealistic youth —his son. The dedication's lines of poetry modify the Keatsean lines to provide a less idealistic, more grounded sense of life's mystery and the route to its unravelling. The address to a living person, similarly, moves the novel out of a strictly literary realm into the social world, where its lesson should be put to use. This duality, but with the emphasis on living people is perhaps the reason why Christopher Harvie refers to McIlvanney and his work thus: "In the 1980s McIlvanney seemed to find his true voice as a documentarist of the human tragedies caused by Smithian market economics divorced from Smithian 'sympathy,' and as a political writer and speaker of great

moral power" (Harvie 158). Ongoing refinement is the way to see *Strange Loyalties* in relation to the first two novels in the trilogy.

Strange Loyalties opens with a shock, for readers of the preceding two novels, because Laidlaw speaks here in his own voice. The first person narration, in opposition to the mediated third person, is more personal; we are being taken into someone's confidence. However, that confidence is quickly tested by the opening where Laidlaw awakens with a hangover[6] (*SL* 3), a hangover caused by his use of whisky as anesthetic. Once he unravels the mystery of his brother's death, Laidlaw "wished [he] had more whisky" (*SL* 281). A mere seven days between one hangover and the desire for the next is certainly bleaker than the compassion for Tommy Bryson in the first novel or a savouring of life through a jig in the street in the second novel. Being closer to Laidlaw brings events in life that are bleak closer to the reader because there are fewer characters here to mediate between Laidlaw and the reader. Characters are encountered by Laidlaw and mediated by his perceptions of and reactions to them. They remain considerable in number. Significantly, a number of characters exist in memory or conversation only, as echoes, traces. The net result of these interactions is largely so that the Laidlaw who didn't know how he ended up a policeman in the first book; then, who examined his role as a policeman in the second, becomes the "Investigator [who will] investigate thyself" (*SL* 7) in the third. The movement is away from his social role to the man.

Keywords provide a continuity with the preceding two novels, as they are the principal means for defining Laidlaw. The most important of these are education, compassion, experience, idealism, and sharing. "My teachers. They taught me everything I don't need to know" (*SL* 3) is a hard assessment of the educational process. Yet, education is standardised, and it is increasingly packaged, so the uniformity inherent in standard education is what is under attack. In place of education of this kind, Laidlaw favours intelligence, an organic process that "should never be a closed circuit" (*SL* 5). Education as it is found in intelligence is an open-ended process, bearing a close resemblance to the idealised nature of the West of Scotland tradition of the autodidact. Not merely one who learns for the love of it, but also one who puts the learning to social use: Jack Laidlaw's scepticism that makes all answers provisional, progenitors of further questions. The individualised nature of intelligence is where the appeal lies because uniformity cannot nurture the individual in each person. McIlvanney and Laidlaw's criticism of education is harsh and as easily disproved as it is proved; yet the point about provisional, different, individual intelligence is one worth making.

The most obvious reason for securing the primacy of intelligence over education is that it allows change and adjustment to circumstances. Procedures need not be followed; flexibility replaces rote; the human resumes primacy from the machine: "I waited. She was in a place of her own. No one should interrupt her there" (*SL* 80). In this instance, intelligence in response to others gives rise to compassion for Ellie Mabon's memories of Scott. But compassion has its limits, again individual specific. Laidlaw "had tried to teach [his] generosity how to live without becoming embittered. If I can spare it, you can have it. But don't take it behind my back. Don't preempt my right to give. It's what makes me me" (*SL* 100). These are characteristics borne from experience, first the familial teachings, then an individual testing of them in new circumstances away from the safety of the old. A form of cheerful scepticism

resides here, where 'education' is updated. Mind games —a negative form of intelligence— or pure reason have no place here; neither does an unbridled individualism and subjectivity: "To pretend that subjective conviction is objective truth, without testing it against the constant daily witness of experience, is to abdicate from living seriously" (*SL* 163). These terms, which live in the condition of Laidlaw, reflect a serious 'philosophy' of life — an intermingling of emotion and intellect, mediated by experience. This definition of Laidlaw's sense of how to live life in the face of absurdity bears a strong resemblance to pragmatism. It is a practical, utilitarian philosophy that is easy to remember and follow. Laidlaw's doubts, paradoxes, and uncertainties from the preceding two novels appear to have undergone revision.

They have not. Laidlaw investigates himself as well as his brother in order to uncover what the death of a close human being means. That investigation complicates the pragmatism because idealism is what it focusses on. Idealism for Scott and his room-mates at university is encapsulated in Laidlaw's memory of Scott one day at Troon: "a stunningly alive young man, unselfconsciously handsome, the eyes lit up with the search for horizons they hadn't found ... All he wanted was everything" (*SL* 98-9). This sense of limitless possibilities is an idealism shared by Dave Ewart, a younger student than Scott and the others, who refines the sense of idealism to "beginnings... the feeling that everything is possible" (*SL* 115). Laidlaw, more experienced, begins an investigation into "whatever it was that had snuffed out a lot of lives, though it might have left them still moving around" (*SL* 200). The effect of the man in the green coat's death on the lives of Sandy Blake, Dave Lyons, Scott Laidlaw and Michael Preston is a sequence of investigations into idealism at a crisis point. Where Sandy Blake can leave to forget, Dave Lyons is vivified into action in business, has "a remorseless hardness" (*SL* 200), Scott Laidlaw eats away at himself, and Michael Preston renews his commitment to the assistance of others. Each learns a way to deal with the shared burden of a man's death. "Sharing" is the last of the keywords to Laidlaw's character.

Where Sandy, Dave, Scott and Michael shared to hide a truth, Laidlaw takes a share as the responsibility of truth: "This guilt was not absolvable. All I could do was take my share of it" (*SL* 279). Again, experience is the key to consistency in Laidlaw's character, for "In just about every case I've investigated, I've wanted to implicate as many people as I could, including myself" (*SL* 10). If the mediation between idealistic hopes and the awareness of (wo)man's absurdity is this form of pragmatism, then there remains hope. Laidlaw's investigations enforce us to recognise a shared condition that implicates each one of us, and in the sharing, pain is lessened. Each of our deaths is "someone's mourning" (*SL* 37), a trial for the living. Similarly, in each ill act we must share the guilt because our way of life has permitted the act. As a provocative witness, these notions of Laidlaw's are most likely to have the reader in revolt. We exclaim: we're not Jeffrey Dahmer!; we're not Fred West!; we're not Peter Sutcliffe; we're not Donald Neilson!; we're not Tommy Bryson! Not specifically, but these are human beings, and the increasing prevalence of their type of life and activity suggests that something is amiss socially. The rhetoric is extreme here as it needs to be for a point of this one's import. Do we merely regress to the situation addressed in *Laidlaw* and label these people with difference? Or do we share not just the guilt of the perpetrators of these acts, but also the pain of their victims, and the ongoing pain of the families of both perpetrators and victims?

Laidlaw is compassionate enough to agree to a 'white lie' to Mrs. White about Fast Frankie, so that the old lady can die in peace (*SL* 153). His act is a sharing of Frankie's better qualities —a love of his mother— and is a more easily accepted sharing than the examples I have offered above. While Laidlaw's experience of sharing appears positive, the negatives are there too, as will become apparent in the conclusion of his search into his own humanity. However, before I renew this provocation, there are structural considerations in the novel that need addressing first. "I felt I recognised where I had been several times this week —a place where people knew unjustifiable things had happened and were happening but had tried to give the truth they knew elocution lessons, *so that form became the criterion, not content*" (*SL* 208, emphasis added). The foregoing passage is an entry into the debate about form and content in art circles as much as it is a debate about truth. Whether something is said nicely or not is irrelevant, socially, to the fact that it is or is not said. How something is said is contextual and provisional. McIlvanney has restricted his plot to a period of seven days, displayed through the meetings between Laidlaw and numerous other people. There is nothing fancy or intricate in that. The intricacies are in his refinement of the details drawn forth in the preceding two books: meaning, papers and language, the use of tenses and pronouns to implicate, a greater number of absent referents, and a lengthy discussion of the title.

The present tense is used with greater frequency in *Strange Loyalties* than in either of its predecessors. Simple statements, like Laidlaw's declaration that "I do a lot of my thinking in the bath" (*SL* 5), set up the narrative as one told from the present looking back on the past — "... I thought, as the bath water cooled" (*SL* 5). A degree of time for reflection on the "lessons" from events increases the novel's realism. They also increase immediacy and let the reader know that Laidlaw remains active ("I read quite a lot of philosophy..." [*SL 9*]), in spite of the "closing" of this case. Events stay with you, even as they have temporally/spatially ended: "There is a blessedly hazy memory of one of the last pubs we went into" (*SL* 21). Or a principle is abstracted from the text for application to the present:

> I have been long enough wandering through the shadows of other people's lives —the violence, the betrayals and the hurt— to be aware of the power of guilt. It is often a malignant power, for it is those desirous of the good who feel it most and, when they do, it can intimidate them into conformity with natures smaller than their own. It can make them so ashamed of themselves that they condone the shameful acts of others. Self-contempt leaves you ill-equipped to challenge the immorality of anyone else. (*SL* 157)

This passage, and those on pages 161 (facing despairs), 191 (choice in "variations of criminality"), 258 (breaching rules), 273 (recognising the evil within oneself) become a series of instructions, an offering to the reader of how life can be lived. They have greater import because Laidlaw has experienced events already and is therefore drawing conclusions from them for his life. The reader, through verb tense and direct address is invited to do likewise.

A discussion of meaning continues the debate about flux and randomness encountered in the first two novels. For Laidlaw, Scott's death has to mean, to signify:

> I needed the death to mean more than it seemed to mean. If the richness of the life in him could be snuffed on the random number-plate of a car, and that was all, I was ready to shut up shop on my beliefs and hand in my sense of morality at the desk. The world was a bingo stall. But I didn't want it to be. I needed Scott in death as I had needed him in life. I needed a reunion in meaning between us. (*SL* 10-1)

This search for a reunion in meaning is Laidlaw's rebellion against the human condition, in a Camuvian sense. If an individual's life has no significance to others, particularly after death, then there is no sense to life itself. To believe, to forge mores for life requires that all humans signify something. In part, for McIlvanney, that signification resides in the words people deploy in an attempt to come to terms with their lives. Tommy Bryson wrote and then erased what he wrote; Tony Veitch wrote and then had his papers burned; Scott Laidlaw, similarly leaves a trace of paper, yet there is no end to the questions such attempts at meaning give rise to.

Dave Lyons' concern about Scott's papers (*SL* 44) gives a potential weight to their meaning, albeit Laidlaw is 'fishing' and has no papers at this point. John Strachan uncovers one piece of Scott's writing, but its cryptic nature makes meaning difficult to discern: "Only this one sheet had looked like something personal, though what it was John couldn't understand. Glancing it over, I could see why. It was a strange piece of writing. It wasn't just the crumpled nature of the paper that made it difficult to read" (*SL* 89). Then, there is the final piece of Scott's writing, given to Laidlaw by Michael Preston —a card allegorizing the death of the green man and Scott's involvement. All of these pieces lead to further questions, whether the mundane (Was Scott driving?) or the more critical (Why couldn't Scott speak of it?) Characters' writings within the novels are the novel writ miniature. Readers are invited to trace a pattern and a meaning that is relevant to their lives; a pattern is not imposed from without, except through the questions that the plot gives rise to. Answers are an absent present. In his search for meaning, Laidlaw introduces a sense of himself and how that affects his approach.

The title, *Strange Loyalties*, offers an example of how the individual's context and experience can provide a provisional shape:

> I saw endlessly criss-crossing preoccupations, pursuing their own strange loyalties. Strange and questionable loyalties, I thought, including my own. We were moles that lived in the light, following painstakingly constructed tunnels of private purpose. My week so far had been one of those tunnels. In its determined progress it had broken into other people's secret places... bringing an alien and upsetting presence... although I admired loyalty, I reflected it could have strange side-effects... 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. (*SL* 186)

What right does Laidlaw, the doubter, have to insist upon the essence of our nature in this fashion? Yes, we may agree with the assessments he makes of other char-

acters, but that is no justification for extrapolating from those assessments to a definition of humanity. The reason for such a pronouncement has more to do with what Laidlaw learns not so much about others as about himself as he comes into contact with others. His provisional, individualised sense of human essence is an extrapolation of what his experience has told him about himself.

Do we as readers identify with the search and the lessons learned? If so, then the provocation found in assessments of others, but more significantly about life and humans, will be fruitfully carried into our own lives. When Brian Harkness enters in chapter two, the atmosphere is less oppressive than that first encountered in the first person narration from within Laidlaw's head. The community of support, albeit through Harkness' questioning of Laidlaw, demonstrates structurally the need for others. Where Unamuno's invocation by Laidlaw leads to a sense of continuity in the individual ending because of a loss of self, Harkness' presence provides continuity in friendship and in profession. If Laidlaw is "improvising" his self (*SL* 10), there are touchstones that will keep him from falling prey to subjective overdrive: the sub-plot to do with his self, in the development or demise of his relationship with Jan (*SL* 14); the investigation by Harkness and Lilley into the death of Meece Rooney (*SL* 13). These subplots maintain a larger picture for Laidlaw, though they are more likely to dominate the reader's initial attraction to the book —the love interest and the detection (traditional). The three plots intermingle, drawing readers fascinated or engaged in one into the other two, not only to seduce readers into questioning what constitutes a detective novel, but also into other aspects of life. None of it is neat and tidy. Laidlaw will lose Jan, so closure occurs, but that closure isolates him from a loving relationship (*SL* 264). However, Naima Akhbar (*SL* 204) offers potential there. In the detection plot, Matt Mason is captured bringing about closure (*SL* 267), but Laidlaw receives this news alone. While he might be able to "'... cobble a solution [to a murder] out of anything.' ... the cobbler's children... are always the worst shod. I couldn't solve the problems of my own life" (*SL* 268). Who can? The solution is in the ongoing effort, where existence precedes the essence of a life that will be a solution of sorts. In the interim, human meaning, like writing, requires that "'... You go it alone. You build your hide round yourself from whatever is available... You wait. You try many different baits. You let everything escape... but the one you're waiting for, the one you know you must get. You're prepared to lose yourself rather than it" (*SL* 200). And so essence can be achieved in a limited, provisional way; it is there in the pursuit, "in the joy that [expectations] were ever there at all" (*SL* 280). Essence is found, too, in reflection and a heightened awareness of ourselves no matter how ill the components are that we uncover: Laidlaw uncovers a "beast" within, a darkness to his own personality that parallels that found in Scott, and which readers will see parallels to in other characters. To learn, mid-life, to "Beware thyself" (*SL* 280) is no small feat; to act upon it to make human life more bearable for the self and others is an achievement.

III. CONCLUSION

The Laidlaw trilogy is a provocative witnessing of created lives, constantly pulled into comparison with the lives outside of the texts. Readers are pushed to question

themselves and their society. No final answers are offered, but that is the trilogy's strength —we are left to participate in an answer for ourselves and our society.

McIlvanney acknowledges each individual's response to the meaninglessness in life suggested in death. Yet, he does not give up nor is he completely pessimistic, the will to communicate is the simplest suggestion of a desire for something more. However, McIlvanney's gauge is more clearly set on the living and a provoking of compassion and passion about others. McIlvanney remains a provocative witness because his works require involvement and action.

Notes

For Max Webber, Callum McLuckie and Anna Lissa Boekelheide.

[1] Matthew Arnold's sense of popular as anarchic: "the political dangers that he believes to be inevitably concomitant with the entry of the urban, male working class into formal politics in 1867" (Storey 22).

[2] Due to limitations in space, and because *The Papers of Tony Veitch* is less dynamic than the other two novels, my remarks on it are curtailed.

[3] William McIlvanney, *Laidlaw* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977) 5. All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated as *L*.

[4] A contrast is enforced later when McIlvanney introduces a foil for Laidlaw, Detective Inspector Ernie Milligan, who espouses: "'... A professional knows what he is...'" (*L* 52). Hoggart refers to the working-class conception of the police as those: "who represent[ ] the authority which has its eye on them, rather than as a member of the public services whose job it is to help and protect them" (*L* 73); Laidlaw, from the working-classes, certainly experiences this contradiction of working for a group that is "against" his own.

[5] "Post-structuralists reject the idea of an underlying structure upon which meaning can rest secure and satisfied. Meaning is always in process. What we call meaning is a momentary stop in a continuous flow of interpretations of interpretations." (Storey 85)

[6] William McIlvanney, *Strange Loyalties* (London: Sceptre, 1994) 3. All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated as *SL*.

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