

TRESPASSING BOUNDARIES: ROBERT McLIAM WILSON'S SATIRICAL TRANSGRESSION IN *EUREKA STREET*¹

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Together with Glenn Patterson and Colin Bateman, Robert McLiam Wilson can be considered one of the first Northern Irish authors who has convincingly approached the "Troubles" in a provocative and unconventional way. The dramatic vision of the conflict we can find in works such as Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence* or Bernard Mac Laverty's *Cal* are totally transformed into a more satirical vision in McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street*. In this novel, the Northern Irish author goes against the tendency to present terrorist attacks in favour of a biting comic satire against politicians, terrorists, well-to-do citizens and exacerbated nationalists, whom he sees as one of the most dangerous threats to art. This paper will examine the satirical strategies the author draws on in *Eureka Street*, and explain their function in the narrative and contextual framework of the novel. In this sense, I will chiefly focus on the rhetorical devices which recur most frequently, as well as the role of the city of Belfast and its inhabitants as the unquestionable generators of satire in the novel. I will also demonstrate that this novel conforms to most of the parameters that characterise twentieth-century satire, specifically its lack of moralising objectives, which is basically what differentiates current satire from that of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

Not at all, satire is never pointless. It makes us look stupid and besides it's just a pretty good wheeze. (*Eureka Street* 356)

The socio-political and religious turmoil in which Northern Ireland has been immersed for the last thirty years has undoubtedly been a key source in the literary production of a significant number of Irish authors. Novelists such as Brian Moore, Bernard Mac Laverty, Glenn Patterson or Jennifer Johnston, poets like Seamus Heaney, Louis MacNeice and Paul Muldoon; and playwrights such as Ann Devlin and Brian Friel, prove the extent to which Irish literature, and particularly Northern Irish literary production, has progressively achieved the noteworthy status it

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currently has. Nevertheless, despite this conspicuous re-emergence, critics still cast certain doubts upon the literature grounded directly or indirectly on what has been commonly denominated as the Troubles. Some of them suggest that the literature of the Troubles is the result of the authors' partial and partisan vision of the conflict.² Others question the literary quality of these writings, especially the Troubles thriller, which, they believe, can only qualify as mere journalistic documentaries.³ However, it is unquestionable that the peculiarities to which this literature has been subjected have turned it into an increasingly demanded and studied topic, especially once the conflict, its origins, development, implications and current impact has become a major issue in most news reports.⁴

Due to the conflict's inherent historical, religious and political complexities, it is not the aim of this paper to deal extensively with or go into depth the actual controversies of the Northern Irish Troubles, but simply to explore the satirical background that underlies Robert McLiam Wilson's most recent novel, *Eureka Street* (1996). This author represents, together with Benedict Kiely and Glenn Patterson, what some critics have denominated a new wave in the writing that centres specifically on the Troubles and their aftermath. The innovations they have managed to incorporate fundamentally reside, first, in the utilisation of new modes of expression, which somehow depart from the journalistic-like accounts of Kevin Dowling or Gerald Seymour, or the realism that characterises Mac Laverly's or Johnston's narratives; and, more importantly, in the use of new rhetorical strategies such as parody, irony, metafiction and satire, which accord much more with ongoing postmodernist trends. In this vein, McLiam Wilson's satirical visions in *Eureka Street* epitomise some of the traits that best exemplify these new and, occasionally, irreverent approaches to the conflict. Consequently, this analysis will concentrate on his singular exploration of the Troubles, identify the targets he most bitingly satirises and the strategies he draws upon in order to construct this attack. To place in this context, it is worthwhile providing a brief overview of the evolution of satire in Ireland and how the influence of Swift or Sheridan's satire has remained indelible in the literary production of some contemporary Northern Irish authors.⁵

² In his pungent portrayal of the situation of the city of Belfast between the 20th and 23rd of October, Graham-Yoole quotes Richard Bell's words in which he deflates the literary validity of "Troubles" literature: "There have been hundreds of novels about the Troubles, a majority of them thrillers, but not much literature. Violence is the subject most easily covered, without explanation, because the thriller requires none. But there is no literature on the tenacity with which peace has been pursued within the community, to match the counter-weighting force of the hard men. We would have thought that more quality would come out of Irish writers, given the history of Ireland as a producer of great writers. In fact, there hasn't been any. There has been some good poetry, and some good theatre. But no literature" (Graham-Yoole 1994: 290).

³ McMinn asserts that the great bulk of the novels written about the Northern Irish conflict is the outcome of the coverage carried out by journalists during the past thirty years (1980: 114).

⁴ For an illuminating and wide-ranging panorama on the current state of Northern Irish literature, see Marisol Morales (2000: 147-94).

⁵ In the chapter he devotes to the poetic and satiric accomplishment of Austin Clarke, Terence Brown outlines a brief and illuminating overview of the role satire has performed in Irish literature (1988: 127-28).

The apology for satire that one of the characters in *Eureka Street* makes in the quotation that opens this paper can be taken as a valuable starting point for the forthcoming analysis of the satirical background of McLiam Wilson's latest novel. The role performed by satire in the evolution of Irish literature has been, and still is, recognisable. It seems, therefore, that its somehow tragicomic dimension perfectly adjusts to the reality of a country that encompasses the pathos of a long-standing sectarian conflict and the citizens' willingness to live in a peaceful and harmonious environment. It is no wonder, then, that satirists have undoubtedly occupied a very significant and, sometimes, outstandingly influential position in the whole range of Irish literature, from the blemishing and destructive satires of Aithirne the Importunate to the witty and ironic drama of Richard Sheridan, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, not to mention the satirical contributions of Jonathan Swift, surely the most widely acknowledged and acclaimed Irish satirist. Such was the importance satire acquired in primitive Irish society that some critics, especially F. N. Robinson and Robert Elliott, have even referred to its magic nature. In his seminal article "Satirists and Enchanters in Early Irish Literature", Robinson carries out an extensive and detailed examination of the early origins and the decisive function satire performed as a weapon aimed at devaluing, denigrating and deflating the dignity and integrity of all those people at whom those lashing verses were directed (1912: 3).

From these pioneering stages, satire in Ireland, later developed, was carved and consolidated by Swift's, Sheridan's or Shaw's witticism, and finds in McLiam Wilson a notably distinguished practitioner. The author, born in Belfast in 1964, started his enormously precocious career at the age of twenty-five, when he published *Ripley Bogle* (1989). This story recounts the turbulent experience of a character whose diffused personal, political and religious identity leads him to enquire about the very nature of Irish national identity.⁶ *Manfred's Pain* (1992) is his second novel. It basically tells the life of an aged German Jew between the end of the Second World War and his experiences in contemporary London. However, it is probably *Eureka Street* the novel that has definitely launched his promising career as a novelist. It presents the story of a Catholic, Jake Jackson, and a Protestant, Chuckie Lurgan, two characters whose development unfolds in drastically opposite directions. Jackson has recently lost his English girlfriend and his job turns out to be as unrewarding and dull as his life in Belfast. Lurgan, on the other hand, represents Jackson's counterpart. His economic success, the result of conspicuously illicit operations, and his relationship with an American woman, which culminates in his fathering of a child, make Chuckie Lurgan the prototype of the self-made man, who manages to get on in an apparently hostile and suffocating environment.

These two characters allow McLiam Wilson to intertwine two different narrative layers — Jake Jackson's first person narration and the third person narrative about Chuckie Lurgan —, and also enable him to introduce a series of themes and

⁶ Critics and reviewers have generally acknowledged McLiam Wilson's thematic and formal achievement in *Ripley Bogle*. For further information on the critical reception of Wilson's debut, see Corcoran. (1997: 161); Patten (1990: 136-39), Graham-Yoole (1994: 290-91); and Smyth (1997: 132-35).

issues that are inextricably interconnected with the situation Northern Ireland has dramatically lived through in the last thirty years. However, as I suggested above, he approaches the Troubles in a more humorous, parodic and sceptical way.⁷ In this vein, *Eureka Street* is partially exempted from the crudity and violence of other novels that deal primarily with the Northern Irish conflict,⁸ and focuses much more on the futility of this confrontation and the causes that may have brought it about. One of the reasons that have undoubtedly triggered off and ignited the conflict is religion and, particularly, the long and unresolved Catholic-Protestant dichotomy. This religious confrontation, which unquestionably points to further and underlying political considerations, is parodied, sometimes in an overtly derisive way, by some of the characters that appear in the novel. McLiam Wilson's criticism towards religious bigotry is embodied in a well-known tradition of religious satirists, whose principal aim was to denounce the corruption and follies that emerged among church people.⁹ His main intention, therefore, is to dismantle and satirise the apparently clear-cut religious divisions that have been repeatedly shown to justify the historical partition of the Northern Irish population. This explains why the majority of characters that turn up in the novel, excluding the radical Catholic Aoighe, do not explicitly show their religious standpoints, and embrace more vague attitudes towards these two unreconciled positions. In the following passage, one of the most satirically accomplished in the whole novel, the author, clearly flouting the expectations of the readers, presents Chuckie Lurgan as a naturally born Protestant, who, despite these antecedents, attends with fervent enthusiasm one of the Pontiff's visits to Belfast: "The people around Chuckie went wild with delight and, as the Pontiff passed by where he was standing, Chuckie threw out his hands amongst the forest of stretching limbs and brushed the Pope's own fingers.... His hand buzzed with surplus blood, it felt suffused, electrified by the touch of fame, the touch of serious global celebrity" (1997: 30).

This first impression is even heightened in a much more parodic episode, which again presents Chuckie showing his double or even triple-facedness. It is clear throughout the novel that Lurgan is a desperate fame-seeking character. The former quotation, in which the reader can appreciate that religious convictions are raucously overturned, anticipates a much more satirical episode that manifestly undermines the polemical relationship that has existed between these two religious factions throughout their historical evolution. It seems that McLiam Wilson intends to emphasise how relative everything is, even the most traditionally assumed truths,

⁷ According to Graham-Yoole, McLiam Wilson "is part of a younger set of novelists who are aloof, irreverent, and humorous, who want to make the Troubles the problem of a different generation" (1994: 290-91).

⁸ *Eureka Street's* overall optimistic and humorous tone is, nevertheless, tinged by incidents that perfectly illustrate the harshness and brutality of the Troubles. Chapter eleven, in which McLiam Wilson describes with notable accuracy how a bomb goes off in Belfast, killing several civilians, proves that writing humorously about the Troubles is a highly complicated task (218-31).

⁹ For a thorough examination of religious satire, see Edward and Lillian Bloom (1979); and Leonard Feinberg (1967).

and how easy it is to trespass the boundaries that have been historically marked by Catholicism and Protestantism, simply for the sake of obtaining social, economic or political promotion. The following quotation illustrates this idea:

All this had a superbity that Chuckie could not match but he incorporated Eve's Broadway-hit status into his own spiel. He began to develop two separate *personae* for dealing with these businessmen. If required, he could be the ultimate croppy boy within seconds, lamenting the filthy English invasion of his land. He became the ultimate Catholic, he grew misty-eyed when talking of the Kennedy clan and blesses himself, inaccurately, before signing any documents.... Alternatively, he sometimes found it useful to assume an entirely English manner. East Coast WASPs responded to this particularly well. (1997: 327)

This satire accentuates not only the fragility of this duality but also the perception of how confusing and blurry the line that theoretically separates them can be. In "Master Tropes in Satire", Rick Eden points out that: "The occasion for satire is the detection of an ironic disparity between what alazons pretend to be and what they actually are, between meretricious appearances and sordid reality. Satire detects guile behind goodwill, animosity behind civility ... in short, folly and vice behind behavior that we accept as rational and moral" (1987: 599-600). And this is precisely where the author's satirical attempt lies. He builds up one character who no longer adjusts to the strictly demarcated dual reality that has been historically imposed in Northern Ireland. Lurgan represents the archetypal figure of a con-man who allows McLiam Wilson to parody these Catholic-Protestant boundaries.

Besides offering a parodic and satiric vision of this religious issue, his satire finds a very obvious target in the excessive trivialisation that surrounds the Troubles. With this, I essentially mean that the author's attacks are also directed at all those people who, through a seemingly sympathetic, sentimental and honest discourse, want to achieve fame and distinction even at the expense of the victims of the conflict. In this sense, *Eureka Street* scorns quite forthrightly the role performed by the mass media in the coverage of the Troubles. The novel depicts with sheer irony that what is supposed to be crucial is treated frivolously, what is supposed to be emotionally shocking is presented with utter morbidity, shown, if possible, in prime-time hours when the biggest audience gathers around the television set. The massive influence the media actually exert is conveniently manipulated by some characters in *Eureka Street* in order to gain popular acclaim, support and leadership. The figure of the ambitious fame-seeking man, object of McLiam Wilson's most venomous darts, is epitomised by Shague Ghintoss, who, according to Jake Jackson's ironic description, happens to be "Ireland's greatest living poet" (1997: 190). Moreover, Ghintoss also conducts the most successful programme in one of Belfast's local radio stations; this enables him to gradually acquire the role of the city's spokesman. However, behind this guise of charisma and involvement, Ghintoss just seeks his personal glorification, a fact McLiam Wilson refers to in order to overtly satirise this figure. In relation to this question, Leonard Feinberg argues that: "The modern

satirist has to fight the propaganda of television, radio, books, comic strips, newspapers, and popular magazines, all of which, even in democracy, misrepresent reality" (1967: 14). In the following passage, we can see how, through the use of irony and indirection, the figure of Ghintoss is utterly scorned and ridiculed:

When the fuzz arrived, Ghintoss obviously pondered the possible benefits to his career. Having a full pacific battle with the cops might have had an attractive 1960s, Parisian-riots air but, on the other hand, he didn't want to lose any glitter with the authorities: there were too many prizes, grants and subsidies available to the genteel and careful Irish poet, too many knighthoods and laureateships. (1997: 194)¹⁰

However, the author's satirical attack towards the media acquires a wider and even more invective nature when he focuses on the morbidity and frivolity with which the conflict is dealt. In chapter eleven, surely the turning point in the novel's narrative development, we find a crude and realistic portrayal of a terrorist assault perpetrated in the city of Belfast, causing numerous deaths, casualties and material damage. This event, which once again reinforces the state of terror and instability in which Northern Ireland is immersed, is soon exploited and distorted by the media, whose only intention is to create a fictionalised and sensationalist story out of an event of such dramatic magnitude. It is clear, thus, that the media's main intention is to offer, in the most impersonal and unabridged way, the very consequences of this kind of attacks. Therefore, blood, limbs, disfigured faces, disjointed bodies, and death are the aspects that, according to McLiam Wilson's mordant vision, draw the attention of TV cameramen and photographers. In this sense, their constant search for bloodshed makes them appear more as carrion birds than as actual human beings, becoming, for this reason, easy targets for the author's acid satire. The following passage exemplifies the extent to which mass media can trivialise key matters in order to reach a greater audience:

Wifeless, childless, Robert simply refused to live with it. He refused to deal with it. Afterwards, television crews, doing pieces about the grieving relatives, used him gleefully for the first couple of weeks. The dead wife and two little girls made such a good story. In the months that followed, with Robert's stubborn resistance to comfort or happiness, the TV crews avoided him. His passionate grief, his lack of development, his unreasonable and untelegraphic refusal to forgive didn't make such a good story. (1997: 224)

¹⁰ This passage reminds us of one of Brian Friel's most vituperative plays entitled *The Freedom of the City*, in which he incessantly denounces the ambiguous function performed by both the clergy and the media in the events that took place in Derry during the so-called "Bloody Sunday". Hale-Winkler refers to this play when he says: "Both his RTE Commentator and his Priest exploit the emotions of the moment for their own ends. The television newsman uses unreliable information to produce an exciting story, and the Priest manipulates his initial sermon into an invective against the evil communist conspiracy behind the Civil Rights Movement" (1982: 143).

Reading the passage above, it goes without saying that McLiam Wilson's satire succeeds in uncovering the "predatory" attitudes of most mass media. In this sense, *Eureka Street* manages to fulfil what Edward Rosenheim denominated "satire's referentiality", which basically points to the idea that all that satire denounces, scorns and ridicules must be known to the readers. Satire, Rosenheim suggests, loses its real effectiveness and impact if readers are unable to localise the evil the satirist criticises (1963: 318).¹¹ Suffice it to say that the morbid reality-shows, in which all these images are displayed without restriction, are probably the ones that people are more interested in. McLiam Wilson's criticism, thus, points to a reality that recurrently emerges in our society, eventually revealing the lack of credibility of most mass media.

Like many classical satires, *Eureka Street* constructs a conscientious attack against Northern Irish political organisations and their members. In this sense, the novel forms part of a long-standing tradition of political satires, which finds in another Irish author, Jonathan Swift, one of its most significant practitioners.¹² Here, the criticism of the figure of the politician particularly stems from his/her administrative passivity during the crucial moments of the 1994 cease-fire. The novel unveils severe accusations towards all those politicians who, behind a curtain of hopeful and confident words, are completely unable to undertake a serious anti-terrorist policy and to implement consistent measures for the eradication of violence. The first direct allusion to this political degradation is sarcastically suggested by Jake Jackson, who firmly believes that: "Politics are basically antibiotic, i. e., an agent capable of killing or injuring living organisms" (1997: 90). Nevertheless, Wilson's satirical comments on politics go well beyond the mere scorn of minor evils or follies. It actually pinpoints the political performance in Northern Ireland in the last decades, emphasising the lack of reliability most politicians convey. Always drawing upon a visibly detached style, the author seems to suggest that this Northern Irish conflict has been unresolved due precisely to the lack of convenient and urgent political intervention. In a wonderfully satirical scene, McLiam Wilson depicts that political decline:

They themselves were some of the frightened. Witnesses were interviewed by the police. The police were interviewed by the press. Politicians gave statements. There was a round of condemnation and outrage on all sides. Few paused to think how often they'd repeated those words over the last double decade or so. (1997: 228)

Although the novel displays a wide-ranging variety of satirical targets, we could frame them within a more general, all-embracing one. That the novel satirises

¹¹ Bargainnier also points out that satire fails if the audience does not manage to understand it properly: "If the satirist fails to achieve such necessary clarity of his aims, he will surely lose his audience" (1978: 5).

¹² Many critics on satire have extensively dealt with one of the *modus operandi* in satirical literature. Politics proves to be the favourite target among most satirists. For further information on political satire, see Dustin Griffin (1989, 1994); Gary Dyer (1997); or Matthew Hodgart (1969).

the futility of the conflict is noticeable from its very beginnings. This explains why McLiam Wilson grounds most of his satirical attacks on underlying "Wh-" questions. Characters often wonder *why* this conflict has not been resolved yet and also *why* the Troubles actually began. This series of interrogations leads them to question the validity of a struggle whose aims and purposes are no longer tenable. The Protestant-Catholic dichotomy I referred to above, which is now regarded as one of the possible reasons for the outburst of the conflict, is often considered by the characters as insufficient to justify such barbarism. The satire on the futility of this religious confrontation, as we can see in the following quotation, equally converges on the overall pointlessness of the armed conflict: "Interestingly enough, Protestant/Catholic hardmen would still routinely and joyfully beat the shit out of Catholics/Protestants even if those Catholics/Protestants didn't believe in God and had formally left their faith. It was intriguing to wonder what a bigot of one faith could object to in an atheist who was born into another" (1997: 163-64). Nothing seems more ridiculous and futile than a fight, in this case founded on religious considerations, in which nobody knows what to strive for. The novel depicts with a tone of ironic disenchantment the depressing scenario of a conflict in which this unstoppable inertia is dangerously postponing the peace and stability so long demanded by the Northern Irish people.

The vision of the stupidity of the Troubles is reinforced by the fact that violence and crime are not only invigorated by military and paramilitary groups but also by all those ordinary citizens who believe that the struggle belongs to them and that it should never end. In what sounds like a masochistic behaviour, McLiam Wilson is straightforwardly appealing to those readers whose inner conviction about the armed conflict might resemble that of the characters that appear in the novel. In "Satire, Speech and Genre", Charles Knight argues that readers should never think that they are completely exempted from the satirist's scorn:

The position of the audience may also be dangerous. Satire usually demands an audience which either agrees with the propriety of the attack or is willing to do so for purposes of entertainment. But since the readers' willing and even conspiratorial cooperation with the satirist implicates them in the guilt of attack, as perpetrators if not as victims, their position is often uncomfortable. To accept oneself as satiric target is to admit one's guilt; to repulse attack by settling it upon the shoulders of the world is to reveal one's guilt. (1992: 32)

The singularity of the author's satire, therefore, lies on the fact that it does not exclusively aim at those military groups mentioned above but also at all those people or political factions who, directly or indirectly, forge and stimulate the constant upheavals of violence in Northern Ireland. In this sense, *Eureka Street* responds quite adequately to one of satire's constituent features, that is, its impartial and unbiased denunciation of universal targets. If satire is one-sided and shows unequivocally the political or religious tendencies of the author, its general effect ends up being inconsistent and pointless. As a matter of fact, the only means satire

can turn to in order to be fully successful is detachment, and this is precisely, as Gerry Smyth suggests in *The Novel and the Nation*, the strategy McLiam Wilson is best at (1997: 116). Along the same line, the following quotation illustrates the extent of the futility of a conflict brought about by such blindness and bigotry: "The IRA and UVF both claimed responsibility. An American newscaster told the camera that her father had been executed because he was too good at his job. The Irish didn't want him persuading them away from their war. The Irish liked their war" (1997: 122). The underlying satiric force of this quotation is grounded on its all-embracing impact: the novel does not differentiate between the essentialism of Protestants or Catholics, Unionists or Republicans, he simply sets forth an attack on radicalism, disregarding the faction in which it might have been originated.

The use of new narrative techniques and rhetorical strategies in the Irish literature of the 90s finds in *Eureka Street* one of its most remarkable instances. Satire, in this vein, emerges as the element that essentially enables McLiam Wilson to decentre and trespass some of the most consolidated paradigms in the history of Northern Irish society. As I have pointed out earlier, the author draws consistently on a wide range of devices which he employs in order to achieve a more accomplished overall satiric effect. *Eureka Street* abounds in irony, sarcasm, parody and, above all, detachment. It is obvious that the efficacy of satire in this novel lies fundamentally on the author's ability to be detached and indirect, veiling his mordant attacks behind an apparently easy-going and humorous guise. The novel, thus, represents a new stage in the development of the Northern Irish literary scenario, together with other authors such as the above-mentioned Glenn Patterson, among others, since it manages to deal with issues of such transcendence as the Protestant-Catholic duality or the blatant manipulation exercised by the mass media in a more humorous and satiric way. Though not inherently protreptic, since Wilson's aim is not in the least to preach a moralising or reforming sermon, *Eureka Street's* satire succeeds in facing in an open, and occasionally irreverent tone, all those events that are the object of discussion and debate in current Northern Irish social, political and religious affairs.

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