

“The Redefinition of the Scottish Split Self in Brian McCabe’s *The Other McCoy* (1990)”

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Contemporary Scottish writing increasingly involves complex negotiations among the different Scottish identities that have proliferated since the nineteen eighties. As is well known, the previous monologic understandings of identity relegated Scottish art to the status of “artistic Wasteland”, and viewed Scottish culture as “traumatic”. However, the later dialogic conception(s) of identity allowed breaking those negative views and seeing the Scottish socio-cultural field in more positive terms. As a consequence of this, new identitarian configurations could and had to be explored.

Many contemporary Scottish writers explore a number of possible identities beyond those of the romanticised rural Scotland of kailyards and bagpipes, or those of the urban and gritty Scotland of the Post-industrial revolution. Most of their works tend to focus on multivocal characters who struggle to reconfigure the fragmentations of identity created by “traumatised” stereotypes like the Caledonian antiszygy or the Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde myth. Brian McCabe (b. 1951) is one of those writers whose work both plays homage to and reworks Scottish stereotypes.

McCabe’s novel *The Other McCoy* (1990) is an example of the combination of classic Scottish intertexts and of parodic irony, which subverts or gives new meanings to some traditional Scottish elements that had become cultural stereotypes. As the title itself suggests, the novel presents as one of its

central themes the haunting classical *topos* of the double, associated in Scotland with the Dr-Jekyll- and-Mr-Hyde figure. McCabe uses the *topos* of the double both to develop and explore his own preoccupations with contemporary life in Scotland and to position himself within the Scottish literary tradition that has the double as one of its key referents considered.

As is well-known, Scotland's historical and cultural circumstances have often been analysed as the causes of a psychological splitting.<sup>1</sup> The so-called "schizophrenic" mixing of voices in Scottish literature, seemed to reflect the historical facts that led to the dissolution of the Scottish State and the crisis in Scottish identity. Some critics have argued that the "problem" of linguistic disunity or so-called Caledonian antiszygy is often dramatised by means of narration and characters. Moreover, irony, juxtaposition, multiple voices, and habitual counter-pointing are said to be distinctive of Scottish culture, expressing an ongoing crisis of identity (Simpson, 1988: 251). According to this negative vision of Scottish identity as the damaged product of adverse historical circumstances, polarity and fragmentation appear as characteristics to be avoided. As a consequence of this theoretical tradition, the Jekyll-and-Hyde figure has been interpreted as the monstrous child of this Scottish linguistic and identitarian ambivalence. However, if the cultural and linguistic diversity in Scotland were perceived as a multiplicity rather than as a splitting, then the Jekyll-and-Hyde figure would not be diminishing but enriching.

The traditionally negative diagnosis of Scottish cultural identity started to

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Edwin Muir (1887-1959) pessimistically commented on the consequences that bilingualism, understood as division, had both for Scottish identity and literary production in Scotland, and he believed that "Scottish writers were afflicted by the ineradicable psychological damage of a divided linguistic inheritance [...], and by the consequent fact that 'Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another'" (in Craig, 1999: 15).

be challenged by some critics in the nineteen-eighties, thus allowing for a positive reworking of the traditional notions of (Scottish) self and world. Cairn Craig has fostered this more positive view on the grounds that a Scottish culture which has regularly been described as “schizophrenic” is not necessarily sick. He proposes a view of it as an example of a culture that is engaged in the dialogue with the other(s), a conversation in different dialects, a dialectic that is the foundation not only of persons but of nations (1999: 115).

*The Other McCoy* expresses this dialogue among individual dialects—a polyphony—, both with oneself and with others, and also manages to give the *topos* of the Doppelgänger a comic<sup>2</sup> and positive twist. The novel tells the story of Patrick McCoy, an unemployed comedian, who wakes up at his meagre shed with a bad hangover on Hogmanay, unable to remember clearly what he did the night before at a friend’s party. In this state of mind, he cannot help but think about his present condition, his past and his future. His landlord wants to evict him from the shed, so Pat gets up and tries to make some money by selling spyholes door to door. What he does not know is that his girlfriend Yvonne and his friends are thinking at this moment that he has committed suicide. During his wandering through the streets of Edinburgh,<sup>3</sup> McCoy meets some of his friends, who thought him dead, and they then realise the misunderstanding. In the end, he meets Yvonne and, relieved, they all celebrate the first day of the year together in what may be described as a faintly ironic and wholly parodic recasting of the traditional ending of Plautinian new comedy.

It must be said that Patrick McCoy is a comedian who specialises in

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<sup>2</sup> This comic turn follows the Russian tradition of the myth of the double inaugurated by Dostoevsky and Gogol.

<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, when dealing with a novel that tells the story of a hero (or antihero) in one day while he wanders through the city, the reader of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) will look for similarities with the classic Modernist work.

impersonating other people and speaking with different voices. But he not only does this on the stage, he also speaks through their voices and slips under their skins, while he tries to find out who he really is and who the other people are. This aspect of McCoy's personality brings to mind Peter Ackroyd's "monopolylinguist", music-hall comedian who can speak in different voices and change roles rapidly in the same play (Onega, 2008: 460). Like Ackroyd's monopolylinguist, McCoy does not actually imitate other people, rather he feels as if he really were transformed into whomever he is impersonating; as if he were the other(s). As we shall see, the apparition of the double in *The Other McCoy* is not a consequence of a scission in the protagonist's consciousness, as could be said of nineteenth-century literary doubles, but of the difference between the self and its imago, that is, between the person and the image that is reflected by the other(s).

As a consequence of the protagonist's impersonating compulsion, focalisation, defined as the relation between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented (Bal, 1985: 50), is one of the most interesting aspects of the novel's story for our analysis, since it provides a deep insight into its form and aim. The novel presents a dual—or a doubled—character-bound focalisation. The two main focalisers are Patrick McCoy and Yvonne, who alternate focalisations almost mechanically. These two perspectives do not really mingle but rather complement each other, as each chapter is almost entirely focalised through one of them. There is, however, no essentialist difference between both focalisations with respect to gender, since the novel presents a conception of the self as constructed through the act of role playing. Thus, *The Other McCoy* integrates the feminine and masculine perspectives without making them antagonists. The very structure of the

focalisation in the novel reproduces, then, an anti-essentialist conception of the self, in relation to other(s), since the subject is no longer a fixed and stable entity, but is rather conceived as made up of multiple facets which, in relation to the other, conform, construct, the individual.

Besides, *The Other McCoy* parodies other previous texts through its intertexts, which erupt as other voices in the novel. In this sense, we might say that the figure of the author becomes that of an impersonator,<sup>4</sup> who shows different voices through the art of storytelling. The previous texts are thus, in a sense, old voices which are newly spoken, re-worked, played with, in order to construct new meanings. Among these, some are canonical texts, which McCabe parodies and gives a more positive outlook.

Two of the most obvious intertexts of the novel are *The Private Memoires and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1924) and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In James Hogg's work, George is haunted by Robert, just as McCoy is haunted by the Other McCoy in McCabe's work. Nevertheless, *The Confessions*, which has been described by David Punter as "a detailed [...] account of schizophrenia" (in Blair, 2003: xx), presents the splitting or doubling of the self in a religious context, whereas *The Other McCoy* has nothing to do with Calvinism.

As regards the discussion of the intertexts *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, there are plenty of allusions throughout *The Other McCoy*. Some are implicit, for example, when Patrick experiences the feeling of having a double: "McCoy felt as if he were being followed a few steps behind by a shadowy figure and he

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<sup>4</sup> The similarity of the role of writer and that comic impersonator is explicitly drawn by Grogan when he tells Pat McCoy about MacRae, the writer: "What he does is no different from what you do. He puts on voices" (150).

thought again about the other McCoy” (160). But others are explicit as, for example, when John tells McCoy that he had had “a long night last night with Camus’ Rebel, Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde and the World Service News” (135).

Stevenson, who has been considered a precursor of psychoanalysis, shows in his masterpiece not that one human being is two, but rather that two or more minds or selves inhabit the human being. Indeed, Mr Hyde is not an external projection, but an internal doubling/splitting, which does not seek independence from his host. Developing this, McCabe moves on to show that this doubling/splitting can even be a way of maturation, and that this sort of splitting does not necessarily lead to fatal destruction.

The *topos* of the Doppelgänger is explicitly linked to the novel’s main character when Grogan advises his friend Ian about how to write: “Doppelganger, what’s that?’ ‘That’s German for something!’ said McCoy, ‘the accusation whining in his voice. ‘Aye’, said MacRae, ‘it’s German for the other McCoy’” (157). But talking about the Doppelgänger provokes in the characters no panic, as used to happen to characters in gothic romances. It only provokes laughter, maybe a nervous one, but laughter after all. The tragic sense of the double is here understood tragicomically or even comically. The character’s attitude is a humorous and hopeful one. Since, as the narrator points out, in life: “There was as much tragedy in it as comedy. It was all in the way it was done” (20).

Life and death are also intermingled, as the protagonists’ death is found in many stories where the *topos* of the double appears. McCoy feels, at the beginning of the novel, haunted by the double: “McCoy felt as if he were being followed a few steps behind by a shadowy figure and he thought again about the other McCoy” (160). The ghostly presence is a burden McCoy will have to get rid

of if he wants to begin again. As in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the only possible solution is to bring the life of that unhappy man to an end, to symbolically die and integrate the split facets of his self. In this sense, death can be an attempt to accomplish wholeness, as can be seen in the works of R. L. Stevenson and Edgar Allan Poe.

It is worth pointing out that McCoy's "rebirth" takes place at Hogmanay, the celebration of the change of year, which represents both the burden of the past and the possibility of a new beginning. For Patrick, this is an ambiguous day in which past and future, death and life, merge:

The New Year. It had never been a straightforward, happy time for him, it had always caught at a bad time, a time of uncertainty, a time when the future looked as if it might be harder than the past. The past was hard too, but at least it was over. Or was it? (113)

According to Mircea Eliade, New Year's Eve was important for archaic civilisations with a mythical conception of time as eternal return, since it symbolises the end of a cosmogony and the beginning of a new one (1985: 54). As the narrator himself explains: "The year's wake was a terrible celebration, but it had to be attended to with due gravity", since it is both celebration and mourning (McCabe, 1991: 128-9). At Hogmanay, people celebrate the advent of the possibility of renewal in a cathartic feast which symbolises the annual return to primordial chaos.

The circular structure of the novel reinforces the notion of mythical time as eternal return and of primordial time as the moment of creation, and brings about, the repetition of the cosmogony (Eliade, 1985: 56-7). The circularity of

the structure is beautifully expressed at the end of the novel, when the characters begin the New Year together “circled around each other” (McCabe, 1991:191). As the novel reaches its end, McCoy’s conception of the world as an inescapable stage, and his awareness of having a dark facet of the self, other(s) with-in, change and he starts integrating both McCoys —the real and what he perceives as his other(s).

Thus, at the end of the novel, Platonic dualism, the fragmented self, and the split of self and other(s) give way to plurality: the self’s internal duality and the duality of self and other(s) are transformed into a hermeneutics of plurality and dialogical understanding. Further, the novel’s circularity and McCoy’s rebirth work analogically to express Brian McCabe’s conviction that is it still possible to renew the Scottish novel by the creative reworking of the old meanings into new ones.



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