

THE EDINBURGH COMPANION TO  
IRVINE WELSH

EDITED BY BERTHOLD SCHOENE

Edi

# The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh

Edited by Berthold Schoene



Edinburgh University Press

Für Gerlinde

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## Abbreviations

AH	<i>The Acid House</i>
BS	<i>The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs</i>
C	<i>Crime</i>
E	<i>Ecstasy</i>
F	<i>Filth</i>
G	<i>Glue</i>
IY	<i>If You Liked School, You'll Love Work</i>
MSN	<i>Marabou Stork Nightmares</i>
P	<i>Porno</i>
T	<i>Trainspotting</i>

## Series Editors' Preface

The preface to this series' initial tranche of volumes recognised that some literary canons can conceive of a single 'Great Tradition'. The series editors consider that there is no such simple way of conceiving of Scottish literature's variousness. This arises from a multilingual and multivalent culture. It also arises from a culture that includes authors who move for many different reasons beyond Scotland's physical boundaries, sometimes to return, sometimes not. The late Iain Wright in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* talked of the Scots as a 'semi-nomadic people'. Robert Louis Stevenson travelled in stages across the world; Muriel Spark settled in Southern Africa, England and then Italy; James Kelman, while remaining close to his roots in Glasgow, has spent important periods in the United States; Irvine Welsh has moved from Leith, in Edinburgh, to a series of domestic bases on both sides of the Atlantic.

All four writers at one time and in one way or another have been under-appreciated. Stevenson – most notoriously perhaps – for a time was seen as simply an adventure writer for the young. Yet Stevenson is now recognised not for simplicity, but his wonderful complexity, an international writer whose admirers included Borges and Nabokov. Similarly, the other three have firm international reputations based on innovation, literary experiment and pushing formal boundaries. All have grown out of the rich interrelationship of English and Scots in the literature to which they contribute; they embody its intercultural richness, hybridity and cosmopolitan potential. Some of their subject matter is far-flung: often they are situated not only physically but also in literary terms well beyond Scotland. Yet they are all important contributors to Scottish literature, a fact which problematises in the most positive and creative way any easy notion of what Scottish literature is.

Ian Brown  
Thomas Owen Clancy

## Brief Biography of Irvine Welsh

Irvine Welsh was born on 27 September 1958 in Leith, the son of Peter Welsh, a dock worker, and his wife, Jean. The family relocated to Muirhouse, a new housing scheme on the outskirts of Edinburgh. On leaving school Welsh initially worked as a TV repairman. In 1978 he moved to London, where he became immersed in the punk music scene. He then spent time as a property entrepreneur before temping as a clerk for Hackney Council. In the late 1980s, newly married, Welsh returned to Edinburgh and became a training officer in Edinburgh District Council's housing department. From 1988 to 1990 he studied for an MBA at Heriot-Watt University. In the early 1990s short stories by Welsh began to appear in small, independent literary magazines. *Trainspotting* was published in 1993. The novel was among the final ten titles long-listed for the Booker Prize, but two judges were so offended by it that they threatened to resign should it make the shortlist. To date *Trainspotting* has sold over one million copies in the United Kingdom alone. Danny Boyle's film adaptation was released on 23 February 1996. The film took £11 million at the UK box office and became the most successful independent release of the year in the United States.

Following publication of four more novels and two collections of short stories, Welsh became a regular columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* in 2003. He also spent some time teaching creative writing at Columbia College, Chicago, where he met his second wife, Beth Quinn, whom he married in July 2005. (His first marriage had ended in divorce.) After living in Amsterdam for several years, since 2004 Welsh has been based mainly in Dublin. While continuing to produce fiction – *The Bedroom Secrets of the Masterchefs* (2006), *If You Liked School, You'll Love Work* (2007) and *Crime* (2008) – Welsh has begun to develop a strong interest in film. Welsh is a partner in two burgeoning film company projects: Four Ways and Jawbone Films. His enduring popularity and cultural import are documented by the recent publication of *Reheated Cabbage* (2009), a collection of some of his pre-*Trainspotting* work, most of which had been out of print since the early 1990s.

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# Introduction

Berthold Schoene

To fully appreciate the impact of Irvine Welsh's work on contemporary British culture and the Scottish literary imagination, one must begin with a quick look at the Scottish literary scene in 1993, the year that *Trainspotting*, Welsh's first and most successful novel, was published. As far as impact and iconic stature are concerned, *Trainspotting* joined Alasdair Gray's (b. 1934) *Lanark* (1981) as one of the two watershed texts that heralded a new heyday in Scottish writing. Both novels captured the mood of devolutionary uncertainty that simultaneously burdened and inspired the nation between the two home rule referenda of 1979 and 1997. *Trainspotting*'s greatest achievement resides in its re-authentication of the Scottish tradition, paradoxically achieved by breaking with it, by asserting a local rootedness marred by deracination, and by distilling a sense of flux and mobility from claustrophobic stagnation. Unselfconscious, unapologetic and seemingly unencumbered by generic conventions or any definite ideological agenda, Welsh's early work makes a perfect match for Hamish White and Janice Galloway's identikit of 'the vital and volatile brat that is [Scottish] literature in the making'.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Welsh's more recent, post-devolution work has been received far less enthusiastically and is often read as insufferably formulaic and anodyne, signalling the apparent decline of this literary *enfant terrible*-turned-'master chef', who seems increasingly incapacitated by the branding of his notoriety.

In 1989 Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull described Scotland as 'a land of no gods or heroes',<sup>2</sup> and in 1993 Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson represented the country as stifled by 'old dreams' and starved of 'new visions'.<sup>3</sup> It is within this atmosphere that *Trainspotting* burst onto the scene, transforming Scotland's image by contemptuously 'turn[ing] its back on Tartanry and Balmorality'<sup>4</sup> and celebrating an aggressively anti-nationalist stance of defiant deviancy, displayed previously only in the occasional television sit-com, such as BBC Scotland's *Rab C. Nesbitt* (1988–99). Welsh's novel imagined Scotland in a new, radically contemporary way, paying little heed to the academically nurtured chimera of a malaise-stricken nation. Symptomatically, in his analysis of the early 1990s, even a critic as

forward-looking and shrewd as Wallace could not escape the representational tropes of Scotland's alleged inferiorism. Urging writers 'to find the cracked and strangled voice and lend it healing speech', Wallace couched his critique of Scotland's 'novel of damaged identity' in the same lachrymose style that he regarded as so detrimental to Scottish cultural autonomy. Wallace's conclusion that 'the sound of that new-found voice will always be recognised as unmistakably ours'<sup>5</sup> seems equally problematic in that it compounds the tension between a fixed sense of national authenticity on the one hand and genuine innovation on the other. What if the fixtures of Scotland were to be subjected to a radical transformation, and suddenly new and hitherto alien 'Scotlands' emerged, and as a result Scottishness began to voice itself in a previously inconceivable, unheard-of way?

Unprecedented and unforeseeable, *Trainspotting* exploded the mix of nostalgia and wishful utopian projection that informed Wallace and Stevenson's collection of critical essays. Welsh's novel at once thwarted and fulfilled Wallace's hope for the rise of a new, curative voice capable of re-authenticating 'our' literary and cultural self-portrayal. Though firmly rooted in Scottish culture, *Trainspotting* set out not so much to heal as to expose the Scottish malaise, and the malaise it exposed had little to do with the dignified, aestheticised inferiorism suffered by certain middle-class intellectuals. Rather, its representational power was dedicated to the despair and ferocious needs of an underclass previously without voice or visibility in Scottish literature. Derek Paget's comment on Danny Boyle's film adaptation – namely, that 'the *Trainspotting* moment signalled the rejection, at least temporarily, of one kind of Britishness – the kind that routinely looked away from, and denied, anything with which it was not comfortable'<sup>6</sup> – applies equally to the idea of a common Scottishness unperturbed by class or multicultural difference. *Trainspotting* could become such an influential phenomenon only because at the same time as it perpetrated a radical break with twentieth-century Scottish literature, spearheaded by writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978) and James Kelman (b. 1946), it also revived what have traditionally been Scottish literature's chief preoccupations: identity, class, language and fantasy. The main difference is that in *Trainspotting* nothing is ever clear-cut; Scottishness can signify cultural paralysis, rootedness and mobility, identity as well as difference. Like MacDiarmid's, Welsh's use of language could be described as 'synthetic' in that it is stylised and strategically crafted, but rather than superimposing a code of his own making and speaking through, or for, his characters, Welsh accentuates his protagonists' idiomatic diversity by rendering himself a mere mouthpiece. Unlike in other, perhaps more typical working-class writing, in *Trainspotting* class is a complex and complicated thing as each social category is shown to splinter endlessly into multitudinous sub-strata, so that ultimately what Welsh's readers are

left with are groups of individuals marked by various degrees of ostracism. In terms of genre *Trainspotting* bears a number of traits traditionally associated with fantasy literature. However, the novel's surreal magic and horror never have an alienating effect on the reader. The opposite is the case as they transcend realist representation, yet retain a strong sense of experiential verisimilitude.

In an interview with Jenifer Berman, Welsh tried to explain the success of *Trainspotting* by pointing to its otherness: 'The book was so different and so obviously from another culture. They [the critics] weren't used to it.'<sup>7</sup> *Trainspotting* is not 'literary' in the conventional sense. One of its most prominent features is its detachment not only from mainstream culture, but also from the cultural 'fringe'. The latter's lack of meaning for people like Welsh is expressed in the protagonist Mark Renton's throw-away comment that 'somebody says that it wis the first day ay the Festival. Well, they certainly got the weather fir it' (T, 27). Welsh's work takes us beyond the fringe, pushing the limits of what has been deemed representable. Yet at the same time as marginality manifests in his work as a nasty, at times barely stomachable beyond, his characters' daily lives are shown to run more or less parallel to our own. The majority of Welsh's characters hail from Leith or Edinburgh's dilapidated council estates, but Welsh does not leave them there to form neatly segregated communities of the oppressed. He insists on subculture's ubiquity; roaming and infiltrating the centre of the city, his characters successfully resist municipal ghettoisation. No doubt Alan Freeman is right when he writes that 'for all its swagger, Welsh's work exhibits lavish qualities of the spiritual despair and fractured identity so frequently found in Scottish fiction'.<sup>8</sup> However, Welsh will not let his characters wallow in their suffering, which thus never becomes wholly debilitating. *Trainspotting* can, and must, be read as a document of subcultural despondency, but Welsh portrays this despondency as a corrosive epidemic instead of an enfeebling, strictly localised disease. In Welsh's work despair is channelled into self-empowering gestures of defiance, creating an atmosphere in which even self-destructive behaviour can at times be forged into subcultural resistance.

While some fans of Welsh's work may welcome the fact that it took *Trainspotting* less than five years to become a classic course text in Scottish schools, others may regard this canonisation as a deliberate attempt to neuter a radically subversive text by absorbing it into the mainstream. *Trainspotting* itself refuses all conventional categories of belonging. Marked by a celebration of cultural dislocation which, according to Patricia Horton, derives from 'an inability to locate forms of identity through class, region or nationhood',<sup>9</sup> the novel vociferously militates against its own Scottishness. Disgusted by Scotland's collusion in its own subjugation, Renton, *Trainspotting's* anti-hero, vents his anger and frustration by calling his home country:

A place ay dispossessed white trash in a trash country fill ay dispossessed white trash. Some say that the Irish are the trash ay Europe. That's shite. It's the Scots. The Irish hud the bottle tae win thir country back, or at least maist ay it. Ah remember getting wound up when Nicksy's brar, down in London, described the Scots as 'porridge wogs'. Now ah realise that the only thing offensive about that statement was its racism against black people. Otherwise it's spot-on. Anybody will tell you; the Scots make good soldiers. Like ma brar, Billy. (T, 190)

Far removed from the nationalist imageries of contemporaneous Hollywood blockbusters such as Michael Caton-Jones's *Rob Roy* (1995) or Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), Renton's outburst is no cry to arms but a manifesto of national dissociation, underscored by Renton's departure from Scotland at the end of the novel. Fiona Oliver reads Renton's escape as 'a tentative but hopeful metaphor for Scotland in insisting on a national renewal once it has rid itself of the self-debasing and self-destructive notions of failure in its own identity',<sup>10</sup> but what does it really say about Welsh's view of Scotland if in his opinion it can only achieve regeneration whilst outside itself? In *Porno*, his twenty-first-century sequel to *Trainspotting*, Welsh repeats the gesture of saying farewell to Scotland: Renton returns to Edinburgh only to set off again as soon as he can, this time not to nearby Amsterdam but to San Francisco. Possibly to indicate the finality of his desertion, he is shown to emigrate not on his own but in the company of two nubile young women, one Scottish, the other English.

If Welsh's break with Scottishness is iconoclastic, the same is true of his remoulding of class as a hallmark of Scottish self-representation. Unlike writers of the urban Glasgow novel and most prominently Kelman, Welsh repudiates the fixity of class by problematising class-bound identities and showing working-class identity not only as heterogeneous, but as profoundly troubled and contradictory. As Welsh explains, 'there are two kinds of working-class philosophies, a radical or revolutionary one that sees the middle and upper classes as enemies; and another more individualistic desire to escape from the working class and assimilate into the upper classes'.<sup>11</sup> Welsh's characters do not always know where they are coming from or what they want; often they do not identify or recognise themselves as working-class, and with good reason. Much of Welsh's work introduces us to an under-class ostracised from hereditary forms of belonging. As Willy Maley puts it, Welsh 'takes us a step lower on the social ladder, to the bottom rung [. . .] sometimes he takes the ladder away altogether'.<sup>12</sup> Welsh depicts the lowest and most obscure substrata of society, but he does so without subscribing to a project of proletarian liberation. True to his intention 'to create characters who speak for themselves',<sup>13</sup> Welsh circumnavigates the social-realist tradition, which frequently 'was not merely on the side of the working class, but

stood in their way, portraying them, representing them, speaking for them'.<sup>14</sup> Welsh's characters are left to *be* rather than represent, even if as a result his work appears at times to be without morality.

Only Welsh's refusal to set himself up 'as this great liberal who approves or disapproves of the characters'<sup>15</sup> could have resulted in the creation of Renton, a protagonist who is a hero and not a hero, who is not even always a protagonist, as on more than one occasion his prominence is called into question by the rise of other voices. Identified by some as Welsh's *alter ego*, Renton incorporates heterogeneity and hybridity: he is of working-class origin yet displays upward mobility by having been to university, if only for a term. Other features adding to his ambivalence include having a Protestant father and Catholic mother, being vegetarian but no animal lover, speaking both Scots and Standard English, being a lad happy to experiment with gay sex, a thinker desperate for oblivion, a lover wary of commitment, a junkie seemingly incapable of an addiction and, last but not least, an unpatriotic Scotsman. A perfect embodiment of Welsh's dismissal of fixed identities, Renton is undeniably Scottish, working-class and a drug user at the same time as he remains a shape-shifting borrower of identities, successfully mimicking both Anglo-Britishness and yuppie professionalism. In Sick Boy's view he is 'a traitor' (P, 170) and in his own 'a hypocrite, a winner who played at being a loser' (P, 382). Renton cannot be identified as unequivocally subversive either: his is not the voice of the proletariat or the subnation clamouring for enfranchisement. If Renton is a rebel, he is a rebel without a programme or plot, a rebel even without hope. Renton's is a boldly apolitical stance; he refuses to partake of anything larger or more abstract than his own individual self. Notably, rather than criticising Welsh for the hedonism of his characters, Maley picks up on the inarticulacy of their 'unspeakable hatred and violence',<sup>16</sup> suggesting that Renton and his associates' lack of politics might ultimately be explained by the absence of a suitable language in which they could adequately articulate their condition and state of mind.

Welsh's writing lacks the integrity of communal self-expression that is so characteristic of Kelman's work. Welsh's language is of course quite recognisably the east coast variant of vernacular Scots, but primarily it presents itself to us as idiolectal speech owned by individual speakers. Instead of listening in to emergent communal harmonies, readers are inundated by a cacophony of voices, an unwieldy orchestration of randomly assembled tales. In *Trainspotting* there are eight narrating voices, not including the omniscient narrator, and the timbre of the individual voice invariably sets the tone of the novel. In other words, 'idiolect becomes character in *Trainspotting* [. . .] all the principal first-person characters (Renton, Begbie, Sick Boy, Spud) have traits of speech which become a kind of recognizable signature tune of their character'.<sup>17</sup> Inevitably Welsh's writing is implicated in what Drew Milne

has called 'the politics of accent', meaning that 'contemporary Scottish writers are [. . .] forced to negotiate the relation between English as a literary language and Englishness as a political formation'.<sup>18</sup> As Cairns Craig has explained in *The Modern Scottish Novel*, 'the existence of two or more distinct linguistic contexts within the text presumes the existence of alternative value systems which those linguistic systems express'.<sup>19</sup> Thus returning us to Maley's proposition that Welsh's characters' lack of agency is a corollary of their inarticulacy, Welsh's use of linguistic styles and registers shows that even if his characters appear to have embraced their political disenfranchisement, Welsh himself most certainly has not.

The chief characteristics of Welsh's work are also found in *Headstate*, not so much a play as a pre-club performance piece, which was premièred in 1994, one year after the publication of *Trainspotting*. The improvised nature of *Headstate* defies conclusive interpretation, and even producing a coherent summary proves difficult. Yet the play does merit attention, deriving from the same creative impulse that also delivered Welsh's debut novel, whose hybridity and structural openness it shares. Without a definite script, *Headstate* is no straightforward acting job; each time it has to be devised anew, opening up and exploring new interactive connections, or modifying the play's focus and perspective altogether. The play looks at the grand themes of love and life, as well as people's specific plights and pleasures with the former's manifold artificially induced replacements. Welsh's preoccupation with human desire for love and self-fulfilment, and how this desire collides with its own consumerist reification, can at times render his vision of the human extremely bleak, even nihilistic. At the same time, however, it infuses his work with great deconstructive power. To agree fully with Robert Morace's conclusion that 'the world according to Welsh is a place of unemployment, giro schemes, scruffiness, violence, drugs, prostitution, and the God of "Granton Star Cause" [in *The Acid House*], a mean-spirited old drunk'<sup>20</sup> would mean to ignore the unruly resourcefulness of Welsh's characters. As Mickey asserts in *Headstate* with regard to her fellow characters:

They still care enough to feel strongly about things. This is where I get my fucking kicks. It proves that something's still going on inside there. It's still there; some sort of passion. It's warped, it's twisted and it's perverted, but it's still there. As long as it is there are possibilities that it can become something else. Something better.<sup>21</sup>

'Some sort of passion' – however directionless and inoperative, selfish or sordid – fuels all of Welsh's early work. Only following the publication of *Filth* in 1998 does his writing become more conventional in literary terms, as illustrated by *Glue* (2001), and more commercially aware, as documented

a year later by *Porno*, *Trainspotting*'s sequel. What we subsequently encounter in Welsh's even more recent post-devolution work, however, ought not simply to be seen as the result of an authorial crisis triggered by Welsh's sudden wealth and celebrity status, but perhaps more poignantly as a literary reflection of the neoliberalist spirit of the post-Thatcher era, its relentless commodification of traditional values, radical atomisation of the individual and large-scale dismantling of society. I cannot entirely agree with Morace who, in deploring the disappearance of 'the filth and fury of his early work', appears to blame only Welsh himself for it, 'his drifting into hollow celebrity, the hedonism promoted by *Loaded* and *The Face* fuelled now by his *Daily Telegraph* column'.<sup>22</sup> Though relatively flaccid and dull in comparison to the earlier work's transgressiveness, Welsh's recent work still provides an accurate record of the changing cultural and socio-economic contexts of its production. The anodyne inconsequentiality of *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (2006) and *If You Liked School, You'll Love Work* (2007), which make it look as if Welsh finds himself creatively at a loose end or has quite simply run out of things worth saying, can easily be read as symptomatic of contemporary Britain's cultural status quo. Most indicative in this context perhaps is also an observation inserted by Welsh in the Afterword to *If You Liked School*, where he explains that 'when you write about places such as Cowdenbeath, and you come from a physically wee (but spiritually vast) country like Scotland, you have the responsibility to emphasise that this is not meant to depict the "real" place, but rather the "Cowdenbeath" of my imagination at the particular time of writing' (II, 391). Pre-emptively marking his work as mere fiction to apologise for any possible offence caused, this is a far cry from the early Welsh's unconditional, 'in-yer-face' realism. It evacuates these later stories of the subversive bite and countercultural clout that motivated and propelled, for example, *The Acid House* (1994).

Morace makes a valid point when he writes that 'the earlier Welsh gave way to one less vernacular and impassioned, more refined and restrained, less like the poet laureate of the chemical generation and more like the grand old man of youth culture and member in good standing of the literary establishment'.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, however, Welsh's trajectory parallels that of post-devolution Scotland as a whole, which has similarly lost much of its explosiveness. Formerly an anti-hegemonic counter-discourse, in the post-devolution age Scottish nationalism's self-authenticating coalitional affinity with other minoritarian movements can no longer be taken for granted. Even though full statehood remains pending, equipped with a parliament of its own Scottishness must now be seen as an institutionalised force. It has lost its sub-national deviancy and hence, as a political strategy, pure and simple defiance must in future appear wholly inappropriate. No longer unproblematically oppositional, post-devolution Scottishness now stands for an established,



politically enfranchised, general culture. It would seem not only anachronistic but deeply disingenuous to continue speaking in the same voice as before, a fact that applies to post-devolution Scotland as much as it does to post-devolution Irvine Welsh. The very timbre and texture of Scottishness have changed and, as a result, so must Scottish literature's. Devolution has brought about a fundamental shift in the imbrication of Scottish culture's tectonic plates, considerably compounding the question of who is now speaking for whom, or in contradiction of what. In this light Welsh's particular challenge, it would seem, is currently to learn how to speak meaningfully from an established rather than subaltern position.

*Crime* (2008), Welsh's most recent novel, looks like a step in the right direction. The novel features policeman Ray Lennox, whom we originally encountered as the reluctant sidekick of Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson in *Filth*. Lennox makes a first-class literary *semblable* not only for Welsh as a post-devolution writer, but also for Scotland as a newly enfranchised nation. Institutionally empowered and well intentioned, if encumbered by personal flaws, Lennox is a Scottish everyman keen to do his best, yet often framed and not always succeeding. Notably, he is left to do battle entirely by himself, at once besieged by remorse and burdened with new responsibilities. Lennox finds himself embroiled in an unpredictable, treacherous world of crime, which leaves him permanently exposed to indictments of complicity and corruption. Despite *Crime*'s great promise, however, Welsh's future career might yet come to be thwarted by what looks like an oddly defeatist lack of confidence in his own work – either that or extremely poor marketing. How else – unless one sees it as a tongue-in-cheek stab at the *kailyard* tradition in Scottish literature – might one read the unfortunate title of Welsh's latest book, *Reheated Cabbage* (2009), a collection of long out-of-print stories from various subcultural magazines and anthologies? Can Welsh still provide fresh food for thought? While not always in perfect agreement about the taste or quality of his work, the contributors to this volume certainly believe so.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Welsh and Tradition

Alice Ferrebe

In *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958) Kurt Wittig was certain about one aspect of the work of students of Scottish literature: texts had always to be read in the context of the national tradition that influenced them. 'For as long as even a few Scottish writers are conscious of having inherited a Scottish tradition', Wittig writes, 'we shall not do justice to their work unless we study it in relation to that Scottish tradition which they themselves are conscious of having inherited.'<sup>1</sup> Yet contemporary Scottish writers can be very prickly about their literary inheritance. A. L. Kennedy (b. 1965) believes that Scottish traditions of writing 'really are an irrelevance with most Scottish writers', and Alan Warner (b. 1964) is 'very fed up with being bunched with that whole Scottish thing'.<sup>2</sup>

Early in his career Irvine Welsh had a tendency to present himself as a kind of literary 'feral child', raised outwith any particular intellectual tradition or allegiance. 'I don't have any literary heroes at all,' he told John Walsh around the time *Marabou Stork Nightmares* was published in 1995. 'I don't take references from other writers, but from music lyrics, from videos and soap operas and stuff. I try and keep as far away from "the classics" [. . .] as possible.'<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the narrator of that other Scottish cult novel of heroin use, Alexander Trocchi's (1925–84) semi-autobiographical *Cain's Book* (1966), is acutely aware of the way in which literary traditions can hamper the process of authentic artistic creation. 'It is all very difficult, the past', Joe tells his reader, 'even more than the future, for the latter is at least probable, calculable, while the former is beyond the range of experiment. The past is always a lie, clung to by an odour of ancestors.'<sup>4</sup> One might, of course, construe the past more charitably, as a fiction rather than a 'lie', leaving us to trace how Welsh's own story of his literary influences has altered and developed over time. By 2003, in Channel 4's *The Story of the Novel*, his admiration is pledged to the indisputable 'classics' of Sir Walter Scott and to 'the greatest books ever written by English novelists' such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot.<sup>5</sup> Yet as with many of Welsh's professions about his work, this stated allegiance needs to be inflected, in part, with devilment. Welsh