

Identity(ies) in Brian McCabe's *The Other McCoy*¹

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Abstract

The Scottish writer Brian McCabe investigates the notion of identity through the *topos* of the Double in his novel *The Other McCoy* (1990). This interest in the Self/Other is closely related to the questions of language(s), the search for, and the making of the Self. McCoy, the novel's protagonist, an unemployed comedian, is a multi-faceted character who often speaks with different voices taken from other people. McCabe uses the motif of the Double, or, rather, its Scottish version the "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" *topos*, as a starting point for the exploration of identity construction, combining it with the idea of performance and the compulsion to role playing. In this sense it could be stated that *The Other McCoy* follows the haunting Scottish tradition of the literature of the double, which presents a culture engaged in the dialogue with the other, a conversation in different dialects.

Brian McCabe has been writing for more than thirty years and is at present a fully recognised creative writer in Scotland. Best known as a short-story writer and a poet, McCabe has received nothing less than six awards from The Scottish Arts Council, two poetry prizes and The Canongate Prize (2000). He has written three poetry collections: *Spring's Witch* (1984), *One Atom to Another* (1987) and *Body Parts* (1999); a novel: *The Other McCoy* (1990); and several collections of short-stories: *The Lipstick Circus* (1985), *In a Dark Room with a Stranger* (1995), *A Date with my Wife* (2001) and *Selected Stories* (2003). Some of his short stories have been broadcast on the radio, and others have been adapted for television and for film. McCabe has collaborated in the digital literary

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magazine “Crossing Borders. New Writing from Africa”, and he is at present the editor of “The Edinburgh Review”. His latest short-story, “A Simple Thing”, has been recently published on the web, at the Scottish Arts Council Archive.

One of the writer’s leitmotifs in his prose narratives in general is the question of identity, and in his novel, *The Other McCoy*, McCabe the short-story writer could develop the issue of identity a bit further, since this medium, a novel, allows characters’ progressive maturation and the acquisition of a complex self-knowledge. Nevertheless this novel shows the unity of a short-story: it is set in one place, Edinburgh, and at one time, Hogmanay’s, the celebration of the New Year.

The novel tells the stories of Patrick McCoy, an unemployed comedian who feels a kind of impersonating urge, and Yvonne, a teacher who has a sentimental relationship with him. McCoy, the novel’s protagonist, is a multi-faceted character who often speaks with different voices taken from other people. Besides the multiplicity of voices, McCoy often feels alien to himself, to his body.

As McCabe himself has noted in the introduction to his short-story “Shouting It Out”: “The business of people trying to find out who they are, trying to define themselves, interests me, and I saw possibilities [...] of exploring this” (McCabe, 1995: 50). As the author explained about his own experience as a teenager, “it wasn’t like real acting, because the feelings were real, but it was like [we] were just trying the feeling on size, like clothes to see if they fitted” (1995: 54). Role-playing is the way in which characters learn to behave in society, they try different roles and mature. That’s what the ‘different kinds of acting’ is about. It is understood as a form of communication and a form for the self to learn how to interrelate with the other. This interest may be said to come to a climax in *The Other McCoy*. 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 investigates the notion of identity through the Double. The apparition of the Doppelgänger seems to be inextricably linked to the main character’s search for identity. As we will see, the issue of identity in *The Other McCoy* seems closely related to the questions of language, the search for, and the making of the self. Analysing a Scottish novel which deals with identity and the Double cannot be

done ignoring the issue of language and the Scottish Antizyzygy, since, in Scotland, language has strong ideological connotations.

Language is a particularly important issue in Scottish literary production, since “few Scottish writers are not bilingual and few have not experimented in writing in two of the country’s languages” (Craig, 1987: 4).

The Other McCoy is written in both languages: English is used for narration and Scots for the dialogues:

He looked up and caught sight of a woman leaning out of a second-floor window. She was wearing a frilly nightdress of some kind —either that or it was her kitchen curtains. She held out a meaty arm, wagged her finger at him and shouted:
 “You leave that poor auld man alane! Ah’ve called the polis on ye! Should be ashamed o yersel, beatin up a blind man!” (McCabe, 1991: 38)

In his use of both Scots for the vernacular and English for narration, McCabe follows the long tradition in the Scottish literary canon started by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). At the time when intellectuals like David Hume or Adam Smith were trying to avoid Scottiscims in their writings, Scott put vernacular Scots as the protagonist of the tale “Wandering Willie’s Tale” (1824). After him, other writers began using this type of prose, which emphasises contrast through the use of different voices and languages.

The problem of linguistic disunity or so-called “Caledonian Antizyzygy” is often dramatised in narration and characters, as in McCabe’s *The Other McCoy*. Moreover, irony, juxtaposition, multiple voices, habitual counter pointing are said to be distinctive of Scottish culture, expressing the ongoing crisis of identity (Simpson, 1988: 251). The crisis of the sense of self is not a modern or postmodern anxiety, since it was already present in eighteenth-century Scotland. The so-called “schizophrenic” mixing of voices in Scottish literature, seems to reflect the historical facts that led to the dissolution of the Scottish State and the crisis in Scottish identity.

Bilingualism often leads to a dualist representation of identity, in what may be described as an adaptation of the *topos* of the Double.

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As Paul Coates has noted, when the Double is explicitly dealt with in fiction, it is often “written by authors who are suspended between languages and cultures”, and he mentions Joseph Conrad, James Hogg, R. L. Stevenson, Henry James and Oscar Wilde, among others (1988: 2). The Scottish linguistic fissure is, according to Gavin Wallace, the source of a real and mythical inarticulacy, which has become a central preoccupation in Scottish fiction (1993: 221). It is not by chance then, that Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one of the most representative canonical Scottish works.

The Scottish poet Edwin Muir (1887-1959) pessimistically commented on the consequences that bilingualism, which is here understood as division, had both on Scottish identity and literary production in Scotland, and contended 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). According to this vision of Scottish identity as being the damned product of negative historical circumstances, polarity and fragmentation appear as negative characteristics to be avoided.

However, this diagnosis has been challenged by some critics like Cairn Craig, 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, a conversation in different dialects, a dialectic that is the foundation not only of persons but of nations (1999: 115). We should not forget that there are plenty of authors, who are not bilingual, who have also felt a certain tension in their language. Miguel de Unamuno said that dialect is individual in the sense that each of us, each individual, has its own language, which is constantly created and recreated (2000: 18). As we shall see, the novel accurately expresses this dialogue among individual dialects, both with oneself and with others, as we shall see.

The novel’s protagonist, Patrick McCoy, is a comedian who specialises in impersonating other people and speaking with different voices, as we said. He is constantly impersonating other people and slipping under their skins, while he tries to find out who he really is and who the other people are. It is as if he could explore people’s identity by stepping into their shoes. That is why he cannot help impersonating

even when he is not on stage: “Oh,’ said McCoy, but even this, this non-committal monosyllable, was not his entirely. It was his mother’s vague ‘Oh’, the one that meant she wasn’t really listening to what was being said” (McCabe, 1991: 67). It is not that he imitates other people, rather he feels as if he really were transformed into the one he is impersonating; he becomes the other. In this sense, we could say, that he suffers from a form of possession, since the other(s) slip(s) into him, possess him. The fluidity and performativity of his self produces in him a certain degree of anxiety. His feeling of self-fragmentation or lack of unity and coherence becomes so strong at certain moments that it could be interpreted almost as a form of schizophrenia. Often, he feels alien to himself, to his body. And he sometimes feels as if his body were independent, as if it were somebody else’s body.

McCabe fictionalises all this by having recourse to the motif of the Double, or, rather, in its Scottish version, the “Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde” *topos*, using it as a starting point for the exploration of identity construction and combining it with the idea of performance and the compulsion to role playing. In this sense it could be stated that *The Other McCoy* is yet another novel in the Scottish tradition of the literature of the double. Brian McCabe has admitted that he was influenced in his writing of the novel by other well-known Scottish “doubled” characters such as the ones in James Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). However, his rewriting of this ages long *topos* is rather innovative, since McCabe reworks the split self into a more positive and flexible self. In line with Craig’s outlook on Scottish culture, we can say that the novel’s protagonist is not schizophrenic—which has the connotation of illness—but rather Protean, and endlessly variable, transformable, mutable.

Indeed, Patrick McCoy is not so much a fragmented character as a plural one, since even his most personal and intimate feelings are felt through an other or even through various others. He does not play a role but he impersonates other people, he really becomes the Other, he melts with the Other when impersonating, both on and off the stage. Thus, as the narrator explains, after a performance in which he was impersonating his father he found himself still feeling “angry and resentful with the audience, but couldn’t tell whether it was his own anger he was feeling, or his father’s” (21). In other words, he is

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constantly feeling that the other is part of his own; it seems as if sometimes a multiplicity of voices would really inhabit him.

But Patrick is not the only character in *The Other McCoy* who seems to look for—his own identity by playing with the self. His girlfriend, Yvonne, also thinks of her job as a teacher as role playing. She pictures herself standing in front of thirty pairs of eyes and endlessly performing, even if as herself. Still, as the narrator explains, she is carried out to the point where she, “almost always [ends] having to be somebody else, someone not herself” (55). Then, she hears her “own voice sounding like someone else’s. Shut *up!* Keep *still!* Eyes on the *blackboard!*” (55).

Both Yvonne and Patrick, the novel’s focalisers, ventriloquate trying to find a voice they can recognise as their own. But as the text suggests, these voices are not natural but rather constructed, and not fixed and unique but multiple and fluid. This could also be applied to the issue of the language(s) in Scottish fiction. Mikhail M Bakhtin, stated that there is no such thing as a general language, spoken by a general voice, since language cannot be divorced from its specificity. In his own words: “Language, when it means, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one’s own inner addressee” (Holquist, 2006: xxi).

Patrick and Yvonne have to dialogue with each other in order to understand themselves and the world that surrounds them. According to Bakhtin’s conception of dialogism, dialogue requires the pre-existence of differences; those differences are connected through dialogue and communication, generating new ideas and positions (Pearce, 2006: 226). McCoy feels “complete” and happy when he has resolved some misunderstandings with his girlfriend, when he has entered somebody else’s semantic position. Moreover, we could add that both Patrick’s and Yvonne’s voices have to engage in a dialogical understanding for the novel’s resolution. Meaning occurs as the product of both characters’ dynamic relationship.

The theory of the “dialogical self”² considers “persons as a dynamic system that consists of both internal and external, and potentially contrasting components” (Kunnen, 2006). Dialogism presupposes that the self is constituted in some fashion out of a

²The term was coined by H. Herman (1993), following Mikhail Bakhtin’s use of the concept in *Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1973).

multitude of voices, each with its own quasi-independent perspective, and that these voices are in dialogical relationship with each other (Barresi, 2002). As postulated by the philosopher John Macmurray³, the self, which exists only as agency, would only be possible through the Other, since, in his own words, “the identity of the Self *is* its relations with Otherness rather than its coherence within itself” (in Craig, 1999: 90). McCoy, as a compulsive comic impersonator is a clear example of this dialogical self, since he possesses various voices and various voices possess him.

But *The Other McCoy*'s narration is focalised through two different characters, Yvonne and McCoy, and they achieve certain stability when both their voices start a dialogic relationship, when they meet. The hermetic and inescapable self, which brings the unhappy life of Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde to an end, enters a dialogic relationship with the Other and is able of growing and evolving, changing, living.

As a conclusion we could say that Brian McCabe's *The Other McCoy* is an example of a novel that shows that both the self's internal duality and the duality of self and other can be transformed into hermeneutic and dialogical understanding. A more positive conception of a Protean self and a non-pathologising criticism would erase the sense of “crisis” that some authors have attributed to Scottish culture, and it would bring about a positive conception of Scottish identity and of Scottish literary production.

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