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Contested spaces in the Troubles novels and Public Discourse: Visual and Verbal identity in Anglo-Irish Literature --Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Contested spaces in the Troubles novels and Public Discourse: Visual and Verbal identity in Anglo-Irish Literature
Article Type:	Original research
Keywords:	the Troubles novels; Anglo-Irish literature; space identity; visual and verbal identity
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Funding Information:	Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) ((grant № 16-01-0038) Mrs Svetlana Strinyuk
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Contested spaces in the Troubles novels and Public Discourse: Visual and Verbal identity in Anglo-Irish Literature

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The paper was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2016- 2017 (grant № 16-01-0038) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

Abstract

The article examines how identity is represented through space in Anglo-Irish literature of the Troubles in the context of public multimodal public discourse. The paper addresses the structure and the functions of the space in Anglo-Irish novels of the Troubles within the framework of visual and verbal identity. It also focuses on verbal and visual ways of identification of the place in divided society as represented in Anglo-Irish literature. The analysis of the novels demonstrated that place identity is represented in the novels and function there as a recognizable landscape marker creating a historical background of the novels. It also performs several communicative functions. Visual and verbal identity represent community solidarity and unification. In case of identity cognition of the other community representative they are seen as an indicator of a potential threat. A more detailed view of four Troubles novels gives a picture of how place is conceptualized as an integral part of national identity.

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Introduction

The Troubles novels constitute a massive layer of contemporary Anglo-Irish literature. They vary in genre, mode, politics but what unites them all is attention to space in all its complexity and multimodality which a work of art can offer. Deliberate attention to conceptualizing space might be explained by the fact that space lies at the heart of the construction of national identity. Taking into

consideration that space in Northern Ireland is a contested category broadly discussed in public discourse it is clear that transforming physical space into an aesthetic category in the works of art (books, films, painting, plays) is unavoidable.

In a colonized country space becomes the arena of showing the power of the dominant social groups. Their claim for the exclusive rights for the space is realized in a variety of forms: in visual (graffiti, murals, displaying state symbols and emblems etc); verbal (deliberate choice of toponyms) and physical intrusion into the territory in segregated and divided communities. As Catherine Nash puts it *spatial dimension in Irish fiction represents the nation on the abstract level, organizes relationship between the landscape and the place and, finally, represents political and historical experience associated with the place.* (Nash, 1994: 228)

Literature reflects these claims for space with the account for aesthetic reframing and makes them an organic part of an artistic space functioning on different levels of the novel. Since the Troubles novels deal with the confrontation which in Northern Ireland is inseparable from the process of self-identification space plays the role of the marker which indicates belonging to the community tightly bound to the space it occupies.

For the research four Troubles novels were selected representing different pragmatic assumptions of the authors and written in different phases of the conflict: Sebastian Barry's *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), Robert MacLim Wilson *Eureka Street* (199), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), James Gordon Farrell' *Troubles* (1970) and Glenn Patterson's *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (2012) with the reference to a large number of novels having the visual and verbal identification as a background. Novels having a strong commitment to conceptualizing space as a part of Catholic or Protestant identity in their full complexities of intersection with political, gender and social identities will be examined within the framework of multimodal approach to literary discourse.

In most recent Anglo-Irish literature¹ the questions of identity are discussed actively due to fast transformation of traditional ideological model of Irish national identity based on narrating political history (with emphasis on collective trauma memorization and victimization), religious identity and conceptualizing space.

Space in Northern Ireland is historically divided between two confronting communities with a strong confliction aspiration. Civil turmoil lasting for decades in the twentieth century not only separated

¹ 'The Mill for Grinding Old People Young' by G.Patterson (2012) is an example of 'rebranding' urban contested areas to transform them into a shared space and fill with a new content appropriate for safe living.

communities but built insurmountable barriers both physically and metaphorically. Much of the research in social studies since the mid-1980s addresses shared and public spaces in divided societies. Some theories focus on research of contested areas (Komarova and Bryan, 2014) with the long-term purpose of reframing it according to new peace policies. In literature this tendency is represented by Glenn Patterson novels of 'alternative Ulster', *The International* (1999), *Fat Lad* (1992) and *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (2012).

The inextricable connection between place and identity is demonstrated by Proshansky who stated that place-identity is an integral part of self-identity. The family is not simply a mother, a father, brothers, and sisters; it is also "a place called home" (Proshansky, 1978: 155). "By place-identity we mean those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment" (ibid, 155). According to Proshansky's theory any specific identity is influenced by general place-identity characteristics of the person which reflect his or her unique socialization experiences in the physical world as well as those experiences common to all individuals and specific groups of individuals living in a particular kind of physical settings (ibid, 155). The theory represents affection to the place in terms of memories, ideas, feelings, but emphasizes hierarchical relations of place-identity with a large structure of self-identity²

Visual and verbal identification of the space is an intrinsic feature of the Northern Irish contested space represented in Anglo-Irish literature. The Troubles novel show communal struggle for the space by demonstrating visual symbols of power creating a historical background of the Troubles novels. Visual identification is conceptualized in the place of predominantly Protestant areas with the Colours of the Union Jacks. In *Both your Houses* (1970) by James Barlow a British soldier 'who knew nothing of Ulster agonies of political and sectarian strife' (Barlow, 1970: 11) learns how to sort out which district of the city by identifying 'paving stones painted red, white and blue' (Barlow, 1970: 36). This reference to the colours of the British flag in the novel functions as a measure of common sense indicating rationality of character's behaviour: in *Eureka Street* by Robert MacLaim Wilson (1999) a protestant protagonist Chuckie does not invite his Catholic friends to his home, because 'he was wary of bringing friendly Catholics to a street so firmly set in the red, white and blue epicenter of the Protestant Loyalist belt of the city' (Wilson, 1999, 32). Colours of the Union Jacks may also impose a threat, in *Cal* by Bernard MacLaverty a Catholic protagonist

² Comparison of three most important theories of identity and place are considered in the paper by Áshild Hauge Identity and Place: A Critical Comparison of Three Identity Theories (2007)

living in the predominantly Protestant estate feels displaced, because ‘He could not bear to look up and see the flutter of Union Jacks, and now the red and white cross of the Ulster flag with its red hand. Of late there were more and more of these appearing in the estate. It was a dangerous sign that the Loyalists were getting angry’ (MacLavery, 1998 :9).

Visual symbols (the colours of the state flag) represent communal solidarity; they activate a strong feeling of belonging to the community which is demonstrated publicly. But at the same time they have to demonstrate to the conflicting community power and readiness to vindicate the right for sovereignty of the place.

In the examples given, the Protestant identity of the area is articulated as toponym ‘Ulster’ which a clear verbal mark of belonging to a Protestant community. The discursive construction of identity in this case is based on an unwritten rule, according to which historical Ulster stopped existing after Partition of Northern Ireland since it was split between two states. A brief discourse study of the principles of selecting toponyms ‘Ulster’ versus ‘North’ in the novels considered shows that these place names function as verbal identity markers represented discursively in public discourse. ‘North’ is typical of Catholic Irish use while ‘Ulster’ is preferred in Protestant community. Opposition Derry and Londonderry follows the pattern: the place names are used discursively to articulate belonging to Catholic or Protestant community respectively.

In the Troubles novels the analysis allows to identify several place names which appear with high frequencies and which are conceptualized as places of battlefields linked with communal violence and segregation: Falls Road, Shankill Road, Derry/Londonderry, Bogside, Omagh, Portadown and Andersvill. In *Eureka Street*, for example, the narrator considers the transformation in the status of minor, provincial Northern Irish places into a metaphors of violence which are conceptualized in public discourse and operates to memorize the collective trauma: ‘When you considered that it was the underpopulated capital of a minor province, the world seemed to know it excessively well. Nobody needed to be told the reasons for this needless fame. I didn’t know much about Beirut until the artillery moved in. Who’d heard of Saigon before it blew its lid? Was Anzio a town, a village or just a stretch of beach? Where was Agincourt exactly? Belfast shared the status of a battlefield. The place-names of the city and country had taken on the resonance and hard beauty of all history’s slaughter venues. The Bogside, Crossmaglen, the Falls, the Shankill and Andersonstown. In the mental maps of those who had never been in Ireland, these places had tiny crossed swords after their names. People thought them deathfields - remote, televised knackers’ yards. Belfast was only big because Belfast was bad. (Wilson, 1999: 14)

A significant part of visual identity in the Troubles public discourse and in novels are **murals** – wall paintings appealing to emotional rather than rational communal solidarity and collective identity. Ideological narratives represented by murals were a constituent part of political and religious debate which Northern Ireland suffered for decades. Along with other political symbols murals perform several specific communicative functions. They perform pride, sorrow, grief, symbolize resistance and unify marginalized social groups. In case of Northern Ireland they perform the function of trauma memorization for both conflicting communities.

In Irish literature the plots which mythologize political history of Ireland and which frequently appear in murals exist for a long time; in the novel *Children of the Dead End* by Patrick MacGill, first published in 1914, there is a remarkable reference to ‘William Crossing the Boyne’ plot. A teenage boy is sent by his parents from home to work. One of the places where he was hired belongs to a Protestant farmer and the first thing the boy sees when he entered the room was “a large picture of William Crossing the Boyne” (MacGill, 2005: 37). The emotional reaction to it is indicative of hatred the boy is filled with: “I hated the picture from the moment I set eyes on it, and though my dislikes are short-lived they are intense while they last. This picture almost assumed an orange tint before I left, and many a time I used to spit at it out of pure spite when left alone in the kitchen” (MacGill, 2005: 37).

“An orange tint” of the picture assumes the colour of William of Orange who defeated King James II of England in the battle in 1690. This most well-known battle had become a core of political mythology of the Orange Order. This political force is associated with the annual parades commemorating the victory of Protestants over Catholics and intruding the Catholics estates which us to cause violence. The parades which broke the sovereignty of the Catholic estates are represented in Troubles novels: *Titanic Town* by Mary Costello (1992), *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane (1996), *Troubles* by James Gordon Farrell (1970) just to name a few. In the texts of the novels this display of ethno-religious triumphalism signifies violence reproduced for generations. In *Titanic Town* parents of the narrator, a teenage girl, explains the historical nature of the ‘orange walks’ and prohibit to attend them to watch, but she cannot resist “the glamour of devil” and on this parade her friend explains that “that’s the Lambeg drum. They only beat it to frighten Catholics. Don’t let them see you’re afraid” (Costello, 1992: 14). It is clear from the passage that discursive construction of the Irish identity is supported on the level of mythology and is discursively reproduced even by children.

The novel *Cal* by **Bernard MacLaverty** conceptualizes the spatial dimension of the national identity of the main Catholic protagonist, Cahal. A young man suffers from displacement since he is forced to live in a hostile environment of the Protestant estate. The tension which he feels is reinforced by national British flags demonstrating the power of the dominating Protestant community and growing threats which his father resists for a time being but which led to a complete defeat – the house was burnt and Cal has to leave the area.

The novel implements the concept of the borderline (strictly speaking - the Border between The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) that is metaphorically is the order between freedom and a menace: ‘Once over the Border he experienced the feeling of freedom he always got. This was Ireland – the real Ireland. He felt he had come out from under the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster, with its neat stifled Sabbath towns. On top of a tree a green, white and golden tricolour flickered in the wind’ (MacLaverty, 1998: 39). This passage gives the example of interpretation of opposing “real Ireland” to “the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster” which shows displacement the protagonist suffers from.

With respect to the place-identity theory I assume that in *Reading in the Dark* by **Seamus Deane** the place is both a formal and a meaningful category and it represents self-identity, being interconnected with other representations of individual identity in the novel.

Reading in the Dark is set in Derry (the official name is Londonderry) in Northern Ireland and county Donegal in the Republic of Ireland; Derry is a town in Northern Ireland known as a place having a long history of civil unrest. The concept of place with references to particular parts of the city, the names of the streets, etc., constitutes a significant basis for the construction of national space. It is remarkable that even the name of the city represents the gap between communities: even though the official name of the city is Londonderry it is Derry which is mostly used by nationalists and Londonderry by unionists. The word ‘Derry’ in the speech of the narrator shows his community identity. Thus, living in Bogside, the area of the city mentioned in the novel where the population is predominantly Catholic, marks belonging to the Catholic community.

The place as an identity aspect might be subcategorized according to the scale of the loci mentioned in the novel. It comes from the primary level of the house which in *Reading in the Dark* is never safe and which is identified by the narrator as “cobweb” space, then street marking belonging to a certain type of community. For instance, sergeant Burke explains to father O’Neill, the parish Administrator: “The trouble we have with that Limewood Street lot, Father” (Deane, 1996: 114) The same place is identified by

Bishop differently: ‘That area you live in, it does have some most unsavoury characters in it, along with good, decent Catholic people as well (Deane, 1996: 110).

Identifying place is vital to create identity; as Catherine Nash puts it: “within the imaginative geography of the nation, particular places, regions or landscapes are used to construct and express senses of collective history and shared senses of belonging.” (Nash, 1997: 117) In *Reading in the Dark* physical place is closely interconnected with social, religious and national references. Home represents the scene for family life it is connected with personal and family history; thus, in the novel disturbing Irish past always accompanies the narrator and members of his family.

The place might become a metaphor of virulence: “The dismembered streets lay strewn all around the ruined distillery where Uncle Eddie had fought, aching with a long, dolorous absence. With the distillery had gone the smell of vaporized whiskey and heated red brick, the sullen glow that must have loomed over the crouching houses like an amber sunset. Now, instead, we had the high Gothic cathedral and its parochial house, standing above the area in permanent greystone winter overlooking the abandoned site that seemed to me a faithless and desolate patch, rinsed of its colour, pale and bald in the midst of the tumble of small houses, unpaved streets and the giant moraine of debris that had slid from the foot of the city walls down the sloping embankment to where our territory begins” (Deane, 1996: 34).

The Cathedral dominating this part of the city attributed with adjectives “grey”, “pale” and obviously has very negative semantics, while distillery even being destroyed is described with positively warm colours “smell of vaporized whiskey and heated red brick” and a glow covers houses like “an amber sunset”. The distillery becomes an ambiguous imaginary place since it is seen as a symbol of the Protestants’ victory over the Catholics.

The narrator’s parents are tied to their house, which becomes a symbol of instability and danger: “Now, as the war in the neighbourhood intensified, they both sat there in their weakness, entrapped in the noise from outside and in the propaganda noise of the television inside.” (Deane, 1996: 203) A murder of a British soldier in shooting at their door only adds to the problem. It is important to note that identification in *Reading in the Dark* has some distinctive features. It is mostly represented through numerous loci which demonstrate belonging to a Catholic community, acting for religious and family values or “other” territory with attributes the antagonistic Protestant community.

The hotel ‘Majestic’ in *Troubles* by James Gordon Farrell represents a downfall of the British colonial project during the Irish War of Independence. Using conventions of the ‘Big House’ novel Farrell

transforms them to challenge the ability of the Anglo-Irish nobility to cope with the maintenance of law and order in the rebellious colony. Generally speaking, Big House as a spatial metaphor has a twofold nature, being physically big in comparison with the dwellings of the tenants living near the mansion; it also shows a serious impact it had in terms of political and economic power on the nearest territories symbolizing the dominance of the British rule in Ireland .

The hotel in the novel is a constituent part of the time-space paradigm (chronotop, using Bakhtin's terminology). The time in the novel is linear which allows to show how the hotel deteriorates gradually until it comes to an end in the fire which symbolizes the collapse of the Empire rule in Ireland. This gives the feeling of fatal illness which afflicts the hotel and since this illness has no cure its collapse is unavoidable. Former glory of Majestic is heavily emphasized to create an utopian 'pre-catastrophic' state, as fame and grandeur of the hotel might be reverted.

Theoretically speaking, *Troubles* is usually referred to from the postcolonial perspective. The hotel is a symbol of the British Empire; the colonial rule is undermined gradually by the owners themselves by neglecting their duty to take care of the hotel. The owner of the Majestic, figuratively speaking, leaves the hotel for self-demolition which represents the personal downfall of the owner.

When the main protagonist, Major, comes to the place to meet his fiancée he notes that Majestic is already in dire state. The owner, a Protestant Loyalist, is in conflicting relationships with the Catholics inhabiting the nearby area. They start a guerilla war with the landlord of the estate. In response, he makes futile efforts tries to protect his home.

The novel addresses *Englishness* as a concept. The Major stays loyal though critical to the owner of the hotel at the last stages of destruction fulfilling the functions of evacuation of its inhabitants. Majority of them had been staying in the hotel for years but most respected and rich preferred to leave it in view of close catastrophe. Stereotypical patterns prevail in conceptualizing *Englishness* in *Troubles*. The Major is firm in troubles, polite, serious and respectable which is an idealized image of an English person.

In historical perspective *Troubles* can be examined in metaphorical terms, as an allusion to the early phases of the Troubles. This double vision of the novel is pessimistic in its essence and provides an Eschatological prophecy of the historical perspective of the Northern Irish society.

The Mill for Grinding Old People Young by Glen Patterson (2012) is a wonderful example of rewriting histories in attempt to build a new spatial identity. Belfast, which was recently associated with civil unrest, terroristic acts, murders and was referred to as a symbol of sectarian society, in after-agreement period is being

reshaped rather aggressively both in public discourse and in urban space. *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* gives an example of ‘alternative Ulster’ ignoring its recent political upheaval.

In the novel the shipbuilding yards, once the place of oppression of Catholics working there, are converted into territorial indicators and boundary markers of capitalistic success and social progress. Such approach, although positive for social construction, transforms the urban space which during the modern phase of The Troubles was scenery of atrocities. The novel is written with the obvious aim to reshape discursively the urban environment and start a new peaceful history of the space shared by communities divided in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be noted that space is a foremost identity issue in Anglo-Irish literature of the Troubles. *Reading in the Dark* by S.Deane, *Cal* by B.MacLavery, *Eureka Street* by R.McLiam Wilson and *Troubles* by J.G.Farrell. Space as represented in these novels is emblematic of the environment affected by civil unrest. Decades of atrocities in XX century made violence a part of everyday life in Northern Ireland. The spatial dimension represented in these novels is vulnerable seen from the Catholic perspective. Nationalistic novels (*Cal* and *Reading in the Dark*) are read as the metaphor of insecure home, central to all four novels, and the poetic expression of home vulnerability in narration, characters and linguistic means.

The idea of segregated space is typical of nationalistic novels and dominates the manifestation of the space in these novels in general. Visual means of place-identity implemented in the novels considered are symbolic ‘color writing’ and murals. They conceptualize the state symbols (most frequently national flags) and political mythology as manifesting dominance or communal solidarity. Characters are entrapped in insecure environment and have no opportunity to escape, thus in these novels the place has become a metaphor both of insecurity and destiny.

In the novels in question the idea of home vulnerability as an integral part of place identity is realized on several levels: from the level primary for ordinary people (house, flat and apartment) through a bigger habitat (districts, streets associated with violence) to “extended home” – city. In the end violence conquer and suppress the “inward man”, allowing violence to dominate the “inner space” of an individual.

In the ‘Protestant identity’ novels the projects of colonial rule is constructed through spatial dimension. If *Troubles* concerns postcolonial state of the Northern Ireland *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* represents reframing a contested space into a new multiple nonbinary identity.

Verbal identity is represented in a deliberate selection of linguistic means – choice of Derry versus official Londonderry characterizes representatives of Catholic communities in the novels.

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