

The City as Text.

The Case of Belfast: from Gothic Horror-Story to Post-Modern Novel

Laura
Pelaschiar

Università di Trieste

The connection between space and narration, the possibility, if not necessity, of reading space as text and the capacity of space to create its own texts has long been established by critics. Fredric Jameson claims that “what is loosely called ‘structuralism’ (...) has generated a whole new counterproblematic of its own in which space - the individual building, or the city itself - is taken as a text in which a whole new range of signs are combined whether in the organic unity of a shared code, or in “collage” systems of various kinds, in structures of allusion to the past, or of ironic commentary on the present, or of radical disjunctures, in which some radically new sign (the Seagram’s Building or the Radiant City) *criticizes* the older sign system into which it dramatically erupts” (Jameson, “Architecture” 36). Applying a similar idea to urban locations, Roland Barthes insists that “the city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language”(92). Franco Moretti concentrates on another space-text dynamic - that of space defining narrations - when, in his *Atlas of the European Novel*, he claims that “different spaces are not just different landscapes (...). They are different narratives matrixes. Each space determines its own kind of actions, its plot, its genre” (84). He goes on to assert that “specific stories are the product of specific spaces, I have often repeated; and now the corollary of that thesis: *without a certain specific location, a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible*” (101).

If space is a language, and the city is a discourse which in turn can create its own distinct texts, then Belfast has for many years spoken a very specific literary code and, as a “narrative matrix”, it has originated a particular (and yet somehow “mute”, as we shall see) type of literary genre: that of the thriller, and more specifically of the Troubles thriller. Because thrillers are one-dimensional narrations obeying strictly deterministic and dichotomous compositional rules, it is not surprising that the textualisation of Belfast within these literary borders came at a great cost. Belfast’s potentially symbolic spatial meaning as a contemporary city has been undermined by its unlucky literary destiny. As Eamonn Hughes correctly states:

As a fictional location, Belfast had to contend with the disadvantages. Firstly, its history sets it up not an actual place to be mimetically represented but as an unspecific battlefield, a place dominated by its ‘Troubles’ and formed, or more accurately deformed, by them into the kind of location where, as ancient maps used to be labelled, ‘Here be dragons’. All that matters in this representation is Belfast’s imputed attributes of danger, violence, mayhem. The currently predominant literary (and televisual and cinematic) representation of Belfast is within the thriller genre, whether the specific instances of that genre are mere ‘Troubles trash’ - in J. Bowyer Bell’s phrases - or something as morally serious as F. L. Green’s *Odd Man Out* or as ambitious but deeply flawed as Brian Moore’s *Lies of Silence*. Represented in this way Belfast is not Belfast at all; it is simply a void, a blank space filled by novelists and film-makers with stock properties (141).

Belfast, from being an extremely complex urban reality in “real life”, claims Hughes, has ended up functioning as a literary void in fiction, a blank space to be filled up by writers with all the most predictable and clichéd elements of the worst versions of thriller fiction: ruthless terrorist paramilitaries, the corrupted army, the compromised secret services, brave and intrepid journalists and thriller writers, psychopathic killers and so on.

Yet, even though Hughes’s denunciation of Belfast’s literary mistreatment is legitimate and necessary, it would perhaps be more correct to say that, until recently, the fictional presentation of Belfast was dystopic because it was cyclopic, the narrative mechanisms which presided over its literary representation focussed only on one of the many urban noises produced by it: that of the bombs and of the bullets. They focussed in other words on a signifier connected to a distorted or truncated signified, as if in order to be made legible, the city had to be reduced, “shortened” or con-

templated from a one-dimensional, and consequently incomplete, view or position.

In a sense it is possible to claim that Belfast has undergone a “reductive” textual semiotics similar to that illustrated by Moretti *à propos* of London and the 19th century English novel. Departing from Kevin Lynch’s important assumption that “in the city setting, legibility is crucial” (Moretti, *Atlas* 81), and inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s famous study of the role of Paris in Flaubert’s *Education Sentimentale* and of the “social trajectories” (Bourdieu 43) of the characters in the novel, Moretti analyses the attempts made by various nineteenth-century English novels to read the urban and to textualise the city. The first texts he studies are the now largely forgotten genre of the “silver-fork” novel (1820s-1840s); in them, Moretti claims, only one part of London - the residential and upper-class West End - was allowed to become text and hence to be “legible”. In principle, what Moretti writes on this literary and cultural phenomenon may be very useful if applied (with some necessary modifications), to the Belfast of the Troubles thriller:

How do silver-fork novels address urban complexity, then? Simple: they *reduce* it. Instead of Booth’s many-coloured London, they give us a binary, black-and-white system: west Regent Street, one city; east of it, a different one. A perfectly ordered, perfectly legible city; Propp’s two worlds, almost. But it’s an order which arises not really ‘out’ of the city, but rather against it: in order to make London legible, silver-fork novels must amputate it, erecting a (symbolic) wall that cuts it in halves, from Regent’s Park down to Piccadilly. And quite a few readers must have said to themselves: the West End, lovely. But the rest of London? What is there, *what kind of stories* are there, east of Regent Street? (Moretti, *Atlas* 83)

With the *Newgate* novels, Moretti continues, and their “stories of crimes and criminals” (84) the English novel opened up a textual space for the other half of London, and yet these two halves still did not add up to a whole simply because they were not allowed to meet in a single text.

If a novel focuses on one half of London, it simply cannot *see* the other half, nor represent the crossing of the border between them (86)

It will take Dickens and his genius as a city-writer to make the whole of London become text, “and his pathbreaking discovery: once the two halves are joined, the result is *more* than the sum of its parts. London

becomes not only a larger city (obviously enough), but a more *complex* one: allowing for richer, more unpredictable interactions" (86).

In the case of Belfast, the only "speakable" or "writable" portion of it in its narrative presentations had been its violent, sectarian and deadly side; a side which (and this should be admitted by writers and critics alike) did and does form a key part of its history and politics which cannot and should not be ignored nor deleted out of literature, but which did not "add up to a whole". On the contrary.

During the 1990s an entire generation of young writers - among them Robert McLiam Wilson, Glenn Patterson, Deirdre Madden, Colin Bateman - began to interrogate the semiotics of the urban and to reflect on the destiny of Belfast as text. In its Troubles thriller version, the city came across as perfectly *disordered* and, because of this, as perfectly legible. But what about the rest of it? What about its social and peripatetic life? What about the "ordinariness" of its cosmopolitan complexity? Where were the texts that made the other half of Belfast legible? As soon as the old textualisation of the city-space began to be called into question, a much needed re-functionalisation of the powerful Belfast city-trope became possible, and - since new conceptualisations and representations of space make new narrations available - a new phase of Northern Irish literature was initiated. What made this possible was a "Dickensian" awareness on the part of young Belfast writers that the un-textualised part of Belfast existed not *in spite of*, or *in opposition to* but rather *along with* the dark side of its sectarian politics. The awareness of this "*along with*" has allowed this younger generation of artists to make the two halves of Belfast meet in their texts (where the violence that threatens the ordinary is never ignored and does intrude into the pages of the metropolis) and to transform the city as text from the monodimensional gothic horror-tale into a richer, more veritable, more complex and more unpredictable post-modern novel.

Belfast as text, therefore, has been able to emerge out of the monodimensional literary location into which it had been entrapped and has ceased to be the place where there is little more than "Here be Dragons" to become a location where "Here be Humans" seems to be more appropriate. In this sense, what Hughes had hoped for at the end of his essay - "The real challenge, however, will be to represent Belfast, if it will allow, not as Utopia, but, in Patrick Gedde's term, 'Eutopia', neither heaven nor hell but simply the good place" (160) - seems to have come true.

There is more than a little truth in the claim that, over the last fifteen years, more in Northern Ireland than in the Republic, the metropolitan has become the site for that topophilia which in Irish culture had traditionally been reserved for the countryside, ever since Yeats and the other representatives of the Irish Revival, as Edward Said has explained, elected the rural (the Irish West) as the “real” Ireland and the geographical landscape in which to shape and locate Irish nationalism and anti-imperialist resistance (Said 271-272). This rural bias, compounded by the rural mythmaking of the DeValera generation of Irish political and cultural leaders, consequently, although perhaps not systematically, gave rise to what Conor McCarthy calls the “corresponding negative aesthetic of the city” (150). In Northern Ireland (as well as in the Republic) as soon as this topophilia - this love for space - was poured into a metropolitan reality, and, in becoming urban, was de-ideologised and redeemed from any excess of nationalistic sentiment, and this in spite of the highly politically charged atmosphere of the Province, the once insurmountable difficulties of representing the city have been triumphantly overcome in the novels of young novelists such as Deirdre Madden, Glenn Patterson and Robert McLiam Wilson. Thus, Belfast’s urban complexity has ceased to be read as a sign of an unbearable - and therefore un-representable - urban moral corruption and to be reduced to a single, and therefore readable (even though terrifying) cypher: that of sectarian violence; its labyrinthine essence has stopped being perceived and interpreted as an oppressive net/cobweb to be escaped from. Rather, the post-modern concept of the metropolis as a global encyclopedia of cultural styles, as the site for, as David Harvey puts it, a post-modern “aesthetics of diversity” (Harvey 75), as “concentration of the world” (Moretti, *Opere Mondo* 117) has overcome the negative and traditionally romantic trope of - Wordsworth’s *docet* - “lonely rooms, and amid the din of towns and cities” (*Tintern Abbey*) and of “thou monstrous anti-hill on the plain” where “The face of every one/That passes by me is a mystery” (*The Prelude*, Book 7) as well as the sense of crisis and shock caused in the individual by the loss of individuality which was typical, according to Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin’s investigations, of metropolitan life. The Wordsworthian sense of urban alienation, which resisted through the 19th and 20th century, and almost entirely characterised the fictional textualisation of Belfast, has been turned upside down, so much so that in the novels of Robert McLiam Wilson and Glenn Patterson

the city locales are associated with the metropolitan experience of - as Roland Barthes puts it in his "Semiology and the Urban" - the place for meeting the other, and perhaps even the place for reading the other.

Mc Liam Wilson is particularly aware of the potential of the city as macro-container of stories, and in his profoundly urban and deeply Belfast *Eureka Street* (1996), under many aspects the most important novel to be published over the last decade in Northern Ireland, the metaphor of the city as text - and more specifically of the city as novel - becomes explicit: at the end of chapter 11, a section of the novel which departs from the main (rather erratic) plot, since it describes the only tragic event in this Northern Irish comic epic poem in prose: the explosion of a bomb in the heart of Belfast. None of the main characters are directly involved nor affected by the explosion, the victims are all extras who only here, in this scene, are upgraded to the role of protagonists because they are all inhabitants of the city. The concept of the city as text is explicitly employed at the end of the chapter, in a passage in which the textual metaphor dominates and where the omniscient narrator registers the meaning of the disappearance of human lives as an "editing out".

They all had stories. But they weren't short stories. They shouldn't have been short stories. They should have been novels, profound delightful novels, eight hundred pages or more. And not just the lives of the victims but the lives they touched, the networks of friendship and intimacy and relation that tied them to those they loved and who loved them, those they knew and who knew them. What great complexity. What richness.

What had happened? A simple event. The traffic of history and politics had bottlenecked. An individual or individuals had decided that reaction was necessary. Some stories had been shortened. some stories had been ended. A confident editorial decision had been taken.

It had been easy.

The pages that follow are light with their loss. the text is less dense, the city is smaller.(231)

Gaston Bachelard - in the pages dedicated to the dialectics of inside and outside of his *The Poetics of Space* - quotes from Jean Hyppolite's commentary on Freud's structure of denegation (*Verneinung*) in order to arrive at a definition of alienation.

Hyppolite spoke of 'a first myth of outside and inside'. And he added: 'you feel the full significance of this myth of outside and inside in alienation, which is founded on these two terms. Beyond what is expressed in their formal opposition lie alienation and hostility between the two'. And so, simple geometrical opposition becomes tinged with aggressivity. Formal opposition is incapable of remaining calm (212).

In the Northern Ireland fiction of the 1990s, the dialectics of inside and outside, of here and there, have been reversed when compared with the urban fiction of the previous years. No longer does the subject's alienation - as defined by Bachelard - derive from the impossibility of integrating individual identity into the urban texture and from the threat that the city poses to the self. Rather the opposite is now true: the self and the city are strictly interconnected, the dialectics of inside and outside take place, harmonically, within the urban text. The self maps itself by mapping the city, the inner landscape of the individual is an extension of the outer geography of the city, both at a fictional and autobiographical level.

It is not surprising, therefore, to encounter a text such as *The Star Factory*, an autobiography of sorts published in 1997 by Ciaran Carson, one of the most prestigious poetic voices in Northern Ireland. *The Star Factory* is as much a memoir of an individual as it is a literary mapping of the city of Belfast; the map of which (along with a picture of the *Titanic*, one of the cultural myths of the city), appears on the front cover of the book. The words which, in the front sleeve of the book, supply the key to the reader are themselves revolutionary in the context of Northern Irish literature, and Irish literature *tout court*, since the connection between the plotting out of an individual identity and the narration of an urban plot is new in the anti-urban Irish cultural background.

This is a book in which the labyrinths of a particular city, Belfast, and of a writer's memory, intersect. A life imposes a pattern on the city, and the urban landscape suggests odd shapes formed by streets, old industrial buildings and the dangerous geography of rival communities. The Star Factory of the title was an abandoned mill, full of Piranesian galleries and rusting machinery which haunted the author as a child; roads converge on Belfast to form a stellar pattern in an ironic benediction of the city's sectarian divisions. But the Star Factory is also a place of the imagination, where history and decaying architecture are turned into stories.

Accordingly, each of the 32 chapters of the book is entitled after a street, a church, a monument, a shop, a building, an area of Belfast: the city, therefore, structures the memory and the text while becoming text itself. In the second chapter, the title "From Abbey Road to Zetland" is directly taken from the most obvious and encyclopedic way in which urban geography becomes text: the street directory, a volume which the author associates with the memory of his father, not accidentally the main story-teller of the book. The city-text - its city street directory - makes it possible for the creative imagination to fill the blanks between the letters of the city locations, to invent stories, to impose destinations. And the connection with Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel which originated from its author's obsessive and creative reading of *Thom's Dublin Directory* of 1904, comes immediately to mind. Franco Moretti claims that geography shapes the structure of fiction - this is the theoretical consideration on which his *Atlas of the European novel* is based (Moretti, *Atlas* 8) - but here Ciaran Carson' ability to "read narratives where there are none, ignorant of all the teeming others and their names and destinations", applied to the geography of the city, is evidence of the fact that geography, and more specifically the geography of a city, cannot only structure fiction, but can also be its very source.

Similarly, streets named after places form exotic junctures not to be found on the map of the Empire: Balkan and Ballarat, Cambrai and Cambridge, Carlisle and Carlow, Lisbon and Lisburn, and so on, through Madras and Madrid, till we eventually arrive, by way of Yukon, at the isle of Zetland, whereupon we fall off the margins of the city.

I am trying to think of myself as a bookworm, ruminating through the one thousand, five hundred and ninety-six pages of the Directory in teredo mode, following my non-linear dictates, as I make chambered spirals in my universe, performing parabolas by browsing letters and the blanks between them.(Carson 8)

Carson's *The Star Factory* is based on the belief that there is an identitarian osmosis between the city and the self: the text devoted to individual memory finds a structure in the map of the city. A very similar process can be seen clearly at work in Eoin Mc Namee's more typical and traditional novel *Resurrection Man*, where the dynamics of definition of the self within the geography of an urban text of street names is of paramount importance.

Resurrection Man is set in the mid-seventies and it tells the story of the rise and fall of Victor Kelly, a young Protestant who, after a very early and undistinguished career as a petty criminal, rises in the ranks to assume a prominent role in the Ulster Volunteer Force, forms his own unit (the "Resurrection Men") and becomes a vicious sectarian killer. Eventually he is betrayed by one of his own and killed presumably by his own side for having become an uncontrollable element of terror and fear in the city. Victor Kelly is possibly the most disturbing terrorist figure in Northern Irish fiction because the events in which he is involved and which are graphically narrated in the novel are clearly inspired by the deeds of the most brutal unit of killers in the history of the Troubles, the so-called Shankill Butchers. Because of this, *Resurrection Man* is a text which sits uncomfortably between a fictionalised version of a real event, while also belonging, at least in part, to the much maligned literary genre of the Troubles thriller (even though there is no mystery to be solved), it also aspires to being a *Bildungsroman* of sorts, a complex, detailed and at times morbid psychological study of a deranged, psychopathic and ruthless killer.

In the formation of the protagonist's identity, the mental possession of the city is crucial. The Belfast which is communicated in this novel is still the clichéd and ugly urban landscape of so many Irish urban novels, since *Resurrection Man* belongs to that numerous family of texts which offer a gothic representation of the city of Belfast, "bad, mad and dangerous to know" (Hughes 149). Yet what is new is the symbiosis between individual identity and urban texture: both are deeply interconnected, since inner space can only be defined by external space. Once this dialectic is interrupted, the subject breaks down, the inner world is destabilized, Victor Kelly disintegrates and his latent madness (which is made more acute after a long period of internment in Long Kesh) becomes evident. Alienation for Victor is not caused by the opposition/hostility between outside and inside, but by the breaking up of their umbilical relationship: once the self is no longer able to "read" the city, it is not able to read itself anymore. Kelly's mental psychopathology becomes evident when his obsessive and detailed knowledge of the city streets fails him, since knowing the city's geography by heart is a fundamental step in his development. Often Kelly likes to show off while sitting in the back of the car that one of his comrades is driving, with his eyes closed, he can still tell where they are without looking.

They argued about how he did it. Big Ivan said it was the smell. Bread from Ormeau bakery, hot solder near the shipyard, the hundred yards stink from the gas-work, Big Ivan reckoned tha he mapped the city with smells, moving along them like a surveyor along sightlines. Willie thought of pigeons homing. Migrations moving to some enchanted and magnetic imperative (26).

He also likes to sit in the car in front of their local pub, again with his eyes closed, silently covering with the motion of his lips the whole map of the city in a narrative of possession which turns Belfast into a text learnt by heart. As in Carson's memoir, the fascination with the sound of city names permeates almost every page of a book, even though the city is called only twice by its name.

It was an inventory of the city, a naming of parts. Baden-Powell Street, Centurion Street, Lonely places along the river. Buildings scheduled for demolition. Car parks. Quiet residential areas ideal for assassination. Isolated gospel halls. Textures of bricks, rain memory (27).

As in many of Ciaran Carson's poems, in *Resurrection Man* Belfast is often referred to, and by different characters, as a text, "a code of destination" (6), a "diagram of violence" (27), a "texture of bricks" (27), "a script to accompany a season of coming evil" (159), a "rank, allusive narrative" (223). Once the text becomes elusive, once the knowledge of the city's texture is lost, once Victor's mental map of city-space begins to fade, his psyche loses track of itself, and the character's spatial disorientation becomes a symbol for his irreversible disconnection with himself. The names of the city streets are not legible anymore, they are "no longer adaptable to your own purpose" (163).

But sometimes on one of these runs he would say, where are we? He sounded surprised as if he had suddenly discovered that the streets were not simple things he had taken for, a network to be easily memorized and navigated. They had become untrustworthy, concerned with unfamiliar destinations, no longer adaptable to your own purpose. He read the street names for signs. India Street, Palestine Street. When he spoke them they felt weighty and ponderous on his tongue, impervious syllables that yielded neither direction nor meaning. Sandy Row, Gresham Street. (163).

In this context, Lynch's conception of city experience (as described by Jameson) in his already mentioned *The Image of the City* - the dialectic-

tic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality - and his conclusions on urban alienation seem an apt description - albeit on a psychological rather than phenomenological level - of what happens to Victor Kelly in McNamee's novel.

Drawing on the downtowns of Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles, and by means of interviews and questionnaires in which subjects were asked to draw their city context from memory, Lynch suggests that the urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of local cityscapes (Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" 353).

In this text the incapacity to mentally map a place is therefore one of the major causes of alienation within the field of urban experience: *Resurrection Man* is, in an Irish literary context, the text which more openly than any other analyses and articulates this psychological process. This is why, after the first manifestations of his disconnection with the cityscapes appear, Victor's reacts by trying to re-establish his "cognitive mapping" and therefore his tie with Belfast.

When this happened, they would return to the Pot Luck and Victor would go off to the back room with the razor-blade and mirror without a word, leaving orders not to be disturbed. After taking a line of speed he would attempt to sketch portions of the city, working fast and silent, streets discarded, corrected, gone over again and again until they yielded up names, faces. Each one seemed incomplete (McNamee 163).

The impossibility of plotting out the city - in itself a cause of alienation - is in this novel a symptom of inner disconnection which will eventually lead to the death of the protagonist. Belfast as text is here a central trope, yet it is a text which still speaks the language of gothicism, while the symbiosis between self and city is still associated with the theme of violence, destruction, madness, death and a sense of all-embracing evil. The destructive and self-destructive essence of the city is everywhere to be found in this novel, and if Belfast is a text, it is a text which keeps deleting important chunks of itself with the ruthless viciousness of the mad killer who inhabits it. The dialectics of inside and outside do not work because the "tribalistic knowing your place as the only way of knowing yourself" that Hughes (154) attributes to the rural within the field of Irish

culture has, in this case, been transferred to the urban. In this version, the city is caught in a sort of one-way street, a narratively autistic dead end since that “fantastic idea” of the city, as Moretti puts it - “Fantastic idea: the city - *the generalized spatial proximity unique to the city* - as a genuine enigma, a ‘mosaic of worlds’” (*Atlas* 129) - is reduced to the puzzle of one single figure, that of the individual subject. “The city”, Hughes writes, “offers a different version of individual identity: where the rural produces an essentialist and organic identity, cities produce relational and constructed identities” (Hughes 151). When the city ceases to be the location for an exclusivistic “knowing thyself” and becomes the space in which “knowing thyself” also and, perhaps primarily, means meeting the other and reading the other, a post-modern redemption of the urban both as space and as text becomes feasible. Thus the city, from being a gothic tale of horror and death, can become a novel, the world of polyglossia, to borrow from Bakhtin's famous definition, the literary location where more than anywhere else – and this is the common matrix of the postmodern novel and the postmodern city - meeting/reading the other is, in the end, the crux of the matter.



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