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“Northern Ireland—I Come from Here”: Glenn Patterson, a Novelist and Citizen in Pursuit of a “Non-Tribal” Identity

As might be gathered from the title, this paper touches only obliquely upon the journal’s thematic frame of a timely consideration of the “Recovered Territories.” At first glance, one might argue that there is little cause to segue into scholarly dilemmas regarding the post-Troubles identity. Although my main objective is admittedly not to wade into the issue of how and why the post-war authorities of Poland legitimized “reclaiming” western territories, one comparative perspective does seem relevant: namely, one might draw instructive parallels between identity in these territories and the new identification paradigm which has emerged abroad in the wake of the 1998 Northern Irish historical settlement. In either case, a key to unlocking the door to a transformed society/community lies in a deliberate recalibration of the collective mindset. As regards the Polish case, according to Marta Grzechnik, any narratives regarding the “old/new” lands aimed, on the one hand, “at creat[ing] a sense of continuity” (669), but on the other at forging “a new history [and] a new future”¹ (668). Looking in turn

1 The above parallel to the “Recovered Territories” passes for a legitimate framework (though not immune to certain reservations) because, as it was in the case of post-war Poland, here also a proposed resolution for Northern Ireland was subject to ratification by the signatory states. Theirs was the decision to demarcate the realm of “possibility” by drawing a new political scenario within which the two antagonized communities, in

to Northern Ireland, since the Good Friday Agreement,² a number of Northern Irish authors, among whom Glenn Patterson could be regarded as a legitimate representative of the local literary field, have participated in various discussions over the possibility of constructing a reformed post-conflict/non-sectarian identity.³ The dilemmas faced by Patterson offer useful parallels, albeit distant ones. Drawing upon two collections of the author's non-fiction accounts, *Lapsed Protestant* from 2006 and *Here's Me Here* from 2016, my article concentrates upon both the hopes and obstacles manifested during the post-Troubles context of an attempted tropism towards a more neutral/non-politicized Northern Irish identification, in hopes that the similar dynamics may also shed light upon the Polish situation.

It is an undeniable fact that literary (non-)fiction happens to be thoroughly intertwined with the socio-political reality of Northern Ireland.⁴ As I claimed elsewhere, several local authors—Patterson speaks/writes as one of them—found it difficult to remain aloof to cultivate mere aesthetic separateness. Thus,

a sovereign manner, could determine a trajectory of the region's future identity formation. Such a potential of collective self-agency is reflected in the section "Constitutional Issues" of the 1998 Peace Agreement. Reading this document, one is informed about the British and Irish governments' declaration to "recognize the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status" (*The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement*, 1998). As underlined by Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, both states aimed, in fact, to "dilute their claims of sovereignty regarding Northern Ireland" (32).

- 2 The objective of this paper is neither to analyze the entire history of the Anglo-Irish conflict, nor to trace the decades-long meanderings of (Northern) Irish identity, if not centuries of stagnation or militancy, but rather to ponder over a historic shift in the constitution of Northern Irishness. As Richard Kearney wrote, "on that dramatic day when John Hume and David Trimble shook hands across historically entrenched barricades and borders, six hundred years of mutual hostilities came to an end" (41). This prediction can be regarded as valid with the caveat that more than twenty years after the Agreement was signed, with no escalating violence on the streets of Northern Ireland, the walls of skepticism (to use an euphemism) about genuine reconciliation stand still.
- 3 From the dawn of that new political "era," there has been room for considering the possibility of developing a pluralistic formula of Northern Irish identity. As indicated by Kearney, the Agreement prompted a constitutional watershed, and from then on one could be/one was entitled to define themselves as "British or Irish or Both" (49).
- 4 For more elaborate analyses concerning contemporary Northern Irish literature and its engagement in recent debates on socio-political changes in the region see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (2003), Michael Parker (2007), or Ryszard Bartnik (2017).

in the spirit of public expectations, but also in the spirit of personal rectitude, such novelists felt (feel) authorized to intervene in debates that could not be neglected or simply left unconcluded (Bartnik 79). Consequently, before one proceeds to an analysis of Patterson’s writing, in terms of his excessive interest in bolstering a domestic agenda of pushing for a non-tribal identity, one might situate that consideration by browsing certain academic research on the notion of collective awareness and self-definition in the district, drawing from a range of other (non-literary) fields. After the political breakthrough in 1998, of utmost importance was to consider whether Northern Ireland could exist not only as a distinct geographical locale, but also as a sovereign political entity. In theory, the Peace Agreement opened a new chapter in the history of the region. As indicated by Richard Kearney, that watershed moment of a teleological reflection could be recognized as “a precondition for allowing the co-existence of different communities in the same society; and, by extension, amplifying the models of identity to include more pluralist forms of association” (55). Yet, as many indicate, even two decades later some serious flaws in the structure of the Northern Irish body politic could still be observed. Regardless of good intentions and sound political declarations, Ulster⁵ labored (and still does) under the weight of its own past. There therefore appears to be a discrepancy between the supposedly new, post-Troubles Northern Ireland and the actual modality of post-conflict everyday life, which to a degree has remained contingent on the legacy of “former” belligerency. This may lead to differing predictions for the region in terms of generating its collective identity format.

In light of the aforementioned expectations towards the reformulation of earlier insular identities, it would be a misstep to overlook the tendencies that endorse an alternative interpretation of Northern Irishness. As Kevin McNicholl et al. point out, the “post-conflict generation” is not so much looming on the horizon as it has already become a fact. Therefore, one should not be surprised

5 My use of the above term rests on the caveat that “Ulster” is not synonymous (in legal terms) with an autonomous political entity. As highlighted by Patterson, it designates “one of the four provinces on the island of Ireland” (2019: 7), with three separate counties beyond the administrative rule of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it would be unfortunate to remain intentionally oblivious to the fact that some of the politically motivated “Unionists” “appropriated the word ... and made extensive use of it” (McKittrick and McVea 5). Yet, this region has its own ambiguous status, and maybe for that reason Patterson, in an interview from 2004, was willing to elaborate on “alternative Ulster” (Hogg 2008). With this potentially unbiased approach in mind, which was intentionally taken by Patterson—a self-appointed “lapsed Protestant,” I permitted myself to use the term in this paper.

by that generation's willingness to manifest a new layout of "cross-community identity" (488). The idea behind that tag brings all of the residents under the same regional banner that allows everyone to march together "regardless of self-identity" (492). In a similar vein, Owen Fenton, in his essay on how to bring down the old narrative frames, a majority of which led to a kind of petrification of the Troubles' logic, draws attention to different public agents expected to reconsider their operative agenda. With the changing socio-political milieu, the goalposts are to be shifted so as "to accommodate contemporary understandings of [non-political/non-politicized] identity" (Fenton 251). Only by "breaking away from" antagonisms of the past can the tangible or imagined divisions be nullified, which by definition constitutes the condition *sine qua non* for any future success of the society.

While recent research on the subject of identity⁶ in Northern Ireland confirms a preliminary stage of the socio-political reconstruction, there remains the well-grounded conviction, outweighing professions of optimism, which defines any such formative/collective experience merely as "a [future] project or orientation" (Todd 34). Some scholars take this kind of criticism a step further by claiming that the creation of a more neutral/joint/national identity is plainly wishful thinking. According to Orla Muldoon et al. (101), the current Northern Irish reality remains constituted by densely emotional formations that feed on mental structures of "oppositional and negatively interdependent" character. To put it another way, the conflict-ridden past carries a burden that has been ineffectively lessened, and continues to have a bearing on the present-day individual as well as community-like mentalities in the region. In light of the above, Stephen Hopkins' idea of coming forward with "[one] master narrative for the population" shedding light on the meanderings of the Troubles "bygone" dynamic is rather doubtful (190). By analogy, a related, comprehensive narrative that would encompass just the current situation of the post-Agreement Northern Ireland is equally unreachable. For a counter argument, however, everyone should concede the point that profound individual diagnoses of the three-decade intercommunal strife along with personal reflections upon opening up the new identity horizon⁷ are more than welcome. In respect thereof,

6 Among others: John Brewer (2019), Landon E. Hancock (2019), Birte Heidemann (2016), and Aleksandra Łojek (2015).

7 McNicholl et al. point to numerous obstacles, derived from Northern Ireland's recent history, which make "a wide recognition" of a reformed collective identity highly "difficult." According to them, "the Northern Irish identity" as a certain new concept, commonly shared, is "relatively new" and in this "deeply divided society [happens to

a relevant exemplification comes from Glenn Patterson, not just a man of letters but also a visionary idealist.

The fact is that some space and understanding for the “reforming” Northern Irish identity exists both in academic and public discourse. An interesting aspect of the subject matter can be found in a collective work from 2017, written by Atsuko Ichijo et al. In accordance with their study, the aforementioned formative framework is not just a passing phenomenon. As underlined, its character is contingent on people’s commitment to the post-Agreement success in socio-political restructuring. One of its results, namely a noticeable “interest ... in increasing self-identification as ‘Northern Irish,’” has already been, so to speak, in the air. Many are eager to praise the times not least because they “herald[d] the emergence of a new post-Troubles identity” (448–449). Interestingly enough, already in the 1970s, as Ichijo et al. remind us, there was a study conducted by Richard Rose defining the local population as sharing a sense of “their Province’s distinctiveness [beyond] the simplistic division British or Irish” (449). The likely conclusion then, drawn on the above, points at the identity being under constant [re]construction, or being on the move. The paradox is, however, that the region’s political turmoil makes the residents constantly perplexed and entangled with nothing but successive displays of the fluctuating⁸ Northern Irishness.

With regard to the above, Patterson’s narrative swings in the other direction, towards endorsing a new (less unstable) identity, with a common share of public

be] disclaimed by the majority of residents” (502). Interestingly enough, Fenton (235) indicates that such a broader identity formation is rather “familiar” to a great number of Northern Irish people, yet its definition was not included or mentioned in the 1998 official document terminating the struggle in the province.

- 8 The above-mentioned fluctuation denotes a kind of sinusoidal pattern of or a specific instability inherent in the local mental background. Kenneth Bush clarifies what lies behind the blurry lines of Northern Ireland’s identity formation. From one angle, there is a call for a new definition of the local “public space,” which should be constituted upon two distinguishable “qualities.” One is defined as “non-excludability” and presumes the coexistence of distinct groups mutually “enjoying the benefits” of the public domain; whereas the other one, known as a “non-rivalry” principle, decrees no possibility of “diminishing” one’s rights by an “opposing” community (172). Yet, from another perspective, as noted by Bush, what is observable in Northern Ireland, long years after the end of the Troubles, boils down to new murals sprouting up to “consolidate populations ... and simply stake out territory that has been already divided” (180). Under such circumstances, it is highly difficult to come up with the concept of one identity, which aims at a joint coexistence of Northern Irish people.

space/public good as well as distinctive qualities of societal coexistence to be taken for granted. Read between the lines, his texts nonetheless imply that its realization is encumbered with a high degree of uncertainty. What is Patterson's position on the Northern Irish identity, then, and how has it been developing? Before we proceed with an analysis of the author's writing, one stipulation regarding a mode of the local identity framing should be made. Fenton, studying the changing understanding of Northern Irishness, draws attention to two, in fact, opposing notions. On the one hand, the identity in question is deemed to have been evidently "emergent"; on the other, it is said to have been "artificially engineered, [thus] manufactured" (251). This paper does not pretend to resolve this contradiction; yet, on the basis of that scholarly debate, it seems legitimate to note Fenton's statement that "the post-Agreement society is narratively shaped" (240), of which a good exemplification is Patterson's (non-)literary output. Let us observe, then, whether in the case of the writer's viewpoint on a newly reformed and collectively shared non-sectarian regional (national?) identity one should place more emphasis on continuity or evolution. In order to address the issue, I juxtapose Patterson's two collections of non-fiction texts to find general correlations, based on the chronology of their release, between concrete micronarratives.

The very title of a collection from 2006 is rather self-explanatory. *Lapsed Protestant*⁹ denotes someone who is no longer an adherent of a given denomination, yet concurrently implies that the author is cognizant of the place and time of his birth, adult life as well as various cultural/social/political imprints on professional activity.¹⁰ At a certain stage, it became clear to him that religion in Northern Ireland has crossed the threshold beyond which a mere spiritual experience has been replaced by political sympathies. Protestantism, as a sphere of faith, yielded to political manifestations of sectarian character. Accordingly, compiling the volume, Patterson had to grapple not only with his religious background, but also a wider context of the Troubles' legacy. It is evident that one of his objectives was to disengage from affirming or forging the politicized identity formation. To understand the author's reason, so clearly presented after

9 It is crucial to understand that the term "Protestant," as used by Patterson, does not bring only religious connotations, but also cultural and political.

10 In one of the interviews, Patterson underlines a personal awareness of his whereabouts. Speaking of the characters he creates, Patterson sees them as compelled to "work through some of the ideas and preoccupations of a society. And given that this society [Northern Ireland] has been dominated by politics and political violence, then if you choose to set your fiction here, ... you can't help but engage with that" (Patterson 1998: 95).

the 1998 watershed, a brief glimpse of Patterson’s writing, preceding the moment of transition is to be provided. Some of the early texts illustrate a process of preparing the ground for bidding farewell to the religious-political affiliation.¹¹

With regard to the question of the writer’s emancipation, it is worth considering Stephen Hopkins’ concept of the Northern Irish discursive domain as “the battlefield.” Of utmost importance, in the context of Patterson’s move, becomes taking up the task of “vacat[ing]” the well-known ground of “us” vs. “them.” It is a merely rhetorical question whether pursuing that path might in any way be unproblematic, for the obstacles on the way to neutrality, as stemming from years of the (sectarian) training, have not retreated and been pushing people towards another habitual preservation of “contested ideological territories” (Hopkins 190). In one of his oldest narratives, written in 1989, Patterson refers to a personal experience of the Glorious Twelfth, which is a festive commemoration held by Protestants to “praise” the seventeenth-century victory over the Catholic King James II. According to Patterson, one of the key elements of those celebrations was to familiarize oneself with such (un)ambiguous songs like “The Billy Boys,” infused with such inimical phrases as “We’re up to our necks in Fenian blood, surrender or you’ll die.” As he explains, performances of the kind had a cultural and myth-making character, designed to solidify a bigoted sense of Northern Irishness. Regardless of the *bona fide* excuse that actions of the kind were not against any other communities, it is rather obvious that the very nature of the Orange Order’ marches was “divisive . . . and intrinsically militaristic,” and the past was instrumentally treated to “mobilize and paralyze in one” (Patterson 2006: 19). Nurtured on the Protestant carnival, being part of that socio-cultural background, he begins to accentuate that the identity offered was all but inclusive, and at its foundations were very much marked by warlike belligerence.

For someone like Patterson, who operates on/with language, it became clear that the vernacular idiom, as one of the constitutive facets of Northern Ireland’s public space, required qualitative shifts in hitherto insular discursive practices. In actual fact, during the Troubles, the feel of dialogic culture almost did not exist. That state of affairs was adequately described by Patterson in one of the discussed micronarratives, written in 1994. Speaking of the words in use back then, he highlights their adoption strictly to politicized purposes: “they were

11 In the same year as Patterson’s publication, Shirlow and Murtagh stressed how crucial, and concurrently difficult it was to expediate a “new deal” with the persistence of “unquestioned group-based identities undermin[ing] the pursuit and existence of more pluralist and secularist lifestyles” (2006: 5).

stripped of the subtlety that gives language its real vitality.” Confined to serve sectarianism, personal or public expressions predominantly aimed at confirming the “[i]dentity ... reduced to one thing or the other, Protestant or Catholic; tit-for-tat words, words to settle scores by” (Patterson 2006: 124). The protest against such reductionism seems to have heralded the need for change signaled by Fenton several years later. In a paper from 2016, the academic wrote about a reformed conceptualization of “Northern Irish identification” based on “free [discursive] navigat[ion]” leading to non-politicized “social interactions” (239). With a different language, there would be a chance for a new identity refracting the contending voices but more affirmative,¹² giving consent to the diversified “us.”

While crossing the divide, everyone is expected to refocus in order to eschew the legitimization of only one, *rightful* Northern Irish identification. Not to deepen the stand-off between two opposing communities, Patterson suggests in 1998 that “where the rights are concerned we must apply ourselves not to the most obviously defensible (our own), but the least: the rights of people wholly unlike *us* and with whom we are least likely to agree” (2006: 22). Once again, this statement shows Patterson to have been a man ahead of his time. Suffice to consider the results of a recent study on the Northern Irish identity conducted by McNicholl et al., wherein one reads about the emerging expectations towards a reformed identification “associated with more conciliatory attitudes [directed at] outgroup members” (490). With the benefit of hindsight, should we regard his vision as unrealistic? By no means, it is rather a mixture of idealism and sound social criticism. On the one hand, in *Lapsed Protestant* we find Patterson’s strong support for the 1998 settlement, which was supposed to bring “peace and stability.” On the other hand, two years later, he made an astute observation regarding the post-conflict reality:

there is a growing sense that this most recent difficulty has exposed divisions which the Good Friday Agreement never properly addressed, divisions which have, if anything, got wider in the intervening months.

12 According to Patterson, Northern Irish Protestants were good at “saying ‘no.’” However, as he explains, “there is no and there is no. There is the no—heard here far too long—that refuses any change, that resists self-scrutiny, and there is the no whose very denial contains the germ of an alternative ..., the first step to yes. Only by rejecting that which artificially divides us can we clear the ground on which to begin the positive task of building a truly equitable society” (Patterson 2006: 125).

Depressingly, it is possible again to guess a person's religion by their views on certain issues. (Patterson 2006: 88)

Having taken on a rather pessimistic tone, in some of the subsequent texts Patterson presents a conspicuous expansion of that sentiment; for instance, when talking about the necessity of redrawing the old boundaries behind which besieged mentalities, of the seemingly post-conflict society, linger on. Therefore, the writer was fully justified in seeking an alliance with potential reformers, knowing “the paucity of a peace process that camouflage[d] the reality [of] sectarianized allegiances” (Shirlow and Murtagh 4).

At odds with the official declarations, trumpeting that the peace dividend started to pay off, the Northern Irish identity has not ceased to resonate with the familiar curbstones of sectarian sympathies. Bluntly put, both active agents and passive participants of the Troubles, remaining under its “imprint,” have not readjusted themselves to “drawing the boundaries of the possible [transformation]” (Patterson 2006: 42). This cannot surprise taking into account more recent scholarly diagnoses, provided—for instance—by Todd or Bush. The former's findings and lexicon, though more neutral and mild, do indicate “substantive continuity in ... these identities,” earlier perceived as *partitioned*. Almost two decades later, some of the old “categories” or “practices” are as deep-seated in numerous local mindsets as they were in the time of the Troubles (Todd 22). In the latter's opinion, it is hard to discuss contemporary Northern Ireland in terms of a geography of peace. According to Bush, it is only nominally a “post-conflict place.” Actually, the present framework of this society has not changed much and “is profoundly segregated and polarized” (170). Back in 2004, Patterson comes to a disconcerting realization that a new dimension of Northern Irishness might be nothing more than just an empty signifier:

It seems that while the peace-lines are undeniably popular with those living within a stone's—or a petrol bomb's—throw of the other side ..., they have perpetuated into our heavily processed peace a worldview where there are really only two types of people—“us” and “not-us.” There are still many thousands of meters of curbstones to go. (2006: 65)

At that point, it becomes undeniable that the divisive past still laid down the law of the present, hence the author's the author's next step to write a novel under the very telling title *That Which Was*, which focuses on postulations regarding the “post-Troubles” collective and individual self-analysis.

Although the main objective of this paper remains other than grasping the essence of Patterson's fiction writing, the author's hints as to how to undo some of the harms of backward-looking identities are nonetheless worth noting. As stated elsewhere, the novel positions its main protagonist as a community leader in the wake of the Troubles. Being a preacher, he is compelled to confront his congregation that is unwilling to think critically about certain weighted foundations of the hitherto Northern Irishness.¹³ In highlighting the life of a single congregation, the author attempted at highlighting the fossilized identities "that agreed to end the conflict but did not entirely succeed in making cross-community life free of rigid ideologizations" (Bartnik 190). In other words, reading that text, one comes across Patterson's response to such local identities which stayed buried in the trenches of bigoted sectarianism. However constructive his literary vision was, in an article from 2005 the novelist depicted Northern Ireland as a land of disenchantment. With a reference to Borges, the author diagnoses the then post-Agreement reality in the following manner:

[i]n a conflict in which there were no winners ... all parties get to write their own histories, paint them on walls, carve them in stone. Forget contamination, we are on the verge of a full-blown epidemic. (Patterson 2006: 155)

Apart from the aforementioned disenchantment, in the same year he seems on the verge of despair saying that a vast majority of people in Northern Ireland "are incapable of ... even parsimonious politeness" (26). On the Protestant side, so familiar to him, there were many fellow-men strongly motivated to sing "Jerusalem" to glorify Britishness; yet, as maintained by the author, the Province must expect less of antagonistic triumphalism and more of constructive encouragement. Unfortunately, the latter's deficiency continuously set the regional mentalities ablaze.

With recapitulation of the thematic areas mentioned so far, in the context of *Lapsed Protestant*, it is Patterson's very critical approach towards the divisive identities that needs to be singled out. Being himself part of an inward-looking Protestant-Unionist formative framework, he wrote intentionally to deconstruct its credentials. In the above work, Patterson enumerated certain sensitive issues that constitute[d] the obstacles to a genuine transformation of the so-called

13 As Patterson explains, his rationale for writing the book came down to one thing and was fairly unambiguous: "That which was still has questions to ask of that which is to be. Sadly, it seems, yet again too many" (2006: 92).

post-conflict society. Evidently, at that stage, as the ending indicates, it was too early to assume that the new, more neutral Northern Irish identity was on the horizon. Is this skepticism or lack of hope noticeable a decade later, when the other volume of Patterson’s non-fiction was published? The answer varies depending on whether the postulated progress in building a genuine intercommunal/political entity was accelerated or deaccelerated over the upcoming years.

With the onset of his volume from 2016, Patterson seems to have slightly shifted perspective, firstly to present cautious optimism as regards the possibility of anchoring himself to a more welcoming identity framework. The lens to view his readjustment is provided by Ichijo et al. (453), who reported on two opposing attitudes to avoid societal “oblivion.” Albeit in a different context, wherein more “traditional” forms of a national built-up operated, their claim was that losing a sense of collective identification can be stopped either by cultivating “a strong community of history” or practicing “the notions of everyday nationhood.”¹⁴ Apparently, Patterson has never been into any national/istic project, which is not tantamount to leaving off with the idea of proclaiming an “adjective-free” Northern Irishness. In this regard, the latter option seems to run parallel to his decision to acknowledge a personal sentiment as well as a sense of personal belonging to the place he was born in and nurtured on. Once on a radio show, he said the following:

After decades of conflict, and a few years carrying on like new lovers coy about the names for the bits that give them pleasure, after negotiations lasting, as negotiations are bound to last, long, long into the night, politicians of all parties have agreed that the name of this place shall henceforward be ... “Here.” Citizens shall be “people here.” (Patterson 2016: 1)

This introductory statement to the whole volume of 2016 is by all means twinkling with hope.¹⁵ From then on, as the author would like to believe, there

14 The two options mentioned above were originated, respectively, by Anthony Smith in *National Identity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin (2001) and by Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss in “Everyday Nationhood,” *Ethnicities* 8.4 (2008): 536–563.

15 But even that hope was spirited with reserve as instead of ordinary “Politics,” there was “Political Process”; instead of peace, there was “the current Peace Process.” What is needed in Northern Ireland comes down to “hav[ing] tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after that again,” yet it is “Peace Process” that is at the people’s disposal (Patterson 2016: 96).

is a new milieu that designates him and the like as the residents of “here,” thus a spot on the world map with no politicized strings attached.

To be optimistic is not equivalent to being blindfolded. Already in the same year, paraphrasing some of the platitudes expressed by some local “ambassadors” of Northern Irishness, Patterson underlines that “a stable society” is rather far from realization. What sort of setback, then, do the Northern Irish suffer from? In his understanding the problem lies with “the [Peace] Process itself. The open-endedness coded into the word has long since ceased to be enabling and became destabilizing: ‘we,’ or ‘they’ ... are not finished yet” (8). Suffice to juxtapose the novelist’s estimation with McNicholl et al.’s research [mentioned earlier in the footnotes]. The latter, a few years later, confirm Patterson’s claim indicating that a considerable number of people are rather skeptical—to say the least—about the distinctly new Northern Irish identity. Such resistance works as an unrelenting aftermath of the Troubles divide. Muldoon et al., a decade after the Agreement, and five years ahead of Patterson, wrote about some of the locals in terms of their determination to “categorize themselves into one of the two main ... groups” (92). Bluntly put, for many the sectarian agenda is not an issue, and they have seen little reason to forsake the “tradition” of positioning oneself counter to the *other* [alien/inimical] identification. The above-mentioned study, in its conclusive argument refers to a specific post-Agreement “climate” (99), which [un]surprisingly petrifies the intercommunal impasse. Its essence, according to Muldoon et al., adds up to another reproduction of former divisions.¹⁶ Hence, there can be no mention of a qualitative change in the perception of Northern Irishness.

When on the air, he sounded relatively positive about the transformation, yet before that radio broadcast as well as afterwards though one can find moments of despondency in his other published narratives. It is not necessarily the case that Patterson is disheartened, but he understands the level of difficulty in overcoming the Province’s formative deficiencies. One of the most striking conclusions was included in a text from 2011. It was the murder of Constable Kerr that triggered Patterson to write about the Peace as a process which continuously causes turbulence. According to the author, it is so since the IRA or UVF should not be regarded as “armies, but as a tradition, ... a thing we do here, some of us do, when the political going gets tough or just not to our liking” (Patterson 2016: 171). He called it “tradition,” yet of equal resonance could be a different term to use here, namely the “collective mindset.” Especially the

16 To be precise, Muldoon et al. noted that from a collective angle, “identification in Northern Ireland [was] likely to continue to be a source of ... dissent” (99).

latter terminology is pertinent in the above context. It denotes superimposing one deception upon another to “safeguard” people against internalizations of certain disturbing truths, and in turn to block molding a more nuanced version of Northern Irishness. Patterson called such denials a policy of “sanitation.” Referring to his compatriots’ approach towards the troubled past, he underlined their eagerness to resort to off-the-cuff clichés. For instance, in an attempt to shed light upon “events in ... recent times,” some ready-made excuses were provided like:

they occurred in particular circumstances, circumstances which our Peace Process will help us all to understand and, if not forgive one another for, at least accept at face value. The implication is that the participants in the conflict were not so much acting as being forced to act—“history made us do it.” (172)

Whether a new scenario for the people of Northern Ireland is a fact or not, it becomes evident that anyone interested in endorsing a balanced/neutral identity must be ready to renounce the muddy ruts of sectarian categorizations. Patterson, for that matter, would definitely agree with Anna Burns,¹⁷ awarded with the Booker Prize for a novel wherein any fundamental change begins from one’s emphasis on non-divisive language.

As stated elsewhere, it is unlikely to create one all-embracing master-narrative which, by being a subtler version of hitherto discourse, opens up a new chapter in the [re]formation of Northern Irishness. Hopkins, speaking of the post-conflict intercommunication, noted that certain “representatives” of the formerly antagonized communities, while trying to narrate post-Troubles agendas, [in]advertently produced texts which resulted in “reinforcing the conflict” (192). Their language, in a nutshell, was targeted at “self-justification” rather than on a reevaluation of the site all of “us” come from. In outlining the language that would serve the purpose of societal (re)formation, Patterson invokes some memorable quotes from an interview with David Grossman. The latter’s (an Israeli writer) perspective is a sample of the unbiased, given the following statement: “I feel that the correct and accurate use of words acts like a medicine. It purifies the air I breathe, removes the pollutants, and frustrates the schemes of the language defrauders” (144). Two years later, that is in 2014, Patterson returns to the question of language. In the same vein, by reference to the claim made by yet another distinguished figure, namely Gerry Anderson, he

17 See also Anna Burns (2018).

elaborated on the possible repercussions of its toxicity. Lest anyone think that a non-dialogic format can constitute new foundations of the Northern Irish identity, he decided to dispel the illusion: “[i]f the language is wrong, everything is wrong” (48). Someone practicing such wrongness must be aware that his/her words of sheer politicization risk leading a given audience/community astray. An illustrative example has been included in the same text, wherein Patterson invokes the Community Relations Act. In his view, former intergroup hostilities unceasingly make people construe “community [as] a word of aggression.” With this regard, according to the novelist, “communities is a word that, rather than multiplying, as most plurals do, actually divides” (50).

The above indicates that the consolidation of the myriad Northern Irish communities under the auspices of a willingly constructed and reformed regional identity is, while not imaginable, at least for the time being a doubtful eventuality. That is even more true if Hopkins’ assertion regarding “a relative calm” in the successive decades after the Good Friday Agreement be considered, which he considers to have veiled “the legacy of the conflict blight[ing] many lives in the present-day Northern Ireland” (189). Deeply aware of such obstacles, Patterson continuously ponders over replacing the “partitioned identities.” Nevertheless, when drawing an analogy to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, he finds the Northern Irish task far more difficult, for the simple reason that “Berliners did not ask to put up that wall in the first place” (2016: 12). In Belfast, for that matter, a symbolic city designating how divided the society is, “when all physical trace is gone, walls persist” (23). According to Declan Hill and Patterson, those barriers relentlessly resonate within individual minds, including theirs respectively.

Is Patterson right, under these circumstances, to persuade his readers that it is essential to muster the strength in order to push an alternative formative agenda forward? It seems that his is entangled in dichotomous thinking. Patterson resembles those interviewees that Muldoon et al. questioned. On the one hand, they were ready to recognize an affiliation with one of the two sectarian identities, but on the other, as maintained by the academics, the same people were inclined to discuss the subject matter “in an open and reflexive manner” (Muldoon et al. 94). To put it differently, inasmuch as one originates from a specific cultural and political setting, Patterson’s thinking holds that any future cultivation of the insular Northern Irish identity can be by no means endorsable. Consequently, the remainder of *Here’s Me Here* (writings from 2014 to 2015) is again imbued with cautious optimism. Speaking of his hopes for a consensual society, he paraphrased an Israeli anecdote to readjust it to local restrictions. The idea behind it, in its original version, concerned Palestinian and Israeli ban-

ners that waved in unison on the neighboring streets, a phenomenon described by one of the vernacular novelists with the following abbreviation: PTAMP.¹⁸ Accordingly, the people of Northern Ireland, who have been living as neighbors, yet separately, in a “relative peace,” are asked “at least” to understand that “we are beginning to piss through each other’s penises. Who knows, given time, we might even learn to love them as our own” (Patterson 2016: 176). True, the region continues to live in the well-framed religious/cultural/political bubbles; nonetheless, Patterson does not cease to explore the possibility of ascending to a new dimension of Northern Irishness. With the mind of future directions, in the closing remarks of the volume, he invokes certain passages from a song by *Crocodiles*: “One of these days the sun will burn out / And the rain will come to stay / And me and my love will surf the streets all day.” In Patterson’s understanding, this sounds exactly as “a long-range weather forecast for ... how to live here. Some weeks [that life] is barely sufferable, [but] some weeks it’s surfable. Look at me, ... I’m surfing, I’m surfing!” (2016: 199–200). As underlined earlier, the walls of the unbearable Northern Irish identities do persist, yet this cannot be tantamount to giving up on the project of their reconstruction.

In conclusion, pursuant to what has been said, Patterson presents his personal understanding of the condition *sine qua non* for forging a romance with the “new” Northern Irish “hereness.” Such a new framework of collective identification requires a set of individual scenarios of “the great reimagining.” As indicated by Rafael Schacter (194), in whole it carries on with the “narrative[s] of reconciliation [and] peace,” but in part it tends to depict the post-conflict space in terms of normalcy. Patterson, as an individual/citizen/writer has taken up the task of revisioning of what it denotes to be a Northern Irish man, and how much it takes to bid farewell to the deep ruts of predominantly sectarian reasoning. As a citizen and a writer, he is a believer and a skeptic at the same time. The best illustration of this dichotomy one finds in one of his most recent texts titled *Backstop Land*. For the clarity of argumentation, I would like to quote Patterson (2019: 29) at length:

I voted Yes to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, along with 676,965 of my fellow Northern Irish citizens, Remain [the Brexit referendum] in 2016, along with 789,878 of them. If presented with the same two

18 Its extension is hilarious, unobvious, and yet very telling. According to Patterson, what the author tried to say about a new stage of the Israeli-Palestinian coexistence could be encapsulated in five simple words, namely they should start “pissing through another man’s penis” (2016: 175).

choices again, I would vote the same way but I would reserve, even so, the right to complain when things look fucked up.

Speaking of which, the new identity project seems in progress, but the legacy of the past and mediocrity of the present politics, Patterson alarms, cease not to be the greatest hinderance to genuine recalibrations of Northern Irish individual, and in consequence collective mindsets. It comes as no surprise, given that strong ideological commitments, especially in conflict-prone regions, account for the deadweight that often proves its potential to hold down anyone who believes that only shrewd policy-making can set people on a path out of the stalemate. One of “the victims” of such political tribalism, mentioned by Patterson in *Backstop Land*, is a friend of his from the South. With high hopes to participate in a potential alternative to the political status quo, in order to step outside the box of familiar sectarian affiliations with “the Irish Taoiseach,” she decided to move to Belfast, in the late 1990s. In the North, pursuing a life as “refined out of politicized existence,” with a new Northern Irish identity looming on the horizon, she ended up disillusioned, seeing the old flames being fanned because of the referendum and the bruising campaign of 2017:

she looked back with regret to that snap election, not because it set the tone for Brexit but because it was so damaging for Northern Ireland, hardening the attitudes of people here—“it destroyed the first chance we had had to break out of the Orange and Green mindset. (Patterson 2019: 25)

Much of what passes for the post-plebiscite backsliding is also reflected in one BBC report that points to the geography of voting as marked by “a re-partitioned Northern Ireland along [former political] lines” (74). In short, when it comes to understanding the current state of Northern Irishness, is it hope or skepticism that prevails in the author’s general estimation? Delving into Patterson’s literary output, one sees certain indications of inner conflict that obscure the point. On the one hand, as he underlines, there is the advantage of a new generation of unbiased people/citizens; on the other hand, the same young mindsets with “no memory of the Troubles can be exploited by adults who want to achieve their own ends” (104). The latter, unfortunately, continue to be driven by the sentiments of a “beleaguered” community. In order to see how little has changed over the years, suffice to invoke Shirlow’s and Murtagh’s concern from 2006, when they drew a rather disconcerting conclusion, namely that “Northern Ireland lacks a unified ‘lifeworld’” (48). A sort of condensed

recapitulation of the above argument has been formulated by the late Aodán Mac Póilin, who played the role of a custodian of Irish language, living and working in Northern Ireland. In *Backstop Land*, Patterson displays an edited transcript of Póilin’s distressing words, which reads as follows:

Northern Ireland’s peace process is an attempt to accommodate the irreconcilable. The odds are stacked against anyone operating under its terms actually doing anything. It does, however, [provide] ideal conditions for the politics of outrage, swagger and emblematic posturing. (Patterson 2019: 68)

In light of the above, Patterson can be regarded a tireless advocate of all the people, particularly of the aforementioned young generation, who resist contracting the (post-)Troubles virus. Lest he should play a naïve idealist, he is eager to take a swipe at the local socio-political domain, withing which a prominent position is still occupied by those who aim at cementing their hold on other fellow men, thus on power.

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| Abstrakt

RYSZARD BARTNIK

„Irlandia Północna – stąd pochodzę”: Glenn Patterson, powieściopisarz i obywatel w pogoni za „nieplemienną” tożsamością

Spółeczno-polityczne otoczenie Irlandii Północnej na przestrzeni ostatnich dekad „wymusiło” na swoich obywatelach opowiedzenie się po jednej ze stron antagonizującego konfliktu tożsamościowego. W roku 1998 zostało podpisane Porozumienie Wielkopiątkowe, którego celem było zakończenie konfliktu pomiędzy stroną katolicko-nacjonalistyczną a stroną protestancko-uniijsyczną. Ta ugoda służyła stworzeniu trwałych, kolektywnych ram dla zabezpieczenia wzajemnej koegzystencji, co ważniejsze jednak, stanowiła wsparcie dla idei regionalnej tożsamości (jej prze-modelowanego formatu), która miała być punktem odniesienia dla obu społeczności. O ile wyżej wzmiankowany społeczny konsensus został zinstytucjonalizowany, nawet jeśli tylko na podstawowym poziomie, o tyle pożegnanie się z politycznymi/religijnymi (wręcz sekciarskimi) afiliacjami okazało się dużo trudniejsze. Glenn Patterson sytuuje się pośród tych lokalnych pisarzy, którzy podejmują walkę z dziedzictwem uciążliwych formacji tożsamościowych. Stąd też głównym celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie przeszkód, z jakimi tacy autorzy jak Patterson muszą się mierzyć, gdy celem staje się wsparcie dla nowego północno-irlandzkiego rysu tożsamościowego. Czyniąc to, Patterson uznaje dekonstrukcję/odrzućenie głąboko zakorzenionych podziałów z epoki „the Troubles” (tłumaczone na język polski na dwa sposoby: ‘kłopoty’ oraz ‘niepokoje’) za warunek konieczny wszelkich pozytywnych/konstruktywnych zmian. Mając na uwadze tematyczne ramy tego wydania „Porównań”, którego celem jest współczesna refleksja nad kwestią Ziemi Odzyskanych, pozwalam sobie przedstawić Pattersona nie tylko jako autora, ale także obywatela, którego artystyczny wysiłek jest ukierunkowany na *odzyskanie terytorium* w celu (prze)budowy tożsamości Irlandii Północnej i zastąpienia ugruntowanych (katolicko-protestanckich/brytyjsko-irlandzkich) dychotomii. W oparciu o jego dwa zbiory eseów/relacji o charakterze niefikcyjnym, zatytułowanych *Lapsed Protestant* (2006) i *Here’s Me Here* (2016), w poniższej analizie uwaga zostaje skoncentrowana na nadziejach autora i przeszkodach, które uwypukla w swych tekstach w kontekście tematyki promującej bardziej neutralną/niespolityzowaną północno-irlandzką tożsamość. Być może opis dynamiki tych dylematów tożsamościowych pozwoli nam spojrzeć z innej, raczej niespodziewanej perspektywy również na kontekst polski.

Słowa kluczowe: Irlandia Północna po okresie „Niepokojów”; Glenn Patterson – pisma niefikcyjne; tożsamość zbiorowa; (nie)sekciarska mentalność

| Abstract

RYSZARD BARTNIK

“Northern Ireland—I Come from Here”: Glenn Patterson, a Novelist and Citizen in Pursuit of a “Non-Tribal” Identity

Northern Ireland’s socio-political milieu over recent decades “pressured” its residents to affiliate with one of the two strongly antagonizing identities. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed to terminate the conflict between the Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist side. The primary aim of that settlement was to establish a solid collective framework for securing mutual coexistence, but more importantly it endorsed the idea of a regional (reformed) identity to be shared by both communities. And inasmuch as the aforementioned societal consensus has been institutionalized, even if only on the very rudimentary level, then bidding farewell to political/religious (almost sectarian) sympathies has turned to be far more difficult. Glenn Patterson stands among those home-grown writers who have been struggling with the burden of such troublesome identity formations. Therefore, the paper’s main focus is to explore the setbacks Patterson and the like face when trying to acknowledge a distinctly new character of Northern Irishness. In doing so, he highlights that the *sine qua non* of any potential success consists in deconstructing/defying the deep-seated divisions of the Troubles. Mindful of the journal’s thematic frame of a timely consideration of the “Recovered Territories,” I intend to depict Patterson as an individual/author/citizen whose artistic endeavor has been constantly gravitating towards *reclaiming the ground* for [re]building the Northern Irish identity, and replacing the well-known (Catholic-Protestant/Irish-British) dichotomies. Drawing upon two collections of Patterson’s non-fiction accounts, *Lapsed Protestant* from 2006 and *Here’s Me Here* from 2016, my article concentrates upon both the hopes and obstacles manifested during the post-Troubles context of an attempted tropism towards a more neutral/non-politicized Northern Irish identification, in hopes that the similar dynamics may also shed light upon the Polish context.

Keywords: post-Troubles Northern Irishness, Glenn Patterson’s non-fiction writings, collective identity, (non-)sectarian mindsets

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