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Glenn Patterson on Northern Ireland's Commitment to (Declarative) Transformation

Abstract

Patterson's literary output includes both fiction and non-fiction that offers commentary on post-Troubles Northern Ireland. The main goal of this article is to investigate Patterson's works of literary journalism, along with one novel, to determine his current view on the region's socio-political transformation. Given the heterogeneous narratives and shifting viewpoints – most recently illustrated in his book Where Are We Now? – it is beneficial to perform a "detective" analysis of individual texts to understand the author's position on post-Troubles reality formulated more than two decades after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. For this purpose, I propose using Peter Brooks' method, known in legal sciences as the "huntsman's paradigm," which traces all previously existing tropes and clues to see how they fit into the author's overall narrative standpoint, culminating in his 2020–21 fiction and non-fiction texts.[1]

Keywords: post-Troubles Northern Ireland, literary journalism, huntsman's paradigm, peace walls, Glenn Patterson

Glenn Patterson's (non-)fiction output deserves attention for several reasons. Beyond the apparent artistic merits of his purely fictional work, it is worth considering his literary essays from the past two decades that "focus on everyday events, […] bring out the […] patterns of community life" (Sims 1995: 3), and more importantly, offer numerous commentaries on the situation in post-Troubles Northern

1 During the preparation of this article, I consulted ChatGPT-4.0 for editorial support, specifically for assistance with language refinement and clarity.

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Ireland.[2] Following Peter Rubie's idea of "self-awareness writing,"[3] which frames one equally as a reporter and "a participator in a story" (2018, loc. 119), Patterson is precisely one of those authors who observe and partake in Northern Ireland's socio-political transformation,[4] presenting his views in both fiction and non-fiction formats.[5] The question I am pondering is whether Patterson interprets the developments in Northern Ireland from 1998 as a resounding success, or whether his outlined perspective suggests these changes are somewhat illusory and merely declaratory. To address the aforementioned issue, I will apply the "huntsman's paradigm," as discussed by Peter Brooks in the article "Retrospective Prophesies: Legal Narrative Constructions." This approach will help determine the author's standpoint based on the "gathered evidence," construed as textual hints embedded in Patterson's writings. The analysis will begin with a reference to the latest novel, *Where Are We Now?*, to indicate that Patterson's stance, as reflected in the literary journalism he pursues, is not coincidental and culminates in his most recent work of fiction. This very book provokes a debate about why the author revisits issues and poses questions similar to those already posed in 2004, when his key literary narrative, *That Which Was*, exploring Northern Ireland's breakthrough, was published. Next, in line with the indicated paradigm, I will examine the "traces" Patterson leaves in several works of non-fiction, the earliest dating back to 1998. A sequential reading of these materials will enable us to discern his understanding of the transformative processes underway in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, before examining Patterson's literary output, it is essential to briefly elucidate the dynamics of change as identified by researchers from disciplines beyond literature. This interdisciplinary dialogue prevents the limitation that Thomas Foster describes as confinement to a single perspective (2020, loc. 89).[6] Such a tactic will aid in determining the extent to which Patterson's viewpoint aligns with a broader analysis of the socio-political phenomena unfolding in the region after the Good Friday Agreement.

As Foster claims, a literary journalist enriches their narrative with substantive minutiae; yet, it is important to note that "detail alone is not enough – we need context, background, explanation as well"

2 In a 2010 interview, Patterson discussed the extent to which his writing, both fiction and non-fiction, reflects the contemporary fate of Northern Ireland. None other than the legacy of the Troubles has shaped his perspective: "The unrest [...] has been a part of my life, and it's part of the story of that place. [...] It is unavoidable that the political backdrop is featured in the novels. In my non-fiction I am quite strongly political [as well]." Given this, he can be seen as a chronicler who understands and is capable of capturing the Northern Irish Zeitgeist. As he himself states, "[...] in the end, what I arrived at was sort of a middle thing. I had the [literary] journalism; I had the novels; then there's this other form [...] which is autobiographically informed writing, where they sort of function like short stories" (Patterson 2010).

3 Rubie uses the term in reference to the art of literary journalism, describing it as a "sophisticated" format, characterized above all by its ability to "tell the story in a compelling voice that the reader will want to hear" (2018, loc. 177).

4 The concept of Northern Irish transformation denotes the shift from a society plagued by violent paramilitary conflict to one striving for peaceful coexistence among its communities and their political representatives.

5 I have previously explored the issue of Northern Ireland and its representation in (non-)fiction texts in several of my publications. However, this paper specifically builds upon a single article: "'Northern Ireland – I Come from Here': Glenn Patterson, a Novelist and Citizen in Pursuit of a 'Non-Tribal' Identity" (Bartnik 2021). It continues the line of inquiry initiated there, now expanded and deepened by an analysis of Patterson's more recent writings, which collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of the author's dilemmas and ongoing engagement with the Northern Irish predicament.

6 Patterson presents his personal views on issues relating to Northern Ireland, but at the same time, he also adheres to the principles outlined by Mark Kramer, maintaining that his voice must be "candid" and that he must not "represent, defend, or speak on behalf of any institution, government, or ideology" (Kramer 1995: 29). Consequently, it is logical to examine the issues he explores from a wider perspective to mitigate any accusations of singular or biased understanding of the situation.

(2020, loc. 981). Accordingly, by examining the broader landscape and incorporating a range of critical voices, one gains insight into the province, its identity, the interplay between communities, and, finally, the language and narrative used to address "The Northern Ireland Question,"[7] which continues to capture public attention long after the Agreement. From this wide spectrum of perspectives, a prominent theme emerges – articulated in a single phrase by two different scholars – that captures the state of the region. John Brewer and John Barry discuss the concept of "negative peace" in their respective articles (2019: 278; 2019: 53), a term that conveys significant unease and implies that local residents are grappling with a unique and rather uncomfortable state of Northen Irish limbo. According to Brewer, such a conception of peace results in "[societal healing] […] [having] witnessed very little progress" (278). Barry, on the other hand, emphasizes in his conclusion that "the outworkings of our peace process" are limited and "associated [solely] with institutional arrangements" (53). In other words, while the institutional order has changed, the toll persists as underlying tensions continue to affect[8] both individuals and communities.

That said, we should be mindful of other, equally relevant implications, when framing the overarching concept of negative and frozen peace. Cillian McGrattan, for instance, writes that historical legacies in Northern Ireland, which impact the proclaimed peace, are closely intertwined with entrenched political discord. Consequently, it is unsurprising that "the very idea of truth recovery," central to the peace process, is contentious, as it both "reinvigorates" and simultaneously fossilizes "heated debates over the past" (2020: 232). For this reason, as Landon Hancock argues, the "relative" nature of "peace" must prompt questions about its effectiveness, as "conflicting narratives of enmity continue to characterize relations between the two communities" (2019: 245). In his view, the "political spectacle" not only fails to promise reconciliation but also conceals underlying antagonisms. Neil Jarman also draws attention to this phenomenon, citing "the flag protests"[9] as an example of actions driven by "sectarian tensions," which indeed undermine the prevailing rhetoric of appeasement (2019: 113). Gladys Ganiel further explores another facet of this issue, discussing "how the violence and militancy of the past are perpetuated through various means such as discourses, images, rituals, and even institutional settings like schools and churches" (2019: 134, 139). A particularly critical perspective is provided by Declan Long who alerts "us to the irreducible dimension of antagonism so often erased within the consensual propagandizing of the 'peace' era" (2017: 153). Either way, whether we use the word negative or stagnant, the meaning of the term peace is quite disconcerting and indicates – unfortunately – layers of lingering resentment towards the communities on the other side of the barricade.

Considering the arguments outlined above, one might question whether a meaningful correlation exists between the concept of negative peace and Northern Ireland's ardent efforts to construct a new/reformed [post-Troubles] identity. Nearly twenty years after the 1998 peace accord, Máire Braniff and

7 This is the title of the multi-author monograph published in 2020, edited by Patrick Roche and Brian Barton, which further demonstrates that the Northern Irish question continues to provoke critical discussion about the condition of local communities.

8 Liam Kennedy and Brice Dickson, in their 2022 report on human rights in Northern Ireland, noted that sectarian violence has not disappeared from the streets as there were over "30 casualties of paramilitary-style assaults and shootings." Interestingly enough, as they highlight, "[f]or reasons that are not altogether clear, loyalists show preference for battering and mutilating victims, while republicans more usually use guns and bullets to inflict pain on those they presume to punish" (2022: 13).

9 As underlined by Jarman, such "protests were clearly […] symbols [that] have played an important role in […] sustaining sectarian tensions throughout the peace process, whether this be in relation to flags, murals, memorials, bonfires or in the naming of public sites" (2019: 111).

Sophie Whiting observe from a socio-political angle that "conflict-related issues retain currency, and people remain tribal, for instance, at the polling stations" (2017: 252). John Garry, Kevin McNicholl, and Clifford Stevenson, discussing contemporary Northern Ireland, highlight the dichotomous nature of local identity. On one hand, they refer to young people, defined as the "post-conflict generation," who, in their view, are ready for building a "cross-community identity." On the other hand, there remains at least a degree of skepticism among the "majority of residents" towards a more inclusive Northern Irish identity that might overcome centrifugal tendencies in a "deeply divided society" (2019: 488, 502). In this context, Owen Fenton wonders to what extent – and in what constellations – the concept of a collective identity can be invoked as a neutral "identifier" across the social spectrum in Northern Ireland (2018: 235). Stephen Hopkins, meanwhile, identifies narrative dynamics that undermine confidence in the establishment of an all-encompassing Northern Irish rebranding. This primarily concerns the persistence of a "battlefield" mentality within both communities, where each "appears locked into exclusive and self-justifying discourses" (Hopkins 2013: 190). Patterson is, in essence, no different from the researchers mentioned above. Like them, his primary focus is the region, its people and their collective mindset. Even so, despite his scholarly inclination, Patterson is also a novelist and literary journalist, thoroughly "immersing himself [...] in background research" and "hanging out with his sources for months and even years" (Kramer 1995: 22) to establish the framework for addressing his *personal* concerns over Northern Irishness.

Having established the contours of the post-Troubles context and drawing on Foster's guideline, we are now positioned to examine Patterson's narratives in greater depth. It is precisely these specifics and subtle clues within the writer's (non-)fiction texts that play a crucial role in revealing his nuanced understanding, skepticism, and perhaps even disillusionment regarding the transformation of post-Troubles Northern Ireland. As stated earlier, the author's meandering thoughts can be examined, as I argue, through the lens of the "huntsman's paradigm," which inherently requires studying earlier 'traces/evidence' that support the presumption of continuity in Patterson's viewpoint on Northern Ireland. This approach, as outlined by Brooks, is both compelling and fully justified, echoing Mark Singer's[10] assumption that in literary journalism authors initiate a sequence of statements without knowing "where the story is going to go" or even "what you're going to say"[11] (quoted in Sims 1995: 8). Upon post-factum reflection and the application of the Brooks' paradigm, we determine how the selected details coalesce into a coherent whole, shedding light on the enduring questions and dilemmas that resonate in Patterson's latest novel.

What is particularly striking in Brooks's discussion of the paradigm is his parallel between the legal and literary domains. He does so, in part, despite Martin J. Stone's assertion that the juxtaposition of legal and literary texts can be baffling. According to Stone, the two serve different "functionalit[ies]," as only the interpretation of legal texts determines what a given account "means", how it should be used, how it weighs in or what it "requires" in a legal case, "in some particular circumstance" (2018: 73). Brooks, however, identifies a common platform shared by both types of textuality. As he underscores "the law understands discovery and recites meanings derived from evidence"; nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that the manner of storytelling plays a role in this process. As Brooks further points out, "the narratives presented in law as well as in literature are not events in the world themselves, but rather the

10 Mark Singer, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

11 As Patterson stated in the aforementioned 2010 interview, when he reflects on his writing, he concludes that "[i]t's all about giving shape to the material", but ultimately, it is about "finding new ways to ask questions" (Patterson 2010).

way we recount events, the way we give them significant order" (2018: 92). In simpler terms, to formulate a hypothesis about what occurred – in this case, what claim our writer made – it is imperative to organize numerous details into a coherent line of thought: "the law [...] when dealing with issues of evidence, must make use of the huntsman's paradigm, seeking to demonstrate how [...] tracking down clues will lead to the understanding of what transpired"[12] (96). Reasoning through textual analysis follows this same principle. The ultimate meaning of a narrative tapestry becomes discernible when we can draw conclusions about the broader whole from a sequence of "seemingly insignificant details" (97). In this sense, both legal and literary texts share a similar functionality.[13] Patterson's writings, rich with clues often separated by years, demonstrate the potential to translate literary (non-)fiction into the narrative that materializes in his most recent novel, thereby illuminating the convolutions of Northern Ireland.

As mentioned above, Fish reaffirms the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing that the perspectives offered by different disciplines complement one another. If the goal were to monopolize or unambiguously communicate research outcomes – if, for instance, the "interdisciplinary map were wholly adequate to every detail in the universe" or "were not partial," then it would "proceed from [...] everywhere and therefore from nowhere" (1995: 81). This type of 'multidimensional unambiguity' would align with the concept of ideal objectivity, which Fish clearly did not advocate and considered unattainable. Therefore, since the perspective of dialogical interdisciplinarity is crucial and objectivity is by definition nearly impossible, any attempt to examine a body of texts written over decades – especially to identify a specific thematic thread – should employ tools from disciplines outside of cultural and literary studies to support more objective conclusions. In considering a framework for such an approach, it is useful to reference Beata Przymuszała's analysis, which aims to delineate the boundary between interpretation and overinterpretation. While she accepts Fish's view that interpretation can transcend the strict confines of a single discipline, she also acknowledges certain limits to textual significations. As Przymuszała observes, a skilled "lawyer who has mastered the practice of proving can do with [legal narratives] what suits him"

12 The question to consider is what series of events and underlying rationale led Patterson, more than twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, to write yet another book – published in 2020 – in which peaceful coexistence is portrayed more as an imaginary construct than a lived reality.

13 The above issue can be viewed from a broader perspective by referring to the arguments of Stanley Fish, who countered the claim that it is difficult to find common ground or functional overlap between legal and literary texts. While reflecting on the concept of interdisciplinarity, Fish emphasized that he did not subscribe to the view of "one large and unified field of knowledge" (1995: 73). At the same time, he argued that specific research fields and disciplines are relationally connected. In this sense, for example, "the legal culture" and "the literary culture" (72) can be seen as interconnected. If we regard these disciplines as distinctly separate, we might assume that each possesses "the special vocabulary of a mere discipline", which would preclude any direct application of one to the other. However, from Fish's perspective, such reasoning is questionable. As he points out, "neither the form nor the content of a discipline are self-generated, but become perspicuous by virtue of relationships with other disciplines that are themselves relationally, not essentially, constituted" (75). One particularly relevant insight for the analysis undertaken in this article is Fish's demonstration of the narrative nature of legal inquiry and the argumentation it entails: "[...] when a client comes to a lawyer he tells a story that in his mind has obvious crucial features and decisive moments; but that when the lawyer hears the story, she hears it quite differently and with different emphases [...]." Ultimately, it is the lawyer who organizes the individual elements of the client's narrative in order to "determine whether or not the client has a legal cause of action" (71). Can Fish's conclusion be seen as consistent with Brooks's approach? In both cases, we observe an emphasis on the role of narrative, within which selected details are arranged – either by lawyers or scholars – to form a coherent and logical whole. As Simon Sterne notes, "narrative logic is an essential and commonplace feature in law" (2018: 314); the same holds true in literary interpretation.

(2005: 137). However, when the goal is to draw conclusions with the highest degree of objectivity, it becomes difficult to accept interpretations that veer into dubious overinterpretation (as construed by Umberto Eco). Przymuszała invokes Michał Zieliński's conclusions, noting that purely language-based interpretation (particularly in legal contexts) is increasingly insufficient. Instead, a broader, systemic interpretation is often required. In Patterson's context, the aim is to identify a correspondence between the verbal imagery in his literary fiction and the author's worldview, as inferred from specific "particulars" in his non-fiction texts. To avoid overinterpretation, it is worthwhile to apply methods from the legal domain (*e.g.*, the huntsman's paradigm) that support the construction and justification of inferences drawn from the analysis of both fiction and non-fiction. Hence, the relevance of the Brooks' model.[14]

What perspective on Northern Ireland then can we gather from the details found in Glenn Patterson's works? To address this question and present my conclusions, I will begin – with reference to the framework described earlier – from the novel published in 2020, *Where Are We Now?*, and then proceed to look into the "particulars" from earlier texts, as well as one released a year later.[15] When juxtaposed, these works create "a meaningful sequence" (Brooks 2018: 96). As said before, the opening point in this sequence would be *Where Are We Now?*, a novel that marks another manifestation of Patterson's fictional voice on Northern Ireland, albeit with a less direct exploration of the legacy of the Troubles.[16] Throughout the text, we encounter "seemingly trivial details" that can be interpreted as the author's commentary on the state of post-conflict society. The central character, Herbie, grapples with personal family issues, finding himself alone after his wife leaves him and his daughter begins a new chapter of her life in London. Through moments of introspection, Herbie reflects on past events and experiences, while also offering pointed, often bitter remarks on the region's current-day socio-political climate.

On one hand, we observe a Northern Irish individual who embraces personal responsibility and resists historical amnesia, haunted by the memory of three Scottish soldiers killed in the sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Herbie, like many young people during the Troubles, would succumb to the "virus" of sectarianism, which ultimately led him to align with a sectarian faction (Patterson 2020: 188).[17] As Brewer stresses (2019: 284), countering tribal identification – by default – necessitates that

14 The use of additional interpretative tools appears justified when considering Frans Willem Korsten's observations about the interpenetration of law and literature. According to him, "[i]n the interdisciplinary field of law and literature, the two are mostly put into a relation of a sort of family." Their interaction rests on the assumption that literary narratives are "superior in [their] capacity to make things imaginable, palpable, tangible [...], or in [their] potential to promote empathy or ethical behavior." At the same time, one can also speak of their "inferior[ity]" due to their "incapacity to follow the strict rules of reasoning and argumentation" (2022: 17). In this context, Brooks' paradigm, which centers on constructing arguments grounded in analyses that uncover logical narrative connections between individual images (traces within texts), and whose overall message aligns with and resonates in a specific socio-political context, proves to be an interpretative tool of considerable value.

15 *The Last Irish Question*, published in 2021, further reinforces the conclusions drawn from Patterson's earlier works published up to 2020.

16 In addressing the author's indirect reference to post-Troubles reality, I juxtapose his 2020 novel with *That Which Was*, published in 2004, in fact an earlier attempt to come to terms with the past and to pave the way for a new chapter in Northern Ireland's history.

17 The character of Herbie seems to resonate with Patterson himself in an intriguing manner. According to Sims (1995: 9), authors who delve into literary journalism often employ "symbolic representation" to focus their "personal involvement" like a lens. Herbie functions as such a symbolic figure, viewing the current socio-political order in Northern Ireland through the eyes of a disillusioned observer – an outlook that closely parallels Patterson's own, as demonstrated throughout this article.

each individual "step[s] away from the narrow confines" of politicized thinking. Accepting personal responsibility, as the protagonist does, thus emerges as a fundamental prerequisite; should it be lacking, the dismantling of the "walls of partition" becomes nearly impossible. On the other hand, Patterson ponders how the ghosts of the past are addressed on a broader societal scale – an inquiry that surfaces most clearly in at least two distinct passages of the novel. Firstly, in a dialogue between the protagonist's daughter and her friends, they discuss the portrayal of "masked gunmen" depicted on murals, namely former paramilitary figures who now roam the streets of Belfast in an entirely different guise: "the masks have started to come off! They're all walking around in their civvies and smiling, like, what were you so afraid of, it was only us?" (Patterson 2020: 219). Skepticism seems to linger between the lines, casting doubt on the authenticity of Northern Ireland's transformation and suggesting that it is neither miraculous nor complete. The purely declarative nature of these changes becomes particularly evident in one of the novel's final passages, where Patterson recounts an event held to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. As it is stated: "One of the churchmen read out a statement saying that no one had an eraser for the past, before he addressed the future, by way of the present moment, calling for an end [...] to all forms of criminal activity by members of the organizations the men at the table represented." Extrapolating from the above, one could argue that the assembled seek nothing less than a *declarative* affirmation of post-conflict transformation. In the following paragraph, the protagonist offers his most crucial commentary – indeed, a standpoint vital for the entire article. As Herbie states, he "had lost count of the number of times paramilitary representatives or the clergymen who flanked them had come out with statements like that [...]. Too many for him [...] to set any great store by this latest iteration" (2020: 239). Birte Heidemann might define this phase as "liminal," or more precisely, as "negative in-betweenness" (2016: 46–47). Similarly, Patterson foregrounds a comparable sense of prolonged stasis, with the main character firmly convinced that profound change, such as holding "those in power [...] accountable for their actions" (Rubie 2018, loc. 887), remains distant and elusive. This pessimistic conclusion reflects the author's distinctive "fingerprint" or "signature," allowing us to discern the unique features of his outlook (Brooks 2018: 96). In other words, while analyzing the book, we encounter a manifestation of the writer's socio-political imagination or, to paraphrase Brooks, *the outcome of his actions*. However, to fully understand why, and in what vein, Patterson revisited the Troubles and their aftermath in his latest work of fiction, we must reconstruct his overarching narrative from the "tracks and traces" he has left elsewhere, that is in his literary journalism.

Given the huntsman's paradigm of "detective" work, my objective is to illustrate that the author's extended journey is winding and characterized by both hope and disillusionment. The so-called "trivial details" embedded in his subsequent texts indicate that Patterson's initial optimism has gradually given way to disappointment and distrust. In examining the specific chronology of Patterson's reflections spanning two decades, I intend to draw on Brooks' notion of "retrospective prophecies" (2018: 98). As Brooks argues, the ultimate outcome of a given narrative is pivotal in determining and retroactively reconstructing events that, when pieced together, coalesce into a coherent story. In the case of Patterson's novel, to recall it once again, this final outcome hinges on his conviction that the socio-political transformation was verbally communicated; yet, at its core, these changes remain merely declarative with respect to the purported evolution of Northern Ireland. To illustrate how his stance has unfolded over time, this analysis will begin in 1998 and conclude more than two decades later.

In *Lapsed Protestant*, a collection of essays written between 1998 and 2005, Patterson rides the wave of optimism following the Good Friday Agreement, stating that "[i]f we were all to look out for each other's rights we might at last begin to get somewhere" (2006: 22). Five years later, his belief in the possibility and necessity of change is still discernible. Referring to his novel *That Which Was*, Patterson writes that he "suspects the majority of Northern Irish people were as quietly hopeful as I was that yesterday's announcements would be genuinely historic". However, in the same text, a note of bitterness surfaces as he adds, "[t]hat which was [...] still has questions to ask of that which is to be. Sadly, it seems, yet again too many" (2006: 91–92). In another essay, published a year later, a sense of unease blends with irritation as Patterson describes the impact of barriers/walls erected to maintain peace: "while the peace lines are undeniably popular with those living within a stone'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'" (2006: 65). Throughout the collection, his bleak outlook on socio-political change intensifies, suggesting that, much like the fragmented Belfast community, the entire population of Northern Ireland remains divided.

Another collection of texts, *Here's Me Here*, published in 2015, comprises essays written between 2006 and 2015. In contrast to the earlier pieces in *Lapsed Protestant*, this volume is dominated by skepticism, although references to the official optimism expressed by politicians are not entirely absent. Responding to political declarations that "[o]ur journey is irreversible [and] we are determined to go on," Patterson critiques the lack of a "sense of [...] agency" in such statements. He further highlights a structural flaw "with the Process itself," arguing that "the open-endedness coded into the word has long since ceased to be enabling and has become destabilizing: "we," or "they" (depending on one's politics) [...] are not finished yet" (2015: 7–8). In a 2014 essay, Patterson, along with Declan Hill, posits that "even when all physical traces are gone, walls persist" (23). That same year, he questions the viability of peaceful coexistence between the two principal communities, prompting a critical reflection on the loaded term "C-word". From his perspective, in the context of Northern Ireland, "community is a word of aggregation, communities is a word that, rather than multiplying, as most plurals do, actually divides" (50). Notably, Patterson, much like Anna Burns,[18] appears to view the rigidity of the local idiom as a crucial factor in perpetuating divisions. Rather than engaging in reconciliation through dialogical formulas grounded in the principle of "no hierarchy of victims," he argues that "the language of truth recovery [...] has been compromised. Repetition has emptied much of it of meaning. Sentences sound more like stratagems than sincere statements" (193). In his later writings, Patterson exhibits both hesitation and a flicker of hope, indicating that not everything is mired in stagnation. Reflecting on the issue of "civil rights" in Northern Ireland in 2015, he offers a sardonic and deliberately provocative remark: "the thought occurs, though, that at least we are beginning to piss through each other's penises. Who knows, given time, we might even learn to love them as our own" (176). Nonetheless, this moment of guarded optimism, coupled with Patterson's mocking tone, does little to eclipse the underlying conviction that Northern Ireland continues to face substantial challenges.

When examining his writings from 2019 and 2021, it becomes clear – especially in hindsight – that more than the two decades after the landmark peace settlement, Patterson expresses a sense of

18 Anna Burns, as I argued in my article from 2021, is among those authors who view "Northern Ireland's language as endorsing ideological agendas and fostering intentional amnesia that comes to the fore as a predominant side-effect of a wrongly construed politics of memory" (Bartnik 2021: 75).

disillusionment regarding the success of peaceful transformation. In recounting a conversation with an acquaintance, he cites her assertion that, following the snap election, neither community has succeeded in "break[ing] out of that Orange and Green mindset" (Patterson 2019: 25). Given this context, efforts to transcend entrenched divisions are hindered by a fossilized past, raising concerns about "young people who have no memory of the Troubles, [and may] be exploited by adults who want to achieve their own ends" (104). Symbolically, the persistence of so-called "peace walls" reflects not bridges being built, but the endurance of divisions. As Patterson notes, these structures "are the exact opposite: the further you get from them, the easier it is to think they could easily disappear" (129). He encapsulates this psychological burden with the German term *Mauerkrankheit*, or "wall sickness" (139), which functions as a metaphor for the ongoing malaise beneath the surface of apparent stability. This bleak image stands in stark contrast with the global desire to see the Northern Irish conflict as resolved. Suffice it to say, politicians often cling to overly simplified and reductive narratives outlining the conflict, its resolution, and eventual reconciliation. However, if we were to consider this portrayal as a "diagnosis", it would be a superficial and misleading one, ignoring the continued prevalence of non-dialogical mindsets that still shape, if not dominate, the region's social fabric. To illustrate this disconnect, Patterson invokes the words of Nancy Pelosi, who, echoing standard diplomatic rhetoric, declared a success story: "The Good Friday Agreement serves as the bedrock of peace in Northern Ireland and as a beacon of hope for the entire world. After centuries of conflict and bloodshed, the world has witnessed a miracle of reconciliation and progress [...]." It is widely acknowledged that viewing the world through rose-colored glasses often leads us astray, which is precisely why Patterson offers a sobering reminder: "[t]he Good Friday Agreement wasn't a 'miracle'. The kit for a miracle, maybe, the problem being that everyone was handed a different manual for how to put it together" (2019: 149). In other words, while the tools for reconciliation may have been distributed, they remain largely unused in the absence of a shared understanding. Within the framework of *Mauerkrankheit*, the continuing presence of these walls, both literal and metaphorical, serves as a powerful counterpoint that underscores the region's unresolved tensions.

With no clear path out of the stalemate, it seems legitimate to ascertain that Northern Ireland continues to grapple with enduring challenges, making it difficult to foresee when a full recovery will be achieved. To further complicate matters, in Patterson's latest non-fiction work, *The Last Irish Question*, he ventures into the region to explore the prospects for a potential unification of the island. Essentially, this undertaking asks whether any profound shift has occurred in the mentality of Northern Ireland's inhabitants. Such a meaningful transformation would signify a move beyond mere co-existence, which may still imply living along entrenched lines of division, toward a deeper sense of communal integrity and, perhaps, reconciliation. While it is clear that Patterson advocates for this kind of reorientation, his outlook remains marked by disbelief and caution. When writing about the possibility of alteration, he observes that "if and when it comes will not be as sudden as a wall coming down. In fact, in areas where walls are a feature of everyday life here in the North, in Belfast in particular, there may well be a demand from those who live closest to them not to touch a single brick [...]." Furthermore, in a more somber tone, he warns of "the chances [...] that some of the old enmities will retain the capacity to sow discord and [...] flare up into violence" (Patterson 2023: 213–14). Importantly, Patterson's conclusions are not based solely on anecdotal insight or intuition. He cites a rather alarming official document from the Independent Reporting Commission, established "to monitor what progress is being made towards ending paramilitary activity." The report's findings are far from encouraging "for Northern Ireland as a whole," as the above-

mentioned progress is minimal, and "the continued existence of paramilitarism [...] constitutes a clear and present danger on an ongoing basis" (2023: 259). Finally, at the end of his book, Patterson draws on the perspective of Lilian Seenoi-Barr, who contends that the Good Friday Agreement did not necessarily "bring peace," but rather "stopped violence on the streets" (2023: 277). If peace is to be discussed at all, Patterson implies, it can be framed within its "negative" form, characterized more by the absence of violence than by the presence of reconciliation.

The very phrase *negative peace* signals a cognitive dissonance, suggesting agreement on the one hand, and negation on the other. At the same time, it is a phrase so general that it invites divergent interpretations. For a clearer understanding, it is prudent to turn to scholarly research, which almost unequivocally demonstrates that the peace established more than two decades ago does not mark the end of the divisions that underpinned the Troubles. As Colin Coulter, Niall Gilmartin, Katy Hayward, and Peter Shirlow write in their book, the "polarization" of Northern Ireland's society is still strong and anxieties over potential violence persist. They acknowledge that the peace is not "perfect," and the realities they describe or the language they employ reveal developments that actively contradict and undermine the very notion of peace. They refer to a society where "flags celebrating paramilitary organizations to fly from lampposts in front of shops and playgrounds" are permitted; where "mothers [are awaited] to bring their sons to be crippled by the shots of masked vigilante gunmen to their teenage knees and elbows." Most symbolically, they describe the physical and psychological presence of walls, thus structures ostensibly meant to protect, but in fact, serving to entrench divisions. This is a world that "accommodates the high walls topped by barbed wire that serve to shield neighbor from neighbor in the capital city of the new Northern Ireland" (Coulter *et al.* 2022: 291).

In conclusion, Walt Harrington writes that the work of a literary journalist succeeds as long as the story of one's own life is "honest, enlighten[ing], and caution[ary]" (2015, loc. 560). Each of these characteristics and qualities applies to Glenn Patterson, whose commitment to truth and intellectual engagement marks him as a trustworthy and conscientious Northern Irish author. Yet this integrity only partially translates into tangible influence on Northern Ireland's divided communities. While Patterson's voice holds a rightful place in the region's public discourse, the impact of his reflections appears limited in a context still shaped by entrenched divisions. What, then, is the nature of his voice, of his perspective? What message is he attempting to convey to his compatriots, neighbors, and fellow citizens? And what larger pattern emerges from the puzzle we have sought to piece together through the lens of the "huntsman's paradigm"? Based on the sequence of details and particulars, it can be asserted that Patterson, more than twenty years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, presents himself as a skeptic. He suggests that the progress often celebrated as transformative remains largely superficial. When applying the paradigm, this view appears justified and well-founded. First, we examined his latest novel, in which Patterson offers a somber reflection on the persistence of deep-rooted divisions despite years of primarily political transformation. Furthermore, he warns that empty, bipartisan declarations of progress may obscure, and even reinforce, longstanding hostilities by masking underlying animosities, thereby solidifying past divisions. Through Brooks' framework, we gathered narrative "evidence" from earlier essays, tracing how Patterson's skepticism evolved across two decades of literary and journalistic writing. These traces, culminating in his most recent non-fiction work, collectively point toward a recurring and unresolved question whether the project of a "New Northern Ireland" can truly succeed if

its foundational divisions remain unaddressed. In Patterson's body of work, the answer seems to emerge with layered clarity and growing doubt.

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