"A landscape of the heart": Emotional geography in William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw* novels

Ioana Gabriela NAN
Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
ioana.nan@econ.ubbcluj.ro

Abstract

The article concerns itself with the mutual emotional effects involved in creating space and being created by it, in a genre where setting, although relevant, is not often thus emphasised. Taking as its case study William McIlvanney's detective trilogy, it aims to demonstrate not only the defining role the cityscape plays in detective novels in general and in the author's Tartan Noir novels in particular, but also the fact that choosing to construct the series around the topography of Scotland and Glasgow betrays deeper meanings attached to the idea of place as familiar space, the home to which one belongs, with all the feelings, sometimes contradictory, attached to it. First, the detective genre is placed against a wider literary background, with a focus on different critical attitudes to it and on its evolution from marginal to mainstream genre. Then it moves on to analyse the flavour of locality pervading the Scottish detective fiction, of which McIlvanney is a salient reference figure, aiming to connect his trilogy to his wider oeuvre but also to point out the literary influences on his style of detective fiction, particularly regarding the role of space in the economy of the novel. That is how it discovers that, in McIlvanney's case, detective fiction may be little more than an elaborate pretext for social, political and cultural comments on Scotland and Glasgow, a viewpoint it connects with and considers in the context of the spatial turn in the humanities, specifically the perspective that recognises the relationship between space and emotion.

Keywords: *the metaphysical detective story, Tartan Noir, the spatial turn, emotional geography, socio-political realism.*

Introduction: the metaphysics of detection

Along with romance and sci-fi novels, the detective novel is one of the literary genres that started out catering for the "popular" taste. Its beginnings are rooted in the historical context of the massification of cities at the height of the

industrial revolution in mid-nineteenth century, the genre itself intimately woven into the fabric of city culture, born "amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city" (Poe, 1900, p. 6). On the other hand, considering the persistent dichotomy between high and low cultural artefacts, particularly in literature, its initial appeal to the urban working class may have deferred it as the subject of serious critical analysis, at least before the second half of the twentieth century, when structuralist critics rediscovered the rich perspectives allowed by the genre, either in its formal aspects (Todorov, Barthes, Eco, Kermode) or in its connection to broader cultural-theoretical and ideological questions (Foucault, Bourdieu, Lacan, F. R. Jameson, Stephen Knight). Whether supportive of the genre's ambitions or still viewing it as a literary annex, this group of scholarly commentators managed to place detective fiction firmly on the critical map of the twentieth century.

The structuralist approach to detective fiction saw, for example, Tzvetan Todorov employ it to illustrate the idea of literary genre. While his classification of detective fiction, based on structural elements of the plot, reveals a logical development – from the whodunnit to the thriller to the suspense novel – which helps define the major building blocks that make up the genre, Todorov's analysis does not attempt to elevate the detective genre from its status of popular literature, or insert it into a literary continuum, as much as to confirm this status by underlining its separation from genuine literature. According to Todorov, it is only in the "happy realm" of popular literature such as detective fiction that a well-written piece can be identified as the one most aligned to the features of the genre, rather than contradict these features in some way, as genuine literary masterpieces usually do: "Detective fiction has its norms; to «develop» them is also to disappoint them: to «improve upon» detective fiction is to write «literature», not detective fiction" (Todorov, 1988, p. 159). Too few to be included in a separate genre, the exceptions he admits to at the time (Patricia Highsmith's Ripley novels, Francis Iles' work) (Todorov, 1988, p. 165) would, however, later on help expand the psychological thriller subgenre and bring detective fiction closer to literature as he understood it at the time of these critical statements.

By contrast, Umberto Eco unhesitatingly includes the genre in the great narrative tradition "from primitive myths to the modern detective novel" (Eco, 1995, p. 8). Himself the author of a detective best-seller (*The Name of the Rose*, 1980), Eco frequently takes the genre as exemplary regarding narratology and textual semiotics questions such as the voice of the model author (when his chosen example is Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), the fictional pact between the author and his/her model reader (when he refers to Rex Stout's Nero

Wolfe novels), matters of translation (when he mentions the Italian versions of American detective novels) (Eco, 1995) or of narrative structure (when he discusses Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale*) (Eco, 1984). Most importantly, he talks about the metaphysical appeal of detective stories, whose fundamental question is identical to that posed by philosophy or religion, namely who is the author of it all - whodunnit? (Eco, 1995) or by psychoanalysis – who is guilty? (Eco, 2014), thus triggering a series of logical conjectures similar to those of scientific inquiry and ultimately ramifying into countless possible outcomes. What Eco implies is perhaps the fact that, as exemplified by his own detective novel, all detective fiction is labyrinthine. By extrapolation, the lesson it teaches the reader is that any type of fiction abounds in possible worlds, that "it is impossible for there to be *a* story" (Eco, 2014, p. 655).

The two positions illustrate the evolution of the genre from obscure and marginal to experimental and representative of modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques. In fact, Edgar Allan Poe's tales of mystery already broke existing moulds by initiating the tradition of psychological thrillers and horror fiction and by introducing the prototypical detective (Auguste Dupin) whose ratiocinative methodology will soon become the staple of classic fictional investigators such as Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Poirot. Throughout the twentieth century, detective fiction became a particular field of literary innovation, with the works of Umberto Eco, Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon[1] crossing the boundaries of the detective genre as described by Todorov. By raising questions "about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge" (Merivale, 1999, p. 1), works like these do not inaugurate as much as confirm the tradition of a metaphysical detective story that transcends the conventions attached to the genre by addressing ontological and epistemological questions. While they display the methodology of detective fiction, they eschew its *telos*, which becomes, especially in McIlvanney's case, solving life, rather than death (Holquist, 1983, p. 173). At the same time, they might also confirm an aspect often unacknowledged, namely the fact that one of the engines of universal cultural development leading to modernism or postmodernism has been the appropriation by high culture of literary models such as detective fiction, a staple of popular culture to begin with. In fact, a permanent traffic between high and low forms has also meant that detective stories have, in

[1] G. K. Chesterton and Jorge Luis Borges are also credited as part of this tradition (Marivale, 1999), as are Alain Robbe-Grillet or Witold Gombrowicz (Holquist, 1983).

turn, assimilated structural and conceptual features specific to canonical works (McHale, 1992, p. 226) belonging to these cultural movements.

The Scottish hard-boiled

Over the past few decades, the metaphysical detective novel has also incorporated a strong regional flavour. The defining presence of a localized landscape, culture and mindset have shaped new brands of "noir" fiction, from Nordic/Scandinavian to Scottish. The philosophical proclivities of McIlvanney's own detective novels have allowed them to be read as exemplary texts for Heideggerian concepts such as the relationship between language and truth, and for a certain mood, illustrative of Heidegger's "Stimmung", that seems to have characterised Scottish literature and politics in the Thatcherism decade (Wickman, 2015), when opposition shaped both of them. Born out of an interrogation of the condition of Scotland faced with British uniformization, Tartan Noir, the Scottish brand of detective fiction, became a literary formula investigating the ontological and political state of Scotland. Consequently, a long history of divided national loyalties, both linguistic and political, are also reflected in the Glasgow of McIlvanney's novels, a city whose "half-life is an indictment of the nation under British rule: […] a nation that does not wholly possess itself, that is not «whole»" (Wickman, 2015, p. 10).

Despite his significant body of work as a novelist, short-story writer and poet, William McIlvanney seems to be much less known outside Scotland than he probably deserves.[2] Moreover, considered against the background of his overall literary output, his detective novel production is limited to the Laidlaw trilogy (thus called after the name of the investigating protagonist) and as such may be considered of minor importance compared to the significantly larger body of work proposed by other contemporary but younger Scottish novelists such as Ian Rankin, whose choice of focusing exclusively on the genre of detective fiction was influenced directly by McIlvanney. Despite his small detective oeuvre, as critics and Rankin himself have acknowledged,[3] McIlvanney set a new standard for all the Scottish authors who succeeded him in writing detective fiction, by creating "an influential symbiosis between a crime-ridden yet vital Glasgow and the divorced, hard-drinking but intellectually literate hero" (Priestman, 2003, p. 185).

[2] At least not in Romania, where only one of his novels – the sequence to the Laidlaw series, co-authored by Ian Rankin – has been translated so far (*Întuneric fără sfârşit*, Bucharest: Crime Scene Press, 2023).

[3] "It's doubtful I would be a crime writer without the influence of McIlvanney's *Laidlaw*" (Flood, 2020, p. 1).

The Glasgow-based, philosophical-minded DI Laidlaw was thus successfully emulated not only by Rankin's rock aficionado, "the Edinburgh Laidlaw"[4] DI Rebus, but also by other British protagonist detectives (e.g. John Harvey's Charlie Resnick[5]) whose obsessive passion is meant to set them apart by identifying them against the anonymous background of an urbanised landscape simultaneously familiar and strange.

Paradoxically, it is also the cityscape that helps reinforce the difference and the connection between the above-mentioned Scottish protagonists. The Glasgow of Laidlaw and of Jack Parlabane (the investigative journalist in Christopher Brookmyre's novels), just like the Edinburgh of Rebus, are both seen not only as national capitals of the country, each in its own right, but celebrated and foregrounded better than in most of the novels produced outside Scotland and outside the genre (Priestman, 2003). In the case of Rankin, the friendship that ensued after he met McIlvanney in 1985, two years before publishing his first novel in the Inspector Rebus series, led to the ultimate homage to the latter's work when, after McIlvanney's death in 2015, Rankin was chosen to complete his "godfather"'s unfinished prequel to the Laidlaw series, published in 2021 as *The Dark Remains*. What McIlvanney had done for Glasgow by writing about a city that he knew well, Rankin emulated in his detailed description of Edinburgh, so that, in the end, the city is as central to their books as their detectives are.

Considering their order of publication, the first two Laidlaw novels must have been intended as a series, with *Laidlaw* published in 1977 and *The Papers of Tony Veitch* in 1983. Between that year and the publication of the third novel in the series (*Strange Loyalties*, 1991), McIlvanney wrote two more novels, neither of which belong to the detective genre, in addition to three poetry and short story collections. Besides indicating how prolific and technically adept the author was in a variety of literary genres, the gap may also explain why critics of the British detective novel such as Martin Priestman often fail to consider *Strange Loyalties* as part of the now classic Laidlaw trilogy when discussing McIlvanney's detective genre production. However, what they point out about the first two volumes is also true about the third, namely the fact that, despite their appearance as police procedurals, McIlvanney's novels in the series are clearly influenced by, and

[4] Asked by Rankin to sign a book for him, this is how McIlvanney himself called the fledgling idea of a detective similar to Laidlaw but based in Edinburgh, the future DI Rebus (Flood, 2020).

[5] In the foreword to the first of his Charlie Resnick novel series, *Lonely Hearts* (1989), Harvey joins Rankin in acknowledging his indebtedness to McIlvanney's "masterly novel about a Glasgow police detective, Laidlaw" that he "read and re-read" before creating his own detective character (Harvey, 2007, p. 1).

employ themselves, the conventions of the American so-called "hard-boiled" detective fiction (Priestman, 1991; Dickson, 1996).

Historically part of the second Golden Age of the genre (from the late 1920s to 1939) and peculiar to the works produced in the United States, this sort of detective novel announces a clean break with the established European tradition of the genre. Thus, whereas Agatha Christie's Poirot or Marple novels are typically set in the isolated decor of an elegant English country house, and display a quasi-stereotypical structure (discovery of the dead victim, a series of false perpetrators whose investigation provide a red-herring delay of the denouement, the latter usually staged to coincide with a final revelatory scene) and featuring a highly intelligent albeit amateur sleuth, by embracing the messy realism of an urban landscape the American hard-boiled detective novels are nothing short of a direct reaction to, and reversal of, this model.

Moreover, one might say that a hard-boiled is as true to life as it is true to death, in the sense that it replaces the previously clean but artificial storyline with a dark and violent one set against a menacing urban background populated by criminals, vagrants and prostitutes. In the fictional world of the hard-boiled novel, detection is more than a game to exercise the protagonist's "little grey cells", as Poirot used to do. It is a tedious, ungrateful desk-and-leg job done by a lonely sleuth, usually an ex-cop often at odds with their former police colleagues, who probes the city's underbelly in exchange for money and not necessarily out of belief in the law, or even in the possibility of real justice for the victims. All this is indicative of the most important characteristic of the hard-boiled novel – the way it blurs the distinction between good and evil, criminals and law-enforcers, raising moral, social and political problems in the process (Cuddon, 2014, p. 169). Perhaps it is also one of the strongest reasons why the genre enjoyed enormous success, with authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler becoming cult figures almost overnight, and even more so after Hollywood turned some of their work into film noir blockbusters in the 1940s (such as, for example, Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*, famously filmed in 1941 and starring Humphrey Bogart as the quintessential detective Sam Spade).

What McIlvanney's Laidlaw has in common with Chandler's Philip Marlowe and other classic American "private eyes" is his "lonely personal quest for «meaning» in a wider sense" (Priestman, 1991, p. 180). His almost obsessive crusades in the name of the underdog (whether the victim is a working class teenage girl, a homeless vagrant, a misfit intellectual or his own guilty artist brother), his irreverence to the authority he himself is supposed to represent, and

an incessant brooding[6] over personal, philosophical (right and wrong, guilt and innocence), social and political Scottish issues in a language that is intensely personal and highly quotable[7] make Laidlaw a "wise guy" hero that happens to be a policeman, rather than the other way round (McGillivray, 1995). It is also this heroic nature that draws Laidlaw close to the typical masculine protagonists in McIlvanney's novels[8], tough and often violent men of the working class (such as Docherty, the eponymous protagonist of the author's 1975 Whitbread Award novel). As if to stress the point, one of them (Dan Scoular, the protagonist of *The Big Man*) also makes a cameo appearance, mediated by Laidlaw himself as narrator, in *The Papers of Tony Veitch* (1983). Despite the apparent fragmentation due to frequent shifts in perspective[9], McIlvanney achieves the "bouncing" effect of credibility deriving from an appropriate mixture of characters that E.M. Forster considers "imperative" in a quality novel (Forster, 1972, pp. 143-144). We see surprisingly many characters, including "villains" and anti-heroes, "curving towards" round characters, in the sense that even secondary characters are represented by more than one trait and "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (Forster, 1972, pp. 138, 143).

A sociopolitical novel under cover

Yet, for all the machismo inherent in the hard-boiled genre in general and in McIlvanney's detective novels in particular, considered sometimes as limiting the power of their social comment – the author's aim in his previous and subsequent production – critics (Dentith, 1990, p. 35; Priestman, 1991, p. 181) seem to agree that "if it were not for the ghettoisation of detective from «serious» fiction, *The Papers of Tony Veitch* and its predecessor *Laidlaw* (1977) would and should be seen as important novels of the 1970s and 1980s" (Priestman, 1991, p. 181).[10] In

[6] The meditative policeman modelled by George Simenon's Maigret, also illustrated by D.I. Dalgliesh, P.D. James' poet-policeman (Marivale, 1999, p. 14).

[7] McIlvanney's style in the Laidlaw series, with its crisp metaphors and sharp dialogue, proves the increasing attention and linguistic skill he invests in his writing (McGillivray, 1995).

[8] Heroism is an idea that pervades all McIlvanney's novels, not only the Laidlaw trilogy, proving that the series is not a diversion from his "serious" work, but a vital component in it (McGillivray, 1995).

[9] Alternating stream of consciousness (*Laidlaw*) with third person limited (*Laidlaw*, *The Papers…*, *Strange Loyalties*) and first person (*Strange Loyalties*) narrative points of view.

[10] Apparently disproving Todorov's assertion that the whodunit is "purely geometric architecture" (Todorov, 1988, p. 160), meaning that "par excellence [it] does not transgress the rules of the genre, but conforms to them" (Todorov, 1988, p. 159). Priestman's opinion about the merit of the Laidlaw novels is further supported by other critics of McIlvanney's work, such as Keith Dixon (Dixon, 1989).

other words, McIlvanney makes use of the conventions of the hardboiled genre not for its own sake, but in order to achieve the same end as in his other novels: a longstanding radical critique of moral, social and political issues centred on Scotland and Glasgow. As far as crime fiction in general is concerned, this is not a new approach. The light the genre throws on the social realities of an urban, industrialised background reaffirms its ties with the social novel of the 19th century represented, in England, by the work of Dickens, and proves its openness to the ideological and political inflections, in this case markedly leftward (Dentith, 1990, pp. 19-20), that McIlvanney imbues all his Laidlaw novels with, but especially the third in the series.[11] The "loyalties" of the title (*Strange Loyalties*, 1991) predict the main issue of the novel, that of the difficulties and dilemmas posed by one's duties to family and profession, but also to one's cultural and national background. These allegiances, it turns out, are crucial for the main character:

> *It would all be meaningless unless we related it to what mattered, to where we came from. We were all from working-class backgrounds. The chance we had was held in trust for others […]. Whatever talents we had belonged to the man in the street. Each of us had to find our own way to reconnect with him. […] Without him, what we had learned was useless.* (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 348)

Combined with the fact that the most important influence on 20th century British crime fiction were the American hardboiled novels (Dentith, 1990, p. 21) of the authors mentioned above, it is hardly surprising that this kind of fiction, and especially McIlvanney's uniquely Scottish breed, would appeal to an urban working class who found their own lives and place in the city mirrored, legitimised and reinforced by the hard-won and sometimes morally ambiguous positions of the characters. At the same time, considering the fact that American culture traditionally values local linguistic idiosyncrasy, another essential feature of the hard-boiled genre originating here and appealing to a working class audience is the use of street language to place and define the characters. On the other side of the Atlantic, McIlvanney chooses to employ the Glaswegian idiom against a cultural background typically characterised by class-obsession and conformity to royal standard language, where his systematic display of the popular idiom is not only unusual, but deliberately conspicuous. Besides providing his writing with a local rhetorical appeal, McIlvanney's use of the Scottish demotic, especially in the first two novels of the series, can be said to carry the same clear political undertones

[11] As Jameson also notes about Chandler, his novels are murder mysteries in disguise, the author searching, in fact, to understand the underlying reality of American society (Jameson, 1983, p. 122).

mentioned above.[12] His appropriation of the Glasgow dialect is meant to convey both his familiarity with and lifelong loyalty to the city, and at the same time his appreciation for the language of the people of Glasgow as different from the British standard and even as different from other Scottish dialects (such as that of Edinburgh, for instance): "Ah wis in the merchant navy. Ah've been around. That's one of the reasons Ah like tae come here. Reminds me. The world's a big place. It's not just Glesca [Glasgow]". (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 171)

Like in the case of the so-called "realist" novel, the hard-boiled detective fiction, including McIlvanney's, relies heavily on *l'effet de réel* (Barthes, 1986, p. 141) achieved in this way, but even more than in the case of the realist novel, it's the setting itself, the "crime scene" that is naturally foregrounded here, as a fundamental part of the plot. In the detective story, space is crucial – it all starts with a murder scene, a setting, a stage. The detective story is as much a "whodunit" as a "whereduni t". In this respect, McIlvanney's novels resemble their American counterparts, so that from language the matter of authenticity extends naturally to the streets and places in the city, most of which are as real as the streets of San Francisco (Dashiel Hammett) or Los Angeles (Raymond Chandler).[13] Paradoxically in a genre whose main appeal is action, the "useless detail" or "insignificant notation" (Barthes, 1986, pp. 142, 143) embedded in extensive descriptions of the cityscape becomes significant to such an extent in the case of McIlvanney that one feels that it is the city that inhabits the characters, rather than vice-versa.

Here too he may have taken his cue from Chandler, who is a master of description, starting with interior spaces and moving outward to the urban neighbourhoods. In his novels, rooms are described in the minutest detail, from curtains to carpet to furniture placement and objects. All the possible rooms in the house, even the most private (living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom) are swept up at a glance or minutely analysed for traces (*The Big Sleep*). They are not only scenes of crime, but theatre scenes, backgrounds against which the detective

[12] It is a recurring feature in his other novels, too. In *Docherty*, for instance, the protagonist discovers that the mother tongue at school and the tongue of his mother at home are not the same, and that the first cannot translate his feelings (Craig, 2009, p. 77).

[13] Ian Rankin went a step further when he provided each of the novels in his Rebus series with a map of central Edinburgh indicating each of the streets, buildings and pubs involved in the settings of his novels. One of the incontrovertible signs of the series' success with the public is the fact that there are now guided tours of "Rebus' Edinburgh", just like there are guided tours of "Holmes' London", "Chandler's Los Angeles" or "Nero Wolfe's New York". At the same time, as Eco points out in this respect, moving as these displays of fandom are, they also indicate a confusion, by the reader, of the fictional world for the actual one, a misunderstanding of fiction for fact (Eco, 1995, p. 85), of a narrative device (the reality effect) for reality.

moves, most often in the absence of the occupants, or in the presence of their inert bodies. House facades are often described in detail (their architectural style, their location) (*The Big Sleep*, *The Little Sister*) and, when this is the case, the geographical location is also recorded (e.g. California, Los Angeles, Malibu, Hollywood, Sunset Boulevard, plus the fictional Bay City, in *The Little Sister*). The minute description of offices (including Marlowe's own, seen in all his novels) and police interrogation rooms, of art galleries and film studios (*The Little Sister*) is almost clinically devoid of emotion – it's the sheer accumulation of details that is meant to convey the character/atmosphere of the place – but occasionally there is the dry subjective comment, always pessimistic, derogatory or self-derogatory, on the part of the detective character in relation to his surroundings.

In McIlvanney's novels, too, the intensity of detail authenticates the plot staging. However, unlike Chandler, he invests places with a meaning that goes beyond the affection for the familiar, resembling the respect one has for an entity beyond one's control, and ultimately beyond one's knowledge. For McIlvanney's detective, solving a crime is this environment is a question of assimilating the cityscape and letting oneself be absorbed by its mood, treating the city as a person with secrets whose revelation is indefinitely postponed. Imagining that one knows the city just because they know its street names is the mark of a bad copper, the "winner" in the eyes of the establishment:

> *He [Harkness] knew Laidlaw's belief in what he sometimes called "absorbing the streets", as if you could solve crime by osmosis. […]; [Milligan, Laidlaw's colleague and nemesis in terms of life/justice/policing philosophy] "I know this city," he said. "Right to its underwear. That's why I'm a winner" […]; [Laidlaw to Harkness, about Milligan] "He's like a lot of policemen here. He knows the names of streets. He doesn't know the city. Who does? […] Who ever knew a city? It's a crazy claim.* (McIlvanney, 1983/2021, pp. 52, 209, 277)

The spirit of place

Mentioned above in connection with the critical rediscovery of the seriousness of purpose inherent in the detection genre, structuralism also embraced and enabled a wider hermeneutic scope, throwing new light on historical and geographical *lieux communs* and reasserting a fundamental connection between space and time (Soya, 1989, p. 18). Often cited as one of its leading figures, Michel Foucault notes as early as 1964 that while the nineteenth century would display an obsession for diachronic, evolutionary themes, the twentieth was the epoch of space, of simultaneous events, of the world as network (Foucault, 1964,

p. 1), a change of perspective accentuated by postmodernism and its aftermath.[14] In his usually iconoclastic way, Foucault advocated for a complete desacralisation of space by subjecting all accepted oppositions (private/public, leisure/work, family/social) to a critical breakdown (Foucault, 1964, p. 1). However, unlike Bachelard, whose phenomenological analysis focused on interior spaces, he devised his concepts (especially that of heterotopias) based on external space as the locus of power discourse.

Literary geography, the geocritical strand of literary theory, was born out of similar viewpoints voiced by other structuralist and post-structuralist critics (Lefebvre, Deleuze, Guattari), who reasserted space as plural, heterogenous and palimpsestic. This so-called "spatial turn" in literary theory (the term itself coined by Edward Soya in his *Postmodern Geographies* of 1989) was thus correlated with and influenced by a change of perspective in philosophy, sociology and cultural studies, one that redefined the agenda of cultural geography over the 1980s and 1990s, which became that of "understanding culture through space and as space" (Shymchyshyn, 2021, p. 14). According to its core belief, the place where events take place become essential to understanding the way they happen and the reason they happen. Thus, while Henri Lefebvre underlines the idea of space as both a product and a producer of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991), Edward Soja, commenting on an explicit remark on existential spatiality by Marin Buber, argues that the objectification of space is a condition of human consciousness itself (Soja, 1989, p. 132). However, places can trigger human ideas and emotions just as much as human emotions are constitutive of places, of how specific sites are imagined and represented. In McIlvanney's own words, it's "the looker [that] makes the looked" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 181). An emotional perspective of geography, then, starts from the way in which emotion is conceptualised and articulated in relation to space, as a relational flow between places and people (Davidson, Bondi, Smith, 2007, p. 3).

[14] The spatial turn in the humanities may have come as a reaction to the postmodernist stance. For instance, along with Foucault, Frederic Jameson posits that it is spatial, rather than chronological categories that dominate our daily lives, mindsets and cultural language under postmodernity (Shymchyshyn, 2021, p. 18). On the other hand, it can be argued that the spatial turn in the humanities only follows in the footsteps of the major 20th century scientific discovery in physics, Einstein's space-time theory of relativity, which redefined the way we think about the effects of the correlation between the two dimensions. When coining his term of "chronotopia", Bakhtin himself refers to Eistein's theory to explain his borrowing of the metaphor from physics to mean the inseparability, or "intrinsic connectedness, of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84).

It is along these lines that space in the detective novels of McIlvanney can be interpreted. Laidlaw himself voices the complexity of experiencing the space-time continuum: "If place were only place and the present only the present, but we invade them with the past, complicate them with our futures. […] If the world was a new red apple, I was the worm inside." (McIlvanney, 1991, pp. 61-62) Yet, for all the potential universality of the remark, his reference is specifically local, for whenever McIlvanney evokes space and time in his detective series, he means Scotland and the Scottish mindset, or Glasgow and its landmarks, whether these are people, streets or institutions. Although influenced by both European and American writers, he is essentially a Scottish author placed "uncomfortably" (Dixon, 1989, p. 146) at the crossroads between two literary trends: a sentimental one, projecting an idealised image of a predominantly rural Scottish landscape, and a realist approach, disclosing the unseemly side of Scottish social and political life. "Uncomfortably" because he is neither a sentimental writer nor an anti-humanist, cynical one. If his concern for the centrality of the Scottish urban experience is explicit as an identity-defining locus ("You take the nexus around Glasgow that's still the eye of the hurricane. I think that's where our understanding of ourselves resides" (Dixon, 1989, p. 147)), it is because, ideologically, he is part of a Scottish radical literary tradition featuring ideas such as egalitarianism and scepticism about the religious establishment, but also compassion for and camaraderie towards the urban working class, whose lives he envisions in justifiably pessimistic tones (Dixon, 1989). His attitude is perhaps better understood in the larger context of modern Scottish literature, where national self-representation is strongly linked to the rapid urbanisation of the country, and especially of Glasgow, at the end of the nineteenth century. The pace and scale of industrialisation here meant that, as the working population of the city grew, the traditional rural ethos that informed their way of life was abruptly replaced by an urban ethos that questioned and disrupted these moral foundations. Despite the fact that a certain sense of community based on a rural model continued to exist, the ensuing conflict, promptly reflected by the literature of the time, between the former ethical norms of rural communion and the amorality inherent in the excessive individualism of urban capitalistic society (Riach, 2005) was unavoidable. McIlvanney's Laidlaw can notice the consequences of this conflict still lingering in Glasgow's landscape and the people's mindsets.

In addition, "inhabiting the paradox" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 7) of "writing on the borderline" (Dixon, 1989, p. 150) between a Scottish and an English cultural heritage adds another tension layer to McIlvanney's fictional universe. More than a typical whodunnit, his detective series attempts to render the image of a

particular Scottish region whose experience of political and cultural ambiguity can be painful. Being a "Borderer" means feeling "that the place that had defined Scottishness at its weakest edge, where it meets Englishness, had lost its sense of itself and blurred into anonymity" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 126). Lost in trying to translate "the demotic of Scottish traditions into a bland standard English" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 223), Laidlaw's father is the epitome of this unhappy mindset. While "maybe looking for Scotland", he describes himself "as Scottish as muffins and tea" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 126).

At the same time, an existentialism-inspired philosophy that forms the background of Laidlaw's worldview[15] and informs his intimate inclination towards free, albeit inevitably tragic, human choice seems to come head to head with the denial of choice proclaimed by a strict Calvinist tradition (Cairns, 1999, p. 107) predisposing him and his fellow countrymen to inherent feelings of guilt, remorse and self-righteousness and rendering them heavy-hearted and lethargic:

> *Guilt was at the heart of this kind of mood. […] Perhaps it was just that, born in Scotland, you were hanselled with remorse, set up with shares in Calvin against your coming of age, so that much of the energy you expended came back guilt* (McIlvanney, 1977/2021*,* pp. 6-7)*; […] perhaps it was just that he sensed a dangerously distorted version of that Calvinist self-righteousness that forms like an icicle in the hearts of a lot of Scots* (McIlvanney, 1983/2021, p. 17)*; […] the old Scottish Sabbath, that interesting anomaly whereby the Kirk's insistence on the observance of the Lord's day of rest resulted in a country busy with Scotsmen transporting a thirst as heavy as luggage from one place to another.* (McIlvanney, 1983*,* p. 69)

One of the essential characteristics of Scottish literature is that it features location as a key topic to a degree of variety and depth rarely matched by other literatures (Riach, 2005, p. 240). The source of the characters' voices, and the ways in which the geographical location reflects these voices are also aspects typical of McIlvanney's work, where the familiarity of the landscape provides a meaningful psychological background to his atypical whodunnit. For instance, Laidlaw's Scotland is an idiosyncratic emotional terrain, where any display of sentiment is repressed as inappropriate and disruptive.[16] The "spirit of place"

[15] There are books by Camus, Kirkegaard and Unamuno in Laidlaw's office desk drawer (McIlvanney, 1977), betraying an intellectual personality trait also emulated by Rankin's Rebus. Laidlaw's philosophical choices, in addition, reflect a staunch commitment to the political and philosophical positions the author himself engages with.

[16] For a documented account of the influence of religion on the practice of emotional relations in the Scottish Highlands, see Parr, Philo and Burns (2007, p. 92).

identified by D. H. Lawrence as specific to every landscape[17] imbues the locals with their characteristic dual nature – fiercely friendly on the outside, sorrowfully stoic within:

> *I realised that it wasn't just in Sparta that people smile and nod and talk trivialities while their self is unseaming. It was what we were all taught to do. Certainly, in Scotland, I decided, a lot of us had evolved social conventions so cryptic they almost amounted to mime and must be sustained, no matter what tragic opera was unfolding in the head*. (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 332)

Nowhere are these ambiguities and tensions, both internal and external, more concentrated than in Glasgow. Laidlaw's arduous description conveys his deep attachment to the place, to the degree where his voice becomes indistinguishable from that of the author. In this capacity as his hero's alter ego, for example, McIlvanney draws attention to the Scottish motto, this "wee message […] carved on the city's heart"(McIlvanney, 1977, p. 112). A historical reminder of a fiercely independent past, the inscription *"Nemo me impune lacessit"*[18] can be found on coats of arms in all major cities in Scotland, but in the context of McIlvanney's detective novel, it acquires the tone of an earnest present warning, cautioning any outsiders to honour the place by not meddling with its ways. It is a message of resilience, but also of implied revenge and dormant violence reminiscent of the region's strong nationalist feelings. It can also be, by extension, a symbol of Laidlaw's both heroic and anti-heroic traits that mitigate his affinity with Glasgow's criminal underworld.

The impression that Glasgow is considered by Laidlaw (and McIlvanney) the real capital city of Scotland is further strengthened by its comparison with Edinburgh. For the author and his hero, this iconic city usually represented as the symbol of Scotland actually reflects the country's political duality. To Laidlaw, the city appears to be "the most English place in Scotland, […] a […] clearing-house of the Scottish identity", its very architecture[19] and street names a political announcement that a transplant of psyche had taken place whereby a past Scottish identity and way of life were replaced by a future "career" as part of Britain

[17] "[…] The different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars" is a "great reality" that each homeland possesses by virtue of its locality (Lawrence, 1925, p. 125).

[18] (Lat.) "No one assails/provokes me with impunity". The motto also appears in Ian Rankin's Rebus series novel *The Black Book* as reference to Scotland. On the other hand, its presence on a family coat of arms in E.A. Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" is less clearly indicative of a reference to Scotland, but the ominous, threatening tone of the message itself may have been deemed appropriate in the context of Poe's story of revenge.

[19] Architecture has the power to reposition a place as culturally or politically significant, hence the importance of various kinds of buildings (Urry, 2007).

(McIlvanney, 1991, p. 149), as if "the root of a thistle should nourish a rose" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 160).[20] By contrast, Laidlaw implies, Glasgow is an uncompromisingly Scottish city. Whatever remains of its Victorian architecture is now "very dirty", "half-devoured" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 158), decaying under the weight of the city's industries. Other old buildings are reminiscent of a Gothic aristocracy (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 14) or of eroding faith (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 56), some of these shabby monuments sometimes strangely but aptly named to invoke their own state of mournful desolation, such as the Coronach Hotel, called after a song lamenting the dead (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 69). Nevertheless, this self-confident architecture of the past, with its big, dark buildings of "handsome […] Victorian portentousness" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 113) also inspires the hero's affection and emotional attachment to the place (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 140).

That Laidlaw is more attached to the city's old looks than to its modern urban metamorphosis also transpires from the nostalgia with which he beholds the gradual, inexorable change whereby its almost rural but friendly neighbourhoods – crowded, noisy tenements, "the feeling that if you stretched too far in bed you could scratch your neighbour's head" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 15) – have given way to the sprawling, impersonal "architectural dump" of the housing schemes at the four corners of the city, prison-like boxes where people are poured into (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 36) and forgotten by a system that puts the interests of real estate above their needs (McIlvanney 1977, p. 40). Displacing people in this way feels, to Laidlaw, like a surgical removal of the city's own past, as suggested by the medical metaphors comparing the city to a patient suffering a "face lift" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 140), one whose "guts [are] replaced with [the] plastic tubing" of looping motorways (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 15). Personifying metaphors like these, especially employed to reflect the apparently disjointed relationship between the past and the present of the city, are quite frequent. For example, the contrast between the warm, vivid slums of the past and the cold, featureless and

[20] McIlvanney's political engagement with the Scottish independence movement comes strongly through at this point. It is probably not by chance that two of the series' novels (*Laidlaw* and *Strange Loyalties*) were published just a few years before two major devolution referendums (1979 and 1997), the author apparently using his novels as platforms to voice and advocate his political convictions. A year before his death, he could have witnessed and voted in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, where the political differences between Glasgow and Edinburgh became visible again, with Glasgow's majority voting in favour of, and Edinburgh's majority against, the country's independence (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/scotland-decides/results).

expensive new estates are seen as an expression of a city "caught in a confused quarrel with itself" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 185).[21]

The streets themselves feel different. "The quality of the old Glasgow" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 44) meant that streets were family/familiar places, rather than serving only as undifferentiated pathways all leading to a wasteland of slum tenements (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 113) as they do now, when their modernity feels drab and bleak, reflecting "an imposed assumption about the meanness" of Glaswegian lives (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 61). The same contrast broadens to encompass the natural element as well. Usually associated with wholesome rurality but ultimately with a state of health and freedom, nature in Glasgow is now trimmed down and exhibited in museum-like fashion: "gated and railinged […], the city's commemorative window box of a once wilder place" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 39). Glasgow's moody weather plays into the atmosphere of stoic thriftiness, the sun a rare sight, and even then unable to provide more light or warmth than "an eye with a cataract" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 26). Despite this, every cloudless moment is celebrated as a boon, counted up and put aside in people's minds as if in the hope that, economised this way, they might nearly "amass a summer" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 26).

Ultimately, though, it is not only the past and the present cityscapes, but the city and the people in it that no longer seem to match each other: "I find the people very impressive. It's the place that's terrible […]; Glasgow folk have to be nice people. Otherwise, they would have burned the place to the ground years ago" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 36). Some of these, like the gallery of lunatics, misfits and picturesque characters imprinted in the city's collective memory, are landmarks of an old Glasgow, their struggles to survive "like kittiwakes nesting on a sheer cliff face" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 146) still an inspiration to McIlvanney's detectives as images of a rebellious authenticity that is indelibly Scottish. Among them, intellectual idealists like Tony Veitch, the eponymous character of the second Laidlaw volume, who refuses to let his precarious circumstances and the place itself circumscribe his vision (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 116), but who ends up a victim to his own inner turmoil. On the other hand, and only a short distance away, an invisible frontier seems to divide this first group from the representatives of the new elite of Glasgow, a new breed "born with their nose in the air" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 89) to whom the city means no more than "a taxi-ride between a theatre and a wine bar" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 110) and who, to Laidlaw, appear as

[21] Arguably taking his cue from McIlvanney, Rankin's Rebus novels also frequently juxtapose "the «hidden» face of under-privileged Edinburgh with the «public» face of the city, […] emphasizing the sharp social and economic divides of modern Britain" (Skaggs, 2005, pp. 92-93).

inconsequential and platitudinous as the streets and houses they inhabit. The epitome of this fortressed world, and in stark contrast to the Coronach described above, is The Albany Hotel, a glass-and-concrete "embassy of privilege by which the rich reduce the world to one place" of impersonal, sanitised comfort (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 137).

A city whose strength seems to reside in the co-existence of attitudinal contradictions, Laidlaw's Glasgow is frequently described as the embodiment of opposite emotional reactions: homeliness and deadly violence, sanctimonious affability and menacing harshness, insensitivity and pain. That is why, in McIlvanney's typical metaphorical shorthand, personification is considered the most appropriate way of representing the place as a human being subject to sudden changes of mood (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 67) whose "right hand knocks you down and [whose] left hand picks you up, while the mouth alternates apology and threat" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 71). In the same conflicting way, the city "can turn your back on you, […] lock you out" (McIlvanney, 1977, p. 181), or, on the contrary, would stand by one in dark times: "the city wouldn't leave him alone" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 297). Sometimes McIlvanney would extend the personifying metaphor to all cities, the better to isolate the peculiarities of Glasgow: "Cities may all say essentially the same thing but the intonations are different. He was trying to re-attune himself to Glasgow's" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 1).[22]

The anthropomorphic treatment of the city seems, in fact, both metaphoric and metonymic. Personified in this way, the city's moods, mindset and behavior represent extensions of those of its inhabitants. At times, McIlvanney's Laidlaw's observant glance focuses on the city with a mixture of pride and didacticism not uncommon to the pages of a city guide intended to instruct and warn visitors about the rewards and dangers to expect in the streets. Thus we find that, despite its wide vistas, Glaswegians value the proximity of a pat on the shoulder and direct communication, rather than the anonymity and the cold shoulder of conventional cityscapes (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 2; McIlvanney, 1991, p. 140). In "the city of the stare" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 1), one should not be surprised to find one's privacy frequently invaded and oneself caught in abundant "cabaret moments" of

[22] As if to suggest an intimate connection based on mutual respect between the city and McIlvanney's protagonists, these personifications are never gendered. The city is invariably identified by name and described from a subject position, except for one feminine referential pronoun, probably considered appropriate in the context of that particular metaphor but also suggesting disapproval – Glasgow as an old woman getting "*her* face-lift" (McIlvanney 1991, p. 140).

impromptu mirth peculiar to the place (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 59). Encountering the city for the first time can even amount to a confrontation, where the two opposing parties – "you" and they" – seem to dance around in a ring, weighing each other's intentions. Mistrustful of outsiders, Glaswegians "hate to be had", so the only safe behavior, reciprocated in the end, is complete openness and honesty: "Come to them honestly and their tolerance can be great" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 55). Putting up with the place and the slightly rude, uninvited remarks of the people may even be considered an act of contrition, designed to "freeze pretentiousness in its tracks", intimating that only a straightforward attitude will do (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 144). A combination of mistrust and friendliness designed to test the sincerity of one's intentions, the strategy is part of the "ancient Glaswegian art" of deceiving the deceiver either by feigning an irresistible innocence (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 140) or by saying one thing but meaning another: "Scartin' an' nippin' is Scots folk's wooin'" (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 222).

Despite the somewhat homiletic tone of these remarks, it is most of all with a self-comforting kind of affection that Laidlaw sees the Glaswegians' power to abide. Contemplating an image that encapsulates his faith in the city, he envisions the typical Glaswegian as the unique survivor of a nuclear holocaust, a slightly bothered but still good-humoured bearer of the last vestige of humaneness, and the one to ensure it endures (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 263). This may also explain why Laidlaw's own wish is to die "among the humane noise" of Glasgow (McIlvanney, 1991, p. 140), a city constantly generating the kind of audible energy one can plug into to feel alive (McIlvanney, 1991, pp. 140, 335).[23] If *Strange Loyalties* is an ode to Scotland (Laidlaw's dead brother called Scott, his mysterious painting feeding the plot, entitled "Scotland", an enigmatic portrayal of the country (McGillivray, 1995)), *The Papers of Tony Veitch* is just as clearly an homage to Glasgow itself, "a small and great city […] with its face against the wind", a city hardened by poverty and populated by survivors who "have made the spirit of the place theirs" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 263). The same apocalyptic allusions and references to martyrdom accompany the hero's affectionate avowal:

> *That was Glasgow. It was a place so kind it would batter cruelty into the ground. And what circumstances kept giving it was cruelty. No wonder he loved it. It danced among its own debris. When Glasgow gave up, the world could call it a day.* (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 263.)

[23] The metaphor of the city as an energy generator occurs twice in the final volume of the series (pages 140 and 335), as if to indicate the hero's strong attachment to a city seen as an ever-renewable source of vitality.

All is not symbolic, though. A political comment makes its way into the core of the metaphor, adding historical accuracy and with it, sombreness to the statements. Once the second most affluent city in the British Empire, wealth has never reached Glasgow's own citizens, concentrated as it was on the other side of the border. Thus "the wealth of the few had become the poverty of the many" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 263). However, what McIlvanney's heroes repeatedly bear witness to is the city's indomitable resilience in the face of any kind of adversity, as demonstrated in the last scene of the novel, where, in what would normally have been a "formula for misery" – a crowd waiting for a taxi in the pouring rain – the place is "jumping joyously" to the tune of an impromptu jig, Laidlaw himself engaged in it. This final image of the city, instrumental in showing the way in which the city is determined to celebrate its own ordinariness (McGillivray, 1995), conveys "something marvellous, a spirit so determined to enjoy life that it had an aesthetic of queues" (McIlvanney, 1983, p. 298).

Conclusion

The particular fusion of time and space that forms the fictional chronotope has always been central to literary discourse, serving not only as the setting of a text, or as background to its plot, but also shaping both the movement of the plot and the development of the characters. The transdisciplinary phenomenon known as the spatial turn in the humanities, which has marked the meeting of geography and philosophy at the end of the 20th century, has ignited a renewed interest in "topophilia" in literary theory and criticism. The term can aptly apply to McIlvanney's series in the sense given to it by Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (1958). Glasgow seems to be McIlvanney's "felicitous space" in the sense that he captures "the human value of the sorts of space that […] may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love" (Bachelard, 1958, p. xxxv). His detective novels are a eulogy to Scotland and Scottishness, the patriotic rhetoric apparent whenever monuments of history are revealed and past conflicts, political or cultural, are recounted. Most of all though, if patriotism means attachment to one's *terra patria*, in McIlvanney's case the sentiment is highly localised, referring to "the intimate experience of place, and a sense of the fragility of goodness: that which we love has no guarantee to endure" (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974, p. 101). Yet, paradoxically, this is presented as the strength of Glasgow – its formidable resilience in the face of historical adversity and its stubbornness in the face of political and economic change. Laidlaw's preference for its old countryside ways,

however romanticised and Kailyard[24] in appearance, betray a universal nostalgia for a simpler life closer to nature, a rural landscape contrasting with the modern idea of the city as the seat of complex politics and sophisticated bureaucracy. For Laidlaw, the urban sprawl of Glasgow feels like the new wilderness, while the Edenic wilderness of old is threatened by extinction (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974, p. 105). Fortunately, a gritty style and abrasive comments balance what could have been an oversentimental approach, much like the people of Glasgow are described as masking their vulnerability behind a tough façade.

That such complex emotional ties to the landscape/cityscape should be exposed in a detective novel series is both expected and surprising. Settings are crucial in investigative fiction, but McIlvanney's novels transcend the narrow boundaries of typical whodunnits to such an extent that they can truly be considered a kind of make-believe detective fiction.[25] In fact, the detection plot seems to work more as a background to the hero's social and political comment on Scotland and Glasgow in what amounts to a wide-eyed ode to both. Being called "the father of 'tartan noir'" (Massie, 2013, p. 1) is therefore perhaps a misnomer for an author whose characters reflect his existentialist beliefs and political commitments so directly and transparently that his (limited) detection oeuvre seems designed to defeat the narrow purpose of the original genre.

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[24] Literally, "cabbage garden." A late 19th century school of Scottish literature idealizing the simple rural life in the language of the people, i. e. the Scottish dialect. The term has quickly come to be employed mostly derogatorily to refer to an oversentimental, parochial kind of writing extolling the virtues of village mores.

[25] Postmodernist experimental writers such as Paul Auster (*The New York Trilogy*) and Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*, *Bleeding Edge*, *Inherent Vice*) regularly employ apparent detective plots in these novels. However, the earnestness of McIlvanney's socio-political engagement places his series in a different category, probably more suited to Marxist interpretation and clearly diverging from his contemporaries' disinterested, pure intertextual play.

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