Hardy, Stephen Paul

Place and identity in contemporary British fiction

Brno studies in English. 1996, vol. 22, iss. 1, pp. [107]-126

ISBN 80-210-1421-0
ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104297
Access Date: 30. 11. 2024
Version: 20220831

SBORNÍK PRACÍ FILOZOFICKÉ FAKULTY BRNĚNSKÉ UNIVERZITY
STUDIA MINORA FACULTATIS PHILOSOPHICAE UNIVERSITATIS BRUNENSIS
S 2, 1996 — BRNO STUDIES IN ENGLISH 22

STEVE HARDY

PLACE AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

1.

The construction, maintenance and even renewal of identity in relation to place would seem to be an increasingly significant aspect of thought and behaviour in Europe, if not further afield. I wish here to make a number of observations about some aspects of recent British fiction which might be considered as being relevant to the thinking of identity in relation to place. First, I want to make a number of general points and then to look at three novels, one of them set mainly, the other two entirely, in London.

Identity is a concept which has haunted the thinking of twentieth century Europe more, it might be argued, than that of most eras. Perhaps this has much to do with the decline of Western European military, social and economic dominance at a global level becoming increasingly apparent. It might also be argued that this form of decline has affected post–war Britain more drastically and virulently than most European countries since hers, during the last fifty years in particular, has been a record of decline not only globally but within Europe.

Political and socio–economic changes are often related to those at a more philosophical level, indeed, the tendency over the last hundred and fifty years or so has been to see them as increasingly related to one another. Thus a striking aspect of European thought during the last century has been an attempted disintegration of the unified, thinking subject. The less deliberate disintegration of a united imperial structure such as the United Kingdom might be seen as related to such a development, coincidentally or tangentially at the least, or possibly with a greater degree of significance, depending on your point of view. It would certainly seem to be the case that disintegration has come home, so to speak, to the United Kingdom, not just to the celtic and northern periphery but even to the

home counties and the metropolitan centre. The process and detail of much recent fiction can be argued to be one indication of such a development.

Before looking in more detail at this process as it is conveyed in different approaches to place in the contemporary British novel, I first want to spend a short time considering two approaches to the development of European thought in relation to identity and certainty which have appeared within the last ten years and which, very much concerned with the significance of the situatedness of thought themselves, will help to contextualise and focus my own observations.

In both cases my sources are writers who have spent a considerable part of their careers researching social and cultural developments in fin–de–siecle Vienna. In his most recent book, **Modernity and Crises of Identity,** Jacques Le Rider looks at a variety of approaches to what was perceived as a debilitating lack of certainty in late nineteenth century Viennese society, approaches which have usually been gathered under the heading of Modernism but whose characteristics Le Rider finds closer to those included in many current definitions of postmodernity. Le Rider's particular aim in his book is to question the emphasis given to the ailing, decadent aspects of the thinking of this place and period and instead to focus on its ability to produce new and more flexible ways of thinking identity even if these were ultimately superseded by the narrower ones which characterised fascism and other later developments. Interestingly, Le Rider's major publication prior to this one had been a study of the young Viennese Jewish intellectual Otto Weininger whose book **Sex and Character** and whose subsequent and related fate were a cause celebre of the time and have become fashionable once more in much Lacanian–inspired theory and literary criticism. A major thesis of Weinginger in his book was that the "genius" in civilization, a very male and Nietzschean being, was increasingly infected and decayed by the languorous, decadent female impulse in the human spirit. This decadent, female aspect was not present to an intolerable level only in women but in related human creatures such as homosexuals and Jews. Jewish himself, Weininger committed suicide not long after completing his book, which influenced not only Viennese intellectuals such as Wittgenstein but Joyce and Lawrence, among others.

The major, and ultimately much more famous, figure of this period and place who also related sex to identity and thinking was, of course, Sigmund Freud, also Jewish and, as Le Rider's book makes clear, considerably traumatised by the very sharp and increasing limitations to the cosmopolitan nature of Viennese society, at a time when the city's population was rapidly rising with an influx of immigrants from the surrounding provinces of the Austro–Hungarian empire, particularly Freud's home province of Moravia. One of the most obvious limitations was the exclusion of people of Jewish extraction from the more prestig-

ious and influential areas of Viennese society. This exclusion produced various reactions. One was Weininger's, which clearly included an element of 'Jewish self–hate', another was Herzl's determination to found an independent Jewish state, located in its historico–geographical origins, far from Vienna and Europe. Another was Freud's move away from a more traditionally scientifically–oriented psychology to his far more verbal, even literary approach to disorders of human identity in the form of psychoanalysis, the talking–cure. Le Rider's book has a great deal more to say about not only these three figures but many other of the same place and time, including the partly Jewish, uncomfortably homosexual, Wittgenstein. For the moment, however, all I wish to do is to make a connection with another publication, by a writer to whose work on the Vienna of this period Le Rider's is much indebted, Stephen Toulmin.

Toulmin, himself a student of Wittgenstein and author of **Wittgenstein's Vienna**, published in 1990 a book entitled **Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity.** While this book makes many and positive references to Wittgenstein its subject is not fin–de–siecle Vienna but, primarily, a broader but arguably even more profoundly troubled and disoriented area of time and space, Europe from the mid–sixteenth to the mid–seventeenth centuries.

It is in this period that Toulmin locates the beginnings of "modernity" and a fateful change of thinking from that represented by the open minded scepticism of the philosophy of Michel de Montaigne and the politics of Henri IV of France to the beginnings of a narrow and dogmatic will to certainty which are most dramatically and influentially exhibited in the work of Rene Descartes. Toulmin's basic accusation against the later philosopher and his followers or fellow thinkers such as Isaac Newton is that

> In four fundamental ways..(they) set aside the long preoccupations of Renaissance humanism. In particular they disclaimed any serious interest in four different kinds of practical knowledge: the oral, the particular, the local and the timely.
>
> (Toulmin 1990:30)

Like Le Rider, Toulmin is very much in favour of the potential for openness displayed both by the Austro–Hungarian empire and by mid to late sixteenth century Renaissance humanism and eager to stress the opportunity that late twentieth century Western thought has to avail itself of approaches to which it has too long blinded itself, with catastrophic consequences. A broader discussion of this issue is not practical here but it is worth drawing attention to the way in which Toulmin himself very self–consciously draws attention to his geographical and historical contextualising of the development of Descartes' philosophical procedures towards abstraction and dualism. The primary context is the

Thirty Years War and both the uncertainty it disastrously typified for Descartes and the equally disastrous climate of intellectual uncertainty he saw as leading to it. For Toulmin this negative approach to uncertainty is mistaken, just as for Le Rider certain reactions to the vague or complex hybridity of late nineteenth to early twentieth Imperial identity were mistaken. In each case openness and variety are appealed to in positive terms and great stress is laid on the socio–historical context of the production of ideas and attitudes.

A crisis in and a search for identity are conditions which might well be applied to late twentieth century Britain as much as late nineteenth century Vienna. This sense of crisis might be argued to have intensified with the bursting of the last optimistic bubble of the late sixties, the oil crisis of the early 197Os, the increasing ungovernability of various constituencies of the British nation and to have found one kind of resolution in the Thatcherism of the 1980s with its emphasis on free–market, neo–Victorian, Anglo–nationalistic man, though the signs seem to be that the crisis is recurring or in fact never went away. Britain's basic problem at the end of the twentieth century is that she is a small (compared to what she was) fish in an increasingly large and competitive global pond and is reaping the less economically beneficial aspects of being the modern world's first major imperial power. That is to say, she has a desperately outdated and potentially undemocratic system of political representation in combination with an increasing variety of identities in need of and failing to find representation and has consistently failed over the last twenty years or more to make the necessary changes to provide the country with investment in research and development on a par with her European and other economic competitors.

Despite this, not all developments in Britain over the last twenty years have been indicative of her economically, socially and politically moribund condition in comparison to most of her healthier, wealthier neighbours. The middle seventies not only saw a rise in national movements of independent representation and major confrontation between the equally dogmatic left and right, a process increasingly intensified during the 1980s, but radical developments involving the influence of continent–based "theory" on various disciplines within academia. The best known of these is perhaps the influence on literary studies and the consequent emergence of cultural studies but at about the same time major developments were beginning to occur within the field of geography. David Harvey's **Social Justice and the City (1973)**, roughly co–temperaneous with Raymond Williams' **The Country and the City (1973)**, is often remarked as signifying an early landmark in the development, certainly of human geography, from a self–contained, "scientifically objective" discipline into one which was much more conscious of the textual surface and history of its own discourse and its political implications, in a way which led its concerns to increasingly overlap with other disciplinary areas such as cultural and literary studies. A major con-

cern of human geography, particularly in the 1980s was that of uneven socio–economic development and the effect of the dimensions of an ever more globally interrelated situation on British society and economy. While writers such as David Harvey concentrated on analysing the general economic foundations and presuppositions of a post–Fordist capitalism of "flexible accumulation" and their relation to cultural developments, others such as Doreen Massey focused on the way different places because of their different type of location and history (with a consequently different, if contested, sense of identity) developed in different ways. The relations between the socially produced space provided by the flows of late capitalism and its effect on a variety of places became a major focus of concern for human geography as it did of course for the nation as a whole, since that whole was clearly becoming increasingly split into a metaphorical north–south, two–nation divide of mythological proportions.

A major focus for this relation between place and uneven development was the Docklands scheme in London, where very rich and very poor lived even more spectacularly close to one another than in Victorian times and where it was extremely clear whose side the government was on, since the scheme was the showpiece of its policy to turn Britain into a dynamic and competitive free–trade centre with London as a newly refurbished global city. I therefore want to turn now to three novels, all primarily, if not completely, set in London and written during this period, to look at some of the ways in which place and identity are treated and interact.

2.

The novel I want to begin with is **The Child In Time** by Ian McEwan, partly because I consider it to be one of the most impressively written pieces of British fiction in the 1980s (a point I think worth making since comparisons I will subsequently with the other two novels might imply a contrary impression) in terms of its openness of imagination and range of perception and also because it does indicate pretensions to be a "condition of England" novel to quite a considerable degree. Like a number of fictions written during this period it has a single main protagonist who undergoes a process of breakdown. This protagonist is, too, often haunted by a missing or spectral female presence (other examples might be **1982 Jeanine** by Alisdair Gray, **Waterland** by Graham Swift, **Edge of Darkness** by Troy Kennedy–Martin).

For the purposes of this article I wish to focus on only one scene in McEwan's novel. The scene is one of the most dramatic and memorable in the novel and clearly relates to the more obvious of its central thematic concerns. Unlike the other two novels I want to look at this one is never particularly precise in naming the places in which the events of the novel take place, despite the fact

that in some cases its locales are treated with considerable detail. It is, though, a metropolitan novel; the opening paragraph informs us that Stephen lives within conceivable walking distance of Whitehall and one can safely presume, without precise indication, that much of the narrative takes place within central London. The exceptions are when Stephen, for one usually very significant reason or another, decides to make an excursion into the country, a country which does not lie far beyond suburbia.

This is the case in the scene with which we are concerned, which we are led into during the course of the third chapter. Stephen has, quite literally, lost his daughter and become distanced from his wife but is now visiting her. Stephen, in the opening two chapters, is depicted as someone who has survived the transition from the childish optimism of the sixties to the reduced realism of the eighties. He accepts that his fate as a successful writer is due to good fortune rather than to genius or even talent and enjoys the ability to consume that the wealth accompanying his success brings – relatively expensive supermarket purchases, first class train ticket, and later a manic bout of overspending on toys. He might not have made the full trip from yippie to yuppie but there isn't too much left in the margin on either side. As he nears the first attempt at reunion with his wife his fears of losing her because of his knowledge of the way she tends to think her life lead him to more a more generalised characterisation of aspects of gendered difference.

> Against the faith men had in the institutions they and not women had shaped, women upheld some other principle of selfhood in which being surpassed doing. Long ago men had noted something unruly in this. Women simply enclosed the space which men longed to penetrate. The men's hostility was aroused.
>
> (McEwan 1989:55).

For the moment, I wish only to note that this difference is established in terms of occupation of space. We then proceed into a detailed exploration or exposition of the precise place in which he finds himself, the nature of the space and its relation to his thinking.

> He knew this spot, knew it intimately, as if over a long period of time. The trees around him were unfolding, broadening, blossoming. One visit in the remote past would not account for this sense, almost a kind of ache, of familiarity, of coming to a place that knew him too, and seemed in the silence that engulfed the passing cars, to expect him. What came to him was a particular day, a day he could taste.
>
> (McEwan 1989:56)

We seem to be close here to an early twentieth century pastoral evocation of place, as in the poetry of Edward Thomas or Ivor Gurney. The forest around him is no Black Forest, even though it does, as the scene progresses, seem to begin to take on Heideggerian overtones; the trees, even if blossoming all around him, are limited in number, the traffic is nearby. The movement home, here as in Heidegger closely related to a place itself closely related to a past almost lost, is constantly searched for in the novel and found, for a while at a later stage in the chapter when Stephen and his wife make love to one another. First the simplicity and familiarity of being naked and making love are emphasised, as is the process of childbirth later.

> It was amusingly simple: they had to do no more than remove their clothes and look at one another to be set free and assume the uncomplicated roles in which they could not deny their mutual understanding.
>
> (McEwan 1989:64)

Then the familiarity becomes overwhelming and euphoniously linguistic:

> Later, one word seemed to repeat itself as the long–lipped opening parted and closed around him, as he filled the known dip and curve and arrived at a deep, familiar place, a smooth, resonating word generated by slippery flesh on flesh, a warm, humming, softly consonated, roundly vowelled word.....home, he was home, enclosed, safe and therefore able to provide, home where he owned and was owned.
>
> (McEwan 1989:64)

This rhapsodic connection of sexual fulfilment and home–ownership moves on, in the rhetorical interrogative mode, first to reject, by implication, going abroad and support a thrifty use of that most vital of resources, often connected very directly with money by a copular "is", namely, time.

> Home, why be anywhere else? Wasn't it to be doing anything other than this? Time was redeemed, time purpose all over again because it was the medium for the fulfilment of desire.
>
> (McEwan 1989:64)

T.S. Eliot's moment of redemption of a rather more ecclesiastical nature is here replaced with a faith in libidinal materialism, arguably the ideal creed for a Thatcherite yuppie, as matter itself is shown to be incorrigibly narcissistic and self–indulgent and not part of the 1984 world of the administered public sphere

> Not governments, or publicity firms or research departments, but biology, existence, matter itself had dreamed this up for its own pleasure

> and perpetuity and this was exactly what you were meant to do, it wanted you to like it.
>
> (McEwan 1989:64–5)

Though perhaps in that last phrase we are uncomfortably close to the Ministry of Love. It must also be conceded that the moment proves, at least until the end of the novel to be transitory, and, arguably, or at least in some respects, self–delusive. Though there is an immense weight of emphasis on return to the family in the novel. In some ways its ability to be an interesting extension of ostranenie in its use of a realism of extreme events, depends on its mooring in a classical sense of returning to the major key, the happy harmonious family, tucked up, off the streets and at home in a world which the novel briefly shows to be threatening elsewhere.

Before arriving back home, in this chapter, however, Stephen has to undergo a profound sense of homelessness (the novel opens with him embarrassedly negotiating an encounter with a street–beggar) as, in the moment of vision in the profoundly familiar place, he reacts to a lack of recognition on the part of his parents

> ... he formed a single thought: he had nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named... Nothing was his own, not his own strokes or his movement, not the calling sounds, not even the sadness, nothing was nothing's own.
>
> (McEwan 1989:60)

People with "nowhere to go" here become articulated with what again can be made to sound like a note of Heideggerian politico–philosophical significance, a people looking for a moment to embody them, though again this is pushed towards a possessive sense of identity, or, here, the lack of one; " nothing was nothing's own".

My aim here is not primarily to indicate that the novel has a political unconscious that is profoundly sympathetic to the aims of Thatcherism. I am prepared to admit that things are rather more complicated, and ambiguous, than that. What is of primary interest here is that Stephen's first climactic breakdown is figured in terms of place related to memory and then to having a place in the order of things, one temporarily regained in temporary sexual communion with his wife later in the chapter. McEwan's novel, like many British fictions of this period, is dealing too with loss, loss of role, purpose and identity, a loss which appears to be retrieved on the private, family level in this book.

3.

I now want to move on to the second work, **City of the Mind** by Penelope Lively. Unlike **The Child In Time**, Lively's novel might be regarded as one of an increasing number of "London novels", if one is to accept Ken Worpole's recently defined basic requirement,

> The main qualification... is that...the city is not simply a backdrop of the action but an essential feature and dominating metaphor throughout.
> (in Bell:1995:83)

one which excludes, explicitly, novels such as Martin Amis's **London Fields** despite its opportunistic title.

At the same time, **City of the Mind,** is a novel which is not, by any means, at home in London. It reads more like an essay about London, one which seeks to emphasise its universal qualities, both in terms of the bewildering variety of its cosmopolitanism but also in terms of its ability to represent any other major city in the global network of the late twentieth century economic, but not terribly social, system. Some of the passages in the novel bear an interesting resemblance to some of Doreen Massey's prose when, as a geographer, she attempts to illustrate the simultaneously global and local sense of any place in order to discourage any exclusive, bounded sense of locality:

> At the local theatre Eamon Morrissey has a one–man show; the National Club has the Wolf Tones on, and at the Black Lion there's Finnegan's Wake. In two shops I notice this week's lottery ticket winners: in one the name is Teresa Gleeson, in the other Chouman Hassan....a notice announces a forthcoming concert at Wembley Arena: Anand Miland presents Rekha, live, with Aamir Khan Salman Khan, Jahi Chawla and Raveena Tandon.... Overhead there is at least always one aeroplane – we seem to be on a flight–path to Heathrow... Below, the reason the traffic is snarled up (another odd effect of time–space compression!) is in part because this is one of the main entrances to and escape routes from London, the road to Staples Corner and the beginning of the M1 to the North
> (Massey 1994:152–3).

Matthew Halland, main protagonist of Lively's novel, experiences an even wider range of cultural difference in an existence typified by paradoxical juxtapositions such as the global–local.

"He is both trapped and ranging free"

(Lively 1992:2)

But his perception of the multiplicity of London is perhaps more anxious, more uneasy than that of Massey; this anxiety stems from the lack of balance achieved between information and interpretation. Halland lives in a world which overwhelms him in this respect.He is told so much, and from so many sources, that

> he has learned to disregard, to let information filter through the mind and vanish, leaving impressions – a phrase, a fact, an image. He knows much, and very little. He knows more than he can confront: his wisdoms have blunted his sensibility. He is an intelligent man, and a man of compassion, but he can hear of a massacre on the other side of the globe and wonder as he listens if he remembered to switch on his answering machine. He is aware of this and is disturbed.
>
> (Lively 1992:3)

His awareness of London is perhaps slightly less disturbing but is of the same ilk:

> The city, too, bombards him. He sees decades and centuries, poverty and wealth, grace and vulgarity.
>
> (Lively 1992:3)

Though the prose in which his perceptions are rendered tends, one might note, to see things with an Augustan classicism of neatly ordered pairs, moving into equally well–groomed trios

> ...buildings that ape Gothic cathedrals, that remember Greek temples, that parade symbols and images. He sees columns, pediments and porticos. He sees Victorian stucco, twentieth century concrete, a snatch of Georgian brick.
>
> (Lively 1992:3)

and relaxing into the near anarchy of a quartet when we move to the language of restaurants.

> He sees, too, that the city speaks in tongues; Pizza Ciao, King's Cross Kebab, New Raj Mahal Tandoori, Nepalese Brasserie.
>
> (Lively 1992:3)

Both Matthew and the implied reader have to be let into the maze of detail that London is rendered as, but not immediately enacted as, with a degree of helpful caution: London for beginners, as it were.

Towards the end of the opening chapter, we are given a similar picture of the new, transplanted heart of London, again in the controlled form of Augustan impressionism and the older body in which it is housed

> Below them, the few surviving terrace houses of Limehouse, of Poplar, of Shadwell seem to crouch in some other time–band. The docks themselves still glint pewter in the sunshine – that ancient sequence of inlets and harbours: East India Dock, Surrey Docks, Canary Wharf, Millwall....
>
> (Lively 1992:13)

Here, though, and not for the first time in the novel, we are dealing with real locations, precisely named, unlike the very special place in McEwan's chapter. There, the place is special for Stephen but remains anonymous, unplaced, to the reader – nowhere, a private utopia, and that phrase sounds distinctly, quietly suburban, suburbs being well–known as places where things don't happen on the streets.

In many, obvious ways, Penelope Lively's fiction is a good deal more conventional and conservative than that of Ian McEwan. Here stories tend to be Jane Austen–like romances, with a distinctive present–tense reflection on now juxtaposed with then on the part of main and often subsidiary characters. The novels, though, tend to be set in the country, well–heeled, middle–class village suburbia, to be more precise, though there is usually at least one vulgar villain in the cast list. In this respect, it's interesting to compare **City of the Mind** with the novel which precedes it, **Passing On.** In the earlier novel, the setting is the village and the story mainly concerns the ability of the two main characters to survive, in a social and natural world both of which appear to have read and agreed with Darwin and the survival of the fittest and nastiest. In **Passing On** this role is filled by Ron Pagett, in **City of the Mind** by Mr.Rutter. In both novels the principal protagonists have major problems in keeping up with the future, the city. The Glovers, unmarried, middle–aged brother and sister, irretrievably, genteelly, rural, make a visit to the metropolis, though this occupies only one of the novel's fourteen chapters. Even here, the London they are used to has gone, to be replaced by the eighties London that will provide the main starting–point for **City of the Mind.**

> ...they found themselves away from the river and in a hinterland of commercial London that was as alien to them as New York or Hong

> Kong. Money reared up all around; it towered in the form of plate glass, stainless steel, polished marble, Portland Stone, concrete, brick and slate. For Helen, London meant the leafy calm of Twickenham, where they had lived in early childhood... For Edward, it was a bed–sitter in Bayswater, the rioting children of the secondary modern and the distresses of those disturbing years. For both of them the landscape in which they stood was quite unrelated to any of this.
>
> (Lively, 1989:94)

Life in general for the Glovers starts to become distressingly disorientating and unmanageable at a more general level than this; with Helen and Edward, we seem to be dealing with a doomed species, albeit in a partial comedy of manners. In **"City of the Mind"**, the outlook is rather more sanguine, though Matthew is still heir to major difficulties which themselves relate to a bleak Tennysonian view of a post–Darwinian world. His problem is not the loss of a mother or a child, nor even of a wife – he is separated from his wife, shares custody of their child and has a lover and is thus a very different kind of character, in significant respects, from either of the Glovers – but, more abstractly and, perhaps more disturbingly, the loss of love, a loss characterised as a death.

> In his bleakest moments, these days, it seemed to him that the death of feeling is more hideous even than the death of persons. He could cope better, he thought, with a Susan who had died loved and loving, than a Susan who had survived the extinction of his love and of hers.
>
> (Lively 1992:40)

Matthew, an architect, is characterised as someone traumatised in certain respects, decent and sensitive, but, unlike the Glovers (though there is clearly an important difference between brother and sister), coping. He can manage to read the city, though with a thoughtfulness that slows him down and therefore disadvantages him in contrast to his near pastless daughter. He has a lover, though one whom he ultimately rejects even if the novel presents us with a situation where she seems to discard him – he doesn't want to father a child on the terms offered. Interestingly, the first major rejection of Alice by Matthew comes at a point where he is relating his problems with Rutter, an estate dealer who seems to be more thug than businessman.

> Alice's world was purely referential. It was composed of people she knew or had heard of, places she had been to, things that had happened to her. This quite often made conversation difficult, Matthew found. Alice flew off in a sequence of tangents, pouncing upon the one identifiable reference in a statement to make it the prompt for an anecdote or rejoinder of her own. The effect was somehow disorienting. Dialogue

> did not progress in the rational and indirectly narrative manner that it should, but leapt all over the place in a way that was unsettlingly unconclusive.
>
> (Lively 1992:63–4)

Matthew's sense of discomfort in trying to pursue a meaningful (on his terms) dialogue with Alice is one which he also feels in relation to the city; it might be seen also as that of the irritation of the "traditional" modernist with the flimsiness of elusively superficial post–modern forms of behaviour or expression, or that of the novel with the city it seeks to reconnoitre, in essayistic paragraphs between the development of relationships, the development of whose form has much to do with the city described. Alice in this part of the novel leads on to Rutter, as perhaps she does in the novel generally. Alice is ultimately replaced by an increasingly evocation of the possibility of tasteful true love in the form of Sarah, a properly educated woman with matching sensitivity, whom Matthew uneasily picks up in a sandwich bar, using the shop–assistant as grinning go–between. Rutter, for whom Matthew feels instant and convincing disgust – he is, after all eminently, caricaturedly hateable – also disappears but leaves Matthew with a contemplative aftertaste which relates very much to the city and the sense of how the city is more than the individual and how identity is related to place. First, in a continuation of the passage above, we are presented with a sense of Rutter's essential Otherness for Matthew

> Right now, Matthew wanted to talk about the nature of evil. His encounter with Rutter had left him, in some perverse way, exhilarated. He felt like a naturalist who has been afforded a rare sighting of some creature whose existence he had always doubted. "It's like talking to a Martian, in a way," said Matthew. "Because you realize you can't make any basic assumptions about how he feels...
>
> (Lively 1992:64)

Shortly after this, communication with Alice breaks down again as she continues to take the non–conversation in her direction and the narrative contents itself with representing Matthew's internalised speech. Much later in the novel, though before Rutter's final, inconclusive appearance (there seems to be every chance of him turning up once more to blight Matthew's life should the occasion arise), Matthew finds himself thinking more philosophically and with an increasingly Alice–like lack of concentrated continuity on the theme of Rutter and his like:

> Cities will always favour people like him. They fatten on opportunity; they are spawned by the place, and then shape it to their own advantage. It seemed the supreme irony that their labours should so long outlast

> them, in terms of what is built and what is destroyed. And eventually, of course, history makes its own reassessments – ruthless greed becomes entrepreneurial skill, opportunism becomes farsightedness and acumen. The ravished landscapes and blighted lives, incapable of testimony slide into oblivion. Finally, the statues are erected; the bold, visionary figures arise in bronze upon their plinths.
>
> (Lively 1992: 196)

But this indignant sense of the injustices of history and the lack of sensitivity of free–market entrepreneurialism to questions of human dignity or survival are dispelled, or distracted, by the condition which worries Matthew in relation to Alice's conversational skills or himself at the point where we first met him in the novel, a sense of being overwhelmed by a cultural economy overloaded with information, a condition for which Lively's London acts as partial metonym (partial because the city has a history which stretches back further than Docklands or the founding of the Bank of England).

> He would think savagely of Rutter, as he drove to the office, or down to Blackwall. And then the thought would be overridden by the merciful vagaries of the attention, as he was distracted by a professional problem, by the dictation of his diary, by the teasing image of Sarah Bridges
>
> (Lively 1992:196)

Distracted, not from distraction, but by vengeful thoughts of public justice, and not, interestingly, by the immediate distractions of the city, but by aspects of his professional and private life.

Thus **City of the Mind** leaves us with a fluent, introductory, conventional, but, to my mind, intriguingly and impressively uneasy and rather confused presentation of a place both named and standing as metaphor for the condition of humanity in 1980s Britain.

A number of ghosts also traverse the pages of the novel, ranging in their chronological location from prehistoric times ("Bishopsgate Jurassic") to the Blitz. One of these is the Eskimo brought back from Frobisher's expedition, one of the first casualties of colonialism, and as Matthew meditates on his fate and on how it should be commemorated it is not strictly clear whether the thoughts represented in the final paragraph are Matthew's or the Eskimo's or the narrator's:

> He sees that he has left the world and come to a place which is nowhere, peopled with devils and monstrous beats... He goes away, deep into himself, back into the proper unity of man and space... He refuses this

> nowhere, he rejects it, he turns away from the dictations of time and seeks within his own head the securities of place.
>
> (Lively 1992:175)

As, it might be said, do the colonisers newly arrived in his part of the world, with genocidal efficiency and lasting effects for the late twentieth century global cultural economy. This undoubted victim might be seen as being characterised in a form which would make him a perfect candidate for the place–bound destiny of Heidegger's "turn" to historical and geographical destiny and Nazism. Disturbing as progress might be, while the Eskimo perhaps has a need and a right, an allowable desire, to close his eyes to the present and the new which are for him a real and an apparent wasteland, this is not perhaps so simple for Matthew, but the novel gets that right; there is nor more than an implied intimation of the author's and the character's sympathy, though like Stephen's feeling of "nothing was nothing's own", it presents the moment as one of powerful and desolate disorientation.

4.

Michael Moorcock's **Mother London** appeared two years prior to **City of the Mind**, at about the same time as **The Child In Time.** There are three main characters who are introduced in the opening section of the book, "Entrance to the City", first together, then individually. David comes first, followed by Mary and Josef, who do act as parental figures to some extent, though to David himself. They are introduced, in the title of the opening chapter, as "The Patients" and do time every now and then in Bethlehem or Bedlam. Their madness is something they share and suffer lovingly as it stems from their identification with the voices of the whole of the number of people that form London. For all of them a crucial event is their hellish baptism of fire in the Blitz from which their madness stems.

The book opens, after a prefatory Mervyn Peake poem on the Blitz and an extract from H.V. Morton's London, also from 1941, with a further quotation, though this time from the pen of one of the major characters:

> "By means of certain myths which cannot easily be damaged or debased the majority of us survive. All old great cities possess their special myths. Amongst London's in recent years is the story of the Blitz, of our endurance."
>
> (Moorcock 1989:5)

The novel has an unusual chronological arrangement; an opening and concluding section give the names of three of their four chapters to the holy trinity

of the three main characters and the core of the novel consists of four parts each consisting of six chapters, each of which has a name, often that of a pub, and a date. In the first part we move from 1957 to 1985, in the second from 1956 to 1940, in the third from 1940 to 1970 and in the fourth from 1985 to 1959. We thus have a double form of approximate mirror–image symmetry with a year of the Blitz at the heart of the structure. The chapters do not form any immediately apparent serial chain of consequence, though there are slight forms of development and closure of the kind traditional to the novel, such as the marriage of Mary and Josef after the death of David at the end of the book. Essentially the book provides us with a series of moments in the lives of our main three and many other characters as they appear at different points in time and space in a London whose different streets, buildings, areas, details are named with unusual thoroughness and a sense of intimate familiarity. The structure and the approach of the novel are comparable with another London novel which appears at almost the same time, Iain Sinclair's **Downriver**, though there is not space in this article to make any further comparisons with the work of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd who have both tended to devote their entire oeuvre to London and hence create the idea of the London novel in late twentieth century Britain, whether it takes the form of gothic, grotesque, or, as in, what seems to be a one–off by Moorcock, a prolific science fiction writer, though one whose recent epics in this genre can, in Ackroyd's view, be seen as condition of England books, near– romantic realism.

To even to begin to do justice to a novel as colossal as this one, in terms of its attentions to the detail of lived space, place in London, would take not just another article but a book. For the present, I wish to indicate only the kind of detail into which the book goes and then to look at some of Josef Kiss's remarks on identity and place towards the end of the novel.

The opening chapter moves fairly quickly into a bus ride in which, rather like Stephen and Bloom in Joyce's **Ulysses** the two meet but only to the knowledge of one of them, this time the younger. Both have the same woman, Mary, as the centre of their lives, though she eventually prefers Josef Kiss to David Mummery, but without losing contact with the latter. While Josef, or Mr. Kiss, a character whose physical appearance perhaps relates him more closely to the author (though Kiss is an actor and mind–reader of sorts, whereas Mummery is the writer), has been talking to a fellow passenger but then the townscape forms the focus of the narrative

> He speaks in a quiet moment between Westbourne Grove and Notting Hill. Grey, massive houses, monuments to the optimism of the late Victorian bourgeoisie, once multiple–occupied, the background to a scandal which destroyed lives and careers and rocked a government,

> slowly being reclaimed from the exploited immigrant by the upwardly mobile whites, go slowly by, on both sides, behind trees.
>
> (Moorcock 1989:8)

Mummery, embarrassed at meeting his friend, father–figure and unwitting rival jumps off the bus and finds an alternative route to the place the three of them will eventually be united, an NHSS Special Clinic for the mentally unhinged of sorts such as themselves. The novel carefully records the deviant mental history of the three but also presents them as the norm and centre of the book's consciousness.

> Mummery rises, disembarks and runs, an awkwardly animated stuffed beast, for the Tube at Notting Hill in time to force himself through the doors of a Circle Line train for High Street Kensington where he changes to a Wimbledon–bound District Line and sits alone as the carriage sighs and rumbles as far as Putney Bridge where he jumps out, dashes through the exit into Ranelagh Gardens, momentarily claustrophobic amongst the oddly arranged terra–cotta houses, to the trees and steeples and undecorated slabs, the hullabaloo of the bridge where the traffic jostles to cross the Thames, and there before him is a number 30 bus heading South. He leaps to the platform just as the bus moves forward again and the river is revealed, beyond it The Star and Garter and all the other rosy English Domestic brick behind tall bare trees on the further shore. For a moment the light turns the water to quicksilver. Gulls rise and fall around the bridge.
>
> (Moorcock 1989:9)

Known locality and movement are simultaneously celebrated here, a landscape, or a streetscape is celebrated here, to an extent that makes the passage as close to one from a guide–book or an affectionate memoir as a novel exploring the tensions and developments within a society. But those are present too; the novel concerns itself, between singing the praises of an often far from conventionally beautiful homescape, with the problems of those who have survived the blitz and have to go on to survive much more. The detail provided here is far more precise than in the other novels, but far less problematic and resonant than that of the other two; this is the celebration of the known (the final chapter of the novel, matching the opening "The Patients", is "The Celebrants"), which can, for instance in the form of Josef Kiss, question and resist development, though in the name of a singular, post–imperial multiplicity in opposition to the drab improvements of C2 Thatcherite uniformity. Thus the first chapter of the last major section of the novel, "The Angered Spirit", set in the latest year, 1985, and entitled, in the midst of the Thatcher era, "The World's End", finds an angered Joseph Kiss responding to his Indian immigrant friend's question:

> "Where are all these wealthy people coming from, old man? That's the mystery."
>
> Mr Kiss was decidedly unmystified and flared his nostrils, a disgusted boar. "From the damned Home Counties, always London's bane, her worst enemies, her potentially deadly parasites. They're driving out most Londoners and taking over houses street by street. My sister's Party encourages them in their destructive investments because it helps develop a brutish and disenfranchised unemployed class. Complaining all the time, these half–educated drones are filling up Fulham and Finchley with their striped pine...London will soon cease to be cosmopolitan.
>
> (Moorcock 1989:378)

In a witty, anti–Powellite, anti–Thatcherite inversion of the let's–get–rid–of–the–Pakis–and–niggers–while–Britain–can–still–recognise–itself–as–British approach the ultimately English Home County stockbroker belt inhabitants are seen as the blight of modern Britain's social landscape, though the whole passage is modified in its aggression by Dandy Banajii's failure to fully agree with Kiss's enthusiastically bad–tempered dismissal of all forms of material improvement and prosperity. Later in the chapter he finds a more fully supportive audience in berating the wartime government for its failure to properly defend the population of London against the ravages of the Blitz.

> "It was the first I fully understood of how fully detached governments become from ordinary people." Mr. Kiss made almost a ritual response. "I never went home. I worked in the East End all that time. The carnage was disgusting. Expecting London to collapse, the authorities made no real provision for defence. The ordinary city pulled the people through."
>
> (Moorcock 1989:386)

The significant combination in this novel and in immediately related fiction such as that of Iain Sinclair is that between people and a sense of place which is endangered by the spatial developments engendered by dominant forms of socio–economic practice in late twentieth century Britain. The concern itself is not a new one, the particular inflection in down–at–heel, cosmopolitan, late twentieth century London provided by these novels is and provides an approach to place significantly different but interestingly related to other novels of the period, such as those by McEwan and Lively, considered here. My aim is not to suggest that Moorcock's is a better novel or that it tells us more about significant aspects of late twentieth century British life, but that its detailed attention to actual landscapes, named, and therefore immediately available to the reader,is

a different process from the selectively imagined locales in McEwan's novel and more intensely localised than Lively's interestingly problematised but distanced and topical rather than topological approach.

5.

It might be argued that in the latter part of the twentieth century many cultures of the world, certainly those in Europe, whether at a national or sub–national or even super–national level, are suffering, enduring, perhaps, in some cases enjoying, a permanent state of identity–crisis, to the extent that in some cases, crisis may no longer be the appropriate term. Part of this development has to do with a somewhat less dominant position in the world has a whole, much of it with the nature of the social production of space in the present socio–economic system and its effect on place. In Britain, particularly in the last quarter–century, the sense of increasing decline and de–stabilisation of "traditional" forms of identity and social practice, has perhaps been stronger than in many European countries. Novelists, among others, have been attempting to represent, dramatise, and, to some extent, diagnose this process. The attempt in this article has been to indicate, to an extremely limited extent, certain ways in which they have tried to do so and the differences between them.

Ironically, from the perspective I have been looking at the three novels under consideration, McEwan, in some respects, emerges as the one with the most traditional aspect to the relationship between space, place and identity. Ironically, in that he is clearly one of Britain's most inventively imaginative novelists, traditional, in that he does not engage, the way that the other two novelists do, though with different approaches, with the social particularities and construction of identifiable places and their broader relation to a socio–spatial economy of living. Again, though, I would have to stress that I'm more interested in viewing this as a potentially significant difference, not as a criticism.

Lively's presentation and analysis of social space, is highly traditional in terms of characterisation and narrative development but interesting in the way that she allows both her hero's and her own traditional perspectives, rooted in eighteenth century, genteel, upper–middle class, professional, humanistic, decent Englishness, be significantly worried at by the spectre of the city – a very gentle, or genteel, form of urban gothic, as well as a very intelligent and interesting one at times.

Moorcock, a fantasist, a writer of science fictions, opts, for once, for something identifiable as realism, therefore making his novel immediately comparable with the other two, in one sense at least. McEwan's novel has a clear start, development and ending, Lively less so, in that there isn't much narrative to de-

velop, commentary arguably takes primary place, and in Moorcock, though we are provided with an ending of sorts we are, for the most part, presented with an exploration of spaces rather than a journey through time, and with a detailed evocation of place that makes the book as interesting as a work of geography as of fiction; it also presents us with a London which is not so much the central metropolis, even if aspects of its imperial history are inevitably present, but as another region of the British Isles.

There are other novelists who could have been mentioned in this context; Raymond Williams' **Border Country**, written more than thirty years ago, and certainly his **The Fight for Manod**, the writing of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd on London, the increasing number of regionally focused detective serials on television. Much of this work indicates a concern with the specific nature of place in relation to the formative currents of the flows of late twentieth century global–capitalism and the complex of inter–acting effects on individual, communal, regional, national and super–national identity. In much fiction to date the emphasis has been on the individual in relation to the national; there seem to be signs, as I have partially tried to indicate here that such a trend might, to some extent, change, and that there is need for it to do so.

PRINCIPAL SOURCES

ed. Ian A. Bell — **Peripheral Visions** (University of Wales Press 1995)

Le Rider, Jacques — **Modernity and Crises of Identity** (Polity Press 1993)

Lively, Penelope — **Passing On** (Penguin 1991)

City of The Mind (Penguin 1992)

Massey, Doreen — **Space, Place and Gender** (Polity Press 1994)

McEwan, Ian — **The Child In Time** (Penguin 1989)

Moorcock, Michael — **Mother London** (Penguin 1989)

Toulmin, Stephen — **Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity.** (University of Chicago Press 1992)