

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

TROUBLED WORDS:
CREATING DISTANCE IN SEAMUS HEANEY, MICHAEL LONGLEY, AND CIARAN
CARSON

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SPRING 2018

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in English and Political Science
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes selected poems by Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson, three of the most well-known poets from Northern Ireland. I focus my analysis of this group's works by looking specifically at each poet's use of distancing devices in his poetry. Those distancing devices are unique to each poet and influenced by their differing backgrounds in the context of Northern Irish society. When those devices are placed in the larger context of the Northern Irish Troubles through this group's poetry, they are able to inhabit and critique the violence without feeding into the continued trauma. Instead, each poet uses those literary devices at his disposal to suggest the possibility for a future in the North that is free from sectarian bloodshed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Mark Morrisson for agreeing to supervise my thesis. His thoughtful guidance and advice throughout the research, writing, and revision processes has been immensely helpful in improving my personal scholarship and writing.

I would also like to thank Dr. Xiaoye You for his assistance as my Honors Advisor as well as all of the wonderful faculty and staff of the English Department for their roles in shaping my undergraduate experience culminating in this thesis.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their enduring support throughout this thesis process and in my life overall. I do not know where I would be without them.

Introduction

Ireland has been marred by a long history of conflict. In “‘Altering the Past’: Northern Irish Poetry and Modern Canons,” Edna Longley claims that “Ireland's supposed advantage is that it offers poets living 'precedents in the popular memory’” (4). The past is never forgotten and still influences current events. In particular, Northern Ireland has been the setting of violence and conflict for centuries. It is that bloody past that caused the Troubles, a bitter conflict spanning thirty years of recent history. The Northern Irish Troubles produced violence and chaos, but the conflict also produced a group of poets whose works capture and interpret the reality of living life in a war zone. Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson have been the voice of the conflict. Individually and as a collective, these poets wrestle with the pressures and frustrations of critiquing the events of the Troubles without using the sectarian language that defines the conflict. Each poet consciously maneuvers through and around these frustrations through the literary techniques of their works.

Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson each use different distancing devices in their poetry to express and critique the traumatic experiences of the Northern Irish Troubles; while each poet's use of distance is influenced by his differing background, when considered together those distancing techniques suggest hope for reaching beyond the Troubles and provide possible questions and processes through which that hope may be realized. Seamus Heaney mythologizes place in order to reach back into the past and compare it to his violent present. His attachment to place is influenced by his upbringing in rural County Derry. This is

almost opposite to Michael Longley, who was born in urban Belfast and whose father fought in both World Wars. He uses relationships, rather than place, especially the one with his father, as entry points into the chaos of the Troubles. Ciaran Carson creates his own dreamscape of Belfast and layers it like a map over the city. While these approaches to creating distance seem vastly different, they each provide a lens through which to glean some understanding of the realities of a time in their country that saw violence made intimate and common.

The Northern Irish Troubles began in the latter half of the 1960's with a Catholic civil rights movement that was started by both Protestant and Catholic students in Northern Ireland with inspiration from the Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Before the movement began, Catholics living in Northern Ireland were treated as second-class citizens with few rights and opportunities in a Protestant Unionist society. In 1968, several non-violent marches or parades were organized to protest the poor treatment of nationalist Catholics. A march organized in Derry on October 5th was one of the sparks that lit the fire of the conflict. Despite a ban from the Northern Irish government, the parade's leaders went forward with the demonstration. They were surrounded by members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which was Northern Ireland's police force, and brutally beaten. This incident, in addition to a few others, set off a chain of violent events that tipped the balance from peace to chaos. People's everyday lives were shaped by seemingly arbitrary killings and revenge killings that invaded the most private of places. The people of the North came to know the violence quite intimately. For these reasons, poets like Heaney, Longley, and Carson felt compelled respond to the events in such a way as to move themselves and their people beyond the Troubles.

Seamus Heaney

Winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature, and one of Ireland's most acclaimed poets, Seamus Heaney grew up in a small rural town in County Derry, Northern Ireland to a large Catholic family. Heaney would later credit his Catholic upbringing as being central to his writing. He described it as, "the distrust of the world, if you like, the distrust of happiness, the deep pleasure there is in a mournful litany, the sense that there's some kind of feminine intercession that you turn to for comfort—this is part of the Irish Catholic thing" (qtd. in Kinahan 408-9). On top of this deep-seated connection to Catholicism, Heaney found a tension between the traditional agricultural side of his father's family and the industrial side of his mother's family.

Northern Ireland before the Troubles was already stratified along religious and socio-political lines. Catholics in Ireland, particularly in the North, typically made their living through farming. They often had a difficult time finding work in the more industrialized cities where Protestants were given preference for jobs and made up a larger portion of the middle and upper classes. This stratified dynamic would later be summed up by Heaney in his Nobel lecture: "The crux of the problem involves an ongoing partition of the island between British and Irish jurisdictions, and an equally persistent partition of the affections in Northern Ireland between the British and Irish heritages" ("Crediting Poetry" 7). Once the Troubles were in full swing, those divisions grew deeper and became all-consuming.

When he was twelve, Heaney received a scholarship to attend St. Columb's College, a Catholic boarding school in Derry. After attending St. Columb's Heaney went to Queen's University Belfast. While there he developed a deep interest in the English Language, specifically its Anglo-Saxon past. "One of his most memorable teachers was John Braidwood, a Glaswegian who was an expert in Old English and Ulster dialects and who exposed Heaney to those images and cadences of the Dark Ages that would later resurface in *North* and *Beowulf*" (Clark 37). Heaney uses several Anglo-Saxon allusions in his work to tease out meaning from the seemingly meaningless violence that surrounded him.

The Germanic and Anglo-Saxon periods provide an entry point into the world of the Troubles. Heaney uses it to distance himself from the violence that consumes his present while delving deeper into that violence to understand the reasons for it. Jonathan Hufstader writes, "Heaney's poetry masterfully represents the dilemmas and travails of a person striving both to understand tribal revenge and to liberate himself from it—even to liberate himself by understanding it" (Hufstader 23). The use of the Anglo-Saxon blood feud as a metaphor for the circumstances of the time creates distance from the Troubles so that poet, speaker, and reader may approach those events without being consumed by them; temporal distance results in physical distance and suggests the possibility of potential clarity when considering the reasons for the self-inflicted chaos.

In the poem "North," Seamus Heaney's speaker looks to the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon moments of the Irish past in an attempt to glean wisdom from "those fabulous raiders / those lying in Orkney and Dublin" ("North" lns. 9-10). The speaker invokes a group of people who invaded Ireland and embedded themselves into the country's narrative; he mentions "those fabulous raiders" in order to draw parallels between their actions and the actions of the modern

day. The speaker removes himself from the present and places himself in a part of the past that has been made into its own mythology in order to see potential resolutions that come from the distance of time.

By pushing the poem to look back in time, Heaney blends past and present in a single place. His speaker talks about, “ocean-deafened voices / warning me, lifted again / in violence and epiphany” (“North” lns. 17-19). The physical place of Dublin is transformed into a mythical space in which the speaker can hear those voices and learn the truths those voices knew through the violence they were witness to and continued themselves. The voices the speaker hears are shaped by bloody and chaotic experiences that give the lines in which they are mentioned an ominous tone of “violence and epiphany;” the weight of that tone is woven throughout the rest of the poem and grounds the speaker’s words in that mythical space as they are layered onto the real and physical present.

Mythical space finds its home in the real world through a people’s ability to remember the myth and continually weave it into the present moment. The speaker in “North” catalogues the series of events that have led him and his home to the current moment. His description of these events evoke the idea of the blood feud as he begins to parallel that seemingly ancient and barbaric concept with its modern manifestation:

thick-witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behind-backs
of the athling, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood. (“North” lns. 24-28)

The gradual Anglo-Saxon invasion into Ireland planted the seed that eventually allowed “thick-witted hatreds and revenges” to grow into “memory incubating the spilled blood” that the Troubles produces. The land of Ireland holds the events of history within it and the people who

inhabit that land have the memory of those often bloody events etched onto their consciousness. The speaker, like Heaney, has been shaped by the modern blood feud that has been present in all aspects of his life and the very land in which he has lived. The land echoes the “lies” and “exhaustions” the Germanic voices tell the speaker about while simultaneously drowning out those voices and the truth they speak.

Through his poems, Heaney asks the implicit questions: How can the violence of the Troubles be solved? And how can the people of the North move past sectarian divides towards a shared identity and community? This is reflected through the speaker in “North” listening to the voices of the past. Those voices suggest, “Expect aurora borealis / in the long foray / but no cascade of light” (“North” lns. 34-36). The answer to Heaney and his speaker’s questions will not come in some grand epiphany; knowledge and understanding come in fleeting, liminal moments, like the ancient voices come to the speaker. He stretches that moment out to become expansive yet confined in an instant on the “long strand / the hammered shod of a bay” (“North” lns. 1-2). All time is layered and happening all at once while the speaker remains in a single place. The answers found in a single, expansive moment reveal that the past is very much present in place and memory. The poem “North” moves back and forth through time while remaining grounded in place. It creates a literary space in the collection *North* that allows Heaney to explore different places and moments in time through several other poems in order to understand the violent sectarian nature of his current world.

Seamus Heaney’s exploration through temporal distance continues with his poem “The Grauballe Man.” In it, Heaney uses the image of the bog mummy to mythologize the tribalistic nature of modern Northern Ireland and enter into the chaos and violence that tribalism produced. The poem begins by rooting or burying itself in a sense of place: “As if he had been poured / in

tar, he lies / on a pillow of turf” (“Grauballe Man” lns. 1-3). While the real Grauballe man was not found in Northern Ireland, there is no direct reference to a specific place or even a specific time in those lines; the specific details are not as important as the ground that the man is found in: the bog. The “pillow of turf” can be found all over Ireland and is deeply grounded in cultural myths and understandings of the world. By backgrounding a specific place on the map and foregrounding the soft turf of the bog, the speaker of the poem places the Grauballe man and the poem in a space that is at once in Northern Ireland and outside of it. The opening lines of the poem create a distance that allows Heaney and his speaker to drift in and out of that space as the poem progresses.

In creating distance through his own space-time, Heaney can closely expose the brutal reality of modern blood feud without being consumed by the real, visceral experience of it. In “The Grauballe Man,” Heaney’s speaker describes the bog mummy and notices, “his slashed throat / that has tanned and toughened” (“Grauballe Man” lns. 20-21). This moment of observation begins an exploration deep into the mummified wound. The speaker notices that the slash appears to have healed in some way: “The cured wound / opens inwards to a dark / elderberry place” (“Grauballe Man” lns. 22-24). The image of a wound that opens inwardly is striking in these lines. It suggests that rather than the body expulsing something from within itself, the body takes something into itself. The body is made to take in or absorb an evil force into itself in order to heal the world. The sacrificial body is the elderberry bush, the mystical object that wards off evil and cleanses the world in which it exists. In this moment, the speaker suggests the use of a violent act in order to achieve peace or order in a group or society. In a subtle way, the “cured wound” alludes to a perception of the Troubles that Heaney struggles with in his

work: perhaps violence is what is required in order rid his country and his people of the imposed and harmful curse of sectarianism.

While the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland was awful, there is a sense that for some, it was necessary. For Heaney, growing up as a part of the Catholic minority in the north made this concept very difficult: “The external reality and inner dynamic of happenings in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1974 were symptomatic of change, violent change admittedly, but change nevertheless, and for the minority living there, change had been long overdue” (“Crediting Poetry” 5). While the violence was not condonable, the possibility of change it could bring for the Catholic population was not something that was considered lightly. Hufstader explains that, “There is a sense of solidarity, even identification, with violent tribal culture undermines his wish for humanistic emancipation from social violence” (Hufstader 22). The blood feud Heaney witnesses is not one he can easily isolate himself from. In attempting to do so he is inevitably drawn into the emotional turmoil the Troubles created. His own inner struggle is made visible on the page and reflects the everyday struggle of the people of Northern Ireland to cope with the reality of what was happening. In every poem, there is uncertainty as to whether or not Heaney believes in the tribal identity or is horrified by what it creates: perhaps both.

It is for this reason that Heaney builds distance into his poetry through space and time as a means of countering the all-consuming nature of the conflict. He reaches back into the far recesses of human experience and memory to uncover the realities of tribal violence that have remained constant up through the present. His speaker, by observing and considering the Grauballe man, forces himself to confront the brutality that went into the man’s death; he questions the actions that were suffered by this man and his own response to those actions’

result. The speaker asks, “Who will say ‘body’ / to his opaque repose?” (“Grauballe Man” lns. 27-28). How has his death come to mean something? How does a people move past the necessity of bloody purge towards something better? The facts surrounding Grauballe man and his death cannot be separated from “the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped” (“Grauballe Man” lns. 46-48). This mummy, this man, is not the only person to have his life violently take from him in an attempt to achieve order. There are countless other victims that the bog has taken in and still houses as the land attempts to heal the wounds that humans inflict on it and each other.

The Grauballe man’s death is more meaningful to the speaker because he is part of a large and terrible whole, but the intended results that those deaths were meant to bring about were never fully realized. When made to parallel the Troubles, the Grauballe man reveals that what the people wish to achieve through blood sacrifice cannot fully or truly be attained; the healing of the world (Northern Ireland) requires actions beyond violence that recognize a central element of humanity. In the present, the land of bogs in the North of Ireland is now littered with a new crop of bodies intended to attain order and peace. But at what point will the sacrifices be enough? Heaney layers his confusion and questions about the Troubles into the space-time explorations he writes of in his poems. Rather than answering his own questions, Heaney repeatedly asks them through the cycles of history that play and replay in the places of Heaney’s world.

Heaney’s implicit questioning and critiquing of the Troubles begins and ends with observations of places in their current state. Those places provide an anchor that allows Heaney to reach out and pull back the words he needs to create meaning and understanding. In the poem “Funeral Rites” in *North*, Heaney begins by providing an observation of the present from which

to expand his thoughts through time. The poem begins with the speaker discussing the scene of a funeral for a member of his family. The speaker's tone is as somber as the room where the dead are laid out. He describes the deceased as "shackled in rosary beads" ("Funeral Rites" ln. 8). Usually meant as a symbol of hope, here the rosary beads are given a weight that chains the speaker and his relatives to not just a faith, but a tradition; they are subject to a tradition of subjugation and hatred for the faith placed above their own. The rosary beads also chain those who have and wear them to a commitment towards the advancement of the people who share their faith while seeking the destruction of those who do not share the faith; to claim a faith identity is to pledge oneself to the fight against all other faiths.

But faith is also something that Heaney, his speaker, and his audience cling to as a means of understanding and closure. The speaker in "Funeral Rites" explains, "Now as news comes in / of each neighborly murder / we pine for ceremony" ("Funeral Rites" lns. 33-35). He compares the death of an individual to the multiple deaths of members of the community, suggesting that they are related. As the deaths of those around him increase the speaker looks for something more meaningful than a dark and stuffy room; he wants to bring back, "the great chambers of Boyne, / prepare a sepulcher / under the cup-marked stones" ("Funeral Rites" lns. 41-43). In just a few thoughts, the speaker leaves the room he is currently in and travels back to a people older than the bog mummies and whose lives are shrouded in myth. At the same time, the speaker also digs up an allusion to the Battle of the Boyne, which cemented Protestant rule in Ireland and set up the three hundred years that lead almost directly to the troubles. He is able to blur distinctions between time and place in such a way that layers multiple connotative moments together. A sepulcher like the ones of old are the only places that can hold the death and chaos that the speaker witnesses. Paralleling several places of final rest allows Heaney to tie those places

together and enter into the violent present through “the megalithic doorway” (“Funeral Rites” ln. 60) of a seemingly distant and mythic time.

Blood feud is woven throughout Heaney’s poems. This Anglo-Saxon literary theme fits over the sectarianism and violence of the Troubles; allowing Heaney to re-write it into an Irish (or Northern Irish) narrative. Like Heaney, the speaker lingers on thoughts of the past, looking back in time for answers to contemporary trouble and turmoil. He contemplates laying to rest the troubles that surround the present:

When they have put the stone
back in its mouth
we will drive north again
past Strang and Carlin fjords

the cud of memory
allayed for once, arbitration
of the feud placated. (“Funeral Rites” lns. 61-67)

The speaker looks for an end to the blood feud of the modern age but cannot find the modern words to describe the violence or the means to end it. The past memorializes the deceased who, “though dead by violence / and unavenged” (“Funeral Rites” lns. 72-73) provide a catharsis for the community; their deaths create moments or spaces in the chaos that allow those who witness that chaos to consider and envision what time beyond the Troubles will be for the North. Molino points out that in a sense, “The speaker in ‘Funeral Rites’ contemplates a mythic baptism on a cultural level....Such a baptism longs to create a community and a communion through a symbolic act” (Molino 99-100). Remembering death as part of a tradition provides the opportunity for the community to cleanse itself and move on towards a new tradition. The funeral rites are the ritual of renewal that ends the Troubles in hope of something more.

Seamus Heaney generates physical and temporal distance in his poetry by layering past and present together in place. This literary technique permits Heaney to look closely at the all

aspects of the Northern Irish Troubles in order to gain deeper understanding of the reasons for it. While his deeper investigations do not necessarily yield answers, they create spaces in between the arbitrary acts violence that consume his present that reveal a potential for the people of the North beyond the present. But Heaney is not alone in his attempts at finding potential through distance. One of his contemporaries, Michael Longley, also finds hope in distance; his distance is one that is generated by shifting focus from time and place to people and community.

Michael Longley

The scholar and poet Michael Longley was born in Belfast to an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. His father had served in both World Wars. Due to his family background, Longley often felt uniquely positioned along sectarian fault lines: “Sometimes I feel Irish, sometimes British, most of the time neither” (qtd. in Crotty 41). Longley often put on what he considered to be different personalities at home and at school. Even at school, however, at an early age it was clear to Longley that his community was deeply divided: “[I] sniffed sectarianism in the school playground, but I didn’t understand what the fuss was about, and I still don’t” (qtd. in Crotty 41).

Longley attended Trinity College in Dublin, where he studied Classics. He eventually became a professor of Classics and was the poet laureate of Ireland for a time. During the 1960’s, Longley joined a group of poets that had been put together by Philip Hobsbaum. Writing in and with this group was influential for Longley: “What Philip gave us was a sense that we weren’t on our own.... Philip gave use the sense that Belfast might matter and that we mattered and that poetry mattered” (qtd. in Wilmer 1). The group helped Longley to ground himself in his identity while refining his work.

While with this group Michael Longley met Seamus Heaney. An affectionate and competitive friendship began between the two poets, who both would later reject the idea that they belonged to a group or school of poets: “We became good friends, but there was too much healthy competition in the air for there to be any collegiate sense—a school or group.... We were individuals who were and are fond of each other” (qtd. in Healy 559). Derek Mahon was among

some of the other poets involved in this competitive group. Both Mahon and Heaney served as important friends and influences on Longley. Several of Longley's poems are dedicated to or about these two poets, demonstrating the importance of relationships to Longley. These familial and friendly relationships provide Longley with openings into the events that trouble his home.

Just like Heaney and other poets from Northern Ireland, Longley felt pressures from the public and within himself to respond in some way to the Troubles as they began to take shape and after they had consumed the country. But expressing the painful nature of the times did not come easily for the writers and poets in the north: "It took time for the raw experience of living through the Troubles to settle to an imaginative depth where they could be dealt with. We were quite self-conscious about avoiding rushing in and hitching a ride on yesterday's headlines and cashing in, as it were, on the suffering of our fellow citizens" (qtd. in Wilmer 3). That self-consciousness never left Longley and it can be seen in all of his works. Although, there is increased sensitivity in the personal and relational poems that delve deep into the Troubles to tease out some sense of understanding.

Like the poetry of Seamus Heaney and his other contemporaries, Longley's poetry depicts and discusses the Troubles while combating the pressure of responding to the chaos of that conflict. Longley uses stark diction that emotes confusion about the reasons for, and nature of the violence while he struggles with his identity and place within that violence. Fran Brearton claims that, "The First World War (which was the beginning of the Irish tragedy as indeed it was the beginning of every other convulsion in the western world in the twentieth century) has been the primal landscape of Longley's poetry" ("Michael Longley: Poet in No Man's Land" 59). This is clear when looking at Longley's poem "Wounds," for in the first few lines he mentions his father's involvement in the Ulster Division at the battle of the Somme.

Michael Longley's poem "Wounds" begins with the speaker talking about his father: "Here are two pictures from my father's head — / I have kept them like secrets until now" ("Wounds" lns.1-2). He speaks of his father's memories with sensitivity and respect. Longley's father also shared stories and memories from both World Wars with his son. In having his speaker talk of passed down stories from father to son, Longley is anchoring his poem and its musing to the father figure as a touchstone. Those memories are treasures to the speaker that have been kept locked away in his and his father's mind. Longley's father and the relationship they had had a major impact in shaping how Longley approached and understood the violence in the north: "The fact that my father was a soldier, for instance, in both World Wars led me to ask the simple question: If he were alive now, what on earth would he make of the Troubles" (qtd. in Wilmer 3)? This question echoes throughout "Wounds" and is foundational for several of Longley's other poems.

The first picture that the speaker describes is of "the Ulster Division at the Somme / Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope'" ("Wounds" lns. 3-4). The speaker's father speaks of the Ulster Division as an outsider; those men are his comrades yet it feels as if there is a distance between them and the speaker's father. In describing a unit that the speaker's father was not a part of, the speaker reveals his father's position of outsider and suggests his own hybridity. The speaker is at once a part of Ulster and an outsider to it. This reflects Longley's perception of himself. "The tragedy of the Somme affects all of Ulster. Every little village and town has its own war memorial, and many of the recorded names fell in that particular battle. My father's own experiences, which he recounted vividly on only a couple of occasions, have allowed me to participate in the community's glum pride" (qtd. in Healy 558).

The father's awed description of the Ulstermen continues as he remembers hearing, "'No Surrender!': a boy about to die, / Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill'" ("Wounds" lns. 5-6). Again, their comradery is not unusual but passion behind every war cry sticks in memory. Not only are the men of Ulster a strong unit, they are "'Wilder than Gurkhas'" ("Wounds" ln. 7). Gurkhas were soldiers from Nepal who served in imperial regiments. During the First World War, they gained a reputation as fierce fighters who were often the first to arrive and the last to leave the battle. By comparing the Ulstermen to Gurkhas, the speaker's father is suggesting that they are not typical soldiers. Their bravery stems from more than adrenaline; it is born out of a deep-rooted hatred. That hatred the speaker's father witness is made slightly disturbing as it take on an ominous tone.

Longley's poetry looks at more than just the violent and emotionally charged moments of his father's memory; his poetry examines the dignified and human elements of war that come when the battle is over: "Next comes the London-Scottish padre / Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick / With a stylish backhand and a prayer" ("Wounds" lns. 9-11). In the midst of death and destruction there remains a sense of dignity, at least for the speaker's father. Ferocity and violence from the first picture is met with a small act of compassion in the second picture.

Both of these images, and the real events Longley has them represent, take their toll on the individual who holds them in his memory. The speaker's father is, "a belated casualty, / He said – lead traces flaring till they hurt - / 'I am dying for King and Country, slowly'" ("Wounds" lns. 14-16). The wounds left behind by the both World Wars, while invisible, remain as a painful anchor to memory. The pain the violence caused did not end with signed treaties; it lingers in and around those who experience that pain. Brearton argues that, "the 'Wounds' of the poem are psychic as well as physical, historical wounds as yet unhealed, fault-lines running through the

century and the society” (“Wounds,’ Michael Longley” 234). Through his father’s death, the speaker enters into the troubling death that has become a part of the world around him.

Longley uses the visible and invisible casualties of a traditional war as a means of giving shape and definition to the violence a people inflicts upon itself. Longley’s speaker buries his father with, “Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone” (“Wounds” lns. 21-22). While his father is buried with “military honours of a kind” (“Wounds” ln. 18), the “soldiers” next to him are from a different war in which there is no honor in dying; one death follows another for the smallest offense. The impassioned hatred that the speaker’s father witnesses at the Somme is buried with him. In this moment, Longley layers the senselessness of the Great War with the senselessness of the Troubles. Those two events are connected with one having its roots in the other. The Troubles Longley and his speaker witness did not just happen; the violence and chaos appear inevitable.

By beginning with his relationship with his father, Longley can expand his work to look at his relationship to the people of his community and the relationships that cross sectarian lines. The three boys Longley’s speaker mentions are not the only casualties of the speaker’s war. The speaker talks about a bus conductor who was killed in front of his family: “He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers / Without a murmur, shot through the head / By a shivering boy who wandered in” (“Wounds” lns. 28-30). Unlike his father’s war, the violence that plagues the speaker’s present does not have clear designations. A man can be shot in his own home by shivering boys without reason or remorse. No dignity exists for the combatants of the Troubles; no honor exists in dying for the sectarian cause. The only consolation to be found is in the emotionless words, “To the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think ‘Sorry Missus’ was what he

said” (“Wounds” lns. 33-34). But how can those words be enough? How will the troubled war end?

Longley’s father is not the only person in whom the poet finds space to express the trauma of the Troubles. According to Brearton, “Longley’s poems are concerned with the distance between private and public.... The ‘public utterance’ is thus mediated through privacies, rather than existing as an abstract meditation on such privacies” (Brearton 78). Longley explores intimate moments of the Troubles by expanding his gaze to the private individuals who make up a community. By addressing private experiences individually and then grouping them collectively, Longley rebuilds his broken community around shared experience. Appearing in Longley’s collection *Man Lying on a Wall*, the poem “Wreaths” consists of three parts or smaller, shorter poems about victims of the Troubles: “The Civil Servant,” “The Greengrocer,” and “The Linen Workers.” Each smaller poem layers on top of the next, creating a distance from the personal realities of the violence while also allowing Longley to work within that violence through compartmentalization.

“The Civil Servant” begins with a man being shot in his kitchen while preparing breakfast: “A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull, / The books he had read, the music he could play” (“Civil Servant” lns. 3-4). The violence that troubles Northern Ireland does not just erase lives, it erases the facets of humanity and culture that those lives contribute to society. The civil servant’s life disappears as, “They rolled him up like a red carpet and left / Only a bullet hole in the cutlery drawer” (“Civil Servant” lns. 9-10). In a matter of minutes, there is nothing left of the civil servant but a hole that mirrors the one made in his skull. He no longer exists, but the empty space left from his murder is deeply felt. The speaker explains, “Later his widow took a hammer and chisel / And removed the black keys from his piano” (“Civil Servant”

Ins. 11-12). The violent acts and revenge killings do more than physically nihilate individual people; the trauma of the violence nihilates the existence of humanity in such a way that strips people of their sanity and innate dignity. This creates a tension between wanting to forget and move on as a people and remembering so that the violence will never occur again.

Longley focuses a complex social problem through intimate individual moments and experiences. “The Greengrocer” adds another layer to the loss and shock experienced in “The Civil Servant.” The poem relates the death of a local greengrocer Longley knew. In a later interview, Longley talks about his response to the man’s death: “I wrote a lament for our local greengrocer who was murdered by the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force]. I sent this to his widow before even considering publication” (qtd. in Healy 560).

The speaker of the poem commends the greengrocer: “He ran a good shop, and he died / Serving even the death-dealers / Who found him busy as usual” (“Greengrocer” Ins. 1-3). The greengrocer does not distinguish between one side of the violence or the other; he serves all who enter his shop, including the men sent there to kill him. While it is not clear if the greengrocer knew that they were in his shop to kill him, it appears that like the civil servant, the greengrocer has no reason to consider himself a target of sectarian violence.

The second and last stanza of the short poem reads:

Astrologers or three wise men
Who may shortly be setting out
For a small house up the Shankhill
Or the Falls, should pause on their way
To buy gifts at Jim Gibson’s shop,
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines. (“Greengrocer” Ins. 7-12)

In this stanza, the speaker connects his local greengrocer to the Son of God. More specifically, the speaker connects Christ to each individual, Catholic and Protestant, who makes up the Belfast community. Christ, like the greengrocer, does not distinguish between the Protestants of

the Shankhill or the Catholics of the Falls. He could appear in any home, regardless of faith or politics. Perhaps the wise men who come to visit will be able to explain that to the men who killed Jim Gibson.

The third and final poem of “Wreaths” called “The Linen Workers” expands Longley’s increasingly layered conflation of victims with martyrs or even with Jesus Christ. The poem begins, “Christ’s teeth ascended with him into heaven” (“Linen Workers” ln. 1). The image of teeth seems misplaced at first but as the speaker continues to discuss them he explains, “I am blinded by the blaze of that smile / And by the memory of my father’s false teeth” (“Linen Workers” lns. 5-6). The speaker seems to be looking up at the blinding smile he describes. In talking about Christ’s smile as it reminds him of his father’s false teeth, the speaker connects his father with Christ; those two figures also refer back to the civil servant and greengrocer of the previous poems. Longley’s speaker reaches across individual lives in order to build a community of casualties.

Longley layers the poems together, expanding and contracting the idea of the Troubles from the overarching and systematic to the intimate and personal. The speaker transitions halfway through the poem to speaking of the linen workers mentioned in the title. They were Protestants who were on their way home from work. Their bus was stopped by men in military-style uniforms and the passengers were lined up outside the bus. When asked who was Catholic, the Protestant workers tried to keep the only Catholic man on the bus from revealing himself; they believed the men were Protestants who would kill the Catholic. But the man stepped forward and as soon as he did the 10 Protestant men were shot and killed.

These are the men the speaker references as he says, “When they massacred the ten linen workers / There fell on the road beside them spectacles, / Wallets, small change, and a set of

dentures” (“Linen Workers” lns. 9-11). The speaker sets the scene of the aftermath of the massacre. He maintains a detached, matter-of-fact tone in the description. The description painted expresses more through the speaker’s restraint of emotion. But the last word and image of those lines, the dentures, brings the speaker back to his father. The father figure provides an entry point or a parallel to the people and events of Longley’s poems. The father allows for the Troubles to be seen through his eyes by relating it to the events that he experienced.

The end of the poem brings the speaker back to his father in a similar way to Longley’s “Wounds.” The speaker talks about burying his father:

Before I can bury my father once again
I must polish the spectacles, balance them
Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth. (“Linen Workers” lns. 13-16)

In going through the necessary steps to bury his father, the speaker mentions the same items found with the murdered linen workers at the scene of the massacre. While he talks of burying his father, the speaker could be burying any one of the men killed; identities are blurred so that the speaker and those he speaks of can exist individually and as part of the larger group victims whose lives were stolen from them. “Wreaths” expresses individual experiences as part of a communal cycle violence that plagues the country. “The cycle repeats as long as the violence in Northern Ireland perpetuates itself: the socio-political critique implicit in this is that the conditions for ‘redemption’, or for breaking the cycle, are not in place – not least of which is an acceptance of a shared guilt and responsibility” (Brearton 147).

Where Heaney’s poems mythologize place, Longley’s poems realize the personal. Where Heaney’s work expands its scope through time, Longley’s scope contracts around individual moments. Each poet’s approach to expressing the Troubles is deeply rooted in their differing personal histories. Those histories, when placed in the context of the Troubles, naturally produce

differing perceptions and means of coping with the communal trauma. But the key to both Heaney and Longley's works is a similar sense of community. Heaney's approach to community centers on tribal interactions while Longley seeks to build a community out of individuals that initially appear isolated. In both approaches, the poets seek to reach beyond sectarian divides in order to grasp possibility for life after the violence. Heaney and Longley's reach extends into the generation of poets to immediately follow.

Ciaran Carson

Ciaran Carson is a Northern Irish poet belonging to the generation just after Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney. He was born into an Irish-speaking Catholic family. Growing up in the working-class neighborhood along the Falls Road in Belfast, he went on to attend Queen's University, Belfast, where he studied English. Due to his family's strong connections with traditional Irish culture, Carson was exposed at a young age to the Irish language and traditional music. He later explained that, "I think that music and song are fundamental to what I write" (qtd. in Michaud 3). The influence of music in Carson's life and poetry can be seen in style in which he writes. He uses a longer line, allowing for thoughts to move and blend together in a way that evokes lyrical tones.

The musicality of the longer line also allows a more narrative structure to unfold as it would in *sean nós* songs. *Sean Nós*, or "old style" is traditional Irish music. Typically, it is highly ornate and complex in its composition. *Sean nós* songs often express deeply powerful emotions of sadness or love as they seek to tell local, historical, or mythical stories important to the cultural narrative. Carson uses the narrative elements of *sean nós* to embed a sense of visceral experience in his poetry. He tells the story of his native Belfast through an extended exploration of the city that provides an immediacy while also preventing Carson, his speakers, and his audience from getting lost in the troubled story.

Carson's deep connection to his home city of Belfast helps to shape his works. Carson's father was a postman, and he often took his children on long walks all around the city, pointing out buildings and streets. Because of this, "the whole sense of exploration, the webs of buildings, streets, factories, shops was there from early on" (qtd. in Laskowski 94). This connection appears

in many of Carson's poems, especially in "Belfast Confetti" from his collection *The Irish for No.* In "Belfast Confetti," Carson lays a virtual map of Belfast on top of the city in order to explore the aftermath of a bombing. It begins, "Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining / exclamation marks" ("Belfast Confetti" lns. 1-2). The bomb is not mentioned in the first lines as the speaker is plunged immediately into the aftermath. He paints of scene of complete pandemonium as "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys" ("Belfast Confetti" ln. 3) rain down around him. The speaker makes reference to the first exclamation mark: the explosion of the bomb. The chaos that follows it consists of the remnants of that initial moment that punctuates the beginning of the poem.

Carson's extended metaphor works to express the visceral embodied experience of a bombing without overwhelming the senses with graphic images. The use of the map that is laid over the city allows the speaker to maneuver and function at a slight distance from the immediate emotion of the situation; he can experience something without getting completely lost in that experience. The speaker describes the explosion as "an asterisk on the map" ("Belfast Confetti" ln. 5). Again, he describes the bomb going off in a print punctuation mark. The image of an asterisk as it appears on a clean map amplifies the exclamation of sound, debris, and human life that the explosion caused. That exclamation has caused the speaker's own thoughts to become a jumble of those asterisks as he struggles to maintain coherent thought: "I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept / stuttering" ("Belfast Confetti" lns.7-8). His thoughts are as sporadic as the rapid gunfire that rips through the air. To live in a city that is defined by events like the one the speaker experiences rips away the ability to maintain clear thought; there is no comfort in the ability to think if those thoughts cannot be communicated.

The use of a map also allows Carson and his speaker to exert some type of control over an immediate and contextual situation. Goodby claims that, “Maps, whoever they are made by, and for whatever reasons, have a tendency to stand in for territory, and to serve dominance and even destructive agency, over it” (Goodby 77). Carson’s literary map of Belfast allows him to undermine visions and maps of his city that have been forced onto the community and caused the conflict he finds himself in. His map attempts to reassert power and authority over a place that has lost all sense of order and devolved into chaos. This is reflected in the confused and frustrated voice of Carson’s speaker.

The speaker’s mind has become cluttered like the streets of the city that he can see when he closes his eyes: “All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and / colons” (“Belfast Confetti” lns. 9-10). Every physical and mental move the speaker makes meets with abrupt stops. The unpredictability that turns the world of his reality does not allow for freedom of any kind. The speaker begins to voice his frustrations and ask, “Why can’t I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. / Dead end again” (“Belfast Confetti” lns. 13-14). Carson’s Belfast and the real Belfast create an environment in which everything and everyone is scrutinized. Actions are “punctuated” in that they can be construed and misconstrued with all kinds of meaning; one wrong move or action could be catastrophic. Living in that map of asterisks and punctuated movement takes a mental and emotional toll; Belfast has become a maze of violence and confusion that ends only in death. The death toll is not defined just by human bodies but by the souls lost and buried beneath the Belfast confetti that blankets the city.

Carson’s descriptions of his troubled city give rise to implicit questions about how a country, a city, and its people will move forward. Carson gives voice to those questions at the end of the poem. His speaker asks himself, “What is / My name? Where am I coming from?”

Where am I going? A / fusillade of question-marks” (“Belfast Confetti” lns. 16-18). The repetition of “why” and “where” echoes through the streets of Belfast, filling the streets with a multiplicity of voices. The speaker focalizes those voices in a “fusillade of question-marks,” suggesting that a new asterisk is about to mark the map. Those questions ending in more question marks also evoke the possible questions of the poet. How does Ciaran Carson navigate the streets he grew up on now made alien to him by the Troubles? How does he, like Heaney and Longley, face the pressure of his society to respond to the multiple question marks of the Troubles without taking on the sectarian language that defines violence? “Belfast Confetti” provides a visceral moment, void of sectarian ties, that layers people, poet, and speaker together to confront all that the Troubles is to them.

Unlike Heaney and Longley, who work with concepts of community, Carson works more with individual perceptions of sensorial, virtual, and real experience. While the individual is not necessarily separate from the community, Carson focuses specifically on how the individual maneuvers through his own understandings of reality. He creates alternate and dream worlds as a mechanism for exploration of perceived experience. *The Irish for No* is divided into three sections, each section building upon the one before it. As Carson notes in an interview with Laskowski, “the poems are seen in terms of scenes that you could cut up, flashbacks, flash forwards, etc.” (qtd. in Laskowski 93). Each poem can be broken into smaller parts and rearranged to weave together images and narratives in order to create multiplicity of meaning.

The same can be said of the individual poems when considered as a collection. Carson explains that his work plays out in, “a series of recurrent dreams about Belfast – nightmares, sometimes, or dreams of containment, repression, anxiety and claustrophobia...often, I’m lost in an ambiguous labyrinth between the Falls and the Shankill; at other times, the city is idealized

and takes on a Gothic industrial beauty” (qtd. in Ormsby 5). Carson understands the concept of the dream as one type of perceived reality. The individual who is dreaming believes everything he sees is real. But, there is at times a self-conscious awareness that punctuates the dream experience. Carson’s poems “Belfast Confetti” and “The Irish for No” express different perceptions of the trauma inflicted by the Troubles through their depictions of dreams or other virtual realities.

“The Irish for No” is the title poem of his second collection of poetry. It is a longer poem that appears in the third section of the work. The poem begins as the speaker asks the question, “*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*” (“Irish for No” ln. 1). The speaker is unsure of himself; he does not know where he has been or what space he currently occupies. The ambiguity of setting allows for the possibility that the speaker is still in his own waking dream. This space that exists outside of the real is where he, “heard her voice before I saw / What looked like the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*” (“Irish for No” lns. 1-2). Again, it is unclear whether the voice the speaker hears is that of Juliet or some other being that is manipulating the scene. But the answer to that implicit question is not as important as the presence of a female voice itself.

The presence of a woman in the beginning of the poem echoes the traditions of the Irish past. Carson sets his poem up as an *aisling*, a concept that has its roots in *sean nós* songs. In an interview, Carson explains that, in an *aisling*, or “dream vision:”

a beautiful woman representing Ireland appears to the poet in his sleep and asks him to vindicate her cause. Sometimes he is accused of writing in English rather than Irish, and this has a resonance for me, as someone who was brought up in the Irish language and writes in English. The *aisling* is an interlingual twilight zone, the place where poetry happens. (qtd. in Michaud 3)

The identity of the woman in the speaker’s dream is not as important as her existence in the dream. She roots the elusiveness of the dream or vision in the past while setting the speaker up

for an exploration of his present. The aisling creates a barrier between poet or speaker and reality that he is forced to confront. Its presence in Carson's poem functions similarly to the map he uses in "Belfast Confetti." This dream world forms a space that allows for exploration into multiple perceived realities while existing as one of those realities itself.

Carson's alternate reality demands an alternate expression of experience. His speaker describes the scene as if in a trance but is immediately jarred out of that trance as he hears, "*It's got nothing, she was / snarling, nothing / To do with politics*" ("Irish for No" lns. 8-10). Implicit in the argument is the question: what is it that has nothing to do with politics? Until hearing this emphatic statement, the speaker has been talking in fog as if he is coming out of or going into a dream-like state. But the female voice abruptly clears some of the fogginess. Her claim that something has nothing to do with politics leaves open the possibility that that something could be related to religion, culture, family, history, or many other things that when placed in the context of Northern Ireland become political. In Carson's own words, "everything you do is political. It doesn't matter who you are. Everything in the world is politics" (qtd. in Laskowski 100).

The female's voice continues with the accusation, "*That goes for you too!*" ("Irish for No" ln. 11). Her address to an unknown "you" brings self-conscious awareness back into the poem. While the "you" could be the speaker of the poem, it could also be a collective "you." The question of who the female's voice is addressing cuts through the dream world and into the reality that exists outside of that world. But before that question can be answered the speaker moves on to walk through the apparent dreamscape he inhabits; the space is one that seems to be layered on top of his native home of Belfast. The speaker describes buildings and explains, "you might see an *Ulster Says No* / scrawled on the side / of the power-block" ("Irish for No" lns. 14-16). He is referencing the Unionist slogan that became widespread after the Anglo-Irish

Agreements in 1985. Those agreements gave the (mostly Catholic) Republic of Ireland an advisory role in how Northern Ireland was governed. Even the dream world that appears separate from the real world is scarred by the sectarianism that plagues the speaker's home.

Carson pulls his poem back into the dream he has created by introducing the Roman god Bacchus. Known as the god of wine, good harvest, and fertility, Bacchus is also connected to ritualistic insanity. While his presence in the speaker's dream Belfast initially seems peculiar, upon further reflection it may be fitting that he appears. The speaker explains:

We were debating,
Bacchus and the pards and me, how to render *The Ulster Bank –
The Bank
That Likes to Say Yes* into Irish, and whether eglantine was alien
to Ireland. (“Irish for No” lns. 19-23)

In this debate with the god of wine and fertility, the speaker ponders an issue regarding translation. His wish to translate English into Irish evokes Carson's upbringing in the Irish language. This moment illustrates the personal and linguistic problem of melding two distinct languages with different cultures attached to them. These lines also relate back to the “Ulster Says No” slogan. Language and translation are not just issues of communication, but of power dynamics. Bacchus' presence in the debate subtly highlights the ritualized insanity that pervades the North's ways of thinking about all aspects of life. The “us vs. them” mentality creates the reality that Carson is attempting to explore and understand.

The debate ends without much resolution beyond a half-hearted attempt at translation on the part of the speaker: “*The Bank That / Answers All / Your Questions*, maybe” (“Irish for No” lns. 25-27). But the speaker's own questions remain unanswered and he questions his own response. He seems stuck on the word “yes” and how to express the weight that it carries and what is left behind in its absence. In the absence of answers, the speaker's dream or vision moves

to, “A corporal in the UDR from Lisbellaw, was last seen having / driven over half / Of Ulster, a legally-held gun was found” (“Irish for No” lns. 35-37). Mentioning the death of a member of the Ulster Defense Regiment propels the speaker out of the dream, if only for a moment. It refers to the killing of several UDR members, many of whom were female, by the IRA in County Tyrone. The sectarian violence of the real world again tries to reach up and into the dream world of the poem. The corporal and the women who were killed with her were not outsiders placed in Northern Ireland; they were natives of the country, caught in the living nightmare that the Troubles became.

Carson blends the reality of the Troubles with the imagined or literary reality that he creates. His reality takes on fluid characteristics that allow his speaker to drift back and forth across the barrier between the physical and dream worlds. Carson’s speaker describes this fluidity as he slips into the fog of Larne Harbour in Belfast, which also, “slips away to perilous seas as things remain / unsolved” (“Irish for No” lns. 43-44). The real and painful problems of the speaker’s current moment drift further away from him as he listens, “To the *ex cathedra* of the fog-horn, and *drink the leave the world / unseen*” (“Irish for No” lns. 45-46). Both Carson, through his speaker, layers the infallibility of the pope onto the infallibility of his mind’s uncertainty; his wish for undeniable truth is safely kept in the fog of his dreams. In the same moment, Carson and his speaker look for the truth beyond the real and hide from that truth in the virtual maze of Belfast.

The poem closes as the scene again shifts to the garage of a man who was killed. The speaker says, “They opened the door / into the dark” (“Irish for No” lns. 54-55). The speaker does not reveal who “they” are or what their relation is to the dead man. Complicating identity the speaker continues, “And now you rub your eyes and get / acquainted with the light / A dust of

something reminiscent drowns over the garage” (“Irish for No” lns. 57-58). Who is the “you” the speaker is addressing? That pronoun brings the poem back to its first moment when the female voice addresses an unknown “you.” Perhaps the fog and ambiguity that shroud each moment in the dream sequence are the reason for the shifts in address. But whoever “you” are, your attention is drawn to, “the unfed cat toys with the yin-yang of a tennis-ball, / debating whether *yes* is *no*” (“Irish for No” lns. 65-66). These last lines of the poem bring the waking dream full circle without providing full resolution. Instead, the reader is left wondering how the cycle will end.

Carson’s use of the dream or dream world allows for a multiplicity of scenes or images that “proceed according to an abrupt, quasi-surreal dream-logic” (Goodby 83). The narrative of Carson’s poem does not require a logical structure of progression. Instead the seemingly random or abrupt scenes blend together through implicit connections. His speaker can maneuver in, out, and through these various scenes in order to go back to particularly troublesome aspects of Belfast’s Troubles. Carson’s dream visions act in a similar way to his map in “Belfast Confetti.” Both devices or extended metaphors shape the poems and allow Carson to exert some sort of control over a situation in which control no longer exists. The act of exerting control permits Carson to dive into the complexities of the conflict while also keeping it at arm’s length.

In addition to belonging to a slightly younger generation of poets than Heaney and Longley, Carson’s stylistic choices, use of literary devices, and general focus seem to make him much different from the poets that precede him. Where Heaney and Longley place more emphasis on community, Carson focuses on the individual and the multiple perceptions of reality that are possible in a single experience. However, the fact that Carson requires a distance from his subject matter unites his work with that of Heaney and Longley. All three poets’ distancing

devices are deeply connected with their differing personal histories. When each of those histories are considered together in the context of the Northern Irish Troubles, the poetry that they produce work together to suggest the possibility for peace in the North.

Conclusion

While the regular violence of the Northern Irish Troubles came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on April 10, 1998, the possibilities that the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson suggest about peace as something other than an uneasy pause in the violence have yet to be fully realized. The long wished-for peace is not something which the people of the North will be able to achieve overnight. But the roadmap to the future may be laid out in the works of these three poets.

More than providing answers to the questions of a post-Troubles Northern Ireland, Heaney, Longley, and Carson provide the questions necessary to consider where the country is and how to move forward. Heaney's mythologized places and spaces reach back in time to ponder the possibility of pre-Christian rituals and understandings as tools to build a better community. Longley's exploration of a community of individuals reflects on the prospect of acknowledgement of shared relationships and experiences as a means of breaking a violent cycle. Lastly, Carson's multiplicity of perspectives expressed in his dream worlds create spaces to ask and re-ask questions about the origins of his reality. All three poets together offer a holistic understanding of the Troubles and provide the processes through which the people may ask the questions that will lead their actions forward. Considering Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson as their own collective begins this process for the North as it moves away from the Troubles and toward the future.

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