READING TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRISH & IRISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation will examine the works of five contemporary Northern Irish poets who lived through the Troubles, a period of intense sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted about thirty years from the late 1960s until the late 1990s. Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Colette Bryce, and Leontia Flynn each write in different experimental modes to express the traumatic experiences of the Troubles. Through a discussion of selected works by these poets, this dissertation will develop a revision of established trauma theory and suggest a mode of reading works about trauma that emphasizes the generative potential of writing about trauma with non-normative narrative styles and poetic techniques.

Carson's middle-era poetry transposes post-traumatic responses into poetry, using poetic form and atemporal narrative to draw the reader in. McGuckian's deeply interior poems initially seem to resist interpretation, but ultimately, the reader as witness plays an important role in processing traumatic experiences. Muldoon's playful and allusive poetry reflects on traumatic experiences without becoming stuck in any repeating narrative, emphasizing the generative potential for using poetry to transform the past into infinite imaginative possibilities. Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn, writing in the "post-Agreement" era after the ceasefire, each seek distance and alternate perspectives that allow them to both look back at the past and look forward into the future.

DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With gratitude for my family and friends for their support, my therapist and my peers for listening to me vent, my great writing group for keeping me on track, and to Athena for just being a cat.

Remembering Frank Duba, who got me started down this road back in undergrad & always pushed his students to say more ("Well yes, but…")

And of course, with thanks to my committee, for their endless patience and encouragement:

Dan O'Hara

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION………………………………………………………………………... 1

Vignettes……………………………………………………………………………….. 1

Overview………………………………………………………………………………..4

History, Remembrance, Trauma………………………………………………………..7

A Background of Trauma Theory……………………………………………………..14

Poets Writing Trauma………………………………………………………………… 21

"ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK": READING TRAUMA IN CIARAN CARSON'S POETRY……………………………………………………………….... 29

Trauma and the Lyric: Carson's Early Work…………………………………………..34

Narrating Trauma Memory…………………………………………………………… 38

Doubling Back………………………………………………………………………... 51

Evasive Maneuvers: Sidestepping Surveillance……………………………………… 56

Conclusions…………………………………………………………………………… 63

INTIMATE EXPERIENCES: MEDBH MCGUCKIAN'S INTERIOR EXPRESSIONS OF TRAUMA……………………………………………………………………………65

Language of Embodiment……………………………………………………………..76

Transforming Language……………………………………………………………….85

The Private-Public……………………………………………………………………. 91

Conclusions…………………………………………………………………………… 98

"SOMETHING ELSE:" GENERATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN THE POETRY OF PAUL MULDOON…………………………………………………………………………... 99

(Dis)placing Trauma……………………………………………………………… 104

(Dis)Engaging with History…………………………………………………………116

(Re)Writing Colonial History……………………………………………………….. 124

Conclusions………………………………………………………………………..130

"POST-AGREEMENT:" THE NEXT GENERATION OF NORTHERN IRISH POETS……………………………………………………………………………… 132

Inheritors of the Troubles……………………………………………………………134

Writing the Troubles……………………………………………………………… 139

Public Trauma and Domestic Life…………………………………………………... 153

Escapes and Returns……………………………………………………………… 162

Conclusions………………………………………………………………………..175

CONCLUSION……………………………………………………………………176

Belfast, January 2008……………………………………………………………...176

"Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"………………………………………………… 176

Reading Trauma…………………………………………………………………...178

The Paradox of Moving On………………………………………………………. 180

BIBLIOGRAPHY…………………………………………………………………183

INTRODUCTION

Vignettes

Easter, 2010. Two years after spending an undergraduate semester studying abroad in Belfast, I returned for a visit along with my college boyfriend. We stayed in a different area of the city, near Queens University, and covered all of the usual fun tourist activities-- Cavehill, the dome on top of the new Victoria Square shopping center (a triumph of glass, indicating that the fears of city centre bombs were a thing of the past), the Ferris wheel by City Hall (we left our compact rolling suitcase with the operator and he joked with a wink, "no ticking, I hope?"). One day was set aside for nostalgia, and we took a bus to West Belfast— to St. Mary's College, where I had studied, and Nansen Street, where I found the same faded pink shoelace on the same peeling and rusted gate of the house in which I had lived for five months one spring, and the same small bog meadows nature preserve, bordered by fenced-off motorways (backing up to one of the peace walls where the roundabout divided a Catholic and a Protestant neighborhood), where that day two small boys were gleefully attacking a smoldering lump of peat with their water guns.

On the final day of the trip, I found myself wandering westward from the center of the city, retracing the route I'd take when walking home to my old flat in West Belfast. As I recall, I was walking alone. I had meant to go down Castlerigg street, but the alley I chose to cut over wasn't the right one. Instead I found myself up against a wall at a dead end, painted with a mural of a man in a flat cap, set next to a spidery map of the city streets. Across the mural was a line from Ciaran Carson's "Turn Again:" "Today's plan is already yesterday's— The streets that were there are gone." I was disoriented, having

encountered several unexpected things at once. The lines from a familiar poem, a missing street, all colluded to reveal the fragility of my spatial memory. I turned again, preparing to retrace my steps to the street that I remembered, feeling that something was illuminated.

Even this retelling comes from an imperfect memory, already flawed and changed from my initial experience. The experience comes to me so clearly, but I had remembered this moment in association with a later trip to Belfast for a graduate conference at Queens in November of 2010 (where I presented a paper on Ciaran Carson and, later that evening, stared anxiously at the man himself from across the room after a poetry reading event with Nuala NiDhomniall) and it was not until I found my photo of the mural, with its undeniable embedded date and timestamp, that I had to revise my memory. And was I alone when I encountered the mural? When, in our trip, had my companion left me to wander on my own, and so far towards the edge of the city center? Perhaps he too had been there, but in my memory his presence has been eclipsed, erased.

***

In Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty's video installation piece "Ghost Story" (2007), which I viewed at the Ulster museum in Belfast some years after the museum had acquired the piece, the viewer enters an enclosed, darkened room and faces a flickering video that is simply the camera, moving jerkily down a dark, forested pathway, occasionally switching to graffitied city walls or suddenly flashing a closeup of a widened human eye. The visual experience is disorienting, especially given the setting of the installation. Critic Declan Long explains that part of what makes these seemingly innocuous landscapes so threatening is their liminal status: the landscapes are "both

superficially mundane and highly charged with threatening possibility. They are ambiguous spaces, unpopulated *terrain vague* on the fringes of the city, generic marginal territories" (Long 113). The ambiguity of these spaces, Long argues, echoes Derrida's understanding of the ghost or "spectre" as neither body nor soul (113). Further contributing to the ghostly atmosphere, through the piece a disembodied narrator, a male voice, speaks in a disjointed narrative throughout the 15-minute looped film. At one point, the narrator says that the landscape reminds him of "faces in a running crowd that I had once seen on a bright but cold January afternoon" (Doherty). This specific mention of January seems to be a reference to Bloody Sunday, a violent clash between the British military and the Irish Catholic protestors that has become notorious as one of the major flashpoints that began the worst violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Here, the narrator seems haunted by that recollection, trapped in a loop of traumatic memory to repeat the experience, over and over, as the film loops seamlessly back to the beginning of the piece. I stood in that darkened room in the museum for much longer than 15 minutes until I started to recognize fragments of the audio narrative. With such a repetitive visual loop, his voice was the only cue that the piece was looping around again.

Another one of Doherty's pieces, an audio installation "30 January 1972," is entirely focused on Bloody Sunday. This work features multiple narrative voices, which all recount different experiences of the event. Initially, just one person at a time is speaking. As the piece progresses, their voices begin to overlap, until the narrative is completely incoherent, and the listener is left feeling unsure of which narrative was accurate, if any. As in "Ghost Story," the experience is disorienting, and the spoken narrative is difficult to make out. During a discussion of the piece, one of my former

graduate professors, an Irish Catholic teaching at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, exclaimed indignantly, “There is no *alternate* interpretation of Bloody Sunday!” But Doherty’s work is not about denying the brutalities committed by the British military, in Derry on that day in 1972 or at any other time during the Troubles. Nor should the breakdowns of coherent verbal expression be uncritically translated as a breakdown in meaning of the event. Rather, these works explore the frailty of memory, particularly traumatized memory, and elevate the individual experience, which so often departs from any “official” narratives.

Overview

This dissertation will examine the works of five contemporary Northern Irish poets who lived through the Troubles, a period of intense sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted about thirty years from the late 1960s until the late 1990s. Through a discussion of the different ways that each poet engages with that period of history and the traumas from the conflict, this dissertation will develop a revision of current trauma theory to establish a mode of reading that emphasizes the generative potential of processing and expressing trauma through poetry. Further, these readings will demonstrate that there is no monolithic approach to writing or reading trauma. Rather than focusing on breakdowns in communication that convey the “inexpressible” nature of trauma, this dissertation celebrates the non-normative modes of communication of trauma that emerge in different ways throughout the works of these poets.

Trauma theory first gained popularity in the late 1990s, with scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick La Capra building on the earlier works of Freud on trauma. The blend of psychoanalytic theory and literary criticism frequently reads texts

containing (post)trauma as works that are unable to communicate clearly. However, this overarching view that trauma is ultimately inexpressible or unknowable positions us as a suspicious reader, rather than a sympathetic one, and forecloses the possibility of being open to alternate modes of processing and expressing responses to trauma that appear in poetry or in other literature. Writings by Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub, which emphasize the importance of witnessing as a part of processing trauma, offer an alternate approach to suspicious reading. In my theoretical framework, I read the non-traditional narratives that may be interrupted or obscured as different ways of communicating the experience of violence and the processing of that trauma.

In the first chapter, I discuss Ciaran Carson's earlier to middle-era poetry, which covers several phases of his evolving style, and explore the different ways that the poet translates common post-traumatic responses (stuttering, breaks in narrative, repetition) into poetic forms that are reflected thematically by the constantly-changing cityscape. Carson's stylistic and thematic choices, I argue, illustrate the non-normative ways that the traumatic memory recalls experiences or moves through time, and carries the reader along in this process, seeking an empathetic response. At the conclusion of this chapter, I jump ahead in time to briefly discuss Carson's final book of poetry, Still Life, which in its return to remembrances of the Troubles, combined with meditations on connections between death and the generative potential of art, exemplifies the repetitions in Carson's earlier poetry.

The second chapter examines poems by Medbh McGuckian, who is often read as an enigmatic poet who refuses to engage with public-facing events. Although her works are often interior or centered in the domestic space, McGuckian's domestic poems at

times blur the boundaries between public and private, as the trauma of the Troubles bleeds into everyday life. Her work underlines the ways in which the 30-year timeframe of the Troubles, while punctuated by violence, was also a long span of time where people still had to go about their daily lives and process the events that happened around them.

In the third chapter, I highlight the ways in which Paul Muldoon's fast-moving allusions and wordplay allow him to create new, generative modes of expressing trauma. While critics often view his work as largely apolitical, and his references to the Troubles may not be a central theme, these references are often present, and Muldoon's constant returns and revisions to Irish history and place, even in poems that are set in other locations (Meeting the British, for example), demonstrate that he is far from apathetic. Muldoon's poetry, when it addresses the trauma of the Troubles, often makes the experience deeply personal to the narrative voice, and develop connections between that experience and wider range of traumas, from the history of colonial oppression to the poet's own personal losses of his parents or a former lover.

The fourth chapter shifts to focus on a younger generation of poets, moving more fully into the post-Agreement era. Born in the 1970s, these poets grew up during the end of the Troubles, and so witnessed the conflict as children, but began writing and publishing poetry around the time of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that officially called a ceasefire. In this chapter, I focus on Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn, two poets from this "post-Agreement" generation who frequently explore how traumas from the Troubles echo in their adult lives. Bryce often writes poems with younger narratives, emphasizing the differences between how an adult and a child might experience and process the traumatic events. Flynn focuses more on the post-Agreement society,

critiquing the narrative of "moving on" and forgetting about the past conflict by juxtaposing the façade of a shiny new city with an underlying theme of rising depression and anxiety in its people. Although Bryce left Derry and lives abroad while Flynn lives in Belfast, both poets frequently return to a theme of travel or escape throughout their work. By achieving some distance from the physical sites of the Troubles through this travel, in addition to writing with other viewpoints in the voices of the speakers in their poetry, both poets consistently emphasize the need for shifting perspectives as a part of understanding past traumatic experiences.

Although this dissertation focuses on contemporary Northern Irish and Irish poetry, I hope to demonstrate an expansion of trauma theory that could be applicable to a broader range of poetry and literature that expresses trauma, reading these works not with a focus on omissions, but on the different modes of expression that emerge from the processing and writing after a traumatic experience.

History, Remembrance, Trauma

"The Troubles" is the most common term used to describe a period of intense sectarian conflict centered in Northern Ireland, with some paramilitary attacks also occurring in Ireland and in England. Although the precise start date of this period varies amongst historians, 1968-1969 marked several large-scale Republican civil rights marches and clashes with loyalist opposition, culminating with the arrival of British troops in late summer 1969, ostensibly to restore order and keep the two communities apart (Coogan 549). In January of 1972, British troops opened fire into crowd of Irish nationalists who were marching in Derry to protest the structural inequalities and discrimination faced by Catholics in Northern Ireland. Fourteen people died, while

fourteen more were injured, leading to the event being memorialized as Bloody Sunday. Historian Graham Dawson notes that Bloody Sunday became a central event in the "politics of memory" surrounding the Troubles, both as an example of state violence and as an event that generated an official narrative in the form of the Widgery Inquiry, which cleared the British operatives of any responsibility (Dawson 2007, 89-90). It was not until the Saville report, which began in 1998 and was not released until 2010, that the British government officially took some responsibility (Smyth 5). Over the roughly thirty years of the Troubles, upwards of 3,600 deaths were directly attributed to the conflict, while nearly 30,000 people were registered as injured in some way related to the conflict (Wallenfeldt). With multiple factions—the Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries, the military, and the police—the breakdown of deaths by religion and affiliation is led by Catholic civilians, followed by Protestant civilians—the conflict is complex and difficult to summarize fully (McBride 18). The signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, which finalized the ceasefire and established the terms of governance of Northern Ireland, is generally considered to be the official end of the Troubles (Dawson 2007, 22-23). Despite the political move towards peace, however, sporadic bombings and outbreaks of violence have occurred in Northern Ireland as recently as April 2021 (Hirst). In addition to lingering tensions, the political solutions lack a comprehensive plan for amnesty and reconciliation, and many victims of the Troubles remain missing to this day, making it difficult for some in society to completely "move on" (Dawson 2017, 82)

Throughout the Troubles, and into the post-Agreement era, the landscape of Northern Ireland has been marked by signs and reminders of the violence. During the peak of violence, the cityscape especially (though not exclusively) was altered by

bombings or burned-out buildings, shuttered shops, security cameras, barricades, and military checkpoints. In an essay on portrayals of Belfast in fiction, Neal Alexander observes that the realities of the "militarized landscape" in the Troubles era translate easily into the literary space, where Belfast becomes a symbolic carceral space dominated by the panoptic gaze, emphasizing the ways in which the physical space of the city was dominated by state control (Alexander 29). In addition to these changes in the cityscape, memorials and street murals appeared throughout the city, both during and after the conflict.

In *The Politics of Irish Memory*, Emilie Pine observes that street murals in particular dominated the landscape and served two major functions: marking sectarian divides (such as the murals along the Shankill or the Falls roads in Belfast or the "Now entering Free Derry" mural in the Bogside neighborhood), and memorializing major events or figures. When the H-block "dirty protests" and hunger strikes began in 1981, Pine notes that murals of the hunger strikers, and most often their leader Bobby Sands, first appeared at the start of the protests. After Sands' death, even more murals commemorating him appeared across Northern Ireland. In this way, Sands and the hunger strikers were elevated as martyrs—even before their deaths—and even long after the hunger strikes had ended, their images became a stand-in for the larger Republican struggle in Northern Ireland (Pine 102-103). It is also important to note here that political memorials like these murals often force a singular, more essentialist narrative: as Pine points out, there were far fewer murals memorializing the dirty protests and hunger strikes in the women's prison (Pine 103). In their study of commemorative practice in Northern Ireland, Graham and Whelan make similar observations, emphasizing the

conflicts between individual and collective identities that generally lead to the individual being eclipsed (Graham and Whelan 478). In the post-Agreement era, the murals that remained, in combination with other installations such as plaques, gardens, or monuments, created visual reminders of the impact of the Troubles for every passerby. An article from September 2008 in the London *Independent* announces a recent agreement to remove some of the "most militant wall paintings" along the Shankill Road, with the intention to replace images of menacing Unionist paramilitiary fighters with images that reflect the cultural history of East Belfast (McKittrick 14). The changes to murals are not always mandated by the authorities, however. The article further notes that Republican murals, while preserving many of the memorials to figures like Bobby Sands, have also evolved to address current events outside of Northern Ireland, such as protesting the Iraq war (14). While these murals may no longer portray a specific event from the Troubles, the sentiments of protesting a Western (colonial) war or expressing solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza still evokes the political struggles behind the Troubles.

In April 1998, a report commissioned by the Northern Irish government was published with the intention of exploring ways to recognize and commemorate the victims of the Troubles. However, sites of remembrance can all too easily become sites of pilgrimage, focused on assigning blame for the loss of life, rather than memorializing the life itself: as Sir Kenneth Bloomfield acknowledged in the opening of the report, "in our society commemoration itself can too easily take on a confrontational quality" (Bloomfield 11). The question with remembrance then becomes when to remember, and when to move on? Discourse surrounding Troubles memorials and murals is perhaps the

most prevalent example of this question, given the visibility of sites of remembrance, but the same debates also appear in critical receptions of literature about the Troubles.

Alongside the omnipresent memorials and other reminders of the Troubles that exist in physical space, the generations who lived through that period of violence carry their own memories of the Troubles. In the 1980s, Dr. Rona Fields conducted research into the impact of the ongoing violence and described the devastating effects on the society as "psychological genocide" (Fields xiii). A more recent psychology study from 2013 found that the highest type of traumatic experience reported by adults in Northern Ireland was what the researchers called "network events," a term that encompasses witnessing traumatic events that affect a "loved one" or witnessing serious injury, death, or a dead body (Ferry et al 439). This study, along with others, emphasizes the severity of post-traumatic response to secondhand—for example, witnessing a serious injury could be traumatic just as much as personally experiencing that same injury. In this way, even citizens who did not directly experience a personal trauma were still traumatized by the Troubles. These traumatic experiences persist long past the event, as well. In an essay on the suicide rates in Northern Ireland, journalist Lyra McKee further points out just how deeply the trauma has persisted: since the cease-fire in 1999, the suicide rate in Northern Ireland has nearly doubled and, as of 2016, exceeds the number of deaths attributed to the Troubles (McKee). For the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, therefore, reminders of the Troubles exist both in the physical space of cities and towns, and in the societal trends of mental health

Given the extent of the impact of the Troubles, violence and trauma often dominates the conversation about contemporary Northern Irish history. As scholar Jim

Smyth notes in his introduction to a collection of essays about the Troubles, the rhetoric surrounding this period fixates on Ireland's long history of divisions, colonial oppression, rebellion, and violence to amplify a prevailing notion that the Irish are stuck in a permanent divide and unable to escape from a cycle of sectarian violence (Smyth 1). Similarly, Dr. Fields opens her study of the Troubles with an extensive discussion of the trauma of colonial occupation, arguing, "slaughters and scorched earth policies of successive English invasions are not only historical facts, but also a feature of contemporary social psychology of Ireland. The Irish people have a psychohistory predicated on siege, manipulation, victimization, wanton destruction and self-destruction" (Fields 1). In the often-cited 1977 history *A Narrow Ground*, A. T. Q. Stewart, a Unionist historian at Queen's University in Belfast, attributes the current conflict to native tendencies of tribalism that have been embedded within the society for generations (Fanning 208-209). Stewart further argues that the sectarian identities of the people in Northern Ireland are territorial:

> The two communities are not intermingled...but they are interlocked, and in ways which it is probably impossible for anyone except the native of Ulster to understand. This gives rise to a situation in which the 'territorial imperative' is extremely insistent. The quarrel is therefore very much concerned with the relationship of people to land, and that relationship has indeed been considered the central theme in Irish history. (Stewart 181)

Stewart's interpretation of the conflict is not unfamiliar to the more predominant rhetoric surrounding the conflict. Allen Feldman notes in *Formations of Violence* that both the Republicans and the Unionists retell origin myths that emphasize spatial divisions, again rooting the conflict in geographical confines (Feldman 18). In the news media coverage, similar attitudes appear, as Simon Cottle notes in an early review of media reporting: "the source of the violence was portrayed as terrorism, the result of inexplicable asocial

forces, and occasionally as the outcome of, equally inexplicable, sectarianism or feuding (Condit and Cottle 285).

In literary culture and criticism, there are similar patterns of conceptualizing and storytelling around the Troubles, with Belfast becoming a popular setting for dark political thrillers or murder mysteries, the city itself acting as a shorthand for a wild place where rampant violence can occur. Declan Long opens a chapter on post-Troubles art by retelling an anecdote that exemplifies Troubles-era art and film:

> In 1982, a Yorkshire Television film crew arrived in Belfast to shoot the espionage and assassination thriller *Harry's Game*. Expecting a city of perpetual gloom, of unbroken cloud cover and never-ending drizzle, the production team's location requirements were abruptly thrown into crisis – the city was enjoying a sudden, unseasonal heatwave. Out of the blue (as it were) the makers of a gritty Troubles tale were compelled to negotiate with the unthinkable: a Belfast lit by glorious sunshine, its contented citizens happily baking under clear skies. (Long 89)

Society's fascination with violence, combined with beliefs that conflict must be endemic to Northern Ireland, is expressed and reinforced by the tropes of popular fiction. In *The Thriller and Northern Ireland*, Aaron Kelly quotes from *The Psalm Killer* by Chris Petit, whose narrator says, "Belfast was a maze to get lost in, where the darkest deeds stayed secret" (Kelly 65). Kelly observes that this is a common theme in the thriller novels set in the city: "Belfast's streets, voided of human agents or socioeconomic relations and forces, become the arterial occlusions of a terminally afflicted heart of darkness, its architecture projects the sepulchral, neural landscape of its inhabitants' monumental psychopathologies" (88). Films and thriller novels from this era build a narrative that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland are trapped in a cycle of violence, in which they are complicit. Given this cultural and literary context, it is even more vital to discuss readings of literature that push against a narrative of being "stuck" in a cycle of violence.

A Background of Trauma Theory

In reading works that address traumatic experiences, literary trauma theory often follows a narrative similar to this popular rhetoric of the Troubles, and often reads trauma survivors as trapped within their traumatic memories, stuck within a cycle of repeating the same event with no way to achieve escape or closure. Cathy Caruth's 1996 *Unclaimed Experience*, and her 1997 edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, are some of the most frequently cited as foundational works of "trauma theory." Many of the theorists in the first wave of trauma theory look back to Freud's writings on trauma and memory and adapt psychoanalytic theory as a basis for their critical approach. Geoffrey Hartman, in a 1995 article, focuses on the unknowability of a traumatic event, writing, "Traumatic knowledge, then, would seem to be a contradiction in terms. It is as close to nescience as to knowledge" (Hartman 1995, 537). For Hartman, literary studies of trauma naturally focus on the imagery and figurative language "in which words replace things," articulating a common theme in early literary trauma theory (540). In Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, she describes trauma as "a wound that cries out," building on an analysis of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to suggest that traumatic experiences manifest with a delay and remains more unknown than known (Caruth 4). For Caruth, the silence of trauma is defined by "the silence of its mute repetition of suffering" (9). In her analysis of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, Caruth points out how that specific type of silence appears as a predominant theme:

> It is indeed the enigmatic language of untold stories—of experiences not yet completely grasped—that resonates, throughout the film, within the dialogue between the French woman and the Japanese man, and allows them to communicate, across the gap between their cultures and their experiences, precisely through what they do not directly comprehend. (56)

The emphasis on the power of the unspoken and the unknown here characterizes experiences of trauma as always inaccessible, thus positioning the critic as a suspicious reader, always looking out for signs of what is missing or unspoken. Throughout the book, Caruth also emphasizes the unknown quantity of a traumatic experience, suggesting that the "absolute inability to know [trauma]" in the moment is what causes the delayed recognition and repetitive memories of a traumatic experience (92). This framing characterizes the post-traumatic experience as a cycle that entraps the subject in unknowing, doomed to repeat memories of an experience without understanding.

In her preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth explains that the purpose of the collection is to bring together different disciplines writing about trauma to develop a deeper understanding of how to read and understand experiences of trauma (Caruth ix). The first section of the collection builds on this with essays by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub that both address the complexities of witnessing testimony about trauma. Many of the essays, including these two, address the Holocaust at length as an example of a large-scale traumatic event. In his essay "Truth and Testimony," Laub examines the narratives of Holocaust survivors as a case study for his analysis of the process of witnessing. Building on the "impossibility of telling" that often characterizes traumatic memory, Laub further suggests that even when survivors spoke about what they witnessed, many of them felt unheard (Laub 64). For Laub, listening to that testimony adds a second level of witnessing, while being heard is a key part of survivors being able to process their trauma (61). Laub further notes that witnessing the Holocaust is complicated by the state of "being inside the event," especially given the suppressive efforts of the Nazis to silence or cover up violence against the Jewish people and other

persecuted minorities (65-66). When the expectation of testimony demands a "realization of the truth," but the trauma of the event makes a full realization impossible (73). However, Laub concludes that in speaking to that loss and trauma, and to be heard, a survivor might be able to face loss and reclaim more of their experience (74). In this, Laub's conclusions move away from a more restrictive imagining of a trauma narrative that is trapped in unknowing.

The second section of the collection opens with Caruth's introduction detailing the differences of traumatic memory, in which she again emphasizes the "incomprehsibility" of the event (Caruth 153). This leads in to "The Intrusive Past," the first essay in the second section by two psychologists who have since published extensively on the psychology of trauma (including their 2014 book *The Body Keeps the Score*). In this essay, Van der Kolk and Van der Hart outline the characteristics of narrative memory and traumatic memory, highlighting the differences in function for traumatic memory (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160-161). The authors also argue that traumatic memories return because they have not been assimilated or understood, resulting in many repetitions until that experience can be processed (176). The following essays in the second section similarly draw on psychology, many of them outlining ethnographies of different communities processing trauma, from residents of Hiroshima to the AIDS crisis in the United States. For example, Kai Erikson's "Notes on Trauma and Community" usefully lays out a redefinition of trauma and post-traumatic responses to clarify the ways in which these terms can be applied to a community, brought together by shared traumatic experiences, rather than separating out individuals (Erikson 185). Although the variety of essays offers a wide range of the applications of trauma theory,

they stay close to the previously established framework for conceptualizing and reading trauma in literature.

Much of trauma theory-centric criticism focuses on the Holocaust and works of both fiction and nonfiction, and so it is most often in this context that discussions of the unspeakable arise. Naomi Mandel's *Against the Unspeakable* focuses on both writers and artists and on critics writing about Holocaust and slavery narratives. She points out that the Holocaust as a historical event is "available to comprehension, to representation, to cultural construction and revision" (Mandel 7), thus making it increasingly important to consider how narratives around the event are constructed. Mandel further argues that one danger in reverting to a critical narrative that focuses on the unspeakable in a text is that it permits the critic to create a distance from any feeling of complicity: "What is *un*speakable evokes the privileges and problems inherent in speech while actively distancing itself from them, performing a rhetorical sleight of hand that simultaneously gestures toward and away from the complex ethical negotiations that representing atrocity entails" (Mandel 5). The privileging of speech—the implication being clear and coherent speech specifically—also leads the critic to overlook or dismiss any other kind of expression of trauma that may be present, including expressions of embodiment or expressions that fall outside the realm of easy legibility. In his essay "Parsing the Unspeakable," Barry Stampfl builds on Mandel's work and further argues, "we err from the start when we conceive of the unspeakable in the singular: as *the* unspeakable, as if there were only one" (Stampfl 16). Stampfl's point here is that expanding our understanding of what is unspeakable reflects the wide range of experiences encompassed by trauma literature. He suggests that critics need not fully abandon

considerations of what emerges as unspeakable in a text; rather, these moments should be read as a "way station" (22) that allows both author and critic to move beyond a single restrictive narrative about trauma.

Over the past two decades, approaches to trauma theory have also broadened to find more applications. As Robert Eaglestone notes in his introduction to *The Future of Trauma Theory*, "trauma is both the origin and the disruption not only of memorial work or fiction but of discipline-specific knowledge in other fields too: the impact of trauma and the theory that studies it respects no academic boundaries" (Eaglestone 12). Postcolonial studies, in particular, have drawn connections between collective trauma and the effects of colonial violence and the persistent intergenerational effects in the post-colonial era, integrating and adapting trauma theory to address this. Michelle Balaev's 2014 collection *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* explores the ways in which trauma theory needs to be expanded in order to encompass a wider range of works. One key factor, Balaev argues, is to place trauma in relation to the society and cultural contexts within which it exists (Balaev 2-3). In another chapter from the collection, Irene Visser explores both the historical limits of trauma theory in the field of postcolonial studies, and suggests that trauma theory must be expanded to include "indigenous narrative traditions" and other modes of expressing the experiences of an individual or society, including oral and ritual traditions (Visser 107).

When establishing a framework of trauma theory to apply to contemporary Northern Irish poetry, it is important to consider the specific intersections of factors that cause trauma in the specific context of the Troubles. As a wide-scale cultural conflict that spanned several decades and echoed past sectarian conflicts in Ireland and Northern

Ireland, the violence of the Troubles could be experienced both first and secondhand; a personal trauma is not the only influencing factor when the news is constantly filled with coverage of bombings and disappearances and the physical space of the city reinforces reminders of the conflict with debris, barricades, and peace walls. Anyone could "disappear" at any time, suspected by paramilitary groups to be an informant for the other side or mistaken for someone else. In addition, for members of the Irish Catholic community, the violence of colonial oppression added further layers of trauma: the fear of arrest, increased state surveillance in the form of checkpoints, house raids, and an inability to trust the police. Because there are many commonalities between reactions to trauma regardless of the root cause, this approach will draw on a variety of texts that address post-traumatic stress responses and symptoms of trauma. However, trauma theory as applied to poetry about the Troubles must also address the influence of what Nigel Hunt, in his book *Memory, War and Trauma* calls the "collective memory" (Hunt 5). The period of the Troubles, although not as clearly defined as an event like World War II, is more like an ongoing war than a series of isolated incidents, and thus Hunt's focus on war trauma is also particularly relevant here. He argues that the range of symptoms reflected in PTSD triggered by war are far wider than allowed for in other definitions of post-traumatic responses. Further, it is important to note that living through a war is not a constant, single traumatic experience: throughout this time, people are still trying to go about their daily lives, working, going out for a drink, and interacting with each other (60). Thus, their experience of this kind of ongoing trauma, and their reactions to it, cannot be uncritically equated with individual experiences of other traumas. Finally, trauma theory as it stands currently, as with many literary theories, can often place the

critic or reader at a far remove from the material so that they might dispassionately analyze the text. When reading poetry that addresses trauma, however, the reader becomes an engaged witness, taking on the role of one who "hears" the survivor's testimony.

In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," psychologist Dori Laub argues that a survivor cannot fully process their trauma without being heard. Thus, the act of listening creates a new understanding between the speaker and the witness (Laub 57). In the context of poetry about trauma, Laub's argument highlights the importance of a reader who engages in listening, becoming more deeply engaged with the poem. In my reframing of trauma theory, therefore, accepting the narrative structures as they appear in this poetry—however experimental or difficult to parse—is a key component to understanding the myriad of ways that trauma can be expressed in poetry. Within a poem, the speaker does not need to explicitly describe or perform their pain in order to effectively communicate it to us, the reader/witness. Muldoon's elegy "Incantata," for example, is filled with inside jokes and private references between the speaker and his lost lover. While we may not understand all of them, complete understanding is not the point: perhaps just knowing that the inside jokes are there is enough, and that reading them as a way for the speaker to work through his grief. Overall, a more empathetic approach to trauma theory and reading poetry not only helps us understand more of the expressions of trauma in poetry, but also opens up our understanding of post-traumatic responses as a part of processing trauma, rather than indicative of being stuck in a repetitive cycle.

Poets Writing Trauma

For those outside of Northern Ireland or the field of Irish literature, the most (if not only) well-recognized name might be Seamus Heaney (1939-2013). An obituary in *The Irish Times* opens with the oft-repeated declaration from American poet Robert Lowell that Heaney is “the most important Irish poet since Yeats” (“Obituary”) in recognition of Heaney’s extensive oeuvre of poetry, plays, and essays from the 1960s up until his death. Heaney has become, in many ways, a national poet: an elegist for the social upheavals and violence of the Troubles, a lyric poet of his experiences of Irish nature and history, a playwright and member of the Field Day literary venture, and a literary scholar writing extensively on the legacy of Yeats alongside essays on British and American poets. For the poets in this dissertation, who all come from later generations, Heaney’s presence in the literary world looms as a significant influence and precedent. Both Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon studied under Heaney at Queen’s University in Belfast, Ciaran Carson wrote about his poetry and later became involved with the Seamus Heaney Center for Poetry at Queens, and both Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn have written about Heaney’s presence as an influence in their lives.

Heaney’s work is often read as essentialist, nationalist, or inextricably connected to the current social moment. For example, in his essay “Heaney and Muldoon: Omphalos and Diaspora,” Elmer Kennedy-Andrews establishes Heaney as a poet with a deep fidelity to place and identity, establishing Heaney as a foil to his reading of Paul Muldoon. In his characterization of Heaney, Kennedy-Andrews argues, “Heaney restores to the poetry of place the sense of myth and history, the element of cultural and political resistance and retrieval […] Heaney develops his own answering Catholic Gaelic myth of

continuity grounded in the transcendental reality of place" (101). Heaney would likely agree with this characterization, as his critical essays often explore similar themes. In his essay "Place and Displacement," writing about contemporary Northern Irish literature, Heaney considers the lyric inclinations in the poets of his generation, which he perceives to be deeply rooted in the historical context of the time (129). Further, he argues, "the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics […] does not absolve it or the poet from political responsibility" (129). In this context, much of Heaney's poetry, especially his earlier works, can easily be read as communicating a political stance. Often, these poems evoke a deep history of conflict and violence that trace back to centuries of colonial violence and oppression. When Heaney draws on other cultural traditions—most famously, perhaps, in his series of bog bodies poems in which the speakers are reminded of the Northern Irish conflict upon the sight of ancient preserved bodies discovered in Denmark and other countries—the poems always return back to Irish history by drawing parallels between the violent histories of the different places.

Heaney's bog body poems, spanning several of his earlier collections including *North* and *Wintering Out*, tend to root the violence of the troubles in a deep history, embodied by the long memory of the bog, which has preserved ancient artifacts since pre-history. These poems especially echo the previously discussed common rhetoric that characterizes Northern Ireland as stuck in a cycle of violence. In Heaney's 1972 collection *Wintering Out*, "The Tollund Man" transforms a bog body found in Denmark into an object of reverence: "Someday I will go to Aarhus/To see his peat-brown head,/The mild pods of his eye-lids,/His pointed skin cap" (64). Here, viewing the body is

equated with a holy pilgrimage and elevates the Tollund man to a saintlike status by the virtue of his death. In the second section of the poem, the speaker's reflections on the Tollund man reference more recent violent events in Ireland, as he imagines praying to this figure to "make germinate//The scattered, ambushed/Flesh of labourers" and mentions "four young brothers, trailed/For miles along the lines" (65). In the third section, the poem concludes with another connection between the past world of the Tollund man and the current time in Northern Ireland: "Out here in Jutland/In the old man-killing parishes/I will feel lost,/Unhappy and at home" (65). The confluence of reverence and violence throughout this poem makes for a troubling reading, which implies an elevation of the victims of Troubles violence into martyrs through the medium of poetry, and perhaps also an aestheticization of the violence itself.

While Heaney's predominant poetic voice is highly lyrical, following the style and conventions that that he elevates in many of his critical essays, the poets in this dissertation all depart from the lyric tradition in different ways. Their stylistic departures also reflect different approaches to writing the violence of the Troubles in their poetry, in another departure from Heaney's nationalistic and essentialist approach. Significantly, although these poets do not approach this history in the same ways as Heaney, they are not avoiding the topic. As the varied critical receptions of these later poets demonstrates, the political and cultural implications of "lyric" or "experimental" poetics vary for different readers. In her book *Improprieties*, Clair Wills argues that the politics of contemporary Northern Irish society reveal the dichotomy between these categories of poetics to be less defined:

> What I want to suggest is that current discussion of the politics of form in contemporary poetry is caught in a false binarism, between, on the one hand, 'traditional' lyric, which while it may carry a political content belies its message through its slavery to conventional forms, and, on the other, 'experimental' or avant-garde poetry, which in its conscious problematization of language itself foregoes political content in favour of linguistic counter-conventions, a rejection of the authoritative lyric voice, a destabilization of meaning. (Wills 48)

Poetry categorized as lyric is generally associated with the "public realm," and is therefore seen as "conventional" or mainstream, as Wills points out here. The "experimental" poetry, therefore, is most often read in contrast as a complete rejection of conventions. Wills suggests that critics extrapolate from this binary view to conclude that lyrics may address politics in theme, but cannot make political statements in style; therefore since experimental poetry is the opposite, this type of poetry may make political statements only through its nonconventional style choices and cannot clearly communicate political statements when the goal of such poetry is a "destabilization of meaning." However, for Wills, contemporary Northern Irish poetry exemplifies "a blurring of this distinction between expressive and experimental poetry" (48), with some poets blending lyric and non-lyric forms or incorporating political and social commentary into poems with experimental poetic forms.

While the poets discussed in this dissertation each experiment with poetic forms and play with language in different ways, even at their most "deconstructive," these poems do not refuse to communicate meaning—nor are they inherently apolitical. Rather, building on Wills' assertions that non-lyric poetics are not diametrically opposed to conveying meaning, it is more productive to look at these poems as generative, an exploration of ways to communicate the complexities of experiences of the Troubles that expand beyond the boundaries of preestablished forms and expectations. Additionally, it

is important to note that reading the loss of “lyric” form as a loss of emotional expression or an aesthetically pleasing line similarly establishes a false binary. Rather, readings of the more experimental poets in this dissertation will illustrate the range of expressions of trauma that open up with further experiments in form.

The younger generation’s push back against more traditional lyric form also seems to be a natural reaction of searching for different modes of expression to capture different experience. In *The Ulster Renaissance*, Heather Clark explores the ways in which the older generation of Northern Irish poets, including Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, influenced each other’s work as they began to publish around the same time. Although the idea of a “Belfast group” or literary school is contested amongst scholars–and by some of those poets, with Mahon famously repudiating any ties to a group–the body of work that emerged in this time shows a depth of collaborative work, even with wide stylistic variety (Clark 4). Clark further argues that many of the poets loosely associated with the Belfast group sought a distinctively Northern voice that could encompass the sectarian divides in their society and communicate “a sense of displacement” that was less evident in the South (104). With similar literary influences, from Louis MacNeice to modernist and contemporary American poets, the poets of the Ulster Renaissance established a style that both remains lyrical and addresses the themes of their time (105-106). As younger poets began to emerge, it is inevitable that they would write in conversation with Heaney’s generation.

Each poet pushes the boundaries of form in different ways that further emphasize the diversity of experience of the Troubles and, more broadly, the diversity of ways that we can read and understand trauma. Ciaran Carson’s experimental forms, shifting from

long-lined, broken phrases to short, sparse verse, both announce a departure from the lyrical tradition and allow for a wider range of ways to express trauma. Both Carson and Muldoon challenge the idea that history is a fixed, singular experience in their fluid approaches to both form and narrative. Medbh McGuckian centers interiority, rejecting the "public poet" persona that often-characterized elegiac poetry about the Troubles. Bryce and Flynn, while they tend to write in less deliberately obscure styles, ironize and distance themselves in different ways from Northern Ireland, forcing a different perspective. Similarly, as they explore responses to the traumas of the troubles, each poet brings in more personal experiences as well: Carson often writes about his late father, and later, about his struggle with cancer, McGuckian reflects on her personal life and writes about the death of a friend, Muldoon weaves together personal losses from his life with memories of the Troubles, Bryce writes the tensions and domestic conflicts alongside sectarian violence, and Flynn ties in the struggles of her generation in the economic slump to the echoes of the Troubles. Although these poets can at times be challenging to read, it is important to note that meaning is not absent in their works. Rather, they create meaning and expression in different ways, emphasizing the wide range of possibilities for communication beyond familiar lyric and metaphor.

The lives and works of the poets discussed in this dissertation are similarly entwined with similar and opposing themes: Ciaran Carson stayed in Belfast, returning to themes of the city and place throughout his works while Paul Muldoon left Belfast, and his poetry often ranges out, transnational—although sometimes returning back to memories of Belfast and the Troubles. Medbh McGuckian remained in Northern Ireland, but in one interview she frankly admits that she often thought of leaving but was held

back by a feeling of rootedness and a sense of obligation after “having voluntarily submitted to the worst twenty years in this country's history, probably, and lived through the worst of it” (Sailer 120). Growing up at the end of the Troubles, Colette Bryce left Northern Ireland and lives abroad, her poems reflecting an urgency to escape the place even as they return thematically back to her childhood. Leontia Flynn, from the same generation, lives and teaches in Belfast, but many of her poems center around themes of travel, exile, distancing, in a push-and-pull of desire to both find home and to regard it from a distance.

The poets are connected with each other too, in ways direct and indirect: For example, Muldoon studied under Seamus Heaney at Queens, mentions in a poetry panel interview how he admires McGuckian’s works (Kennedy-Andrews 178), and in 2020 published “The Triumph,” a 9-page-long elegiac tribute to Ciaran Carson after his death in 2019 (Muldoon). Although I have separated out the poets as pre- and post-agreement, it is important to note that all the older generation were still writing and publishing poetry into the recent present, alongside the post-agreement poets. The differences between their styles remain a defining factor, however—something that was also recognized by the younger generation of poets. In a 2011 essay for the *Edinburgh Review* blog, titled “What do I know? (Or, why I’m giving up post-modern poetry to live an irony-free life.),” Leontia Flynn looks back to Carson, Muldoon, and McGuckian, describing their poetry as a post-modern standard (Flynn). In her poetry, too, Flynn references her predecessors: one poem from 2008, “Sky Boats,” is subtitled “after Medbh McGuckian (sort of)” (*D* 13). Ultimately, reading these poets and their work in conversation with each other and in

conversation between their works draws out the different possibilities for writing and reading trauma in poetry.

"ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK": READING TRAUMA IN CIARAN CARSON'S POETRY

The Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson grew up in Belfast in an Irish Catholic family living on the Falls Road, which is the heart of West Belfast and an Irish Catholic community within the city. While talking about his childhood in an interview, Carson refers to himself as "a guy from the Falls Road" before even mentioning Catholicism, indicating the importance of the Falls as a geographical locator that is coded with deeper meanings of identity (Brandes 78). In his poetry, too, place frequently acts as a stand-in for identity. Although he was raised speaking Irish as a first language, Carson writes predominantly in English, and attributes this in part to a rebellion against the "moribund nineteenth-century nationalist implications" of writing in Irish (Kennedy-Andrews 14). Many of Carson's poems reflect details from his life: the speakers in his poems often reference a Catholic identity and are similarly concerned with place and in many poems where a speaker references his father, his father is a postman, just like Carson's father (Laskowski 94). However, Carson's work is deliberately fictionalized. Even The Star Factory, a book-length essay exploration of the deep history of Belfast that includes details from his own life, is not meant to be a memoir, as he explains in the same interview: "You never really know how things were exactly. We reinvent it all the time." (95). In his poetry, Carson deconstructs and recombines bits of history, news stories, and personal experiences to create a space in which the traumatic experiences of the Troubles can be processed and expressed through his writing. Similarly, places in his poems constantly shift and change, complicating the easy security that comes out of knowing where one is from and rejecting any singular nationalistic narrative. His poetic forms

often feature nonlinear narratives and stylistic structures that echo the complexities of how trauma is experienced, and thematically, his poems emphasize the generative potential of constant change, even as it can be disorienting. Rather than remaining trapped in a cycle of traumatic thoughts, the speakers in Carson's poems make use of this generative change to regain some creative autonomy.

In Carson's work, memory is unreliable, which allows the speakers in his poems to evade a relationship to history that is fixed and inescapable. References to the Troubles appear throughout the body of Ciaran Carson's poetry, prose, and memoir writings. This prevalence suggests that events from this time are deeply influential to Carson, who returns to similar themes from his earliest works up through his final collection of poetry. Significantly, despite constantly returning to familiar themes of violence and trauma, his work emphasizes change and evolution—both in his writing styles and in how he approaches the topics—which again rejects the notion that the past and its traumatic memories can trap the subject. As Naomi Marklew notes in her reading of Carson's poetry as modern elegy, Carson's poetic form has changed substantially several times over the course of his career, and readings of his later middle period poems, which are largely structured with short, minimalist lines, can also offer valuable insight into how the poet engages in different ways with a cultural trauma like the Troubles over time (Marklew 353). This chapter will focus mainly on two earlier collections of poetry, *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, to closely examine how Carson's longer-lined, wordier forms from this period create complex, interrelated poems that entangle the reader in the post-traumatic memories of the speakers. In these earlier volumes of poetry, the trauma of living through this time in history is clearly apparent in poems that constantly

reference bombings and police searches. These early works share many common images or even direct intertextual references between poems, and their speakers share a similar outlook on the cityscape that they inhabit, which suggests with affirming that these narrators are the same person, constantly returning to the same space and going down the same well-worn trails of thought. Between the poems, there is just enough commonality and just enough difference that each narrator's experience is both familiar and unexpectedly altered: even when entire lines like "the city is a map of the city" reappear in multiple poems, the surrounding context is different, changing the reader's experience. As Dominick LaCapra notes in a gloss of Sigmund Freud's work, repetition as related to traumatic experiences generally indicates a subject who is trapped within a repetitive cycle where they uncontrollably relive the traumatic moment (LaCapra 34). Often, the subject is then re-traumatized by repeatedly experiencing this moment (35). However, Carson's work challenges the idea that repetition of events is always identical by introducing change from poem to poem. This fluidity allows Carson to maintain a space that is constantly re-created, offering the potential for change and growth rather than remaining stuck in place. In one interview, Carson explains, "I want whatever world I live in to be defamiliarized so that it can make sense to me, so that I can see it anew" (Kennedy-Andrews 18) By making the familiar strange, Carson's poetry creates space for "seeing anew" the experiences of trauma expressed by the speakers in his poems.

Much of Carson's earlier poetry focuses on the city space of Belfast, which acts as a physical manifestation of the Troubles for the speakers in these poems. The streets hold both real and allegorical reminders of the trauma caused by the violence of the Troubles. The cityscape becomes a constantly-changing labyrinth shadowed by violence

that most often leaves the narrator, and the reader, lost and disoriented. Often, the speakers of the poems simultaneously walk the streets and face intrusive traumatic memories, emphasizing a connection between place and memory. Place also shapes a speaker's identity, as Carson's own reference to himself as "a guy from the Falls" indicates. Carson's narrators frequently demonstrate a tension between two sometimes conflicting urges: to map, navigate, and understand the streets—and therefore the traumatic memories that they hold—and to escape the oppressive surveillance of the state, to resist being seen, labeled, catalogued. This escape seems more possible when the narrator can embrace disorientation and remake the space that has become defamiliarized. Reading these poems for expressions of trauma, with a focus on how they alter the reader's perception and experience of that trauma, emphasizes both the role that unconventional narrative style can play in shifting perspectives and the importance of the reaction of the reader as witness.

One challenge in approaching works that address trauma is to read them in a way that does not categorize that trauma by default as fixed, insurmountable, or wholly impossible to express. The American Psychological Association's updated diagnostic manual, the DSM-IV-TR, lists as one of its categories "persistent avoidance," which appears in various forms (53). This has been picked up by many psychologists, who focus on symptoms of repression and dissociation that, in extreme cases, cause complete alienation from the self (63). However, as Michele Balaev notes in "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," repression is not the only potential response to trauma (Balaev 6). Thus, approaches to literary trauma theory that look only for what is unspeakable fail to recognize and celebrate the generative potential of trauma literature to both express and

process trauma. In Carson's poetry, the very act of the narrator's speech, however obliquely he approaches the topic, is a part of processing his traumatic experiences of the Troubles. The role of the reader is therefore important as the reader becomes an audience for this processing.

A feeling of uncertainty about reality and instability in a sense of self commonly characterize the aftermath of a traumatic experience. However, these symptoms can be read more productively than dismissing them as avoidant or dissociative responses. In his book *Real Hallucinations*, Matthew Ratcliffe explores the intersections of phenomenology and mental disorders, including responses to trauma, which can productively involve the reader's response to the work. Ratcliffe builds on Husserl's description of how people view and experience the world around him to explain what Ratcliffe calls "experiences of anticipation" (Ratcliffe 124). According to Husserl, we seek to move towards an object as a part of perceiving and understanding it (125). This brings with it an expectation of engagement, or anticipation that the experience will proceed in a certain and familiar way (125). When this anticipation is thwarted, there is no script for the possible outcomes of that experience. This leads to uncertainty and doubt (126). It is this "recognition of negation" that characterizes an individual's response to trauma, when the world moves from the predictable to unknown possible outcomes (127). Therefore, reality and memory both become uncertain, and the senses that we rely on to anticipate and plan our reaction are similarly no longer reliable constants. For Ratcliffe, trauma leads to a breakdown of trust toward both individuals and the functioning of the wider world, a questioning of reality, and even doubts directed at the subject's own body (132). When the anticipated experience does not meet those expectations, everything else

falls apart. However, this state of uncertainty should not be dismissed as an avoidant or dissociative response. Rather, it is a different positioning, a different way of looking at the world.

By denying expectations of a linear progression of time or a cityscape that is predictable and can be easily mapped and navigated, Carson's poetry constantly shifts the burden of Ratcliffe's "recognition of negation" onto the reader. In this space where the reader moves away from an anticipated experience of the world, it is then possible to engage with trauma on a deeper level, beyond merely reading and identifying the symptoms of a post-traumatic response within a text. The reader must actively process the disorientation caused by these poems in order to interpret and understand the oft convoluted narratives. Thus, reading trauma becomes a more engaged experience that is directed by the text as the poems' style and content change how the reader is oriented toward the world within the text.

Trauma and the Lyric: Carson's Early Work

Carson's first full collection of poetry, *The New Estate*, was published in 1976. The Wake Forest edition includes several illustrations in a black and white woodcut style, both on the cover and paired with some of the poems throughout the book. Several of the poems are adapted from Carson's translations of early Irish poetry and are short, lyrical verses often centered in nature, like the opening poem, "The Scribe in the Woods"; many other poems reference Celtic lore, saints, or history. "The Insular Celts," for example, describes the ancient Celts in a way that imitates an origin myth. In these early poems, Carson's style is reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's lyrical, nature-centric imagery. At first reading, the collection seems to be focused on familiar ways of writing Irishness in

poetry that romanticizes a deep history of culture and place and fits within a generic nationalist narrative—again similar to how Heaney approaches writing Irishness.

However, at the center of the collection, on opposing pages, are two poems structured as a matched set: both are four stanzas with four lines each. The first, "The Holiday," opens with a vivid description of a sheep carcass, a jarring departure from the earlier poems in the collection:

> At breakfast, I remembered
> The mutilated sheep we found yesterday,
> The pus had thickened to a sour cream
> In the pink-lipped wounds […] (*NE* 20).

The blunt description of decay in this poem rebukes the lyrical, pastoral imagery of the preceding poems. The mythologized insular Celts and the lyric images of scribes and ancient saints and famous musicians like O'Carolan in the earlier poems give way to vivid images of mutilation and rot, proving the earlier visionary poems to be, as Carson explained, "the voice of a proud and foolish Celt" (Brandes 80) that satirize, rather than romanticize, a particular vision of Irishness. The speaker in this poem is on his way home from a holiday, and the final line of the penultimate stanza moves from describing the waitress in the diner where they have stopped for breakfast to say that he is "going home to Belfast" (20). In the final stanza, the speaker describes his house as "cobwebbed" (20), piled with unread papers and sour milk. His homecoming, therefore, offers only further disillusionment, and sets the tone for the poem that is set opposite to "The Holiday."

The second poem, "The Bomb Disposal," is notably the only poem in *The New Estate* that alludes to the Troubles, and establishes some of the imagery and themes that Carson develops further in his later poetry when more poems become centrally preoccupied with the violence and traumas of the Troubles. In "The Bomb Disposal," the

poem opens with the narrator setting up a simile as he tries to imagine what it is like to defuse a bomb:

> Is it just like picking a lock
> with the slow deliberation of a funeral,
> hesitating through a darkened nave
> until you find the answer? (21)

The imagery of a "funeral" and "darkened nave" immediately creates an ominous mood, while the phrasing of a question indicates the speaker's uncertainty. This uncertainty continues when the second stanza concludes with another question: "can you read/The message of the threaded veins/Like print, its body's chart?" (21). The dismantling of a bomb here becomes the dissection of a corpse with "threaded veins" that must be read and interpreted, echoing the image of the sheep carcass in "The Holiday." The subject of the narrator's questioning is unclear here: if directed at a bomb disposal specialist, this question seems reasonable, but aimed at the reader, the question becomes a rhetorical statement that drives home the futility of trying to understand the threatening intricacy of the bomb's wiring. The bomb here stands in for the broader concept of violence, as the imminent threat, if it cannot be properly defused, is clear. Because the narrator is unable to "read" this incomprehensible message, he is also unable to understand or communicate the violence that it represents.

In the final two stanzas of the poem, the speaker shifts to describing an unnamed city that, like the bomb, presents a confusing landscape that is difficult to navigate:

> The city is a map of the city,
> its forbidden areas change daily.
> I find myself in a crowded taxi
> making deviations from the known route […] (20)

Given its association with a bomb and the historical context of the Troubles, this poem invites a reading of "the city" as specifically Northern Irish, particularly when we also consider the poem's placement opposite "The Holiday," which explicitly names Belfast. With these connections in mind, the speaker in this poem can be read as also trying to process the larger atmosphere of sectarian violence in his city.

The narrator's experience of the constantly-changing city in "The Bomb Disposal" is characterized by a lack of agency. He describes his ride in the taxi not as a choice, but a situation in which "I find myself" and the car itself moves away from what is "known" to the narrator. The idea that the narrator is swept along on this journey mirrors how Matthew Ratcliffe describes traumatic memory as "permeated by passivity and detachment" (Ratcliffe 162). In this poem, the narrator retreats into passivity—or is forced into it—by the threat of violence both within the bomb and within the city. When the speaker arrives at a destination in the final stanza, everything in the cityscape is closed off to him: the street ends in a "cul-de-sac" with "boarded windows" and "drawn blinds" that prevent anyone from looking in or out (21). The "boarded windows" also evoke the frequent bombings, which could strike at any time and shatter unprotected glass. The narrator's view of the city mirrors his description of the bomb as an inscrutable embodiment of violence, while his own uncertainty is a direct result of his traumatic experience. The reader, following the narrator's path, is similarly affected by the same passivity that blocks further access to more information, and must therefore accept only this partial understanding of the city.

The remaining poems in *The New Estate* reflect the shift in tone: they return to more familiar imagery with poems that are often domestic, sometimes encompassing

death and sickness in their themes, but there is little menace in these images: these are vignettes of a loss in the family or a body being laid out for burial rites. The disruption of "The Holiday" and "The Bomb Disposal" has shifted the focus away from pastoral nostalgia, but the smaller moments in life, including the occasional death, remain central to the collection.

Narrating Trauma Memory

After *The New Estate*, just over a decade passed before Carson's next book of poetry, *The Irish for No*, was published in 1987. In an interview with Rand Brandes, Carson attributes this gap to his job with the Arts council and his increased involvement with traditional music and dance (Brandes 81-82). He notes that he was drawn to the "immediacy" of music, especially when compared to the longer process of carefully crafting poems (81). When he began writing again, Carson's style and thematic focus had changed significantly, and was largely influenced by traditional music and the surrounding pub culture. Carson points out the rhythmic similarities between the long lines of his new poetic style and the reel, as well as what he calls "pub speech" (Brandes 83), the long, rambling stories that people would tell each other in pubs. Many of these poems are clearly centered on the city of Belfast, and the violence of the Troubles is present to some degree in most of the poems.

The Irish For No is divided into three sections, but the volume opens with one standalone poem, "Turn Again," which is placed before the beginning of part one. The poem's shorter form—nine lines, broken into two stanzas of five and then four lines—matches the structure of the poems in part two of the volume. In both *The Irish for No* and his subsequent publication, *Belfast Confetti,* Carson favors this structure for his

shorter poems, because it evokes a traditional fourteen-line sonnet but subverts expectations of the form with its overly long lines, lack of a rhyme scheme, and erratic line breaks (Brandes 84). While the irregularities in form emphasize a nontypical narrative structure, at the most basic level these deviations are also deliberate artistic choices that make the familiar unfamiliar.

"Turn Again" opens the volume by firmly situating the reader in Belfast, but immediately establishes the thematic focus of the rest of the volume: the city is not a stable or predictable space. The poem begins:

> There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built.
> A map which shows the bridge that collapsed' the streets that never existed.
> Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane, Stone-Cutter's Entry—
> Today's plan is already yesterday's—the streets that were there are gone.
> And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons (*IN* 7).

The map, typically understood as a key to understanding and navigating a place, is no longer trustworthy or accurate for the narrator. This view mirrors the experience of the speaker in "The Bomb Disposal," where "the city is a map of the city/its forbidden areas changing daily," thus tying this collection back to the earlier poem (*NE* 21). In this poem, the oppressive and violent presence of the government in this conflict, referenced by the "shape of the jails" is just as traumatic as the bombings and other threats of the Troubles. This bridge was never built, or that bridge collapsed—either way, the connections cannot be made whole. The names offer no navigable directions, as the speaker lists streets that "never existed," while the oppressive and violent presence of the government in this conflict, referenced by the "shape of the jails," is even more shrouded in mystery.

Lacking any guidance from the map, the speaker is uncertain and plagued by a feeling of paranoia that is specifically tied to a challenge of his knowledge of the city. His

disorientation within the space of the city affects his sense of self as well, blurring the lines between place, body, and identity:

> When someone asks me where I live, I remember where I used to live.
> Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into
> A side-street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed (*IN* 7).

Location is key to identity, particularly in a city of sectarian divides, but the speaker is unable to remember where he currently lives and, by extension, struggles to maintain a cohesive sense of self in relation to place. The series of "someones" questioning the speaker create confusion, as he seems unable to answer their demands for location-based information and first remembers the past rather than the present. In this stanza, the "shadow" both is literal and hints at a person shadowing the speaker, following him for some threatening purpose. He knows the "streets that never existed," but this knowledge offers no stability in the real world. In her essay "Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional," Kathleen McCracken focuses on how maps appear in Carson's poetry and argues that "the map is a figure which keeps changing, against the rules of logic and rhetoric, into something else [...] the city as it used to be, the city as it is becoming" (McCracken 356). In this reading, this illogical map, while challenging to navigate, also gives the speaker space to "turn into/a side street"—the line break here both suggesting that the speaker can transform himself by turning into something different, and the following line clarifying the meaning to be a physical action of turning. The speaker's decisive action to turn allows him to dodge his "shadow" and returns agency to him, and thus he can declare that "history is changed." Rather than feeling trapped by the past and disoriented by how the city has changed over time, the speaker can forge a new path forward.

In addition to imitating traditional music or digression-filled "pub speech" (Brandes 83), the long-lined, narrative style of the poems in parts one and three of *The Irish for No* also evoke recognizable symptoms of a post-traumatic response to stress, particularly when the form is read in combination with the themes of the poems. In "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," van der Kolk and van der Hart explain that "narrative memory" allows an individual to process, explain, and express an experience (van der Kolk and van der Hart 160). However, trauma disrupts this process and distorts the familiar "constructs" that an individual relies on to categorize and process memories. As a result, the individual experiences a breakdown in how memory is formed and in how events are processed. This "traumatic memory" is characterized by a disruption in mental function that results in incomplete or fragmented memories that are more difficult to access, recall, and recount (160). Carson's narrators frequently demonstrate an inability to focus on a single train of thought or to speak clearly or directly, instead following a more disjointed narrative pattern. The difficulty experienced by the reader in following these rambling narratives is a key factor in reading these poems about trauma as the reader becomes more involved in this part of processing trauma, leading to a phenomenological shift in perspective.

Part one of *The Irish For No* opens with "Dresden," a long poem of ten nine-lined stanzas, with long lines that overflow the page. The poem opens by telling the story of a fighter pilot who is reminiscing about bombing Dresden during the war:

> It would be Horse. Horse kept his ears to the ground.
> And he was a great man for current affairs; he owned the only TV in the place.
> Come dusk he'd set off on his rounds, to tell the whole townland the latest
> Situation in the Middle East, a mortar bomb attack in Mullaghbawn—
> The damn things never worked, of course—and so he'd tell the story
> How in his day it was very different. Take young Flynn for instance […] (*IN* 11).

The violence in the Middle East is placed alongside the Troubles, inviting a comparison between the two situations, but the narrator does not pursue this, and instead takes an aside to comment on the fallibility of mortar bombs before getting completely distracted by recounting Horse's story of Flynn. As the poem continues, even the identity of the speaker becomes confused: Was the interjection the original narrator, or Horse himself? When the line shifts from "in his day" to "Take young Flynn for instance," it could easily be Horse speaking, taking over the narrative. The confusion here adds to the difficulty in following the narration of the poem, which continues to jump along a chain of associations, going from the story of Flynn to talking about a Master McGinty, until finally in the sixth stanza, the poem returns to the original subject:

> […] I forgot to mention they were twins. They were as like two—
> No, not peas in a pod, for this is not the time nor the place to go into
> Comparisons, and this is really Horse's story, Horse who—now I'm getting
> Round to it—flew over Dresden in the war […] (*IN* 14).

By portraying a speaker—or speakers—who have difficulty focusing on one narrative thread, Carson creates a feeling of disorientation in the reader, who must track each digression or backtrack several stanzas to pick up on a previous train of thought. The repetition of phrases and topics throughout this piece further emphasizes the scattered, circular patterns of the speaker's memory, which forces a reorientation toward reading and following traumatic memory

rather than narrative memory. It is important to note, however, that despite the rambling digressions, the poem is still a cohesive whole. For example, the reference to "comparisons" in this stanza gestures to the earlier implied comparison between civil unrest in the Middle East and Mullaghbawn, but here, the line "this is not the time nor the place" offers a critique of drawing parallels too easily. This meta-level line also reminds

the reader to avoid over-analyzing the speaker's trauma-influenced narrative expression, emphasizing again that the narrative style is not abnormal, but just adaptive to the aftereffects of trauma.

In the volume's long-lined poems, the structure of the lines also pulls the reader in and forces a slower, more deliberate reading, making reader engagement more central to understanding the traumatic experiences these poems address. This structure denies access to a straightforward story; instead, we must double back and remember all the previous threads that were dropped in order to make sense of the whole narrative. This disjointed storytelling, and the disorientation it creates in the reader, mirrors the disorientation that often occurs in reaction to a traumatic experience. The world of the text is made strange and more compelling because its narrative path is unpredictable. With each turning, the reader discovers a different perspective. Here, Carson's experimental structure creates a shift in perspective that better enables the reader to witness expressions of trauma that emerge in response to the Troubles. His poetry celebrates these less conventional forms of narrative, thus empowering the speakers in these poems to communicate more effectively without being forced into a more restrictive narrative form.

In the second section of *The Irish for No*, the poems return to the shorter form of the nine-lined structure established in the opening poem "Turn Again," but the long lines are increasingly broken off mid-sentence or digressive. In "Belfast Confetti," the opening poem of the second section, the violent conflict of the Troubles is made explicit in the fragmented opening lines:

> Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation marks
> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion

> Itself—an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire…
> I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering,
> All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and colons. (*IN* 31)

The "riot squad" is set against Belfast confetti—a slang term for projectiles loaded with scrap metal—but the nuts and bolts become exclamation marks, in the following lines, asterisks, hyphens, stops and colons, all punctuation that cut off speech. For Kathleen McCracken, the listing of punctuation creates a "non-language" that replaces words that convey meaning (McCracken 363). This wordless language conveys only a percussive violence that interrupts the narrative of the poem and stops the narrator as he tries to form a complete thought, in anticipation of speech: he cannot complete a sentence without "stuttering," the term here both describing interrupted speech and evoking the sound of machine gunfire. The speaker of this poem is unable to communicate anything meaningful or coherent as he is both figuratively and literally "blocked." Given its close tie with the violence of Troubles, the narrator's stuttering is also significant in that it evokes the stuttering, broken speech that often manifests as a post-traumatic stress response (Alao and Selrarajah). Speech is central to self-expression and contributes to the ways in which a subject builds a sense of identity and communicates that to others. When the narrator in this poem is unable to form a thought to speak, his generative potential is blocked, along with the potentialities of "alleyways and side streets" that could offer different directions if they had not been been blocked off. Faced with the more immediate trauma of the riot squad, the speaker here is far more limited than the narrator of "Dresden." Therefore, his narrative style changes to reflect these limitations and to work around them.

As the poem continues, the narrator's inability to express himself corresponds with a feeling of being stuck in the physical city space, which no longer offers alternate routes, but has instead become a trap:

> I know this labyrinth so well – Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street –
> Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end again.
> A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shield. Walkie-talkies. What is
> My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question-marks.
> (31)

The street names, all references to other areas of conflict, create a sense that the violence is all-encompassing and inescapable. Constantly frustrated by the dead ends and cutoffs, the narrator is ultimately faced with a disembodied soldier, described only as "Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies." The questions that they ask him become, equally, questions that the narrator might be asking himself: "What is my name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question marks" (93). This line of questioning, beginning with where the narrator comes from, is loaded with a double meaning: the soldiers could be inquiring either about his immediate previous location, or his place of origin. Furthermore, given that Belfast is a city where one's residence reveals a specific cultural background and political allegiance, the line of questioning focused on his name and location indicates a desire to categorize and label the narrator. The aggressive "fusillade of question marks," where the punctuation again acts as an anti-language, overwhelms him, leaving him unable to answer these questions. In his hesitation, the narrator is unable to place himself in easily-identifiable categories, again showing his inability to form an expression of his identity in the midst of a traumatizing experience. However, this ambiguity is also freeing, allowing the speaker to avoid being placed into a particular category by his questioners.

The structure of *The Irish for No* as a whole echoes the ways in which traumatic memory fixates on a single traumatic memory, repeatedly returning to the same images and keeping the victim of trauma trapped in a fixed memory (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172). The predominant themes in "Belfast Confetti" continually reappear throughout the volume as poems return to similar imagery of the city as a labyrinth, altered either by blockades or bombings, a narrator who lacks agency or self-knowledge, and the threat of police or military surveillance. The poems also begin to reference each other by mentioning the same events. In "Cocktails," a shorter poem in part two, the speaker says, "We were trying to remember the facts/Behind the Black & Decker case" (*IN* 41) without providing further explanation. Then, in a longer poem in part three, "The Irish for No," the narrator follows a stream of idle thoughts, moving from the cityscape to a recent murder—a protestant paramilitary member found dead—to describing the scenery of harbor, and then opens the final stanza with the question, "What's all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled/Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker? It was just a normal morning/When they came […]" (50). With more detail, now, the "Black & Decker" case is revealed to be a grisly death. The "he" here is ambiguous, given its separation from the preceding lines: at first reading, it seems to refer to the subject of the sentence, the Belfast business-man, but as it is difficult to imagine how he could self-inflict thirteen holes in his own skull with a drill, the "he" more likely refers to the paramilitary victim described earlier in the previous stanza, marking the "business-man" as the perpetrator, a sectarian mobster. Alternately, the implication of suicide could be a dark joke that satirizes cases where deaths from sectarian violence were mischaracterized or covered up. This deliberately vague phrasing and talking around the event forces the

reader to stop and untangle the details as they are doled out, thus causing a state of uncertainty that many of the speakers in these poems express themselves when faced with the violence of the Troubles that is both seemingly random and inevitable.

In "33333," another poem in part two, the speaker experiences a crisis of self-identity similar to the speaker in "Belfast Confetti," which is also precipitated by an encounter with the oppressive police state:

> I was trying to explain to the invisible man behind the wire-grilled
> One-way mirror and squawk-box exactly where it was I wanted to go, except
> I didn't know myself—a number in the Holy Land, Damascus Street or Cairo?
> (101)

The disembodied "invisible man" in a position of authority questions the narrator, again, about his destination. The colloquial phrase "I didn't know myself," indicating the narrator's uncertainty about his destination, lacks punctuation that would add clarity: "I didn't know, myself" would be more obvious here. The ambiguity in this phrase, however, also includes another meaning, that the narrator does not know *himself*. The speaker's self-knowledge is intrinsically tied to his knowledge of place, but since he does not know himself, he cannot know the city. The narrator says, "I know this place like the back of my hand, except/My hand is cut off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I never knew existed" (101). Here, the connection between a lack of self-identity and a lack of knowledge of place is rooted in the speaker's physical body, his hand, which has been "cut off" in the same way that the city streets, in this poem as in others, are blocked by "ramps, diversions, one-way systems" (101). Like an incomplete body, the speaker's knowledge of place is also lacking. The chopped-off hand is also a reference to the red hand of Ulster, a heraldic symbol with several different origin myths attached to. In one of those stories, as warring tribes raced to claim the province of Ulster, a warrior cut off

his own hand and threw it onto the territory, allowing him to be the first to touch and therefore claim the province (Eriksen and Jenkins 81). This myth in particular highlights the history of violence and sectarian politics that are deeply embedded within place and a nation-building narrative and emphasizes the physicality of how a body moves through the city.

Place, whether descriptions of pastoral or urban spaces, is often a visual reflection of the state of the nation and its people. In the imaginations of most of its citizens, Northern Ireland during the Troubles is defined by divisions, violence, and trauma. Popular Troubles literature and even some non-fiction writing often reflects the attitude that this violence is so ingrained in the history of Northern Ireland that it is both inevitable and unstoppable. Because the society is associated so closely with its city, the people, as they are described, seem to have absorbed some of this violent atmosphere. For example, the historian A.T.Q. Stewart views both the city and its citizens as stuck in an inescapable pattern of sectarian thinking, suggesting that the inhabitants of Ulster have internalized a map that reinforces the conflict of the Troubles:

> The Ulsterman carries the map of this religious geography in his mind almost from birth. He knows which villages, which roads and streets, are Catholic, or Protestant, or 'mixed.' It [...] imposes on him a complex behaviour pattern and a special way of looking at political problems. (Stewart 181)

Here, Stewart implies that this internalized behavior is atavistic: the Ulsterman inherits “almost from birth” an ancient, ancestral knowledge which both defines the landscape and directs his actions. The space of Northern Ireland thus shapes an individual’s viewpoint and behaviour, and he can move through a city like Belfast with a tribal knowledge of the streets.

The approach to place in this excerpt from Stewart views the city as a stable space that is defined, like Northern Irish society, by sectarian certainties. Similarly, in this constant state, the individual is secure in his sense of identity. For Carson, however, the city space is anything but rigid; rather, the streets are constantly disrupted by bombings, roadblocks, and detours. Neal Alexander notes that Carson's cityscape is always provisional, accessible only by pedestrians (Alexander 42). Through their on-foot wanderings, the narrators of Carson's poems frequently try to map out the city streets, and thus gain some deeper understanding of everything that the city represents: place, identity, and the violence of the Troubles. However, the narrators are most often frustrated in their pursuit of understanding. When they express trauma in their narratives, then, the speakers must also engage with the cityscape in a more provisional way, rather than approaching the landscape as something that is fixed or certain.

In "Linear B," the narrator is watching a person who seems to have some clue to understanding the city, but not in any way that corresponds with typical modes of communication: "his *rendezvous* is not quite *vous*" (*IN* 33). The narrator follows this person's erratic, "zig-zag" path in order to glimpse the notebook that he is constantly writing in, and describes what he sees: "Squiggles, dashes, question marks, dense as the Rosetta Stone./His good eye glittered at me: it was either nonsense, or a formula—for/Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city" (*IN* 33). Although these enigmatic scribbles may contain some knowledge to help him navigate the "perpetual motion" and constant change within the city, the narrator is still unable to read it, and is left just as frustrated as before. However, the author of this "formula," in his non-traditional mode of thought and writing, seems to have some knowledge that the

narrator, restricted by words, cannot grasp. The person in “Linear B” is like a physical embodiment of the rambling, disjointed narrative style that characterizes other poems in this collection, and similarly, his erratic motions and enigmatic scribbles create more space for processing the trauma that has affected the “collapsing city.”

Carson’s 1989 volume *Belfast Confetti*, titled after the poem from the previous collection, is also divided into three parts, and opens with a reprint of “Turn Again,” which is again placed before part one begins. This recursive gesture foregrounds the ways in which the poems throughout *Belfast Confetti* reference earlier poems and each other, echoing phrases as well as broader themes. References to confetti and percussive punctuation are scattered throughout the volume. The first stanza in “Jump Leads,” a shorter poem in the middle of the volume, concludes with the line, “The bomb-disposal expert whose face was in shadow for security reasons” (*BC* 56), referencing both “The Bomb Disposal” and repeating the phrase “for security reasons” from “Turn Again.” A prose poem towards the end of section two, “Revised Version,” ends with a full, repeated line from “The Bomb Disposal,” this time in italics to highlight its reoccurrence: “*The city is a map of the city*” (69).

The constant references to previous themes work on several different levels. In an interview, Carson explains,

> It goes round in circles. And if that's deliberate, it seems to reflect real life . . . the fact that many of the recurrent images in the book are about enclosure, or being 'inside'— whether it's inside a bar or a jail— is a direct reflection of Belfast. When I began to write the poems, this wasn't clear, but it rapidly became so. (Brandes 87).

The stylistic choices that lead to this feeling of enclosure also echo the after-effects of a traumatic experience, much like the structure of *The Irish for No*. As this volume

increases in its repetitive references, the reader becomes a paranoid reader, constantly pausing over a half-remembered phrase, forced to double back in order to find the original appearance of a particular phrase, feeling a sense of repetition in traveling the same paths, almost as they were before but slightly different, just as the narrator in "Turn Again" finds that the city has changed when "the streets that were there are gone" (*BC* 11). This mode of reading both reproduces some of the aftereffects of trauma—the feeling of being trapped, of questioning memory—and re-orients the reader to a position of one conducting surveillance, in opposition to the narrators, who more often find themselves to be the subject of questioning. The volume is therefore in a constant state of tension between these two conflicting positions.

Doubling Back

The connections between place, memory, and identity are emphasized throughout *Belfast Confetti*. The lines of the poems illustrate long, rambling paths, much like the circuitous routes that Carson's city-walking characters follow in other poems. In "Ambition," the narrator's memories of his father are also a stream of consciousness meditation about memory itself:

> Any journey's like that—*the first step of your life*, my father interrupts—
> Though often you take one step forward, two steps back. For if time is a road,
> It's fraught with ramps and dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti; here and there,
> The dual carriageway becomes a one-track, backward mind. And bits of the
> landscape Keep recurring […] (27-28)

The narrator's description of time and, by extension, memory, doubling back and becoming "one-track" echoes a different aspect of the traumatic memory described by van der Kolk and van der Hart. Recurring fragments of memory, like the "bits of landscape" that keep reappearing for the speaker of the poem, arise post-trauma without

conscious control as the narrator is forced to move “backward”. However, time is also fluid, as implied by the “dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti,” suggesting that traumatic memory may not always function as a rigid path backwards. On the contrary, the narrator seems to find some comfort in this fluidity, as he continues, “Or the issue is not yet decided” (28). The uncertainty over where the narrator is situated in time is therefore both disorienting and contains some potential for a chance at a different, perhaps better, outcome. The nonnormative view of time and memory in this poem, then, like the nonnormative modes of expression in other poems, offers a generative potential rather than foreclosing any possibility of progress.

While fractured or recurring memory alone is not necessarily an indicator of trauma, “Ambition” also directly alludes to a traumatic event as the narrator broadens his simile:

> And if time is a road, then you’re checked again and again
> By a mobile checkpoint. One soldier holds a gun to your head. Another soldier
> Asks you questions, and another checks the information on the head computer.
> Your name. Your brothers’ names. Your father’s name. His occupation. As if
> The one they’re looking for is not you, but it might be you. (28).

Being subjected to a military checkpoint with “a gun to your head” and the threat of violence is perhaps the most immediate instance of trauma in this poem, and a familiar experience for many in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. and is further emphasized by the shift to a second-person point of view that includes the reader in the experience. This particular checkpoint encounter feels more immediate than the military or police encounters in “Belfast Confetti” or “33333.” In this poem, the narrator faces a line of questioning that directly targets his identity, overlaid with the threat that he “might be” the suspect they are specifically seeking. For the narrator, therefore, the experience is

traumatic not just from the threat of violence from the soldiers, but from their demanding questions that, in Althusserian terms, interpellate him as a subject of the state, forcefully placing him within an ideological framework. For Louis Althusser, to be interpellated and to respond is merely an expression of subjecthood and place within an ideological function of society and does not necessarily carry implications of violence towards the subject (Althusser 116-117). While for Althusser, responding to a hail solidifies the subject's identity, here, as in the earlier poems, the speaker feels uncertainty in his status: he "might" be a suspect, or he might not, but remains suspended until his identity is verified. Furthermore, at the checkpoint, the narrator is treated with suspicion as the soldiers anticipate identifying him as the other, the Irish-Catholic antagonist to the state, and a potential criminal. The challenge at the checkpoint, therefore, emphasizes the narrator's subordinate position and reflects the history of colonialism and sectarian divides that have led to this most recent period of violence in his society.

Later in the poem, after further digression away from this traumatic memory, the narrator's train of thought circles back to another past trauma, when his father was arrested and held for seven weeks—an event which illustrates the dangers of this state interpellation. His father's voice interrupts the flow of the poem, followed by the narrator's explanation to provide context: "*I walked the iron catwalk naked in the freezing cold*: he's back into his time/As an internee, the humiliation of the weekly bath" (30). Here, the narrator observes his father slipping back in time as he recalls his time as a prisoner. We further learn that his father's arrest was a mistake; it was the narrator's uncle that the police had meant to arrest. The violence of the state is again at the center of how the narrator and his father have experienced the Troubles, only compounded by the

unfairness of a case of mistaken identity. Recent experiences remind him of past events, causing the narrator to slip back in time to all those traumatic memories, which become jumbled together as he retells them. The circumstances of his father's arrest and imprisonment echo the narrator's description of being constantly stopped at checkpoints and asked to provide his name, and the names of his brothers. The common thread of being at the mercy of the power of the state further blurs the lines between memories. However, the evasiveness of his narrative and the fluidity of his perception of time opens the possibility for an alternative to the official state narrative of linear time. For Jenny Edkins, "trauma time" goes beyond just an expression of traumatic memory: this non-linear conception of time, shaped by traumatic events, "[exposes] the lack that underpins a sovereign political symbolic order and [reveals] the radical relationality of life" (Edkins 127). The traumatic experience lies outside any recognizable "symbolic order," including a state-established narrative. By embracing this altered perception of time, therefore, the narrator can engage with and process his traumatic memories while also removing himself from the control of the state. In this poem, both the narrator and his father have faced the consequences of being subject to a state narrative, but blurring the lines between their two experiences gives the narrator a different perspective and brings him closer to his father in solidarity. At the conclusion of the poem, he returns to the present moment, where he is walking with his father: "As I closed in on him, he coughed. I coughed. He stopped and turned,/Made two steps back towards me, and I took one step forward" (*BC* 31). Here, both the narrator and his father reclaim some agency, however small, in moving towards each other.

In the second section of *Belfast Confetti*, the structure of the collection changes, alternating between shorter, terse poems that focus largely on the present-day Troubles and long, rambling prose-poems that explore the structural history of the city. Place and memories of place (which sometimes prove to be inaccurate) constantly preoccupy the speakers in these poems. Periodically, the city's history blends with a narrator's personal memories of the city, emphasizing the connections between place, memory, and how he understands himself. The prose poems frequently echo lines from earlier poems, tying the sections together and circling back explicitly to the same themes. "Gate," the opening poem, focuses on how violence has changed the city, leaving the narrator feeling disoriented in both place and time: "The stopped clock of *The Belfast Telegraph* seems to indicate the time/Of the explosion—or was that last week's? Difficult to keep track" (BC 45). Here, time is both frozen and fluid, keeping the narrator trapped in the moment of an explosion, but also impossible to "keep track" of a specific date of the event. The narrator's acknowledgement that he struggles to "keep track" also highlights the unreliability of his memory, thus creating a space that reflects his traumatic experiences, characterized by a sense of time where violent events both persist and blur together, constantly re-traumatizing the speaker.

In response to the trap of slipping into a fixed traumatic time that repeatedly cycles with no escape, the prose poems in the volume delve into the history of the city and its geography in an attempt to form a more coherent narrative and to establish some understanding of the place. Even here, however, the narrator recognizes that memory is unreliable: "I imagine or remember peering between the rusted iron bars […]" (47). This poem, "Farset," meanders like the underground river that is its subject, following

diversions into etymology, geography, and history. At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator describes "a maze of dams, reservoirs, sluices, sinks, footbridges that I remember in my dreams as walled-in by Titanic mills […]" (49), again calling attention to the instability of his memory. The river, as it becomes a character in the narrator's imagination, does not offer a solid history of the city either: "It remembers spindles, arms, the songs of mill girls. It remembers nothing: no one steps in the same river twice" (49). The changing nature of the river undermines the narrator's attempts to find something reliable in historical records, even in something as seemingly concrete as geography. However, there is also something productive in this fluid space that makes the familiar strange and reminds the reader that memory is not absolute. There is something comforting in a river that "remembers nothing," in comparison to the image of a frozen clock in the earlier poem "Gate."

Evasive Maneuvers: Sidestepping Surveillance

Carson's poetry frequently places the changeable, evasive cityscape of Belfast against the narrator's awareness of being watched. Even when the narrator is not directly challenged by state authority, he is conscious of how others look at him. In "Last Orders," the short-lined poem preceding "Farset," the speaker describes entering a bar that is barricaded against potential terror attacks:

> Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but
> It's someone else who has you in their sights. Click. It opens. Like electronic
> Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who's who, or what
> You're walking into. I, for instance, could be anybody. Though I'm told
> Taig's written on my face. (BC 46).

To enter the bar, he must buzz in, knowing that someone is watching him, although he cannot see who is watching him. Although this bar is privately owned, this panoptic gaze

recalls the "invisible man behind the wire-grilled/One-way mirror" of an earlier poem, where the narrator is being watched and questioned by a military or police figure representative of the oppressive state power (CP 101). In "Last Orders," the uncertainty of who is watching leaves the narrator feeling acutely aware of the imminent threat of violence, as indicated by the play on "sights" that reference both visual sights and the sight of a gun, and following simile of Russian roulette. Once inside the bar, the narrator's awareness of being watched shifts to concern over how he is perceived by the others in the bar, tied closely with an anxiety of being identified as a "Taig," a derogatory term for an Irish Catholic. It is not just his face, however, that presents a danger: when the narrator and his companion order Harp lager—an Irish beer—he also risks sending the wrong social cue, even though it "seems safe enough" (46). And, indeed, he notices that "someone looks daggers at us/From the *Bushmills* mirror"— the emphasis on Bushmills indicating its alliance to the Irish Protestants—and suddenly re-orients his perspective, seeing himself as the enemy. The poem concludes with the narrator musing, "how simple it would be for someone/Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and ourselves, to Kingdom Come" (46). The narrator here acknowledges that this surveillance, although it makes him feel acutely self-aware, offers only a semblance of safety; and having internalized the gaze and implied hailing that identifies him as the threatening other, he imagines the potential terrorist agent to be "someone like ourselves."

The constant subjection to the suspicious surveillance reappears in "Question Time," and "Intelligence" two more prose poems in part two of *Belfast Confetti*. "Question Time" opens by establishing the feeling of disorientation that arises when a

familiar place becomes unfamiliar, when the expectations of a stable city are shattered by a city that is changing daily. This disorientation affects the speaker's confidence in his own senses and, by extension, how he forms his identity. To emphasize the connection between knowledge of place and self, the poem quotes a line, in italics, from the earlier poem "33333," but then veers off in a different direction from the original: "*I know this place like the back of my hand*—except who really knows how many hairs there are, how many freckles? A wound, a suture, and excision will remind us of the physical, of what *was* there […] (57). Here, he replaces an uncertain knowledge of a map with a physical wound, an embodiment of trauma, before returning to imagery of the city. The image of a wound evokes the violence of bombings, and in response, the city has added "ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines" that impede the speaker's movement (58). In this cityscape, the speaker is vulnerable, and is "grabbed round the neck by this character, while someone else has [him] by the arm" (61). It is unclear here if his questioners are official representatives of the state or independent actors, but they have clearly identified him as a threat and question him, the prose poem containing over a page of short, rapid-fire questions and statements about his movements:

> You looked at it.
> You looked at it.
> You were seen. You were seen.
> Coming from the Shankill.
> Where are you from? (62)

As he endures these unrelenting questions—the narrator's answers, if he gives them, are not written in the poem—the narrator observes, "I am this map which they examine," further affirming his connection to place (62). Throughout the lines of questions, "You were seen" is repeated five times, emphasizing that as he moves through the city, the

narrator is always being watched. However, at the conclusion of this poem, the narrator is ultimately able to establish his identity enough to satisfy his interlocutors and escape.

"Intelligence," the final poem of section two, opens with this same theme, as the speaker asserts, "We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walking-talkies, car 'phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index [...]" (78). Here, the narrator is both watched and in the position of watcher, but the dynamic of power becomes clear as he observes, "Keeping people out and keeping people in, we are prisoners or officers in Bentham's *Panopticon*, except sorting out who's who is a problem for the naïve user [...]" (79). After a lengthy quote from Bentham's writing, the narrator's voice returns, and he imagines a "time warp" vision of Belfast: "down there, in the Beechmount brickfields, I can nearly see James Mason squatting in the catacomb of a brick kiln where I played Soldiers and Rebels, these derelict cloisters half-choked with broken brick and brick-dust, that are no go, erased, levelled back into the clay [...]" (82). While the speaker cannot access a position of surveillance that offers authoritative knowledge or power, he can move into an imaginative space, despite how the city has changed, to escape a feeling of being only in the position of being watched, thus blurring the divide between "prisoners or officers."

The third section of *Belfast Confetti* returns to long-lined, multi-stanza poems, but this time they alternate with haikus, including many attributed to the 17th-century Japanese poet Basho. The associations between these different poems are difficult to fathom, and the chosen haikus are enigmatic. This haiku by Basho precedes the final

poem of the volume: “Wild rough seas tonight:/yawning over Sado Isle,/snowy galaxies” (104). The final poem, “Hamlet,” opens with an abrupt transition: “As usual, the clock in The Clock Bar was a good few minutes fast […]” as the narrator describes his drinking companion’s storytelling about a sergeant who was shot in 1922, outside a bank that has since been demolished (105). The speaker’s thoughts are diffuse, and he seems to have trouble maintaining a cohesive train of thought and muses over “a name drifting like an afterthought/A scribbled wisp of smoke you try and grasp, as it becomes diminuendo, then/Vanishes” (106). References to past poems and themes appear in this final poem as well: “the bomb-disposal expert” has now “been outmoded by this jerky robot” (106). The narrator contemplates the movement of time, going back to the opening image of the clock and recalling earlier poems like “Ambition” where time does not move in a straightforward, predictable path. The narrator says that familiar streets—Ragland Street and Balaklava—have now “been unraveled,” leaving behind only “the memory of where [he] lived” (107), again emphasizing the fleeting nature of seemingly concrete physical landmarks. But these memories are important, in that they can transcend the passage of time, as the poem concludes: “The barman’s shouts of *time* will be ignored in any case, since time/Is conversation; it is the hedge that flits incessantly into the present […]” (108). As long as memories remain alive and shared, the poem suggests, the end is not final, and perhaps this becomes the solution to the traumatic memories that the narrators must face and process. The reader, throughout this volume, also becomes a part of processing these memories, in bearing witness to all that they represent.

Carson’s writing style continues to evolve through the 1990s and 2000s, moving from long, complex lines to poems that are composed of short, sparse lines that create a

feeling of openness. In the more recent 2003 volume *Breaking News*, for example, "Home" looks at the city of Belfast not as a pedestrian, but from an aerial perspective: Looking out the window of a plane as he prepares to land in Belfast says, "my eye zooms//into the clarity/of Belfast/streets" and, from this aerial remove, he declares, "at last/I see everything" (*CP* 432). In this poem, the narrator is freed from constraints and takes on the role of the watcher, rather than a subject under surveillance.

In his final collection of poetry, however, Carson returns to many structures and themes that are similar to his earlier works. Carson's final collection *Still Life* was published posthumously in 2020 and is a series of ekphrastic poems, each titled with the painter, title, and date of the work. While the collection is more of a meditation on life, love, and death, a few references to the Troubles are present as well, inevitably part of a retrospective on life. These poems are, like much of Carson's work, intimately autobiographical in nature, and the familiar themes of repetition and circling back run throughout this collection, just as much as the topics in many of the poems look back to earlier themes. In "Joachim Patinir, Landscape with Saint Jerome, 1516-17," the speaker articulates one return, in poetic form: "Back in the 80s I measured my verse by the width of an A4 page. For whatever reason/I've gone back to that arbitrary rule that turns your thinking unexpectedly [...]" (34). Images of daffodils appear in several different poems, first in the opening poem "Claude Monet, Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1880," then reappearing in "Jeffrey Morgan, Hare Bowl, 2008" as a bouquet of cut flowers, an image of vivid yellow that parallels another repeated yellow image, the lemons that first appear in "Angela Hackett, Lemons on a Moorish Plate, 2013." All of these poems are preoccupied with the passage of time and the spectre of death--whether in the upturned

pot of daffodils or the discussion of how quickly a lemon might rot, or the speaker's wry echo of a doctor's lingo with "the neutrophils are up to par, so everything is good to go" as he receives chemotherapy (SL 24).

Throughout the collection, as the speaker contemplates the passage of time, memories of the Troubles also resurface: in the opening poem he imagines tourists abroad, moving from a setting of ancient Rome to the equally exotic Glandore Avenue, "So different now from thirty years ago, the corner shop at the interface/Torched and the roadway strewn with broken glass and rubble" (10). In the next poem, the narrator's train of thought sends him back to memories of the Troubles:

> It's 1973, and I'm pushing a pen in Family Income Supplements behind the City Hall.
> The IRA were bombing downtown shops and offices on a weekly basis
> It seems. My dreams are filled with wavering buildings avalanches of astonished Glass. [...] (19)

In this passing mention, the threats and violence of weekly bombings are juxtaposed against the speaker's daily life and uneventful job, encapsulating the speaker's experience of living through decades of conflict while still having to go about his daily life.

Similarly, towards the end of the collection, "Yves Klein, IKB, 1959" begins with descriptions of the painting, followed by a narrative of the bombing of Hiroshima and the painter's experience visiting the city in 1953. In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker is reminded of Belfast:

> I looked west to the city centre 3 miles away to see cloud after cloud blossoming into the blue.
> And so forth, and so on: after all these years from time to time the buried memory comes back
> Out of the blue as it were. I never know the date, I just look for it online. Bloody Friday, 21st July 1972. (79)

Although he cannot remember the date of the IRA bombing campaign without looking it up, he can still recall the aftermath, the body count, the empty apologies, and the cleanup of the "unspeakable remains" (79), illustrating the persistence of traumatic memories.

Despite the reminders of past violence and the narrator's own mortality, growth and rebirth also emerge as a major theme in this collection. In "Canaletto, The Stonemason's Yard, c. 1725," the poem opens and closes with an image of a construction site. In the opening stanza, the site seems as barren and desolate as the scene in Canaletto's painting, with a yellow digger replacing the goldfinch the narrator remembers seeing years ago in the same place (40). However, as the speaker leaves a chemotherapy session, the poem concludes on an optimistic note: "For here we are again in Hopefield, looking through the green chain-link fencing/At the big yellow JCB. And as for what they're going to build there, we can't wait to see" (45). Throughout the collection, in three other poems, the speaker, often accompanied by his wife, returns to the construction site to watch the progress of the new building--apartments, as the final poem reveals (81).

Conclusions

Repetition and returns characterize Carson's work, from the level of repeated lines in different poems, to returns to familiar places and themes. While the narrators in Carson's poems remain in the city, escape from surveillance and self-doubt seems difficult, intensified by the ways in which traumatic memories frequently trap them, and the reader, in a recurring cycle. However, within the disorienting space when the familiar becomes strange, the reader gains a new perspective that comes from re-orienting towards the responses to trauma, characterized by the oblique expressions and the sideways, backwards, circling-around motions and narratives that the speakers of these

poems employ to navigate within the changing, traumatized space. Carson's poetic structures in these early volumes encompass the trauma of the Troubles without becoming overwhelmed by it, always balancing blockages with diversions that allow the speakers to find a different expression of similar experiences and themes with each iteration, allowing them to express trauma instead of dismissing it as "unspeakable."

INTIMATE EXPERIENCES: MEDBH MCGUCKIAN'S INTERIOR EXPRESSIONS OF TRAUMA

Medbh McGuckian is a difficult poet to read and a difficult poet to easily categorize. In many interviews, McGuckian emphasizes her identity as rooted in being Northern Irish, Catholic, and a woman, but resists being pigeonholed by critics as political or feminist (Schrage-Fruh xv). For McGuckian, labels imposed by outside readers and critics, even friendly ones, evoke a strong reaction to push back against these claims. In a 1993 interview with Susan Shaw Sailer, when the interviewer suggests that perhaps the poet's work has been influenced by the surrealism of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or the poetry of John Ashberry, McGuckian's response conveys her animus towards the whole idea:

> People say that. I did just an ordinary degree and I haven't done research. […] I've read Ulysses, and I know about Finnegans Wake, but I just avoid it, because I know I couldn't read it at the minute. I guess I do work through association, but I think it's so very female that it doesn't help to talk too much about male predecessors. (Sailer 112)

McGuckian's dismissive tone here seems to be provoked by the presumption of the interviewer to interpret her work by drawing parallels to other writers—not just because they are "male writers" who hold no importance to her, but because Sailer's observation comes loaded with an implication of labels or "understanding" that McGuckian finds objectionable. In the same interview, McGuckian further pointedly notes that because her work is largely autobiographical, the events are specific to her experiences—so if she writes often about childbirth and motherhood, it is a reflection of something personal to her (Sailer 113). In a different interview, she again emphasizes the "private" nature of her work (Blakeman 65). Her earlier poetry largely focuses on intimate moments, speaking to

personal relationships and a domestic space. Later in her career, after the Good Friday agreement that formalized peace in Northern Ireland after decades of violence, McGuckian began addressing the violence and trauma of the Troubles more directly, although still without taking a political position that would be clearly identifiable to critics and readers.

Since McGuckian has so frequently described her own work as centered on her personal experiences, many scholars similarly focus on the private, interior themes within her poetry. However, these critics tend to conflate the private and domestic space with a refusal to engage at all with the outside world, which overlooks the ways in which the larger outside world influences a person's everyday life. For example, in *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones*, Jonathan Hufstader dismisses McGuckian's early poetry as "obdurately coded verse, preoccupied with a secret inner world" that is "nonpolitical" (261-262). For Hufstader, there is a barrier between the public and the private; therefore, he reads McGuckian's domestic, personal narratives as inherently apolitical (265). This barrier between the public and the private is quite arbitrary, and critics who read her work in this way miss the ways in which turning inwards can speak to public life. Furthermore, as Clair Wills points out, the domestic "private sphere" has already been brought into public life in many ways, particularly in the ways that women's bodies are transformed into symbols or regulated through legislation (Wills 50). In the context of the Troubles specifically, being a woman within a domestic space was no escape from the tensions and traumas; nor did the home automatically convey safety or isolation from the threats of violence sparked by a public political discourse. Understanding the fluidity between

personal and private, domestic and public space, therefore, is a significant part of productively reading McGuckian's work.

Throughout her career as a poet, criticisms of Medbh McGuckian's work, often driven by imposed critical frameworks like the public/private binary, frequently center on her elusive verse or on her apparent refusal to engage directly with public and political life in the themes of her poems. In his article "Medbh McGuckian's Poetic Tectonics," for example, J. Edward Mallot opens his article by describing McGuckian's commentary on her poetry as "cryptic," criticizing not only her work, but also her refusal to explain herself (Mallot 240). His tone suggests that the poet has failed in some responsibility; as though the critic is entitled to an explanation. In an essay addressing the "difficult" nature of McGuckian's poetry, Shane Alcobia-Murphy opens with a list of choice quotes from literary reviewers of her early work, including some sourced from clippings that were preserved in the collection of McGuckian papers at Emory University. Descriptions of her poetry include: "exotic," "impenetrable," "obscure logic," and "an alluring book of nonsense" (various, quoted in Alcobia-Murphy 67). These descriptions of McGuckian's work echo stereotypical characterizations of women as mysterious and illogical and reflect the critics' desire to "penetrate" her work to reveal some core meaning. Even positive reactions to McGuckian's work characterize her poetry in similar ways. For example, the title of Peggy O'Brien's article sums up her approach quite bluntly: "Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand." O'Brien explains her project as "to defend that obscurity as necessary within the terms of McGuckian's poetic […] and to place that poetic within the canon" (239). O'Brien's approach, while positive towards McGuckian's poetry, nevertheless reinforces the same

critical narrative that genders McGuckian's work as distinctly feminine. Similarly, O'Brien's suggestion that some defense and reparative work is necessary before the poet's work can be properly recognized begins with the assumption that the poems are initially outside an acceptable (and largely male) "canon" and valorizes that male canon as definitive. Whether criticizing or admiring, these approaches reduce the importance of McGuckian's work, which uplifts and validates the personal and the private without creating definitive barriers to separate the interior private space from "public" life.

More recently, some critics have moved to reclaim McGuckian's poetry from the initial accusations of unintelligibility, purporting instead to offer a clearer understanding and interpretations that uncover the hidden meanings in her poems. In one such approach, Mary O'Connor usefully considers the ways in which McGuckian's "deliberately obfuscating" style of writing breaks down the symbolic order, basing her approach to McGuckian's work on a Kristevan framework, and concludes, "it seems clear that McGuckian's poems are engaged in revolutionary action (O'Connor 157). Despite her central argument, O'Connor focuses on identifying symbolic meaning in words or images that repeat across several volumes of McGuckian's work, an approach that seems to be at odds with encouraging the "revolutionary" approach of resisting an established framework that defines meaning.

McGuckian has always been fairly open about her writing process, which involves pulling phrases from other texts that she is reading—generally nonfiction writing, often biographical—and then rearranging them into her poems (Alcobia-Murphy 68). This approach to writing has invited criticism of her work as "unoriginal," while others defend her work as a form of "found poetry" (Alcobia-Murphy 2012, 130). This

critical debate about the validity of her writing process sets up definitions that are once again arbitrary to determine when something is "really" poetry, leading critics to often overlook the content of her work and the meanings that emerge from reading the poems as McGuckian has written them. McGuckian generally explains her process as adaptive, in one interview describing the words as plants and expressing her hope that "they take with them some of their original soil, wherever I got them" (Blakeman 67). McGuckian herself provides few clues or guidance concerning these sources. One particularly prolific McGuckian scholar, Shane Alcobia-Murphy, studied McGuckian's papers and old journals in the Emory University collection and, from the longer passages and notes in the collection, discovered the source texts for many of her poems. Initially, McGuckian envisioned her sources as remaining entirely private, and was upset when scholars began uncovering the texts from which she harvested passages (Alcobia-Murphy 2006, 83).[1] In another interview, McGuckian emphasizes the "incongruous" nature of the passages that she chooses for her poems and is careful to clarify: "I do change and adapt [the material], so the crossover is not simple" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 202). For McGuckian, her sources are clearly transformed by her poetry, and through this process, become her own.

Alcobia-Murphy reads McGuckian's poetry almost exclusively in the context of her sources and suggests that responses to the violence of the Troubles are revealed in her choice of intertextual references, if not in the text of her poems. In "Memory and atrocity in the poetry of Medbh McGuckian," Alcobia-Murphy cites McGuckian's references to

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[1] In a more recent interview, McGuckian tells Alcobia-Murphy that she sees scholarly work like his as a useful way to pay tribute to the author of her original source without having to be forthcoming herself (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 202), in a seeming reversal from her earlier, more protective sentiment. While I suspect this was partly due to her friendly relationship with Alcobia-Murphy, it seems likely that the passage of time and McGuckian's growing security within the poetic community also contributed.

writings from the American Civil War, WWII-era French writing, and Holocaust narratives to support his reading of "an implicit parallel made between Ireland and those other areas of conflict" (Alcobia-Murphy132). In another critical analysis, he is careful to frame his approach as a way to "resolve some of the reviewers' confusion about the texts' intelligibility, all without closing off the texts from further analysis" (Alcobia-Murphy, 115-16). However, his intertextual readings too often tend towards an authoritative stance that forecloses other interpretations, and in his insistence on revealing and analyzing McGuckian's sources, Alcobia-Murphy risks overlooking the ways in which McGuckian's poetic process has altered the significance of the phrases that she chooses to borrow.

Both extremes of the reactions to McGuckian's poetry—dismissing her work as nonsense or claiming to know the hidden answer—reduce the complexities of her work and conceal the variety of ways in which she engages with language and meaning. While her poetry is often experimental and deconstructed in form, it is complex and nuanced, not "impenetrable." The narrative voices in her poems are often inwardly-turned and intimate, and therefore create narratives that are unfamiliar to a reader used to the declamatory oration of a "public poet." Her poems must be read under the conditions that they establish. A reader pushing to reveal a perceived true significance or hidden message of every phrase will inevitably be frustrated, and to claim full knowledge is to overlook the purposeful ambiguity and openness that exists in many of her poems.

Reading McGuckian's work in the context of trauma theory, therefore, requires an approach that does not demand intelligibility or straightforward communication. My adaptive framework of trauma theory acknowledges that responses to trauma do not need

to directly address the topic as a part of the process of working through and expressing traumatic experience. Furthermore, there is no single formula to apply to reading expressions of trauma: while poetry may imitate common and recognizable symptoms of post-traumatic stress responses, as we see in Ciaran Carson's work, this is not the only way to communicate the effects of living through a traumatic time. McGuckian's thematic preoccupation with language clearly speaks to the multiplicity of ways to process and express traumatic experience. The poet's frequent focus on private, interior life, with speakers who describe personal experience and emphasize embodiment as a part of that experience, does not foreclose the possibility of understanding how these interior experiences can also interact with the "public" experiences of the Troubles. Further, the ambiguity and doubt raised in many of her poems echo the ways that traumatic experiences resist straightforward expression, but significantly, they are not completely inexpressible. Rather, the narrators in her poems develop different ways to express particular experiences.

Given that McGuckian's writing is so complex, it is also important to consider how the concept of the "unspeakable" has become entrenched in trauma theory and, more recently, how a reliance on this rhetorical device has been reexamined more critically. As a rhetorical device, emphasizing the limits of language—particularly in expressing a strong emotion—has a long history. In the context of trauma literature, the unspeakable is generally read as a combination of a writer's inability to describe the horrors of the traumatic experience and as a symptom of post-traumatic stress: both romanticized and pathologized. However, as Naomi Mandel argues, focusing too much on the unspeakable aspects of trauma risks creating too much distance between the witness and the subject

(Mandel 5). Furthermore, fixating on the (in)ability to speak trauma minimizes the importance of alternate modes of communicating trauma. Certainly the range of themes and language in McGuckian's poetry, as well as the diversity of responses amongst Northern Irish and Irish poets writing about the Troubles, suggests that the processing and expression of trauma have many forms, and must be read accordingly.

It is also important to remember that the violence of the Troubles spanned decades, which for many—including McGuckian—encompassed a significantly large period of adulthood—and therefore could not bring "normal life" to a standstill or cause severe disruptions to the same degree as, for example, WWII and the Blitz bombings of London. Even a household untouched by direct loss would still find the Troubles filtering inside, from the television, newspaper, or neighborhood gossip. McGuckian's poems about everyday private moments, therefore, should not be dismissed as avoidant; nor should her more enigmatic phrases be read as solely intended to be resistant to interpretation. Rather, her work is part of the wide range of what it means to live with a constant and steady background of violence. Within this framework, we can understand the body of McGuckian's work as still positioned in and responsive to the world around it; the speakers may engage with that world in different ways but are not rejecting the public space, as previous critics have suggested.

When expressing trauma, an important part of the process is being heard. Thus, it is important to consider the role of the witness (or reader, in this case). On the importance of bearing witness, Dr. Dori Laub writes,

> The trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the

> place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*" (Laub 57).

Here, Laub explains that a witness or audience must be present for the speaker to feel heard, and that having this audience allows the speaker to both express a narrative of trauma and to gain a new understanding of the experience in that process. While this theory of trauma tends to fall in line with earlier approaches to psychology and trauma theory that emphasize the need for a fulsome expressive narrative to work through the trauma, it can also be usefully applied to a more inclusive approach that embraces the incomplete, the interior, or the oblique. By acting as witness and both accepting and listening to the non-normative discursive voices of the speakers in McGuckian's poems, the reader becomes more deeply involved with the poem as it is presented and gains a shift in perspective that creates new knowledge. Thus, McGuckian's narratives of trauma are generative, rather than presenting trauma as something that prevents growth or forward motion.

In the 2015 collection *The Unfixed Horizon: New Selected Poems*, the editors attempt to reconcile some of the differences in critical approaches to McGuckian's work, but take a defensive position in their introduction, insisting that even McGuckian's earlier poetic works engage with the social ramifications of the Troubles: McGuckian's multi-layered poems characteristically interweave the private and the public, viewing the sectarian violence in her native Belfast through the lens of the female body as well as through elaborate domestic and nature images—while they *do* tell all the truth, these poems most certainly tell it *slant*" (xv). Framing her work in this way, while not inaccurate, does limit readings of her work in some ways. The female body need not be restricted to a "domestic" space or associated only with nature imagery. And again, here,

the private and the public are held up as opposing forces that must be interwoven or synthesized, rather than viewing the boundaries as arbitrarily-defined spaces. Finally, the editors' need to prove that McGuckian *does* address the Troubles risks overlooking the ways in which the everyday, intimate life that appears in many of her poems can be understood as valid experiences of trauma without needing to speak directly or even indirectly about the events surrounding that narrative.

Earlier in her career, McGuckian was decidedly opposed to speaking directly about the Troubles and those traumatic experiences. In a 1993 interview, McGuckian observes,

> I think when it's over maybe you can comment. But our violence was such an inbred thing, and so ongoing, it wasn't like a war. For years, the bloodshed was chaotic. Here it was like a person killed every night, like just a drip. I've never been able to write about it; I'm very squeamish about it. (Sailer 116)

In this part of her response, McGuckian emphasizes the difference between a single contained event and a traumatic event that is more drawn out and ongoing, indicating that the lack of temporal distance from the conflict makes it difficult (if not impossible) to process and express. Only "when it's over" could one "maybe" comment. McGuckian is unwilling to write about this trauma without the perspective and healing potential allowed by the passage of time and is further unwilling to definitively suggest that there may be a time when one could express this trauma. She further asserts, "This is why these poets committed suicide, because they did try. I mean they definitely did try to confront it, and I think it's extremely dangerous. For me, it just would not work" (116). Here, she highlights the emotional toll that seems to be inescapable for a poet who responds to the traumas of war and violence in their work.

McGuckian's deliberate avoidance of direct references to trauma or the Troubles in her earlier poetry, then, is not apolitical, but a personal expression of how she relates to traumatic events. With some references to the emergent themes of language and embodiment in McGuckian's earlier poetry, this chapter will focus mainly on poems from several volumes of McGuckian's middle-to later works, which begin to engage more directly with the violence of the Troubles and life in post-Good Friday agreement Northern Ireland. Many of these poems look back to past experiences of trauma and loss, which is consistent with McGuckian's earlier explanation of how she would engage with trauma in her poetry. In these poems, the speakers often search for a language, a way to express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Often, language is elusive, reflecting the ways that traumatic experiences can block or alter normative or standard language. In many poems, a deep sense of embodiment becomes a way for the narrator to express or approach what would otherwise be difficult; the body expresses more clearly what the mind may not. McGuckian's poetry consistently celebrates atypical modes of communication, encouraging the reader to think outside and around familiar patterns of reading trauma. Rather than criticizing her work as opaque or pathologizing her thematic and structural evasions as repression, we can understand these poems as representations of individualized responses to a traumatic event that was enduring and, in many ways, omnipresent as a part of everyday life.

It is further important to note that even with more easily identifiable or directly linked references to Northern Ireland's history of sectarian violence, McGuckian's poetry from this time remains far more elusive, indirect, and apolitical when compared to other contemporaries writing about similar topics. In an interview with Helen Blakeman from

2003, McGuckian notes of *Drawing Ballerinas*, “this collection is still not blatant, it is still very subdued […] You see, the danger is of feeding off the Troubles, and I would not want to be that kind of poet” (Blakeman 64). Often, the most direct reference will be in the title, or in an author’s or editor’s note (unattributed, so the source is unclear) placed either at the beginning or at the end of a poem. For McGuckian, this is a deliberate choice that allows her to create and maintain more distance from the events of Troubles. In the same interview, she mentions that several poems were inspired by a hunger striker and by Michael Collins, two historical figures from the Irish rebellion for independence in the 1900s, but immediately follows that revelation with “I don’t specifically refer to them because I still would think that is not a good idea” (65). McGuckian’s reticence here is not just about how she perceives her work, but also about how her work is read. What seems to be consistent in McGuckian’s attitude towards her work is a reluctance to speak directly to anything that feels too public or political—which should not be taken as a refusal to deal with these issues at all. McGuckian’s poetry invites the reader to engage more deeply with each poem and, as a witness, shift her perspective to better hear the voice of the narrator, rather than reading her work within preexisting frameworks that define “that kind of poet.”

Language of Embodiment

McGuckian’s poem “Drawing Ballerinas” was originally published in the 2001 collection by the same name and was subsequently republished in the 2002 *Soldiers of the Year II* along with roughly half of the other poems from *Drawing Ballerinas*, indicating a degree of importance of this poem within McGuckian’s oeuvre. This is also one of the few poems that McGuckian does explicitly connect to a specific event: the

poem is followed by a note commemorating the loss of a friend of the poet, who died in a café explosion in 1972, at the height of the Troubles, and a quote from Matisse explaining that "drawing ballerinas" helped him get through the violence and trauma of WWII (McGuckian 95). Significantly, although the reader is explicitly invited to read the poem as a commentary on how an artist deals with trauma, this commemorative note does not appear until the end of the poem, offering illumination only after the poem has been read through. It seems important for the reader to experience the poem first without any preconceived notions, instead encountering the narrator's voice as a more fully immersive perspective. After the initial reading, however, the reader must then re-read the poem with this re-oriented perspective. The deliberate placement, therefore, calls attention to the importance of how the reader engages with and understands the text as a part of witnessing the speaker's expression of trauma. This placement of the author's note also reflects the poet's own writing process. In talking about this poem, she explains,

> I just wrote the poem, and it had no meaning for me. I was not thinking about the girl that I say I was thinking of. I pinned that meaning onto it afterwards, to make it mean something to me, and it did then, when I saw it through that meaning, that lens. I always wanted to write a poem about that and could never, and that loss is defined for me now, but if I had set out to deliberately write a poem about that I would never have written that poem. (Blakeman 67)

McGuckian's commentary here challenges the idea that a poem must have some predetermined meaning before it can be written or created. On the contrary, it was a freedom from meaning that allowed McGuckian to write. After she "pinned" meaning onto the poem, however, McGuckian shifted her perspective—similar to the shifts in perception that her poems often demand of the reader—and was able to finally "define" this loss from her past. McGuckian's explanation here, in combination with her earlier comments that she "would never" have been able to begin writing with the intention of

talking about a loss, echoes familiar narratives about the difficulty in facing trauma directly and the challenges of expressing a reaction to that trauma.

"Drawing Ballerinas" is one of McGuckian's many ekphrastic poems, inspired by a work of art. Going against tradition for this type of poem, a specific painting is not explicitly named in the title or in the body of the poem, but the endnote reference to Matisse does make it clear that this poem is in response to, if not one specific painting, his collective paintings of women and ballerinas. In reference to this poem, Alcobia-Murphy asserts, "one cannot deny that the 'pressed-together thighs' and the 'lips that half belong to a face' refer to Matisse's *Portrait of Mademoiselle Yvonne Landsberg* (1914) and *Portrait of Josette Gris* (1915) respectively" (Alcobia-Murphy 116). However, identifying the source here is not the point—quite the opposite, in fact. In the poem, the speaker seems to be looking at a single image. The paintings that may have inspired the poem are thus transformed into a more symbolic portrait that can be any or every woman, creating a space where the speaker can project her own reading. When Alcobia-Murphy reads this poem as taking a "detached stance […] that upholds the eternal validity and verity of art" (116), he fails to acknowledge how a meditation on art can allow for a processing of trauma that allows for a deeper emotional engagement, not detachment. Significantly, the speaker is not looking at a work of art as a detached observer; she is instead pulled in and closely involved with it as she contemplates the form and details of the work. By emphasizing the speaker's connection with the painting, McGuckian further suggests that viewing art can be a more personal and deeply engaging experience where the viewer is a present and involved witness.

The speaker opens with a statement that indicates a close association with her subject before moving into describing the image of a ballerina: “We are the focus of storms and scissor-steps./A young girl that dressed up as a woman” (94). This “we” allies the speaker and the ballerina, but suggests a wider collective—of ballerinas, or of women—who are all objects of focus. While “scissor-steps” refers to the motion of a ballet dance, the reference to the “storms” that center around the dancer and the viewer evokes turmoil and disorder—the opposite of a carefully controlled and choreographed ballet. The image of the ballerina in particular, aside from being the subject of the painting, is also a particular kind of image of femininity and womanhood, and the speaker’s description of the ballerina as “a young girl” who is only “dressed up” as a (presumably more mature) woman emphasizes the ballerina’s youthful nature, with the implications of innocence and vulnerability that usually accompany stereotypical artistic representations of youth. However, the speaker’s viewing of the painting and her description of the ballerina does not completely line up with these expectations, as the ballerina’s hairstyle evokes “a machine-gun/’in its nest, a crease in the middle of a flower.” This intrusion of a violent image, like the earlier reference to undefined “storms,” indicates that even in an idealized painting representing order and femininity, past trauma still emerges in the speaker’s mind.

The contemplation of the painting also becomes a meditation on the connections between visual form and an expression of loss as the speaker personifies the lines of the painting: “the lines’ desire is to warp to accommodate/a body, a lost and emptied memory of a lost/body, the virgin mind emptied from or of it” (94). The speaker imagines that the lines changed in response to a loss, and are “warped”—a word that, like “twisted” and

“wrenched”, has negative connotations and implies something misshapen—away from their original shape—around a space that has been vacated by a “lost body”. Rather than observing what is present in the painting, the speaker focuses on what is absent, reading the body of the ballerina as “lost,” repeating the word twice in the same line in reference to both a memory and the body itself. The “virgin mind,” which generally implies a state of innocence, has also been lost, as it has been “emptied” from the body. Simultaneously, however, the speaker imagines the mind as being emptied *of* the body, as if even memories of the lost body are now gone, and no longer easily accessible.

The speaker’s focus on the body and the embodiment of experience deepens as the poem continues:

> The body turns in, restless, on itself, in
> a womb of sleep, an image of isolated sleep.
> It turns over, reveals opposing versions of itself,
> One arm broken abruptly at elbow and wrist,
> The other wrenched downwards by the force of the turning (94)

Although neither violence nor the troubles are specifically mentioned in this poem, jarring images like a broken arm or a forceful wrench suggest an external violence that disturbs the speaker’s interior meditation and “isolated sleep”. The body’s restlessness reveals “opposing versions of itself,” effectively describing a dissociative response to trauma. The speaker here describes this response in bodily terms, imagining a body that has been twisted in opposite directions, which further emphasizes the connection between the mind and the body when responding to violence. While the cause of the abruptly broken arm is unclear, the other arm has been twisted by the body’s own motion; thus the body in this image is less passive and more directly implicated in self-destruction. Similarly, in the following stanza, the speaker describes how the body “settles under its

own weight" and then "obligingly/arranged its legs, or joined those imprisoning arms" (94). The imagery of ballerinas no longer seems simply beautiful or innocent, as "wrenched" and "imprisoning" calls to mind not only a dancer's contortions, but the extremes through which many dancers put their bodies, while the emphasis on the weightiness of the body contradicts the gravity-defying airiness generally associated with ballerinas.

In the final two stanzas, the speaker seems to reach some closure when she imagines the lines of the painting changing and breaking apart "as if the body-burden with/its stripped-down beauty, having rested,/removed her necklace […]" (95), granting the figure of the ballerina a release from the tension of her pose. With this release, the speaker can then look at the painting differently, and so "that underlaid whiteness is reunified/by light into a breathing white, an undivided whiteness […]" (95). The reunification here feels freeing, as it allows "breathing" and creates a more cohesive, "undivided" whole, unlike the separated body and mind in the earlier stanza. Through her contemplation of the image, therefore, the speaker is able to process and resolve her previous feelings of disorder.

The publication and framing of this poem also speaks to the act of processing and the breadth of ways that a poet can approach writing trauma, and the role that poetry plays in this processing: the poem was first published in 2001, but goes back to the traumatic loss of a friend from 1972. Further, the speaker of the poem is not directly remembering violence or loss, but is instead contemplating a painting, displacing some of her emotions onto her interpretation of the image. This is not avoidant, but rather, is a part of the process for this speaker who is facing and expressing trauma.

Another poem republished from *Drawing Ballerinas* in *The Soldiers of Year II*, "*Gaeltacht Na Fuiseoige*," illustrates both a retrospective on traumatic experiences that take more time to process and offers some commentary on the ways that language can be stretched and altered to encompass a wider range of expression. The poem is dated "New Years Day, 1997," and at the bottom of the page, an author's note explains that the title references the Irish-language area of the Maze Prison, where many Republican prisoners were held. Unlike the note in "Drawing Ballerinas," however, this was added after the first publication of the poem, appearing only in *The Soldiers of Year II* and in the later *New Selected Poems*. As Alcobia-Murphy notes, around the time that this poem was written, McGuckian had been working with inmates of that prison, and he attributes this experience to many of the emergent themes in her 1995 collection *Captain Lavender* (Alcobia-Murphy 69). As hinted at by the title and end note, "*Gaeltacht Na Fuiseoige*" opens with a contained image that evokes a prison cell:

> Cubes of sky-wielded silence
> yellow the light: the light
> that would be glad
> to bathe itself in you. (*SY* 113)

The speaker directly addresses a "you" who seems to be a prisoner, as she imagines the restrictive silence of a cell transfigured by warm golden light. The play between sound and color continues in the second stanza when the speaker says, "my soul chimes/like an inhabited word" (113), suggesting a different kind of language that has an element of synesthesia, using color to offset a lack of sound and "chimes" rather than words in a known language. For the speaker, this kind of thinking "[entices] meaning, laying/word against word/like pairs of people" (113), bringing her closer to the subject of the poem

that she addresses. This poem, therefore, is a purposeful exercise in remaking language in a way that suits the speaker and allows her to build a connection to her subject.

From her earliest writings, McGuckian's poetry reveals a desire to find a language to process and express deeply personal life experiences. In looking at her later work, it is important to keep in mind that the complex relationships between language and body have been a frequent theme of inquiry throughout her work, rather than a more recent development. "The Flitting," from her first publication (1982, 1993, and republished again in *New Selected Poems*) opens with the first two lines in quotations: "You wouldn't believe all this house has cost me—/in body-language terms, it has turned me upside down" (*NSP* 18). The speaker of the poem opens with another's words, rather than her own, and the statement itself is about communicating meaning: in order to explain the "cost," the quoted speaker must translate the explanation into "body-language terms" to be more easily understood. The speaker continues speaking in these embodied terms, describing "the feel of being weightless" while being carried, then adds, "Now my own life hits me in the throat, the bumps/and cuts of the walls as telling/as the poreholes in strawberries" (18). Here, the body replaces verbal language or written signifiers, which would usually be prioritized as normative modes of expressions, even more necessary since the speaker has been "hit in the throat." The wall is also described more like a body than an inanimate object, with "bumps," "cuts," and "poreholes" rather than scrapes or holes. The emphasis on the body as the mode of dictating meaning, therefore, creates a language that allows the speaker to express the costs and traumas of her own life.

With this embodied language, which is distinctly interior and personal, the speaker can also more easily identify with the house, and so the "cuts in the walls" can

further be read as a record of undefined injuries—whether physical or not—which are now displaced onto the physical space of the house. This displacement allows the speaker to negotiate a way to engage with past trauma without facing it directly:

> I cover them for safety with these Dutch girls
> Making lace, or leaning their almond faces
> on their fingers with a mandolin, a dreamy
> chapelled ease abreast this other turquoise-turbanned,
> glancing over her shoulder with parted mouth. (18)

By explaining how she covers the damaged walls with paintings and describing images that suggest works by Vermeer, including *The Lacemaker* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, the speaker shifts to another mode of communication, using ekphrasis to evoke familiar images that the reader can also envision. The universal language of contemplating a painting, therefore, creates a deeper connection between the reader-witness and speaker. Focusing on these paintings rather than on the damage of the walls beneath them also provides the speaker with some "safety" to reflect on her experiences. The speaker describes the girls depicted in the paintings as "dreamy," relaxed, and receptive (the "parted mouth" of the girl with the pearl earring), again emphasizing the openness of art that allows her to impose meaning.

In the next stanza, the speaker celebrates the enigmatic expression of the girl with the pearl earring, asking, "Who knows what importance/she attaches to the hours?/Her narrative secretes its own values, as mine might" (18). Preserving the mystery within the subject of the painting emphasizes the importance of evasion over direct communication and stops the imposition of an absolute meaning. It is the painted girl's mysteriousness that allows the speaker to identify with her and declare that "her narrative secretes its own values, as mine might." The poet's choice of "secretes" here sounds like "secrets,"

further emphasizing the restorative power of resisting complete interpretation. Her use of "secretes" also emphasizes the body, which produces secretions. Significantly, the speaker envisions the girl as able to create her own values through her narrative, rather than being subject to values imposed upon her.

Inspired by the narrative possibilities that she imagines in the painting, the speaker frames her own narrative as if she is speculating on what it "might" be like:

> if I painted the half of me that welcomes death
> in a faggotted dress, in a peacock chair,
> no falser biography than our casual talk
> of losing a virginity, or taking a life, and
> no less poignant if dying
> should consist in more than waiting. (18-19).

She imagines herself first as a queen in fancy array, that "welcomes death," and asserts that this could be just as real as the reality represented by "casual talk." The speaker mentions virginity and murder in the same line, suggesting that the narrative of "casual talk" allows her to consider subjects that generally would not be associated together. For her, this talk, casual and private, is just as valuable as the regulated public conversations—or even more so, given that it generates unfamiliar perspectives. By moving through different modes of language throughout this poem, the speaker builds a narrative that permits ambiguity and speculation, thus creating a more open space where she can express herself and be heard without the weight of imposed values or interpretation.

Transforming Language

In her middle-period works, as McGuckian begins to write more directly about the impacts of violence and of living through the Troubles, the consistent theme of non-normative modes of communication emerges in many of her poems as a potential

solution to the challenges of expressing these experiences. One such poem in *The Soldiers of Year II*, "*Idée Mère,*" ("mother idea," from the French) opens with the speaker's declaration, "I want words that don't exist, the ways/of killing are monotonous"" (*SY* 59). The title of this piece emphasizes the generative potential of the "mother" to create new thoughts and ideas, even in the face of something that is difficult to otherwise express. Having voiced her frustration with the dearth of available words, the speaker expresses her reaction to the monotony in colors instead:

> […] On the right kind
> of grey day, thousands of male flowers
> receive the same shock time after time,
> have hardly lost their full green
> spectral color to decayed silver-gold (59).

The diminishing, "decayed" greys and silvers of the flowers reflect the "shock" of the violence, expressing it visually rather than verbally. The specification of "male" flowers here also gestures back to the "mother" in the title, suggesting the familiar trope of a generative female offsetting a sterile male. However, the speaker never appears explicitly as a mother, nor does she associate herself with the earth, or other familiar healing-maternal tropes that demand some sacrifice from the maternal figure to restore life to the land. By sidestepping these tropes, the speaker avoids making herself responsible for solving the problem of violence. Instead, she can focus on reflecting on her own experience.

Because the words that the speaker is searching for still elude her, she must create her own narrative, which she continues to develop in color imagery:

> Then there's sky all the time, and in part
> of the sky that's not yet dry, the high north
> light of a fishbone, sharkspine cloud,
> the colour of wine lees, like a ravine cut

by rain, continually devastated and re-occupied. (59).

The bloody slash of red in the "high north" of the sky is both ominous and beautiful, and for the speaker, a way to express the violence of being "re-occupied," a pointed choice of words that equates erosion with colonization, and evokes the colonization of Northern Ireland specifically. Throughout this poem, therefore, the speaker can both reflect on and grow beyond her reaction to the violence that she has witnessed.

A slightly earlier collection, the 1995 *Captain Lavender*, is generally seen as the first full volume in which many of McGuckian's poems invoke political or cultural topics. In this collection, the poem "Elegy for an Irish Speaker" transforms the language of the elegy. The title indicates a political commentary on language and identity, invoking the familiar narratives about Irishness and speaking Irish as a part of identity that has been lost due to centuries of colonial oppression. However, the subject of the poem does not follow a politicized narrative of Irish language or identity, deliberately subverting the expectations set by the suggestive title. Further, although the term "elegy" in the title also invokes a specific literary form, the poem adheres only loosely to the familiar conventions, again emphasizing transformation in both form and theme.

The poem opens without a direct invocation of a particular subject; instead, the speaker opens with a request:

> Numbered day,
> night only just beginning,
> be born very slowly, stay
> with me, impossible to name. (*NSP* 97).

Her declaration that something is "impossible to name" reflects the difficulty in defining and expressing loss, which contradicts the usually authoritative stance taken by the speaker of an elegy. The introduction of uncertainty here also changes the tone of the

questions that appear throughout the rest of the poem, moving this elegy away from the characteristic rhetorical flourish, as in Milton's "Who would not sing for Lycidas?" (Milton). Instead, the speaker's questions are more genuine, open to a range of possibilities rather than assuming an answer.

In the second stanza, the speaker of the poem addresses a personified figure of death, shifting to a more identifiable subject: "Do I know you, Miss Death,/by your warrant, your heroine's head/pinned against my hero's shoulder?" (*NSP* 97) Her direct address demystifies the process of death by making Death into an approachable figure rather than an inexplicable phenomenon. Simultaneously, however, there is some uncertainty in how the speaker asks, "Do I know you [?]". Picturing Death as the heroine, set opposite a hero that the narrator claims as "my hero," further personalizes Death as having an almost romantic connection with the subject of the poem. The feminine characterization of Death further develops in the next stanzas as the speaker focuses on the generative potential that could emerge after death:

> Are you waiting to be fertilized,
> dynamic death, by his dark company?
> To be warmed in your wretched
> overnight lodgings
> by his kind words and small talk
> and powerful movements? (97-98).

The fertilization of death transforms the lost "hero" from a partner of the heroine Death to her child, as the narrator imagines, "He breaks away from your womb/to talk to me" and, in the next stanza, "he shouts himself out/in your narrow amphora" (98). Rebirth is a familiar theme within the elegiac tradition, but the poets most often focus on lofty, abstract images. In this stanza, McGuckian distills the concept of rebirth into a more concrete image of pregnancy and childbirth, drawing a close connection between the

body and language and making it clear that speech and expression are inextricably tied to the body. The hero, therefore, must be transformed before he can continue to speak.

The subject's transformation here transitions the narrator to an even more direct meditation on the nature of language and poetry in the final stanza:

> Most foreign and cherished reader,
> I cannot live without
> your trans-sense language,
> the living furrow of your spoken words
> that plough up time.

The forms of speech that emerge from the reborn hero-as-fetus need to be heard, or read, before they can create meaning. The narrator's shift to directly addressing the reader makes it clear that the creation of a language in poetry that transcends, transforms, and transposes meaning must involve the reader. Her composite term "trans-sense" is itself an act of creation and, in addition to calling to mind so many other words with the same prefix, also evokes the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, which is in its own way also a kind of rebirth. This "trans-sense" of language moves beyond the rational or the practical, and in this way the space between the speaker and the reader is generative and freeing. With a new non-normative language, the speaker can "live" and flourish, and most importantly, evade the weight of "the real past/with its deep roots" (98). In this poem, the past is framed as a burden, rather than something nostalgic that the reader wishes to bring back. The "Irish speaker" from the title of the elegy cannot be revived, only transformed. In her repudiation of the past, the speaker emphasizes a more general desire to move on, grow, and transform beyond what came before. Her concluding lines deviate from the more traditional elegy, which might instead focus on mourning what was lost and imagining how to memorialize that loss. The narrator's emphasis on "living"

spoken words sets this new language apart from the Irish indicated in the title, and she concludes the poem with a look forward, rather than back:

> I have minutes when
> you burn up the past
> with your raspberry-coloured farewell
> that shears the air. Bypassing
> everything, even your frozen body,
> with your full death, the no-road-back
> of your speaking flesh (99).

The speaker's rejection of the past and her final declaration of "no road back," while not directly associated with the traumatic violence of the Troubles, does offer some productive parallels to thinking about the role of poetry in a time of conflict. Firstly, in her emphasis on a connection between the reader and the poet, the speaker in this poem promotes a generative space that leaves more room for empathy rather than a disengaged reading. Secondly, a call to evolve and transform beyond a state of being stuck in the past easily transfers to the experience of living in a society of deep sectarian divides. Creative and generative self-expression, as celebrated in this poem, therefore, are offered as an alternative to becoming mired in the same old patterns.

Emphasizing the exchange between the speaker of a poem and her reader is another theme in McGuckian's work. In "The Over Mother," also from *Captain Lavender*, the narrator again directly addresses the reader, asking in the second stanza,

> My cleverly dead and vertical audience,
> words fly out from your climate of unexpectation
> in leaky, shallowised night letters—
> what you has spoken? (*SP* 109).

Here, as in "Elegy for an Irish Speaker," the narrator of this poem seems preoccupied with how her act of speech is shaped by her understanding of who is listening (or reading). In this poem, her creation of the word "unexpectation" to communicate the

meaning of lacking expectation, emphasizes again the need for a generative openness to new potential, rather than a reliance on familiar language. Again, therefore, the interaction between the reader and the poet is an important part of the generative process. When she asks, "what you has spoken?" the speaker implies that it is not only the language that changes, but also the participants; this language is flexible enough to express multiple selves. The potential for change here leads to further transformation in the final stanza:

> I keep seeing birds
> that could be you when you stretch out
> like a syllable and look to me
> as if I could give you wings. (109)

Here, the speaker's creative imagination transfigures her audience first into birds, and then into "a syllable," an element of language itself. Her role as a poet enables this potential and the power of language, as she concludes, "as if I could give you wings."

The Private-Public

McGuckian's 2002 collection *The Soldiers of Year II*, in comparison to her earlier works, addresses the political violence in Northern Ireland more directly. However, she still frequently frames these issues within a more personal and domestic space, both in the themes of these poems and in the structure of the collection itself. This volume includes a new collection of poems, while the second half contains a selection of poems republished from the previous collection *Drawing Ballerinas.*[2] In a departure from earlier collections, the new poems in *Soldiers* are framed by two prose poems, one at the

[2] It is worth noting that in the *New Selected Poems*, there are no poems attributed to *Drawing Ballerinas*; rather, only those that were republished in *The Soldiers of Year II* are included, although they are marked in the Table of Contents as "also published in…" It is unclear if this was a preference of the author, or a choice made by the editors of *NSP*.

beginning of the section and one at the end. Both of these prose poems have a strong feeling of family history, offering an alternate narrative to an "official" or politicized history, and are narrated in the first personal with a rambling, conversational tone. The opening poem, "Helen's War," is narrated by Helen, who talks about some relation named Bertie and about her own health struggles and time in the hospital. She addresses a listener as well, mentioning "your mother" (13-14), so the reader must consider both the narrator's voice and the perspective of the specific person who whom she is telling this story. The closing prose poem, "Three Rings, Six Graves" seems to be narrated by a speaker from a younger generation, tracing her family history through the material history of three wedding rings as she contemplates a family gravesite. Here, recent events do intrude, as she observes, "No one appeared to have visited it all during the troubles, and it was only now when it was relatively safe people were coming back to tend to their relatives" (89). By returning to her family gravesites, the speaker reclaims her family history after the decades of political upheaval in an act that emphasizes the importance of maintaining personal narratives. These two prose poems, bracketing the collection of poetry in *The Soldiers of Year II*, interrogate language and storytelling in a time of violence, suggesting that the local and the personal are just as valid as politicized public discourse.

McGuckian's transformations of language also appear in the ways in which she reimagines the "public discourse" that critics seem to expect from poetry that engages with history or culture. Instead, as she begins to write more about themes relating to the Troubles and the colonial history of Ireland and Northern Ireland, McGuckian maintains familiar themes of domestic life, interior thought, and nature imagery. In "The Colony

Room," published in both *Drawing Ballerinas* and *Soldiers of Year II,* the title hints at postcolonial themes as in the earlier "Elegy for an Irish Speaker," but again, the poem subverts the expectation of an overtly political discourses and instead focuses on a private, intimate relationship between the speaker and her subject. The opening stanza explores a language that is more embodied than spoken: "If you are touching, you are also being touched/if I place my hands in prayer, palm to palm,/I give your hands new meaning, your left hand calm." (*SY* 101). The relationship between the two is immediately identified as reciprocal: "touching" and "being touched," just like the relationship between the poet and her reader. This interaction allows the speaker to create a "new meaning" for the "you" that she addresses here. Her intimate connection continues throughout the poem, and as she explores her subject's body with her hands, the relationship is again reciprocal as "You define my body with the centre of your hand." (101) Definition here is both tactile and figurative, and her explorations of touch give the speaker some deeper understanding that goes below the surface:

> Less touchable than the birth or continuation
> of Ireland, in its railed enclosure, your root-note,
> in its sexual climate, your kingdom-come eyes,
> year-long, inactive lover, durable as paradise.

This "durable" lover offers the speaker a sense of security and permanence that overshadows "the birth or continuation/of Ireland," emphasizing being within a moment, rather than fixating on trying to understand the past. Contrasted with Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union," which imagines colonization as a violent sexual act, McGuckian's "The Colony Room" focuses on a close relationship between the two subjects of this poem, imagining a cohesion where the actions of one always reflect on the other, just like "the mirrors reflected the coloured ray" (101). Rather than removing the speaker from the

"public" discourse, McGuckian's emphasis on the private, interior life of the speaker, while still engaging with themes related to cultural identity, politics, or trauma, breaks down the public/private dichotomy that so often dominates the critical rhetoric of her works.

In "A Mantra of Submission," another poem from both *Drawing Ballerinas* and *The Soldiers of Year II*, the speaker again focuses on an intimate relationship within a private space. McGuckian often writes about private, intimate moments that speak more to a mood or state of mind than directly to some event in the world. However, it can be useful to analyze these more private poems as well, with the understanding that for McGuckian, private experiences or intimate moments reveal deeply personal reactions to a speaker's relationship to events beyond her individual experiences.

Notably, this poem is one of the shortest in the collection and is tightly structured, contained within eleven lines of no more than eleven syllables. At one level, this poem reads like a love poem, but the constant feeling of control, and the speaker's submission to that control, builds a connection between her private life and the external pressures of society. The poem opens with a two-line stanza: "My miniature shore is a lick of gold/iced over as his singing dated head" (107). Immediately, the speaker reduces herself by associating herself with a "miniature" shore, then closely describes herself in relation to her companion, further submitting to him. Her "lick of gold," while sensuous, also echoes the phrase "just a lick," a colloquial term for a small amount. Similarly, "iced over" indicates not only whitening, but also frozen immobility, amplifying the tightly contained feeling of the poem.

In the second stanza, the speaker further emphasizes her feelings of submission and stillness as “From the caged area of the garden/he murmurs across newly-found pillows/furring my single-hearted arteries (107). The garden is “caged” and contained, and when her companion speaks, the speaker’s arteries become “furred,” a word that brings to mind insulation and thickening. If considered literally, thickened arteries slow the flow of blood to the heart and can cause a paralyzing stroke, once more referencing inflexibility as well as containment.

The third stanza shifts in tone and subject, no longer focusing on her companion, but on the speaker, who is awakened from her daze:

> At midnight like a storm that feels
> my presence,
> twelve raw Muse-grapes
> free me from all the years of blame

In this reference to grapes, McGuckian adapts a Spanish New Year’s tradition of *las doce uvas de la suerte*, the twelve grapes of luck. As custom dictates, twelve grapes are eaten at midnight leading to the new year to ensure prosperity (Coughlan). the narrator’s description of the grapes as “Muse-grapes” emphasizes the role of creativity and artistic expression, while “raw” distinguishes the fruit as both in a natural state and evokes the intensity of a generative creative experience. For the speaker, the creative act is a way to “free” herself, and in the final stanza, she explains that the “blame” she seeks to escape is for “being ill-at-ease among pacifists/war-harnessed as a soldier to his voice” (107). the restrictions that bind the speaker seem to come from a world outside the “miniature” and “caged” world that she has built with her companion. While the “pacificists” make her feel uncomfortable, the speaker militantly asserts her desire to submit, describing herself

as “war-harnessed” instead. Rather than feeling trapped in a mantra—which is itself a repetitive, enclosed chant—the speaker claims freedom through her poetic expression.

In these poems that emphasize the unclear boundaries between the public and the private, the violence and upheaval of the Troubles mingles with the interior lives of the speakers, rather than appearing as an intrusion. In “Life of a Literary Convict” from *The Soldiers of Year II*, the speaker describes how she moves through this complicated space:

> I have experienced a wilderness
> printed black on white.
> Tarnished years of silver fever.
> All my minds are weapons. (18)

The term “wilderness” here captures the upheaval of violence in society, and the speaker’s reference to print suggests the intrusion of this violence specifically through the news, which has “tarnished” and aged her. The final line of this stanza introduces the idea of multiplicity, as the speaker refers to “all my minds,” but in referring to these minds as “weapons,” it also seems clear that the speaker has had to change herself to push back against the wilderness of society.

Bringing this changed perspective, the speaker observes the society to which she belongs:

> Signs of the still recent war
> creep among the people like a plague,
> dressed as Phoebus.
> While I wander about in search of the dead,
> all I see are the living,
> being pulled into full existence,
> emerging as if from a cellar. (18)

The violence here has passed, but for the speaker it is “still recent.” Her view of the world, therefore, is influenced by her awareness of what has recently passed. The lingering aftereffects of this violence are present, but they only “creep,” seemingly

overlooked by the people. Phoebus, or Apollo, stands in for the memories of violence that "plague" society, referencing the Greek myths associating Apollo with plagues against humanity (Evslin 32). Apollo is himself a complex figure, however, and the speaker's allusion to him here could also encompass the god's associations with medicine and healing, or his role as a patron of poetry (15). In this reading, poetry is a way to express the speaker's complicated relationship with the aftereffects of a violent history. To further emphasize the contradictions that can be encompassed a tension emerges in the speaker's search for "the dead" revealing only "the living," who are, as she sees them, becoming more fully realized than before as they are "pulled into full existence."

As the poem continues, the speaker describes in more detail the violence that she has lived through, including "Everything that ended in gunshots/and news of massacres/and third-class funerals" (18). However, this violence, like the decades of unrest caused by the Troubles, is offset by the need to proceed with everyday domestic life as she continues:

> but the clockwork life of the unchanging
> street, and the uninterrupted houses in rows
> neutralised the lava of war
> to a normal part of winter
> at an enormous cost. (18)

Here the two worlds, so often seen as separate, are clearly interacting, each influencing the other. The domestic "clockwork life" and "uninterrupted houses" lessen the "lava of war," but the constant stream of violence takes a toll on everyday life in return, "at an enormous cost." By explaining these influences, the speaker conveys a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of ways in which people experience and process trauma.

Conclusions

In the constant interplays between interior and exterior spaces, McGuckian's poetry creates a space where new meanings and languages can emerge. As the narrators in her poems reflect on their interior, domestic spaces, they are also processing experiences from the outside world, emphasizing the ways in which the two spaces are not separate, but influence each other. Reading McGuckian's work requires a sensitive reader and a willingness to engage with the poems on the ground that they establish. Her poetry places the reader in the position of a witness to the internal thoughts of the narrators as they process and respond to trauma. In the exchange between the narrator of a poem and the "foreign and cherished reader," new languages emerge that can communicate without conforming to narrative expectations, allowing for the poet to explore and express trauma in her own time.

"SOMETHING ELSE:" GENERATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN THE POETRY OF PAUL MULDOON

Paul Muldoon's poetry is variously described by critics as postmodern, playful, elusive, allusive, evasive, subversive, and apolitical. Christopher Malone, for example, notes that Muldoon "has resisted pressures to make his work accountable to place and has been condemned repeatedly for not taking up a consistent political position" (Malone 1084). Implicit in most criticism of this type is the attitude that a poet has a responsibility to represent some essential national identity or sentiment in his work. When this seems to be lacking, then, its absence often becomes a major point of note. For example, in his introduction to a collection of essays on the poet—adding a few more adjectives to the pile in the preface's title of "Introducing Paul Muldoon: 'Arbitrary and Contrary"—Elmer Kennedy-Andrews observes that Muldoon's poetry "displays a characteristically ambivalent attitude to home" (1). However, Ireland—place, mythology, history—is present throughout Muldoon's poetry, even in poems and collections such as *Meeting the British* that are explicitly set somewhere else. The frequent references and reminders of Ireland indicate not ambivalence, but an acknowledgement of how reminders of the past can creep in at any moment. As Malone further observes in his essay "Writing Home," "The impossibility of achieving a centered sense of identity points to the failure of memory altogether, both personal and cultural. This failed recovery of the past makes the present unstable and alters the discursive shape of home such that it is never comfortably in possession of controlling foundational narratives" (Malone 1087). The displacement in Muldoon's poetry is closely tied to the ways that the speakers in these poems think of home. The instability that comes from the constantly-changing sense of identity, and

erratic memory is what enables the speakers in these poems to think about home without being trapped by the "controlling foundational narratives" of Irishness and belonging.

Kennedy-Andrews suggests that Muldoon's life and writing encapsulate what it means to be a modern Irish poet: an experience which is inherently migratory and connected with the world outside of Ireland (1). Muldoon is certainly an international poet, born and raised in Northern Ireland, but now living in the United States as an American citizen. Even within Northern Ireland, however, the idea of "belonging" is difficult to parse, with sectarian divides between the communities and complex politics in play. And, as Muldoon notes, leaving a place no longer automatically means being separated from it. In an interview from 2009, long after he had settled in the United States, Muldoon comments, "Exile is less interesting these days, and that's partly because it's harder to be an exile because it's so bloody easy to get home. Also, there are people who are truly in exile" (Muldoon 109). The poet's attitude towards "exile" goes against the ways that the concept is often dramatized, particularly in relation to Irish writing, given the long history of Irish emigration from a nation impoverished by centuries of colonial oppression. Rather that bemoaning exile, Muldoon celebrates internationality as a part of his experience. In considering Muldoon's response to the Troubles, therefore, it is important to approach his work without expecting themes that are limited to specifically Irish cultural references or a straightforward engagement with place and politics. With this broader perspective, it becomes more apparent that his poems do not sidestep or evade referencing the Troubles; rather, events are often woven in as a part of the background of a poem or in the back of a narrator's mind.

Muldoon's poetry, while not solely focused on the Troubles, offers generative responses to that cultural trauma: in his poetry we find alternate modes of thinking, processing, and expressing the complexity of the human experience. In response to an interviewer's question about a connection between the unrest in Northern Ireland and the "outpouring" of Northern Irish poetry, Muldoon is hesitant to glorify the violence of the Troubles as a catalyst for art, but does concede, "the fact that there's a sense of the unfinished about the state of Northern Ireland or, by extension, Ireland as a whole, that the question of who one is in this country and exactly what one's allegiances are remains a question—that has something to do with it" (Muldoon 28). His response here suggests that the social upheaval of the Troubles has opened space for a reimagining of the relationship between an individual and national politics. It is this mode of reimagining that most often characterizes Muldoon's approach to themes of trauma and loss. In some poems, the speakers displace traumatic experiences onto a seemingly unrelated topic in order to process their grief. Similarly, the speakers of many poems gain distance by imagining a speculative history or future that moves away from a proscribed destiny where violence or trauma is inevitable.

Muldoon's poetic forms evolve from the more narrative lyric form to experiment with broken lines or disjointed narratives that often reflect a speaker's rambling inner thoughts rather than a polished oration. The language in his poems is similarly unorthodox, often characterized by complex rhyme schemes, puns, malapropisms, and free association between words that look or sound similar. Muldoon's collection of essays *To Ireland, I*, based on his 1998 lectures series at Oxford, further highlights the poet's interest in the subversive and transformative potential of literature. In the opening

of the first essay, Muldoon quotes a well-known old Irish poem attributed to the bard Amergin, reading the poem as representative of the simultaneous urge to be a public poet and to explore "the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible" (4-5). Unsurprisingly, nine pages into the collection, Muldoon is already generating his own wordplay: In the section titled “Anonymous,” as he moves through notable Irish poets in alphabetical order, Muldoon opens with “I look to four invisible poets, all of them writing in Irish, on whom I will not linger long just now, though I will return to them anon” (9). The playful pun here is a reminder that the poet is constantly aware of the potential for wordplay and celebrates it whenever possible.

The creative slippages in poetic structure and word choice also mirror the ways in which the mind reimagines and processes traumatic experiences. In his essay “Responsibility and Difficulty,” Rajeev Patke notes that Muldoon’s play with language emphasizes his reluctance to engage directly with overt political themes. However, Patke also suggests that the poet views his role as “serving as a medium through which language transforms our sense of human experience by helping us articulate, share, and preserve the articulations that it is the genius of language to bring into being” (Patke 280). Here, Patke suggests that Muldoon does engage with his culture and with the social moment, thus responding to the many critics who view Muldoon’s work as empty wordplay (281). While critics often see Muldoon’s work as evading or failing in its duty to communicate meaning, Patke suggests that while Muldoon’s play with language and his postmodern, question-filled poems demand more work from the reader to puzzle out allusions, meaning develops out of this generative work (289). Muldoon’s response to the trauma of the Troubles, appearing in evasive references in his poems, can thus be

understood as reaching out to engage with the reader and invite interaction. In *Postcolonial Overtures*, Julia Obert goes one step further than Patke to assert that Muldoon's play with sound and wordplay is not about approaching meaninglessness at all, but rather weaves through Muldoon's poetry to create an epic "opera" (Obert 124). With this perspective, the sympathetic reading of Muldoon's poetry becomes even more important, where the reader must seek to understand the languages and modes of communication that emerge from Muldoon's poetry, rather than attempting to impose meaning from an existing narrative structure.

Muldoon's subversion of the arbitrary binary boundaries that often characterize discussions of nation, religion, and tradition further emphasize the transformative possibilities within his poetry. His imaginative and playful approach to history allows him to re-write and re-envision that history, creating an escape from any fixed, restrictive narrative. This connects back to reading his works for expressions of trauma with the importance of the perspective that there are not fixed signs or symptoms to find, but rather, how the speakers in his poems reacted to a concept of cultural trauma without being forced into embracing a particular notion of culture or identity. The fragmentation of self, often discussed as an indicator of trauma, is not a negative thing to be feared in Muldoon's poetry; rather, it is celebrated and embraced.

Muldoon's postmodern, destabilizing approach to the past also parallels the more recent move in trauma theory that challenges a notion of PTSD that limits experiences of trauma as a result of the Troubles to being fixed in the past. In his essay "The Meaning of Moving On," Graham Dawson argues that over-emphasizing the concept of "psychic entrapment," where a subject suffering from trauma is mentally trapped in the past, risks

a focus on trauma as "backwards-looking" (Dawson 82). The idea of closure, however, can be equally problematic, as it enforces the same liner progression from past to present in which victims of trauma are encouraged to "move forward and let go of a traumatic past" (88-89). As Dawson and others note, post-trauma emerges in a range of ways that do not necessarily reflect the conventional understanding of memory and linear temporality, and to attempt to force these diverse lived experiences into one mold is to lose much of the important nuance that is required for understanding the workings of trauma (89). Muldoon's decentering of the past, therefore, and the ways in which his poems constantly question a singular, monolithic meaning, can be read in part as a push back against the dominant trauma narrative surrounding recent Northern Irish history and literature. In Muldoon's poetry, closure is less important than the ability to remain flexible, revisiting a topic from different angles to generate more meaning from a multiplicity of viewpoints.

(Dis)placing Trauma

While the Troubles are rarely a predominant topic in Muldoon's work, references to violence and trauma do appear in many of his poems, and often a line or two will allude specifically to experiences from the Troubles. Often, these poems evade the specificity of one traumatic event and instead create a flood of seemingly random imagery and Muldoon's usual wordplay. While some critics might read this as another evasive or apolitical move, it is important to look how these poems offer a reading of the variety of ways in which someone reacts to trauma rather than ignoring it. In these poems, the speakers may not directly address their trauma or the event(s) that caused it, but the way they relate to their experiences and memories of traumatic events broaden

our understanding of how individuals react to trauma. When a past trauma is displaced, rather than reading the indirect references to trauma as avoidant, examining the ways in which the divergent narratives play out within a poem can uncover ways to read these poems as a portrayal of the experience of living through an event like the Troubles. While the speakers in these poems might be distancing themselves from their more immediate experience of trauma, it does not make their processing and expressions any less valid. Further, the obliquity of the speaker pushes the reader to become more deeply engaged in the process of reading the poem, as the reader must recall or research the various allusions and references throughout Muldoon's poems, and then consider how and why these seemingly disparate topics are significant to the narrator.

"Aisling," an earlier poem published in Muldoon's 1983 collection *Quoof*, references in its title the Irish tradition of the dream vision, a genre of poetry in which Ireland appears to the poet in the form of a woman (O'Donoghue 1). The Ireland-as-woman trope extends beyond just the *aisling*, but within this tradition especially, the embodiment of this symbolic woman is closely tied to the state of the land. Muldoon's poem subverts the typically romantic embodiment of Ireland, however, as the woman that appears to the speaker represents scarcity, not fertility:

> Her eyes spoke of a sloe-year,
> her mouth a year of haws.
>
> Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora,
> Artemidora, or Venus bright,
> or Anorexia, who left
> a lemon stain on my flannel sheet? (126-127)

The fruits referenced here—sloe, haws, and lemon—are bitter and sour, not lush and appealing. In a later poem in *Quoof*, "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants," the

first two lines of this second stanza reappear, then continue with “or Helen fair beyond compare,” keeping to more conventional mythological figures that appear more often in poetry—the reference to Helen here, for example, invoking the wealth of references to Helen of Troy that appear in Yeats’ poetry (141). In “Aisling,” however, the direction is markedly different: the names of more familiar goddesses are followed by “Anorexia,” transforming the medical condition of extreme, self-inflicted starvation into a symbolic figure, goddess-like, who is worshipped by the hunger strikers. In this vision, the traumas suffered by the divided country are displaced onto the body of this dream woman. The reference to Anorexia also sets up a clear tie between this commentary on the state of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the Troubles, as the next stanza references the famous hunger strikers:

> In Belfast’s Royal Victoria Hospital
> a kidney machine
> supports the latest hunger-striker
> to have called off his fast, a saline
> drip into his bag of brine. (127)

The hunger strikes during the Troubles draw on a long tradition of Irish prisoners protesting for the right to be recognized as political prisoners. Some of the earlier hunger strikers during the Troubles were women, most notably Dolours and Marian Price in 1973 (Keefe 178-179). However, the women’s prison protests were less publicized, while the men in H-block were elevated to martyrs and some becoming enduring faces of the Republican struggle. In this poem, the speaker specifically identifies “the latest hunger-striker” as male, referencing the group of men who went on a coordinated hunger strike in 1981. Although ten of the men died, many others either called off their strike, or were overruled by family members. The man pictured recovering in the hospital here is not a

dead martyr and is recovering from the ordeal. Therefore, the dream-woman figure of Anorexia, rather than embodying an actual hunger striker, remains purely symbolic, allowing the speaker to project his experience of the Troubles onto her, allowing him to remove himself from the traumas of the event. In the final stanza, the speaker transitions to a new scene in which he is the subject: "A lick and a promise. Cuckoo spittle./ I hand my sample to Doctor Maw./She gives me back a confident 'All Clear'" (*P* 127). The "lick and a promise," a colloquial cliché indicating careless or unserious attention, shifts away from a more serious tone. Similarly, the "cuckoo spittle" echoes the changeable nature of the dream-woman, Anorexia masquerading as a goddess, and now in this stanza, she becomes a doctor with a menacing "maw" who takes the speaker's bodily fluid for a medical test. In this conclusion, however, the speaker is declared "all clear"—absolved from any closer engagement with the suffering that he briefly contemplates. From the unconventional portrayal of the dream woman to the playful conclusion, Muldoon breaks down and rewrites the *aisling* tradition, both denying the comfort of a dream-vision and allowing the speaker to distance himself from traumatic experiences.

Displaced trauma also appears in "A Trifle," another poem in *Quoof*. This poem opens with a reference to a common event during the Troubles: a bomb alert. However, rather than focusing on an emotional reaction to the bomb threat, the speaker's attention lingers on a dessert. The poem opens with the speaker recalling an afternoon at work where, after a bomb alert is called, the office workers must "run down/the thirty-odd flights of steps" (120). As they hurry down the stairwell, the final two stanzas of the short poem shift away from the immediacy of the action:

> I had been trying to get past
> a woman who held, at arm's length, a tray,

> and on the tray the remains of her dessert—
>
> a plate of blue-pink trifle
> or jelly sponge,
> with a dollop of whipped cream on top. (121).

The speakers' sudden fixation on the details of the trifle—although he cannot quite remember if the desert even *is* a trifle, or if it is perhaps instead a jelly sponge—take the reader on an unexpected turn and deflects the seriousness of the event. Describing the dessert as a trifle also suggests the other meaning of the word: something trivial or of little importance. The narrator's fixation on the "trifle" captures a moment of a traumatic experience, and the way that the mind often focuses on a small, insignificant detail to avoid being overwhelmed by the situation at hand. At the same time, the mundane details of the trifle suggest that the bomb threat and evacuation of the building is also "a trifle," unremarkably commonplace. In a 2000 interview, Muldoon notes that the pause between "the remains of her" and "dessert" is "this moment of horror [...] Now somewhere between that word 'her' and 'dessert' actually, in a strange way, the poem resides. And the plate of trifle is in a sense a fleshing out of that in its gruesomeness-- brain matter *et al*, that we're all too familiar with" (Muldoon 172). In the poem, there is no line break between "her" and "dessert" to indicate a hard pause, but perhaps the pause comes from the disconnect between this harmless image and the descriptions of a bomb threat and mad dash to safety in the previous stanzas. Further, the choice of phrases like "arm's length" and "remains" do emphasize the bodily implications as the speaker describes the trifle, and ultimately, although the speaker does not express how he might be feeling in this moment of panic, the way he views the dessert indicates how trauma can be more easily expressed when it is projected onto something different.

The mundane and everyday appears again in the setting of a short, punchy poem "The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife" from Muldoon's 1987 volume *Meeting the British*. The speaker recalls a dinner out with a companion, a seemingly innocuous scene. However, his description of this dinner scene seems to be a space to contemplate deeper feelings of trauma that are more difficult to express directly. In the first stanza, a reminder of colonial conflicts enters the speaker's mind, with a reference to the marriage of an Irish princess to a conquering Norman noble following the Norman invasion of Ireland (Hull). Even his description of his companion eating uses warlike imagery as he watches her "try to get to grips/with a spider-crab's/crossbow and cuirass" (*MB* 11). The references to Ireland's history continue in the third stanza as he describes the next course as "Ireland's whole ox on a spit" (11), picturing the country as divided up for consumption by colonizing forces. The image of an ox specifically also gives a nod to old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the Cattle Raid of Cooley. The speaker's feelings about the course of Irish history seem to be a preoccupation, even in this safe setting. In the final stanza, a hint of violence returns:

> It's as if someone had slipped
> A double-edge knife between my ribs
> And hit the spot exactly. (11)

The ending to this poem disrupts the pleasant image of a dinner as the speaker plays on the colloquial phrase "hits the spot," which is often used to indicate feeling satisfied with a meal, to instead describe a knife in the ribs. With this, the other imagery earlier in the poem becomes more foreboding, showing that it is not easy for the speaker to remove himself completely from past trauma.

Muldoon's tactics of displacement also influence his elegiac poems, although they do address sorrow and loss more directly. His 1994 poem "Incantata" is a long-form elegy, dedicated to Muldoon's former lover, the artist Mary Farl Powers. The poem is filled with allusions to literature and history alongside Muldoon's playful use of language and is personalized with the speaker's remembrance of intimate moments between himself and his lover. In an interview, Neil Corcoran asks Muldoon about the role of his complex poetic structures in elegies like "Incantata" and "Yarrow," which are published together in *The Annals of Chile*. Muldoon responds that without some kind of formal structure, he would find it too difficult to write, and that rather than hiding his grief, "That's what brings it out" (Muldoon 186). In response to a follow-up question if irony is a "controlling influence" he answers, "It is a saving influence, I think, from time to time. it is extraordinary, that's why I'm interested in it, because the serendipity that might emerge from that is—can be—phenomenal, if one allows oneself to go with it" (187). Through his use and expansion of the traditional elegiac conventions, Muldoon broadens the scope of his experience of grief and encompass a more universalizing experience of loss that is connected to the outside world. Simultaneously, the eight-line stanzas and consistent rhyme scheme create a structure to contain the wide-ranging narrative and disparate imagery throughout the poem.

Throughout the poem, the speaker moves freely between different memories and associations as he remembers his lover and their life together. At times, working through his personal grief leads the speaker to recall other traumas, and so references to the violence of the Troubles become intertwined with his memories of their shared romantic relationship. In one stanza earlier in the long poem, the speaker watches his lover, an

artist, preparing a lithograph, and sets an image of her illness: “your failing, ink-stained hand” (16) against her inner strength: “you ground down that stone by sheer force of will” (16). In the following stanza, the dichotomy of her physical frailty and mental strength translates to the speaker’s memory of a Troubles-related bombing:

> I remember your pooh poohing, as we sat there on the ‘Enterprise’,
> my theory that if your name is Powers
> you grow into it or, at least,
> are less inclined to tremble before the likes of this bomb-blast
> further up the track: I myself was shaking like a leaf
> as we wondered whether the I.R.A. or the Red
> Hand Commandos or even the Red
> Brigades had brought us to a standstill worthy of Hamm and Clov. (AC 16)

Here, as the speaker remembers the strength of character that makes his companion “less inclined to tremble” in fear, the cause of this fear is explicitly a bombing of the Enterprise, the train that runs between Dublin and Belfast. However, in a familiar fashion, this reference to a specific trauma is subsequently derailed by a train of associations. After mentioning the IRA, or Irish Republican Army, and the Red Hand Commandos, a Loyalist paramilitary group, the speaker mentions the Red Brigades, an Italian terrorist group that rose in the 1970s and followed a Marxist doctrine (Martin 500). By adding the Red Brigades to the list, the speaker implies that the three organizations are not so different after all, in the sense that they all cause violence and destruction regardless of their political motives. The way that this stanza moves so quickly and deftly from an elegiac remembrance to a larger commentary about violence in society illustrates one of the major themes of “Incantata,” the ways in which personal and public experiences are often inextricably linked.

In the following stanza, the public experience of trauma from a politically-motivated bombing that brings the train to a "standstill" takes the speaker back to the intimacies and problems in his romantic relationship:

> the fact is that we'd been at a standstill long before the night
> things came to a head,
> long before we'd sat for half a day in the sweltering heat
> somewhere just south of Killnasaggart
> and I let slip a name—her name—off my tongue
> and you turned away (I see it now) the better to deliver the sting
> of your own tail, to let slip your own little secret. (17)

This transition back to the private pain that the speaker is processing throughout this poem emphasizes the complexities of loss and mourning. In a departure from more lofty, optimistic elegies, the speaker here recalls a difficult moment in the relationship, embracing that hurt as a part of the experience—but it is also this which enables him to remember his lover without getting stuck in one moment, and so in the following stanza he is able to move on to a different memory.

Later in the poem, as he contemplates his lover's battle with cancer, the speaker moves from those painful memories into a meditation about how art is created:

> if nothing more than a turn
> in the road where a swallow dips into the mire
> or plucks a strand of bloody wool from a strand of barbed wire
> in the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden
> and builds from pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt,
> a monument to the human heart
> that shines like a golden dome among roofs rain-glazed and leaden. (19)

The idea that art can emerge from emotional or physical pain speaks directly to one of the purposes of an elegy, to transform the pain of loss into something beautiful. The imagery in this stanza, however, is far from lofty—the "mire" at the side of a road, "bloody wool" on a barbed-wire fence—showing how Muldoon adapts elegiac conventions to use

imagery that is more familiar to him. This passage also makes a wider statement about causes of suffering beyond a personal loss, specifically referencing warfare and two battles, which both occurred during civil wars—the American Civil War, and the Jacobite Rebellion. The specific nature of these wars invites a comparison to the conflict of the Troubles without making a direct reference, establishing the common experience of violence even across different times in history. By moving from contemplating his personal loss to the more widely experienced trauma of civil conflicts in society, the speaker also suggests parallels between these different traumatic experiences. Although these parallels do not indicate a universalizing experience or suggest that there is one way to experience trauma, the interchange between loss and the trauma of the Troubles throughout this poem does emphasize empathy for the suffering of others.

Later in the poem, the speaker references the Troubles more directly, again returning to the image of the 'Enterprise' train line:

> To use the word 'might' is to betray you once too often, to betray
> your notion that nothing's random, nothing arbitrary:
> the gelignite weeps, the hands fly by on the alarm clock,
> the 'Enterprise' goes clackety-clack
> as they all must; even the car hijacked that morning in the Cross,
> that was preordained, its owner spread on the bonnet
> before being gagged and bound or bound
> and gagged, that was fixed like the stars in the Southern Cross. (20)

Here, the speaker directly addresses the subject of his elegy and confronts the idea that the traumatic events of the Troubles are "preordained," as if violence is just as inevitable in life as the train running on schedule. His view of the world as contingent, where anything "might" happen, sits in contrast to his lost lover's belief that "nothing's random." The imagery of the ticking time bomb, with the oozing gelignite and alarm clock that will ultimately set off the explosion, is inextricably tied to the speaker's

awareness of the progression of cancer in his lover's body: the gelignite "weeps," Muldoon's wordplay doubling the meaning to evoke sadness, and the hands of the alarm clock "fly" too quickly as the days count down. Naturally then, the speaker's train of thought brings a reflection on collective trauma back to his personal loss, as the next stanza opens with a rebuke to his lover for choosing not to seek treatment for her cancer: "The fact that you were determined to cut yourself off in your prime/because it was pre-determined has my eyes abrim" (20). The speaker's reaction to her decision hints at his reaction to the parallel idea that wider conflict and violence is also pre-determined. In mourning and rejecting one notion, he rejects the other as well. Throughout this poem, the speaker's heartbreak over his lover's death mingles with references to the violence caused by the Troubles to engage deeply with trauma and loss.

In his 2009 collection *Plan B*, Muldoon returns to the entanglement of personal remembrance, generational trauma, and loss with references to a dying friend in "A Hare at Aldergrove." In the original collection, the poem is spread out over three pages, placed opposite a series of photographs: a closeup of trees, a broken piano, and a more distanced shot of a seagull on a stone pillar, which looks like a monument. The poem begins with the narrator spotting "A hare standing up at last on his own two feet/in the blasted grass by the runway" (59). Close enough to the runway to see the hare, whether he is boarding or disembarking from a plane, the narrator is positioned in a liminal space in between destinations. From here, the opening imagery morphs into a treatise on the mythology of hares and their fighting heritage:

> [...] These hares have themselves so long been given to row
> against the flood that when a King
> of the hares has tried to ban bare-knuckle fighting, so wont
> are they to grumble and gripe [...] (59)

The line break in here sets up a double meaning, introducing some ambiguity: the hares have been "given to row," an expression which would indicate fighting, or "to row/against the flood," a variation of an expression meaning to be contrary or resist authority. Thus the hares are doubly implicit in perpetuating violence, either by fighting or by resisting the King's attempt to "ban bare-knuckle fighting." With the narrator's position at the Belfast airport, the allegorical commentary on the sectarian fighting of the Troubles is clear.

The image of the "bare-knuckle" boxing hares appears again on the next page, where the narrator continues to describe the hare:

> Clapper-lugged, cleft-lipped, he looks for all the world
> as if he might never again put up his mitts
> despite the fact that he shares a Y chromosome/with Niall of the Nine Hostages,
> never again allow his Om
> to widen and deepen by such easy stages,
> never relaunch his campaign as melanoma has relaunched its campaign
> in a friend I once dated,
> her pain rising above the collective pain
> with which we've been inundated
> as this one or that has launched an attack
> to the slogan of 'Brits Out' or 'Not an Inch'
> or a dull ack-ack
> starting up in the vicinity of Ballynahinch […] (61-63)

Here, the hare's calm presence contrasts with a genetic predisposition to fighting—and that suggestion of a warlike nature prompts the narrator along multiple other trains of thought. In the following lines, all in a single convoluted sentence, the narrator's thoughts shift to thinking of his friend's struggle with cancer and of the Troubles—the two images seemingly inseparable, with cancer becoming a metaphor for the surges in sectarian violence, which are both evoked by the image of hare with genetic links to a fabled warrior from Irish mythology. The imagery throughout this poem is both playful and

peaceful, concluding with the narrator aligning himself with the hare and describing himself, like the hare, as "in a flap now only as to whether/we should continue to tough it out till/something better comes along or settle for this salad of blaeberry and heather/and a hint of common tormentil" (63). The thing to "settle" upon here is, like the bitter herbaceous plants, the bittersweet ability to hold memories of the violent history and the trauma of the troubles, and the loss of a beloved friend whose suffering surpasses the "collective pain" of the Troubles, some of which is described in the following lines.

(Dis)Engaging with History

Muldoon's approach to the record of history is playful, irreverent, and deconstructive. His poems often challenge the notion of one fixed past or source of authority, which is paralleled in his approach to revision and authorial authority. In the Author's Note to his collection *Poems 1968-1998* Muldoon stresses that the collection is not a "complete" collection and notes that aside from a few "factual errors," the poems republished in this volume have not been significantly revised, explaining, "since I'm fairly certain that, after a shortish time, the person through whom a poem was written is no more entitled to make revisions than any other reader" (xv). Muldoon's metacommentary here is a familiar stance on the role of the author, but significantly, making this declaration in the context of introducing his own work also creates some distance between the author and his poems and sets the tone for a deconstructive approach to authority.

Muldoon's disavowal of revisiting and revising a work after some time has passed also emphasizes the ways in which people grow and change over time. While another poet might look back on old poems and alter them to suit his more current outlook,

Muldoon positions himself as a reader, instead of an author, once that time has passed. Although Muldoon notes that a few errors were corrected in the collected edition, many of his poems also celebrate misremembered words, malapropisms, or other confusions between words, which suggests that the poet is more comfortable with a work being preserved in a rougher state. In her essay "Acutely Discomfiting: Subversive Representation in Paul Muldoon's Poetry," Florence Schneider suggests that Muldoon's approach to language "overflows the world and overwhelms one's sense of experience" (180). In terms of trauma literature, the joyous abundance of language that Schneider highlights in Muldoon's poetry is the opposite of any idea that language is lacking or inadequate. Schneider points out that Muldoon's wordplay and embrace of slippages in meaning challenges the primacy of memory and history in building an identity (188). She further notes that Muldoon frequently undermines even the notion of one specific identity for the speaker in a poem, further freeing the idea of self from fixed definers like religion or gender (191). The poet's embrace of wordplay, therefore, both allows the narrators in these poems to assert their own sense of identity and establishes the space for expressions of trauma that focus on a freedom of language, rather than a lack of speech.

In many of Muldoon's poems, the intentional errata parallel another common theme, a misremembered past. When the narrators in these poems express various forms of forgetfulness, or imagine a different kind of future, they create alternate histories that emphasize the faultiness of human memory and the joyful potential that can emerge from accepting these slips in memory. Similarly, Elmer Kenney-Andrews reads Muldoon's insistence on uncertainty as a rejection of notions of place and identity and characterizes the poems that reflect this as "deeply suspicious of myths and visions" (Kennedy-

Andrews 108-109). Muldoon's insistence on alternate histories also allows for freedom from the often-common dictate to "never forget." If we are not allowed to forget and move on, then our present will inevitably be shaped by the patterns of the past. However, as Christopher Malone observes, "For Muldoon, the past presents no narratives capable of structuring the present; instead the poet's self-consciously fictional restructuring of the world evokes a sense of community freed from foundational narratives" (Malone 1103). The "foundational narratives" that Malone references here are the myths or collective memories that shape a society's understanding of itself. These monolithic narratives can impede the generative, creative potential of poetry. Similarly, in her essay "For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents," Fran Brearton argues that Muldoon's poetry often re-creates myths that are "unstable, eclectically and inconsistently evoked, and in the end collapse into each other to disrupt straightforward oppositional readings" (Brearton 55). If we understand myths as familiar referents that act as touchstones for an understanding of cultural identity, then the destabilizing of both myth and history in Muldoon's work serves to open more possibilities for a present and future that can be built anew.

In "History," an earlier poem from 1980, Muldoon subverts the expectations of readers who see history as something that is fixed and monolithic. In the first line, the speaker asks, "Where and when exactly did we first have sex?" (Muldoon 87). Rather than a public narrative of "history" that might be assumed based on the title, the opening line establishes an intimate, personal history is a playful way to disrupt expectations about the weightiness of history. However, even this personal history is unclear to the

speaker, and he continues to quiz the reader, who is put into the position of a lover by the speaker's direct address of "you" throughout the poem:

> Do you remember? Was it Fitzroy Avenue,
> Or Cromwell Road, or Notting Hill?
> Your place or mine? Marseille or Aix? (87)

Although these streets and cities are mentioned in relation to the personal question at hand, many of these place names are also weighted with overtones of imperial power, reminding us once again of the other meaning of "history." The variety of references and place names, however, ultimately make it difficult to form a monolithic narrative, creating instead an array of possible versions of events and allowing the speaker to remain free from any one restrictive narrative of history.

Finally, the speaker recalls an encounter that may be the answer to his original query, although it is still phrased as a question:

> Or as long ago as that Thursday evening
> When you and I climbed through the bay window
> On the ground floor of Aquinas Hall
> And into the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow'
> Or the room where they say he wrote 'Snow' (87).

Louis MacNeice, an influential Irish poet from the previous generation, was often insistent on evading any nationalistic definition of Irishness (Kennedy-Andrews 102). By evoking his name in this context, the speaker also alludes to the weight of history and culture while also tying this well-known figure to his personal history. In the final line of the poem, the speaker concludes by emphasizing the mythologized nature of history, qualifying his description of that room with "they say." Rather than stating the history of this room as a certainty, this final line introduces some skepticism, which naturally fits with the way in which the speaker doubts his own memory throughout the poem.

Ultimately, the mythologized version of history, with all its imaginative possibilities, is more compelling than the reality of the event, just as the room where MacNeice is thought to have composed a famous poem holds allure because of the story associated with it.

In another short poem, "Gone," the speaker meditates on the possibilities of alternate progressions of history and the vagaries of human memory. The poem opens, "Since one of our functions is to forget/the smell of an apple-cannery" (*MB* 31), suggesting that forgetfulness is a part of the human experience. The speaker lists small things that could be easily forgotten, but are memorialized now within the poem—everything from natural imagery to "the subcutaneous/freckle on a cue-ball,/the story of O. Henry" (31). This list of possibly forgotten moments concludes with a question:

> what should we make of that couple
> we never quite became,
> both turning up one lunch-hour
>
> at an auction-room
> to bid, unwittingly, against each other
> for the set of ten Venetian goblets? (31)

In imagining something that "we never quite became" and spinning an O. Henry-esque tale of a couple bidding for the same auction item, the speaker's question becomes a speculative exercise, imagining what might have been, a "what if" that would not be possible without his earlier embrace of the experience of forgetting the past. Along with the human capacity for forgetting and misremembering, then, comes the potential to generate imaginative alternate realities.

In other poems, the slippages in meaning and remembering tie back to the process of mourning loss. "Milkweed and Monarch," one of the shorter poems in the same

collection as the longer elegy "Incantata," is a villanelle narrated in the third person, as the subject of the poem returns to his parents' gravesite and contemplates loss. Structurally, the villanelle echoes the confusion of the subject's thoughts, which jump around despite the constrains of the form. Although the inflections of the repeating lines vary by stanza, the form also imitates repetitive traumatic thoughts. In this poem, the trauma of loss leaves the subject feeling distanced, and in response, he lists things that have become confused in his mind. The line "he could barely tell one from the other" (*AC* 10) repeats throughout the poem, highlighting the different breakdowns in meaning that occur as a result of the subject's confusion. While these could simply be read as manifestations of the mourner's mental state, a deeper analysis offers a reading that focuses on the thematic push back against arbitrarily imposed meaning.

The opening of the poem establishes a subject who struggles with displaced grief and memories that intrude upon his visit to the gravesite:

> As he knelt by the grave of his mother and father
> the taste of dill, or tarragon—
> he could barely tell one from the other—
>
> filled his mouth. It seemed as if he might smother.
> Why should he be stricken
> With grief, not for his mother and father,
>
> But a woman slinking from the fur of a sea-otter
> In Portland, Maine, or, yes, Portland, Oregon—
> He could barely tell one from the other— (10)

In the first confusion between things, the subject feels overwhelmed by a taste in his mouth "of dill, or tarragon," but is unable to identify which, because he cannot distinguish between the two. The sensation of taste as an expression of grief seems like a kind of synesthesia, a way to convey his emotion without attempting to describe it in

words. In the third stanza, he elides Portland, Maine and Portland, Oregon, suggesting an irreverence towards place, in the sense that the location of his memory of an encounter with this woman is not significant to him. The repetition of the phrase "he could barely tell…" in this stanza particularly changes in tone from simply stating a fact of confusion between two different herbs to a dismissive attitude towards the idea that a memory must be perfectly accurate in every detail.

In the second section of the poem, the phrase "mother and father" appears in a different context, as he recalls the woman reciting the chaos theory about how a butterfly's wingbeat "may trigger off the mother and father/of all storms" (10-11). This repetition of the phrase indicates that the subject's mourning for this woman is tangled up with the experience of losing his parents, and so throughout the poem, his expressions of grief conflate all these losses. In the final section of the poem, which is just one stanza of four lines, the confusions center on the subject's parents:

> He looked about. Cow's-parsley in a samovar.
> He'd mistaken his mother's name, 'Regan', for 'Anger':
> As he knelt by the grave of his mother and father
> He could barely tell one from the other. (11)

In the second line, the subject misreads his mother's name on the headstone, instead seeing the word "anger," which is an anagram of "Regan." Here, the letters are as jumbled as his emotions, and the word that he initially reads indicates one of those emotions, anger, that may occur as a part of the mourning process. At the conclusion of the poem, the two graves become difficult to tell apart, transforming his parents into a more universal stand-in for loss. Throughout this poem, Muldoon's play with confusion and mistaken meaning allows for a wider expression of grief and loss when it is no longer confined to familiar patterns of elegiac or memorial poetry.

One of Muldoon's relatively later poems, originally published in 1998 in *Hay*, further advances the poet's interest in the ways in which meaning can become unmoored, opening the possibility for different interpretations. "Errata" reads like a list of errors and corrections; for Florence Schneider, the poem seems like a half-finished "draft" (Schneider 185). She argues that this format highlights the idea that "the writer may be wrong, that he needs to correct his own verses" (185). Not only does this poem leave open the potential for mistakes or mis-speakings, but it also embraces the potential for simultaneous multiple meanings— in other words, error and revision need not have negative connotations. The listing of errata also presents itself as a gloss, but little can be inferred about the original text from the seemingly random words that must be corrected:

> For "Antrim" read "Armagh"
> For "mother" read "other"
> For "harm" read "farm"
> For "feather" read "father" (*P* 445)

In isolation from a larger context, we can only consider how the replaced words indicate a shift in meaning. Antrim and Armagh are both counties in Northern Ireland, but the similarity ends there, making the errata in this opening line quite egregious. Going by recent census data, Armagh has a significantly larger Catholic demographic than Antrim, making this particular choice in placenames seem relevant to the sectarian conflict as well. However, in this poem, the offhand correction, phrased as an instruction to read one county for the other, calls attention to how easily places could become interchangeable. The meaning of place and, by association, the political and national identity that often dominates the culture in Northern Ireland, is therefore not completely fixed and could be obscured or revised. In a later stanza, the speaker returns to the theme of place, but this time lists the Irish name for Belfast, which is initially misspelled, then

corrected: “For ‘*Beal Fierste*’ read ‘*Beal Feirste*’” (445). Here, while there is a similar emphasis on the importance of place, this line evokes the shibboleth of a place name and corrects a misspelling that an “authentic” Irish-speaker would catch.

In the second line of the first stanza, the reader is instructed to read “Mother” as “other,” creating distance between the speaker and a mother figure. The image of “father” is treated differently in the final line of the stanza, however, where the word has been confused with “feather.” The feather/father is more a play on a simple spelling error and perhaps on pronunciation as well: the two words are not too far apart, particularly if one imagines a thick Northern Irish accent. In a later stanza, the speaker presents another set of words that are also close in pronunciation: “For ‘married’ read ‘marred’” (445). These lines exemplify the playfulness with which Muldoon often approaches language and uses this to create strange and puzzling juxtapositions. His reliance on sound here also emphasizes the importance of accents in establishing (literal) meaning through both verbal and written communication.

(Re)Writing Colonial History

Throughout Muldoon’s work, references to Irish and British colonial history frequently appear in combination with seemingly unrelated topics. Far from being apolitical, these poems—like the earlier poem titled “History”— make a statement by subverting expectations about how a poem engaging with Northern Irish history “should” look. In looking at his work for references to the Troubles, the frequent references to colonial violence and oppression are significant as well, particularly given the dominant narrative from social historians that emphasizes the historical roots of the Troubles. Although many of these poems are set in different times and places, far removed from

modern-day Northern Ireland, these times and places are specifically colonial histories, suggesting parallels to Northern Irish history and to the Northern Irish present, which has been so affected by the country's colonial past. Further, the widespread nature of the colonial violence acts draws connections between Northern Irish history and the range of colonial oppression and trauma in other times and places. Rather than focusing on one moment of violence and trauma like the Troubles, this deeper exploration allows the speakers in these poems to engage with similarly traumatic experiences without directly facing contemporary events. In many of these poems, similar traumas or memories of colonial violence emerge, allowing the poet and reader to process the traumas of the Troubles without facing them directly.

One earlier poem, "The Field Hospital" from his first volume *New Weather,* originally published in 1973, references the American Civil War and offers a commentary on warfare and conflict. While not directly related to colonial conflict, this war does have similar parallels, and the historical setting for this poem offers similar lessons for the current day. The choice of this conflict—a civil war—offers a clear parallel to the Northern Irish conflict, which is also a conflict between a divided society. The voice of the poem is a plurality, either one person speaking for all of the soldiers, or the soldiers speaking together:

> We answer to no grey South
>
> Nor blue North, not self-defence,
> The lie of just wars, neither
> Cold nor hot blood's difference
> In their discharging of guns,
>
> But that hillside of fresh graves. (*P* 33)

The reference to the American Civil War is clear in these lines with the South/North divide and the focus on the color of the soliders' uniforms, grey and blue. The geographical labels also happen to fit quite neatly with the Northern Irish conflict, as many Irish Catholics living in Northern Ireland saw themselves as aligned with the "South," or the part of Ireland that had gained independent rule decades ago. The message in this passage is quite direct as the speaker refuses to answer to "the lie of just wars" or accept that any cause could justify a "hillside of fresh graves." As the stanza continues, the speaker reflects on lives that have been lost in addition to the willing combatants and describe a girl "who died screaming for ether" after being shot (33). Here, the moral consideration of collateral damage adds more weight to the view that the idea of a "just" war is a lie, as they ask if that girl could "yet protest our innocence" (33). During the Troubles, a conflict that was characterized by bombs being planted in public spaces with the intention to destroy property, collateral damage was common and expected, even if the aim was not to kill or injure civilians. In this poem about the Civil War, however, these soldiers reject the idea that the girl's death is acceptable. In the final stanza of the poem, the imagery further emphasizes the speaker's indifference to the glories of war:

> Those gigantic, yellow moths
> That brushed right over her wounds,
> Pinning themselves to our sleeves
> Like medals given the brave. (*MB* 33)

The medals for bravery are pictured as ephemeral moths, rather than permanent symbols of courage in battle. Thus, the glory of recognition for bravery is also proven to be fleeting. The image of moths in this specific context, when they so often represent delicate beauty, here reminds the reader that most lepidopterans enjoy feasting on

carrion—hardly a poetic, beautiful image. Nothing about war or death in this poem is beautiful or glorious, and with the parallels to the Northern Irish conflict, this poem can be read as a condemnation of violence and a rejection of the standard patriotic narratives that so often shape the rhetoric of warfare.

Muldoon's 1987 collection *Meeting the British* further explores a wide-ranging theme of colonial violence and oppression. In the titular poem "Meeting the British," for example, Muldoon writes a narrative from the perspective of Native Americans encountering British officers in Canada. As Kathleen McCracken notes in her essay "Paul Muldoon's Inscription of Native America," Muldoon's frequent allusions to Native American history throughout his *oeuvre* build parallels between the history of the Americas and Ireland, which share experiences of colonial oppression (McCracken 50). She further argues that many of these poems can be read as "parables about the Northern Ireland Troubles," giving as an example the genocide described in an earlier poem, "The Year of the Sloes" as a parallel to Derry's Bloody Sunday, a comparison that Muldoon also explicitly points out in an interview (52). However, McCracken is careful to clarify that Muldoon's thematic interest in colonialism is not appropriative; rather, she argues that these colonial-themed poems often make note of the ways in which the Irish, as Europeans, have been complicit in the silencing of Native voices (54). Muldoon's references to other histories and cultures, therefore, functions more as a broadening of perspective, including the wide range of colonial experiences.

"Meeting the British" is a shorter poem, composed of nine couplets that mirror the cold winter atmosphere in the poem in their sparse, terse form. The first line opens with a colloquial phrase: "We met the British in the dead of winter" (*MB* 16). The imposition of

an English-speaking colloquialism like "the dead of winter" onto the speaker of the poem, a Native American, both highlights the ways that colonialism erases native language, and reminds the reader that the speaker is not being presented as an authentic representation. Rather, the speaker here is a constructed figure standing in for the colonized in a moment that is both specific, in the poem's references to particular British soldiers and the notorious smallpox blankets, and generic, with its wider themes of colonial oppression.

The atmosphere of the poem is reinforced by the cold imagery of the setting, where "The sky was lavender//and the snow lavender-blue" (16). Adding to the eerie feeling, the winter landscape is silent except for "the sound of two streams coming together/(both were frozen over)" (16). The metaphor of creaking ice from two streams intersecting is almost too apt for a meeting of two different cultures, but even at a more basic level this image evokes a tortured sound, further setting the tone. The slightly surreal nature of the colors of the sky and the sounds of colliding ice builds up to a feeling of alienation as the speaker observes, "and, no less strange,/myself calling out in French" (16). Using French, the language of another colonizer, to communicate with the British officers is another reminder that the speaker is estranged from his culture by the violence of colonization, no matter how peaceful the interaction seems in this poem. The difficulties in cultural exchange go both ways, as the speaker adds, "Neither General Jeffrey Amherst//nor Colonel Henry Bouquet/could stomach our willow-tobacco" (16). However, despite the casual conversation between the two groups about the scent of lavender, we are reminded of the oppression of the colonizers in the final two lines: "They gave us six fishhooks/and two blankets embroidered with smallpox" (16). The

blankets, one of the most well-known examples of colonial atrocity, are described here with the foreknowledge of the danger they contained, again positioning the speaker as a reconstruction, rather than a historical individual. With this more self-aware development of the speaker, Muldoon invites the readers to consider the wider themes of what it means to meet the British and evokes more universal colonial experiences.

Another poem from *Meeting the British*, "Something Else," approaches the topic of colonization with a speaker in a contemporary setting, but his free-association train of thought references a series of historical moments of colonization to draw parallels between similar experiences. In a similar setup as "The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife," the poem begins with a theme of consumption—someone choosing a lobster for purchase, in this poem—which moves into suggesting a parallel to the colonial conquering of a nation:

> When your lobster was lifted out of the tank
> to be weighed
> I thought of woad,
> Of madders, of fugitive, indigo inks (33)

The dyes mentioned here all come from different places: woad invokes the ancient Celts, who painted themselves blue to go into battle with the Romans; madder is a red dye that was a closely-held secret in Turkey, and indigo was grown in the American South with slave labor. All these colors that the speaker thinks of, therefore, have some connection to a history of imperialism and colonial violence that parallels the history of Ireland. In the next stanza, the lobster reminds the speaker of something seemingly completely unrelated: the French poet Nerval, who, he muses, "was given to promenade/a lobster on a gossamer thread" (33). Then, still thinking of the poet and after relating the story of how the poet committed suicide, he concludes, "which made me think//of something else,

then something else again" (33). This enigmatic ending line of the poem is on one level quite self-referential, reminding the reader that the speaker in this poem has jumped between different allusions with only the most tenuous of connectors—as fragile as the lobster's "gossamer thread." On another level, this final line also emphasizes the way that thought and memory works. It is rarely predictable or logical, particularly when recalling potentially traumatizing topics. Even though this poem is about "something else," it offers a reminder that sometimes talking about a seemingly unrelated topic can offer a strategy to work through a more challenging subject.

Conclusions

Muldoon's 2006 collection *Horse Latitudes* is peppered with memories of the Troubles, despite the international flair indicated by the title of the collection (helpfully described on the back of the book as areas around the equator where traveling ships encounter calm seas). In comparison to his earlier poetry, the references to the Troubles here are blunt, as in the poem "Turtles" where the speaker recalls "those Belfast nights I lay awake, putting in a bid/for the police channel/as lid bangers gave the whereabouts/of armored cars and petrol bombers lit one flare" (*HL* 50). While this later collection is far more obvious in its references to the violence of the Troubles, these poems are not stuck in the past like the becalmed ships in the oceans at the horse latitudes. Rather, the speakers' memories of Northern Ireland in this past time are incorporated with their more recent past and with their present, allowing these past traumas to be processed and incorporated into the speaker's overall life experience. These poems are no more solely about the Troubles than his earlier works, even though the references may be more obvious. What does appear consistently throughout his *oeuvre* is an interest in expanding

the ways in which the speakers in these poems can process and express their experiences, including traumas. Muldoon's approach to trauma and the past celebrates generative potential, rather than viewing the past as something that entraps the speaker. When Muldoon's earlier work is read primarily for the ways the poet evades political references, it becomes too easy to overlook the degree to which the Troubles is evident and on the narrator's mind in so many different poems.

"POST-AGREEMENT:" THE NEXT GENERATION OF NORTHERN IRISH POETS

For the other poets in this dissertation— Ciaran Carson (b. 1958), Medbh McGuckian (b. 1950), and Paul Muldoon (b. 1951)— the Troubles was something that began when they were just about old enough to remember how things had been before, and then the conflict persisted for the next thirty years, spanning most of their early adult lives. In this chapter, I will consider how my approach to reading trauma in poetry might adapt to poets in a later generation, who, just twenty years behind the poets discussed previously in this dissertation, were born during the height of the Troubles and grew up without having experienced a "before." Many of these poets began writing towards the end of the Troubles and publishing works largely in the decades after the ceasefire was signed, which puts their work in the context of a society that now amplifies a narrative of rebuilding and moving on into a new era of peace and prosperity. Of course, it is important to note that sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland did not develop overnight at the start of the Troubles, nor did they vanish after the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998, but for the sake of establishing a timeframe, this project defines the Troubles as a time of heightened violence and conflict that is generally recognized as a historically distinct period.

For this emerging next generation of writers in Northern Ireland, scholars and literary anthologies have lately coined the term "post-agreement" to encompass those writers who were born around the 1970s, when the Troubles as at its peak, and began their adult lives in the time of the peace agreement in the late 1990s. For these writers, the traumas of the Troubles are real and recent, but not immediate and ongoing as they develop their literary voices. Instead, these younger writers exist in a social space where

the Troubles are ostensibly over. Society seems to encompass two conflicting narratives: one of remembrance, with cities in Northern Ireland filled with memorials—murals, plaques, monuments, gardens—and one of "moving on" and insisting that peace has been restored, and we must look forward to the future. In her essay "At Vision's Edge:Post-Conflict Memory and Art Practice," Fionna Barber observes that even after the Troubles had formally ended, the widespread effects of the Troubles are widespread and passed down to the younger generations, making it difficult to fully buy into the narrative of moving on (Barber 233-234). For poets who began writing in this time, therefore, processing and addressing the traumas of the Troubles is often overlaid by the wider social rhetorical environment. As Birte Heidemann explains in the introductory chapter of her book *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature*, "post-Agreement writers are acutely aware of how this shifting political terrain breeds a different kind of 'conflict,' one that is certainly less violent but gestures towards new forms of violence exerted by the Agreement's rhetorical negation of the sectarian past and its aggressive neoliberal campaign" (Heidemann 4). For Heidemann, post-agreement writers must always navigate between a "suppressed and 'regressive' past" and a forward-looking future, which frequently places them in a liminal space that is unique to their generation (4).While earlier poets like Carson, McGuckian, and Muldoon were still writing in this same post-agreement time period, it makes sense that their memories of the Troubles, as they look back, would be processed and filtered differently. However, despite their different positioning within Northern Irish society, post-agreement poets engage with themes of trauma in ways that are often similar to the poets of the previous generation, searching for ways to express, process, and move beyond the traumatic moment without erasing it from

memory. This chapter will discuss two post-agreement Northern Irish poets, Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn, who each engage with the history and legacies of the Troubles from different angles. Bryce addresses this history more directly in many of her poems, frequently looking back to the past and writing from the perspective of child narrators witnessing the Troubles, while Flynn most often references the legacy of the Troubles in her poetry when she writes about experiences of her generation as young adults or describes the new and changing cityscape of Belfast. For both poets, running throughout their work is a common thread of a need to achieve some distance and perspective: whether by physically leaving the places in Northern Ireland that hold memories of the Troubles, or by reaching a temporal distance from those experiences, these post-agreement poets are continually seeking and revising how they relate to the traumas of the recent past.

Inheritors of the Troubles

In March of 2018, I attended a poetry reading by Colette Bryce, who was at the time the visiting writer-in-residence at Villanova University. Afterwards, we talked briefly about my early dissertation research as she signed my books, and Bryce expressed her uneasiness at the idea of being labeled a "Troubles poet," feeling that it was so limiting to be relegated to that narrow thematic focus. Even though she was a poet who was writing in the post-Good Friday era, first publishing full works in the 2000s, Bryce still felt that there was some danger of literary critics swooping in to label her work. On her mind, too, was a recently-published article in the London *Times*, which she suggested I look up and read: a short article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, titled "Poetry and conflict in Northern Ireland" with a sub-heading that declared, "Tess Davidson argues for

the poetry of the Troubles to be recognized as its own literary category." For much of the article, Davidson's commentary seems to embody the outside critic that Bryce expressed some wariness towards:

> It's fruitless to reduce an entire literary culture to a simplistic discussion of the Troubles. And yet when it comes to poetry, the Troubles as a quasi-genre becomes a framework through which the violence of Northern Ireland can be explored in a way that transcends the political. For the thirty years in which the Troubles dominated the landscape, they permeated much of the literature. But when the violence was reframed in narrative or verse form, new possibilities emerged. While public discussion was stunted, poetry became a form of dialogue, providing relief in the immediacy of its response. (Davidson)

Davidson's suggested approach to reading poetry about the Troubles rightly identifies the role that poetry can play in creating "new possibilities" of talking about and processing the traumas of the Troubles. In suggesting a genre of Troubles poetry, Davidson's intent seems to be for the poems to shape the narrative about that specific period, rather than for the historical moment to dictate what shape a poem should take. Inevitably, however, with a genre that is defined by a historical time period or specific theme, some qualifications are due to follow. This has already begun to happen within the same paragraph, as Davidson mentions "when the violence was reframed in narrative or verse form," implying that violence must be a part of anything that would qualify as Troubles literature. As we have seen in previous chapters, the highly political nature of the Troubles conflict also enters into critical reception of poetry from this time and place, where a poet like Muldoon or McGuckian would be accused of making a political statement by not talking enough about the Troubles.

Furthermore, Davidson's framing of Troubles poetry as a response to "public discussion" risks overshadowing the experience of the poet as an individual. Identifying a body of work as centered on the Troubles overlooks the ways in which the traumatic

events of that time often became a part of everyday life, an omission that can result in readings that do not fully acknowledge the importance of those everyday lived experiences, and instead focus on the national rhetoric of trauma and remembrance. For Bryce, the most pressing concern with being labeled as a "Troubles poet" seemed to be the idea that this label could be limiting—whether for the reasons outlined above, or because one might read her poetry solely for references to the Troubles and miss the richness of other themes that run throughout her work. However, embracing a reading of poetry about the Troubles that moves away from Davidson's "public discussion" and instead centers the individual experience and the multiplicity of ways that trauma can be experienced, processed, and expressed is the opposite of limiting. As my analysis of both Bryce and Flynn's poetry in this chapter will demonstrate, responses to the traumas of the Troubles are inseparable from the experiences of growing up as an individual within society, and do not eclipse all those other aspects of individual life.

Born in Derry in 1970, Colette Bryce grew up in a Catholic neighborhood, surrounded by the ongoing conflicts in the Northern Irish city. In a 2018 interview, Bryce reflects on her experience of the Troubles:

> For me, the war there, or conflict, or Troubles, or whatever we choose to call it, was my ordinary lived experience as a child and teenager. […] Politics was in the warp and weft of the everyday, and my context was a Catholic, republican community with a history of oppression. (Wyeth)

In this same interview, however, after being asked if there was one poem that could "sum up" her experience of growing up during the Troubles, Bryce responded, "Gosh no" (Wyeth). The body of her work exemplifies this, as it encompasses, among other themes, a whole range of experiences and ways of engaging—or escaping—a childhood in Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. In her 2017 *Selected Poems,* although the

table of contents is divided by each original collection, the poems appear without breaks within the body of the book. Bryce explains her reasoning for this choice: "There's an old theory that some poets are really writing the one book, published in instalments. Each collection is important to you, of course, but the ongoing process much more so" (Wyeth). With this choice, in the *Selected Poems* it also becomes easier to trace recurring themes and preoccupations that emerge throughout Bryce's work. While Bryce's writing does not focus solely on the Troubles, many of her poems reflect her own experiences growing up in Derry and often take the perspective of a young child as the narrator in a poem to revisit past experiences with some more distance. In reaction to the violence and destruction, many of her poems explore the intersections between art and aesthetics. In a similar reaction, the speakers in her poems are often longing for escape or have already left the place that they associate with past traumatic memories.

Leontia Flynn was born and raised in County Down, in a more rural area outside of a major city like Derry or Belfast ("Leontia Flynn"). In her 2018 collection *The Radio* many of her poems look back at a more isolated and rural childhood—although that still does not offer a complete escape from the Troubles—but her earlier collections frequently feature Belfast, where she spent her early adulthood and now lives and works. Despite these references to place, however, one dominant theme that emerges for Flynn is the idea of travel—of leaving Belfast, being elsewhere, or on occasion, returning "home." Another frequent theme that Flynn explores throughout her works focuses on mental health issues, offering more indirect insight into the ways in which the Troubles and the post-Troubles era has influenced her generation. In a 2018 interview, Flynn commented, "I felt that when I wrote "Letter to Friends" from *Profit and Loss* I very deliberately went

into reverse from the kind of elusiveness and fragmentation of the postmodern work I'd loved, and I found that exciting" (Flynn). This sentiment echoes her search for "sincerity" in contrast to postmodern poetry, which Flynn outlines in her 2011 essay for the Edinburgh Review, "What do I know? (Or, why I'm giving up post-modern poetry to live an irony-free life.)." The movement away from postmodern elements, particularly the elusiveness and fragmentation that Flynn specifically highlights in both this interview and in her earlier essay, is also a key difference in reading Flynn's work in conversation with the traumas of the Troubles. While in previous chapters, this project emphasizes the parallels between techniques like fragmentation and the commonly studied responses to trauma, studying Flynn and other post-Agreement poets requires expanding the possible ways in which a poet can write and engage with trauma without replicating it within a poem in the same recognizable postmodern methods as the earlier generation of poets. However, this is not that say that Flynn does not engage with these themes at all. In his overview of Northern Irish poetry through 2006, Michael Parker briefly discusses Flynn's first volume of poetry, noting that feelings of displacement or reactions to the violence of the previous decade(s) seem to be "largely absent," instead focusing on the emergent themes of "family, domestic spaces, everyday objects" (Parker 237). His dismissal here, while admittedly only based on one volume of poetry, is perhaps rooted in a limited understanding of the multiplicity of ways that trauma can be processed and expressed. Parker's critique of Flynn mirrors earlier dismissals of Medbh McGuckian's poetry, again reinforcing a false binary between the "domestic" and public social discourse. In this dissertation, I hope to provide some more fulsome readings of selected poems from Flynn's larger body of work.

Writing the Troubles

In her poetry, Bryce often writes about experiences of the Troubles from a child's perspective, creating narrators who are often less self-aware than an adult speaker might be. Michael Parker describes this narrative decision as a "childhood act of witness" and identifies it as a common theme in poets from the "next generation" (Parker 179). With a young narrator, the reader often has a greater knowledge of context than the speaker in the poem, creating tension between the experience of witnessing for the speaker and for the reader. In other poems by Bryce and Flynn, the recalls events from her childhood. When the narrator is speaking from a position of looking back at childhood memories, the narrative voice in a poem is further complicated by the inclusion of an adult perspective along with a younger-self voice, and grants the speaker a greater distance from the traumatic events of the past. For Heidemann, the use of a younger-self voice allows the post-agreement poets to move away from the restrictions of recalling an experience in only one particular way. Heidemann envisions child narratives as a space where the poets can engage with memories: "The poets thus introduce childhood as a spatio-temporal realm to which they set out to return in the form of writing, albeit re-evaluating it from an adult perspective. What one encounters, then, is a poetry that is conscious of a "time collapsed in on itself," laden with a sense of immediacy to past events" (Heidemann 144). In these poems, the traumatic event is therefore experienced simultaneously in its immediacy as the child-narrator first experienced it, and as a traumatic memory that the speaker is still processing.

In one early poem from her first 2000 collection, Bryce employs a child's narrative voice to contrast an innocent perspective with the realities of the violence and

sectarian tension. “Break” opens with the speaker, seemingly a younger child, having a friendly interaction with a soldier:

> Soldier boy, dark and tall, sat for a rest
> On Crumlish’s wall. Come on over.
>
> Look at my Miraculous Medal.
> Let my punch your bulletproof vest. Go on, try. (2)

The innocence of their interaction and the simplicity of the language contrasts here with reminders of their differences: the speaker shows her “Miraculous Medal,” indicating that she is a Catholic, while the soldier is wearing a bulletproof vest and later lets her examine the gun on his knee, explaining, “Here’s the catch and here’s the trigger” (2). The cadence of the soldier’s words calls to mind that old children’s game, “here is the church and here is the steeple,” further emphasizing the disconnect between the child’s neutral perception of the soldier and the violence of which his presence is a reminder. Despite their friendly interactions, however, their differences in society are exposed at the conclusion of the poem when a woman refuses to take the soldier’s money for cigarettes and the soldier goes on the defensive, while the speaker watches the interaction: “I watched you backtrack, alter, cover/your range of vision, shoulder to shoulder. (2) Throughout this poem, the speaker’s voice remains neutral, recording their interaction and what she sees, but not communicating any understanding as to why the solider has a gun, why the woman throws his money back in his face, why he retreats defensively. In this poem, the child’s experience is not traumatic to her in that moment, but if we interpret this perspective as the speaker looking back on childhood memories with adult insight, or read the poem with a contextual knowledge of the time, these small interactions become more significant.

In “The Harm,” a later poem, from her 2008 collection *Self Portrait in the Dark*, Bryce returns to a child’s perspective. In this poem, she also writes in second-person, as if speaking to her childhood self or writing “you” in a way to include the reader and invite them to take on this perspective. “The Harm” is a tightly-structured sestina form, where six words are repeated in each stanza before all appearing in the final three-line stanza. Each stanza is linked, as the word that appears at the end of each stanza is the word that must conclude the first line of the following stanza. The element of repetition in this form translates to the repetitions that arise in relation to traumatic memories. Despite the strictures of the form, the repetition of these 6 words (stop, sure, harm, print, ticking, corner) is softened by Bryce’s skillful wordplay. For example, “ticking” like a clock in one stanza becomes “a good ticking/off” in the following stanza (50). With these transformations in meaning, Bryce demonstrates a way to move beyond the potentially entrapping repetition. Significantly, although the trauma of the Troubles is present in this poem, it is not the source of the speaker’s traumatic experience. Her encounter with death in this poem comes secondhand, as she witnesses the suffering of a bereaved mother. By bearing witness, the speaker experiences loss and trauma from a different perspective than her earlier childhood imagination allows.

The poem opens with the narrator speaking in the second person, bringing the reader into the mind of a young child who is walking to school. In the first stanza, the reader is invited to imagine, along with the child, that there is bomb inside a lamppost, although her attitude seems more curious than fearful:

> On the walk to school you have stopped
> at the one significant lamppost, just to be sure
> (if you’re late where’s the harm?),
> and are tracing the cut of the maker’s name in raised print

> and yes, you are certain it is still ticking,
> softly ticking where it stands on the corner (50

In this stanza, “the harm” refers to a lesser concern, only a scolding from the teacher, but the more menacing harm comes from the threat of violence from a potential bomb that the child imagines. In the following two stanzas, as she continues to stand by the lamppost, the child’s imagination extends to picture the bomb blast itself:

> When it goes off, and you are sure
> it will be soon, this metal panel with its neat square print
> will buckle like the lid of Pandora’s tin and harm
>
> will blow from the mechanical heart, harm
> in a wild cacophony of colour [...] (50)

Now, “the harm” is far more ominous, the explosion of a bomb. Given that she is still standing next to what she imagines to be a bomb, the child’s attitude indicates a combination of dark fascination and apathy towards the violence; for her, this is commonplace, a preoccupation certainly, and a wariness for the harm it could cause, but also seeing some potential in “a wild cacophony of color”. The complexity of her reaction offers another perspective on how one who has grown up during the Troubles might experience and process that backdrop of violence.

However, the poem shifts at this point to portray another kind of “harm.” As the child begins the cross the street, she is nearly hit by a speeding car, and in that moment of heightened adrenaline, her heart becomes the ticking bomb and she encounters a woman who has experienced loss firsthand:

> ‘For God’s sake stay on the pavement out of harm’s
> way!’ the woman who grabs you says. ‘Sure
> haven’t you been told how to cross a road? This corner
> has already seen the death of my daughter. Stop
> and look, and look both ways!’ (50)

The "harm" is now the woman's loss of her daughter, presumably from a random tragedy like a traffic accident at the same street corner, and the child's experience of the woman's grief is compounded by her own terror at a near miss and by her jarring experience with the woman, who "prints//her grip on your thin bare arm, the sour imprint/of alcohol on her too-close breath" (51)

In the final stanza, the idea of a secret bomb on the streetcorner becomes a way for the child to process and try to understand the woman's loss:

> [...] You are sure, as sure as the ticking
> lamppost is a bomb, its timer on, of harm, printed
> forever on the corner where the woman's world has stopped. (51)

This poem captures the experience of a child growing up during the Troubles, knowledgeable enough to expect things like a bomb, not wary enough of the dangers, yet at one level not really understanding the depths of loss, until she is faced with this woman's grief.

Another emergent theme in how Bryce writes about the Troubles is the generative potential that can come out of traumatic experiences of violence, rather than viewing the violence as something that traps the speaker. While the age of the speakers in these poems is less clearly "childlike" than in other poems, the narrator's viewpoint is similarly focused on the imaginative potential that often corresponds with childhood. Two poems from her 2004 collection, *The Full Indian Rope Trick*, "Last Night's Fires" and "Device," are thematically focused on the unrest and violence, but shaped by this imaginative view. "Last Night's Fires" captures the aftermath of some vandalism in the streets, which is not explicitly connected to sectarian unrest by the narrator but is implied by the wider context of the wider themes of the collection. The title, similarly, hints that the fires are a

frequent occurrence, thus the need to specify “last night’s.” The short, two-stanza poem opens with the speaker describing the aftermath:

> The street-lamp by the gutted bus
> soft-ticks, watches us from the stuck
> joint of its neck. There’s windscreen
> shattered on the ground like jewels (20)

Here, the personification of the street-lamp as it “watches us” and the transformation of broken glass into “jewels” transforms this scene into something less ominous and creates a space for creative expression, focusing on the potential that comes after destruction rather than on the violence, or the causes of that violence. In the second stanza, the narrator moves on to describe the world starting up for the morning, moving beyond the violence of the previous night as “Cars start, cough breath, raise/the lights of their eyes. A milk van,/faintly ringing” (20). In this poem, the speaker’s imagination is what allows her to look beyond the violence and focus, instead, on the potential to move towards a fresh start.

“Device” opens with the speaker describing an object—a bomb—without naming it directly. Rather than describing the device as a complete artifact, the speaker visualizes the bomb broken down into its component parts: “Some express themselves like this:/circuit kit; 4 double-A batteries, 1 9-volt,/1 SPDT mini-relay, 1 M-80” (24). Introduced in this way, the bomb is more comprehensible: rather than appearing as a mysterious machine with unknown workings, all of its component parts are known and identifiable. This allows the speaker to consider how this object might be a way for the bomb maker to communicate, or “express themselves.”In the second stanza, the bomb is further transformed from a mode of self-expression into a work of art:

> Dawn or before, the artist’s hour,

> it is placed, delicate as a gift,
> under a car in a street that will flare
> to a gallery in the memory,
> cordoned off and spotlit for eternity. (24)

In this description, the bomb is treated carefully, like a "gift," and the narrator imagines how a bomb blast will forever be enshrined in a "gallery," equating it with a prized painting or sculpture rather the destruction it brings. The speaker's description of "a gallery in the memory" also employs a relatable metaphor to communicate the enduring nature of a traumatic memory, hinting at how these memories remain visually imprinted for the speaker, and can be revisited just like a painting in a museum. This poem raises the problematic question of aestheticizing violence but does not elevate or condone the violence of a car bomb. Rather, the references to art remind that reader that the poem, too, is carefully crafted, and that connections between violence and art about violence that should be interrogated.

Although the relationship between art and violence can be complex, it is also particularly empowering when it comes to expressing trauma. The transformative possibilities of imagination often allow the speaker in a poem to process trauma without describing the specific experience. Psychologists working with children who have suffered traumas often rely on storytelling, with metaphors to create "emotional distance" along with nonverbal creative works like drawing or painting to provide these children with alternate forms of expression (Desmond et al 442). Similarly, the characteristics of poetry, with metaphor and imagery particularly coming to mind, make the poem a useful medium for exploring and processing traumatic experiences.

In her 2014 poem "Helicopters," Bryce offers a meditation on the differences that perception can make. The helicopters in this poem are military, and so they represent the

state surveillance and the police state that governed the lives of so many Catholics living in Northern Ireland. As the speaker observes the helicopters, she declares that "so much depends upon/the way you choose//to look at them" (89). The echo of William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" indicates a similar interest in exploring the significance of imagery, which the speaker elaborates upon as she describes two different ways to look at the helicopters:

> their minor flares confused
> among the stars, there--
>
> almost beautiful.
> Or from way back
>
> over the map
> from where they might resemble
>
> a business of flies
> around the head-wound of an animal. (89)

In the first image, the speaker suggests that the helicopters, symbols of state violence and colonial oppression, could be "almost beautiful" if viewed from below like stars in the sky. However, the second image is more negative, comparing the helicopters to "flies" swarming a "head-wound," imagining how they would appear clustered on a map.

Another poem from the same 2014 collection, "The Analyst's Couch," addresses the ways in which trauma can be experienced secondhand, as for example by witnessing someone else being injured. Here, too, the speaker relies on her imagination to process and express her experience. The title indicates the speaker is in therapy or counseling, calling attention even from the title that the traumatic effects of the Troubles can last beyond the time of the event. From this position, we understand that the speaker is looking back at a memory, resulting in a layered narrative voice of both the past (child)

and the present self. The speaker begins sharing this memory by placing herself at a remove from the traumatic event:

> I was not there when the soldier was shot, so I didn't see him
> carried up the street and manoeuvred
> Through our propped front door.
> *Who took his weight, the women or the soldiers?*
> Blood, seeping in the cushions, dark brown stuff
> Like HP sauce, soaking thoroughly into the foam [...] (88)

The speaker's phrasing of the denial as "I was not there" echoes a court testimony, as if in denying her presence she is also claiming innocence. While this statement could be a simple statement of fact--she was not there, someone else described this event to her--it also evokes dissociation, where a witness to a traumatic event might find themselves unable to process it without creating some distance. This range of meanings creates ambiguity in the poem, leaving the reader unsure of the speaker's status as a reliable witness. The italicized line that first appears in the opening of the stanza represents a different voice, the speaker's internal monologue. At first, she is just wondering about a detail of the event-- who was supporting the injured soldier's weight, something an observer might not be able to tell. However, in the final lines of the poem, the speaker's awareness of what *actually* happened and her imagination blurs together as she pictures the sofa coming alive, again in the italics representing that inner voice:

> [...] *Am I making this up*? Its animalness.
> *Paw-footed, it pads from the room, the soldier lying bleeding on its back.*
> No it doesn't. (88)

She begins by questioning her memory and her perception, asking "Am I making this up?". In reference to what follows-- a description of the sofa walking away-- the answer is clear, but this question could be applied towards her previous description of events as well, In the final line, the speaker reasserts reality, denying the imagination of her

internal monologue, leaving the reader only with the image of "the soldier lying bleeding." However, in these momentary flights of fancy, the speaker can engage with her traumatic memory from a different perspective, and it is that creativity that offers a potential of freedom from that memory.

In Leontia Flynn's work, writing the Troubles most often takes the form of alluding to the aftermath—the ways in which that period has impacted her generation and left lingering effects beyond the official end to violence with the Ceasefire agreement. In each of her four full collections thus far there are at least a few poems about mental health, and many about suicide specifically. This preoccupation with mental health within the context of a Northern Irish upbringing is not a coincidence. In a 2016 article for Mosaic science magazine, "Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies," journalist Lyra McKee builds a compelling exploration of generational trauma in Northern Ireland. She begins by looking at the work of sociologist Mike Tomlinson, who made a startling discovery about suicide rates in the country:

> [D]uring his research, Tomlinson discovered that of all suicides registered in Northern Ireland between 1965 and 2012 (7,271 in total), 45 per cent were recorded from 1998 onwards. It's the oddest of anomalies: if the official statistics can be taken at face value, more people are killing themselves in peacetime than in war. (McKee)

While the majority of these suicides came from the demographic of middle-aged adults who were born in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, McKee is more interested in finding an explanation for the high rate of teenage suicides: "of the 3,709 people who lost their lives to suicide between 1999 and 2014, 676 of them – nearly a fifth – were aged under 25" (McKee). This age demographic, as she points out, would have been born close to or after the ceasefire. Without dismissing the many other potential causes of suicide, McKee

points out that being surrounded by an older generation who has lived through a trauma like the Troubles can still have a significant impact on the younger generation. Northern Ireland, she argues, is nearly unique in the world's recent history of conflicts, given the record-keeping that has been maintained (even accounting for cultural reluctance to accurately report a death as a suicide), enabling studies like Tomlinson's which reveal that the advent of peace does not correlate with an absolute end to traumatic experiences. What McKee's article ultimately makes clear is that the effects of the Troubles persist still in Northern Ireland, experienced differently by different generations, but not erased. Similarly, the theme of suicide and mental health problems that runs throughout Flynn's work brings light to the struggles of her generation for a different perspective on the post-agreement era in Northern Ireland.

One poem from Flynn's first collection *These Days* is a moving elegy to the subject of the poem, who has committed suicide. While there is no specific references to traumas experienced in relation to the Troubles, this poem establishes similar themes of mourning and processing loss that reappear in later poems throughout Flynn's work. In "Granite," the speaker addresses the subject of the poem directly as "you" throughout the poem, painting a more intimate picture of the subject's life. In the first two stanzas, she recalls memories of the friend, and in the final stanza describes his suicide as if she witnessed it:

> where later you sealed your bedroom door
> with a pile of sodden clothes
> you had worn for days; washed the door handle
> seven times (taking care that the washcloth
> touched neither the heel of your hand, nor the wrist)--
> and then counted the pills
> into piles of seven. You were sixteen. (*TD* 34)

By acting as a witness and speaking to her lost friend in such intimately knowing terms, the speaker can express and process her trauma, shaping it into a different kind of elegy that is deeply personal. Unlike a more traditional elegy, which concludes with the speaker expressing some emotional revelation and movement towards peace, this poem concludes with that feeling of loss still fresh, still addressing the friend directly: "You were sixteen." This adaptation of the elegy form also keeps the focus on the subject of the poem, rather than on the speaker.

In her 2008 collection *Drives*, the two poems that most directly reference suicide place the narrators at a remove from the subjects of the poems, in keeping with the collection's theme of travel and achieving a fresh perspective with a greater distance. The first, "Poem for New Year," is a short poem of two four-line stanzas with a writing style that evokes a nature haiku:

> Snow covers London, snow covers Glasgow,
> snow lies along the West Highland line.
> The sap in the trees is frozen
> and it makes no sound. (25)

In the first two lines, the narrator's sweeping vision of snow covering the British Isles from London to Glasgow is cinematic, placing her in the position of a distant, aerial viewer. In contrast, the following two lines, which repeat at the beginning of the next stanza, zoom in to describe the sap in the trees. The "frozen" sap in the winter snow echoes an emotional state of numbness or shock that one might feel upon hearing bad news, as the narrator shares news of a suicide in the final two lines: "Word reaches us: a friend of a friend is dead/by her own fair hand" (25). Again, there is distance here—not a friend, but a "friend of a friend," yet still enough of a connection for the speaker in this poem to feel some impact.

In the other poem in *Drives*, "For the Suicide in the Tate Modern," the speaker has no personal connection to the subject of the poem. The elegy convention of addressing the subject directly transforms the subject into a more symbolic figure, but the speaker attempts to fill in some of that distance by imagining what those final moments could have felt like, creating a push and pull of tension between distance and empathetic closeness throughout the poem. The first stanza opens with the speaker reenacting the event: "They said your phone rang, then you took the steps/over to the handrail on the top level" (49). Here, the speaker makes clear that she was not a witness to the event, reinforcing that distance between herself and the subject of the poem. As the stanza continues, the speaker attempts to move closer to understanding by imagining what the person felt: "[…] as you were stood there, life/lovely to us, to you must have seemed all/the lousy things that sank you to this height" (49). However, in the final two stanzas, the speaker launches into a wider meditation on what comes after death:

> After the vaulting over what comes after?
>
> Yours was the shortest journey through this space,
> through its thick crowds and the indifferent art,
> beyond their reach, further beyond us, *elsewhere*. (49)

Here, she imagines death as a journey and an escape, something that takes the subject of the poem "further beyond us." This poem, then, becomes a way for the speaker to imagine an escape that is elusive to her, no matter how much she may travel.

The most explicit connection between Northern Irish history and mental illness appears in "Holland," a poem from Flynn's 2004 collection *These Days*. In the first stanza, the speaker's cause of distress is unclear, but, speaking in the second person, the opening lines communicate a feeling that things are breaking down: "The rattling noise

from the heater in the daffodil shed/has assumed the rhythm of the production line/where now you continually pack and unpack yourself" (39). This cycle of "pack and unpack" gives the impression of instability, where the speaker lacks a firm sense of self—emphasized by the use of "you" rather than "I," which creates some distance in the narrative voice. In the second stanza, the speaker goes to a doctor who prescribes Oxazypam, a drug used to treat anxiety. The poem concludes with the doctor addressing his patient and her reaction to his words: "then taking your grime-stained urchin's hand, he adds/'If I live in Belfast, I also perhaps feel bad'./Now even your neuroses are unoriginal" (39). The speaker describes herself as an "urchin," emphasizing a childlike state. In his closing remark, the doctor assumes that Belfast, with its troubled history, is the cause of the speaker's distress. In her sardonic reflection that her mental illness is "unoriginal" in the context of being from Belfast, the speaker confirms a link between the city and increased cases of mental illness.

In Flynn's 2011 collection *Profit and Loss*, "The Help Line" suggests similarly that the rising suicide rates are a culturally specific phenomenon:

> At the telephone help-line in our revamped city centre
> we are talking about the suicide report:
> young men are opening veins, they are dropping from branches,
> their girlfriends are swallowing tablets. What can be done,
> we ask, to make life less awful here--and brief? (19)

In the Northern Irish context, "our revamped city centre" is weighted with meaning: Belfast needed substantial rebuilding after decades of destruction and decline from the Troubles, so the reference here to the city being "revamped" carries all of the implications of that recent history. However, although the city has now been improved, life has not gotten better for the people of the city, as the "suicide report" shows. In the

face of this suffering, the speaker feels helpless to “bridge the gulf” and reach the people who are suffering (19). In this context, the final lines of the poem feel more desperate than uplifting: “*Stand up*, we urge*, from the crisis of your lives/And exhale and look out at the new snow in the yard…*” (19).

Public Trauma and Domestic Life

For the post-agreement generation, much of their knowledge of the Troubles was filtered through the reactions of their parents and the older generations. As we saw in Bryce’s poems with child narrators, age changes perspective: while a young child might not be concerned to see soldiers marching down a street, for example, they would still be sensitive to how their parents reacted to those soldiers. In Leontia Flynn’s 2018 collection *The Radio*, the first of the two poems titled “The Radio” is a biography of the speaker’s mother, and also on the traumatic experiences of the Troubles. The narrator experiences this trauma mainly through her mother’s history, but also through childhood memories of the radio, which becomes a central motif in the poem as a vehicle for transmitting news about the sectarian tensions and unrest. In this poem, the narrator both takes on the voice of her younger self and recalls events in the past tense, indicating that she is looking back with her adult perspective. The poem opens with an ominous image: “The radio hoots and mutters, hoots and mutters,/out of the dark, each morning of my childhood” (12). In the final stanza of the opening section of the poem, the first image of the speaker’s mother is a counterpoint to the news on the radio:

> and through its aperture, the outside world
> comes streaming, like a magic lantern show,
> into our bewildered solitude.
> *Unrest*…it hoots now *both sides…sources say…*
> My mother stands, like a sentinel, by the sink. (12)

Here, her "sentinel" stance suggests that the speaker sees her mother as a protective force to keep the uneasy news at bay, but in the next section of the poem, her mother's past experiences of the Troubles is a part of her identity: "sixth child of twelve surviving—'escapee'/from the half-ignited *powder keg* of Belfast" (12). The emphasis on "surviving" and "escapee" highlights the ways in which the effects of the violence have created a dynamic where her mother is always on the defensive, reacting to the events. In the following stanza, the speaker further describes her mother as "small, freaked out, pragmatic, vigilant;/she's high-pitched and steely—like, in human form,/the RKO transmitter tower […]" (12). Here, the simile of her mother as a "transmitter tower" suggests that even unintentionally, her mother absorbs the traumatizing news and transmits it back out again, in her "freaked out" and "vigilant" composure, something that her children can pick up on even if they do not understand the cause.

As the poem continues, the speaker imagines her mother as if in a battle against the tide of the news, "as she tries to resist the harrowing radio,/its *Diplock*…and *burned out*… and *Disappeared*" (13). The listing of "Diplock" alongside "burned out" and "Disappeared" incorporates some of the different causes of trauma from the Troubles—from state violence, represented by the mention of Diplock courts that legalized trials without jury in Northern Ireland,[3] to the violence perpetrated by citizens or paramilitary organizations, burning people out of their homes or kidnapping people off the streets for torture or murder. Although the family lives out in the country, away from the city, they are not safe from the worries brought on by the Troubles:

> But when the night has rolled round again,
> my mother will lie unsleeping in her bed.

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[3] See for example Carlton, Charles. "Judging without Consensus - The Diplock Courts in Northern Ireland." Law & Policy Quarterly, vol. 3, no. 2, April 1981, p. 225-242.

> She'll lie unsleeping in that bungalow bed
> and if a car slows on the bend behind the house,
> she's up, alert—fearing the worst, which is:
> that a child of hers might die. Or lose an eye.
> Or a child *anywhere* die or lose an eye.
> That the car which slows down on the bend behind the house
> —*Midnigh*t ..,. she thinks now… *random… father of five*—
> is the agent of vile sectarian attack. (14-15)

The repetition of phrases in this stanza, and throughout this poem, imitates the mother's anxiety-driven repetitive, intrusive thoughts and worries that leave her awake and on high alert as she imagines what could happen. Although the narrator understands the traumas that her mother experienced as she looks back at this time, at the conclusion of the poem, she returns to her own perspective as a child: even after hearing "how two young men/were *taken from their car beside the road*…" (17), the final lines of the poem conclude: "and because I was just a child and understood/nothing at all, I simply fell asleep" (17).

In her poetry, Colette Bryce most often addresses this idea of intergenerational trauma from the point of view of a child narrator. In many of Bryce's poems, the trauma of the Troubles seeps into the domestic life of the often-young narrators, highlighting the ways that the tensions and violence were not just contained to the streets outside, but affected every aspect of daily life for many living through the conflict in Northern Ireland. Lucy Collins suggests, "For Bryce, to confront what is concealed in a close-knit family structure is to acknowledge that estrangement is felt most acutely in a context of shared experiences. This combined sense of intimacy and distance is an important dimension of traumatic representation in all these works" (Collins 100). In exposing the domestic space, Bryce shows how the intergenerational trauma contributes to the traumatic experience of growing up during the Troubles. As the relationship grows closer

between experiences of the Troubles and the more intimate family experiences described by speakers in various poems, these works break down the constructed binary of public and private.

At times, the Troubles enters the domestic space through physical artifacts. In "The Republicans," the narrator describes two triptypchs hanging on the wall: one showing three images of Jesus, while the other "depicts a map, a gun and a dove. *Ireland unfree shall never be at peace*//spelled out by sons in prison workshops" (95). Another poem, "Don't speak to the Brits, just pretend they don't exist" opens with the lines, "Two rubber bullets stand on the shelf,/from Bloody Sunday—mounted in silver,//space rockets docked and ready to go off" (96). In both images, violence is explicit—guns, bullets "ready to go off", prison workshops—and enshrined, with these symbols of violence being placed alongside religious iconography or set in silver.

In many poems, the speaker's position of a child places her in a position to observe the ways in which adults, especially her parents, have been affected by outside conflicts and trauma. An earlier poem "Satellite" opens with tension between the speaker's parents, her mother shouting at her father, "*For all we see of you these days,/you might be living in outer space!*" (21). While the Troubles are not referenced directly in this poem, the family's economic situation is clearly under pressure, as the speaker's father has been working late nights in a pub. While the children count the coins that their father has brought home, the argument continues: "*there's nothing left/in this doom town for us;*/my mother stood her ground" (21). Her mother's description of their home as a "doom town" makes her despair clear. In the final stanza, the speaker redirects her attention to the coins she is sorting, rather than focusing on her parent's argument.

However, even this task is a reminder of the divides in Northern Ireland as she sorts coins from Ireland from the British coinage used in the North: "Part of the task was to separate/the rogue harps and leaping fish/from the Queen's heads, the odd button" (21). While from the child's perspective this is perhaps unremarkable, it illustrates the ways in which the sectarian conflict filtered into everyday aspects of her life.

In other poems, the connection between domestic tension and the traumas of the Troubles is more explicit. "Positions Prior to the Arrival of the Military," a later poem from *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, places the family traumas in the context of the military raids that were not an uncommon experience for Catholic families living in Northern Ireland. Bryce, reflecting on how she experienced these raids as a child, comments in a 2015 interview with Susan Haigh, "Well, as much as I can remember, it was also quite exciting to be raided. I was very young at the time so I didn't really understand what was going on" (Haigh). In this poem, the speaker's experience reflects some of a child's lack of understanding that Bryce recalls.

The domestic conflicts that appear in "Positions Prior to the Arrival of the Military" are all filtered through the speaker's perception and become slightly surreal as a result, allowing her to process and express these experiences without describing them directly. The poem opens with a fight between her parents, described like a televised boxing match:

> Mother (out for the count) has been carried
> From the ring. Ding ding! we have a victor,
>
> Father, who has vanished in a puff of smoke
> From his pipe, to return in the small hours. (97)

The line break in the second stanza suggests that the speaker's father has "vanished in a puff of smoke" like a magician or demon, rather than the mundane reason—smoke from his pipe—that follows in the next line. The trauma of witnessing her father's abuse is further placed in contrast with the speaker's idea of how family should be when later in the poem she describes the shows "the screen in the corner//has much to offer: heart-warming stories,/Little House on the Prairie" (97). However, these "heart-warming stories" are not relatable to the speaker, and so she must create her own imagery to describe what she is witnessing.

In response to this domestic violence, the speaker's descriptions of how her siblings react grow surreal: "Sister has stepped from her sleeping body/and floats about unnoticed amongst us" (97) while her brother "sleeps on the ceiling//lately" (97) in response to his bed-wetting. Finally, the narrator, shifting to second-person, describes another child's response:

> You're climbing the banisters, monkeying up
> Through the house without the aid of stairs--
>
> A test, if passed successfully,
> That will save the world from nuclear meltdown. (97)

The enormity of this domestic dispute, for the children, translates to a "nuclear meltdown"-level catastrophe, something so out of their control that the child can only resort to a superstition, hoping to stop bad things from happening by not touching the stairs. In the final two lines of the poem, the military arrives: "Rat-a-tat-tat at the door and the dog/is going berserk. All hesitate" (97). The interruption of the knock throws everything into uncertainty, and the final line, a fragment with no final punctuation,

further emphasizes the pause between the knock and opening the door, where everything is unknown.

"Derry," one of the longer poems from *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, moves between the speaker's personal experiences and wider view of society, like a camera zooming out, and this experience of living in a time of sectarian conflict becomes a central theme. The poem opens with a clear evocation of Louis MacNeice's 1938 poem "Carrickfergus." MacNeice's poem begins, "I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries/To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams" (MacNeice). Bryce's poem begins similarly, but rather than evoking nostalgia, her opening stanza emphasizes how the Troubles have become embedded in the landscape and in the speaker's consciousness:

> I was born between the Creggan and the Bogside
> to the sounds of crowds and smashing glass
> by the River Foyle with its suicides and rip tides.
> I thought that city was nothing less
>
> than the whole and rain-domed universe.
> A teacher's daughter, I was one of nine
> faces afloat in the looking-glass
> fixed in the hall, but which was mine? (78)

The "crowds" and "smashing glass" exist in the speaker's memory as sounds, both recognizable and, with the reference to smashing glass, signs of violence. Her naming of Creggan and Bogside, two predominantly Catholic neighborhoods on the edge of the city, highlights a hyperawareness of place particularly as it relates to identity; the speaker does not need to mention being Catholic because the placename stands in as an indicator. The river Foyle, the other geographical feature specifically named, holds only menace, reminding the speaker of death, whether from "suicides" or "rip tides," and it is this

vision of the city: sectarian, threatening, that becomes the speaker's whole world as a child. In the second stanza, the speaker places her developing awareness of self alongside her growing awareness of the city around her, but her sense of identity is uncertain as she still struggles to distinguish herself from her siblings.

As the poem continues the speaker describes her developing awareness of the sectarian divide and the conflicts raised by the Troubles, declaring that "The adult world had tumbled into hell//from where it wouldn't find its way/for thirty years" (78). In a later stanza, she describes her experience of an army checkpoint:

> We'd cross the border in our red Cortina
>   stopped at the checkpoint just too long
> for fractious children, searched by a teenager
>   drowned in a uniform, cumbered with a gun
>
> Who seemed to think we were trouble-on-the-run
>   and not the Von Trapp family singers
> harmonizing every song
>   in rounds to pass the journey quicker (79)

In relating this experience, the speaker compares her life with the Von Trapp family. The image of the Von Trapp family singing, carefree and happy, acts initially as a contrast to the speaker's "fractious" family being searched by a soldier. However, since the Von Trapps were persecuted by the Nazis and not always so carefree, this reference also draws a parallel between the experiences of the two families.

The speaker's awareness of the Troubles expands in the second half of the poem as she establishes a wider context: "The year was nineteen eighty-one,/the reign of Thatcher" (80). Now the speaker acts as a witness to the wider experience of Derry in 1981, "where talk was all of hunger strikers//in the Maze, our jail within a jail" (80). Her personal memory of going to school is bracketed by memories of how "riots blazed in the

city centre" and how, returning home, the children would see "Shena Burns our scapegoat drunk/swayed in her chains like a dancing bear" (80). However, upon returning to her home, the domestic space does not offer much reassurance:

> On the couch, we cheered as an Irish man
> bid for the Worldwide Featherweight title
> and I saw blue bruises on my mother's arms
> when her sleeve fell back while filling the kettle
>
> for tea. My bed against the door,
> I pushed the music up as loud
> as it would go and curled up on the floor
> to shut the angry voices out. (80)

Here, the narrator's traumatic memories of her father's abuse of her mother and the conflict between her parents becomes inseparable from the traumas of the Troubles. These two stanzas show that for the narrator, no space seems wholly safe or immune from the outside world.

In the following stanzas, the speaker moves back to describing her experiences of the wider social atmosphere, recounting attending a protest outside the barracks and commenting on the widespread poverty and economic depression: "While half the town/were queuing at the broo, the fortunate others//bent to the task of typing out the cheques" (81). The violence of the Troubles reappears here as well, in an experience shared between the speaker and the public:

> *Boom!* We'd jump at another explosion,
> windows buckling in their frames, and next
> you could view the smouldering omission
>
> in a row of shops, the missing tooth
> in a street. Gerry Adams' mouth
> was out of sync in the goldfish bowl
> of the TV screen, our dubious link
>
> with the world […] (81)

The explosion, although startling in the moment, is also just “another explosion,” emphasizing the frequency of this kind of event. The bombing leaves behind an “omission” in the physical cityscape, but the feeling of something being missing is echoed in the following lines, where “Gerry Adam’s mouth/was out of sync.” This refers to the government-imposed ban on broadcasting any representatives of the IRA, instituted by Prime Minister Thatcher in 1988, which led to Adam’s words being dubbed over by an actor reading a transcription (Welch). Here, Adams’ missing voice acts as a reminder of the repressive state apparatus, which further leaves the speaker feeling alienated and disconnected.

At the conclusion of the poem, the speaker describes a government grant that allowed children from Northern Ireland to visit America, and the final stanza closes with a description of her own trip: “I watched that place grow small before/the plane ascended through the cloud/and I could not see it clearly any more” (81). Until this point, the city and its conflict has been central to the speaker’s life, forming her whole “universe,” and in these final lines the city is not just literally growing small; the speaker is also realizing that the world is larger than the confines of Derry. This escape, at the conclusion of the poem, offers, finally, some resolution to the speaker, something that she could not find without gaining that external perspective.

Escapes and Returns

The plane trip that concludes Bryce’s poem “Derry” represents both an escape from the place and from its associated weight of history. This theme of escape is central in other poems by Bryce, often through a narrator who has left Northern Ireland and is now returning to visit. Some of this impetus to leave comes from pragmatic reasons: in an

interview with Alex Pryce, Bryce explains, "I was brought up to leave and so it was inevitable. Derry was so economically depressed and my mother drummed it into us that education was our passport out" (Pryce). For other post-agreement poets, even those who returned to Northern Ireland to live, travel is also a central theme, along with taking an outsider's perspective on that former homeland: one that is familiar, but distanced enough to look critically at the social structures the speaker has left behind.

The theme of emigration-and-return, or exile-and-return, is a familiar trope in Irish literature. Exile has become an intrinsic part of the Irish experience after centuries of forced emigration, whether through criminalization under the British state or due to causes like the Great Famine or economic depression—causes that are all rooted in British imperial oppression of Ireland. "Fields of Athenry" or "Spancil Hill," both traditional Irish ballads that fondly recall the Irish fields and family that have been left behind by the singer, who was forced to leave his homeland. Often, more modern narratives about departure from Ireland are filled with nostalgia, or laden with angst and shame—or some combination of all the above. For example, Derek Mahon's 1975 poem "Afterlives" portrays a speaker who travels from London to Belfast and finds "a city so changed/By five years of war" that he feels almost completely alienated from both the physical space of the city and from the people who live there (Mahon). At the conclusion of the poem, the speaker blames himself:

> Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
> And lived it bomb by bomb
> I might have grown up at last
> And learnt what is meant by home. (Mahon)

In these final lines, his bitter self-condemnation precludes any attempts to understand the changes that he encounters. Instead, the speaker sets himself apart, unable to see the

"home" he remembers because he has not changed along with it. In this poem, self-identity and place have a firm link that, when severed by exile, cannot be repaired—thus leaving the speaker feeling permanently alienated from his former home.

In another take on the theme of Irish emigration, Ciaran Carson's 1987 poem "The Exile's Club" explores the limits of nostalgia within the context of the violence of the Troubles. In an Australian bar, the "exiles" surround themselves with reminders of home: "Red Heart Stout, Park Drive cigarettes and Dunville's whiskey,/slightly-mouldy batch of soda farls" (Carson 107). In this gathering, the exiles try to recall the details of Belfast street names and buildings. The exiles' actions seem to be motivated by a belief that place is an important part of their sense of identity, and so to maintain that identity, they must reconstruct their city as they remember it. However, their recall is challenged by the constant news coming out of the city: "They just about keep up with the news of bombings and demolition, and are/struggling with the finer details" (107). Ultimately, the exiles' obsession with the "finer details" of the past is a futile endeavor that clarifies their inability to let go of the past. Like the narrator of Mahon's "Afterlives," these exiles are trapped by the constructs of their own making.

For the speakers in post-agreement emigrant poems, however, leaving is more often something welcome, rather than a source of guilt or internal conflict. Leaving Northern Ireland provides these speakers with both distance and perspective, allowing them to look more critically at how their upbringing has influenced them, while also celebrating the ways in which they have grown beyond it. Sinéad Morrissey's 2002 poem "In Belfast," from her earliest published collection, offers a revision of Mahon's "Afterlives," with a few key differences. Like his poem, "In Belfast" has two sections

and a similar verse structure, but here, the speaker begins in Belfast, rather than in London. Her descriptions of Belfast portray the city as a whole ecosystem where "The inhaling shop-fronts exhale the length/and breadth of Royal Avenue, pause,/inhale again. The city is making money" (3). While Mahon's narrator is troubled by his feeling of alienation, Morrissey's concludes the final stanza with a different tone:

> The city weaves itself so intimately
> it is hard to see, despite the tenacity of the river
> and the iron sky; and in its downpour and its vapour I am
> as much at home here as I will ever be.

Although she does not claim to belong, the speaker here has found some degree of feeling "at home" and has been able to not just look out upon, but also to understand the city.

The importance of time spent away from home is a common theme for all of these post-agreement poets. The speaker in Morrissey's poem has "returned after ten years" (3), which has provided her with that necessary perspective to renegotiate a sense of belonging. Heidemann argues that for many post-agreement poets, a sense of home is intrinsically tied to "journeys away from home," creating a more liminal space (Heidemann 143). Leontia Flynn's work, from her earliest collection to her most recent full collection in 2018, constantly evokes airports, flights, and travel. In "The Furthest Distances I've Travelled" from *These Days*, her first collection, the speaker says, "I thought: Yes. This is how/to live. On the beaten track, the sherpa pass, between Krakow/and Zagreb, or the Siberian white/cells of scattered airports" (47). Flynn's second collection *Drives* exemplifies this theme of travel, with many poems titled with city names—Belfast, Monaco, Barcelona, Rome, Paris, Berlin, LA, Washington. In most of these poems, the speakers are tourists, or, as in the poem "Paris," "skilled voyeurs/of

the ancient capital's artistic feast" (20), rarely claiming a sense of identification or belonging in any one place.

"Belfast" opens with a portrayal of the post-agreement cityscape, emphasizing growth without referencing the past Troubles—although this recent past lurks in the subtext. The speaker still remembers how things were before, acknowledging the layers of the city in the opening lines, where "The sky is a washed-out theatre backcloth/behind new façades on old baths and gasworks" (2). Her attitude towards the "new façades" becomes more sardonic in the following stanzas:

> Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction.
> What was mixed grills and whiskeys (cultureless, graceless, leisureless)
> is now concerts and walking tours (Friendly! Dynamic! Various!).
> A tourist pamphlet contains an artists' impression
>
> of arcades, mock-colonnades, church-spires and tapas bars;
> are these *harsh attempts at buyable beauty*?
> There are 27 McDonalds, you tell me, in Northern Ireland
> (but what are we supposed to *do* with this information?) (2)

The speaker's positioning within this city space is intimate enough to be familiar with the intricacies of the city, but also maintains enough distance to be skeptical of the touristy descriptions of the city as "Friendly! Dynamic! Various!". The speaker rejects the focus on economic growth and development, with success measured in the number of McDonalds restaurants, pointing out how ultimately such advances feel meaningless: "what are we supposed to *do* with this information?" In the larger context of Flynn's work, with so many other poems returning to address mental illness and economic insecurity, the performative façade of a "new" Belfast seems ultimately empty and does not leave the speaker feeling at home.

In "Leaving Belfast," the speaker addresses someone who is leaving the city, and again examines the city in all of its complex layers, seeing both "every torn-up billboard and sick-eating pigeon/and execrable litter-blown street" and "some scrap of hope in the young, in the good looks of women,/in the leafiness of the smart zones" (8). In the second stanza, the speaker considers what will happen after the person leaves:

> There are good times and bad times, yes, but now you are
> burning your bridges, and you are leaving Belfast
> to its own devices: it will rise or fall,
> it will bury its past, it will paper over the cracks
> with car parks and luxury flats, it will make itself new— or perhaps
> become the place it seemed before you lived here. (8)

The speaker imagines the city here as in a constant state of change, independent of the people who live there— it is the city that will "rise or fall" or "bury its past," once the person has left the city behind. The act of leaving has created a liminal space of possibilities where anything can happen in the city, but those who leave will not be there to see it, so it is a purely imaginative space. In the final line of the poem, the speaker suggests that after leaving the city, the person who has left might regain a different perspective and see the city as it "seemed" to be—once again regaining the ability to imagine and project onto a place without being faced by the realities of everyday life in that place.

Although most of the other poems in *Drives* focus on the experience of travel or place the narrators in the role of a tourist without referencing back to a "home," the city poem "Berlin" draws a connection back to Belfast in the final lines:

> […] Here where the past
> recent and awful, brick and bullet-hole
> stands on street corners—here, the Berlin Wall
> reminds you, you say, of peace walls in Belfast. (21)

The comparison between the two walls and the two segregated societies feels almost inevitable, and the speaker frames this as something said by someone else, addressed in the poem as “you,” which makes it more of an interjection that interrupts her own narrative earlier in the poem where the city evokes “hotspots of the West/where deadbeats boozed and binged—and Bowie *et al*/recorded music so close to the East” (21). In this poem, the speaker cannot remain a tourist immersed in a different culture without being reminded of that legacy of Belfast, emphasizing the incompleteness of the escape to a different place.

In other poems, Flynn focuses solely on the liminal space of travel where the speakers in these poems often find a greater sense of belonging than they do in any particular place. Her poem “Airports,” also from *Drives*, opens with the line “airports are their own peculiar weather” and builds a description of a place where time slows or moves differently in “each sealed lounge” (35). In the atmosphere of the airport the speaker knows how to navigate, knows the rules: “We have packed our bags ourselves, no one has tampered with them” (35). At the end of the poem, the speaker concludes, “And when we return, the airports remain in us./We rock, dry-eyed, and we are not at home” (35). This final declaration that “we are not at home” inverts the typical narrative of traveling to get to a destination; instead, the travel itself is the goal, the place where the speaker feels the most comfortable. Similarly, Flynn’s 2018 poem “Flights” emphasizes the freedom of being in-between:

> *Excess and melodrama. Constant flight.*
> If I could have lived continually
> between the take-off—from the tarmacked strip
> still hyper-accelerated but at bay,
> an em-dash set evasively in place,
> between one *ad hoc* quarter and the next—

> then maybe everything would have turned out alright,
> before our bumpy landings, cramped and sour (38)

In this description of a plan taking off, the speaker equates the moment of takeoff with the "em-dash" punctuation, which generally indicates a pause or an interruption, but here becomes extended into a longer moment, the moment "between" where everything is "alright" before the moment ends and the airplane passengers return to earth. Here, the freeing possibilities of constant motion only seem accessible in this liminal time of travel, much like the freedom created by the liminal space of the airport.

In "Boxes," another poem from *Drives*, the speaker is again in the liminal space of an airport, but this time she is positioned at a border, standing in lines at customs, preparing to leave the airport space. Here, the "boxes" of the title refers both to the boxes on the travel form and the "boxes" of categories that confine and define. The narrator in this poem speaks in the second-person, as if addressing a universal traveler while also describing her more particular experience:

> A grey-clad official at a customs desk
> --by the outbound flights, or in some border town--
> bends on your passport like a feeding bird
> On the worm of your struggling... indigestible name. (22)

The speaker is centered in this liminal space of travel, in between destinations, or in "some border town" but despite this escape she is marked by her name, and in the following stanzas, increasingly invasive customs questions, which she describes hyperbolically as "boxes to tick for your name, age, destination,/fields to be filled for your income! The length of your instep!" (22) Her flippant resistance to being put into "boxes" finally culminates in a rejection of gender categories and national identity in the

final lines of the poem: "You write 'Yes Please' for sex?; and 'Northern Irish'--'N. I.'/Which also, privately, stands for 'N[ot] I[nterested]...'" (22).

In her study of contemporary Irish women poets, Lucy Collins suggests that Bryce's work, much like Flynn's, is often driven by the push and pull between the ideas of home and away:

> Many of her early poems, from 'Day' to 'Cabo de São Vincente' depict a movement through landscapes and across national borders. Uncertainty attends this dynamic, though; while the energies of these poems suggest the freedom of self-invention, there is a subtle sense of entrapment in the apparent necessity of return. (Collins 82)

The liminal space of being-in-transit creates a potential for these speakers in these poems to not only invent themselves, but to re-invent the meaning of "home" as well. However, as a close reading of some of Bryce's later poems will demonstrate, returning to Northern Ireland does not always imply entrapment; rather, the speakers are able to engage differently with that place because of their time away. At the conclusion of her interview with Alex Pryce, returning to the theme of emigration, Bryce comments,

> Maybe leaving Derry is some kind of trauma I'm doomed to replay! But, seriously too, emigration has been a central experience, a continuous experience in my life. Because of that, I didn't become a poet in the Northern Irish context, and I didn't set my bearings within it. I think there is also the sense that it's hard to transgress within such tight communities, so I imagine it may have been harder for me to write honestly. (Pryce)

Although there is likely some truth in her initial quip, Bryce's response to the interviewer's question: "Could you ever imagine life if you hadn't left Derry?" emphasizes far more strongly the necessity of leaving her community in order to grow and develop as a writer. Her poems might "replay" the challenges of leaving home, but ultimately the speakers in these poems, like Bryce herself, have found fulfillment in their escape.

In “The Full Indian Rope Trick,” the titular poem of Bryce’s 2004 collection, the speaker describes her departure from Derry as if it is a magic trick:

> Guildhall Square, noon,
> in front of everyone.
> There were walls, bells, passers-by;
> a rope, thrown, caught by the sky
> and me, young, up and away,
> goodbye. (Bryce 28)

The speaker’s reference to Guildhall Square, a landmark in the city of Derry, identifies her as belonging to that place, but in the same stanza, she climbs up a rope and vanishes, rejecting her association with the city. This departure is not a sudden decision: in the following stanza, the speaker describes the rope itself as “a braid/eighteen summers long,” and in the final stanza of the poem she says, “It was painful; it took years./I’m my own witness” (29). Her choice to leave is not sudden or easy, but ultimately, the speaker is empowered by her action.

Emigration in Bryce’s poems is often framed as an answer to the feeling of being trapped—whether in a place, by fear of violence or traumatic memories of the Troubles, or by social conventions and restrictions. Bryce’s 2008 poem “When I Land in Northern Ireland” follows immediately after the short poem “A Spider.” Reading these two poems as a pair offers further insight into how Bryce views departure and return as empowering. In the first poem, “A Spider,” the speaker is fascinated by a spider that she has trapped in a glass:

> I meant to let him go
> but he still taps against the glass
> all Marcel Marceau
> in *the wall that is there but not there*,
> a circumstance I know. (48)

In these final lines, the speaker does not clarify or explain her empathy with the spider's predicament of being trapped by something he cannot full conceptualize, leaving the interpretation open as to what has created a "wall" to trap her. Ultimately this allows for a more universal statement about feeling trapped—but in the context of the following poem, the connection to the experience of growing up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles is also clear.

The following poem, "When I Land in Northern Ireland" opens with a speaker who has already left Northern Ireland, so the focus is on her attitude upon returning. The poem opens, "When I land in Northern Ireland I long for cigarettes" (49), replacing any nostalgic response to "home" with a desire for cigarettes. Rather than describing the beauty of Northern Ireland, the speaker fantasizes about a rush of nicotine. The place is still strongly present on her mind, however, as the first stanza ends with a repeated phrase: "Stratus shadows darkening the crops/when coming in to land, coming in to land" (49). Here, "land" gains a deeper significance through this repetition, while the structure of the final lines of the stanza adds heaviness as the speaker is pulled down to earth.

In the second stanza, the speaker enters a bar, which transports her back to memories of place and the culture she had left behind:

> What's your poison?
> A question in a bar
> draws me down through a tunnel of years
> to a time preserved in a cube of fumes, the seventies-yellowing
> walls of remembrance; everyone smokes and talks about the land,
> the talk about the land, our spoiled inheritance (49)

The phrase "what's your poison?", a common way to playfully refer to alcohol and not out of place in a bar, also gestures back to the nicotine that the speaker craves in the previous stanza, emphasizing the addictive nature of both substances, and the potential

for abuse or damage to the body. The "poison" takes on another significance as the stanza continues, as the speaker is reminded of "our spoiled inheritance." Here, her reaction to the history of the land is the opposite of nostalgia, viewing the past as poisoned and spoiled. Similarly, the "walls of remembrance" hold their memories of the past through the unpleasant image of layers of yellowed paper stained by smoke and age. In her analysis of this poem, Heidemann argues that the speaker feels anxiety upon landing because she does not want to feel alienated (Heidemann 160). However, it seems clear here that the speaker is not searching for a place to belong, as Heidemann suggests, but rather, that her position as an outside allows her to look more critically at the past without falling into nostalgia.

Another poem from the same 2008 collection, "Car Wash," also illustrates the ways in which a speaker returning from "exile" responds to old feelings of being trapped by social expectations. In the opening of the poem, the speaker associates an idea of "home" with familial ties: "This business of driving/reminds us of our fathers" (54). However, her reaction to the reminder is neutral at best, merely observing that the experience of driving a car "has brought them,/ever-absent, nearer" (54). At the beginning of the poem, the speaker and her companion are positioned as passive participants in this process, as "this business of driving" becomes the active object which "has brought us, two/women in our thirties,/to this strange pass,/a car wash in Belfast" (54). As the poem continues, however, the speaker and her companion reclaim their agency:

> And when spinning blue brushes
> of implausible dimensions
> are approaching the vehicle
> from all directions,

> what can we do
> but engage in a kiss
> in a world where to do so
> can still stop the traffic. (55)

The “spinning blue brushes” of the car wash, approaching the car “from all directions,” echo the sometimes disorienting demands of societal expectations, but they also hide the women, who take advantage of the moment to assert their difference, revealing that they are not just companions, but lovers. Their kiss is a small moment, but deeply significant, marking the speaker’s joyous affirmation of her difference, in contrast to the chaotic motion of the car wash outside the car. Although they express the truth of their relationship with this act of kissing, the two women are still also constrained by the social space, only feeling comfortable while hidden from view and aware that only in this private space can they kiss without drawing unwanted attention or “stop the traffic.”

In the final stanza, as they prepare to leave the car wash, the speaker and her lover are again reminded of the weight of inheritance:

> we are polished and finished
> and (following instructions)
> start the ignition (which
> reminds us of our fathers)
> and get into gear
> and we’re off
> at the green light. (55)

“Following instructions” reminds them again of their fathers, highlighting the connection between family and obligation. However, despite this reminder, the two women have a sense of completeness: like their car, they are “polished and finished,” having been able to complete their personal growth after leaving home. And so, despite this reminder of “instructions”, they are able to depart and declare “we’re off,” in control of their driving

and their destination. In an interview with Adam Wyeth, Bryce comments that a feeling of "outsiderness" in her work originates from a range of experiences:

> the emigrant experience and also being gay in a predominantly heterosexual cultural context. From working for a long time in a solitary discipline. Of being categorised a British writer in one place, an Irish writer somewhere else, sometimes neither, and you're simply not there. (Wyeth)

A poem like "Car Wash" combines some of these experiences, with queer women in a relationship returning to their more conservative home country and feeling out of place. However, the subjects in this poem can process and move past this discomfort by gaining distance from those problematic categories.

Conclusions

In the post-Agreement poetry discussed in this chapter, the experiences of the Troubles are combined with different coming-of-age narratives, where the speakers often distance themselves—both physically and temporally—from childhood experiences of the Troubles in order to examine and process trauma. Reading poets from a younger generation adds more breadth and depth to how we understand post-trauma in relation to the Troubles. In the same way, reading Bryce and Flynn through a lens of trauma theory that emphasizes the potential for atypical narratives introduces another layer of interpretation to their poetry. Northern Irish poetry does not need to be "Troubles poetry," with specific themes or characteristics, in order for a poet to still develop generative modes of expression to reckon with the history of the Troubles and process their experiences.

CONCLUSION

Belfast, January 2008

On my first full day in the city, after we three American exchange students had found our way from the chilly flat on Nansen Street to St. Mary's College, a few of the Belgian and German exchange students took us for a walk up the Falls, towards the city centre.

Past the Royal Victoria hospital with its wavy blue fence, past the small park with the empty brownstone fountain, past the Bobby Sands mural that we didn't understand (not yet), and then a tall block of a building dominated the skyline, looming over the spires of St. Peter’s.

"That's Divis Tower," one of the Germans commented. "Sean told us that's where the snipers used to sit, up at the top of the tower, for anyone entering the Falls Road." No one had anything to say to that, and we kept walking in silence.

I wondered if anyone else felt like we had crossed an invisible dividing line as we walked through the shadow of the tower and left it behind. I wondered what side he was talking about. For the next four months, every time I walked that familiar route, I found myself looking up, and wondered what it was like, twenty years ago, to see that tower on the horizon.

“Whatever You Say, Say Nothing”

In February of 2019, Northern Ireland reentered the forefront of American awareness with the publication of Patrick Radden Keefe’s intensively researched *Say Nothing*, a nonfiction investigation of some of the closest-kept open secrets from the height of the Troubles that quickly became a bestseller. The title is a reference to one of

Seamus Heaney's most well-known poems about the Troubles, "Whatever you say, say nothing" in which the speaker describes "the famous//Northern reticence, the tight gag of place" (Heaney 132). As in the poem, the atmosphere that Keefe builds up in his book reflects a society defined by secrets and fears about revealing too much of one's identity to the wrong person—and although the author writes about the present as well as past events, it is clear that for so many, the Troubles have not been forgotten and still affect their daily lives.

In the book, Keefe weaves together multiple narratives, alternating between a detailed account of different actors and operations within the IRA and the British military, the background and story of Jean McConville, who was kidnapped by the IRA in 1972, and her children's search for answers in the current day. Radden Keefe's arrangement of the material, drawn from personal interviews, recordings, and historical media reports, creates a pattern in the narrative where there is no victory: the chapter describing the triumphant end of the Price sisters' hunger strike, when they win their appeal to be sent from a prison in England to the women's prison in Armagh, ends with a mention that their mother had passed away four months before their transfer. The next chapter picks up the thread of Jean McConville's story, opening with "For weeks after their mother disappeared, the McConville children clung together, trying to hold on to the family home" (Keefe 191-192). As the story unfolds and we realize that the Price sisters may have been involved in Jean McConville's disappearance, Keefe's deliberate unravelling of the different threads of the cold case reveals the extent to which these stories are entangled. In his note on sources, Keefe comments on the reluctance of many to be interviewed and writes, "It may seem strange that events from nearly half a century

ago could still provoke such fear and anguish, but as I hope this book makes clear, in Belfast history is alive and dangerous" (417).

In his review of *Say Nothing*, American poet Philip Metres reflects a similar sentiment, writing, "The first time I heard this story, I felt it was instantly a haunting emblem of how the Troubles hadn't quite ended. How the past, as Faulkner once wrote, is not dead, nor is it ever really past" (Metres). His reading of *Say Nothing* focuses, like many discussions of the Troubles and post-Troubles era in Northern Ireland, on the idea that violence and trauma may be persistent and inescapable. As Metres traces the culture of silence in Northern Ireland from the colonial oppression of the Irish Catholic minority to the more recent silences that arose in fear of sectarian violence, he is also implicitly suggesting a sort of inevitability in how the history has played out. And indeed, it does sometimes seem that Keefe is inviting this kind of reading, particularly in the way that he traces the progression of events. Discussing the compelling narrative style of the book, Metres further notes, "occasionally one gets lulled into the romance of the murder and mystery, and forgets the wounds that every victim and survivor continues to carry" (Metres). Reminders of these persistent wounds are never far, however, even for those who are still alive by the end of Keefe's account. What *Say Nothing* makes clear is the importance of telling these stories, even while perfect closure may be elusive.

Reading Trauma

Each of the poets discussed in this dissertation share a determination to create a language through poetry that can communicate trauma, not through gaps or silences, but with alternative narrative forms that integrate the traumatic experiences with other moments and images from their lives. The overarching framework of my approach,

therefore, has been to approach poetry about trauma as a witness and a sympathetic reader: looking for meaning, rather than focusing on the failures in communication, and meeting the narrator of the poem where they are, being open to alternate narrative modes and meanings rather than going in with a certain expectations. The revision of literary trauma theory in this dissertation demonstrates that writing about trauma does not equal being stuck in a repetitive traumatizing experience any more than "moving on" must be synonymous with forgetting the past. Rather, this framework focuses on the generative experience of processing trauma through the writing and reading of poetry, creating a space where atypical expressions of trauma can be heard and acknowledged.

The flexibility of this framework also opens a potential to read poetry about trauma from other times and places from the same perspective. One such work, Philip Metres' 2015 *Sand Opera*, encompasses the atrocities and trauma of the long Iraq war and the then-recently uncovered torture at Abu Ghraib from a variety of narrative voices and perspectives. His use of multiple voices throughout the collection evoke Dougherty's visual works, similarly emphasizing how individuals experience and process traumatic events in different ways. Throughout the collection, poems are characterized by lines filled with gaps and irregular breaks and blacked-out bars redacting words and entire phrases (Metres 16-17). While the more literal significance of these experimental poetics is clear, as the broken lines both illustrate the violence of military censorship and echo the broken bodies of torture victims, the form does not prevent the speakers in these poems from communicating their traumas. On the contrary, the form often adds a layer of significance. In "Black Site (Exhibit Q)," the poem is composed of four short lines that are spaced to fill the whole space, and gradually drift to the right-hand side of the page:

"so I could // pass the time // they also gave me / a Rubik's Cube" (39). Without the context of the title and its association with the other poems in the collection, these lines would seem innocent, but the spacing across the page creates a reading of the sentences that is fractured and halting. In *Sand Opera*, writing the voices of prisoners and soldiers into poetry offers a way to conceptualize and process the violence, while encouraging the reader to listen, without expectations, and to accept how the narrative arrives. Metres' approach to experimental form parallels the ways that blanks and erasures function in much of the poetry about the Troubles in this dissertation, communicating experiences of trauma without necessarily needing to describe it directly.

The Paradox of Moving On

Despite the lack of closure that many in Northern Ireland feel, there is an equally strong social pressure for society to "move on." In "The Irreversible and the Irrevocable: Encircling trauma in Contemporary Northern Irish literature," Stefanie Lehner observes, "The rhetoric of the peace process is notably marked by the repeated entreaty to leave what has happened behind" (Lehner 273). Similarly, Neal Alexander argues that "In the cultural sphere, the past's insistence upon the present is registered by a pervasive, almost obsessive, concern with the politics of memory and forgetting" (Alexander 59). However, as Alexander points out, much contemporary Northern Irish literature, and poetry specifically, (60). In reading poetry that addresses past violence and ongoing experiences of processing trauma, then, it is important to identify the ways in which the work acknowledges and explores reactions to past conflict and trauma.

In his essay "The Meaning of Moving On," historian and scholar Graham Dawson meditates on the possibilities and difficulties of "moving on" from the Troubles in

Northern Irish and British society, where so much still feels unresolved. He argues that our understanding of "trauma" as a concept has become too fixed and "backwards-looking" by always understanding trauma as a state of being that leaves the subject feeling trapped (Dawson 82). If we follow this more rigid definition of trauma, he argues, we are more likely to think of "moving on" *only* as forgetting or ignoring trauma (85-86). If we can conceptualize post-traumatic responses as variable, adaptable, and generative, however, moving on does not require amnesia. Dawson further argues that thinking of processing trauma as a strictly linear procession of past to present is too simplistic, particularly in a situation where many tensions remain even after the Good Friday Agreement (86-87). In this dissertation, the ways in which each of the poets navigate both acknowledging trauma and finding ways to process their responses—moving on, but not beyond—offer a way to get around the issues that Graham raises.

In a posthumously-published article, "We were meant to be the generation that reaped the spoils of peace," journalist and activist Lyra McKee writes about the disenchantment of her "ceasefire" generation. She writes, "They call my generation the "Ceasefire babies", though I've always hated that name. I hated the mocking tone in which it was usually said, as if growing up in the 90s in Belfast was a stroll. There were still soldiers on the street when I was a kid" (McKee). As she outlines in the article, the promise of a prosperous and peaceful Northern Ireland after the new peace was established never fully came to pass, as her generation still felt the presence of the soldiers and the threat of violence. What McKee takes issue with the most in this article is the prevalent social rhetoric that encouraged her and everyone else to "move on," to

forget about the past, and that everything was safe. In April 2019, Lyra McKee was shot in the crossfire of rioting in Derry and passed away at the age of 29 (McKay).

For Carson, McGuckian, Muldoon, Bryce, and Flynn, writing trauma is not about "moving on," but neither is it about remaining stuck in the past. Their varied approaches overcome the often-binary approach of remembering/forgetting, instead using writing as a way to share and process traumatic experiences. Carson's work creates meaning through experimental forms that communicate the experience of a post-traumatic response, offering meaning rather than a silencing in those gaps. For McGuckian, the complex, interior voice of her poetry reaffirms the central importance of individual processing and places responsibility on the reader to accept and listen to a narrative voice that may be different from their own. Muldoon's playful challenges to a fixed notion of history allows for endless generative possibilities, leading to a more optimistic view of a future after trauma. Finally, Bryce and Flynn, writing from the "Ceasefire" perspective, find resolution in changings perspectives, achieving distance to look back at the past without leaving it behind.

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