Poetry as Citizenship in Northern Ireland
Richard Rankin Russell

Conflicted Visions: Troubles Cinema
Charles Andrews

Memories of 1916
Tammy M. Proctor

Empathy and Horror
David S. Western
On the cover: Photographic detail of graffiti on one of the “peace lines,” the concrete walls that divide Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast, Northern Ireland. In recent years, sections of the walls have become covered with murals and graffiti art, often expressing hope for the peace process and Northern Ireland's future. Visitors to the walls sign their names and leave messages of peace. This section includes a quotation from former US President Bill Clinton's speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The quotation reads in full, "Strength and wisdom are not opposing values."

First constructed in 1969, the peace lines stand today as a stark reminder of the continuing divisions in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive has pledged to tear down the peace lines by 2023.

Photograph © Jen Grantham.

Back cover: Sign near the entrance of the Corrymeela Centre near Ballycastle, Northern Ireland.

Photograph © Martin Melaugh / CAIN.

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whatever is **TRUE**

whatever is **NOBLE**

whatever is **RIGHT**

whatever is **PURE**

whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

*Philippians 4:8*
IN LUCE TUA
In Thy Light

The Work of Reconciliation

IN APRIL 1998, EVERY HOME IN NORTHERN Ireland found in their daily mail a copy of a document. This document, The Good Friday Agreement, had recently been signed in the city of Belfast and would prove to be a major step forward in resolving a long and complicated conflict. Outbreaks of violence between British Protestants and Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland have occurred for centuries, but in the late-1960s a three-decade-long era of riots, paramilitary battles, bombings, and military occupation in the province commenced. By the time the agreement of April 10, 1998 was signed, over 3,500 people had been killed in the Troubles.

Yet by no means did this agreement mark an end to the conflict; rather, it signaled the beginning of a process. The Good Friday Agreement created a political and constitutional framework that would allow the underlying issues to be addressed slowly, through sharing of power, negotiation, and compromise. Today, violence is rare, but it has not entirely stopped. As recently as May 29, 2014, a bomb was detonated in a Londonderry hotel (Reuters, "Bomb explodes in Northern Ireland hotel..." May 30, 2014). Belfast remains scarred by over twenty miles of peace lines, high walls built to separate Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. According to a 2012 survey, 69 percent of residents who live near these walls do not want them torn down.

On the northern coast of Ireland in County Antrim, a small center is dedicated to furthering the peace process. Corrymeela is an ecumenical Christian community that provides a refuge of tolerance and respect, a place where honest, public dialogue can lead to healing and reconciliation. In July 2012, a group of scholars, supported by the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts and by Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, gathered at Corrymeela to attend a three-week seminar. These scholars studied and travelled together throughout Northern Ireland to learn about both the history of the Troubles and the ongoing work of reconciliation.

In this issue of The Cresset, we are pleased to present four essays that had their genesis in this seminar. In "W. H. Auden, Michael Longley, and Poetry as Citizenship in Northern Ireland," Baylor University's Richard Rankin Russell explores how poetry can help us imagine and create communities where peace and justice might flourish. In "Conflicted Visions," Whitworth University's Charles Andrews considers how the myth of martyrdom has been depicted in film, particularly in the 2008 film Hunger. In "Northern Ireland's Memories of 1916 and The Trouble with The Past," Utah State University's Tammy M. Proctor demonstrates how public memorials of the Troubles and earlier conflicts reflect a gendered model of heroism. And in "Empathy and Horror," Valparaiso University's David S. Western reflects on the tension that the reconciliation process creates between two biblical injunctions: to demand justice for those who take the life of another human being, but also to offer forgiveness even to the worst of sinners.

Much remains to be done in the work of reconciliation, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere around the world. There is likely much work of reconciliation to be done right in the communities where we all live. It is an ongoing work, a process that might never be fully completed. Yet we have hope that someday all our wounds and divisions will be healed and that the broken world in which we live will someday be transformed, and the horizon of our hope is expanded by the work of the people of Corrymeela.

—JPO

W. H. Auden, Michael Longley, and Poetry as Citizenship in Northern Ireland

Richard Rankin Russell

Instruct us in the civil art
Of making from the muddled heart
A desert and a city where
The thoughts that have to labour there
May find locality and peace,
And pent-up feelings their release....

W. H. Auden, “New Year Letter.”

W. H. Auden’s desire, evinced above, to be instructed in “the civil art” to make a locally grounded community—his Just City, where peace and “pent-up feelings” might flourish—suggests how poetry might sonically imagine harmonious order. It might seem strange to begin an essay on the vexed topic of literature’s response to the recent violence of Northern Ireland by invoking the English poet Auden, who later became an American citizen, but Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” written after the death of the greatest poet in the twentieth century, perfectly captures the problems and possibilities for writers confronted with violence and expected (often unfairly) to make a contribution to its amelioration. In the crucial second stanza, Auden’s speaker states flatly, “Poetry makes nothing happen....” Too many critics and poets have taken that to be some sort of final statement in that poem, but the phrase is not even the end of the sentence. Immediately following the colon after the phrase in question, the sentence continues: “it survives / In the valley of its making... / flows on south /... /... it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (1991, 248). Auden takes special pains to convey poetry’s capacity for survival—beyond the death of Yeats, beyond suffering—and its essential orality. Further, Auden’s “elegy” largely neglects the tripartite structure that the genre of elegy, beginning with Milton’s “Lycidas” in 1637, has displayed: lament, praise, and consolation. Instead, Yeats’s passing is repeatedly imaged as underwhelming; he is not given an encomium but brought down to our level (“You were silly like us”); and the consolation offered takes the form of Yeats teaching us “to rejoice” and “how to praise” (248, 248, 249). Auden’s elegy, then, praises poetry, its survival, and its ability to maintain a space wherein we might chant songs out of our suffering: “Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress...” (249).

Singing songs about suffering in the midst of violence exemplifies the work of many of the best writers from Northern Ireland, who lived through horrible years of conflict in which fellow human beings visited the most personal and intimate pain upon each other. Many commentators date the beginning of that violence to the savage attack by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (a heavily Protestant police force) on mostly Catholic civil rights marchers in the city of Derry/Londonderry on October 5, 1968, but the roots of the animosity go back much further, to the early 1600s, when King James I “planted” a series of English and Scottish Protestants in the northeastern part of Ireland in order to break the Gaelic civilization there. These “planters” dislocated the local Catholics from their land and that part of Ireland became majority-Protestant. In 1920, Northern
Ireland was set up, in which six of the counties in the northeastern part of Ireland stayed British; in 1921, the remaining twenty-six counties on the island became part of the new Irish state. From 1922 to 1972, the Northern Irish state was run by Protestants who often discriminated against Catholics in employment, housing, and education. The Northern Irish Civil Rights Association was founded in the late 1960s as a civil disobedience movement modeled on its American predecessor that had worked to attain civil rights for black Americans in the southern United States and elsewhere. But after the violence meted out to civil rights marchers in 1968 and afterward, conditions quickly deteriorated. The British Army was brought in to protect Catholics from violent Protestants (loyalists) who feared the civil rights marches would lead eventually to Northern Ireland's incorporation into the Irish Free State. Their counterparts, known as Republicans, then resorted to defending Catholics, but some of these self-styled defenders became part of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and began attacking British Army soldiers and others. Bombings and murders became common, particularly in the poorer, working-class areas of the province's capital, Belfast, but also in Derry/Londonderry and in the smaller cities and towns. The “Troubles” lasted for at least thirty years, and over 3,500 people were killed before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which set up a power-sharing executive between Catholic and Protestant leaders.

Writers such as the poet Michael Longley (1939–), the poet Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), the playwright Stewart Parker (1941–1988), the poet Derek Mahon (1941–), and the novelist and short-story writer Bernard MacLaverty (1942–) have each maintained in various subtle ways a space in their imaginative work for dwelling on the terrible violence in the province, yet each has also offered songs that might teach us to rejoice and praise not in spite of suffering but because of it. Each has suggested how even if poetry (or literature generally) literally makes nothing happen, it nonetheless connects us to each other by virtue of its survival, and in the process, may yet change entrenched perceptions and attitudes and melt frozen hatreds. But that wished-for change cannot be poetry’s aim; if so, it founders and collapses as a work of art, becoming too dependent on public opinion, the weather in the streets. Only through its own deep integrity to and for itself can the best art—in Northern Ireland or anywhere—have a chance of imagining change.

Auden modeled the best kind of poetic citizenship possible for such writers in his insistence that we recognize our uniqueness and evince our acceptance of responsibility to each other through reaching out in word and deed. Heaney recognized Auden's privileging of citizenship when he linked the poet and his embrace of all that is civilized to Northern Ireland and the potentially ameliorative role of art there:

There is a story about a Ballymena listener calling the BBC one morning in 1969, after the Northern Ireland news had given a lot of coverage to speeches by civil rights leaders the previous evening. “Tell us this,” he said, “are yez Unionists or are yez not?” At the centre of Auden’s work, an equally categorical question is implicit: “Tell us this, are yez civilized or are yez not?” For while it is true that his feelings quickened in the presence of the desolate and worn-out and primitive, the counter-truth holds also: the human achievements of art, manners, social intercourse, just government, are all that are worth living for. (1976, 21)
Elsewhere, Heaney has affirmed this contention about not only Auden's privileging of upholding civilization as the basis for his poetry, but also for poetry in general's necessity of doing this as well: He points out that the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky once remarked "something Auden-like in its simple clarity and conviction. Human beings, he said, are put on earth to create civilization. And if we accept that definition of our human raison d'etre, then we will admit that in a century when inhumanity was never far to seek, the poets have been true to that purpose, and have indeed proved central to it" (1999, 7). If, for Auden, "The process of poetic composition is a work of civilizing. A barbaric horde of emotions which cannot rule themselves are transformed into a just, loving, and self-ruling polis," then poetry models what the Just City might eventually become (2010, 65). At the same time, as Auden is quick to point out, "The degree of justice and self-rule possible in a poem is very much higher than in any historical political society. Every good poem is very nearly a Utopia" (65). Such is also the case for the carefully arranged verbal worlds of Michael Longley, as we will see: Longley can only control the rich possibilities inherent in the world of the poem and hold it up as a model of civilization that society will likely never fully follow, even though he persists in that hope.

The dangers of writing imaginative literature during a conflict such as the recent one in Northern Ireland are manifold; perhaps the most disturbing possibility has been the many breathlessly voyeuristic or angry novels, lyrics, dramas, or short stories that have been composed too close to the moment. Even a critic who has long counseled disinterest through art, Denis Donoghue, has sympathetically invoked Thomas Kinsella's vociferous poem, "Butcher's Dozen," written almost immediately after the publication of the Widgery Report, a British tribunal that exonerated the British Army soldiers who killed thirteen unarmed Catholic civil rights protestors (a fourteenth later died from his wounds) during what became known as "Bloody Sunday" on January 30, 1972, and Brian Friel's drama The Freedom of the City (1973), written soon after Bloody Sunday. Donoghue points out Kinsella's and Friel's "insistence upon unmediated rage," and further observes, drawing on Auden's memorable phrase from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that "It is natural for a writer to resent, on such a violent occasion, the admonition that his art is bound to be indirect in its effect and slow to act upon its cause. That poetry makes nothing happen is normally a tolerable fact; but there are occasions on which a poet feels that he must respond to one act with another similar in character and force" (1986, 187; my emphasis). Well. The price paid is high for such anger; as even Donoghue admits, these works have a certain "crudity," a contention that is borne out by Kinsella's own remarks on the poem: "One changed one's standards, chose the doggerel route, and charged.... The poem was finished, printed[,] and published within a week of the publication of the Widgery Report, and I believe it had the effect I wanted, 'unhelpful' though I am sure it was" (1979, 142). Moreover, there are some scenes of documentary immediacy in Friel's play that make it seem too much in certain moments like reportage, although The Freedom of the City rises above such moments to imagine for his disparate Catholic protestors, trapped in the Derry Guildhall while surrounded by the waiting British Army, a temporary community of freedom, separate from the republican rhetoric that renders them instant martyrs and from the British imperialist rhetoric that figures them as terrorists.

Overly propagandistic art that asks no sacrifice from its audience and imagines a tidy return to peace after conflict can recoil against its artists and lead the outcast members of society to reject that fellowship. Auden has offered a very powerful objection to the type of art that pushes too hard, too fast for personal or societal change through the speech of Antonio in his 1944 work The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest. Antonio adamantly refuses to join Prospero's created social order of peace and prosperity through his resumption of his dukedom. By purposely isolating himself "outside / Your circle," he ensures that "the will to charm is still there" (1991, 411). He believes strongly that Prospero will be led to rely upon his magical art that he renounces at the end of Shakespeare's play in order to coerce him into behaving properly and strongly resists such a development. Thus, he concludes his speech by memorably chanting,
Your all is partial, Prospero;  
My will is all my own:  
Your need to love shall never know  
Me: I am I, Antonio,  
By choice myself alone. (412)

Anyone familiar with the shop-worn phrases of the conflict in Northern Ireland—such as Sinn Féin’s motto, “Ourselves alone”—will recognize in Antonio’s intransigence a simultaneous desire to be recognized even while maintaining a rhetorical and real distance from a polis they feel is irredeemably stained, in the case of Northern Ireland by British imperial policy stretching back hundreds of years. Auden’s Prospero, whose dukedom has been usurped by Antonio, makes matters worse when he maintains about his brother’s betrayal, “both of us know / That both were in the wrong, and neither need be sorry...” (407). By neglecting his statecraft in favor of the dark arts, Prospero certainly left a power vacuum that his brother filled; at the same time, he posits that they should not work through a process of forgiveness, a potentially fatal mistake for the harmonious future of his realm, as Auden’s memorable commentary suggests. How can literature address the notion of community on the page and more broadly? Can it create community? Can literature lead to conversations whereby such deep hurts such as those visited on each other by the citizens of Northern Ireland for several decades be aired or even healed? That is, how can literature fully be true to itself and imagine a commonweal where sectarianism is exposed and suffering addressed, where we might glimpse singing, praising, or rejoicing?

Michael Longley’s entire career offers some tentative answers to these questions. Born in a middle-class Protestant household (his parents were Church of Ireland) in south Belfast, Longley began early to see how disturbing were the divisions built into Northern Irish society. In his autobiography, Tuppenny Stung, he points out that:

Belfast’s more prosperous citizens have usually been careful to separate themselves from the ghettoes of the bellicose working classes. An odd exception is the Lisburn Road which runs south from the city centre. Intermittently for about three miles, workers’ tiny two-up-and-two-down houses squint across the road at the drawing-rooms of dentists, doctors, solicitors: on the right, as you drive towards Lisburn gardenless shadowy streets; on the left rhododendrons and rose bushes. Belfast laid bare, an exposed artery. (1994, 25)

Can literature lead to conversations whereby such deep hurts such as those visited on each other by the citizens of Northern Ireland for several decades be aired or even healed?

Dwelling in a liminal space between the posher middle-class homes such as the one occupied by his family and those of his poorer Protestant neighbors accustomed him to class difference and sectarianism from an early age. His working-class Protestant friends from school, Herbie Smith and John McCluskey, “shared with me their mythology which was mostly concerned about Roman Catholics. Did I know why Taigs crossed themselves? What dark practices lurked behind confession and Mass? Didn’t the nuns kidnap little girls and imprison them behind the suspiciously high walls of the big convent at the top of the Ormeau Road?” (26). Worse, he was shown “pamphlets which purported to describe Catholic atrocities from the twenties and thirties. Every page carried blurred photographs of victims who, it was claimed, had been tortured and mutilated, their brains or hearts cut out, their genitals chopped off” (27). Despite being steeped early on in such suspicious and hateful
attitudes, Longley has emerged as an ambassador of poetry, a man who has committed his life to overcoming such sectarianism as has long been practiced in Northern Ireland through portraying ordinary acts of kindness and charity in memorably wrought lines that have often been invoked in public by politicians and others who seek to articulate solutions to the deep-rooted problem of religious and cultural hatred in the province.

In his introduction to the stirring 1971 anthology, Causeway: The Arts in Ulster, a publication sponsored by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland after Longley had begun working there the previous year, he turns to Auden to address the vexed issue of art's relationship to life. After surveying a series of literary works that warned about the possibility of Northern Ireland's slide into civil war in the previous decades, Longley muses, "Warnings generally go unheeded. Art seldom changes things. Two wise lines from W. H. Auden's New Year Letter provide at least an alibi: 'Art is not Life, and cannot be / A midwife to Society'" (1971, 9). Such a statement agrees almost exactly with Auden's statement from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" that "Poetry makes nothing happen," but intriguingly, just as Auden's line continues to express that poetry survives, Longley goes on to hold that the poet has another job besides witnessing, that of celebrating normal human life. To wit, he posits that "the artist has other duties to perform apart from his painful role as a Cassandra. He has a duty to celebrate life in all its aspects, to commemorate normal human activities. Art is itself a normal human activity. The more normal it appears in the eyes of the artist and his audience, the more potent a force it becomes" (9). In the midst of the Northern Irish Troubles, normality was in high demand, a desideratum of many. Glenn Patterson's recent screenplay, Good Vibrations, about the Belfast punk-record shop owner and producer Terry Hooley indicates just how important it was for the arts to have an outlet in war-torn Belfast like his shop of the same name became. Within its confines, youths and teenagers and young adults could buy and sell records and dream of making it big. Because Good Vibrations established an oasis of normality in the midst of conflict, it became a potent force for human community where Catholic and Protestant youths who might never have met otherwise could gather.

The artist who attends to normality can make a difference, as Longley further believes: "the artist is in fact uniquely qualified to demonstrate how both our cultures can define themselves by a profound and patient scrutiny of each other: "...all real unity commences / In consciousness of differences"" (1971, 9). Longley is again quoting Auden's "New Year Letter." These lines appear very late in that long narrative poem, after Auden's demoralizing discussion of the pervasive and ineluctable power of evil in the world. The section under consideration even begins, "Our news is seldom good: the heart, / As ZOLA said, must always start / The day by swallowing its toad / Of failure and disgust" (1991, 241). And yet, if we fix our eyes steadily on each other and recognize our real differences, some unity might emerge, as Auden suggests and Longley later would, following Auden's lead. Auden's couplet that Longley cites is followed by his imprecation to us to practice something like agape love based on our uniqueness: "We need to love all since we are / Each a unique particular / That is no giant, god, or dwarf. / But one odd human isomorph..." (241). Celebrating normality and commemorating uniqueness in the human, animal, and plant worlds drive Longley's considerable oeuvre, which appeared in his Collected Poems (2007), and which has now been enhanced by the considerable charms of his 2011 volume, A Hundred Doors. In what follows, I attend to particular poems from Collected Poems and A Hundred Doors that show Longley at the height of his poetic powers of citizenship, demonstrating how such poetry in all its fragility and commemorative force point toward the type of society—Auden's Just City held together by agape love—that Northern Ireland might yet have a chance of becoming.

In July, 2012, I invited Longley to give a poetry reading at the Corrymeela Community when I was there with other American faculty for a Lilly Seminar on "Teaching Peace and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice in Northern Ireland." I knew him from my time spent living in Belfast on a dissertation fellowship from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in
the spring of 2000, and I have written often on his poetry over the years in articles and in my book, *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, 2010). Longley read carefully and quietly from some of his most famous poems and included a healthy sampling of the new ones from *A Hundred Doors*. Throughout his reading, his dignity and respectful tone echoed such values in his poetry. As he read in our location perched high atop the edge of the North Antrim coast, I was reminded of his principled insistence in an interview about his interest in civilization and ceremony and how we should actively protect fragility in all its forms:

"The opposite of war is custom, customs, and civilization. Civilization is custom and manners and ceremony, the things that Yeats says in "A Prayer for My Daughter"... I think we can judge a culture by how it deals with the vulnerable, those creatures and those people who are indeed less fortunate than we are, children and animals.... So I'm thinking of civilization as much more than the word that's derived from the Latin, *civis*, meaning "citizen." I think we should be citizens of the whole world, as well as citizens within our societies" (2004, 61).

The care with which Longley read his poetry that evening reflects the care he believes we should take of those less fortunate: animals, children, the environment.

That care is displayed throughout the pages of *Collected Poems* and *A Hundred Doors* in poems such as those set in his adopted townland of Carrigskeewaun, a tiny community in the western part of County Mayo, on the west coast of Ireland. Carrigskeewaun epitomizes all of Longley's concerns about fragility and interrelatedness and our obligation as citizens to know uniqueness and protect it. Poems about this townland not only exemplify Longley's commitments toward preserving nature in all its variety, but by extension, his desire to conserve and promote human community in war-torn neighborhoods in Northern Ireland that still suffer from segregation in housing and education. In one of his recent Ireland Professor of Poetry lectures, "The West," Longley argues, "In the Mayo poems I am not writing about a cosy community. Nor do I dwell among the calls of waterbirds and the psychedelic blaze of summer flowers to escape from Ulster's political violence. I want light from Carrigskeewaun to irradiate the northern confusion" (2010, 15). Longley thus rejects Carrigskeewaun as an idyllic pastoral space, an untouched Eden, remote from the pressing concerns of the outer world. That place too is blemished, bruised, and violent and yet in it he finds reasons to delight and rejoice and wants to infuse the troubled North with its light. He recalls being surprised "to find that one third of my poems are set in south-west Mayo. This is thanks to David Cabot, the great Irish ornithologist, who allows me to stay in his remote cottage and open my mind to the endless intricacies of the landscape and the Atlantic weather" (7). Being receptive to such ecological profundity and complexity has enabled Longley to develop a nimbleness of mind and outlook that has stood him in good stead to write poems about the fraught situation in Northern Ireland from the perspective of his poetic ideal of citizenship first modeled to him by Auden.

Many of Longley's Carrigskeewaun poems seem satisfied to iterate lovingly particular flora and fauna and thus to inscribe them in our minds;
the procedure of using such catalogs has also helped him commemorate many victims of the Troubles. In one of his most famous poems, “The Ice-cream Man,” originally collected in Gorse Fires (1991), he recites the names of a series of wildflowers from the Burren area of western Ireland, a micro-climate composed of karst limestone with flowers typical of both alpine and subtropical regions as an intricate oral wreath to adorn the memory of the man who served in the ice-cream shop on the Lisburn Road in Belfast:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butterscotch,
walnut, peach:
You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
Herb Robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
Yarrow, lady’s bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel. (1991, 192)

As he has remarked, “I mean that catalogue to go on forever, like a prayer. The murder of the ice-cream man violates all nature. The poem is also, partly, an elegy for the flowers themselves, which are under increasing threat” (2010, 16). Note how the particularity of the two lists—ice cream flavors and flowers—also lovingly, uniquely rejects the vague evil of “They” who “murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road.” The recitation of flavors and flowers cannot undo the murder, but it can reawaken us to wonder in the midst of senseless murder and further, lead us to want to preserve all that wonder around us that Longley found that day in the Burren. As I have argued elsewhere about this stunning poem, attending closely to its rhythms and its horizontal lists of flavors and flowers “creates a comforting, meandering litany of sorts that effectively elegizes the man in his rhythmic, unhurried recitation of ice cream flavors, although this comfort may well be fleeting...” (Russell 2010, 137). Because Longley believes that “Poetry’s origins are in ceremony. Poetry commemorates,” this poem enacts his theory of poetic citizenship grounded in naming and ritual (Longley 2003, 305).

On April 6, 2011, Longley extended the elegizing effect of “The Ice-cream Man” to Ronan Kerr, a Catholic member of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who had just been killed by breakaway members of the former Irish Republican Army opposed to the peace process in the province. The PSNI, formerly a redoubt of Protestantism, has slowly welcomed more Catholics to the force since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and Kerr’s murder was meant to frighten Catholics and members of the nationalist community from joining. On the same day Kerr was buried, Longley spoke at a book launch for Robert Thompson’s and John Faulkner’s A Natural History of Ulster. Obviously moved by Kerr’s murder, he remarked, “On the day of Ronan Kerr’s funeral I would like to read a poem of mine called “The Ice-cream Man” (2011, “A Natural History...” 26). After stating, “I mean that catalogue to go on forever, like a prayer,” he quickly added, “The banal thugs who murdered Ronan Kerr and the ice-cream man violate everything that the intellectual effort of this book represents” (27).

An insistence on the banality of evil is also a favorite theme of Auden, and this insistence itself stemmed from his Augustinian conviction that “evil is a deprivation of goodness, especially in the human soul” (Schuler 2013, 48). Stephen Schuler points out that such an Augustinian view “implies that all humans have the capacity to commit great evils, and that the eradication of evil is not as simple as redistributing the means of production or undergoing psychotherapy” (38). For instance, in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Auden opens by pointing out how the “Old Masters,” painters like Pieter Breughel the Elder, four of whose works inspired the poem, knew that suffering “takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or
just walking dully along..." (1991, 179). And in “The Shield of Achilles,” written in 1952 after the atrocities of World War Two, Auden's portrayal of evil's banality is horrifying in its flatness and blankness: "A plain without a feature, bare and brown, / No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood, / Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down" (596). In such a barren landscape, "A crowd of ordinary decent folk" watches "As three pale figures were led forth and bound / To three posts driven upright in the ground" (597; my emphasis). A contemporary recasting of the Crucifixion, this scene chillingly indicts "ordinary" members of society for not helping their fellow man; such scenes, preceded as they are by "An unintelligible multitude, / A million eyes, a million boots in line, / Without expression, waiting for a sign" also recall the Nazi stormtroopers who carried out the Holocaust. Worst of all in its banality, perhaps, is Auden's image of "A ragged urchin" who takes on faith "That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third," because he'd "never heard / Of any worlds where promises were kept, / Or one could weep because another wept" (598). The very ineluctability and repeated occurrences of such acts renders them especially sinister.

Just as Auden did, Longley sets normal acts of kindness and goodness over against banal acts of evil, perhaps most movingly in two of his best and most well-known poems, "Ceasefire" and "All of These People." The stately sonnet "Ceasefire" moves along at a dawdling pace, instantiating order and ceremony to the meeting between Achilles and Priam in the midst of a stoppage in the Trojan War. Longley's poem recreates an intimate world of male camaraderie across battle lines where "one could weep because another wept," in contrast to Auden's bleakscape of isolation in "The Shield of Achilles" where there is "No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood." So Priam "curled up at his [Achilles'] feet and / Wept with him until their sadness filled the building" (Longley 2007, 225). Achilles, who has killed Hector, Priam's son, takes the "corpse into his own hands" and "Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake, / Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry / Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak" (225). Achilles' respect for Hector's body and his surviving elderly father contrast his martial prowess on the battlefield, but the poem suggests that such ritualistic acts are not only proper but required for civilized people. Most wrenchingly, the sonnet concludes with a couplet that imagines Priam's actions earlier: "I get down on my knees / and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son" (225). This poem, printed in The Irish Times during a period in 1994 when the Irish Republican Army was contemplating a ceasefire that they soon took up, suggests both how hardened warriors might come together

Just as Auden did, Longley sets normal acts of kindness and goodness over against banal acts of evil. through civilizing actions, and, ominously, that just as the Greeks and Trojans would fight on after the lull that followed Hector's death, so too would republican and loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. Indeed they did. But "Ceasefire" inserted itself into that lull and created a space for poetry—its survival, "A way of happening, a mouth." Without insisting that poetry makes things happen, "Ceasefire" captures a tender yet horrible moment between two proud fighters convinced their cause is right, gently suggesting that articulating grief together and charitably prostrating oneself to one's sworn enemy might be first steps toward creating a civilized community.

"All of These People" perhaps most fully captures Longley's commitment to a poetry that upholds civilization in the best sense of the word:

Who was it who suggested that the opposite of war
Is not so much peace as civilization? He knew
Our assassinated Catholic greengrocer
who died
At Christmas in the arms of our
Methodist minister,
And our ice-cream man whose continuing requiem
Is the twenty-one flavours children have by heart.
Our cobbler mends shoes for everybody; our butcher
Blends into his best sausages leeks, garlic, honey;
Our cornershop sells everything from bread to kindling.
Who can bring peace to people who are not civilized?
All of these people, dead or alive, are civilized. (253)

Each instance or incident in the poem features connection across potential divides: faith, generations, party. The bountiful, overflowing nature of such human gestures is signaled by the open arms of the Methodist minister, the ongoing recitation of the ice cream flavors, the welcoming cobbler, the butcher’s flavorful homemade sausages, the cornershop’s catering to everyone. One is reminded here of Auden’s interest in agape love, which stands over against the banality of evil in such poems as “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Shield of Achilles.” Auden eventually came to “recognize that real acts of charity are mundane, unremarkable, and anticlimactic” (Schuler 136). Similarly, the charitable, civilizing, ceremonial gestures of the citizens in Longley’s “All of These People” stand firmly against the dehumanizing murders by nameless thugs of lovely individuals in Northern Ireland that Longley revivifies and reincorporates into his memorable last line, a community of the living and the dead, civilized and civilizing by virtue of their openness and human decency.

More recently, in several poems from A Hundred Doors, Longley again returns to the western landscape of Carrigskeewaun that he explored in many past poems, including “The Ice-cream Man,” to confirm how we are bound together with animals and plants into a community of citizens anchored in an abundant, but imperiled environment. For instance, in “The Holly Bush,” a poem in memory of Dorothy Molloy, he recalls:

14 The Cresset

- Frosty Carrigskeewaun. I am breaking ice
- Along the salt marsh’s soggy margins
- And scaring fieldfares out of the holly bush
- And redwings, their consorts, chestnut-brown
- Flashing one way, chestnut-red another,
- Fragments of the January dawn-light
- That Killary focuses on the islands
- Before it clears the shoulder of Mweelrea.

(2011, A Hundred Door, 33)

The poem itself quickly becomes “decorated” with the browns and reds and greens of the birds and holly bush in the dawn light by his paratactic lines. These birds also “radiate apricot from within;” another consolatory color for the poet who finds out about his friend’s death that same day and who finally muses upon her life and poetry as the sun begins to peep over the horizon: “Golden plovers—a hundred or more—turn / And give back dawn-light from their undersides. / The edge of the dune wears a fiery fringe” (33). The echoes from Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur” with its bright morning springing and his “Windhover” propel this from a merely elegiac poem to one that meditates upon eternity through establishing local landmarks—Carrigskeewaun, Killary, the mountain Mweelrea—and the “citizens” of that landscape, the birds, the holly bush. The flutters of color in the morning light suggest an ordered world, yet also convey that the natural world is always capable of surprise. Furthermore and more important to understanding Longley’s poetry about the conflicts of World War One and the Troubles, the temporary beauties of this time and place are rendered all the more beautiful for their fleetingness. As he has remarked about this lovely but desolate terrain, “The bones of the landscape make me feel in my own bones how provisional dwelling and home are” (2010, 15).

At times, various landscapes interpenetrate in the poetry, as in “Volunteer” and “Into Battle.” The four-line “Volunteer” is narrated from the point of view of “The old gamekeeper,” who “could recall a young groundsman / Leaving Ballynahinch to cycle to Galway / And on to the Western Front, his red / Neckerchief like a necklace of poppies” (2011, A Hundred Door, 55). Thus, the Connemara
region of County Galway in western Ireland is sutured onto the wounded landscapes of World War One, whose most memorable symbol was the bright red poppy that grew even in the mud of the trenches in that desolation. In the lovely two-line poem, “Into Battle,” which runs in its entirety, “The Hampshires march into battle with bare knees. / Full of shrapnel holes are the leaves on the trees,” the exposed knees of the Hampshire regiment are congruent with the bullet-riddled leaves (58).

The only poem directly about the sectarianism in Northern Ireland collected in A Hundred Doors is “The Poker,” dedicated to the province’s now-deceased Protestant playwright Sam Thompson, whose play Over the Bridge (1960) challenged Protestant bigotry toward Catholics, particularly in the all-Protestant Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast where tens of thousands of men worked building the Titanic and other ships in the twentieth century. Catholic men who tried to cross the bridge to the shipyard were hit with “Belfast confetti,” a mixture of iron bolts, nuts, and other debris; they were beaten and insulted. In this poem, Longley offers a poker to Thompson that his twin Peter made the “brass handle for” (43). Again resorting to a litany of names, Longley terms Thompson “Shipwright, playwright and trade unionist, / Old Decency’s philosopher, our own / Diogenes” and praises him for opening “a way over the bridge / For Jews and gypsies, all refugees, / Persons displaced by our bigoted / Hometown” (43). He imagines Thompson stepping out for a curtain call at a theater, and finally offers, “There’s a Brasso bottle in my toolkit. / Shall I polish my brother’s poker? / It’s precious, Sam. It belongs to you” (43). The durability of the poker along with its shiny brass handle combine into an image of lasting decorum for this dramatist, an exemplar of the type of citizen Northern Ireland should applaud. Longley’s body of work repeatedly and quietly insists that we see each other as the unique creations we were meant to be, reveling in each other’s differences, while conducting the hard work of healing cultural, political, and religious wounds. The civilizing power of his poetry leads us into ceremonial recognitions of each other and has ensured poetry’s survival, its “way of happening.” It also just may have helped create the rhetorical conditions for our own survival as a human community.

As usual, Longley manages to evoke his concern for others through such messages. I was touched by his words and realized how courageous it was for him to have driven up to Corrymeela as he battles gout to recite his poems to us in his soft Belfast accent. In his care for words and for creating community, Longley has shepherded both poetry and people through a dark time when it seemed like literature and life were no longer valued. In the process, he has shown how poetry can help create community through the ritual, charitable acts that we are all capable of.

Although Longley does not share Auden’s marked interest in the orthodox tenets of historical Christianity, he has remarked on his interest in writing religious poetry, noting,

I’m anti-clerical, full stop. And I’m also an atheist, or certainly an agnostic. The spiritual part of life has got to be do-it-yourself. However, I am interested in what it could mean to write religious poetry, particularly at the end of this godawful century. [F]or me, poetry is my way of making sense of life and of the world, and of celebrating it. I like Horace’s phrase, “Priest of the Muses.” The poet must never forget that in other societies he’s the shaman and the witchdoctor whose rhythmic intonations of words stop an outbreak of measles or help to end the drought. There’s

Wrote Longley after his reading to us at Corrymeela, thanking him for it, and he wrote me back on August 2, 2012, saying,

Dear Richard,

I thought the evening went well. I felt terribly tired at the end and was dreading the long drive home in the dark—which is why I withdrew without the usual embraces. Anyway, please consider yourself symbolically hugged. (“Email from Michael Longley,” August 2, 2012)
Longley's poetry, like Auden's before him, is religious in the best sense of the word, deriving from its Latin root "religare," meaning "to bind fast or connect." By connecting disparate individuals, animals, and even plants in a radical community of respect and appreciation, Michael Longley teaches us all that we carry each other into the future through our choice to act charitably as citizens of the world. 

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Works Cited


The clock of hunger-strikers dead is not ignored with ease
and 'please, God, please keep loved ones safe'
was then
repeated round and round and round
like rosaries told upon a bead, ...

Pádraig Ó Tuama, “hunger strikers”
from Sorry for Your Troubles (2013)

With his customary humility, the Irish poet, playwright, senator, and occultist W. B. Yeats took credit for inventing the hunger strike in 1904 through his verse drama The King’s Threshold. This dramatic work depicts a poet starving himself to regain his privileged access to the court, and Yeats claimed in his notes that “when I wrote this play neither suffragette nor patriot had adopted the hunger strike, nor had the hunger strike been used anywhere, so far as I know, as a political weapon” (315). In the play, Yeats's poet Seanchan (pronounced "Shanahan" by the playwright) upholds his principled stance against the outrage of the aristocrats, his peers, and the common people, and his visionary self-destruction is blessed as heroic martyrdom. The titular king in the play rues Seanchan's actions and the disgrace that will come upon his governance, since “The common people, for all time to come, / Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold, / Even though it be the King’s” (258). But what also emerges in the play is a dispute about the appropriateness of this technique, as characters like the Old Pupil and others argue that Seanchan is dying for a trivial custom and using a weapon that is disproportionate to the fight.

Whether Yeats’s version of the origins of hunger striking is accurate or not, his play has become a touchstone for analyses of the political hunger strikes in Northern Ireland, where Seanchan remains a spiritual and moral emblem of the Republican cause. Bruce Beresford, for instance, author of Ten Men Dead, the most celebrated history of the protests in Belfast's Long Kesh prison, quotes Yeats’s play at the beginning of each chapter in his book and concludes with a triumphant excerpt from a speech by Seanchan: “When I and these are dead / We should be carried to some windy hill / To lie there with uncovered face a while / That mankind and that leper there may know / Dead faces laugh. King! King! Dead faces laugh.” This final phrase was even Beresford’s preferred title for his book, suggesting the ultimate triumph of the Hunger Strike and the much-displayed, grinning photograph of Bobby Sands that became an icon for Irish Republican politics (2006, 250).

The climax of Northern Ireland’s Hunger Strikes occurred in 1981 with the deaths of ten IRA prisoners in Belfast, men who were agitating for a set of rights relating to their treatment as political prisoners of war rather than as criminals. Margaret Thatcher’s government categorically refused to recognize the IRA prisoners as anything other than terrorists and law-breakers, and the Prime Minister’s famous iron will remained rigid as one by one the men succumbed to starvation, beginning with the charismatic and good-looking Bobby Sands. To this day, the effect of these hunger
strikes and the righteousness of the prisoners' claims remains controversial.

Studying the Northern Ireland conflict of (roughly) 1968 to 1998 always entails stepping onto contested ground. Even the commonplace name for this conflict—"The Troubles"—sounds quaint and trivializing and is fraught with misunderstanding. The poet and conflict mediator Pádraig Ó Tuama explains this etymology in his prose-poem "Sorry for Your Troubles" which begins with a "gay British Asian" comedian at a club in Belfast saying "What about the troubles, then? Why do you people call it that? It sounds so twee. It sounds like a spot of bother" (4). This story is paired with the words of a Republican man, who says "Don't call this war in Ireland the troubles... Some English bastard made that word up, I'm sure." Correcting both of these views, Ó Tuama continues: "In Irish, there isn't a specific word for bereavement. In English, the word 'bereave' means to deprive of, to despoil, to seize or rob. There isn't a word for this in the Irish language. Our way of saying bereavement is trioblóid, which, anglicised, is troubled" (5). In the Troubled terrain of Ireland's North, even the very name of the land is contentious—Catholics prefer "the North of Ireland," while Protestants say "Northern Ireland"—and attention to language is deeply political.

These were a few of the many lessons learned during my recent time in Northern Ireland with a group of fifteen professors from multiple disciplines at Lilly Network schools who convened at the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle during July 2012 for a seminar called "Teaching Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland." The seminar was led by the above-mentioned poet Pádraig Ó Tuama, a Catholic from Cork who lives in Belfast and serves the Corrymeela Community in many capacities relating to group therapy, conflict resilience, and art.

At Corrymeela, people from opposing sides of the Conflict are routinely brought into lengthy listening sessions, asked to hear each other's stories of loss and to see one another as human beings and fellow-sufferers rather than "ideas" or emblems of the "Other Side." At our sessions, we conversed with professors, clergy, peace workers, former (and not-so-former) paramilitaries—people from across the spectrum of difference in Northern Ireland. Everyone who engages in group work at Corrymeela shares their stories, their grief, and dishwashing, an activity that often yields as much community-building as a therapy session. The shared labors following each meal are essential to seeing the Other as an embodied, living person instead of as just a symbol. The poet Eavan Boland has condemned the tendency she finds in Irish poetry for women to be reduced to merely symbolic status: "The wrath and grief of Irish history seemed to me—as it did to many—one of our true possessions. Women were part of that wrath, had endured that grief. It seemed to me a species of human insult that at the end of all, in certain Irish poems, they should become elements of style rather than aspects of truth" (356–7). Wrath and grief are crucial parts of peoples' stories of bereavement, and Boland's insistence on recognizing women's real and embodied selves is put into practice for all people at Corrymeela.

The healing effects of embodied communities like Corrymeela and other peace centers exist in stark contrast to the bodily assault of hunger strikes. What makes these acts by Seanchan, early twentieth-century suffragettes, and today's Guantanamo Bay prisoners so powerful is that the individual suffering becomes symbolic of larger concerns shared by all involved in the protest. For the prisoners in Long Kesh, having their political demands rejected required a grand gesture. Initially, the prisoners refused prison-issued uniforms, choosing to be naked and wrapped in...
blankets as long as their own clothing was denied. Then they quit shaving, showering, or getting haircuts in what became the "no-wash protest." Their penultimate phase was the "dirty protest," where the prisoners refused to "slop out" their cells, choosing instead to smear the walls with food scraps and their own excrement to produce political art out of abject squalor. This array of bodily humiliations culminated in the Hunger Strike, the ultimate form of physical self-denial and display of personal destruction for a grand cause.

The destructiveness of hunger striking is captured particularly well in Ó Tuama's poem "hunger strikers" which serves as the epigraph for this essay. The poem describes in imagistic form the appearance of the strikers: "all those younger faces became stripped and old / eyes shrunk back and foreheads cold & bold / with skin that's limp and paper thin, / barely separating blood and bone from stone" (9). In the wasting and aging faces, we find icons of the political protest, an iconography that embellishes the rosary bead image from earlier in the poem. Part of Ó Tuama's effect here is achieved through his recreation in language of the famous visual images from the IRA Hunger Strikes.

This visual dimension of the IRA protests is exploited even further in the many films about the Northern Ireland conflict which focus on the prisons. In works like In the Name of the Father (1993), Some Mother's Son (1996), and H3 (2001), the images of long-haired, shaggy-bearded men emblazonize this particular phase of the conflict. More important than the historical accuracy or inaccuracy of these films is their appropriation of visual tropes familiar to those in the Conflict.

The different ways that stories about this history are represented influences how certain values are reproduced out of sacred, political mythologies. Cinema has a special role in this process, particularly in Northern Ireland where the "Troubles Film" has become a recognizable sub-genre, significant enough to merit its own college courses, film festivals, and critical monographs. In Troubles cinema we find a complicated mixture of political statement, visual art, and commercial entertainment.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yeats and collaborators like Lady Augusta Gregory and J. M. Synge used the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre to self-consciously fashion dramas that would resuscitate Ireland's mythic past and assert a political vision for its future free from British rule. Populating their works with characters like Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the Poor Old Woman who represents Ireland herself and who needs the sacrificial blood of young men to return to queenly youth, Yeats and others wanted a political art that could redeem the nation. On the whole, Troubles-era cinema is far more circumspect about the worth of political art and far more critical of bloodloss and bloodletting as virtuous tools. And yet, as I intend to show here, even attempts at using the history of the Troubles for artistic purposes can get mired in the conflict.

A century after The King's Threshold, the award-winning British filmmaker Steve McQueen offered his own lyrical take on the 1981 Hunger Strike and its emblematic figure Bobby Sands. McQueen's Hunger is arguably the best of the prison-related Troubles films and even one of the best films ever made about Irish politics. It is unquestionably masterful in purely aesthetic terms, beautiful to look at and employing a trove of flashy directorial moves that serve the storytelling while reminding us we are in the hands of a skillful auteur. McQueen won the Turner Prize in 1999, an annual award for the best British artist under age fifty, and he has recently become famous in the United States for his film 12 Years a Slave which won the 2014 Academy Award for Best Picture. This latest, highly-decorated film is the third entry in a loose trilogy begun with Hunger (2008) and Shame (2011) and starring Michael Fassbender, whose extreme self-debasement may be the central unifying thread in the three films.

McQueen studied art at the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London as well as at Goldsmith's College working in experimental film, and this background shows in his relative neglect of plot and his deliberate fixation on the image as the central facet of the medium. If conventional narrative cinema has as its literary analogue the short story or novel, it seems appropriate to describe Hunger as a closer relative of the poem with its series of significant, evocative images that
are suggestive of character and emotion rather than being concerned with backstories or explanations. McQueen has said that he wanted the audience not to be given a lot of explanation, to trust that we know the history of the Hunger Strikes and of Bobby Sands and that his film should make us close observers and intimate witnesses of the prison conditions.

With its poetical beauty, *Hunger* offers a commanding and sympathetic look at the Belfast prisons in the early 1980s. But the film gestures toward being something more than Irish Republican hagiography. Were it more simplistically focused on glorifying Sands and the other prisoners in the style of, say, Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* (1996), which features Liam Neeson as its highly idealized, swashbuckling hero, then it would be less necessary to investigate its politics. But the several ways McQueen and his collaborators tug our sympathies toward and, more importantly, *away from* Sands suggests that the film strives for a nuanced—even critical—portrayal: a portrayal that it ultimately does not fully deliver. My contention is that this failure occurs partly through the beautiful aesthetics that make the film so artistically successful, and that the powerful forces of mythologizing and memorializing Troubles-era Northern Ireland interfere with complex artistic representation.

As with so much in the Northern Ireland conflict, the term "memorial" is fraught. The UK government-created Consultative Group on the Past recommended public memorials as one of the steps toward reconciliation and specifically suggested a shared memorial honoring the dead from all sides. Jay Winter’s theorization of First World War memorials has offered a template for this sort of public witness. Winter observes that memorials carry a host of conflicting political, religious, moral, and aesthetic interpretations, but nevertheless allow disparate views to converge in the unifying act of public mourning around what he calls “visible signs of... collective bereavement” (79). More common in Northern Ireland are memorials with only a limited unifying effect and that display aggression toward the other side. Sara McDowell has even argued that memorialization was a deliberate tactic by Sinn Féin in what Gerry Adams called the “new phase” of struggle after the era of the ArmaLite and ballot box (727). And something similar, of course, may be seen in Loyalist murals, such as a prominent building on the Shankill Road which depicts five acts of Republican violence including the Frizzell’s Fish Shop bombing of October 23, 1993. The text above this mural reads “30 Years of Indiscriminate Slaughter by So-Called Non-sectarian Irish Freedom Fighters” and below is a list of questions asking “Where are our inquiries? Where is our truth? Where is our justice?” These questions might be most appropriately read with the word “our” emphasized, since they suggest that Catholic/Nationalist/Republicans harmed in the Conflict have received a larger share of justice through inquiries into events like Bloody Sunday, 1972.

The famous Bobby Sands mural on the Falls Road in West Belfast is one memorial that seeks not only to give space for public remembrance but also for solidifying a mythology. His name is printed as “Bobby Sands MP” emphasizing the role of his parliamentary election while imprisoned, and a list of descriptors calls him (among other things) a “poet” and a “Gaeilgeoir” (Irish for an “Irish speaker”). Curiously, the Hunger Strike itself is an insignificant part of the mural, shifting the narrative away from the prison almost entirely, except through the abstract image of broken chains around the border. Arguably, the most important part of the mural is the iconic picture of Sands with his beaming smile that corresponds to the quote
"our revenge will be the laughter of our children." The mural makes a profound contribution to the Sands mythology by emphasizing his words, his lightness, and the free future for others that he tried to create.

The film Hunger might seem a long way from this kind of public art, and yet it too slips into mythos and iconography while avoiding direct affirmation of Republicanism. Much like memorials that are historically significant markers of a grieving public's values rather than "objective" history, Hunger provides not a history lesson but an emotionally resonant portrait of committed belief overcoming harsh and repressive conditions. Sands becomes something other than a symbol of the Republican movement. He is a symbol for all types of perseverance and commitment. In essence, McQueen hijacks the political symbol and deploys it in service of universal humanism.

It could be argued that any sort of hijacking of a deeply cherished political symbol is a successful intervention, a subversion laudable for the way that art can disrupt political agendas and narratives. While McQueen does achieve something of a triumph by creating a Bobby Sands movie that diverts the focus from Republicanism, that diversion leads into something far vaguer and not completely satisfying.

Before the film's initial release at Cannes, IRA comments touched upon this shift in focus. Former prisoner and IRA press officer Richard O'Rawe said, "I have heard the film is more a psychological story about one man facing death. If that is all it is, then I have no problem with that" (Thorpe and McDonald). During production, Belfast City Council refused to allow a one-day shoot of a violent scene, and as one Democratic Unionist Party councillor put it, "we don't need to open old wounds... about the Troubles" (O'Hara). The main concern of these groups before the film's release had much to do with how the symbol of Bobby Sands would be used in the present day peace process. By attending more to Sands's agonizing death than to any of his specific beliefs, the film manages to set aside questions about Sands's place in current Northern Irish politics.

McQueen has claimed in interviews that Hunger is not a political film, and though this sounds a bit like Gabriel Conroy in Joyce's story "The Dead" wishing to tell the staunch nationalist Miss Ivors that "literature is above politics," there is a sense in which he may be right. Many Troubles films have rather overt political or social agendas. For instance, Alan Clarke's avant-garde short Elephant (1989) shows eighteen killings in Belfast presented in an unrelenting stream with long tracking shots on the gunmen and lingering observation of the victims. Lacking music, dialogue, or a story, the succession of killings feels excessive, and Clarke's purpose seems to be provoking the viewer to wish for all this to stop. Since the gunmen are not marked as either Republican or Loyalist, Clarke achieves something like the Consultative Group on the Past's wish for a shared memorial: all sides are implicated in the killings and all viewers should desire their cessation. Much more typical are films like Bloody Sunday (2002) or Omagh (2004) that recreate specific historical events as memorials to injustice on a particular side of the Conflict. Closer still would be Terry George's Some Mother's Son which also portrays the 1981 Hunger Strike, but does so with a flatfooted political message about IRA righteousness and clearly sides with Helen Mirren's character, a mother who wrestles with her decision to remove her son from the strike. Michael Fassbender—who also says Hunger is not political—has said in interviews that this typical kind of Troubles film is "embarrassing and insulting."
Hunger is especially resistant to the common-practice “taking of sides” through its portrayal of the perspective of the prison guards. In a first act largely conducted without dialogue, we are introduced to a guard named Raymond Lohan who quietly eats breakfast with his wife and enters the prison locker room to suit-up. His entrance is paralleled by the entrance of Davey Gillen, a newly-arrested IRA man who “suits up” for his role by stripping before a group of guards and taking a blanket. The prison guard character who we follow for the first part of the film suggests a humanizing of the British or Unionist figures, but this humanizing does not extend into any serious engagement with their political positions. As this main guard stands in the snow against an austere wall smoking or rinses blood from his knuckles or stares at himself in the mirror, the overall impression is that he is ashamed, not that he is committed to an ideal. Exiting his driveway through iron gates while his wife warily observes from the window and changing into his uniform at the prison locker room, we see that he too is imprisoned. There is a systemic entrapment of these men into their roles.

It might seem that this revealing of systemic oppression could function as the true politics of the film, but that sense of the systemic evil is overwhelmed by the last third of the movie where McQueen takes us into close identification with Bobby Sands. For much of this final act, we remain with Sands, the dialogue muted and images blurred to represent the shutting down of his sense organs. More than just inhabiting Sands's point of view, McQueen's elegant aestheticization of Sands's death renders us complicit in his transcendence of material conditions, politics, and perhaps even death. After a particularly gruesome sequence focusing on Sands's bed sores and vomiting, the camera swoops and bobs, finally fading through a series of shots with birds flying, an echo of Sands's reminiscences of a childhood cross-country meet in a pastoral part of the Republic. This flock of birds fades into a graphic match of Sands's artfully blood-stained bed. In these images, the transcendence of the birds culled from Sands's most vivid childhood memory unites with the transcendent, aesthetically rich shedding of blood. Absent in these moments is any central focus on Republicanism, prisoners' rights and demands, or sense that anyone is experiencing this other than Bobby Sands. We are locked into Sands's experience and share his last moments, a choice that makes us not only intimate observers but also accomplices in his transcendent death.

The scene which has drawn perhaps the most commentary, including special commendation at Cannes when the film won the Caméra d'Or prize for best debut feature, is a twenty-four minute long conversation between Sands and Father Dominic Moran that occurs in the middle of the film and connects the largely dialogue-free first and third acts. Seventeen minutes of this scene is a single take with a static camera focused on the two seated men, lit so that their faces are obscured like silhouettes. Moran and Sands verbally joust about the righteousness and effectiveness of a hunger strike, and the priest tries every robust argument he can muster: the authority of IRA leadership and Christian scriptures, the pathos of abandoning Sands's child, and even a charge that Sands is a self-serving martyr craving posthumous celebrity. But the long take of debate between Sands and Father Moran ends in a cut to close-up on Sands, his face now visible after seventeen minutes of profile, and with painful, earnest conviction he tells a story about his childhood (fabricated for the film by McQueen and his co-writer Enda Walsh) where he killed an injured foal, knowing that he would be blamed and punished instead of his friends who were with him. In this speech, he reveals that he...
has always seen the angles, known well before others the significance of his own actions, and known that violence can be a wonderful tool even when others fail to realize this in the short term. Here, the mythology of Bobby Sands is on full display, where an added speech is like a Midrash on the historical record and where Sands's power derives from conversational skills and the purity of his unwavering conviction. Sands thanks Moran for testing him, offering a checklist of arguments against the hunger strike that he can now do without. The triumph here is in his absolute certainty, a carefully composed shot of light on Fassbender's face, one eye nearly swelled shut, the other staring out radiantly and evoking the Byzantine image of Christ Pantocrater. He becomes more of an idea or an icon than a person. There is even a religious quality to this narrative: Sands's belief in the Movement coupled with unwavering practicing of his faith is rewarded after death with immortality. The film does little to challenge this religion apart from the substantial but temporary engagement with the other religious presence in the form of a Catholic priest.

and though a debate scene like this momentarily pulls the audience's sympathies away from Sands by asking us to consider the priest's arguments, Sands's victorious final speech merits no rejoinder from Father Moran who leaves bested.

Father Moran's accusation of intentional martyrdom resonates with the religious undercurrent that permeates the film, a final way that McQueen indulges in mythologizing Sands. In his essay for the Criterion Collection Blu-Ray of Hunger, Chris Darke remarks that in the late 1970s media images of the prisoners on the blanket protest had what Darke describes as “an ascetic otherness that was inescapably Christlike” (“Threshold”). We are introduced to Sands thirty minutes into the movie as he is beaten, shorn, and forcibly bathed. By beginning with the character Davey Gillen who is new to the blanket protest, McQueen de-centers Sands and avoids turning Hunger into a mere biopic, but this portrayal also dehumanizes him. After his beating scene, we get Maud Ellmann's analysis of Yeats's The King's Threshold and the Irish Hunger Strike focuses on the "strategies by which the flesh is transfigured into words, because the art of disembodiment depends on this fatal alchemy" (60). Ellmann employs a Girardian analysis of sacrifice to show that “although Seanchan insists that he is starving for the nation... he would rather the nation starve for him; and the poetry implies that he is sloughing off the weight of nationalism, leaving his imagination stateless, free to soar” (64). McQueen's film, while never suggesting that Sands would rather let others do the starving, entertains a similar weightlessness. As Sands lies in his hospital bed, a feather floats by evoking his decreasing body weight and the lightness of his spirit. Twice we hear voice-over sound clips from Margaret Thatcher publically condemning the IRA and the hunger strikers, and this certainly connects us to the political context. However, since Thatcher is present only as a disembodied voice, she functions more as pure...
ideology and maintains the weightlessness of the film. The “freedom to soar” that Ellmann observes in Yeats’s play emerges in Hunger through the birds, the feather, and the swooning steadicam shots of Sands in his last days.

A final set of intertitles across a black screen inform us about Bobby Sands’s parliamentary victory and the Pyrrhic victory of the Hunger Strikes. And, we even have some return to the opening character Raymond Lohan with a statement about the sixteen prison guards killed during the “blanket” and “no wash” protests. But these titles are more of a gesture toward the historical context rather than a full part of the artistic investigation of the Prison War. Thus, Sands remains an icon removed from a precise identification with the long-haired, angelic image from his most famous photo. The memorializing that occurs in McQueen’s film is distinct from the politically driven Republican memorializing of the murals. But it is a memorial to something somewhat more bland and abstract, a testament to an individual’s commitment and, I would argue, a Gnostic flight from his own body.

In McQueen and Fassbender’s follow-up collaboration Shame, a similar lyricism buoys a story about a successful New York yuppy consumed with sexual addiction. A third act rampage of lust functions much like the sequence of Sands’s slow death, but with a noticeably different effect. In Shame, McQueen’s ethereal style paradoxically acts as counterpoint to the intense physicality of its protagonist’s orgies. Fassbender’s agonized climaxes are lit to capture every line in his face and self-loathing in his eyes. But with Hunger, the ethereal direction evokes not the heavy despair of sinking but the diminishing weight of the striker and the loftiness of his transcendence. Sands becomes less human and more symbolic, reproducing for aesthetic purposes the mythologizing accomplished by Irish Republicans in politics.

Myths like the martyrdom of Sands and the nine men who followed him into death are deeply ingrained in Northern Ireland's struggle to achieve a lasting peace. Otherwise senseless deaths in the Troubles can take on rich meaning if they are immortalized and made symbolic. Part of the great work of organizations like Corrymeela is in addressing unresolved tensions at the symbolic level. Taking in Protestant and Catholic schoolchildren during the tinder box season of Orange Order parades in July works by providing physical safety, but it also symbolizes the ways Corrymeela reforms the mindsets of the youngest inheritors of the Conflict. Corrymeela’s founder Ray Davey wrote in his memoir that the temptation for Nationalist youth was to join the “armed struggle,” and the temptation for Unionists was to avoid conflict altogether. “Very quickly,” Davey explains, “we [at Corrymeela] began to grasp the importance of our existence as an alternative to violence and to apathy, by offering the way of co-operation between the two traditions, and also to recall and reaffirm the Christian values of justice and peace, and the dynamic of the Gospel of forgiveness... Our task was to try, even in a small way, to make this alternative visible” (80–1). As a visible sign of the third way between violence and apathy, the Corrymeela Community embodies peace-making in the midst of Northern Ireland’s conflicted visions. Even where other, more destructive political mythologies have deep roots, the shared life of bodies united by story, song, food, and work allows reconciliation to grow.

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Works Cited


Endnotes

1. Among the many examples of Seanchan’s afterlife, Padraig O’Malley’s book about the hunger strikes *Biting at the Grave* takes its title from Yeats’s play and includes an epigraph of the king urging his subjects to persuade Seanchan to eat.

2. Bill Rolston’s series of books entitled *Drawing Support* offer a sustained look at the changing murals in Belfast. *Drawing Support 3: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland* has the frequently reproduced Bobby Sands mural on its cover.

3. The outbreak of the Troubles is often seen as occurring on October 5, 1968 when police violently disrupted a march in London/Derry held by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). The Good Friday Agreement at Stormont on April 10, 1998 marked the official end of violent conflict, though the subsequent decades have continued to experience violent flare-ups.

4. More of Ó Tuama’s work can be found at www.intshelter.com, including audio recordings of his poems. An additional hour-long presentation of his stories and poems can be found here: https://www.whitworth.edu/Podcast/index.aspx

5. For an early journalistic account of these protests by a popular historian with pronounced Republican sympathies, see Tim Pat Coogan’s *On the Blanket: The Inside Story of the IRA Prisoners’ “Dirty” Protest*.

Northern Ireland’s Memories of 1916 and The Trouble with the Past

Tammy M. Proctor

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.

W. B. Yeats, Easter 1916

In the post-1998 world of Northern Irish memory, few years loom as large as 1916. For both the Unionist and the Nationalist factions in the North, the year marks a turning point in their creationist myth and a foundational cornerstone in their sectarian historical narratives. For the Unionists, 1916 constituted proof of their blood sacrifice for the Union with Britain, and it provides evidence of their “no surrender” mentality. Unionists only need point to the 36th Ulster Division’s heroic stand at the Somme on July 1, 1916 in which they reached enemy lines before being forced to retreat, sustaining more than five thousand casualties (Orr, 200). The year 1916 marked a very different trial by fire for Nationalists; it witnessed the birth of the modern revolutionary impulse for independence in Ireland and launched what would become a bloody civil war and revolution. The Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin was important to the building of a Nationalist narrative, but more significantly, it was the British reaction to the Rising that launched a militant Republican movement. Thousands were imprisoned, and the leaders of the Rising were executed quickly in Dublin (Costello, 17-23). These two events, the Somme and the Easter Rising, have provided competing notions of what Irish nationalism should look like.

Perhaps these wartime incidents might have receded into distant memory had it not been for the rise of sectarian “Troubles” in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. The founding of the Loyalist paramilitary organization, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), in 1966 explicitly harkened back to the UVF of the pre-First World War years, which became the Ulster Division. The birth of the UVF also coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, tying the two together in popular memory and providing a vocabulary of nationalism and sacrifice for the fledgling Loyalist groups. At the same time, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was playing a central role in the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising; in Northern Ireland, these celebrations contributed to the radicalization and birth of the Provisional IRA (1969) in the wake of the failed civil rights demands of 1968 (English, 82). This explosive mix of historical memory, rising sectarian and nationalist violence, and the clash of young men seeking to prove their part in a blood sacrifice helped cement the importance of 1916 in Northern Irish memory.

This short article emerges from a Lilly Summer Seminar in Northern Ireland that was held in summer 2012 at Corrymeela, a peace and reconciliation center located in Ballycastle. The American seminar participants learned about the promise and limits of the 1998 Good Friday agreement in healing the wounds of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. We were also plunged headlong into the complex subtext of life in the North through our visits to the Orange parades and bonfires of July’s “marching season,” a tour of Derry with a former IRA combatant, and with the lectures, tours, and conversations planned for our
month at Corrymeela. As an historian of the First World War, I was immediately drawn to the ways in which the iconography of the time of Troubles in Northern Ireland called upon the memories of the past and particularly of 1916, a crucial year in the sectarian script of Ireland’s past. Particularly intriguing were three moments during the seminar that raised the specter of 1916. The first of these came early in the trip when Michael Longley recited his 1972 poem, “Wounds,” during a reading at Corrymeela during our first full day in Ballycastle. In the poem, he evokes his father’s war experience at the Somme in the First World War, then juxtaposes it with the dead from the Troubles. His description of his father’s war depicts a foolhardy masculine heroism and sacrifice:

First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
Going over the top with 'Puck the Pope!'
'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,
Screaming 'Give 'e m one for the Shankill!' 'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words
Of admiration and bewilderment.
(Russell, 223–224)

Soon after this reading, we visited the Protestant-dominated Shankill area of Belfast and saw the murals depicting the sacrifices of World War I. The murals depicted men at the Somme, the memorials to their memory in France, and the poppies of remembrance. Finally, we also visited the memorial gardens in the Falls neighborhood, where Catholics remembered the martyrs of violence. After each of these events, we discussed among ourselves the meaning of it all. Our conversations and questions led me to explore the real events of 1916 in Dublin and on the Somme in order to understand how these events have shaped popular memory of sacrifice.

The contemporary depictions of these 1916 martyrs, both in Loyalist and Republican iconography, use and misuse history for nationalist purposes. As one of our speakers, Damian Gorman, astutely noted, narrative can be a weapon in the sense that “our story obliterates your story.” Gorman argued, quite persuasively, that narratives of peace need to displace narratives of conflict for real change to take place. Corrymeela focuses on creating such a language of reconciliation, a space for dialogue and shared experience of humanity, but the iconography of 1916 poses an alternate dialectic of conflict, personal sacrifice, and division. In this article, I argue that 1916 became a cornerstone of the Northern Irish narrative partly because of its association with violence and partly because of the gendered model of heroism and martyrdom that it presented to a generation of men coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. This

1916 became a cornerstone of the Northern Irish narrative partly because of its association with violence and partly because of the gendered model of heroism and martyrdom that it presented to a generation of men.

Historical Context

For many reasons, 1916 was a critical year in the history of Ireland and the British Empire. After devastating losses at Gallipoli and Neuve Chapelle (among others) during 1915, British military planners saw 1916 in terms of a decisive offensive that would turn the tide of the war. Their plans centered around a large coordinated offensive in northern France that would follow attacks on other fronts, especially Russia, and that would allow Britain to break through the German lines. This battle, at the River Somme, featured a massive artillery barrage of 1.7 million shells across a front that was 22,000 yards wide (Beckett, 166–167). Altogether British forces suffered roughly 60,000 casualties on the first day of the battle alone (Ferguson, 293).
The Battle of the Somme became a defining moment in Northern Irish memory for two reasons initially. First, the opening day of the battle on July 1, 1916 coincided with the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, the 1690 conflict that had become a focus of Unionist identity in Northern Ireland by the time of World War I. Second, the Ulster Division, which was almost entirely Protestant and drawn from the tight-knit communities of northern Ireland, figured prominently in this battle, sustaining more than 5,000 casualties out of a force of 15,000 (Jeffery, 56). While all of Britain mourned the huge losses at the Somme, for those in the Ulster Protestant community, this sacrifice became framed in the larger argument for continued union with Great Britain (Loughlin, 135-136). As Nuala Johnson argues in her work on the geography of remembrance, “The losses of the first day of the Somme... cemented a sense of the social nature of Ulster’s sacrifices in the war. The Battle of the Somme became the archetype of Ulster’s loyalty and defence of the crown” (71). The Somme became enmeshed with the Orange parades of the July “marching season” and an integral part of the collective memory of Loyalists in Northern Ireland. It is no wonder that William of Orange sometimes shared a mural or a banner with soldiers of the Somme, as with the Hydepark Loyal Orange Lodge 1067 banner (Jarmin, 71-72). Many of the banners used in the July Loyalist parades continue to feature scenes from the Somme [Figure 1]. Murals featuring the Somme appeared as early as 1919 in Protestant neighborhoods, and the Northern Irish government supported commemoration of World War I as a Unionist event (Beiner, 382-383).

Two months prior to the events on the Somme, a small group of Irish Republicans organized for a coordinated strike against the British in Ireland. These men and women united around a belief that British promises would not lead to Home Rule in the postwar world, and they saw an opportunity for gaining freedom in the midst of Britain’s crisis in Europe. The Rising took place in Dublin a day later than planned on Easter Monday, a holiday that fell on April 24, 1916. Fewer than two thousand rebels took control of several public buildings in Dublin and declared an Irish republic, but the British Army quickly brought in troops to quell the revolt (Ward, 1-14). In the aftermath, martyrs emerged after the deportation and internment of nearly 1,800 participants and the brutal repression.
of the Rising. The key action was the execution of more than a dozen leaders under the wartime Defence of the Realm legislation (Costello, 19).

Irish Nationalists living in Northern Ireland have less of a direct connection between the Easter Rising and their historical memory or experiences, but the link is clear nonetheless in their iconography. For Republican groups, the leaders of the April 1916 rebellion experienced martyrdom at the hands of the British, and this narrative of martyred manhood continues a tradition of naming the honor roll of martyrs to the cause of Irish freedom. Guy Beiner argues that the Easter Rising highlights a direct connection to Republican defeats of the past and supports a narrative that claims “our day will come” (Beiner, 378–379). From 1916, Republicans draw a line to the dead of the Irish War for Independence in 1919 and to those who sacrificed during the Troubles. Like the Somme, the Easter Revolt was also a blood sacrifice of young men, but it provides a vivid memory and point of contrast with the Loyalist story of 1916. While Loyalists celebrate the British soldier, Republicans focused on the executed Easter rebels. As one Irish officer wrote in 1916 just before his death, “These men [of the Easter Rising]... will go down in history as heroes and martyrs; and I will go down—if I go down at all—as a bloody British officer” (Jeffery, 61). Irish Nationalists fighting in World War I had a complicated and tense relationship with the memory of the war and of the Rising, but the Irish War for Independence cemented the connection between the Easter Rising and the long struggle for freedom, calling into question the loyalty of those who fought for Britain.

The Belfast Republican memorials call on viewers to understand that the dead of the Troubles are part of a larger history, stretching back to the 1916 and 1919 conflicts, but they emphasize the more recent dead in their martyrs’ gardens (Figure 2). Damian Gorman described the practice of “going on remembering what we already know” rather than questioning the past narrative. This linkage, between the blood shed in the past by Irish revolutionaries and the blood of the IRA became particularly apparent as a result of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 1966. For instance, Seamus Heaney’s poem *Requiem for the Croppies* (1966) took as its theme the 1798 rebellion in Ireland against British rule, but it was written as a way of commemorating and connecting the Rising’s anniversary to the past. Heaney writes of the futile sacrifice of men killed while “shaking scythes at cannons,” evoking martyrdom of past patriots. Heaney’s men die in fields of barley in Ireland, while the Ulstermen drown in a sea of poppies on the western front (Prince, 731–732).

One of the important details of these memories of conflict is the focus on male experience of loss and sacrifice. Despite the fact that women also participated in the Easter Rising and in the mobilization of wartime society during the First World War, their roles do not figure in the iconography of the murals and the banners. As with much commemoration of national conflicts, war is gendered male, and all experience is framed in relationship to the man as soldier or revolutionary. In this context, the narrative of martyrdom and sacrifice playing out in the images of Northern Ireland centers on meanings of Irish masculinity: what it means to be a patriot in the context of the segregated communities of the North. The Troubles affected whole communities—men, women, and children—but men were at the center of the violence, and they also continue to dominate the “institutions, rituals, organizations, standpoints, and styles of political engagements” in northern Ireland (Ashe, 233). In short, men at war in the 1960s and 1970s used as models men who had sacrificed their lives for a common goal and identity.

**The Trouble with the Past**

Memory is important to any society and to any nation, and those victimized by years of conflict need a collective memory to explain their losses. Victims do not want to be invisible or erased, so it is necessary to acknowledge the pain and violence of the past. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, official figures place the death toll of civilians, combatants, and security forces at 3,451 people (Coakley, 192). In a small territory such as Northern Ireland, these are significant and traumatic losses in a generation. Add to this
unemployment and underemployment, crumbling infrastructures, and continued sectarian geographical divides, and the problem is clear. Also, memory of the past does not remain static or stable in this context. The 1987 bombing of Enniskillen's Remembrance Sunday service (commemorating the dead of World War I) imbued the 1916 symbols with even more importance. Eleven people died and more than sixty were injured by this attack engineered by the IRA (Beiner, 387). With such contemporary violence tied to the violence of the past, how can Northern Ireland reframe its history?

At Corrymeela, we met educators using American pedagogical programs such as restorative justice and “Facing History” to create new curricula for youth in Northern Ireland. When antagonism and not citizenship is the dominant experience of civic and cultural life, then how does one transcend the divides of fear and suspicion? According to Susan McEwen, who spoke at Corrymeela in 2012, only about 8 percent of children in Northern Ireland were enrolled in integrated schools. One of the central concerns in framing new educational standards is the problem of the past continually invading the present and the future in Northern Ireland. Facing History proponents suggest that using an external case study such as the Holocaust might allow students to rethink questions of us versus them and the legacy of violence in a society.

The overwhelming message that links 1916 to the present and to a longer historical record is one of nationalist masculinity. Armed men sacrificing for a particular view of the nation is the key narrative of this iconography, both for Republicans and Loyalists. Corrymeela's strategy uses narrative to break down walls. It emphasizes reconciliation and peaceful conversation, but it seemed to me that these programs gained more traction during and after the Troubles with women, who found in widows' groups and weekend retreats a place to share grief and to work through misunderstanding. The Green Gate project asked women from different backgrounds to bring objects and photographs to discuss. These everyday objects created points of connection for women from different religious communities. For many men, however, the murals in their neighborhood require them to remember the sacrifices of the past and to put their own bodies on the line for the real and imagined communities in which they live. Certainly the murals constitute a cultural heritage of the violence of Northern Ireland's past, but I wonder if they make the work of reconciliation with past and future combatants more difficult. Corrymeela, as I learned during my time there, seeks to frame a conversation that moves beyond the current containment model. The conflict that marked 1916 and the Troubles has not disappeared nor has it been resolved, but instead it has been contained by Peace Walls, disarmament, and political agreements. Reconciliation is a popular word in 2014 in Northern Ireland, but as those working at Corrymeela know, it is not easily achieved in an environment of suspicion.

Revising the memories of 1916 might be a good starting place for this conversation, especially with the centennial of the Somme and Easter Rising in 2016. Scholars have begun to reclaim the historical record of 1916 from myth. Richard Grayson's 2009 book painstakingly accounted for the soldiers from Belfast who fought at the Somme. What he found undermines notions of the sacrifice of 1916 as being entirely one made by Protestants. His study records the service of Catholics from the Falls (the 16th Irish) at the Somme alongside Protestants from Shankill, and he discusses some of the reasons why both Loyalist and Republican communities chose to forget the role of the Catholic soldiers in this battle (Grayson, 171, 192).

Just as the history of the Somme is obscured by its mythic status, so too is the history of the Easter Rising. Many Nationalists in Northern Ireland and in the South did not support a revolt in the midst of war. As Michael Laffan argues, "the actions of a small minority forced most nationalists to confront and then respond to a military insurrection which was carried out in their name... moderate views were stifled" (49–50). Many Irish soldiers fighting in Europe were horrified to learn of the revolt and the destruction in Dublin, and in April 1916, the rebels were hardly popular. Sebastian Barry's recent novel, A Long Long Way, tries to capture the shifting loyalties and feelings

30 The Cresset
of betrayal that Irish soldiers at home and abroad felt in the wake of the Rising. The main character, Willie, tries to figure out who was fighting whom in Dublin and asks a fellow soldier to explain, and he replies:

You got to keep up, William. We were one and the same up to the war breaking out, and then some of us said we would do what Redmond said and fight as Irish soldiers, you know, to save Europe, but a few of them—well, they didn’t want that. You know. A handful really. But the names, you know, I know them well. Some of the best of us. (Barry, 95)

Barry’s use of the ambiguity of the volunteers in this conversation raises the notion of contemporary attitudes toward the war and the Rising rather than the lens of the 1970s for understanding these conflicts. In addition, a generation of gender historians have exposed the ways in which women figured in these conflicts as participants, victims, villains, and heroines, broadening the debate beyond the masculine. Despite these efforts, men appear at the heart of commemoration of the 1916 events and as central to most histories.

In fact, recent years have shown the ways in which 1916 could come to stand for reconciliation rather than division. One physical sign of a new shared iconography of World War I is the Island of Ireland Peace Tower in Messines, Belgium, which was dedicated in 1998. This memorial marks all the Irish dead of the war, and at its opening, both Queen Elizabeth II and the President of Ireland attended (Jeffery, 138–141). This memorial’s opening coincided with the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and the two events speak to tangible signs of reconciliation with a troubled past. More recently still in 2005, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern proposed commemorations of both the Easter Rising and the Somme for the ninetieth anniversary in 2006, saying that 1916 was “an iconic year in Irish history” that could be reconceived in terms of “shared history” and reconciliation (Beiner, 367).

It is hard to predict if 2016 will be a moment of reconciliation for sectarian communities in the North or a flashpoint for further violence (as 1966 was), but it is true that the broader interest in commemoration of the First World War in the global community might provide a safe context for a re-examination of Ireland’s part in that conflict. Many countries have launched digital projects to rescue the history of the war and to involve the public in its commemoration. Britain’s National Archives has launched “Operation War Diary,” which uses “citizen historians” to transcribe war diaries (operationwardiary.org). The Imperial War Museum is collecting information on ordinary people’s participation in war (livesofthefirstworldwar.org) and the European Union’s website on the war has collected an enormous amount of material on multiple nations (europeana1914–1918.eu). These projects are multi-national because of the nature of the war itself and provide a global context for this important conflict. Northern Ireland has an opportunity to redefine its 1916 moment in this broader commemoration and redefinition of the meaning of the war and its legacies. It remains to be seen whether the North can embrace such a project.

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Bibliography


Empathy and Horror
Reflections on a Handshake

David S. Western

It is hard not to admire Alistair Little. In many ways he represents the personification of Northern Ireland's heroic journey toward peace. Born and raised twenty miles from Belfast during the fiercest decades of the Northern Irish conflict, swept from birth into a swirling sea of anger, despair, and bloodshed, Alistair has lived through a hard-won triumph of personal transformation. He has been the phoenix, utterly destroyed to rise again a better man. In his youth, he was a force for violence. Like many a Northern Irishman, Alistair was fully engaged with war before his body was fully grown; he joined the neighborhood paramilitary at age fourteen. Today Alistair is a counselor and healer, devoted to the regeneration of peace in Northern Ireland. Individual by individual, heart by broken heart, he works to re-sow the violently torn social fabric of his country and to reconcile Northern Ireland's essentially two-sided soul.

So I was shocked to discover on the day I met Alistair that my insides recoiled at shaking his hand. My mind had no qualms. Slow, polite, and well socialized, the conscious part of me was as compliant as ever. But as our hands drew together, something deeper than conscious thought—some feeling of revulsion—rose up in my guts, yanking on my spine, demanding that I pull back from his palm.

Of course I didn't pull back. I bit through the feeling, and to the eyes of the world we had an ordinary handshake, unremarkable and, for Alistair, immediately forgettable. But to me it was a lightning bolt. I was baffled by my own reaction. Why the sudden reluctance to give Alistair this simplest of courtesies? Why the profoundly uncomfortable feeling of aversion to a fellow human being?

The answer, of course, had everything to do with the fact that those hands once killed a man.

In meeting Alistair Little I was torn. At once there was my admiration for his peace work and, of course, basic human respect. But there was also sheer, rising horror for the reality of killing. Decades ago, as a mere seventeen year old, in the last crescendo of a three-year run of teenage paramilitary violence, Alistair murdered Catholic James Griffin with five shots through the Griffin family window—an act that, as Alistair puts it, created "a legacy of darkness... from which I think I will never be free" (Little, 71).

I was surprised by my internal conflict, but shouldn't have been. The human condition, after all, is one of Gordian knots, of irony, tragedy, and competing goods. As Immanuel Kant put it in a moment of uncharacteristic poetry, "Out of the crooked timbers of humanity no straight thing was ever made." Even among people committed to unity and peace, we find ourselves conflicted.

In response to acts of terrible violence and humans killing humans, we are caught between two ethical imperatives, which seem to carry equal weight but can pull us in different directions.

On one hand, there is the profoundly difficult ethic of reconciliation that we find particularly in the New Testament. Here we are told to love our enemies, forgo judgment, do not repay evil for evil (Matthew 5; Romans 12:17). Of murderers in particular, the Book of Matthew tells us, "You
have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother, you will be liable to judgment... and if you say ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire... [So] be reconciled to your brother or sister...” (Matthew 5: 21–24). Jesus in Matthew refuses to distinguish between the sin of murder and the sin of resisting murderers or being angry with them. We are

We must feel the horror of humans killing humans and resist such deeds with every moral fiber of our souls. We must also show grace and reconcile with killers without hesitation.

reminded that we are all sinners, and there seems to be no gradation of wickedness when it comes to human sin. Some sin may do more damage, but sin is sin is sin. The only ethical response here is to show grace and reconciliation to each other, even those who have taken other lives.

On the other hand, we have, as a deontological imperative, the commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” Genesis ties this commandment to the *Imago Dei*: “For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning... Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made mankind” (Genesis 9:56). Moving past the suggestion here of *lex talionis* justice (eye for an eye), there is also the suggestion that the imperative not to kill each other, in contrast to the lack of imperative not to kill animals, is tied to human beings having something special about us: something sacred or, in post-Enlightenment terms, dignified. We are made in the image of God. That makes each human life precious and the act of humans killing humans intolerable.

In the perfect Law of Love—that level of ethical living at which Jesus could comfortably walk—I have no doubt these two ethical imperatives cohere together seamlessly. But for the rest of humanity, incapable of reaching ethical perfection, these two imperatives may be branches from the same trunk, but branches that tend to point us in different directions. To the mortal eye, they can seem to be asking us to choose, one direction or the other.

But we cannot choose if choosing means denying one for the other. They both seem to be profoundly important ethical imperatives. We must feel the horror of humans killing humans and resist such deeds with every moral fiber of our souls. We must also show grace and reconcile with killers without hesitation.

We are left conflicted. Such is the human condition. And perhaps, imperfect creatures that we are, simply sitting in that conflict, uncomfortable and torn, is the best response we can muster to the act of humans killing humans.

As a scholar, my deep interest is in the power of human empathy, particularly as it works in processes of peacemaking. In this, Northern Ireland has been my nursery. Much of what I know about the reality of peacemaking has developed over three trips to this country. In Northern Ireland, I have learned the importance of empathy by witnessing the peace work of people like Alistair Little, and the ensuing shifts in society, the friendships growing where once there was only fury.

Yet I’ve also felt, as anyone must feel if they travel through Northern Ireland with any kind of awareness, an underlying ocean of resentment and despair. Walk the land long enough and your shoes get wet with the blood that still bubbles up from the saturated earth.

By the time I met Alistair, I was empathizing with more than just the people with whom I wanted to empathize: the peacemakers. I was empathizing with victims as well: the quietly nonviolent, whose contribution to the Northern Irish “Troubles” was the unwilling sacrifice of a daughter or son, those who have a hard time swallowing that the very men and women of violence that held their country ransom for decades have emerged the nation’s heroes, peacemakers, and political leaders.
I met Alistair Little as a participant in the 2012 Lilly Summer Seminar, a wild but brilliantly led three-week ride through the complexities of Northern Irish life. In previous trips to Northern Ireland, I was focused on a relatively pleasant investigation into how increasing levels of empathy facilitated burgeoning Irish peace. I set myself up to focus on the cheerful.

But the Lilly Summer Seminar was designed to spin our heads: a twirling rollercoaster journey through all the different communities and perspectives in the country. One day we spent with Protestant paramilitaries, the next day with conflict resolution workers, the next with journalists, the next with Republicans walking us through the events of Bloody Sunday, the next with a playwright recounting personal experiences and ending with the question, “Is our talk of peace just the lullaby we sing as we drift off into an unending darkness?”

The expanded, fast-paced view of the seminar lay bare how conflicted and troubled Northern Ireland remains.

There's a sickening dissonance to Northern Ireland—a mix of beauty and barbarity—that leaves you disoriented. Hosted by the Corrymeela Community on the dazzling northern Irish coast, our seminar group woke daily to all the majesty of creation. The Northern Irish are friendly and funny, living lives that, on the surface, hardly hint of a violent past. The paramilitaries we met were charming and charismatic. One entertained us with stories of his conflict-era day job as an urban sniper. I thought of the “Washington Snipers” of 2002, deemed monsters by Americans, the eldest sentenced to death. As we parted we offered hugs and cheers like old friends sad to leave each other. On the day we met Alistair, we mingled over tiny triangle sandwiches prepared by the caterer.

This is a country where many urban, working class teenagers grew up feeling that violence is an immutable fact of life, and that “killing Catholics” or “killing Protestants” is a heroic and moral job description. This is a land where Alex Reid was captured, dragged to an abandoned building and beaten with a concrete block until his skull was smashed in by a seventeen-year-old Protestant simply because Alex was Catholic. This is a land where Stephen Magill, a policeman, was called to investigate a domestic disturbance that wound up being an IRA ambush. Gunned down, he was left to die in the road. This is a land where Robert McCartney, father of two and a Catholic Republican, was stabbed to death by IRA members after defending his friend in a pub brawl instigated by those IRA members.

To contemplate the thousands of killings—to read David McKittrick's harrowing Lost Lives, an accounting of every soul murdered during three decades of conflict, and find in those pages factory workers shot dead as they punched out for the evening and old ladies riddled with bullets while watching television in their armchairs—it is hard not to feel indignant against the ungodly arrogance of those who imagine themselves justified in wielding such power, such decision making over the lives and deaths of others.

The feeling that rose up in me the day I met Alistair Little was a message, a protest. Feeling is a language. It speaks to us in somatic tones, beneath words and all the more intensely for it. On this day, the message, ancient and powerful, reverberated out from some deep place: some basic center of morality written into our DNA. Or someplace older than humanity itself: a moral spiritus mundi, reflecting the very mind of the Creator.

That feeling was nothing less than raw, elementary horror for the act of humans killing humans: a horror that is the very fundament of our understanding that murder and war are wrong. It is through this feeling that we receive that moral message primarily and most powerfully. It is this feeling that we land upon when there is nothing left to debate. Why do we have the initial inclination that killing and violence are things we should avoid? This feeling, this horror, lies at its root.
That horror built up inside me for weeks, prodded on by the ever-present hum of a choir of restless ghosts, unjustly dead. When it finally came forth, crying “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” it announced itself like an Old Testament prophet returning from the wilderness, discovering in his absence the tribe has grown lax with the commandments of God.

On the other hand, peacemakers in Northern Ireland like Alistair Little have worked to tamp down, even dissolve, that raw feeling of horror because, moral or otherwise, it tends to create obstacles to building peace in this country. So when we look at peacemaking in Northern Ireland, something at the root of it has been more like the reconciliatory ethic we see in Matthew 5.

The New Testament presents us with a hard ethic. When we are called to “repay no one evil for evil” (Romans 12:17), it seems to mean not only that we forgo “eye for an eye” justice but that we do not meet those who sin against us even with resentment and judgment. Instead, we are to show them understanding, grace, and be reconciled to one another. There is no reason to believe murder is exceptional in this regard.

Prerequisite to this ethic, as Nigel Biggar put it in 2009, is “the Christian belief in the universality of sin, and more specifically the belief that... all human beings are finite and somewhat fated creatures, weighed down by historical and social baggage.” That is, we are all imperfect creatures who, to some crucial degree, are products of our histories and environments.

In recognizing our equal status in finitude and sin, and a certain lack of control over the conditions that shape us, what we wind up with is a sense of our common humanity, which transcends in-group/out-group psychology of a sort that has so damaged divided societies like Northern Ireland.

With this notion of a common humanity in our minds, empathetic understanding is the best ethical response. Biggar continued, “If we really regard all human beings as fellow creatures and sinners, then we will learn to grow in compassion for our enemies. We will learn to expand our compassion for those who were responsible for their choices... but who are also—and like us—considerably the subjects of tragic circumstance.”

Without the overtly Christian tones, Alistair Little exemplifies this approach in his peacemaking. In his own life’s conversion from warrior to peacemaker, Alistair tells us, experiences of empathy for his enemy played a crucial role in his transformation.

Such shifts have become the cornerstone of his peace work. Today Alistair facilitates eighteen-month workshops that bring together people from all different sides of the conflict: Catholics and Protestants, victims and perpetrators, paramilitary and police. In a spirit of empathy, participants tell and listen to each other’s stories. They discover, as Alistair learned, that “By sharing my experience, I show listeners that I [have] a story to tell, that [I’m not] without humanity, that [I’m not] a monster” (Little, 163). In these moments of humanization, psychological barriers dissolve. Catholics and Protestants, killers and victims, imagine themselves not as different identity groups irreconcilable to each other, but as human beings, caught up in the oceanic forces of a wide social tragedy too deep and powerful to deny.

For Alistair, when we see the human in each other, our psychological and moral resistance to each other lessens. We see both ourselves and enemy alike as trying to do what we think is right, discovering all too late how flawed our understanding of “the right thing to do” can be. We see
the other less as a monster and more as a human who, as any of us could, has made flawed choices. Compassionate respect for the other starts to grow, and with it, eventually, understanding and maybe even concern for the other’s welfare. In all, this healing and reconciliation begins.

The great obstacle to Alistair’s approach is a mind frame that organizes people into distinct and divisive moral categories: murderous Catholics versus self-defending Protestants (or vice versa), innocent victims versus monstrous perpetrators. From Alistair’s view, this kind of categorization only seems to reinforce axes along which conflict can be perpetuated.

It is also the sort of categorizing that our feeling of moral horror for the act of killing tends to produce in our psyches. In the same way that I was hesitant to shake Alistair’s hand, when we feel that horror for a murderous act, we see the perpetrator as different, degraded, having at some stage “lost their humanity” and now holding a lesser moral status. When we feel that horror we cannot understand why the other has committed such an atrocity.

Alistair strives against this by emphasizing two things. First, he emphasizes that the capacity for tremendous violence is latent in all of us, shared by merit of our common humanity. Where some of us commit great violence and others do not, it tends to come down to a difference in social conditions. Some of us are unfortunate enough to wind up in circumstances (for example, being raised in a war zone) that make manifest our worst latent capacities.

Alistair writes, “Most of the people caught up in the violence of Northern Ireland are normal people, just like those who haven’t been caught up in conflict, but they’ve committed acts of violence that have devastated the lives of others. It’s the worst aspect of human nature but it’s still human nature. It’s not the sort of thing we want to acknowledge because it... becomes the responsibility of us all to create the kind of society that doesn’t force some of its members to live out the dark sides of their natures” (Little, 217).

Second, Alistair stresses moral complexity and ambiguity, breaking down the lines that define some of us as “good” or “innocent” and others as “bad” or “monstrous.” Rather, he suggests, none of us are monolithically good or bad.

In “bad” people, then, he finds emergent good: “[A]s human beings we find it easier if people stick to the labels that we give them. So paramilitaries are evil in the eyes of many. Many of us did do evil things, though we thought we were right to do them at the time. Yet when the opportunity arose we debated the issues, changed our thinking, met with ‘our enemy’ and began to work for peace...” (174).

In “good” people, he finds bad. “[People] often feel comfortable with the idea of the victim hitting out and wounding the perpetrator... but not the perpetrator fighting back. That seems to be because the victim is seen as the innocent party, the good guy, and the perpetrator is the guilty one who deserves all he gets. [But this only] suggests that they think some human beings are of less worth than others... If they felt able to justify an act of inhumanity against me because I was a perpetrator, what did it say about them?” (205).

Ultimately it strikes us that in conflicts like Northern Ireland’s there may be no real moral line between victims and perpetrators. Rather, there is a host of victims on either side of the gun, struggling with different forms of victimization. Alistair writes that he is “seen as a man who created victims, not a man who was one,” but he “knew that [he’d] become a perpetrator in response to being a victim of the conflict” (158–9).

With the mind frame of reconciliation Alistair works so hard to encourage, the space opens up for enemies to meet each other with kindness and grace. Alistair punctuates his autobiography with examples of “the grace I experienced from victims who, despite the grief caused by people like me, offered support.” On his journey away from violence, these small moments of grace played a crucial role. They “kept [him] going time and again” (164). When he frequently met the opposite reaction—rejection, revulsion for his past—Alistair would wonder, “Sometimes I felt others would prefer if I remained a man of violence. That way I wouldn’t challenge their perspective” (173–4).

It can be argued that peacemaking in a place like Northern Ireland fundamentally just is the
alchemization of mind frames and relationships—from division, resistance, and enmity to respect, understanding, and grace—that Alistair Little, working with a secularized form of the New Testament ethic of reconciliation, is effecting.

When I think of violent conflict in Northern Ireland I am torn between two reactions. On one hand, there is empathy for everyone involved, and the deep desire to transform all the resentment and enmity in Northern Ireland into something more luminous: something workable, life-affirming, even loving. On the other hand, I feel righteous anger for the deeds committed by violent women and men, who seemed to lose in the fog of this war the raw horror which should signal to us all, in powerful tones, the evil of taking a human life.

Even though both of these reactions seem ethically required, they pull us in different directions. The latter, even if spurred on by an empathic feeling for the victims of violence, has the feel of law to it. It pushes us into making divisive moral categories between those who violate the law against killing and those that do not. The former compels us toward grace. It draws us toward dissolving or transcending those moral categories in the name of compassion for our common humanity.

Despite my anger, I am convinced that Northern Ireland itself is proof of, if nothing else, the practical importance of an ethic of grace and reconciliation. As imperfect creatures living imperfect lives, there is for us no perfect, royal road to peace, and I would never suggest that the kind of peacemaking Alistair exemplifies is the clear, singular answer to violent conflict. But the process of humanization that Alistair promotes has been indispensable to the successes of the Northern Irish peace process. For many commentators, the Northern Irish conflict largely hinged on intractable political disagreements. But in the relative peace of today's Northern Ireland, with hindsight we know that even the most polarized Catholic and Protestant groups can come together to find workable solutions to their issues. More fundamental were the psychological divisions—the hate, fear, mistrust, and prejudice—that kept the two communities from coming together to talk out their problems in the first place. As Alistair writes, "[I]t's easy to commit acts of violence against people you've demonized. You don't consider their pain. You don't consider their families" (169). In this, the rehumanization of the other in the eyes of the most polarized of Northern Irish communities has been central to Irish peacemaking.

Yet in grappling with my reaction to shaking Alistair's hand I was eventually reminded of how indispensable it is to hold on to that feeling of horror for killing, as well.

My deep worry is that when we lose touch with that feeling of horror we begin down a slippery slope of accepting—perhaps not legitimating, but resigning ourselves to—a sense that humans killing humans is inevitable: that in our tragic circumstances, inherently sinful creatures that we are, we have to understand that killing simply will happen. Our consolation, our comfort, is that God will forgive us if we repent, and whatever damage is wrought need not be permanent on society. By being graceful with each other, understanding and through our increasing knowledge of peacemaking, human beings are able to find a way to refashion peace after our violent outbursts. The consequences of killing are not insurmountable. It is a sin that we do not want, but one with which we can learn to live.

Later in life, a mature and long-transformed Alistair Little has dealings with the family of the man he killed decades ago, and hears (second hand) about the "anger, pain and loss" of the victim's brother. "Because I was responsible for his pain," writes Alistair, "what I heard pierced my heart... I tried to think about the boy I was then, and found myself wondering yet again, how could I have done what I did. Then again, I had to acknowledge that I, like any other human being in certain circumstances, had the capacity to kill" (204).

We can debate whether this is a shirking of personal responsibility for the killing or not. But what I want to draw our attention to is how, in order to maintain the graceful attitude of reconciliation, Alistair applies to himself the same moral ambiguity he applies when reconciling...
victims and perpetrators in his workshops. This murder was a tragedy, but he must accept that this is the sad condition of being human.

At what point, does this acceptance of the tragic human condition—gracious, compassion­ate, and conducive to reconciliation—become a narrative that erodes our resistance to the moral imperative against killing humans: against an evil we should not cease to resist.

While it seems theologically undeniable, among Christians at least, that there is no scale of higher and lower sins, we can certainly recognize that some sins result in more damage than others. Killing steals everything from the killed, every possible hope, opportunity, experience once written in his future. There is no act more damaging. We must accept ourselves as creatures that will never transcend our sinful natures by our own accord, but still we can draw a line under the most damaging sins and say, “and yet, not this!”

In this I think Martin Luther King, Jr., must be right when he sermonizes, “How can evil be cast out of our individual and collective lives?... [N]either God nor man will individually bring the world's salvation. Rather both man and God, made one in a marvelous unity of purpose... can... drive out the deadly cancer of sin” (140). In the continuing process of the Kingdom of Heaven erupting into the kingdom of earth, our choices have some role to play.

So while I agree it would be ugly and wrong not to shake Alistair’s hand, while I have nothing but reverence for his profoundly important work as a peacemaker, and while I think it is crucial to promote the ethic of reconciliation he now embodies, not only for Northern Ireland but for all of us, I cannot apologize for feeling discomfort in the presence of a killer, any more than I would feel in my own skin should I one day become a murderer.

In this, I think I say no more than Alistair Little has expressed of himself. He too remains conflicted, torn between these two orientations. He conducts his peace work without “a sense of having redeemed myself. There is no inner peace... and I think that's the price you pay for being involved in violence.” Later he writes, “It's said that those who most need forgiveness are those that have least right to it, [and] I don't think it's for me to seek it out.” Yet he hopes, “As I continue in this work, maybe those who hear my story will not begrudge me experiences of grace” (Little, 221).

Alistair, myself, Northern Ireland, perhaps the world: in the face of great violence we sit conflicted between two ethical requirements: graceful reconciliation and moral horror. Philosophers and theologians, I suspect, will see this conflict as simply a place to start their investigations: a problem to be solved, answers patiently waiting. But I think that is a mistake, treating something as complex as Northern Ireland—as human life—as a Rubik’s cube: a puzzle to twist and turn until the solution reveals itself.

Instead, I suspect, the only way to avoid this conflict is nonviolence: the active commitment to never killing humans in the first place.

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Works Cited


FISH OR BIRD BODY

Blue heron on the bank
    purple gradient of wing
strained neck to pluck a fish
    from the stream.

What is it like
    to see that great shadow
hover above? I'm trying not to
    make this a metaphor
but I have to ask
which I would be: fish
or bird, the water, the dam?

    The heron swallows
a sleek length of trout and I
imagine it convulsing like jonah
    inside the whale except
there is another metaphor
and now I am asking god how he calls
    the fish food and not the man and I am asking
again what I am—
    fish or bird or man?
All of them convulsing
    each inside the other?

Kristin George Bagdanov
Keep On
Pete Seeger
Jennifer Forness

Kim Alexander is a self-described "jamvangelist" who has a passion for jamming with friends and encouraging others to make music together. She wrote a letter to Pete Seeger last August, describing the impact his life and music has had on her own. She was disappointed, although not surprised, when she did not receive an immediate response from the ailing ninety-four-year-old. Instead, she continued to organize monthly music jams in her community, an activity inspired by Seeger. Alexander did not hear from Seeger before he died on January 27 of this year.

Among all the hats Seeger wore during his long life—singer, songwriter and collector, banjo player, social activist—it may well be for his role as community music organizer that we will best remember him. No matter what Seeger was doing, whether protesting during the Labor movement or standing with the 99 percent during the Occupy protests, he encouraged everyone to sing with him, with their neighbors, together. He believed that singing together could change the world, and he worked tirelessly to fight injustices through song.

Seeger learned to sing and play from his musicologist father and concert violinist mother. With his father and stepmother, he collected rural folk music and discovered the humor, passion, and tragedy in that music. His early music influences included the great blues singer Lead Belly and his soon-to-be close friend Woody Guthrie. He moved to New York City in 1938 and soon was organizing musicians to sing benefits for union groups during the 1940s.

Seeger's passion for organizing people to sing together is demonstrated in one of his greatest accomplishments, the use of "We Shall Overcome" during the Civil Rights Movement. The song itself was published by Charles Albert Tindley in 1901 as "I'll Overcome Someday." During the Labor movement and early in the Civil Rights Movement, Seeger and other musicians began to use the song during protests. Seeger is credited with changing the lyrics to "We Shall Overcome." "I will overcome" focuses on the individual, but Seeger changed the song to acknowledge the power that comes from the people and for the people.

Many of Seeger's songs are meant to be sung by large groups. "If I Had a Hammer," written with Lee Hayes, changes one word per verse, which makes it easy to lead in a rally or concert. Its lilting rhythm and narrow vocal range are ideal for the amateur singer. Most important, however, are the lyrics. The first three verses explain what can be done with a hammer, a bell, and a song. The fourth verse pulls everything together when the singer realizes that the hammer of justice, the bell of freedom, and the song of love are always available. By singing the song, especially in a group, one engages these tools to work for change alongside the brothers and sisters all over this land.

Some of Seeger's songs became big hits for other performers. "If I Had a Hammer" made the Top Ten for Peter, Paul, and Mary, and "Turn! Turn! Turn!" topped the charts for The Byrds. Adapted from Ecclesiastes, the song affirms that "To everything (turn, turn, turn) there is a season." Seeger's contribution to the lyrics consists of the title and the last line, which call us to action. The song declares that love, hate, war, and peace all have their own season, but it is never too late for the season of peace. The melody is easy to sing along to, the refrain rising up on the text and stepping back down on the "turn, turn, turn" phrase. The verses do a simple turn around the same three notes. The song's simple melody invites everyone to sing along, whether with The Byrds' recording or at a concert.

While many of his songs have religious overtones, Seeger himself was not a "religious" person. He technically belonged to a Unitarian Universalist church, but admitted in an interview with beliefnet that it was a rouse to use their rehearsal space. He did, however, describe himself as a spiritual person. He saw in every person the gift of love and the ability to be a good neighbor. In the same 2006 interview with beliefnet he said, "According to
my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God."

Seeger may not have been interested in organized religion, but he was interested in organizing people. He was involved with almost every social movement of the last hundred years. His work began with the Labor movement and took on a national presence during the Civil Rights movement. He tirelessly campaigned against the Vietnam War and both Iraq Wars, has championed environmental rights and international disarmament, and, at the age of ninety-two, stood in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Whether it was a stadium event or a small concert in an elementary school auditorium, Seeger was there to lend his support through song.

Seeger was often criticized for his firm beliefs and was even jailed for them, albeit briefly. In 1955, he appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee and refused to plead the Fifth Amendment (as many others had done before him), explaining, "I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this." Seeger was unwilling to sacrifice his fellow neighbors for his own reputation, and there were periods in his life when it was difficult to find work performing. But even when he was shunned for his beliefs, he performed wherever he could, making music with others.

Seeger was often recognized for his music and his influence on other musicians. He received three Grammy awards, along with a Lifetime Achievement award and was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He also received the National Medal of Arts and the Kennedy Center Award for his service. Seeger is often seen as the father of the folk music revival and strongly influenced singers such as Bob Dylan; Peter, Paul, and Mary; Joan Boaz; and Bruce Springsteen. But this kind of recognition was not the most important thing to Seeger himself. In a speech during Seeger's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Arlo Guthrie said, "I can't think of a single event in Pete's life that is probably less important to him" than the Weavers' #1 hit "Goodnight, Irene." Seeger was more interested in making music than fame.

Seeger will be best remembered for his desire to make music with whatever community of which he found himself a part. Seeger recognized the power of music to change lives. He saw firsthand the change that took place when thousands of people joined together in song during the Civil Rights Movement. He could take a room of nervous strangers and, through leading them to sing together, make them into a community. His clear and gentle voice, along with his old-timey banjo playing, led people away from their individual troubles to a place where peace is possible. Seeger never performed a concert; instead, he jammed with others, always encouraging them to sing.

Kim Alexander was sad when she learned that Pete Seeger had died. The next day she received a huge surprise, a letter from Pete Seeger. Just days before he died, he had finally written a response to her letter. In it, he congratulated her on her work and encouraged her to keep jamming with others. He acknowledged that he was getting old and that his health was failing. "You stay well" he told her, "keep on." Keep on singing, keep on playing, keep on working for justice. Thank you for your music Pete. We'll keep on too.

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THE ESTRANGEMENT

At noon I eat light, the light
of the world; in the evening I eat a sailboat
with its spinnaker full of last bits.

The rudder turns my heart, & leaving behind a buoy, a line, an anchor,
I drift over the surface of what could be linseed oil.

I am the same as a loon, a paintbrush
calling for paint. Thickly I comprehend all languages
including the keel

that holds me upright. The star field above the hillside dotes upon the ironclad
colors of the insomniac, yet

in this space, faced with immediate
danger, one cannot help asking again for the invisible.

L. S. Klatt
Weaving Poetry and Scripture  
Tania Runyan’s Second Sky  
Nathaniel Lee Hansen

RELEASED IN NOVEMBER 2013, TANIA Runyan’s third full-length collection, Second Sky, is the tenth book in the Poeima Poetry Series by Cascade Books. Arranged in one continuous section, the fifty-seven poems bring together a contemporary woman’s experiences with the narrative of Paul’s life (including his pre-conversion days) and with the words and ideas contained in his New Testament letters. With subject matter that touches on the seemingly mundane and everyday, the global, the spiritual, and the miraculous, Second Sky doesn’t flinch from the difficulties inherent in living a life of faith in the twenty-first century.

Just as in her prior work, this collection contains exceptionally convincing persona poems including such characters as Onesimus (referred to in Philemon), a Philippian prison guard, and Ananias, but these three voices are connected with the book’s primary individual, Paul. Runyan recounts and imagines Paul’s experiences in such poems as “Paul Discusses His Healings at Ephesus;” “Paul Proclaims in the Synagogue;” and “Paul Insists He is Not a God;” among others.

One of the more intriguing Paul persona poems is one that is actually pre-Paul: “Saul Complains About the Way.” In it, he growls, “As I bind their wrists, they pray for me—I a Hebrew of Hebrews needing prayer!” We see his frustration, anger, arrogance, and most tellingly, his religious pride.

Second Sky, in some respects, represents a departure of sorts for Runyan. For one, its cast of characters is smaller than the cast of biblical women of A Thousand Vessels (Word Farm, 2011) and the cast of biblical and historical figures in Simple Weight (FutureCycle, 2010). The polyvocality so evident in those prior collections yields to a more tightly sustained trajectory in this book. As a result, it gives the impression of an even greater cohesiveness, a more challenging vision and mission. This smaller cast of characters demonstrates an ambition that speaks to Runyan’s growth as a poet: creating and arranging a sustained vision less dependent upon those varied voices.

The collection derives its name from the poem “Approach with Boldness,” a twenty-line poem that focuses on the geothermal pools of Yellowstone National Park and the horrific deaths of those individuals who were ignorant of the pools’ destructive powers. The poem’s closing moments find Runyan pondering how “the first hunter to wander” into the area “thousands of years ago”:

must have thought he discovered a second sky breaking through the ground, a miracle of sorts,
if he knew about those, radiating in the snow.
He laughed, bent his face over the rising steam, and thought nothing of reaching in.

Much of the book deals with death, in both physical and spiritual senses. And on a related note, these poems address the quandary of suffering and the horrors associated with it, and on occasion the suffering and its horrors as experienced by those most vulnerable.

Her ambition is exhibited not only as she incorporates the words and ideas of Paul into her poems but also as she wrestles with them. “Man is Without Excuse” begins with the biting wit characteristic of her poetry: “Perhaps you could say that in Rome, Paul, / where the olive trees of the Seven Hills // string their pearls of rain against the sky.” The remainder of the poem follows a refugee fighting for survival in a conflict-laden region not known for its belief-compelling scenery and environment.

Second Sky explores various elements of the Christian experience and teases out their
significance. For example, baptism (despite its various understandings, both theologically and practically) symbolizes renewal. So "Buried With Him In His Death" (the phrase from Paul's letter to the Romans) depicts this idea in a literal way. The speaker has in fact been crucified with Christ (to use Paul's terms), buried with him in his death: "Then there was the mess of prying us loose: / wailing women and splintered lumber, / flesh stub-
bornly sticking to the nails." Note the us. Then there is the haunting last stanza, the speaker in the tomb with Christ:

I lay in the cave and wanted to touch you,
but my hands were no longer mine.
They closed in on themselves like daylilies.
The stone rumbled over the window of light,
and then our difficult rising began.

Note also the complication implied by the word "difficult." This is faith that resists quick and easy acceptance.

A pronounced structural element of the collection is the inclusion of scriptural references adjacent to each poem's title. These references, along with the scripture index, might turn away potential readers hostile or perhaps even indifferent toward Christianity, those unwilling to engage the poems and their potential implications. Yet the reading of the poems and their respective references creates a conversation, one that is rich and complex in the way that good literature is. The effect is to showcase the intertextuality of Runyan's work, and especially, her engagement with biblical ideas.

As has been the case in her prior collections, these poems are accessible in the most positive senses of that word. Still, the more one knows of the biblical narratives involving Paul, the better. I would even go so far as to suggest readers take in the collection with Bible in hand, reading each poem, reading the relevant scripture reference, and then rereading the poem. Beyond encountering and appreciating the intertextuality of each poem, there is also the delight resulting from the cumulative intertextuality occurring as readers make their way from the first poem to the last one.

We also see Runyan stretching herself in two long poems, "The Road to Damascus" and "Pilgrimage." These multi-sectional poems are also multi-vocal, and they are some of my favorites for many reasons, a main reason being their sense of ambition. "The Road to Damascus" con-gles the speaker's own conversion with that of Paul. Readers witness her trademark humor in the opening stanza:

Mine is not a sin-tacular story
of stumbling up the steps to the heroin clinic,
prostituting my way through prom night
or mangling my children in the slot machine—
no crazy here—

Indeed, this poem is one of several that describe the speaker's own spiritual journey, the tensions present within Christian faith. Whether describing spiritual unease, the terror of flying, the thrill of a roller coaster, or the outcome of health problems, the speaker does so with a vulnerability and openness that feels genuine without wandering into the trappings of self-pity.

As the title hints, the ideas of perception and renewal play a role in shaping the book. "Ananias Speaks to Saul" ends with these two moving unrhymed couplets:

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This healing is not easy. Something silver falls from your eyes. Brother, something like the scales of a struggling fish scatter at my feet.

Here we see Runyan’s skill with figurative language and her skill in fleshing out the poignant scene mentioned only in passing in Acts 9. The Second of the title implies the opportunity for something new to be done, something new to be experienced, all via the senses. For as Paul proclaims in “Paul Speaks After Blinding Elymas,” “Sometimes you must do out of love what devastates the senses.”

Arguably, one of the most famous passages in the Bible, and in particular in Paul’s writings, is the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, often called the “Love” chapter. So how does the poet write about such a familiar passage? She takes the phrase “The Greatest of These” and provides the reader with a listing of all that we should love, the list containing the unexpected: Love “Sends a gift to the wall-punching uncle” and “Yields the last word on the Facebook fight.” It also “Embraces the woman whose child screams / on the floor of the cereal aisle.” She concludes the poem fittingly, noting that love “Echoes long after the cymbals have died.” Here again is the weaving of poetry and scripture.

Tania Runyan’s poetry does not offer readers uncomplicated, unthinking faith. There is no kind of “easy believism” to be found within the pages. Rather these poems reveal the paradoxical and complicated avenues of faith. Readers will be challenged by these poems, not only by the content, but also by the implications they create in their own journey of faith, whatever the progress of that journey.

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ON BEING ALIVE YESTERDAY

What a day it was Sunday, being alive. It all began with me waking up in my bed. Coffee tasted soapy, and the air felt used,

but I was like that Italian boy we saw on the plane kissing his holy card before the pilot revved the engines. And then when we were aloft,

remember how he took a picture of his breakfast, leaning back as far as he could to get it all in, and then another picture of the empty tray?

I was that boy yesterday in my old maroon teeshirt, eating the white meat of a chicken and a small red roasted potato with butter.

John Ruff
Hosea Goes to the Opera

George C. Heider

For the past two seasons, I have been trying something utterly "out of the box" for me: I subscribed to the Lyric Opera in Chicago. I have always had a predilection for choral music, as opposed to, say, symphonic (maybe that is part of "Being Lutheran"?), and now that the home nest is empty, it is time to try new things. Grand opera qualifies on a grand scale.

I confess that many of its subtleties simply escape me. I suspect that it is like letting me taste a particularly fine vintage wine: my palate is not trained to appreciate what I am experiencing. The plots often seem hopelessly contrived, and with all due respect to those who constructed an extraordinary acoustical space at the Lyric (where no singer is ever miked), the seats do seem like prototypes for economy class in airlines. But the combination of solo voices, ensembles, and the orchestra does on occasion break through even to my neophyte ears as sublime.

Then, at the final production for this season, I was caught unawares and seized by the heart. The opera was La clemenza di Tito by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The program notes informed me that the work was loosely inspired by the life of Titus Flavius Caesar Vespasianus Augustus, Roman Emperor from AD 79 to 81.

Ah, yes, that Titus. The one who took over as the Roman general besieging Jerusalem at the end of the First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–73), when the legions elevated his father, Vespasian, to emperor, displacing Vitellius. The one who contrived to break through the city walls and then to burn the Second Temple in the year 70 on the very day on which the Babylonians had done the same to the First Temple in 587/6 BC. To this day, Jews mourn the day as Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the lunar month of Av, reading thereon the book of Lamentations. This Titus then enjoyed a "triumph" back in the capital city; one can visit the Roman Forum to this day and see on the Arch of Titus the plain image of a menorah and other loot being hauled away. This Titus is the inspiration for Mozart's "Tito." Just what kind of clemency did Mozart have in mind?

The opera makes no mention of the war in the East. Rather, it tells of another incident in Titus's life (which may well be fabricated out of whole cloth). It features Vitellia, daughter of the emperor who had been deposed by Tito's father and who sees Tito as a usurper and feels herself entitled to selection as Tito's consort (including the title "empress") as her just deserts. Vitellia manipulates Tito's dear friend Sesto, who has a hopeless crush on Vitellia, into agreeing to assassinate Tito. However, Sesto botches the job and is apprehended, tried, and sentenced to death by the Roman Senate. Tito must simply sign the death warrant.

Yet Tito is deeply conflicted. He confronts his dear friend in search of some pretext by which to pardon him, but Sesto is so determined to protect Vitellia that he will allow no mitigation of his own guilt. Sesto exits the stage, having confessed both his betrayal of his fealty owed the emperor, and, far worse, that he was a traitor to his friend. Tito is left, warrant in hand, expressing in a recitative the loneliness of supreme leadership:

Where was more insolent disloyalty ever heard?
I must avenge his disregard
And scorn for my clemency.
Avenge! ... Can the heart of Titus
Nurture such feelings?... Well, let him live...
Then do the laws mean nothing?*

And, sure enough, he pardons not merely Sesto, but, when Vitellia confesses her own role as instigator of the plot, he pardons her and all the co-conspirators,
and even challenges the Roman gods to sit in judgment on his choice:

Let us see whether others' perfidy
Or my clemency will be the more enduring.

By the time of the climactic choice, we had been bathed in the incomparable melodies of Mozart for something on the order of two hours. As Tito struggled with what to do, I was transported in mind and spirit to hear another voice—older than Mozart, older even than Titus. I was listening to the prophet Hosea, speaking eight centuries before Titus (and twenty-five before Mozart), as he described YHWH's own internal turmoil over what to do with his favorite son:

11 1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. 5 They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. 6 The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. 7 My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. (NRSV, here and throughout)

More than once, I have choked up, as I taught this passage in an Old Testament class. What father (or mother) does not know the agony of watching things go badly, as a beloved child begins to make his or her own choices that have lasting consequences? What parent does not at such moments recall with tenderness—even tears—times of unalloyed affection and trust, when the child was small? The Old Testament is full of so-called “anthropomorphisms,” by which God is described in human terms. Yet all too often the images that stick in our minds are those of rage and judgment (cf. the recent film Noah). When we dwell on those kinds of Old Testament images, Christians embrace in effect what the church spurned as heresy in fact in the second century: Marcionism, which rejects the Old Testament for its God of Wrath, allegedly distinct from the New Testament God of Love. Careful readers of Hosea know better. Following the struggle within the very Being of God described above, the Lord opts for mercy over judgment:

8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. 9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Both God and Mozart's Tito choose clemency. For a Caesar, that could be risky. Another article that I read on the opera suggested that the head of the Praetorian Guard, Publio, might well have taken Tito's decision as a sign of weakness and moved to replace him afterward. Such are the risks of mercy, in governance, if not in families. But God still comes down on the side of mercy, and he invites us to do likewise in our own works (or “opera,” for the Latin-minded). He even doubles down on that choice when he sends another Son.

But that's another opera. We know how that one will turn out. But God only knows when “the fat lady sings.”

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* All translations from the libretto are taken from www.impresario.ch/libretto/libmozcle_e.htm, accessed on March 31, 2014.
QUIET DAYS

Our quiet days are numbered—
our unquiet ones are numberless.

The still, small voice of God...
who has heard it even once?

Down goes the mole blindly into darkness,
travelling through earth its body wide.

The fox in the hayfield
turns and runs for the woods,
stops far off and looks back.

Who will clear the world of its noise
without making a single sound?

Who will bring us the words
that turn words into silence?

Our quiet days are numbered—
but our unquiet ones are numberless.

Thom Satterlee
When the Supreme Court in late April decided the case Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, it again directed attention to what is surely one of the most peculiar issues in American politics. The Court's own opinions on the use of affirmative action in higher education have been frequently confusing and unsatisfactory. Yet this muddle accurately reflects Americans' broader ambivalence about a policy that our own political ideals might seem both to endorse and to condemn.

The Court's confusion has been evident since 1978, when it decided Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, issuing its first major opinion on the use of affirmative action in higher education. Bakke examined a policy of the University of California Medical School at Davis, which reserved sixteen seats out of one hundred in its total entering class for qualified minority applicants. In deciding the case, the Court, on the one hand, upheld the use of affirmative action by a university as a means of assembling a diverse student body, but, on the other hand, struck down the particular system in use at the UC-Davis Medical School. Although a university might fairly treat race as one among various “plus” factors taken into account when considering a particular application, the Court argued, each student was nevertheless entitled to individualized consideration. A rigid numerical quota such as that at Davis did not grant such consideration to every student on an equal basis, because while minority applicants could compete for all one hundred of the available seats, white applicants could compete for only eighty-six of them.

Ironically, however, only one justice on the Court, Lewis Powell, Jr., actually held this view. Four justices would have simply rejected the use of race in admissions decisions altogether. Four others thought not only that the use of racial preferences was constitutional, but also that the particular program at UC-Davis passed muster. Powell joined the former group in striking down the medical school's program, but he joined the latter in agreeing that race could be validly taken into account in order to achieve the goal of diversity. Powell's middle-of-the-road position—that universities may consider race as long as they do not employ a numerical quota system—thus determined the outcome of the case, even though not one other justice agreed with him.

In 2003, Bakke was replayed in almost uncanny fashion when the Court decided a pair of companion cases, Gratz v. Bollinger and Grutter v. Bollinger. Both involved challenges to affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan. Gratz dealt with the university's undergraduate admissions program, which employed a "points system," in which applicants received up to 150 points for a variety of factors. Applicants receiving a total of at least one hundred points were admitted, and students from underrepresented minority groups were automatically awarded twenty points, one fifth of the total required for admission. Grutter, the second case, took up the corresponding policy at Michigan's law school. Instead of using a points system, the law school gave each applicant "individualized, holistic review... giving serious consideration to all the ways"—including race along with other qualities—"an applicant might contribute to a diverse educational environment."

With Justice Sandra Day O'Connor this time playing the role of Lewis Powell, the Court again managed to split the difference. It struck down the undergraduate admissions policy at issue in Gratz, holding that the automatic assignment of
twenty points to every minority applicant was akin to Bakke’s quota system in denying each student equal and individualized consideration. But it upheld the law school’s policy in Grutter, arguing that the holistic review employed there satisfied the requirements of equal protection. As in Bakke, however, the Court fractured badly; only one other justice, Stephen Breyer, joined O’Connor in striking down the one policy and upholding the other. Four justices would have struck down both programs; three justices would have upheld both. The victorious middle-ground position thus had less support than either alternative.

Schuette in turn arose directly from the controversy in Gratz and Grutter. Following those decisions, Michigan voters approved a 2006 ballot proposition that amended the state constitution in order to forbid the use of affirmative action in public education, including the state’s public universities. Opponents challenged that outcome, arguing that the amendment to Michigan’s state constitution was invalid because it violated the Equal Protection Clause of the United States Constitution. The Supreme Court in Schuette rejected their position, holding that Michigan voters were indeed entitled to prohibit the use of affirmative action if they so desired.

The issue in Schuette is thus somewhat different from that in Bakke or Gratz/Grutter: not whether affirmative action is constitutional, but whether voters may amend their state constitution in such a way as to deny public universities the option of employing affirmative action. As Justice Kennedy put it in his opinion for a plurality of the Court, “This case is not about how the debate over racial preferences should be resolved. It is about who may resolve it.” Six justices agreed that the voters were entitled to resolve it through a popular referendum and constitutional amendment. Yet these six produced four separate opinions among them, not one of which received the support of more than three justices. And the longest opinion of all—longer than all of the others combined—was an impassioned dissent from Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who complained bitterly that the Court was being blind to the reality of continued racial inequality.

The Court’s efforts to deal with affirmative action have thus been noteworthy for their consistent inconsistency. They are consistent in hewing to what I have called a middle-of-the-road position. In somewhat simplified but not inaccurate form, we might summarize it thus: some consideration of race is acceptable, but numerical quotas are not. Because the Court has been so deeply fractured, however, with no approach able to win the support of a majority of justices, it has failed to delineate any consistent rationale for its decisions. From a legal point of view, this is unsatisfactory. For the sake not only of voters and politicians, but also of lower courts seeking to apply precedents in subsequent cases, it would be preferable for the Court to settle on a clear rationale that could predictably indicate what is permitted and what is not. From the standpoint of moral or political philosophy, however, there may be something to be said for the resolution the Court has—almost despite itself—reached, even if few individual justices have endorsed it. We can see this by considering the arguments about affirmative action that are standard in our political debates. For, much like the Court’s decision, these arguments are also frequently muddled and unsatisfactory.

Conservatives typically oppose affirmative action or any use of race-based preferences. They like to cite Justice John Marshall Harlan’s ringing dissent in Plessy v. Ferguson: “Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.” To affirm with the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal means that every citizen is entitled to be judged on his or her own merits, and not simply lumped together with other members of a race, as if one’s personal talents, interests, and experiences were all outweighed by the single fact of skin color. To be sure, the United States long failed to live up to this fundamental principle of equality. But we did not fight a civil war and amend the Constitution merely to replace slavery’s brutal caste system with a morass of ethnic preferences that perpetuate racial balkanization instead of overcoming it.

This is a familiar argument, but it is in some ways a strange one for conservatives to make. Conservatives emphasize the value of tradition,
inheriting from our forebears a way of life and its corresponding values. They stress the importance of patriotism and of national pride. They affirm Edmund Burke’s famous description of society as a contract stretching across generations: “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” Yet this perspective arguably lends support to affirmative action. For if we are part of an ancestral community reaching back into the past and forward into the future, then we bear some continuing responsibility for its faults. We cannot take pride in our country’s achievements without also accepting our share of guilt for the injustices it has done. And if we have benefited from those past injustices, then we have some obligation to address their consequences in the present.

Liberals, by contrast, typically defend affirmative action as an appropriate way of leveling the racial playing field by giving a hand up to minorities who have suffered various forms of oppression, especially the centuries of slavery and segregation inflicted upon African-Americans. Yet the obstacles that such policies create for less advantaged white Americans—the most advantaged, of course, are not the ones who bear affirmative action’s costs—rest uneasily with core liberal values. Liberals are deeply reluctant to see social costs imposed upon people without clear individual responsibility. We should not assume, for example, that criminals “deserve” severe punishments, or welfare recipients a place at the bottom of the economic totem pole, without first considering whether factors beyond their control—poor education, broken homes, the loss of low-skill jobs due to globalization—have left them unfairly disadvantaged. Yet a white student who has met the qualifications for college admission but because of her race is denied a place given instead to an equally or less qualified minority applicant—the situation of Jennifer Gratz in the case bearing her name—is unquestionably being burdened on the basis of something for which she bears no responsibility.

Indeed, the insistence that we not distribute social benefits or burdens on the basis of undeserved factors is at the heart of the most creative and influential contemporary statement of liberal political philosophy. In A Theory of Justice (1971), John Rawls described how principles of justice should be deduced from the “original position,” a hypothetical situation in which we know nothing about ourselves that might unfairly influence our choice of principles: not our sex, or our economic class, or our particular skills, or, of course, our race. These factors are all, Rawls says, “arbitrary from a moral point of view” and thus should not be allowed to bias our conception of justice. It is difficult to see, however, how such a formula could produce anything but color-blind principles of justice. The white college applicant clearly bears no responsibility for his race, and to disadvantage him because of it is, as Rawls might say, to treat him not as an end, but rather as a means to the achievement of a social goal. Justice cannot mean that we must treat blacks as ends but may treat whites as means. We might expect liberals, rather, to borrow a line from Justice John Roberts, who, in a decision dealing with segregation in Seattle schools, said, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discrimination on the basis of race.”

O ne could, of course, give different accounts of both the conservative and liberal positions than I have given here. But these arguments suffice to illustrate the problematic nature of affirmative action, for they show that one could have good reasons for expecting conservatives to support and liberals to oppose it. That the opposite is the case merely reveals how difficult it is to resolve the controversy over
affirmative action on the basis of political principles familiar to us from our ordinary political discourse. Perhaps, indeed, those principles do not determine a particular, “correct” resolution of the issue at all. Perhaps, instead, we are simply thrown back upon the need for prudential judgments about what will best serve the nation and heal its racial wounds over the long run.

In that spirit, we might look to one last feature of Justice O'Connor’s opinion in Grutter for a token of wisdom. While upholding the University of Michigan’s use of race in law school admission, she also indicated that the justification for such racial preferences grows weaker over time, so that at some point they will no longer be compatible with the Constitution’s demand for equal protection. She even sought to set a deadline: “It has been 25 years since Justice Powell [in Bakke] first approved the use of race to further an interest in student body diversity in the context of public higher education.... We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary....”

This sounds more like a legislative than a judicial judgment, and as a piece of constitutional interpretation it is perhaps rather unsatisfactory. Yet it may contain a great deal of political prudence. If society is indeed a partnership “between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born,” then we do indeed have a duty to redress our ancestors’ wrongs. At some point, however, the claims of those “yet to be born” become compelling. As Justice O'Connor suggests, there is a kind of statute of limitations—perhaps lacking a clear cut-off date, but existing nonetheless—on the demands of intergenerational justice. It is one thing for the sins—the political sins, at any rate—of the fathers to be visited upon their sons, another for them to be visited upon their grandsons and great-grandsons, as if the debt could never be paid. If those who are living accept responsibility for the sins of those who are dead, we may look forward to the day when those who are yet to be born, white and black alike, will finally find their past debts paid off. Or at least forgiven.

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As an undergraduate several years ago at the University of Illinois, I participated in an informal discussion on non-violence led by a theologian whose name I did not recognize at the time, but was destined to become very familiar by the end of my studies: Stanley Hauerwas. And as a student unfamiliar with the person of Stanley Hauerwas, I came away from this discussion rather annoyed, confused, and possibly a bit jealous because of what I had experienced. It was no regular day in the University of Illinois Religious Studies Department.

At the time, I took great pride in my subversive mentality. My sense of self-importance as a "Christian among the secularists" made me confident in my assumption that I was on the side of Christ. I do not know at what point Hauerwas destroyed this self-image. All I know is that it began to happen the moment I left the meeting.

In the preface to his recent book Approaching the End (Eerdmans 2014), Hauerwas informs us that he understands himself to be a teacher, first and foremost, and that he hopes to be remembered as a teacher in the future. A teacher knows, he writes, that "every interaction with students... involves exchanges that are formative," including interactions about important matters like baseball (viii). Had he talked about baseball at this meeting I attended, I highly doubt I would have understood the point he was making. What I did understand was that Hauerwas was different and different in a way that made Christianity strange to me. Put simply, Hauerwas revealed to me that my Christianity was ordinary. It was less than just ordinary; he showed me that how I—and most Americans—think about our faith is downright boring.

My brief encounter with Hauerwas marked a turning point in my life, but that is because through Hauerwas I encountered another story. It was a story that yes, I had claimed to belong to... but how strange this story then appeared during the minutes of that meeting! Hence my confusion, annoyance, and jealousy, which quite possibly reveals the end for which God created Hauerwas: to shake up presumptuous Americans by scaring the hell out of their Christianity.

And so he did, and so he does. Approaching the End tackles questions of eschatology and the life of faith in the itinerant style for which Hauerwas is (in)famous. No single thread or thesis ties Approaching the End together, but that plays into the hands of Hauerwas who calls systematic analysis into question. It may be that faithful witness
requires adopting a variety of approaches, so that Christians never grow too confident about where they are going. This raises a curious issue for a book on eschatology. How can Hauerwas talk about the future, or the end, without knowing where Christians are going or even where they are? The ground is thereby undercut for prediction and speculation, forcing Christians to fall back upon their best guesses and sincere wishes.

But not quite. As Hauerwas reminds us in this book, to so define Christian eschatology in terms of the future only is to overlook its foundation in the past and the present. Christian eschatology takes its departure from the Christ-event which transforms our understanding of the nature of reality. To talk about “the end” is thus to talk about “the beginning,” says Hauerwas, for both beginning and end remain objects of Christian faith. In formal terms, this means eschatology must be approached through Christology. Hauerwas refuses to fix his gaze upon a murky and doubtful future, for the end of things has already arrived for Christians in the person and work of Christ.

Hauerwas refuses to fix his gaze upon a murky and doubtful future, for the end of things has already arrived for Christians in the person and work of Christ.

Not that the goal of Christian ethics is to antagonize rival enquiries, but a Christian ethics that fails to be Christian rather misses the point. If Hauerwas is right, then “creation” cannot be conceived apart from the cross, and thus Christians have no “ethic” that does not pass through the cross. For the last thing Christians want, certainly the last thing Hauerwas wants, is to make Christian ethics “useful” to the agendas of the world. But for Hauerwas, this does not intend to elevate the Christian above the non-Christian; rather, it forces Christians to take seriously what they claim to believe in. The challenge is perfectly captured in a classic Hauerwasian line: “For I take it to be crucial that Christians must live in such a manner that their lives are unintelligible if the God we worship in Jesus Christ does not exist” (67). For Hauerwas, this must mean not baptized secular ethics, not more “beliefs” sincerely held and proclaimed, but a call to faithful witness through a pacifist commitment: the renunciation of violence in the name of Jesus Christ.

According to Hauerwas, Christians witness to the truth not by witnessing to their beliefs, but by leading lives that show the world the truth of their beliefs. In an important essay addressing the role and necessity of witness, Hauerwas defends the provocative twofold claim that God “requires witnesses” (37), and that if God can be known without witnesses then the Christian God does not exist. Citing Kavin Rowe’s (2009) account of the early Christian martyrs, Hauerwas contends that Christian witness turns the pagan world “upside down” (the title of Rowe’s book) by re-narrating the entire universe as a story about God. Thus in light of the cross of Christ, everything must change. It is not simply for the sake of change that change must come about; Christ overturns entrenched assumptions about what it means to be human. Now, through the transformation Christ effects through the Church, Christians stand at the opposite end of the
prevailing powers-that-be. For Christians, faithful witness takes on eschatological significance to the extent that Christ defeated death and brought an end to the need for sacrifice. He brought an end to the sacrificial order at the heart of worldly power, such that Christians must now protest that power through commitment to non-violence. Revisiting themes of war and pacifism that have marked his career, Hauerwas invites us to think again about the implications of Christian faith if Christ truly is alive in the manner that Christians proclaim.

It is here of course that Hauerwas, having brought to prominence an important debate regarding Christianity and the state, has proved his most controversial among contemporary theologians. He shows no signs of backing down from his pacifist commitment, and continues to deliver jarring critiques of the prevailing neoliberal order that fosters public complacency in the face of state violence. For example,

Liberalism may well result in the production of a banal and flattened account of human existence, but such a form of life seems necessary if we are to be at peace with one another. Liberalism as a way of life depends on the creation of people who think there is nothing for which it is worth dying. Such a way of life was exemplified by President Bush, who suggested that the duty of Americans after September 11, 2001, was to go shopping. (70)

There is no neutral space in the Hauerwasian universe, and this includes the common presumption that Americans must rule the world. To up the ante, Hauerwas further argues that the "modern nation-state," of which America is exemplary, necessitates sacrifices of the highest order in order to legitimate its existence. The nation-state has "stepped into the place of religious belief," such that "[w]ar becomes the act of sacrifice by which the state sustains the assumption that, though we die, [the state] can and will continue to exist without end" (70). Forming a people whose self-understanding barely transcends their consumerist impulses, the modern nation-state creates the conditions that render warfare inevitable, while channeling this inevitability to sustain the state's existence, indeed its inevitability. Based on these remarks, it is not surprising that critics accuse Hauerwas of being careless. Whether or not he fully deserves the charge of being a "fideistic, sectarian tribalist" (70), Hauerwas speaks to things that no faithful Christian can stand to ignore and remain faithful. Eschatologically speaking, he reminds Christians that all have views about the future, and that the methods for securing those futures tell us who we are, and what we believe in.

Is Hauerwas extreme? Undoubtedly so, and if that is our only response to him, he has fulfilled his initial purpose. But to walk away from Hauerwas after having labeled him "extreme" is to abandon the conversation at the critical point. The extreme irrelevance of a crucified Lord ever remains for him the starting point. Whatever Christians believe in, surely they believe in this. In the world's eyes, Christ's death meant he failed to achieve his mission. Though Christians believe Christ sits triumphant at the right hand of the Father (Col. 3:1), the world can only "see" this truth through the witness of the Church.

The impetus behind this is John Howard Yoder. Through Yoder, Hauerwas became entranced with a vision of Christian faith whose instantiation takes visible form in the practices of the Church. Yoder taught Hauerwas that Christian pacifism is eschatologically determined, shaped by the cruciform narrative of God's victory in Christ. "Yoder represents a form of pacifism that assumes that a Christian understanding of war draws on an eschatological perspective unavailable to those who do not share the Christian worship of Christ" (135). What Christians do and refuse to do in the name of Jesus Christ, transforms eschatology from an academic study into a visible presence. There is no need to seek out conflict with the powers-that-be, no need to slink away to a Christian ghetto waiting the end times. The powers-that-be have Christians surrounded and earnestly demand their allegiance,
and the fact that Christians are giving it shows the struggle that still remains.

But what of the victory Christ already secures over the powers-that-be? Is it only through the Church that God accomplishes his purpose? Though for Hauerwas the starting point is the cross of Jesus Christ, one wonders whether the resurrection does not alter the shape of the narrative. There is not much resurrection in Approaching the End. Where it does appear, it serves to illuminate the “ironic logic” of the Christian’s existence: that because Christ is risen, Christian martyrdom “remains a consistent possibility” (61). This appears to lay the emphasis on crucifixion, not resurrection, as the event that determines the nature of Christian witness to the world. Must it be so? The resurrection, after all, marks the inauguration of the “new creation,” pointing the way toward the restoration of the world that God created. For Hauerwas, by contrast perhaps, our kinship with God comes not yet through a restored humanity, but through an embrace of our mortality. This would explain his return to questions surrounding suffering, disability, and death, which occupy the later portions of Approaching the End. According to Hauerwas, Christianity offers no program to improve the world, but teaches Christians how to die in the hope of a new future. Yet whether this gives due weight to the significance of resurrection, to somewhat reverse the charge that Hauerwas levels at Jean Porter, remains ambiguous within Hauerwas’s assessment of the Christian vocation.

That being said, Hauerwas’s account of what it means to “learn how to die” proves a powerful and challenging witness to the road that is the cross. In a moving chapter called “Bearing Reality” in which he explores the cruciform life, Hauerwas channels Gillian Rose in order to sum up his career. “If I could choose any epigraph that might summarize what my work has been about, it would be ‘keep your mind in hell and despair not’” (155). Despair not, of course, because despair is a sin. But keep your mind in hell? As a matter of fact, yes. The easiest thing in the world is to obscure the face of the world: to wipe away the hellish circumstances that implicate us all. Or to put it the way Rowan Williams does, in a quote Hauerwas loves: “the hardest thing in the world is to be where we are.”

For Hauerwas, the greatest enemy of Christian witness is sentimentalism, the tendency to shower our situation with sanctimonious cant (to borrow a phrase from David Bentley Hart). If Christians are called to anything, it is to bear the truth of reality by not retreating to where we want to be, but inhabiting where we are. To stare into the void of life in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit is to participate in Christ’s suffering as it overcomes the world. Hauerwas puts it thus: “The church cannot make the difficulty of reality less difficult. What I hope the church can do, a hope I think is the heart of Yoder’s work, is help us bear the difficulty without engaging in false hopes” (157).

Hauerwas’s legacy, for many readers, consists in precisely this call to reality, telling the truth of “what is” through lives of faithful witness. Approaching the End continues a conversation Hauerwas started many years ago, which has led many American Christians to re-think their Christianity and to recapture its strangeness for the next generation. There is much I wish to ask Hauerwas now that my journey is underway. I hope he’s right that this book is not the “end” of his writing, but a further step to engaging the questions that his legacy provokes. Those questions are not the kinds of questions one answers in this life, but they are ones we must learn to live through while approaching the end.

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