

Ambivalent Déjà-vu: World War II in the poetry of the Northern Irish Troubles

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Abstract

This article addresses how the poetry of the Northern Irish Troubles enters into a dialogue with the memory of World War II. Poems by Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Sinéad Morrissey are analysed, showing how World War II is a controversial source of comparison for these poets. While World War II provides important ways of framing the suffering and claustrophobia of the Northern Irish conflict, evident differences also mean that such comparisons are handled warily and with some irony. The poems are highly self-conscious utterances that seek to unsettle and develop generic strategies in the light of traumatic suffering. This essay draws on Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, and it also makes use of Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory in order to highlight how Seamus Heaney in particular makes use of the World War II memories mediated by popular culture to respond to the Troubles.

Keywords

elegy, lyric poetry, multidirectional memory, Northern Irish Troubles, song, victimisation

Introduction

In June 2011 the Peace Bridge was opened in Derry, Northern Ireland. Crossing the river Foyle, the bridge linked together areas of the city generally identified as having republican Catholic and loyalist Protestant sympathies. It was intended to symbolise and facilitate the peaceful future of Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement having led to a near cessation of violent hostilities in the region. The opening of the bridge was meant to be a joyous occasion, spurred by the optimistic spirit of reconciliation that had been underlined by British Prime Minister David Cameron's public apology the preceding year for the British army's 1972 killing of fourteen civilians in the same city. Proceedings were however disrupted by a demonstrator who persisted in shouting 'SS RUC!'. When the offender was fined £150 a month later, the Deputy District Judge described his chant as 'historic' (BBC News, 2010). The offending phrase brings together the acronym of the Nazi paramilitary organisation Schutzstaffel (SS) with that of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which was the

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name of the Northern Irish police force until it was renamed under the Good Friday Agreement as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

The demonstrator's chant is indeed 'historic', in the sense that the phrase was used repeatedly during the history of the conflict. The punk band Rudi featured it in their notorious song 'Cops' (1977), and it has frequently been shouted in demonstrations. In a 1995 symposium entitled 'Reconciliation and Community: The Future of Peace in Northern Ireland', the poet Michael Longley (2017a) recalled 'in the later 1960s joining a civil rights demonstration in Belfast, and then leaving it in despair when the crowd started to use the Nazi salute and shout at the police "SS-RUC! SS-RUC!"' For Longley (2017a), this 'wasn't remembering. This wasn't even knowing. The SS would have strung us up from the lamp-posts' (p. 199). For readers tuned into the identity politics of Northern Irish poetry, Longley's (2006) own position as a Protestant – who early in his career reminisced in his 'Letter to Derek Mahon' about wandering in 'August sixty-nine / . . . Around the burnt-out houses of / The Catholics we'd scarcely loved' (p. 258) – will not be irrelevant. Like most parties with a connection to Northern Ireland, Longley might be deemed what Michael Rothberg has termed an 'implicated subject' rather than a neutral observer (cf. Laanes, 2017 and Rothberg, 2019). Yet Longley's own exemplary commitment to reconciliation and to transcending destructive tribalism means that this remark deserves to be interpreted as more than a whitewashing defence of the RUC.

Longley's angry riposte came within a talk that also navigated around the complex issue of the memory of the Irish Famine, the 150th anniversary of which fell at around the same time as the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust. It is arguably true that to 'equate the Famine with the Holocaust is to devalue both' (Longley, 2017a: 199) and one may sympathise with Longley's reluctance to do so, yet such historical linkages seldom represent a straightforward form of equation. Nor can they be reduced, in a narrow sense at least, to attempts at mere knowing or remembering. An unarmed protestor's chant at a public event is a performative act rather than a constative statement and can be interpreted as a form of rhetorical combat in the face of imposing force. In the case of the 'SS-RUC' tag, the historical record gives several grounds for both uproar and belligerence. As McKittrick and McVea (2001) have noted, the behaviour of the RUC during the outbreak of Troubles violence in 1969 'wrecked whatever relationship existed between a large proportion of the Catholic community and the RUC' (p. 56). Members of the RUC have been accused of, and in some cases sentenced for, murders, torture, and collusion with loyalist paramilitary forces.

The work of Michael Rothberg (2009) has underlined that our understanding of the past is often comparative, linking together cataclysms of different times or places. Although the complexity and length of the conflict make the Northern Irish Troubles unique in many respects, comparisons can and have been made with other situations elsewhere. The conflict became a focus of international attention for diplomats and political analysts after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, as both the successes of that agreement and lingering doubts casting a shadow over its narrative of reconciliation were likened to the situation in South Africa for instance, or the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. As with all political conflicts, similarities and differences can be found between the Troubles and other cases of violence. Rothberg's work on the Algerian conflict for instance has pointed out how memories of the Holocaust were a powerful resource and comparative framework for a process of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s. The interpretation of the Northern Irish conflict as a 'colonial' one is not undisputed, but it is possible to see the Troubles in this perspective. The British government have also at times seen the conflict as a colonial one, as evidenced for instance in the early 1970s when some 'Labour politicians began to discuss British withdrawal [from the province] under the code-name "Algeria"' (Dixon, 2008: 115).

In the literature of the Troubles, the writings of the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney and his fellow poets have also won international acclaim, thus transcending their local context. Yet apart

from Longley's poems comparing the conflict with World War I and the Trojan War, little attention has been paid to the way in which these poets at times make use of a comparative prism to make sense of the bloodshed and terror that long permeated Northern Irish society. Benjamin Keatinge (2011) has provided an overview of important responses in Irish poetry to the Holocaust. He attributes this interest in World War II and the horror of the fate of the Jews to a movement whereby 'at least some of the more national and nationalist preoccupations have been overtaken by a far more global point of view' (p. 24). He does not address, however, how much Irish poetry combines the local and the global. With a specific focus on Northern Ireland, my own essay will look at how World War II provides a template, at key junctures, both for understanding the Troubles and for questioning apposite representational strategies for the Northern Irish conflict. I will highlight three poems in particular: Longley's 'Kindertotenlieder', Seamus Heaney's 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', and Sinéad Morrissey's 'English Lesson'. In addition, Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' will also be given some attention.

These texts are acts of memory that make use of poetic form in self-conscious ways. Moberley Luger (2015) has argued that there is a memorial function in poetry in general. Not only may poetry itself be deemed a form of cultural memory, but memory has also traditionally been intrinsic to the very nature of poetry. Rhyme and rhythm are, among other things, mnemonic devices that are utilised so that poetry can be learnt by heart. In addition, poetic genres such as the elegy have specific, commemorative purposes. The poems addressed in this article add multidirectional memory to the mix; as acts of multidirectional memory, the way in which these poems draw parallels between the violence of World War II and acts of terror and oppression on both sides of the political divide raises uncomfortable questions. The poems involve a verbal display or performance of reticence and even distress by the poets who draw such analogies, highlighting the taboo that surrounds for instance comparison of modern Britain to wartime Nazi Germany. In this respect, they concur with Longley's consternated response to the 'SS-RUC' chant. At the same time, though, these poems also insist upon a sense of individual struggle against the coercive force of sectarian, collective narratives. The poems hover around retraction and silence, evoking both Adorno's famous proscription of poetry after World War II, and lyrical poetry's status as a cultural memorial form that embraces silence and the discretion of ellipsis rather than easily summarised narrative.

Beyond song? Michael Longley's 'Kindertotenlieder'

Longley's own poetry can provide us with a point of entry to this topic. His early poem 'Kindertotenlieder' was published in his collection *An Exploded View* (1973). The title is German, and can be translated as 'Songs on the death of children'. Only six lines long, the poem manages to raise a number of concerns despite its brevity:

There can be no songs for dead children
Near the crazy circle of explosions,
The splintering tangent of the ricochet,

No songs for the children who have become
My unrestricted tenants, fingerprints
Everywhere, teethmarks on this and that. (Longley, 2006: 61)

These two tercets constitute a recognisably traumatic utterance, as the disaster they mark both facilitates and denies representation. In the words of Cathy Caruth (1996), 'traumatic experience [. . .] simultaneously defies and demands our witness' (p. 5). Longley's poem is marked by denial,

most noticeably in the ‘no songs’ of lines 1 and 4. The poem is an elegy for children who remain unnamed. The form of the elegy changed over the twentieth century, and ‘Kindertotenlieder’ is reflective of a new tendency towards a lack of resolution in a process of infinite, rather than completed, mourning. It thus illustrates Jahan Ramazani’s (1994) distinction between the modern, melancholy elegy’s tendency to be unresolved and ambivalent, as opposed to the classical elegy’s more consolatory nature.

Ramazani (1994) also describes the modern elegy as subjecting itself to ‘self-criticism’ (p. 4). Longley’s poem can certainly be interpreted as questioning its own status as a memorial form. The opening (‘There can be no songs’) would at first glance seem to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and yet the formulation is open-ended enough that it can also be interpreted as laying down a moratorium on a literary response to a devastating loss. Interpreted in this way, the poem might be seen as rehearsing Adorno’s famous injunction against poetry after Auschwitz – an injunction to which I will return later. If it is left undecided whether songs are prohibited or impossible, Longley’s poem is also elliptical on the nature of, and its own relation to, the songs it mentions. ‘Kindertotenlieder’ does not, for instance, state whether or not it is a song itself, so the question of whether or not the poem transgresses its own prohibition is left unanswered.

Poetry has deep historical connections with song. But is this heritage amenable to a modern lyric poetry that would see itself as a cultural commemoration of atrocity? Tacitly, Longley’s brevity indicates that the formal restraint of the lyric may be, to a degree at least, an alternative to song-like eloquence. Throughout his career he has singled out the brevity of the lyric poem as a specific formal feature that is characteristic of ‘what it does best, i.e. intense lyrical expression’ (Longley, 2017a: 379). Brevity is here connected with a form of reticence, withdrawing from overexplicit or showy demonstrativeness. There is also tension in how ‘Kindertotenlieder’ deals with the children’s dead bodies, which – even as they are mourned and presented as lost – are evoked as ineluctable ‘tenants’ of the speaker’s mind. This mind is presented as unable to achieve repression, as minute memory triggers, suggested metaphorically via the ‘fingerprints’ and ‘teethmarks’ of the dismembered deceased, create a sense of draining arousal in everyday life. On their own, the poem’s two short stanzas are powerful but elliptical, the lack of any clear reference extending the sense that these children are both nowhere and everywhere to be found.

Longley himself (2017b) has however pulled the poem back from indeterminacy. A historical context is provided in a recent article in the *New Statesman*:

In August 1969, Patrick Rooney, a nine-year-old boy, was struck by a tracer-bullet fired by the RUC as he lay in bed in the Divis Flats in the Falls Road district of Belfast. He was the first child to be killed during the Troubles. In helpless response I wrote “Kindertotenlieder” (“Songs for Dead Children”), its title borrowed from Mahler’s great song cycle.

Although this compositional record moves towards situating the poem, it does not do so fully. Mahler’s 1904 song cycle of the same name was motivated by personal grief, as two of the composer’s children died of scarlet fever. Within the context sketched by Longley’s gloss, the ‘borrowing’ of the title intervenes in a completely different context, displacing the focus from a personal to a political level. Politically, Rooney’s name and home situate him on the Catholic side, thus casting the poem as a statement of mourning and solidarity across the sectarian divide. Longley might, in this context, be construed as an accuser of the RUC, even though we earlier found him denying the relevance of the ‘SS-RUC’ chant. Yet matters are complicated by how the poem’s six lines relate to the title and Longley’s paratextual remark. The title and remark are parerga that do not simply fuse with the poem’s two stanzas but rather exist in a semi-suspended relation with it. It is surely significant, for instance, that Longley’s explanation of the poem’s genesis appeared in a magazine

article presenting a survey of Northern Irish poetry on the Troubles. Skewed by that context, his remarks might surely be interpreted as not excluding other possible entry-points to his 'Kindertotenlieder'. They do not, for instance, explain why he had recourse to Mahler's title.

Where does the 'crazy circle' of the poem's contextual ambit end? What might be deemed its most immediate zones of reference? With a poem going off on such 'splintering tangent[s]' as this one does, this is not an easy question to settle. Given that the text was written less than 30 years after the cataclysm of World War II, the terrible destruction of that context – ineluctably marked by Germany's role as the main aggressor – certainly comes to mind too, for this poem with its German title. In her monograph on Longley, Fran Brearton (2006) notes that the poem is, among other things, 'evocative of the Second World War' (p. 100). Another intertext might be added that further consolidates a World War II reading of 'Kindertotenlieder'. In 1968, only a handful of years prior to Longley's poem, the English poet Geoffrey Hill had published his powerful sonnet 'September Song', which self-reflexively both mourns and questions its own mourning of an unnamed child killed by gas in a concentration camp. Longley (2017a: 403) has described Hill as one of the inspirations he 'absorbed' early in his career, and 'Kindertotenlieder' can be read as partially reworking 'September Song'. Where the English poet overlays his war elegy for a child with self-reflection, Longley's palimpsest combines a restrained marking of grief for the dead of the Northern Irish conflict with a memory of child lives lost in the preceding world war.

Déjà-vu: Encountering World War II in Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon

One obvious difference between 'Kindertotenlieder' and the chant of the demonstrators that so upset Longley in the late 1960s is of course that 'Kindertotenlieder' does not name the perpetrator. By withholding the information that the Northern Irish child he mourns 'was struck by a tracer-bullet fired by the RUC', Longley the poet does not allow a blaming finger to be pointed. Critics such as Peter McDonald (2000) and Neil Corcoran (2000) have attributed to Longley a form of classicism rooted in objectivity, economy and impersonality, and the kind of restraint he musters here to avoid political partisanship might be interpreted along similar lines. Longley's sense of decorum might be compared to that of Seamus Heaney who, like Longley, belongs to the first generation of poets who established themselves during the Troubles. Heaney was a good friend of Longley's, and with his 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature he might be considered the iconic Troubles poet. Yet he has always resisted identifying his own work with the political conflict. In his essay on 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney (1995) called for poetry to respond to human suffering and loss. Yet poetry must also defend, he claimed, 'poetry as poetry', with its ability to 'set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means' (Heaney, 1995: 5). This insistence upon poetic autonomy circumscribes and deflects the poem's role as a potential carrier of cultural memory. Such counter-pressure to political engagement also brings with it, in Heaney's work, something akin to Longley's classicism. There is in much of his oeuvre not only an emphasis on the formal craft of the well-made poem, but also a consistent reluctance to engage with the conflict in tactless or sensationalist ways.

At the same time though, Heaney's poetry is not all restraint, and a clear contrast with Longley in how to relate World War II and the Troubles can be traced in his poem 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing'. This text stages an angry collision between how the British press depicted the Troubles and what Heaney perceived as its altogether more complex and rebarbative reality. The first version of the poem appeared in *The Listener* on 14 October 1971, expressing in conversational lines the poet's views on Northern Ireland upon returning to the region after a year in the United States. The poem represented an interesting formal experiment for

Heaney, as he had been asked by the editor Karl Miller at *The Listener* for ‘a “Views” piece about what it was like to return to Belfast’ after his stay abroad (O’Driscoll, 2008: 123). Heaney himself describes the result as ‘journalistic’ (O’Driscoll, 2008: 123), but the poem actually stages a kind of stand-off between journalistic and poetic discourses within the halfway house of a seemingly casual and prosaic form of verse.

The first three sections of the poem explore the difficulty of finding the right words in what might be termed the early stages of a cultural trauma. Although the concept of trauma was not drawn upon as an interpretive frame for the Troubles until late in the 1980s (see Dawson, 2007: 68), Heaney’s poem depicts at a collective level the shock and lack of comprehension that is part of the early response to traumatic experience. The fourth and final section presents a brief sketch of Heaney’s personal experience:

This morning from a dewy motorway
I saw the new camp for the internees:
A bomb had left a crater of fresh clay
In the roadside, and over in the trees
Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.
There was that white mist you get on a low ground
And it was déjà-vu, some film made
Of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.
Is there a life before death? That’s chalked up
In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,
Coherent miseries, a bite and sup,
We hug our little destiny again. (Heaney 1996: 55)

The reference to ‘the new camp for the internees’ fixes this quotation firmly into the political context of that time, as 1971 was the year Brian Faulkner – as new Stormont prime minister for Northern Ireland – deployed the measure of internment without trial. While Faulkner saw internment ‘as a panacea which would halt the violence and in time provide a more peaceful atmosphere’, the ‘abandoning of legal procedures [. . .] was bound to attract strong condemnation from nationalist and human rights bodies both at home and internationally’ (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 67). The legitimacy of these measures was not helped by the fact that they were ‘directed solely at the nationalist community’ (Dixon, 2008: 112). Later evidence has shown that many people detained in this way, for instance through Operation Demetrius of August 1971, were subjected to brutal treatment and were in many cases ‘traumatised, radicalised and infuriated by the experience’ (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 68).

One of the facilities used to detain prisoners was the Long Kesh Detention Centre, later renamed Her Majesty’s Prison Maze, and Heaney’s verse uses his personal encounter with Long Kesh or a similar site as a framing device in this part of the poem. As will be shown at the end of this section, a sense of constriction is also crucial to how Derek Mahon’s ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ links the Northern Irish conflict to other violent events. The sense of imprisonment is carried into the ensuing allusion in Heaney’s poem: ‘it was déjà-vu, some film made / Of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound’. Reality copies fiction here, the feeling of unreality underlined by the following reference to a ‘dream’. Yet Stalag 17 is of course more than a random allusion to the movie industry; the 1953 film brings Heaney’s interpretation of the unfolding Northern Irish conflict into dialogue with a popular, mass media response to World War II. The film depicts American soldiers at a Nazi prisoner of war camp in Austria, and is based on a play that drew on its authors’ authentic experiences of such a camp. William Holden was awarded an Oscar for Best Leading Actor for his

role as Sergeant J. J. Sefton. Sefton is suspected of being an informer when it becomes clear soon after a failed escape attempt by two of the prisoners that the Nazis have inside access to what's going on among the prisoners. Later he discovers and reveals the identity of the actual informer – a German masquerading as Sergeant Frank Price – and assists a lieutenant in making a heroic escape.

As with Longley, there is some restraint in Heaney's poem in indicating a perpetrator. Although the sense of imprisonment – shared by the detainees in the prison camps and, in a more metaphorical sense, by the population of Northern Ireland in general – is here cast as a common denominator between the World War II camp and the Troubles, the reader is left to make a tacit comparison between the British authorities and Nazi Germany. Other similarities come to light from comparing the film to other sections of Heaney's poem. The earlier parts of 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' depict a pervasive sense of constriction and a lack of forthrightness, in a culture permeated by suspicion. This, we are told in the third section, is a 'land of password, handgrip, wink and nod, / Of open minds as open as a trap'. In *Stalag 17*, there is a parallel sense of paranoia and distrust once the camp is overtaken by suspicions that there is an unknown, internal informer. This comes to a head towards the end of the film, when Sergeant Price is subjected to close interrogation by Sefton. Rather than being a Cleveland boy who served at Pearl Harbor, Price is revealed to be a German spy, more likely a 'Preissinger' or 'Preishoffer' than a Price. Heaney's poem broaches similarly dangerous acts of identification: 'Manoeuvrings to find out name and school, / Subtle discrimination by addresses', and attempts at deciphering tell-tale names ('With hardly an exception to the rule / That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod / And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape'). Another parallel lies in how both works thematise misrepresentation of the atrocities. Heaney's poem starts off with 'an encounter / With an English journalist in search of "views / On the Irish thing"', and goes on to satirise the mass media's inability to grasp the true nature of the Troubles. In *Stalag 17*, the prisoners make ironic jokes when letters from home reveal that the American population have a prettified view of the daily life of POWs. A key episode of the film concerns the visit of a Red Cross inspector: fearing reprisals from the Germans, the prisoners have no choice but to go along with the Nazis in concealing the actual conditions in the camps.

The same Red Cross inspector interrupts the interrogation of the American lieutenant who later will escape together with Holden's character. The lieutenant is depicted as being subjected to sleep deprivation by the Nazi colonel von Scherbach. This echoes the 'experimental interrogation treatment' used by British authorities as part of internment, where among the measures deployed were 'sensory deprivation techniques which included the denial of sleep and food and being forced to stand spread-eagled against a wall for long periods' (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 68). While such resonances are doubtless no accident, there are other aspects of the film that do not easily agree with 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing'. *Stalag 17* was directed and produced by Billy Wilder, and the film has many comedic elements. In one of its scenes, one of the soldiers decides to liven up the dancing at the prisoners' Christmas Party by cross-dressing. A close friend of his delusionally imagines they have been joined by Betty Grable, only – after a humorous interlude that anticipates Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* – to have his illusions cruelly dispelled. Although light-hearted, this episode underlines the film's pervasive exploration of the difficulty of drawing a clear borderline between fiction and reality, which communicates nicely with how Heaney's poem blurs the lines between reality on the one hand, and 'film' and 'dream' on the other. It also implicitly raises questions about the film's fictional response to the realities of World War II. Heaney's own relationship to that war was necessarily a mediated one, since he was born in 1939 and grew up in a Northern Ireland that was not directly affected by any fighting. The way he draws upon *Stalag 17* in 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' can be described as akin to Alison Landsberg's (2004) definition of prosthetic memories as 'privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a

mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience' (p. 19).

While Heaney's allusion to the film is part of the unfolding interpretation of the Troubles at the time, it also takes place within a process of public response to World War II. Randall Stevenson (2004) has dated the entry of the Holocaust into the literature and 'collective memory' of Britain to the 1960s (p. 55). In her work on the American reception of the Holocaust, Alison Landsberg states that the Holocaust only became a recognisable and debated event as late as the 1970s. She claims that prosthetic memories of the Holocaust can enable people who did not suffer Nazi atrocities themselves to 'find ways to address our local traumas' (Landsberg, 2004: 139). Although Heaney's focus here is not on the Holocaust, it is part of the same historical moment and works in a parallel way. His emphasis on the emotional sense of constriction and lack of communicative transparency also gels with Landsberg's reading of prosthetic memories as important vehicles of affect rather than cognition.

In Northern Irish poetry, an important and critically acclaimed follow-up to 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' works in a related, though distinct, way, and refers to the Holocaust rather than Prisoner of War camps. Although Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' deploys a more elliptical, allegorical approach, it too compares World War II to the Northern Irish Troubles. The poem has been subjected to extensive criticism already, and will only be briefly addressed here, but it relates interestingly to the precedent of Heaney. First published in 1973, in the same magazine (*The Listener*) where Heaney's poem had appeared, the six ten-line stanzas of Mahon's poem (1999) construct a picture of dereliction and despair: 'Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins / A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole' (p. 89). The poem is dedicated to the novelist J. G. Farrell, and his literary treatment of the Irish War of Independence and the ensuing civil war in 1919–1923 provides an important intertext. But Mahon casts his net wider than that. His allegorical image of personified mushrooms awaiting a saviour or rescue mission points towards the ongoing Northern Irish conflict – the poem was written in January 1973, after what turned out to be the most violent of all the years of the Troubles – but also takes in the 'Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii' (Mahon, 1999: 90). As Hugh Haughton (2007: 19) points out in his rich interpretation of the poem, although the reference to Treblinka might seem isolated, it is strengthened, in Mahon's *Collected Poems* (1999), by a reference in the following poem 'Autobiographies' to the 'released Jews / Blinking in shocked sunlight' (p. 91).

The way in which Mahon connects a variety of political and natural disasters differs from the more limited, even understated, comparisons we have traced in Longley and Heaney. Marianne Hirsch (2012) has called for a form of connective history that 'maps a future for memory studies beyond discrete historical events like the Holocaust, to transnational interconnections and intersections in a global space of remembrance' (p. 247). 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' seems singularly attuned to this future. Nevertheless, this poem is like those of Longley and Heaney that we have already addressed here in that it is very much a document of the grimness and remorselessness of the early stages of the Northern Irish conflict.

Silence and brevity: Sinéad Morrissey's 'English Lesson'

Both the settling into the 'long war' that ran through the late 1970s and the 1980s, and the gradual move towards peace in the 1990s, necessarily fostered different forms of literary and artistic expression. Sinéad Morrissey's 'English Lesson', published in her poetry volume *There Was a Fire in Vancouver* (1996), bears witness to a very different context:

Today I taught the Germans about Northern Ireland.
 High on their interest, I paraded as a gunman
 On the Falls Road. Death holds the attention –
 BANG! blew them off their seats and I got away scot free.

‘A fiddler in a death camp’ –
 Beyond the lot of it.

The only honesty is silence. (p. 18)

The speaker appears to be giving German visitors an introduction to local culture on the side of her language lessons. She is however caught up in the theatricality of the situation – ‘High on their interest’, she is seduced by their attention – and pretends to be a paramilitary from a Republican part of Belfast. This act of pretence marks a contrast to the earlier work addressed in this article. Not only does it engage the speaker in a more ironical, self-deprecating rhetoric, but it also – and relatedly – engages with a violent perpetrator in a more direct way. The title ‘English Lesson’ points not only towards the language of instruction but also, tacitly, to a major party of the conflict. Even as the tone of the poem is light and self-ironical in a way that differs from the work of figures like Longley, Heaney and Mahon – avoiding for instance the classicist impersonality of ‘Kindertotenlieder’ – the self-directed sarcasm of the line ‘Death holds the attention’ echoes the reluctance of the earlier generation of Troubles poets to wallow in the carnage.

Naomi Marklew (2014) has commented on the opening line of this poem that, although it ‘might suggest that it is impossible to write poetry about subjects like the Troubles, this suggestion is immediately countered by the prevalence of these themes in [Morrissey’s] work’. In fact, the poem itself stages an ambivalent doubling typical of trauma literature, whereby the expression of impossibility accompanies a form of troubled, albeit second-hand, witnessing. The ending of ‘English Lesson’ appears to withdraw from addressing the Troubles directly, even as it quickly musters up a series of comparative allusions. Fittingly, the poem whittles down the length of its stanzas from four lines to two to a single line, before ending within the blank space – or, indeed, silence – of the remaining white page. It thus follows the example of Longley’s ‘Kindertotenlieder’, and indeed several other of his poems too, in suggesting that an extreme and austere brevity of lyrical form might be the most apt response – if indeed there is an apt response – in the face of disaster. Together with the accompanying self-consciousness of its own formal affordances, this can be seen as a defining feature of how a particular kind of modern lyric poetry embraces – or deflects – its role as a vehicle of cultural memory.

The critical nod to a ‘fiddler’ might be taken as a chastening self-reflection on the sensuous musicality of poetical form, which once again – as in ‘Kindertotenlieder’ – is being reined in on account of its potential tactlessness in the face of extreme suffering. But things are complicated here, at the end of Morrissey’s poem, by the presence of several intertexts. Although the reference to a ‘death-camp’ arguably once more points towards Long Kesh and other locations used by the British authorities to detain internees – these camps being ingrained in the popular imagination by the 1981 Hunger Strikes – the reference appears to be to World War II. More specifically, the fiddler in a death-camp would seem to nod to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, addressed by Michael Longley’s (2006) two-line poem ‘Terezín’ a few years earlier: ‘No room has ever been as silent as the room / Where hundreds of violins are hung in unison’ (p. 186).

Whereas ‘Terezín’ addresses the almost universally denounced atrocities of the Nazis though, Morrissey’s position is complicated by the fact that she is implicitly making a connection between

those atrocities and the suffering inflicted by the Northern Irish Troubles. The self-incriminating tone of her speaker inflects this with the classical motif of Nero fiddling while Rome burns. This is not, however, an exclusively classical move, as Morrissey is arguably pointing back to one of Longley's (2006) earliest Troubles poems, a verse letter to James Simmons in which Longley ironically admonished his friend to 'Play your guitar while Derry burns' (p. 56). In the final line of her poem – 'The only honesty is silence' – Morrissey's speaker is drawn towards the same quiet that Longley depicts in 'Terezín'. Yet in her formulation there is again an added complication, as the words echo Wittgenstein's (1990) famous conclusion to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with its austere admonition: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen' (p. 188). As Ray Monk (1990) has shown, Wittgenstein's prohibitory maxim was partially influenced by his witnessing the atrocities of the First World War. More generally, the coupling here of concentration camp and poetic recalcitrance would seem to echo Adorno. Adorno's adage on the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz was confronted by Seamus Heaney in an interview with Rand Brandes (1988), when he asked whether one could 'write a poem that gazes at death, or the western front or Auschwitz – a poem that gives peace and tells horror?' (p. 21).

Although Morrissey (who was born in 1972) is old enough to have memories of the middle and later stages of the conflict, and 'English Lesson' was published 2 years in advance of the Good Friday Agreement, the poem reflects the changing narrative of the conflict in a period when its worst atrocities had been left behind. Indeed, the poem might be read as tacitly anticipating the difficulty of memory in a peaceful future when those who experienced the trauma of the Troubles first-hand have passed away. Like Morrissey's later poem 'Tourism' (2002: 14), 'English Lesson' expresses anxiety about the commodification of the political conflict. While Alison Landsberg (2004) has acknowledged the pitfalls of such commodification, her work stresses that it nevertheless has the virtue of making 'ideas and images available to people who reside in different places and have different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and classes' (p. 18). Even as Morrissey's poem is ironic about teaching Germans about a native conflict that can be framed in ways that reflect World War II, the situation it describes – the mediation of the memory of the Troubles to peoples and geographies not affected by it – is continued, and at least partially endorsed, by the publication of the poem for an international readership. 'English Lesson' itself can be read as a commodified product that – in an admittedly complex and highly self-conscious manner – 'open[s] up a world of images' outside its readership's 'lived experience, creating a portable, fluid, and nonessentialist form of memory' (Landsberg, 2004: 18).

The 'fluid' nature of the poetic memory of the Northern Irish Troubles has been the focus of this essay, which has shown how key Northern Irish poets – Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Sinéad Morrissey – all use World War II in their poetry as a point of comparison. One consequence of this comparison might be a temptation to universalise, seeing those dead, wounded or traumatised by the Troubles as part of a recurring and timeless process of victimisation. This would be a more specific instance of how Marianne Hirsch (1997) interprets the 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Family of Man*, curated by Edward Steichen, as presenting a vision of 'universal humanity' that 'disallows any deeper political or ideological analysis' (p. 70). For Hirsch, contextualisation is what undercuts this form of false universalisation. Among the poems addressed here, Heaney's 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' is perhaps the one which most clearly bears its own context within itself, making it hard to read the text in any deracinated or freely floating way. This is in part because of the possibilities inherent in that poem's 'prosaic' form. Although Heaney's text represents a rebarbative attack on journalistic prose, it adapts an informal and conversational style that allows a relatively full – if self-ironic – exploration of the political pressures of the time of its conception. This stands in opposition to the elliptical nature of Longley's intense elegy and Morrissey's act of gradual lyrical reduction, both of which pitch themselves closer to

silence in gestures of lyrical mourning. In them a central paradox of the modern lyric comes to formulation. As Angela Leighton (2007) has shown, literary form may become a search for a ‘musical surplus which nonplusses sense’, but in ‘the twentieth century such a search comes to be seriously compromised’ (p. 30).

By approaching the form of song, Longley’s ‘Kindertotenlieder’ suggests the form of the poem may become an imposition when faced with profound suffering. In Morrissey’s ‘English Lesson’ a similar lesson is learnt, but now the offending trait of musicality, embodied by the ‘fiddler in a death-camp’, is accompanied with the stain of self-indulgent dramatisation. Both poems however conjure a counterforce to such self-compromising trespasses by also pursuing brevity or a whittling away of the literary text. As such they embody a contrasting trait of literary, and especially poetical, form, which ‘always carries that hint of tactical withdrawal from meaning and intention, of a retreat into the intrinsic’ (Leighton, 2007: 245). This retreat is distinctive of the modern, lyric poem as a form of cultural memory. The withdrawal also affects how these texts work as multidirectional forms of memory, as they partially erase or obscure their comparisons between the Troubles and World War II even as they put them forward. Thus, finally, poetry shows itself to be an oddly ambivalent and dynamic form of cultural memory, both engaging with and swerving away from comparisons between the traumatic histories with which it engages.

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