

‘What do I say when they wheel out their dead?’ The representation of violence in Northern Irish art

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In one emblematic shot from Midge MacKenzie’s *The Sky: A Silent Witness* (1995), a documentary made in collaboration with Amnesty International about human rights abuses, the camera frames the sky’s reflection on the surface of water while an unidentified woman recounts the horrifying story of her rape on 3 September 1991, in the midst of the Bosnian conflict. The reflection, as Wendy Hesford identifies, ‘reverses, distorts, and contains the sky on the surface of the water’; thus, it ‘establishes boundaries where there are none, and therefore draws attention to both the crisis of reference and the crisis of witnessing’.¹ The potent image, enclosing part of the formless, uncontainable sky and rendering the witness visually absent, suggests that the woman’s trauma is unattainable, unknowable and, consequently, unrepresentable. Paradoxically, even when an image of violence *is* perfectly legible, its formulation can have the effect of ‘[dispensing] us from receiving the image in all its scandal’; as Roland Barthes argues, the photograph, when ‘reduced to the state of pure language’ may not ‘disorganize us’.² Atrocity can be rendered banal, an unedifying spectacle represented atrociously due to the all-pervasive, and hence ‘ultra-familiar’, imagery of agony and ruin that is, as Susan Sontag states, ‘an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war’.³

In this chapter I want to examine how the activity of creating art in a time of violence brings about an anxiety regarding the artist’s role, and how it calls into question the ability to re-present atrocity. More specifically, I want to closely examine how artistic silence and narrative breakdown in texts by Northern Irish writers and visual artists often result from an unwillingness to respond to atrocity due to the need to remain ‘expertly civil tongued’,⁴ from a perception that art lacks efficacy in (what is perceived to be) a cyclical, pre-ordained conflict, and from a sense of being at a disabling temporal, cultural or spatial distance

from events. These artists encounter the limitations placed on the artist by his or her medium: the anxiety of the writer or artist brought on by a failure of the linguistic or visual medium to re-present the materiality of violent events; the difficulties in mediating between competing, often mutually exclusive, discourses of the State and the Terrorist, and the necessarily self-reflexive strategies adopted by the artist to foreground the cliché, the stereotype and the empty sign. A tension emerges between what Seamus Heaney calls the text's desire 'to answer back with its clear tongue when the world gets muddled and bloodied'⁵ and the need for it 'to understand its place and placing, even if it is a poem of total harmony, total beauty, and apparently total innocence'.⁶ 'What do I say when they wheel out their dead?' asks the speaker in Heaney's poem 'Stump': 'I'm cauterized, a black stump of home'.⁷ In 'Midnight', a poem by the same author, 'The tongue's / Leashed in my throat'.⁸ As we shall see, the formal strategies adopted by writers such as Eoin McNamee, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian, and by visual artists such as Willie Doherty, Rita Donagh and Paul Seawright, all implicate the reader/viewer in the construction of narratives about 'The Troubles'. Yet this is neither an abdication of artistic responsibility on their part nor an unwillingness to bear witness due to qualms of voyeuristic prurience. What each work deliberately highlights is the disjunction between event and artefact, the dangers of an aestheticisation of conflict and the pressing need to counteract the narcotic banality and simplicity of media stereotypes, sleepwalking as they do '[t]he line between panic and formulae'.⁹

On 6 December 2002 the Ridiculusmus Theatre Group staged the aptly named production *Say Nothing* at London's Pit Theatre. The two-man play defies paraphrase. It is a hilariously cyclical seventy-minute *tour de force*, a satire on the so-called Peace Process, the lack of progress of which it encapsulates both thematically and stylistically. Kevin, a peace studies graduate, has moved to Derry to work in conflict resolution, running conferences entitled 'Hands Across the Barricades' and encouraging cultural diversity amongst the populace. Dishearteningly, what he meets head-on is prejudice, leading to what can be interpreted as his gradual mental collapse. The play emphasises the lack of communication during the Peace Talks in two key ways: visually, by having the two characters remain within a suitcase full of grass (an emblem of how two fractious communities cling to a differing, yet similarly outmoded sense of place, unwilling to move on); and thematically, by including cyclical motifs in the conversations. None of the depicted characters actually listens to his interlocutor; hence the conversations go round and round, saying nothing. The play's title is another example

of repetition as it is an intertextual allusion, revisiting Seamus Heaney's 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing',¹⁰ a poem which establishes a tension between speech and silence:

The famous
Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing

Heaney's poem, like *Say Nothing*, emphasises empty rhetoric, hypocrisy and self-protective reticence. It also focuses on the pressures brought to bear upon the linguistic medium in a time of crisis. The poetic speaker rails against

... the jottings and analyses
Of politicians and newspapermen
Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas
And protest to gelignite and Sten,
Who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',
'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'provisional wing',
'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'.

Complex analysis is the first casualty; quotation marks isolate the already redundant clichés of journalistic shorthand. Must the artist engage in a very public response to the Troubles, and in what form? Must it (or even can it) avoid the conventional terms? Responding to such questions in 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces', Heaney depicts the figure of the artist as Hamlet, 'pinioned by ghosts and affections'.¹¹ As Francis Barker has argued in *The Culture of Violence*, Hamlet's problem lies in 'the difficulty of telling in both the interleaved senses of colloquial speech: that it is difficult to know, and difficult to narrate'.¹² In the Northern Irish context, the speaker is left 'dithering, blabbering' because of his awareness of inherited atavism, the unwillingness towards partisanship and a frustrated sense that the conflict is, as he later states in 'The Marching Season', 'scripted from the start'.¹³ In 'Mycenae Lookout', the speaker feels his 'tongue / Like the dropped gangplank of a cattle truck'; he is the liminal figure, 'in-between-times', struck dumb due to competing claims on his loyalty.¹⁴ To avoid such a disabling feeling of inarticulacy, then, writers and artists must, by necessity, adopt strategies other than direct statement.

In his visual artworks Willie Doherty responds to both the performative and narrative dimensions of Northern Irish punishment killings by creating texts which, while silent, are complexly self-reflexive and engage the viewer's own understanding of the Northern Irish conflict.

Doherty's photographic diptych entitled *Small Acts of Deception 1* (1997) at first seems enigmatic, eschewing contextualising detail save for the enigmatic title. It deliberately refrains from presenting the images within an overt interpretative framework: there is no accompanying explanatory text, no biographical details of its subject, no precise geographical co-ordinates. Nevertheless, within the context of his previous work the viewer is led to assume a connection with Northern Ireland.¹⁵

On the left-hand side of the exhibition space the viewer sees a photograph of a car parked in front of a house; the picture is taken at night, with the flash obscuring the number-plate. Adjacent is a photograph of a body lying on the ground; only one of the bound hands and part of a leg are framed within the photograph. The latter is an already mediated image: it is a photograph of what appears to be a video-still. A comparison with footage from BBC 1's *Panorama* documentary on the IRA (11 July 2003) suggests that the body is that of Francis Hegarty, a suspected IRA informer who was shot by the Republicans on 25 May 1986. The title helps to confirm this,¹⁶ yet the viewer who is unaware of the dead man's identity is left to surmise exactly what acts of deception have been committed, to whom, to what end, and with what effect. In light of the work's subject, is the designation 'small' ironic? How can we judge the scale of the implied deception? Commenting on the titles allocated to each of his works, Doherty contended that '[t]hey propose a narrative, and I'm interested in how the viewer completes that narrative and locates these images within it'.¹⁷ As Paul O'Brien rightly contends, therefore, Doherty's oeuvre consistently raises 'the question of how we fill in meanings to images, in the context of the set of accepted ideological responses'.¹⁸ The viewer may well be fully informed about how the 'performative discourse of the body' operates for punishment killings, how it is part of what Feldman calls 'a theatrical substantiation and ritualization of paramilitary power on the street';¹⁹ or he may encounter the work in ignorance or even prejudice, ideologically pre-disposed against making distinctions between the different kinds of killings in Northern Ireland. Indeed, as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews argues regarding the reception of 'terrorist' acts:

For the humanistic, bourgeois narrative to maintain its hegemonic control, political violence can be understood only as outside the law, disruptive, discontinuous, unavailable for narration. By representing violence as irrational outrage, anarchy unleashed, the history of domination is made to appear as alegitimate process of civilisation.²⁰

Crucially, however, the artwork's form not only engages the viewer's attention by withholding a coherent narrative and by featuring images

taken from oblique angles, but it also implicates him within the hermeneutic process. The shiny surface of cibachrome prints reflect back the viewer's image, situating him within the picture's frame: '[t]heir high-gloss reflective surfaces have a mirror-like quality, which insists on the presence of the viewer before them, repelling the viewer's desire to "enter" their imaginary spaces. Paradoxically, they would only be clear where a viewer does not exist'.²¹ The viewer's gaze is returned as he formulates a narrative and thus may be forced into considering how he came to his conclusions.

While repetition and silence in a Northern Irish text often suggests a pessimistic outlook regarding the perceived cyclical nature of the conflict and the inability of the artist to meaningfully intervene, with Doherty's single-projection video installation entitled *Sometimes I Imagine It's My Turn* (1998) these motifs are deliberately employed so as to question how narratives concerning violent killings are constructed. Panning across waste ground, the camera comes upon a figure lying face down on the ground. Then, as the exhibition catalogue outlines:

This establishing shot is quickly followed by a sequence of tracking shots that take us closer and closer to the figure, whose identity is never disclosed. The continuity of this sequence is interrupted by close-up shots of the undergrowth and by short inserts of hand-held footage of the same scene. The growing sense of unease is further heightened by the intrusion of rapid inserts of inserts of television footage, suggesting a link between the subject of the video and actual news coverage.²²

No commentary is provided; no narrative clues are offered as to the figure's identity or to what has happened to him. The video lasts for three minutes, after which time it is repeated since the projection is on a loop. During each replayed sequence, the viewer looks anew at every detail, trying to answer each unresolved question. What is the link between the different kinds of footage? Why does the camera linger on the body and why is it shot from different heights and angles? What terms do we find ourselves using for the figure ('victim', 'terrorist', 'volunteer', 'member of the public') and why? To a certain extent, the film's silence is matched by our own.

To understand Doherty's intent, one can usefully establish a comparison with Alan Clarke's film *Elephant* (1989), which also employs the key motifs of silence and repetition. The viewer bears witness to a series of sectarian killings in the disused factories and deserted waste grounds of Belfast. Shot by means of a roving steadicam, the film follow killers and victims alike on their journeys through the city without the aid of a situating commentary; it is up to us to articulate the lacunae in the

narratives as the camera provides lingering close-ups of each victim's body and killer's hand pulling the trigger. The film lasts for thirty-seven minutes, during which there are eighteen murder sequences each shot following 'a specific structural pattern' described by Michael Walsh as follows:

Most sequences begin with a long take that serves as an establishing shot and tracks either the killer or the victim onto the killing ground . . . These Steadicam takes are all at least thirty seconds long, with some lasting as long as two and a half minutes, and the locations always either deserted or actually derelict; we see only killers, victims and occasional victim's friends, who for obvious reasons flee. By contrast, each segment pivots on a flurry of shots lasting less than a second – a medium close up of the killer, a close-up of the weapon, often a shot of the victim falling, sometimes more shots of the weapon being emptied into the prostrate body. Each segment then concludes with further long takes which follow the killer's departure and return to a merciless inspection of the unmoving body; these shots of corpses last between twenty and twenty-five seconds. Some segments slightly vary the basic regime, but the essential impression is one of thoroughgoing regularity.²³

The killings' unrelenting nature and the lack of narrative contextualisation could represent, as Walsh reminds us, 'a pitiless demonstration of what the conflict in the six counties really amounts to, suggesting that for all the history, politics and ideology of Ireland, the stark reality is that anonymous men drive or walk up to other men's front doors or places of work and shoot them down'.²⁴ Indeed, in his monograph on Northern Irish film Brian McIlroy reads the film in this way, arguing that Clarke's "Steadicam aesthetic" provides an affinity with "the murderers" and presents the viewer with a view of the Troubles as "monstrous".²⁵ That which is 'monstrous' is beyond comprehension: it is alien, barbaric and cannot be expressed in language. As such, McIlroy's conclusion typifies the reaction to a Northern Irish atrocity and highlights the inability of language to either faithfully re-present the killing or encapsulate the resulting grief. In a paper entitled 'The Spectacle of Terrorism in Northern Irish Culture', Richard Kirkland argues that 'it has been the traditional role of language in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist atrocity to present itself as unable to capture the overwhelming materiality of the event itself. What, so the argument runs, can words offer in the face of such violence? Understood as such, every terrorist outrage becomes unspeakable'.²⁶ However, Kirkland's article brilliantly focuses our attention on a different kind of silence, touched on above by Kennedy-Andrews: the occlusion of the terrorist narrative by the British media and by State institutions. By avoiding a situating

commentary, Kirkland argues, Clarke forces the viewer to work out a narrative for himself. This emphasis on silence and the highly stylised approach to representing the violence are explained by Andrea Grunert as follows:

Clarke's stylistic approach underlines the supposition that durational factors generate thoughts which could be integrated in the emotional response in which affective and cognitive factors tend to reinforce each other. The emotional responses created by his films are linked to the symbolic production of meaning and the way they problematize and evaluate violence. Without explaining the motivations of the characters or the reasons of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the films and the spectatorial engagement they encourage help us, the viewers, to face and to understand the nature and mechanisms of individual and collective violence.²⁷

As viewers, we are not encouraged to simply take one point of view. Countering McIlroy's interpretation of the 'Steadicam aesthetic', Kirkland rightly contends that Clarke's use of the Steadicam 'gestures towards the implication of the subject that is the classical role of "point of view" while hinting that this interpellation is ultimately conditional, that we can, and will, range beyond our own perspectives as necessary'.²⁸

Texts about the Troubles often eschew definitive statements; instead, they foreground multiple, often conflicting perspectives, and demonstrate how individual responses are conditioned by socio-political discursive formations. Since forty years of media coverage has resulted in journalistic shorthand and a proliferation of clichés about the violence, it is little wonder that this has become the critical focus of much artwork.²⁹ For example, Rita Donagh, a Staffordshire-born artist, responded to ways in which the *Sunday Times* reported and photographed the Talbot Street bombing on 19 May 1974. One work from this series, *Aftermath*, includes a newspaper photograph of people milling about a corpse which has been covered up and shielded from the public gaze. Below this she has drawn an extension of this scene, enlarging (and thus foregrounding) the image of the hidden body. What conceals the person's identity in her drawing are newspaper pages (a motif also included in *Newspaper Vendor*, *Evening Newspapers* and *Talbot Street*, 1974), the text of which is comprised of meaningless phrases used to indicate the shape of the story waiting to be written. In the catalogue for Donagh's retrospective, Sarat Maharaj convincingly argues that the Talbot Street series shows '[h]ow issues are "covered by" the media, the notion of "news coverage", is set off against the idea that personal facts, painful moments of loss, grieving and shattering of individual lives, tend to get covered up in the interests of a larger story which has to be told'.³⁰ If a picture tells a thousand stories, which one is 'true'? Can

reportage, whether photographic or linguistic, ever represent the event? Can it explain the rationale behind an atrocity, and its consequences for all those involved? It is important to note, however, that Donagh's work self-reflexively calls attention to the failure of representation in her own work. The artwork draws the viewer in, inviting an engagement with the scene's anonymity, to fill in the missing narrative. If, as David Morrison suggests, '[v]iolence . . . draws its meaning only from the totality of the situation within which it occurs and from the meanings that people give to the act within the known structures of its occurrence',³¹ then the viewer will necessarily fail in his attempt to fully understand the violence being represented.

Northern Irish fiction has been culpable for proliferating a narrow vision of the Northern Irish conflict and has fostered what Lewis R. Gordon terms 'epistemic closure',³² the erection of stereotypes resulting in a presumption of total knowledge about 'terrorists' and the 'Troubles' in general. The popularity and sheer pervasiveness of the thriller genre has resulted in the creation of the 'Troubles trash' novel, 'a cult phenomenon in which hardened terrorists race across flat-roofed buildings and blow up sidewalks, misguided idealists die for Erin and lovers are caught in the crossfire'.³³ Thrillers such as Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence* (1990), Chris Pettitt's *The Psalm Killer* (1996), Paul Anthony's *The Fragile Peace* (1996) and Murray Davies' *The Drumbeat of Jimmy Sands* (1999) all peddle simplistic clichés and present conflict as inherently cyclical and sectarian. However, several more sophisticated novels have been produced which disrupt the join between world and text, which focus both on the telling of the tale and on the fictionalising process of history.³⁴ Such novels are historiographic metafiction, texts which underline 'the realization that "the past is not an 'it' in the sense of an objectified entity that may either be neutrally represented in and for itself or projectively reprocessed in terms of our narrowly 'presentist interests' ".³⁵ Such texts do not, of course, deny that certain events happened; rather, they problematise their subsequent representation.

One such novel is Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man*,³⁶ a fictional account of the killings perpetuated by the so-called Shankill Butchers. The novel, when it appeared, was 'much maligned as, variously, a novel that perpetuates the dismissal of Belfast as a hellish stasis left behind by world history, an insult to unionism or loyalism, or an exploitative and voyeuristic example of the "Troubles trash" that has so dehistoricized the conflict in the North'.³⁷ Indeed, when the novel was made into a film,³⁸ the critics were cool in their reception. While admiring its 'satanically-vicious violence', Kevin Barry disliked 'the film's stylishness'. Both Michael Dwyer and Gary Mitchell concurred, the former

arguing that it 'bordered on the voyeuristic', the latter being abhorred by its 'abundance of bloody, mindless violence and stylish still-frame holds on frenzied idiots'.³⁹ The critics missed the point entirely: the stylised filming of violence, the slick editing, freeze frames, slow motion and jump-cuts all make the audience aware of an aestheticised violence. Rather than a glorification of violence, the director presents a filmic critique of it. In this regard, the misguided reception of the film matches the misreadings of McNamee's novel. Glenn Patterson, a fellow Northern Irish novelist and contemporary of McNamee, has been scathing in his criticism of the way in which McNamee approaches the topic of the Shankill Butchers:

I don't like *Resurrection Man*. In fact it is one of the few books I've ever reviewed and I was really angry about it. What I didn't like about the book was stylistic. . . . [B]ecause of the way the book is written, and there's some very fine writing in it, when the characters speak it is quite obvious that the descriptions of the murders are all in a language that I don't believe is available to those characters as he has them speak. Therefore, what I get is Eoin McNamee writing very florid descriptions of murders. There's something of the horror and strange beauty of violence. Violence is not strangely beautiful.⁴⁰

Equally scathing, the critic Richard Haslam states in a recent article that: 'every aesthetic is encoded with a potential ethic: the obligation to do justice, not violence, to one's subject. In *Resurrection Man*, however, the *unglamorous* ethic is missing. Sublime abstractions displace concrete atrocities; the pose obscures the corpse'.⁴¹ But we are *meant* to linger on this corpse; our attention is time and again focused on the pose. When Patterson says that the characters are speaking in a language he does not believe in, that is pointing to the real thematic focus of the novel: the scepticism regarding the novelistic medium to represent violence and to respond to the Troubles. McNamee's text is a metafiction, a novel about the crisis of novelistic representation and avoids the unwanted designation of 'Troubles trash' through its self-reflexivity and intertextual use of differing genres.

The author employs five key strategies to foreground his own intense unease with the linguistic medium. Firstly, McNamee uses a plot element – the severing of a victim's tongue – to state overtly his main thematic concern, namely that language as it currently exists cannot adequately represent the violence perpetrated by the Shankill Butchers: 'The root of the tongue had been severed. New languages would have to be invented'.⁴² Secondly, McNamee directly refers to the sensational reportage and mediocre thrillers produced during the worst years of the Troubles:

The violence had started to produce its own official literature. Mainly hardbacks, with the emphasis on the visual. Photographs of bombs at the moment of detonation, riot scenes, men in balaclavas displaying heavy machine-guns, burnt out vehicles, moments of numbness and shock. There was the inevitable photograph of the civilian victim.⁴³

By laying bare the conventions for the reader, McNamee is able to establish the genres that he seeks to avoid in his own text. Thirdly, he insistently establishes a connection between language and violence in a series of macabre similes. For example, looking at photographs of cadavers, one of the characters remarks upon the wounds, 'the marks regular, like the script of some phantom tongue used to record inventions that might be found on the lips of those about to die'.⁴⁴ Similarly, when one of the main protagonists, Ryan, looks upon the corpse of Darkie Larch, he notes how 'his torso was incised with small cuts meticulously executed and his head was bent to his chest as though there were something written there he could read, words in a severe tongue'.⁴⁵ Each time the author attempts to establish a connection between language and violence, the reader not only notices his recourse to simile ('like'; 'as though'), but also that the narrator can never read what the incisions say. Linked to this is the fourth strategy, namely the way he depicts each character in search of a language: just as the author fails to find a way of representing violence, his own characters suffer a linguistic crisis. Heather's attraction to Victor is partly based on her desire for this new language: 'He looked like he might think in another language. She wondered if he might be an Arab. She had read somewhere that Arabs like plump women and she imagined him discussing the plumpness of women in a strange and cruelly shaped alphabet'.⁴⁶ Ryan wants 'to hear an invented language of sex, its expressions of forgetfulness and terror'.⁴⁷ Copping sits in his parked car, 'chanting names until it seemed that the recitation was an end in itself, a means of fathoming the forces at work. As if the knowledge they were looking for was concealed in the names themselves'.⁴⁸ Finally, the narrator plays with different genres throughout the novel and is never able to settle into any of them. Two critics in particular, Gerry Smyth and Nuala Johnson, convincingly argue that the incongruous multiplicity of the novel's languages – discourses of the psychological treatise, crime thriller and *film noir* – points towards 'the suspicion that language cannot adequately circumscribe motive and communicate meaning for politically charged and savagely executed violence in the city of Belfast'.⁴⁹ Indeed, the reader bears witness to the author's unwillingness (and inability) to frame his take within a single genre. Although the characters themselves articulate a sense of dislocation – 'the state of civil unrest had made them feel

obsolete, abandoned on the perimeter of a sprawling technology of ruin’⁵⁰ – it is important to note that their alienation stems from a dissatisfaction with their linguistic resources. While Elmer Kennedy-Andrews correctly argues that the novel’s events become textualised (newspaper reportage, anecdotal accounts), and that narration displaces the real into the mediated (that which is re-presented),⁵¹ nevertheless the underlying emphasis of *Resurrection Man* is on the distorting nature of this representation and its ultimate failure to either encompass the primal scene of violence or explain its socio-political cause. The novel’s key motif is, in fact, silence. One key scene epitomises this failure of representation. When Victor is in prison and seeks revenge on a fellow inmate, he goes to his cell and forces him to write a confession by holding his wrist:

When he had finished Victor had difficulty in reading it. The letters did not seem to bear any relationship to others he had seen. At first glance they did not appear to belong to any known language, but were something called up out of months of solitary confinement. It was a language of seclusion: plaintive, elegiac, lost.⁵²

Here we have a character who cannot read the words he himself has dictated. It is fitting that Victor’s final act in this scene is to smother the inmate by placing a pillow over his face (the latter had already admitted that ‘I can’t mind the words no more’).

Of course, Northern Irish writers’ acute sensitivity to the problematics of re-presenting atrocity is not confined to their engagement with the Northern Irish conflict. Indeed, their constant vigilance towards, and avoidance of, the hackneyed phrase and the clichéd response have served them well when approaching other violent events such as the extermination of the Jews under the Nazi regime. One poet in particular, Michael Longley, has been especially vocal in his desire to avoid treating the Holocaust as ‘a mere subject’:

The German philosopher Adorno suggested that there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz. Perhaps he meant that after the holocaust poetry could not remain the same. In which case I agree with him. But I also believe that if poetry is incapable of approaching so huge and horrible a subject, then there is no future for poetry. A bad poem about the Holocaust will be a crime against the light. So this is dangerous territory. Although there is little we can do imaginatively with the pictures of the piles of bodies, the torture chambers, the gas ovens, we are duty bound to try and work out how we arrived there.⁵³

Longley never shirks from what he regards as the poet’s responsibilities, and avows his belief in the efficacy of the poetic text: the poet, he says,

must make 'the most complex response that can be made with words to the total experience of living' and, in so doing, he 'illuminates and orders it with words'.⁵⁴ 'Orders' does not simply connote a sense of containing chaotic violence within a regular metrical scheme; rather, it means to regulate, to direct, and to bring into order or submission to lawful authority, namely that of the poet. Indeed, this is what Seamus Heaney famously calls 'the jurisdiction of achieved form'. Changing the name of an early draft entitled 'Photographs' to 'The Exhibit',⁵⁵ Longley not only refers to a cultural artefact on display ('the pile of spectacles in the Auschwitz museum'), but also invokes the legal meaning, implying that the text is produced as evidence both of 'the torments inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis',⁵⁶ and of poetry's governing power.

I see them absentmindedly pat their naked bodies
Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been.
The grandparents turn back and take an eternity
Rummaging in the tangled pile for their spectacles⁵⁷

The changes made to the early drafts demonstrate a meticulous and justly scrupulous intelligence regarding his choice and arrangement of words. While he changes a demonstrative preposition ('this') to a definite article in 'the tangled pile' to allow for a sense of distance, he crucially alters the opening line of the earlier drafts to intimate his presence (he now includes the phrase 'I see'), conveying his own act of bearing witness and his imaginative intervention at one and the same time. For the reader, this opening gambit embodies the ambiguity inherent within all testimony: as Derrida reminds us, while '[b]y law, a testimony must not be a work of art or fiction', nevertheless since it cannot constitute proof, then 'there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction . . . that is to say, the possibility of literature . . .'.⁵⁸ The poet's opening statement is all the more poignant as the victims themselves are deprived by the Nazis of the power of vision: while they literally cannot see without their spectacles, they also cannot foresee their own death. The Auschwitz exhibition may connote the absence which resulted from the extermination (all that is left is a pile of spectacles), yet Longley's vision reverses the victims' dehumanisation, firstly, by remembering them as people within a familial context ('grandparents') and, secondly, by reconstructing the unbearably affecting moment prior to death when they 'pat their naked bodies / Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been'. By changing 'turn around' to 'turn back', the poet intimates a temporal dimension, allowing them to forestall the inevitable. Indeed, by literalising, thereby

revivifying, the outworn phrase 'spend an eternity', he presents us with an image of the grandparents held in stasis, almost as if they were revenants returning to reclaim what is theirs. Perhaps the most admirably courageous (and ultimately astute) editorial decision taken by Longley was to change the poem's format, deleting what was originally the second section:

Hundreds in broad daylight are waiting to be shot.
I pick out one only. Her aging breasts look sore.

While the couplet once again presents a human dimension, the clever ambiguity of 'to be shot' (photographed; executed) is deemed inappropriate, and the poet avoids placing himself in the position of the Nazis ('pick out' is too reminiscent of the selection process whereby the Nazis chose those who were to be eliminated in the crematoria). The concluding image, though tender and humanising, is perhaps also uncomfortably voyeuristic.

In the first section of an earlier poem, 'Ghetto', the speaker describes the impossible predicament of those who were singled out for selection to go to the Jewish ghettos (the preliminary stage before the death-camps):

Because you will suffer soon and die, your choices
Are neither right nor wrong: a spoon will feed you,
A flannel keep you clean, a toothbrush bring you back
To your bathroom's view of chimney-pots and gardens.
With so little time for inventory or leavetaking,
You are packing now for the rest of your life
Photographs, medicines, a change of underwear, a book,
A candlestick, a loaf, sardines, needle and thread.
These are your heirlooms, perishables, wordly goods.
What you bring is the same as what you leave behind,
Your last belonging a list of your belongings.⁵⁹

Opening with a logical conjunction ('Because'), the speaker questions the rationality of a decision to be made within an ethical vacuum. The choice of which articles to take to the ghetto is made, initially, on both practical and sentimental grounds: each is necessary for cleanliness and health, yet also acts as a totemic item of comfort and familiarity. While the associative connections foster a compensatory sense of non-estrangement, the text's insistent emphasis on temporality ('soon'; 'so little time'; 'rest of your life') undercuts the illusory fiction and hints at the victim's imminent demise, and hence at the absence of any real choice. Indeed, the ironic juxtaposition of 'heirlooms, perishables' connotes not only the destruction of all things material, but also the

destruction of an entire generation. 'Worldly goods' becomes 'wordly goods' within the 'concentrationary realism'⁶⁰ espoused in this poem: through bureaucratic exactitude (list-making), only the words survive for the victim. Such a conclusion may also hint at the author's positive assertion of language's ability to persist, and his desire to confront (and overcome) silence.

Discussing an earlier poem, 'Terezín',⁶¹ Longley states:

Sometimes the brevity is to do with tact in dealing with momentous subject matter, and the only way to contain it without being offensive is to touch it and no more. A poem for instance that I wrote, 'Terezín', which is about a photograph in Montreal which I'll never forget seeing – it was a photograph of a room in Terezín filled with hundreds of violins that had been confiscated from Jews and were I suppose about to be handed out to young Aryan future Mozarts. It seemed to me that the only way to deal with that was two lines which approached the condition of silence.⁶²

In the poem, Longley refers indirectly to the suffering within the concentration camps:

No room has ever been as silent as the room
Where hundreds of violins are hung in unison.

The victims are present here only by their absence. Originally entitled 'Silence',⁶³ the text presents the reader with an image that on first reading could signify the death of art. Much of its power derives from the title which provides an implied context: the ghetto (and transit camp) established by the Nazis north of Prague. To create the spare, haunting image, complemented by an eerie acoustic echo signifying emptiness ('No room . . . room . . . unison'), Longley again employs his better judgement and shortens the original quatrain by two thematically redundant lines. The overall effect is restorative: bearing witness to and opposing a regime that resulted in the death of so many musicians, the text embodies the surviving efficacy of art. Never has a silence been so resonant.

When writing about atrocious events, Seamus Heaney often achieves artistic distance and a sense of objectivity by adopting the strategy of quoting from literary exemplars. When citing approvingly from the work of others, or when alluding to their artistic praxis, the poet not only seeks their *auctoritas*, but also measures his own work against theirs. By constructing an artistic pantheon – a 'self-referential intimacy' – he creates 'a bolstering imaginative system of self-instruction, self-declaration, self-evaluation, and self-rebuke'.⁶⁴ However, there is as much 'self-rebuke' as there is 'self-instruction', and Heaney's recourse to a discourse of exemplarity is not always a resolving one, nor one of unqualified self-approval. At times in his poems, therefore, there is a tension between

the need to speak out directly, and an attitude of self-censorship resulting in silence. For example, when writing about the conflict in the Balkans in 'Known World'⁶⁵ he finds himself forced to contemplate 'That old sense of a tragedy going on / Uncomprehended', and his first impulse is to invoke an artistic allusion, referring to conflict in aesthetic terms: 'A pity I didn't know then (for Caj's sake) / Hygo Simberg's allegory of Finland'. He translates Simberg's image of the wounded angel into more familiar terms: 'A first communion angel with big white wings . . .'. Yet even when he has transformed the unknown into the known, he self-reflexively meditates on his right to interpret Simberg's allegory: 'who's to know / How to read sorrow rightly, or at all?' At the time he felt 'involved at the moment and closer than usual and yet half-culpably secure'.⁶⁶ Having raised the issue of his self-doubt, however, he invokes a further allusion:

The open door, the jambs, the worn saddle
And actual granite of the doorstep slab.
Now enters another angel, fit as ever,
Past each house with a doorstep daubed 'Serb house'.

Explaining why the houses were 'daubed "Serb house"', Karl Miller, in conversation with Heaney, states: 'This was a message which was painted on thresholds in order to dissuade those who would otherwise enter the house and kill everyone inside'.⁶⁷ Referring to the Passover (*Exodus*, 2:12), Heaney makes an implicit link between that genocide and the contemporary circumstances in the Balkans. Overt judgement and condemnation are avoided – the speaker no longer uses the first person singular; intertextuality facilitates indirection while still allowing the poet to refer to the war.

Recourse to quotation as a poetic strategy when referring to unspeakable atrocity is perhaps taken to a curious extreme in the work of the final writer examined in this chapter: Medbh McGuckian.⁶⁸ Caught between the ethical compulsion to respond and the knowledge that she is not an authoritative witness, McGuckian embeds un-attributed quotations from eye-witness testimonies, using and engaging with the insights of those who have actually experienced the conditions of war. For example, 'Corduroy Road'⁶⁹ refers to an unspecified 'historical ground' situated 'not far from Richmond': 'ripe and suffering / is covered with dirt and pitch, / the sentimentalized blossoms, / outlast the stench'. Here she cites from David W. Blight's 'No Desperate Hero: Manhood and Freedom in a Union Soldier's Experience', a study of two hundred American Civil War letters written by Charles Harvey Brewster. Blight's analysis argues that those who fought in the Civil War

experienced conflicting emotions, running ‘from naïveté to mature realism, from romantic idealism to sheer terror, from self-pity to enduring devotion’.⁷⁰ The specific line taken from Blight cites his observation that combatants often mask ugliness and horror when writing about war, not only as a self-protective measure, but also as a means of shielding loved ones from atrocity: ‘[s]entimentalized blossoms so often outlast and even replace the stench of the dead and the vileness of war’.⁷¹ Within McGuckian’s text, the quotation extends Blight’s argument to suggest that historiography and commemoration can equally render the reality of war as safe and distant for those in the present: the Corduroy Road becomes ‘that now historical ground’. Yet the poem refuses to participate in the whitewash and insistently dwells on the psychological effects of war:⁷²

the compass that had been built into me (p. 64)	It was a compass built into me,
militarization of thought (p. 368)	the militarization of my thought,
the crackling shots were to him like voices (p. 65)	their shots were to me like voices . . .

In the context of the American Civil War ‘militarization of thought’ refers to what Blight discerns as ‘a male tradition deeply ingrained in American society, and one that common and less literary-inclined men like Brewster had helped to cultivate. Brewster’s own manly compass sent him irresistibly off to war’.⁷³ Individual volition is negated due to the war effort, and Brewster’s imagination is left, like Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, tormented by the sounds of battle; the ‘shots’ may be ‘like voices’, but they drown out his own voice.

McGuckian’s poems often deal with situations in which one can only ‘say nothing’. Borrowing from Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind*,⁷⁴ the opening section of ‘Asking for the Alphabet Back’⁷⁵ depicts a prisoner’s encroaching speechlessness:⁷⁶

she suddenly forgot all her small stock of Russian words, even, for instance, the word for water (p. 363)	She could not even remember the word
a single drop in a grey wave (p. 353)	for water. A single drop
So he lied to me (p. 17)	in a grey wave lied to her,
The news burned, stung, clawed (p. 25)	singing the news that clawed and stung.
these un-men (p. 60)	The un-men were not only men

it brimmed over (p. 118)	but her men. They brimmed over
symmetrical watchtowers (p. 397)	the symmetrical watchtowers, the wall spoke
Toward evening the wall spoke (p. 82)	as though it were the unbroken Host.

Within an Irish context, one could read the poem as expressing the effects of linguistic colonisation on the speaker, with English replacing Gaelic as the mother tongue, discomfiting not only her sense of place but also her sense of being (the text goes on to talk of 'the bullet through her heart / as English followed the roads, its tidings' / malady amputating the wildscape'). In the section cited above, the quotations present an analogy between British colonisation in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland and Stalinist Russia in the mid-1930s. Ginzburg's autobiography relates a narrative of betrayal by the communist government in which she believed, a tale of sham trials, purges and imprisonment. She tells of how her friend Maria Zacher began to lose 'her small stock of Russian words' while imprisoned at the Magadan camp, and of how news of the widespread mock-trials 'burned, stung, clawed at one's heart'. Freedom, individuality and voice were confiscated by the totalitarian regime: all became 'un-men'. Although the implied analogy is historically inaccurate, the quotations themselves are unacknowledged and thus meant to be untraceable. The views expressed may be extreme, but the use of a fellow writer's text functions as an enabling means by which she can empathise with those who suffer oppression. The lack of statement of intent is of course in line with both the text's (and intertext's) thematics of secrecy and focus on silence.

In conclusion, one can argue that the writer and visual artist may find themselves compelled to 'say nothing' in three crucial circumstances: firstly, when their role as artists is under question, when they contemplate their objectivity and effectiveness; secondly, either when the linguistic and photographic media becomes debased through the prevalence of clichés, or when they find themselves using discourses which are considered to be beyond the pale (republican nationalism; the discourse of the terrorist); thirdly, when there is a severe crisis of representation (through the intrinsic failure of language to represent the actuality of violence, through psychological self-censorship, or through the artist's feeling that he or she lacks authority). However, contemporary artists from Northern Ireland, and those like Alan Clarke and Rita Donagh who are responding to the conflict in this area, tend not to end up as some angst-ridden Hamlet, 'dithering and blathering'. While their

artwork tends toward the self-reflexive, using intertextuality and other formal strategies which foreground an artwork's principles of construction, they are not self-enclosed. When speaking of atrocities, they do not speak atrociously.

Notes

- 1 Wendy S. Hesford, 'Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering', *Biography*, 27/1 (winter 2004), pp. 104–45, p. 109.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), pp. 71–2.
- 3 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 21.
- 4 Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 57.
- 5 Seamus Heaney, 'Us as in *Versus*: Poetry and the World', *When Hope and History Rhyme: The NUI, Galway, Millennium Lecture Series* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 50.
- 6 Seamus Heaney, *Talking with Poets*, ed. Harry Thomas (New York: Handsell Books, 2002), p. 47.
- 7 Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972), p. 41.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 9 Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 46.
- 10 Heaney, *North*, pp. 57–60.
- 11 Heaney, *North*, p. 23.
- 12 Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 36–7.
- 13 Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001): p. 54.
- 14 Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 29.
- 15 The work formed part of Doherty's retrospective at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 31 October 2002–2 March 2003. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith (eds) *Willie Doherty: False Memory* (London: Merrell, 2002), p. 144.
- 16 It has been alleged that the informer was lured back to Ireland on false promises by Martin McGuinness and that he was subsequently shot. One other person allegedly involved in all of this was Freddie Scappaticci, who may or may not have been a British agent as well. So many deceptions . . .
- 17 Willie Doherty, 'Like Home', interview by Joan Rothfuss, in Zarina Bhimji et al. (eds), *No Place (Like Home)* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1997), p. 47.
- 18 Paul O'Brien, 'Willie Doherty: Language, Imagery and the Real', *Circa* 104 (2003), p. 53.
- 19 Allen Feldman, 'Retaliate and Punish: Political Violence as Form and Memory in Northern Ireland', *Éire-Ireland* (summer 1998), pp. 195–235: p. 207.

- 20 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (De-)constructing the North* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 12.
- 21 Brian Hand, 'Swerved in Naught', *Circa*, 76 (1996), p. 22.
- 22 Christov-Bakargiev and Mac Giolla Léith, *Willie Doherty*, p. 158.
- 23 Michael Walsh, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: Coming to Terms with Northern Ireland in the 1980s and the 1990s', in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 288–98: pp. 294–5.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- 25 Brian McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland* (Richmond: Steveston Press, 2001), p. 128.
- 26 Richard Kirkland, 'The Spectacle of Terrorism in Northern Irish Culture'. *Critical Survey*, 15:1 (2003), pp. 77–90: p. 77.
- 27 Andrea Grunert, 'Emotion and Cognition: About Some Key-Figures in Films by Alan Clarke': www.artbrain.org/journal2/grunert.html (accessed on 12 June 2005).
- 28 Kirkland, 'The Spectacle of Terrorism', pp. 86–7.
- 29 See Shane Murphy, 'Don't Mention the War: The Trouble(s) in Northern Irish Poetry', in Michel Hensen and Annette Pankratz (eds), *The Aesthetics and Pragmatics of Violence* (Passau: Verlag Karl Stutz, 2001), pp. 89–102.
- 30 Sarat Maharaj, 'Rita Donagh: Towards a Map of Her Artwork', 1974/1984/1994: *Paintings and Drawings* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1995), p. 15.
- 31 David E. Morrison, 'The Idea of Violence', in Andrew Millwood Hargrave (ed.), *Violence in Factual Television: Annual Review* (London: John Libbey, 1993), p. 125.
- 32 Lewis R. Gordon, 'A Questioning Body of Laughter and Tears', *Parallax* 8/2 (2002), pp. 10–29: p. 16.
- 33 Eve Patten, 'Fiction in Conflict: Northern Ireland's Prodigal Novelists', in Ian A Bell (ed.), *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 128–48, p. 128.
- 34 See Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 65–87, and Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1696: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Edinburgh: Ashgate, 2005).
- 35 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 57.
- 36 Eoin McNamee, *Resurrection Man* (London: Picador, 2005).
- 37 Aaron Kelly, '"A Stasis of Hatred, Fear and Mistrust": The Politics of form in representations of Northern Ireland Produced by the "Troubles" Thriller', in P.J. Mathews (ed.), *New Voices in Irish Criticism* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), pp. 109–15, p. 109.

- 38 McNamee wrote the screenplay for the film, which was directed by Mark Evans (1998).
- 39 See Kevin Barry, *Irish Times*, 13 February 1998, Michael Dwyer, *Irish Times*, 20 February 1998, and Gary Mitchell, *Irish Times*, 27 February 1998.
- 40 Glenn Patterson, 'Nothing Has to Die', interview by Richard Mills, *Northern Narratives*, ed. Bill Lazenbatt, *Writing Ulster*, 6 (1999), pp. 113–29: p. 119.
- 41 Richard Haslam, '“The Pose Arranged and Lingered Over”: Visualizing the “Troubles”', in Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds), *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 192–212, p. 208.
- 42 McNamee, p. 16.
- 43 Ibid., p. 92.
- 44 Ibid., p. 197.
- 45 Ibid., p. 213.
- 46 Ibid., p. 42.
- 47 Ibid., p. 24.
- 48 Ibid., pp. 34–5.
- 49 Nuala C. Johnson, 'The Cartographies of Violence: Belfast's *Resurrection Man*', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 17 (1999), pp. 723–36: p. 724. See also Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 123.
- 50 Ibid., p. 83.
- 51 See Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Antic Dispositions in Some Recent Irish Fiction', in Fran Brearton and Eamonn Hughes (eds), *Last Before America: Irish and American Writing* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), pp. 134–6.
- 52 Ibid., p. 103.
- 53 Longley, 'A Few Thoughts about the Ghetto', Michael Longley Papers, MSS 744, Special Collection, R.W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 38, Folder 15.
- 54 Longley, 'Definition of Poetry', Michael Longley Papers, MSS 744, Special Collection, R.W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 35, Folder 11.
- 55 Longley, Drafts of 'The Exhibit', Michael Longley Papers, MSS 744, Special Collection, R.W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 26, Folder 25.
- 56 Longley, Draft of *Cenotaph of Snow*, Michael Longley Papers, MSS 744, Special Collection, R.W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 35, Folder 7.
- 57 Michael Longley, *Weather in Japan* (London: Cape, 2000), p. 18.
- 58 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 43.
- 59 Michael Longley, *Selected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 1998), pp. 97–9.
- 60 See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 1982), pp. 50–4. 'Worldly

goods’ became ‘wordly goods’ when the poem was included in Longley’s *Selected Poems*.

- 61 Longley, *Selected Poems*, p. 96.
- 62 Peter McDonald, ‘Au Revoir, Oeuvre’, interview with Michael Longley, Special Collections, The R.W. Woodruff Library, Box 43, Folder 5.
- 63 Longley, ‘Silence’, box 23, folder 30, Special Collections.
- 64 Neil Corcoran, ‘Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 17 (1987), pp. 117–27: p. 119.
- 65 Heaney, *Electric Light*, pp. 19–23.
- 66 Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: BTL, 2000), p. 28.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 68 For a fuller discussion of McGuckian’s use of intertextuality, see Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).
- 69 Medbh McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* (Meath: Gallery Press, 2003), pp. 80–1.
- 70 David W. Blight, ‘No Desperate Hero: Manhood and Freedom in a Union Soldier’s Experience’, in Elizabeth Clinton (ed.), *Divided Houses: Gender and Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 55–75: p. 56.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 72 McGuckian’s text is on the right; quotations from Blight (with page numbers to ‘No Desperate Hero’ in parentheses) are on the left.
- 73 Blight, ‘No Desperate Hero’, p. 64.
- 74 Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, trans. Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward, 2nd edn (San Diego: Harcourt, 1995).
- 75 McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives*, p. 31.
- 76 McGuckian’s text is on the right; quotations from Ginzburg are on the left, with page numbers from *Journey into the Whirlwind* given in parentheses.

