

Poetry in a Troubling Time

Analyzing several poems inspired by the Troubles in Northern Ireland

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Preface:

Most of the news about Northern Ireland for the past year has been about what effect Brexit will have on the North's relationship with the Republic of Ireland. The discussion of eliminating the "soft-border," and replacing it with a "hard-border," which would see the reinstatement of checkpoints along the 500-kilometer border, continues to dominate international headlines. The EU has been attempting to allay concerns, and in March, President of the European Council Donald Tusk, traveled to Dublin and reaffirmed the EU's commitment to avoiding a hard border and maintaining the peace process in the region (Stone, 2018).

At the surface level, this hard border issue would appear to just be an economic problem that threatens the current trade arrangement between Northern Ireland and its Southern neighbor, but it is also an Irish identity issue which some fear would threaten the longstanding freedom of movement, employment and residency between Britain and the Republic, which pre-dates both Irish independence and EU membership. A hard border would fundamentally divide the population in a matter that has not been seen in decades.

Tony Blair recently commented on the border issue, stating that, "I find it not just disappointing but sickening that people should really be prepared to sacrifice peace in Northern Ireland on the altar of Brexit" (Allegretti, 2018). Though this quote may sound melodramatic, it is a real fear for some that the current peace and harmony enjoyed in Northern Ireland could revert back to how relations were during "the Troubles," a multi-decade streak of sectarian violence that afflicted the region from the late 1960's through the 1990's, and pitted Catholic and Protestant

neighbors against each other. This paper attempts to examine the effects that the Troubles had on the ever-changing Irish national identity during this time period, specifically in the field of poetry, by analyzing the works of several prominent Irish and Northern Irish poets, including Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson.

Poetry in a Troubling Time:

In the nearly 30 years of the Troubles, more than 50,000 casualties were suffered, and more than 1,800 civilians were killed (BBC). These events had profound effects on the morale of the territory and also effected how the world perceived of Northern Ireland as a whole. The high number of civilian casualties made the Troubles appear particularly gruesome to international audiences who could not comprehend the reasons behind the violence. Though peace was brokered in the late 1990's as a result of the Good Friday Agreement, the poetry of the era is still important to read, as it effectively conveys the sentiments of citizens at the time of the conflict. Many of these poems revolve around the indiscriminate nature of the violence during the Troubles, the indifference and misperceptions of the outside world when viewing Ireland's crisis, the ambivalence of certain citizens towards acts of violence, and the overarching necessity for peace. Seamus Heaney is perhaps the most well known poet to write on this portion of Northern Ireland's history, but poets like Ciaran Carson, and Michael Longley both have deeply personal contributions to the poetry of the Troubles as well.

Seamus Heaney is considered by many to be one of Ireland's greatest poets, particularly for his approachable imagery and his poems' surprising depth. Heaney was born in 1939 in County Derry, Northern Ireland, and was raised in a Catholic family during the Troubles. Many of Heaney's poems are stories that use sensual images to describe the history of Ireland, through depictions of nature, and a heavy reliance on the musicality of words. Some of Heaney's poems are delightful to read, while others delve into more uncomfortable topics. Heaney wrote several famous

poems on the Troubles, as this period had a profound influence on his life. In Seamus Heaney's "The Wood Road," he alludes to parts of the conflict as a series of events that have taken place on a road near Heaney's home, which he has travelled many times before.

The title of the poem, "The Wood Road," brings to mind the famous opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*, "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost" (Alighieri). It may be a suggestion of Heaney's that as a result of the ongoing sectarian violence, Northern Ireland has found itself in a dark wood, and lost its straightforward path. Northern Ireland had become quite a successful territory, economically speaking, but its development path had been marred by the perpetual problems between its Catholic and Protestant citizens.

The poem begins with the lines, "Resurfaced, never widened, / The verges grassy as when / Bill Pickering lay with his gun... / Nightwatching, in uniform— / Special militiaman. (Road, 1-6). The opening lines present the image of a road that has been given a new coat of asphalt, but which the speaker recognizes as the same road he has always known. He is able to associate the current way that the road looks with a memory from when Bill Pickering, a protestant soldier, guarded the road in the past. The first line suggests that the problems facing Northern Ireland at present may appear new to some, but they are the same problems that have existed between Protestants and Catholics for several hundred years. The use of the word "resurfaced" may be Heaney's suggestion that the term "The Troubles" is just a new name that is being applied to the age-old conflict in Northern Ireland. Heaney goes

on to describe a childhood memory of riding a cart on the road, writing, "Or me in broad daylight / On top of a cartload / Of turf built trig and tight, / Looked up to, looking down, / Allowed the reins like an adult" (Road, 13-17). The innocent memory of the speaker here is contrasted with the earlier memory of the militarization of the road with protestant troops. This farming memory of Heaney's has the classic earthy descriptions of farming activities that Heaney is known for, with the use of words like turf, trig, cartload, and reins, but they are interjected in this poem in a manner which makes them just a portion of the story that the road has to tell.

The definitive turn of the poem comes when Heaney describes walking the wood road to attend a funeral:

Then that August day I walked it
"To the hunger striker's wake,
Across a silent yard,
In past a watching crowd
To where the guarded corpse
And a guard of honour stared. (Road, 19-24).

This is the first instance in the poem where the deaths commonly associated with the Troubles can be seen. Heaney's description of the funeral is rather eerie, with the silent yard and the watching crowd and the staring guard. Everything about the scene is uncomfortable, and it effectively conveys Heaney's ambivalence towards the Troubles as a whole. Heaney never condoned the violent methods used by either side, though he was notably more sympathetic to the Irish cause. The use of a hunger striker as the death depicted in this poem is powerful as it is a peaceful and self-inflicted death, which takes weeks if not months to occur. The lack of violence

associated with this death makes it more impactful in many ways, because it shows the enduring problems that led to such a death, and the dedication of a side to bring about change. In fact, the deaths of ten hunger strikers during the Troubles in 1981 inspired many Irish nationalists to create the political party Sinn Féin. Heaney portrays himself as an outsider at this funeral, perhaps because he is not quite as radical as many of the other Catholics, who were willing to die for the unification of Ireland.

In the stanza after the funeral, Heaney chooses to discuss the death of a little girl, who was hit by a car. He does so rather matter-of-factly, and chooses not to treat the subject very emotionally, writing:

Or the stain at the end of the lane
Where the child on her bike was hit
By a speed-merchant from nowhere
Hard-rounding the corner,
A back wheel spinning in sunshine,
A headlamp in smithereens (Road, 29-30).

This mention of the death of the girl seems unnecessary, but it serves a broader purpose in the poem by showing the pervasiveness of death, and the indifference of nature. This is especially evident with the image of the “wheel spinning in sunshine,” which does not seem to accompany the violent death that immediately precedes it. The accidental nature of the brutal death of the girl starkly contrasts with the intentional political nature of the non-violent death of the hunger striker. This seems to be Heaney’s way of saying that even if death can serve a broader purpose, as is seen to be the case with the death of the hunger striker, death can also be pointless, and serve no purpose at all. It is the cruel nature of the world. The last stanza of the poem seems to address the reader, stating, “Film it in sepia, / Drip-

paint it in blood, / The Wood Road as is and was, / Resurfaced, never widened” (Road, 30-34). This repetition of the first line of the poem suggests that all of the events discussed in the poem are just part of Northern Ireland’s history, but that they are not fundamentally changing the territory itself, or “widening the road.” The command to film it in sepia, or drip paint it in blood, seems to directly address the Troubles themselves, and the tendency for outsiders to portray the violence as something novel and noteworthy. Heaney does away with this opinion, writing that the road is merely resurfaced, but never widened. This resurfacing could be the evolution of the IRA throughout the 20th century, or the presentation of the Troubles as a wholly new problem facing Northern Ireland, but Heaney suggests that this road has always been the same.

Ciaran Carson is another Northern Irish poet who describes the effects of living during the Troubles vividly in his work. Carson grew up a few years after Seamus Heaney, but had many similar experiences during his upbringing. Carson is also from a Catholic family, but Carson’s family made the interesting choice to only speak Irish in the home (Edemariam, 2009). This was extremely rare in Belfast at the time, and Carson reckons that his family was one of a handful of families in the entire city that spoke Irish in the home. Carson’s uses language to convey more than just the technical definitions of words, and he attributes his unique use of words to his bilingual upbringing. Where Heaney uses images of nature and Irish imagery to get his message across, Carson uses the words themselves as the tools of the poem. This is perhaps best exemplified in his famous poem on the Troubles, “Belfast Confetti.”

“Belfast Confetti” is a short, jutting poem about Belfast during the Troubles. The poem is two stanzas, with the first stanza in the past tense, and the second stanza in the present tense. The poem repeatedly uses caesura and enjambment, and has no formal rhyme scheme. All of these features collectively give the poem an abrasive and confused feeling, which effectively convey the emotions of the speaker during the Troubles. The poem immediately brings the reader into a scene of violence in Belfast, with the lines, “Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation / marks, / Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type” (Confetti, 1-3). The riot squad makes the reader think that this may be a normal poem about an incident during the Troubles, but then the exclamation marks are mentioned. After this there are the descriptions of tangible objects, like nails and bolts, but then once again Carson abstracts the imagery by describing a “fount of broken type.” This mixture of the material and the immaterial world makes the poem particularly unnerving, as it is almost as if the violence of the real world has transformed itself into the erratic and almost violent use of language in the poem. The name of the poem, “Belfast Confetti,” is in reference to bombs used during the Troubles in Belfast. These bombs were typically made with items like the nuts, bolts and nails mentioned in the third line, and rivets from the shipyards in Belfast (Wake Forest, 2015). The choice to name the poem after an improvised explosive like this seems random at first, but it works well for several reasons. The irony of the term is important, as confetti is typically associated with celebrations and unions, whereas in Belfast it symbolizes terror and separatism. Also, the collection of items used in these bombs has the effect of making the weapons very personal to Belfast. Much of

Belfast's economy was based on its shipyards, where many of these bolts and screws could be found, so in a sense Belfast is being destroyed by the very components that helped construct it in the first place.

Carson's use of enjambment in these opening lines is notable as well, because it has the interruptive effect of the explosion that is being described. Words are often inadequate at depicting the full scope of an event, but Carson manages to incite the feeling of an explosion through his enjambment of several lines describing the event. He writes, "And / the explosion / Itself - an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst / of rapid fire..."(Confetti, 3-6). The poem carries an interrupted feeling that makes the speaker appear delirious, as if he has shellshock from the explosion, and it is hindering his ability to write. Carson's poem differs from most other poems that describe war, with a detached, somber, and formal tone. In "Belfast Confetti" Carson's work is succumbing to the violence of the Troubles. In the next line, the speaker remarks, "I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept / stuttering" (Confetti, 7-8). Carson cleverly has the poem's words take the effect of the message that they are conveying. The caesura after "head" coupled with the choice to leave the word "stuttering" in a line by itself makes the reader experience the mental stutter described by the speaker, and produces a noticeable gunfire sound in the poem. The speaker then goes on to remark that "All the alleyways and side streets [were] blocked with stops and / colons" (Confetti, 9-10). This is another example of the immaterial aspects of language and poetry being mixed in with the material descriptions of Belfast. This has the effect of making the speaker sound trapped, but because of his fear and

anxiety, not because of any real barriers. This may be Carson's way of showing what life was like during the Troubles, as the turmoil had the capacity to make one feel trapped in one's own city.

Carson continues using the idea of being trapped in one's home in the second stanza, when the poem shifts to the present tense. He writes: "I know this labyrinth so well - Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman, / Odessa Street - / Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. / Dead end again" (Confetti, 11-14). These are all streets in Belfast, which Carson knows well, but he is unable to navigate them now. His description of Belfast as an inescapable labyrinth is particularly evocative of the horror that the Troubles brought to Northern Ireland. The continued usage of caesuras and enjambment give the poem the feeling of a labyrinth, with its many stops and starts, but eventual dead ends. The second stanza is also where the speaker poses the first question of the poem, pondering why he can't escape. This question is not one that is readily answered in the poem, and suggests the helplessness of many during the Troubles. The ending of the poem presents more of these questions, with the speaker asking, "What is / My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? / A fusillade of question-marks" (Confetti, 16-18). These questions bombard the poem in rapid succession, giving the lines the fusillade effect. Carson's poem is an amazing work for its ability to use words to symbolize the actions of a bombing and the mental effects of being present during an attack. It does not resort to violent descriptions, but instead uses words, punctuation, stresses, and caesura to create an effect that powerfully conveys the effects of the Troubles. Carson's "Belfast Confetti" is obviously a much different poem than

Heaney's "The Wood Road." His specific approach is not equaled by any other poet who wrote on the Troubles during this time. Carson breaks away from the traditional poetic styles of conflict, and uses his unnerving, bizarre, and creative approach to resonate deeply with those afflicted by the Troubles.

Michael Longley is another poet who approaches the Troubles in a particularly insightful and distinct way. Longley was born in Belfast in 1939, the same year as Seamus Heaney. Michael Longley's background shares some similarities with that of Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson, but it also has some notable differences. Chief among these differences is the fact that Longley was brought up in a protestant household by English parents (Wroe, 2004). This makes Longley's perspective on the Troubles slightly different from the perspectives of Heaney and Carson, who both had native Catholic upbringings. Longley has remarked that as a result of his upbringing, he feels both British, and Irish (Wroe, 2004). This is a sentiment which is not shared by Carson, who as previously mentioned, only spoke Irish in his home, or by Heaney, who once wrote, "Be advised my passport's green. No glass of ours was ever raised to toast the Queen." (Irish Times, 2015). This blended identity makes Longley's perspective on the Troubles all the more interesting, because he feels no clear allegiance to either side. "Ceasefire," one of Longley's most memorable poems about the Troubles, uses the Trojan War as a metaphor for the bloody conflict that was taking place in Northern Ireland at the time.

"Ceasefire" is an interesting poem both for its format, and for its content. The poem first appeared in the *Irish Times* in 1994, a few days before the IRA announced

a ceasefire. It offered hope to a population that was hurting from the recent uptick in violence around Belfast in the 1990's. The poem's structure is rather simple, and is a sonnet broken into four stanzas. The first two stanzas have an ABCB rhyme scheme, while the third stanza is free verse, and the final stanza is a rhyming couplet. The meter is not entirely apparent, but the poem seems to oscillate between five and six beat iambic lines. The entirety of the poem is an account of the meeting between King Priam and Achilles during the Trojan War, as depicted in Homer's *Iliad*. Though no mention of Northern Ireland is made, the poem effectively uses the Trojan War and the meeting between Priam and Achilles as a metaphor for the Troubles and the tentative peace process that was underway at the time.

The first stanza of the poem begins with the image of the awkward initial meeting between Achilles and Priam, who have both suffered from the losses of close friends or family. The grief for their kin is what brings the two together. The second line reads, "Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king / Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and / Wept with him until their sadness filled the building" (Ceasefire, 2-4). These two men are honorable, with one being the greatest warrior in the *Iliad*, and the other a respected King, but both are shown at an emotionally low point in this scene. This depiction of the two men crying for their respective losses is powerful, and humanizes both sides. This may be where Longley's dually British and Irish citizenry is at display, as he makes neither figure the clear enemy, but merely attempts to portray the grievances suffered by both sides, and acknowledges the humanity of both figures. The materialization of sadness as a space filler is also a powerful image in this opening stanza.

In the second stanza, this respect between enemies is displayed again, with Achilles cleaning Hector's body for his father: "Achilles / Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake, / Laid out in uniform" (Ceasefire, 5-7). Achilles' strikingly tender treatment of the corpse of Hector, whom Achilles had previously dragged around in a chariot for several days, is a point in the poem where Longley seems to suggest the ultimate futility of violence. Both Catholics and the Protestants suffered great casualties during the Troubles, and the typical response was continued violence by both sides. However, this ultimately did not solve any of the underlying issues of the conflict, which could only be ended by peace talks.

In the third stanza, Longley describes Priam's and Achilles' admiration for each other, writing, "When they had eaten together, it pleased them both / To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might, / Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still" (Ceasefire, 9-11). This seems to be Longley's way of alluding to the benefits that could come from the ceasefire talks that were occurring between the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries in 1994. This is the noticeable stanza that does not rhyme, and its lack of rhyme has the effect of breaking up the rhythm of the poem. In a sense, the third stanza is the poetic ceasefire, temporarily halting the rhymes of the previous two stanzas. The stanza also has a slow and dreamy quality to it, describing an extremely calm scene where Achilles and Priam view each other as "lovers might," instead of as enemies.

The rhyming couplet at the end contains the two most powerful lines in the poem. It is the only moment where either character speaks, and it comes from Priam who states, "I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles'

hand, the killer of my son" (Ceasefire, 13-14). This is the ultimate scene of forgiveness, and it perfectly conveys the pride that Priam must swallow in order to retrieve the body of his son. This moment is grueling, but it is through this swallowing of pride that both sides are able to have a peaceful interaction. Longley makes the fairly clear suggestion that parties on either side of the conflict will need to make concessions if they want to achieve lasting peace. Interestingly, this couplet brings back the rhyming, which was departed from in the third stanza. This ends the poetic ceasefire mentioned before. It is worth noting that the ceasefire that took place during the Trojan War was not lasting, and Achilles was killed soon after. Longley may be insinuating that ceasefires don't solve political issues, but that they temporarily prevent unnecessary carnage from taking place while allowing time for lasting peace agreements to be worked out. This would indeed hold true, as the ceasefire in 1994 failed when the IRA started its bombings again in early 1996, but the Good Friday Agreement would bring an eventual end to Troubles several years later in 1999.

The Troubles were a terrible period in Northern Ireland's history, and Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Michael Longley all were personally affected by the violence that struck the communities that they lived in. Each poet's approach to comprehending the conflict and what stance he would have on it is interestingly portrayed, and the unique point of reference for Heaney, Carson and Longley is visible in each of their respective poems. Heaney's "The Wood Road" uses a country scene and nature to describe the effects of the Troubles, while Longley's "Belfast Confetti" takes an urban and more abstract approach to describe the firsthand

effects of the violence. Longley's "Ceasefire" takes a much more detached approach to the conflict, using an allegory to effectively convey the necessity for peace.

Despite the immense differences of these three poets, they all express a desire for the carnage to end in their work. There is no jingoism or deep nationalism present in any of these poems, just a shared belief that the sectarian violence had run its course.

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**Seamus Heaney
(1939-2013)**

“The Wood Road” (2010)

Resurfaced, never widened,
The verges grassy as when
Bill Pickering lay with his gun
Under the summer hedge
Nightwatching, in uniform—

Special militiaman.

Moonlight on rifle barrels,
On the windscreen of a van
Roadblocking the road,
The rest of his staunch patrol
In profile, sentry-loyal,

Harassing Mulhollandstown.

Or me in broad daylight
On top of a cartload
Of turf built trig and tight,
Looked up to, looking down,
Allowed the reins like an adult

As the old cart rocked and rollicked.

Then that August day I walked it
“To the hunger striker’s wake,
Across a silent yard,
In past a watching crowd
To where the guarded corpse

And a guard of honour stared.

Or the stain at the end of the lane
Where the child on her bike was hit
By a speed-merchant from nowhere
Hard-rounding the corner,
A back wheel spinning in sunshine,

A headlamp in smithereens.

Film it in sepia,

Drip-paint it in blood,
The Wood Road as is and was,
Resurfaced, never widened,
The milk-churn deck and the sign

For the bus-stop overgrown.

**Ciaran Carson
(1948)**

"Belfast Confetti" (1987)

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation
marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car keys. A fount of broken type. And
the explosion
Itself - an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst
of rapid fire ...
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept
stuttering
All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and
colons.

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

**Michael Longley
(1939)**

“Ceasefire” (1994)

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector’s corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king’s sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other’s beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

‘I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles’ hand, the killer of my son.’