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Lest We Forget: Memory, Trauma, and Culture in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

/ EN / While the Good Friday Agreement heralded a new beginning in Northern Ireland, its promotion of amnesty and amnesia, and its "rhetorical dismemberment of the past," effectively occluded the experiences of victims. Rather than engage in the seductive embrace of cultural amnesia, much Northern Irish art focuses upon the dangers of forgetting the past. For visual artists and writers alike, a wilful neglect of history may result in the return of the repressed and in psychic breakdown on both the communal and individual levels. Works by Jack Pakenham, Ciaran Carson, Colin Davidson, Frank McGuinness, and Willie Doherty use the trope of "haunting" to allow readers/viewers to bear witness to the plight of those left behind by the Agreement's rhetoric and to understand their post-conflict trauma.

/ FR / Bien que l'Accord du Vendredi saint annonçât un nouveau début pour l'Irlande du Nord, il eut comme résultat, de par sa promotion d'une amnistie combinée à une amnésie forcée, ainsi que son démembrement rhétorique du passé, de nier le vécu des victimes. Plutôt que de se laisser subjuguier par la séduction de l'amnésie culturelle, une grande partie de l'expression artistique de l'Irlande du Nord se concentre sur le danger d'oublier le passé. Pour les plasticiens aussi bien que les écrivains, une négligence délibérée de l'histoire pourrait ramener la répression et occasionner des blessures psychiques aussi bien au niveau communautaire que de l'individu. Les œuvres de Jack Pakenham, Ciaran Carson, Colin Davidson, Frank McGuinness, et Willie Doherty déploient le trope de la « hantise » pour permettre aux lecteurs et au public de témoigner de la souffrance de ceux qui ont été laissés pour compte par la rhétorique de l'Accord, et de mieux comprendre leur traumatisme post-conflit.

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The Good Friday Agreement, signed on April 10, 1998, and effectively endorsed by the passing of two separate referendums, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, on May 22 of that year, heralded a period of optimism with regards to peace and reconciliation in the Northern Irish State. The so-called Troubles, it was argued, were at an end: just prior to the signing, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, was moved to utter a heartfelt, and subsequently much quoted, sound bite: "A day like today is not a day for sound bites, we can leave those at home, but I feel the hand of history upon our shoulder with respect to this, I really do."² Yet the Agreement itself, as the historian Feargal Cochrane notes, "did not connect adequately with communities in a way that would help to encourage integration or reconciliation."³ Reflecting on both the legacy and impact of the Agreement, Peter F. Kelly argues that "discourse around issues of confidence and trust within the political arena allied to dilemmas surrounding former paramilitary parties that now co-govern [Northern Ireland] on how to suitably deal with the past continue to persist and damage the body politic." Rather than just

engendering the conditions for peace, the Agreement has also fostered a sense of injustice; as Kelly states, the “re-traumatizing impact of such legacies upon the conflict victims constituency” has “endangered the chances of survival of the Good Friday Agreement.”³³ Just where *was* “history” in what Birte Heidemann terms “the Agreement’s rhetorical dismemberment of the violent past”?³⁴ The answer seemed to be: cut off at the wrist. Indeed, in her study of the aftermath of violence in Northern Ireland, Susan McKay concludes that “there was no proposal about how to deal with the past in response to the needs of victims.”³⁵ What this article explores are the ways in which writers and artists have looked beyond both the blind optimism of the peace process and the Agreement’s rhetoric and have focused our attention on those who have been occluded or ignored by it, namely those who have suffered irreparable loss or damage.

The Agreement has been lauded as an impressively detailed document, one that “envisages an internal consociation built within overarching con/federal institutions”;⁶ however, it is also characterized by “constructive ambiguity” and was “designed to be presented in different ways to different audiences.”⁷ As a framework for negotiated political settlement, the Agreement, as Aoife Duffy points out, “critically omitted retrospective components, focusing instead on prospective provisions.”⁸ The Agreement’s text is actually underpinned by a progressivist ideology, most notably in its second paragraph, in which the declaration that “[w]e must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families” is immediately followed by the statement that “we can best honour them through a fresh start.”⁹ That seemingly innocent caveat invites what Paul Connerton terms “prescriptive forgetting,” a form of willed amnesia “precipitated by an act of state” which is “believed to be in the interests of all the parties to the previous dispute.”¹⁰ What underlines and drives such forgetting is the fear that the “awakening” of the dead, rather than “making whole,” would lead to violent retributive action.¹¹

Thus, the progressivist gaze that we are required to adopt by the Agreement is not quite Janus-like, looking simultaneously to the past and to the future; rather, we are made to inhabit the realm of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, as described by Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations*:

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to

which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”¹²

The aim of such state-sponsored “shared amnesia,” as Connerton sees it, is “to prevent a chain of retribution for earlier acts from running on endlessly.” While there might be “no explicit requirement to forget,” he argues, nevertheless “the implicit requirement to do so is ... unmistakable.”¹³ Thus, the double-bind in which Northern Irish society finds itself involves, as Cillian McGrattan has outlined, the attempt

to find a balance between the ethical imperative to remember the violence and crimes of the past and the human rights demand to give victims their due and hold perpetrators to account on the one hand and the exigent demands of contemporary politics, including limited resources for revisiting and/or public interest in exploring historical injustices, along with the stated futurist visions of Northern Ireland’s political class to build a “shared future” and a “cohesive,” “integrated” society.¹⁴

While many commentators have stated that “avoiding talk of the past, rather than addressing it, was the defining leitmotif of the Irish Peace Process of the 1990s,”¹⁵ nevertheless it has to be admitted that the Agreement did lead to a considerable number of measures being taken to address victims’ needs and to examine closely the legacy of conflict. Strategic policies and provisions directed at those adversely affected by conflict in Northern Ireland have been put in place and have been co-ordinated by key governmental agencies such as the Victims Liaison Unit (1998), the Trauma Advisory Panels (1999), and the Commission for Victims and Survivors (2008). The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has also issued three key documents focused on reconciliation between the communities: *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (2005), *Programme for Cohesion Sharing and Integration* (2010), and *Together Building a United Community* (2013).¹⁶ In 1998, the Saville Inquiry was announced to look anew at the events of January 30, 1972, in Derry, a day known as Bloody Sunday, and a number of other inquiries were set up “into disputed killings allegedly resulting from collusion between state security forces and paramilitaries.”¹⁷ The Agreement also paved the way to the establishment of a special investigative

unit entitled the Historical Enquiries Team (2005), which was granted wide-ranging powers "to re-examine all deaths attributable to the security situation ... between 1968 and 1998."²⁸ Similarly, a number of government-funded bodies were formed "to provide practical and psychological help to the victims," including the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund (1998), the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains (1999), the Family Trauma Centre (1999), and the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation (2002).²⁹ Such measures seem to fulfill one of the crucial requirements for a society slowly emerging from years of internecine strife, namely the setting up of "reparations policies that take into account the requirements of, and moral obligations to, victims."³⁰ These measures have been bolstered by initiatives undertaken within the independent/voluntary sector, such as the Healing through Remembering Project and the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, and by the three "PEACE" programmes (1995–2013) set up by the European Commission, which provided funding for victims and support for cross-community initiatives aimed at reconciliation. The remit of such initiatives, statutory bodies and policy documents is certainly not "shared amnesia."

However, some controversial and divisive governmental measures seem rather tailor-made to promote amnesty and amnesia (Connerton's "prescriptive forgetting"). The Inquiries Act (2005) effectively allows the British government to block inquiries into areas that are deemed too sensitive, thereby stalling efforts to facilitate transitional justice: as Lundy and McGovern contend, when establishing the remit and format of an inquiry, the Act "allows for Ministers to decide whether some evidence can be heard behind closed doors"; hence, the Act delimits "the potential of such processes to get to the truth."³¹ Acknowledging the problems which this Act may cause, the Canadian Judge Peter Cory, who had been appointed to lead an investigation into allegations of collusion between the security forces and paramilitary organizations, declared in a letter addressed to the head of a US Congressional Foreign Affairs sub-committee:

the proposed new Act would make a meaningful inquiry impossible. The commissions would be working in an impossible situation. For example, the Minister, the actions of whose ministry was to be reviewed by the public inquiry would have the authority to thwart the efforts of the inquiry at every step. It really creates an intolerable Alice in Wonderland situation.³²

Equally, the early release scheme, whereby prisoners affiliated to both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organizations were released on licence, is designed to wipe the slate clean and has led to criticism of its rationale and effectiveness: on the one hand there was "widespread disquiet over the gulf between the treatment of perpetrators and victims," which this measure seems to foster; on the other hand, many felt that the early release of prisoners was "deeply offensive" as it presents the victims "as nothing more than pawns in the inexorable pursuit of peace at any price."³³ An amnesty, as Paul Ricoeur argues, is aimed at bringing "to conclusion serious political disorders affecting civil peace."³⁴ Such an amnesty is said to function "as a sort of selective and punctual prescription which leaves outside of its field certain categories of lawbreakers,"³⁵ and can work to engender amnesia. The proximity between the two concepts, says Ricoeur, "is more than phonetic, or even semantic," and "signals the existence of a secret pact with the denial of memory, which ... distances it from forgiving, after first suggesting a close simulation."³⁶ However, as Ricoeur later states in an interview with Sorin Antohi, amnesty "prevents both forgiveness and justice."³⁷ Hence, it is little surprise that the early release scheme has attracted radically different reactions from the public: there are some for whom "restorative justice schemes involving ex-combatants are the way forward," since it is recognized that "such people were brutalized by political circumstances and would not otherwise have acted as they did," while for others "this fosters a no-blame history, which absolves those who killed and maimed of guilt."³⁸ McGratian, for his part, seems to wholly reject the former and argues that "an ethical approach to the future demands revulsion at the acts of violence that took place in the past." He writes, what is needed is "an ethics of resentment and anger to take precedence over epistemological or ontological issues."³⁹

One of the key reasons why opinion is so polarized is that there is a lack of firm consensus over who constitutes a "victim." When Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, the Victims' Commissioner, produced his report on April 19, 1998, entitled *We Will Remember Them*, he was roundly criticized for "largely ignoring those who had been victims at the hand of security forces."⁴⁰ He had, in effect, established a hierarchal approach to the victims' agenda, with an implicit suggestion that "some victims—nationalists and republicans killed by British security forces—were more 'undeserving' than others."⁴¹ Even following the publication of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006, which presents a much more open and comprehensive definition of victimhood,⁴² there was

considerable debate about which individuals and groups constituted the more deserving "victims of violence." As Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood contend, "many individuals had felt victimized or harmed enough to become involved in a violent armed campaign" and "their victimization was part of this process"; at the same time, however, there was a competing sense that "because paramilitaries or members of the security forces had harmed others or at least had the power to make this choice, they were not 'real' victims in the sense that many of those who were killed or injured were 'innocent' victims."³³ To disregard or ostracize those affected by the Troubles, be they members of the security forces, paramilitary volunteers, or non-affiliated civilians, is perilous since, as Brandon Hamber argues, the past "can never just be ignored and past traumas can always be expected to have emotional consequences for an individual and the society at some later stage."³⁴

The stalled debate on victimhood and the Agreement's rush to forgive and forget may avoid the derailment of peace initiatives by not dredging up or dwelling on the events of the past, but they may well actively exacerbate, as Graham Dawson contends, "the difficulties of social recognition and the fears of abandonment—of being left to deal with the past alone—experienced by the bereaved of the North."³⁵ In short, prescriptive forgetting utterly fails to salve the mind's wounds. What this article examines is the alternative approach adopted by Northern Irish writers and artists: rather than foreground the imperatives to forgive and forget, or promote what Senator George Mitchell termed "the decommissioning of mindsets,"³⁶ much Northern Irish art has taken on the public role of highlighting the dangers of forgetting the past and of not dealing with the legacy of violence. What the works of visual artists and writers alike stress is that a wilful neglect of history may result in the return of the repressed and in psychic breakdown on both the communal and individual levels.

In Ciaran Carson's poem "Peace," published in 2008, the speaker does not foreground the progress resulting from the Good Friday Agreement; rather, he laments the tokenistic nature of the decommissioning of weapons and the (admittedly low intensity) ongoing violence as the "disabled guns" are somehow still active:

And all the unanswered questions of those dark days come back
To haunt us, the disabled guns that still managed to kill,

The witnesses that became ghosts in the blink of an eye.

Whom can we prosecute when no one is left fit to speak?³⁷

Indeed, one wonders how punishment shootings and executions were still being carried out³⁸ if what the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning declared on September 26, 2005, was true: that the IRA had "put all its arms beyond use."³⁹ More significantly, however, the speaker underscores the inherent dangers of the strictly presentist concerns of Northern Irish realpolitik by meditating on significant absences from the ongoing peace-building process. In the lines quoted above, as Neal Alexander observes, "the imperfect present is haunted by the past, by a silencing of memory that renders justice impossible and the duty to remember unfulfilled."⁴⁰ Here, Alexander refers to Ricoeur's contention that remembrance is an "action," one that is a prerequisite for bearing witness to atrocities and the subsequent achievement of justice. "The first reason why it is a duty to tell," Ricoeur states, "is surely as a means of fighting against the erosion of traces."⁴¹ He does admit that, in order to get beyond fixating on anger and to become reconciled with the past's legacies, there is, alongside the duty to remember, a complementary "duty to forget"; nevertheless, he concedes that the two duties are not comparable and that progress cannot be achieved by the erosion of traces and archives.⁴² Carson's text implies that post-Agreement Northern Irish society will continue to be haunted by the unfinished business of the past and that restorative justice will not be achieved because the traces of past crimes have been eroded.

Such concerns are also writ large in Jack Pakenham's *Lest We Forget*, a seven-foot by twelve-foot painting addressing the often surreal and uncertain aspects of the Peace Talks leading to the Agreement. The work is accompanied by a poetic text which foregrounds the prevailing progressivist double-think adopted at the time by politicians:

In their eagerness for Peace
the dead were all forgotten
the lies were all forgiven
and someone said

'Let's pretend it never happened
all those people never died
the crippled maimed can now all walk
the blinded now can, clearly see.'⁴³

This pretence, involving a denial that violence took place, a wilful eradication of historical traces, and a prescriptive forgetfulness, is clearly evident in the painting itself: the city becomes a series of theatrical backdrops, a movable and shifting space for spectacle and charade. The blankly staring masked paramilitary holds a "Peace" sign with his right hand, while potentially concealing something more deadly in his left hand behind his back; on the negotiation table lies a disembodied mannequin's head (either ready to say what others dictate, or having been betrayed and served up for the sake of peace); to the right, relegated to the floor, is the inscription "Lest We Forget," while signifiers of past atrocities and violent events ("Greysteel," "Shankill," "Bloody Sunday," "Donegall Street")⁴⁴ are scrawled, but partially occluded, on the ground. In *Peace Talks*, an equally large scale painting, we see two red-haired ventriloquist's dummies reach out to one another from across the table, all the while holding weapons in their other hand; underneath the table, unremarked and unconsidered, lies a third dummy with a bullet hole in his head and still in his box (doubling here as a coffin).⁴⁵ In *Mask Carnival* we see, front and centre, three more ventriloquist's dummies arranged to mimic the three mystic apes who, combined, embody the proverbial principle "Speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil," yet the third figure is hooded, with rope tied around his neck.⁴⁶ Rather than representing the idea of not dwelling on evil thoughts, the trio are presented as victims of a culture which instills a code of silence and, perhaps, a lack of moral responsibility to acknowledge the persistence of dark deeds. Surrounding the trio of dummies is a series of masks—false faces, mannequin heads, paramilitary disguises—suggestive of a carnival, that period in which we have the suspension both of law and the norms of propriety. The accompanying text calls the viewer's attention to the necessary self-deception needed to maintain the façade of peace:

Someone howls at the end of the street
pockmarked pavement against his head;
we turn the key inside the lock
try not to hear
when the trigger's squeezed
hold the cat inside our arms
hang the dog's collar on the hook;
a car backfiring in the night.

"Pain," as Veena Das argues, "is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication, or marks one's exit from one's existence in language"; rather, it "makes a claim ... which may be given or denied."⁴⁷ Here, however, the "howl" remains simply a marker of subjective, internal distress—the witness is unreceptive to the claim being staked on their attention. Despite the call to bear witness to pain, no relation between victim and witness is formed, and the former remains anonymous ("someone"). Furthermore, the reality of their experience is denied, domesticated and transmuted: the gunshot becomes "a car backfiring in the night."

To deny the experience of pain, to ignore the victims (or their loved ones) immediate and debilitating distress, to consign it to history, and to strive to eradicate the traces, constitutes both a form of violence in itself and a process of dehumanization. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed." When the victim's narrative is occluded and their family's grief is denied, one effectively declares that some people's lives are not "grievable" and, hence, are less than human.⁴⁸ "Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death," she contends, "leaves a mark that is no mark. There will be no public act of grieving."⁴⁹ Northern Irish artists like Colin Davidson have endeavoured to reveal that "mark" and to present to the public the spectral, haunted existence of the victims. *Silent Testimony*, an exhibition of eighteen large scale portrait paintings (127 x 117cm; oil on canvas) with accompanying descriptions, was shown at the Ulster Museum from June 5, 2015, to January 17, 2016. Each portrait depicts the face of someone who has suffered loss during the Troubles and whose traumatic grief has never been alleviated through the achievement of justice. Davidson says the "germ" for this exhibition was the Good Friday Agreement: "I was struck at the time by how the 'yes' vote for it would be a relief for most of us who were sick and tired of what was going on in our land. For the perpetrators, for many of them, it was going to be pretty good. But for the people who had suffered loss I realised that there wasn't anything in it for them."⁵⁰ In a short film centred on the making of *Silent Testimony*, the artist notes how "the people who've suffered loss are in a sense paying for our peace" and that "any hope for justice that they felt they were going to have—the potential for that has kind of gone."⁵¹ In the context of prescriptive forgetting, their voices have been silenced and the grieving process forestalled:

For many thousands of people living in Northern Ireland, and indeed beyond, that tick on the ballot paper also marked an end of hope. A hope for justice, hope for answers. Their personal moving-on was now impossible. For many, the natural human process of dealing with loss was interrupted, often never to restart. And in the years that followed, with the rhetoric of blame, histrionics and procrastination, heard together with the calls for healing, forgiveness and love, this significant section of our community has fallen voiceless. After all, what can they say? How can they be heard? The noise of the 'peace process' has swept us all along.⁵²

The exhibition resolutely refuses to partake in the silencing propensities of amnesia and amnesia: while the portraits are of "people who really haven't had a voice for the story they've got to tell," the artist sees his work as expressing "the horror in every case that the stories brought."⁵³ Take, for example, the painting of Stuart McCausland: what the viewer sees is a visceral portrait of grief—with downcast eyes, a bewildered, faraway look, and open lips caught in the midst of stalled utterance, the face expresses a haunted, fragile disposition. The accompanying descriptive text provides us with the relevant context:

Stuart McCausland's mother Lorraine (23) was beaten to death by a gang on 8th March 1987. Lorraine's body was found face-down in a stream near Tynedale Community Centre in Belfast. She was a single mother of two boys, Stuart and Craig. Eighteen years later, on 11th July 2005, Stuart's brother Craig (20) was shot dead in front of his girlfriend and her two young children.

No one has ever been convicted for either of the murders. Reporting in 2005 about Stuart's continued search for justice, Angélique Chrisafis noted, concerning Lorraine's death, that while "the UDA never claimed the murder as a sanctioned killing ... everyone believed their members were to blame."⁵⁴ When the Historical Enquiries Team investigated the murder, they told the family that "the main suspect was recruited weeks later by the police as an informer" but that "it could not prove collusion was a factor in the killing."⁵⁵ Although a new enquiry has been opened, progress has been painfully slow, fuelling continued suspicions of a cover-up by the police.⁵⁶

While political expediency demands prescriptive forgetting, or what Davidson refers to as "the rhetoric of 'moving on,'"⁵⁷ for victims such as Stuart McCausland, there is no foreseeable end to grief. For those featured in the exhibition, it is clear that they exist, in the terms used by Butler cited earlier, "in a state of suspension between life and death." The portraits, in their very form, capture this spectrality: each person is static, framed and caught in the hiatus of an eternal present. Thus, the very medium captures the temporality of traumatic grief. As Kai Erickson notes, for a trauma victim the "mind holds on to that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again The moment becomes a season, the event becomes a condition."⁵⁸ As such, trauma gives rise to a haunted existence: it presents itself, as Anne Whitehead states, in the form of "a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition."⁵⁹ Since the event is not (and cannot be) "assimilated or experienced fully the first time, but only belatedly, in the repeated *possession* of the one who experiences," traumatic recall has a "haunting power."⁶⁰ Each portrait frames a moment of traumatic recall and allows a viewer to witness its effect on the sitter through scrutiny of his or her face. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the encounter with the face of "the other" is an ethical one: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse."⁶¹ Extrapolating from Levinas's discussion of the ethical encounter, Butler notes that the framing of such an encounter is all important:

If ... it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames. There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness, that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives. And then there are frames that foreclose responsiveness, where this activity of foreclosure is effectively and repeatedly performed by the frame itself.⁶²

While Butler's essay on the frames which determine what is constituted as "a grievable life" is centred on photography, its conclusions pertain equally to portraiture. If "effacement" is what characterizes (and results from) "prescriptive forgetting," then Davidson's work strives "to give face" and to allow for a counter-discursive formation to that contained within the Agreement. Rejecting the call to "move on" and avoiding the Agreement's preoccupation with sectarian and political affiliation, the exhibition treats its subject matter on a more fundamental level, in terms of violence to the human mind and body. As Davidson states, "we have stripped the stories of badge—it's human loss—it's not Protestant loss or Catholic loss."⁶⁵

Rather than promote an enforced sense of closure, Northern Irish writers and artists focus on the dangers inherent in forgetting and seek to represent, embody, and bear witness to a victim's experience in their texts. Such an enterprise is fraught with complications since a victim's trauma, by definition, is unknowable and unrepresentable. As Jenny Edkins argues, one "cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification"; all one can do, she states, is "to *encircle* again and again the site" of the trauma, "to *mark* it in its very impossibility."⁶⁴ One way to do this, as Anne Whitehead has shown, is to "draw ... on literary techniques that mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma"⁶⁵ and, as Laurie Vickroy argues, by internalizing "the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within [the text's] underlying sensibilities and structures."⁶⁶ Thus, while an artist like Davidson may use the static form of painting to convey the atemporality of trauma, a writer must disrupt his or her text's linearity and resist closure. Indeed, theorists have argued that trauma is actually revealed in the distortions, gaps, and fragmentations of language: within a trauma narrative, what Gabriele Schwab calls "the buried ghosts of the past" emerge "to haunt language from within, always threatening to destroy its communicative and expressive function."⁶⁷ Such a process can be seen at work in Carson's poem "Remains":

Given not so much as
a knock on the door
men disappear
no word for years
a mechanical digger
strips the ground,

men with spades move in.
A mother watches from the margin
envisioning a body
transfigured from the mire.⁶⁸

Like Davidson's portraits, the poem refers to a neglected and silenced group, in this case to the Northern Irish "Disappeared." During the Troubles, seventeen individuals were abducted, murdered and secretly buried by the IRA, and it was only after the Northern Ireland Location of Victims Remains Bill was passed in 1999, effectively granting an amnesty to anyone supplying information as to the whereabouts of the victims, that the IRA issued a statement saying that "it had identified the location of the bodies"⁶⁹ and agreed to supply the information as to their whereabouts. Five are still missing. The undiscovered graves constitute what Allen Feldman terms "the emblems of surplus sacrificial history."⁷⁰ Written out of history, "the survivor and the dead inhabit a symbolically liminal social space,"⁷¹ and what results is a state of unresolved grief. Without a body, the families cannot achieve closure. Grief, as a practice, requires a material focus and is "seen to be impaired by the absence of a body."⁷² A body is said to be a way of "making real the fact of the loss"; hence, the visual connection with the deceased "helps to bring home the reality and finality of death."⁷³

In the absence of material remains, what results is trauma that can take on "a chronic nature that has emotional, psychological, economic and social consequences."⁷⁴ Carson's poem seeks to capture that trauma in its very form. The ten-line stanza starkly encapsulates the abrupt and unheralded nature of the abductions and their devastating consequences. "Men disappear" is presented as a fact or an occurrence that has to be accepted without excuse or explanation. The entire process—from abduction to attempted reclamation of the body—is presented as dehumanizing, with key actors bereft of agency and volition: "men disappear"; "a mechanical digger / strips the ground"; "[a] mother watches." The mother is relegated to a bit-part; at the mercy of external forces, she can merely look on "from the margins." The final line's ambiguity—is it the body which might be "transfigured" or the mother?—intimates what a discovery would mean to those left behind. Carson's use of the continuous present tense ("envisioning") suggests that the mother has been traumatized; time has stopped for her since her mind is drawn back again and again to the body. The mother, like the body, has been stuck in "the mire" for years. Yet even before presenting this detail, the poem succeeds in conveying the disruptive and dislocating nature

of trauma through the formal strategies that constitute a performative embodiment of the trauma of loss. The expressive and communicative aspects of language are under threat in the seven-line opening sentence: ungrammatical and lacking in connectives and proper punctuation, the sentence mirrors the effects of the traumatized condition.

Justice and the needs of those who have suffered loss can become side-lined when the often unpalatable exigencies of realpolitik outweigh moral considerations. Indeed, truth recovery initiatives aimed at restorative justice are sometimes perceived as endangering the transition to peace⁷⁵ and as risking "more atrocities than it would prevent."⁷⁶ As Iosif Kovras and Neophytos Loizides argue, negotiated transitions are inherently fragile and so the involved parties often "avoid taking any measure that might polarise the political atmosphere": "they do not want to provoke the intransigent actors who act outside law and who might attempt to derail the peace process."⁷⁷ The consequences of such silencing and the refusal of restorative justice are explored in Frank McGuinness's powerful version of Euripides's *Hecuba*, first performed at the Donmar Warehouse, London, on September 9, 2004.⁷⁸ The play is set in the aftermath of the Fall of Troy, and centres on Hecuba, the now vanquished Queen, who is destitute and in mourning. Thematically, it tackles four conjoined issues: who is to be commemorated and whose narrative is to be occluded; the treatment of those on the losing side of a conflict; how conflict resists closure; and what happens when the demands for restorative justice are ignored. McGuinness in interview has pointed out the relevance of the play to Northern Ireland:

Hecuba is set in the aftermath of a war, and of course Ireland, since the mid-'90s, has also been in the aftermath of war. The reality is only hitting me now ... of the sheer desire to live in hatred among the extremists, who are being indulged left, right and centre. ... At the end of the play, Agamemnon says: "We can go home now—the war is over". And, of course, for a Greek audience, the warning bells would have been sounding—they know what is to come. What the play communicates is: do not feel secure, never feel that you are home and dry. So there was an immediate correspondence between my society and this play.⁷⁹

The playwright's lingering frustration (and marked indignation) is palpable when he comments on how the extremists are being "indulged left, right

and centre." In Northern Ireland this is manifest not only in the early release scheme, but also in the divisively selective approach to commemoration. For example, in 2007, Craigavon council acceded to a request "to allow a memorial bench to LVF killer Mark 'Swinger' Fulton be put up in its municipal graveyard."⁸⁰ Described by the journalist Susan McKay as "a raving sectarian and convicted extortionist,"⁸¹ Fulton took over as leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force following the death of Billy Wright in December 1997, during which time he presided over the deaths of thirteen people, including the assassination of human rights solicitor Rosemary Nelson, and eight others when the LVF operated under the *nom de guerre* of the "Red Hand Defenders."⁸² The council's decision caused predictable (and understandable) outrage: the SDLP councillor, Dolores Kelly, branded the move as "an obscenity," and stated that the Unionist politicians had "lost all moral authority in relation to memorials in general and indeed the needs of victims."⁸³ Here we can see how, in the aftermath of conflict, public commemoration itself can become "a battlefield where selective, discrepant and antagonistic narratives of the past clash and compete": when one offers public recognition of the traumas of one community, the resulting "politicized communal memories ... tend to withhold recognition, to forget and deny the traumas of the other."⁸⁴ Such a dynamic is at work in McGuinness's play: the ghost of Achilles, the killer of Hecuba's son, Hector, appears "hungry for honour" (7) and demands that his death be commemorated. He asks that Polyxena, Hecuba's daughter, be put to death as a sacrificial offering. From the perspective of the victorious Greeks, the ghost's appeal seems just and reasonable:

Achilles died for Greece—
Died bravely, died nobly.
Lady, he must be honoured.
Anything else is a disgrace.
Alive, we laud him.
Dead, he is forgotten.
Is that right? (17)

Commemoration here validates Achilles's actions and valorizes the Greeks' interpretation of the Trojan conflict. However, it also serves to reinforce the subjugation of the other side: "Say nothing, be spoken to, / For we are the vanquished" (18).

Emphasizing the plight of the losing side, the play opens with a very different ghost. The opening words are spoken by Polydorus, the murdered son of Hecuba and Priam, detailing the circumstances of his cruel betrayal at the hands of his father's friend, Polymestor, and the ill-treatment of his unburied corpse: "He kicked my corpse, / Kicked it into the ocean" (4). Polydorus is one of the "disappeared": "None to mourn me, / Nor to bury me" (4). As a ghost, he is the "appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present."⁸⁵ Time here is out of joint. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, the ghost symbolizes "a disjointed or disadjusted now"; in the context of both mourning and trauma, for the restitution of order to occur one "has to make sure that the dead will not come back."⁸⁶ Although Polydorus's corpse is discovered and the requisite funerary rites are performed, his death and the subsequent sacrifice of Polyxena result in a third (figurative) spectre: Hecuba.

McGuinness portrays her as someone who is neither alive nor dead: she is utterly subsumed by traumatic grief, a condition whose symptoms include a lost sense of security, detachment, difficulty acknowledging the death of a loved one, and a feeling that life is devoid of meaning.⁸⁷ "Tell them," she says, "I am a woman who — / Who no longer knows who she is" (22). She exhibits dissociative behaviour as she speaks about herself in the third person—"What is Hecuba to do?" (35)—and she is paralyzed by melancholia: "Her body's buried in her grief" (24). Indeed, her traumatized condition is not only expressed by what she says, but also by how she articulates it:

What am I to say?
My heart is sore.
How do I cry?
What is my lament?
I am afflicted.
Afflicted with age.
A slave — cannot endure it.
Cannot bear it — a slave.
Who's to protect me?
What son, what city?
Priam is dead and gone,
Children dead and gone.
What road do I follow,
That one or this? (8–9)

Commenting on the playwright's stylistic decision to depart from the more conventional twelve-syllable lines in iambic trimeter to very short verse lines, Brian Arkins argues that the play acquires a "lucid, lyrical quality."⁸⁸ However, the achieved effect seems to be quite the opposite. In interview, McGuinness describes his desire for "a fiercely energetic, unrelenting, restless type of speech—especially at the beginning for Hecuba where she seems to be incapable of saying more than four to five words to a sentence, where there's a lot of broken speech, where there's a lot of upheaval, syntactical upheaval."⁸⁹ The short, jagged lines are not "lyrical"; rather, they are expressive of the bewildering state of traumatic grief. As in Carson's poetic meditation on "the Disappeared," trauma reduces language here to "pieces, splinters and fragments of speech."⁹⁰ For Hecuba, the war is far from over.

But the play does not just present us with an insight into the plight of victims in the aftermath of conflict (like Davidson's portraits and Carson's poem); more significantly, in the absence of restorative justice, McGuinness/Euripides warns us that further violence is possible since Hecuba goes on to wreak bloody vengeance by slaughtering Polymestor and his sons. The lexis of the play is all important for McGuinness's message since he deploys an actuarial discourse throughout: when Hecuba thinks of Polymestor's treatment of her son, she says "He dug no grave, but the watery sea — / To him that's all he was *worth*, my last, lost son" (39, my emphasis); when reflecting on her own status, she declares that she is "of no *account*" (40, my emphasis); when addressing Polymestor, the Chorus contend that "you *pay* a terrible *price* / For committing terrible crimes" (51, my emphasis); and when reflecting on the cause of her own predicament, Hecuba declares "if you *pay* no penalty nor punishment — / There is no justice among men" (39, my emphasis). Deaths are quantifiable; tallies are to be taken; perpetrators of violence are to be held to account; and, in the end, justice can be measured out. As Allen Feldman notes, "our public culture is rife with enumeration debates over collective violence, by which hierarchies of horror are established with the rhetoric of quantification." Such discussions, he argues, "appear to bring an often reassuring rationality to the cultural management of the memory of violence." However, as in the play, when there is an absence of post-conflict restorative justice and when the narrative of the victor occludes that of the vanquished, the "logic of retribution" is also "pervaded by an actuarial logic" and its function is far from "curative." Feldman writes, "each stroke of violence creates a debt that cannot be paid and produces an asymmetry, but can never return the social order back to, or move it forward to a new homeostatic

resolution.⁹¹ McGuinness's warning is clear: if victims' stories are not heard, and if their claims go unattended, then the declaration that "the war is over" (*Hecuba* 63) can only ring hollow. Hecuba may have found peace in her retributive act, but further violence will ensue: for Agamemnon, who facilitated the revenge killings, all that awaits him at home is "a bath of blood" (62).

Each of the artworks discussed in this article foreground the need for closure on the part of victims as they are shown to experience a haunted, spectral existence. Indeed, "haunting" is both the key motif and thematic concern here, as it allows the artists to make present that which "rhetorical dismemberment" and "prescriptive forgetting" consign to oblivion. "Haunting," as Gil Hochberg argues, "renders visible the *invisibility* that marks the limits of our common practices of seeing and makes us see, as in recognize, that there is a presence before us, which we nevertheless fail to see with our naked eyes."⁹² To show a victim's trauma is a way of raising public awareness of their plight, and this is one of the key objectives of my final example, Willie Doherty, a visual artist from Derry. Doherty states, "For me one of the most difficult things about the post-Ceasefire context is the question of how we deal with the aftermath or the trauma. How, as artists, do we begin to visualize it? Is there a kind of a role for artists to play in all this?"⁹³

In Doherty's *Closure* (2007), a single screen video installation, the viewer sees a woman dressed in black walking around the perimeter of a narrow, enclosed space.⁹⁴ Lasting just over eleven minutes, but played on a loop, the film follows her progress around the space, with the camera always keeping her in the foreground while, at times, cutting to a close-up of her face. The accompanying voiceover provides us with her thoughts: "My mission is unending. My anger is undiminished. The street is ablaze. The street is twisted. The surface is melting. My ardour is fervent. My passion is unbowed. The roof is decomposing. The ceiling is dripping. The floor is submerged." While the woman outwardly appears calm, her thoughts appear dislocated and disjunctive: her trauma is manifest in the fragmented nature of her delivery. Her thoughts move between moments of stoic resolve and reflections on an environment which seems to be collapsing around her, the latter acting as a form of pathetic fallacy. That Doherty gives *Closure* a circular, looped structure, one that is replayed endlessly in the exhibition space, is crucial, as it conveys the subject's experience of trauma: what we witness is trauma in the sense of "a disease of time [which] permits the past to relive itself in the present, in the form of intrusive images and thoughts."⁹⁵ The idea of achieving closure is belied by the unsettling (and unsettled) nature of her

thoughts, the circular journey that she goes on, and the looped structure of the artwork. The viewer's sense of an unwanted (and endless) sequence of return is reinforced by the film's location. In an interview, Doherty notes, "That is actually the space in front of an old RUC station in Derry. I managed to negotiate access to the corrugated enclosure she finds herself in, with those crude security measures that grew up around the existing fortifications, although it's not necessary for the viewer to know where it actually is."⁹⁶

While the viewer does not need to know that the film takes place at the site of the former police station at Rosemount, Derry, such knowledge does lend the piece an added poignancy and suggests a direct relevance to the post-Agreement Northern Irish context. The fortified structure, with its hundred-foot high surveillance mast, was part of the State's architecture of containment and surveillance during the Troubles; it was a visible manifestation of power and control. As Foucault states, "le regard qui voit est un regard qui domine."⁹⁷ The dynamics and regulating power of the State's scopic regime meant that "life under constant observation became normal,"⁹⁸ thereby inducing unease, paranoia and self-scrutiny in the populace. In the *Belfast Telegraph*, Clare Weir states that the station at Rosemount "proved contentious for people living in the area" and was certainly out of favour: it was revealed in 2004 that "just 12 people a year attended the one-man station at a cost of more than £275,000 to the taxpayer."⁹⁹

Although the station is now closed, Doherty's video installation suggests that psychological closure has not been achieved. Indeed, the artwork itself constitutes a form of (traumatic) return for the artist, as he had previously photographed the site in 1992 for his photo-text entitled *Remote Control*.¹⁰⁰ The black-and-white photograph of the outside of the station is overlaid with the words "Remote Control," a phrase which connotes the alienating operation of power at a distance. Such a work strives to reveal "how the panoptical strategies of regulation and disempowerment subtly inscribe the fabric of the city."¹⁰¹ Commenting on his photo-texts, Doherty states:

What is important is what is not shown. The things one cannot see are those that impinge on your life ... that you are being watched, and that surveillance happens continuously. You cannot photograph these things. They are not public. They are not seen. How can one photograph a psychological state that you experience daily[?]
Surveillance is a condition—it happens all the time. It is like weather in winter, constantly grey. There is no break.¹⁰²

What *Closure* suggests is that there is still “no break,” even in the structure’s absence, as the psychological scars of conflict and surveillance are still present.

In conclusion, rather than entering into the seductive embrace of cultural amnesia, much Northern Irish art focuses upon the dangers of forgetting the past. While the individual artworks of Pakenham, Carson, Davidson, McGuinness and Doherty are intrinsically different—they are presented in different media and deploy distinct formal techniques—they each use the trope of “haunting” to allow readers/viewers to bear witness to the plight of those occluded by the rhetoric of the Agreement and to understand their post-conflict trauma. The works themselves are not characterized by explicit statements for either revenge or recompense; rather, they implicitly call on the reader/viewer to bear witness to a victim’s pain, and thereby acknowledge it. Such an acknowledgement, if it is offered, validates the lives of those who have been killed as “grievable” and can work to counteract the process of dehumanization initiated by “prescriptive forgetting.” ¶

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