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‘My narrative falters, as it must’: Rethinking Memory in recent Northern Irish Fiction.

This essay will reflect on how novelists David Park and Lucy Caldwell engage with the preoccupation with the past in Northern Irish cultural, social and critical discourse. Their novels were published in 2012 (*The Light of Amsterdam*) and 2013 (*All the Beggars Riding*), at a time of both peace-building initiatives and a rise in dissident terrorist activity. To write in such a politically complicated environment yet not retreat into didacticism is a problem Northern Irish writers contend with, as David Park notes: “The great danger about being a Troubles writer was that the book became a weapon: one attempted to impose humane values on barbarism. But in the end that just becomes a kind of feel-good exercise. And that doesn't produce good art”.<sup>1</sup> So, while not wanting to imply that fiction can ‘save’ the Peace Process, my argument will be informed by the generative possibilities espoused by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, that a reconsideration of trauma “can be a point of departure for a new understanding of the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others”.<sup>2</sup> Butler alerts us to the problems inherent in trying to account for loss and in trying to fill it with meaning: “[When] one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss”.<sup>3</sup> The Troubles appear as a spectral presence in both novels but they also all circle around other losses and interrogate how they intersect with the historical narrative. The Northern Irish novel was in danger of standing as a melancholic archive to the violence of the troubles but these new fictions can provide a new place where the diversity of experience can be narrated.

The past is contested in Ireland in two main spheres: the legacy and trauma of familial and institutional abuse, and the contestation and memorialisation of historical narratives. The novels of John McGahern, Sebastian Barry and Anne Enright, among others, serve to deconstruct both the narrative of the veneration of the Irish family and the role of the state in colluding with these abuses.<sup>4</sup> Emilie Pine notes that “we cannot escape the remembrance of things past in newspapers and books, on stages, on screens, in museum and on the streets of major cities”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Irish Studies’ obsession with writing about and through trauma can be read as a melancholic recycling of the very political discourse it seeks to critique.

Jacques Derrida insists on the melancholic nature of trauma-writing: “This trauma is endlessly denied by the very movement through which one tries to cushion it, to assimilate it, to interiorize and incorporate it”.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in critical appraisals of Irish literature: Aaron Kelly critiques accounts of crime fiction “in which a nightmarish model [...] reverberates ceaselessly in irresoluble crisis”<sup>7</sup>, Robert F. Garrett states that the “widely held view of Irish history as tragic provides an additional context for the treatment of cyclical violence”<sup>8</sup>, and Joep Leerssen sees Irish history as manifesting a “nightmarish burden of uncanny familiarity”.<sup>9</sup> However, there is the alternate problem, which Colin Graham cautions against: “[The] dangers of constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers, which detaches itself for survival, which regards identity, in its widest sense, as danger rather than as the very substance of the matter”.<sup>10</sup> Graham aims his critique at forms of state-sanctioned forgetting which homogenise difference. The tension for authors, then, is to produce creative engagements with the past without either falling into ‘irresoluble crisis’ or banishing the ‘substance of the matter’: to acknowledge the often messy ways in which people encounter and deal with, or don’t deal with, traumas personal and political. It is worth highlighting that in Northern Ireland, the troubles have been the predominant narrative catalyst for literature and culture, so other traumas have been relatively hidden from view.

Of course, a concern over the uses of history and how to ‘deal with’ a contested past are not the preserve of the island of Ireland. Irish theorists have been particularly influenced by the work of Pierre Nora<sup>11</sup>, Maurice Halbwachs and Paul Ricoeur, which engage with issues of collective memory and national commemoration as we approach a raft of national and international centenary events.<sup>12</sup> Particularly, Paul Ricoeur’s concern with how an ‘art of memory’ and ‘art of forgetting’ would occur simultaneously<sup>13</sup> is particularly attractive for theorists grappling with current Northern Irish politics, as well as his ‘ethic of narrative flexibility’<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, Simon Prince notes that ‘*Les Lieux de memoire* still remains the defining influence for most Irish scholars working on memory’<sup>15</sup>. McGrattan argues for ‘the possibility of fostering a Ricoeurian pluralism as regards Northern Ireland’s troubled past’<sup>16</sup>.

The focus of recent Northern Irish criticism has been extended to the conflict resolution process, which has taken a variety of institutional shapes, including Amnesty’s Time to Deal with the Past Report (2013) which reported that Northern Ireland was “disgracefully let down” by the current approach to dealing with the

past and the Haass-O'Sullivan talks focused on 'Dealing with the Past', particularly the definition of victimhood and processes of truth and reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> All of these efforts are focused on particular kinds of victims of violent political conflict and elide more complex understandings of trauma which might engage with homophobia, racism, ableism and misogyny, as well as less traumatic aspects of Northern Irish life. Recently, instead of the focus on grand narratives and collective memory events, a more nuanced approach is beginning to emerge in history writing. Graham Dawson contends "there is never any single meaning, but rather a plurality constructed through the telling of different stories that make different interpretations and draw differing conclusions".<sup>18</sup> While oral history projects and story-telling are useful sites for narrative production, Astrid Erll, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, discusses the ways in which literature can also represent diverse ways of speaking about the past: "Literary works can display and juxtapose divergent and contested memories and create mnemonic multiperspectivity".<sup>19</sup> The novel, then, is particularly well placed to accommodate a plurality of narrative voices, as well as an engagement with the detail and sweep of the historical moment.

If we move on to the types of experiences that the novel can represent, McGrattan raises an important question: "[W]hat happens if we are not haunted? In other words, traumatic reading of history and culture depends on a tactic of depopulation – a writing-out of the histories and cultures of individuals (and groups) who do not feel traumatised".<sup>20</sup> Not only this, but trauma can come from sources that are not related to the conflict or from sources which have an ambiguous relationship to it, such as women who are terrorised by partners with ex-paramilitary weapons or the rise in 'post'-conflict xenophobia. People can respond to trauma, whether political violence, institutional abuse or more personal events, in 'inappropriate' and wilful ways which fracture the narrative of collective recovery. Like Sara Ahmed's unhappy queers, melancholy migrants and feminist killjoys, these subjects are difficult to 'deal with' and do not orientate themselves towards appropriate sources of trauma or objects of happiness.<sup>21</sup> Rather than thinking of such perspectives as difficult, they are in fact vital to discourses of futurity in 'post'-conflict Northern Ireland. Fiction can allow these dissonant voices to be heard and allow the diversity of experiences and reactions to be read outside of a narrow political narrative.

Writing about David Park's 2012 novel, *The Light of Amsterdam*, Ian Sansom stated: "it's his first book – perhaps the first book by a serious Northern Irish novelist – that might be described as a genuinely post-Troubles novel".<sup>22</sup> Park has been acutely aware of the trouble of being a Northern Irish novelist: "You felt that you were in a forced marriage, an arranged marriage. Could you write a romance set in Tuscany? Would it feel morally appropriate?"<sup>23</sup> It is Park's first novel after his 2012 pronouncement that "When I finished *The Truth Commissioner*, I knew I would never write anything on that subject again [...] Any contribution I had to make as a writer, I had made".<sup>24</sup> However, despite Sansom and Park's pronouncements and the central character Alan's assertion that "The past was simple", this novel does not constitute a simple 'moving on' as it is preoccupied with the language of memory.<sup>25</sup> It is the story of three different journeys on an Easyjet flight from Belfast to Amsterdam and Park discusses his intention in situating the novel, his first proclaimed 'post'-troubles novel: "I wanted to write a book about love. And so naturally I thought, let's get out. Let's go to Europe [...] It was the first European city I ever really stayed in, and I was just so struck by the beauty of it, and by the history that wasn't divisive or sectarian".<sup>26</sup> Of course, the Netherlands has its own complicated religious history, and one that intersects with Ireland, but is now one of the most secular countries in Europe.

It begins with the death of footballer George Best in 2005: "The whole city was a giant wake".<sup>27</sup> From this beginning, we are made aware that the central concerns of this novel will be the interrelation of individual and collective processes of memory and mourning. Best, despite being raised in a Free Presbyterian family in East Belfast, was seen as an icon to both communities as he played for Manchester United, a club often associated with the Catholic diasporic Irish community, so the funeral was a collective non-sectarian memory-event.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the collective outpouring of loss over Best, Alan the Art Lecturer considers his relative absence of immediate grief over a more personal tragedy: "He had lost his father without expressing love or even gratitude".<sup>29</sup> Park presents a society where personal trauma is trivialised but collective memory is prioritised: "But he lived in Belfast so it was a question of catching himself on, pulling himself together and taking up a socially approved therapy such as drinking too much or trying desperately to have meaningless sex with people he didn't like".<sup>30</sup>

The motif of light recurs frequently throughout the book, from a 'lightness of being' to an impatient desire "be outside in the morning light" to "the street lamps [that] began to sheen and smear the dark surface of the water into some new tremble of light".<sup>31</sup> Light could be read as epiphanic but Park, like Joyce and McGahern, is acutely aware that this process is not straightforward, that light casts a shadow, and that vision is always partial: "[He] didn't know what the truth was any more except that it was constantly coloured and changed by the refraction of light".<sup>32</sup> These moments of 'coming to light' are often based on misinformation or misinterpretations and the truth is often acutely painful, particularly for Marion and Richard. She presumes her husband no longer desires her and so hires him a sex worker in Amsterdam. She goes ice skating for the first time in years, feeling the physical liberation she did as a young girl: "everything in her head seemed to have loosened into a freefall of memories and impulse".<sup>33</sup> However, it turns out her moment of epiphany was false, that the lightness she felt was predicated on a misinterpretation of the situation as her husband refuses her gift to him. It is in darkness, then, that they tenderly reconcile: "So after they had switched off their lights and he came to her, nervous and frightened".<sup>34</sup> However, this event, this new enlightenment prompts further realisation as Richard divulges that their daughter is in a lesbian relationship, and at the novel's close they resolve to be supportive and thoughtful towards her and welcome her new partner into their home: "[Nothing] needed to be hidden or locked away in secret rooms".<sup>35</sup> For Marion, then, the trauma that she prepared for was false and the Irish coming out story, once so significant and painful, is a relief.<sup>36</sup> This narrative shows, then, both the personal narratives which have been elided from official perspectives but also that the generative power of reconciliation often arises in the most surprising places.

The second narrative is focalised through Karen, a cleaner in an old people's home whose daughter, Shannon, is getting married. Shannon's father abandoned Karen while she was pregnant and the loss still haunts her, to the point where she cannot be happy for her daughter: "[She] wanted to shake her and tell her that weddings were fairy-tales, the happy-ever-after dreams of know-nothing children".<sup>37</sup> Following a confrontation with her daughter, Karen visits the Rijksmuseum and goes to the painting she has been told she will enjoy: "*The Night Watch* meant nothing to her and seemed not much more than men with guns and spears showing

off”.<sup>38</sup> However, it is another painting, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* by Johannes Vermeer, that really holds her interest:

[She] read how in 1691 when sold at auction the catalogue noted “the changing light and dark suggest a splendid wellbeing”. They hadn’t understood the painting, hadn’t looked at the way the young woman held her letter tightly in both hands as if trying to keep her balance, hadn’t seen the stiffness in her arms.<sup>39</sup>

Vermeer's letter paintings typically give little away, from *The Love Letter* through *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* to *Mistress and Maid*. This ambiguity allows Karen to identify with the girl and brings her immediately back to the moment of her rejection. Her memory comes in fragments, unbidden, and both the stimuli and the reaction to it is unpredictable: “She had no idea of what she would say and as she walked the events of the day splintered in her head and then reformed in sharp-edged, disconnected images – the pregnant girl reading the letter, the ice-skaters, the music in the church, a stranger’s tears”.<sup>40</sup> Caldwell’s novel also meditates on the partial and unpredictable operations of memory: “[In] too many books people’s memories come in seamless waves, perfectly coherent and lyrical. Recollections come like that one just did to me, searing, intense and jagged from nowhere, burning bright when before there was nothing”.<sup>41</sup> In both of these books, then, memory is not a mass, commemorative process but rather something difficult and complex, which does not always rise to the ‘right’ stimuli and provide a uniform response.

Karen is an archetypal Freudian melancholic, who has incorporated her loss into her self-image: “a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that find utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment”.<sup>42</sup> The theft of a bracelet in the nursing home is a typical act of self-sabotage, with the attack on the incorporated other turning inwards onto the self, reminiscent of Derrida’s comment that:

Not having been taken back inside the self, digested, assimilated as in all “normal” mourning, the dead object remains like a living dead abscessed in a specific spot in the ego. It has its place, just like a crypt in a cemetery or

temple, surrounded by walls and all the rest. The dead object is incorporated in this crypt - the term “incorporated” signalling precisely that one has failed to digest or assimilate it totally, so that it remains there, forming a pocket in the mourning body. The incorporated dead, which one has not really managed to take upon oneself, continues to lodge there like something other and ventriloquate through the living.<sup>43</sup>

Karen maintains and sustains her loss, keeping that moment of rejection alive, through her continual self-sacrifice and penance for a daughter who does not appreciate it. But, she eventually realises the universality of suffering and loss, which allows her to both acknowledge and volunteer to stage a dramatic re-enactment of it when Alan, on the flight home, offers to paint her: “‘Ok,’ she said and as he smiled and nodded his pleasure, ‘but can you paint me reading a letter?’”<sup>44</sup> While this is arguably, the repetition of loss, it feels like a step forward for her, the recognition of what has been lost and the desire to take ownership of the experience of abandonment, to tell her story, just like Caldwell’s protagonist. Park demonstrates through Karen’s narrative that loss, recovery and memory are multi-faceted processes.

For Alan, the trip to Amsterdam is about redemption: to inspire him to write and help save his job, to see Bob Dylan and to reconnect with his surly, disaffected son Jack. While we can speculate that Alan’s faith has a distinctly Protestant evangelical hue, this is never stated. Ian Sansom describes the importance of Park’s spiritual background: “The legacy of his Protestant evangelical upbringing is obvious everywhere in his books: plots which revolve and resolve themselves as stories of personal redemption; numerous scenes of transfiguration; and above all, a return again and again to moral questions and dilemmas”<sup>45</sup> Alan is the only character in the novel who evidences any religious faith and although he has now lapsed in practice, he still retains an attachment to the aesthetic dimensions of belief: “Now gradually I came to believe in other things, things that were spiritual but in a different kind of way”<sup>46</sup> Alan hopes to get from Dylan's performance a glimpse of the divine that he has been missing in his life. But he is seriously disappointed by his idol: “[I]t sounded like a man singing into a beer bottle, half-spoken, half-sung, the familiar words slowly separating from the sound memory was playing in his head”<sup>47</sup> Dylan, of course, frequently uses Abrahamic religious imagery in his



music.<sup>48</sup> His voice offers Alan both a remembrance of his radical past, but also a realization of how far away from it he now is:

Gradually he realised that it wasn't possible for him to hear anything independently so it no longer mattered about the voice because what he was hearing came tumbling out was the past. And there he was with Stan marching with their rather superior, arty placard to Ravenhill rugby ground to protest against the appearance of the apartheid era Springboks and there he was picketing the American consulate in Queen Street [...] And when the troubles arrived there was no room for play politics any more he'd done what everyone else had done – dug a deep hole and climbed in.<sup>49</sup>

This is the novel's only engagement with political activism, and it is left-wing rather than directly sectarian. However, many of those involved with leftist politics in Northern Ireland became integral to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Alan's revelation, then, is that his radical days are behind him, and that he will play the political game to get ahead in his workplace: "He'd finally admit in public that he worked on Maggie's farm and he'd do what they all did which was to do and say anything that kept him safe from the new mandarins".<sup>50</sup> Alan is able to reconcile his past and present and think clearly about moving on to his future: "So even if that moment and all the other moments like it that had follow would later prove at best insubstantial, at worst illusory, then he couldn't dent them or their part in forming who he was".<sup>51</sup> Dylan's music prompts an involuntary synaesthetic reaction, bringing back the vital colours which were so important to Alan:

The colours of human passion flooded again through his consciousness in a counter harmony with the museum – the red of the mono record player, the vermillion of the front door of the home he had once shared, the black smudges of crows in the painting clamouring upwards against the yellow of the wheat fields and the blue peasant clothes of the old man as he wept on the yellow chair.<sup>52</sup>

Afterwards, in a bar, Jake sings Nirvana's 'Come as You Are': "The word 'memory' was repeated in the chorus and as Jack's voice strengthened he glanced up once, the

pale moon of his face suddenly open and visible before he looked away”.<sup>53</sup> Alan’s memories, where his activism gave way to the Troubles, is clearly further troubled by his son’s identification with this artist.

“The book is really about how to love your child,” says Park, “You want them to share your moral values, but that’s not how it works. It’s about going on loving even when it’s difficult”.<sup>54</sup> It is on this sentiment that the novel ends, with the characters flying back to Belfast, and Alan sacrifices himself on behalf of his son when customs investigate them: “Every good reason in the world to stop and at worst Midnight Express screening in his head, at best the imagined indignities of a full body search in some strip-lit cell, but he had no choice because in that moment he knew that love was the price that had to be paid for bringing a child into the world”.<sup>55</sup> The fulfilment that he sought in politics, in his affair, in music and spirituality is now found in a profound, sacrificial and unconditional love for his son. From focusing on his own needs and dissecting his own past, he ends the novel shedding these concerns to protect his son’s future. As Park has it: “What I have come to realise is that communal healing is not to be found in truth commissions or in institutions, but is simply to be found in the renewed rhythms of life. Young people falling in love, children being born”.<sup>56</sup> For Alan has been transformed from being obsessed with his own personal redemption into a being fully prepared to sacrifice himself for another, through empathetic encounters and, often, the ‘wrong’ memory objects.

Lucy Caldwell’s *All the Beggars Riding* (2013) deals with the textual mechanics of narrating grief and the protagonist Lara Moorhouse’s attempts to make sense of loss. The novel bristles at the seams with different types of grief, whether the victims of the Troubles and Chernobyl or Lara’s family tragedy, and considers the different ways in which individuals weave a narrative frame around their experiences. Caldwell’s relationship with the conflict is markedly different from older novelists, such as Park: “The ceasefires happened when I was 13, so although it would be disingenuous to pretend that after that everything was fine, it did mean that I had a pretty ‘normal’ adolescence”.<sup>57</sup> The focus of this novel is storytelling and framing the traumatic experience, a central theme in Irish Literature. It is not just the psychological notion of the ‘talking cure’ that is important to this tradition, but also the Irish context of the *seanchaí*, or storyteller, one who makes sense of communal myths through the act of storytelling. This, of course, has much in

common with processes of conflict resolution. At the Northern Ireland affairs committee in 2005, a diverse range of interest groups “representing a range of disparate, perhaps even contradictory political interests – were united to the extent of seeing the value of storytelling for individual and societal healing”.<sup>58</sup> From the beginning of Caldwell’s novel, grief and recovery are foregrounded: “As if all the griefs in my life, my father, my mother, and to an extent Jeremy, as if I was mourning all of them: mourning myself and all my other selves”.<sup>59</sup> Central to the novel will be this idea, then, of mourning the life not lived, or the loss that cannot be fully articulated as the object has never existed. One of these ‘other lives’ that Lara is mourning is motherhood as she nears forty: “I’m writing about my own parents, and how they fucked up, but I’m writing about myself, too, mourning the loss of something I won’t now have”.<sup>60</sup> In this novel, then, Caldwell takes the language of storytelling and plays with it: some stories work, and others do not. She self-consciously keeps the storytelling of the Peace Process at a remove while exploring other types of reconciliation and the problems of self-narration.

The major catalyst for the protagonist’s memory work is a documentary on the horrors of Chernobyl and her empathy for a woman who tries to defy the safety instructions of the state guards to see her dying husband. Lara feels guilty for making connections with her own life (“It was the realisation that if my mother had watched Nastasya talking of her sweetheart, she would have understood”), but this only highlights the unpredictable operations of memory, where the stimuli and the reaction are not always ‘right’.<sup>61</sup> Lara’s first, unsuccessful attempt at storytelling features her mother’s love story which Caldwell purposefully writes as awkward and jarring, to make the point that we are not always best equipped to tell the stories closest to us. Within this story within a story, Lara tries to give voice to her mother’s desires but fails. However, she gains insight through this Lara often foregrounds her own attempt to understand her mother’s motivations: “Beneath the nondescript exterior, there’s steel, there’s something stronger than self-pity, something even she doesn’t fully grasp or understand”.<sup>62</sup>

*All the Beggars Riding* is deeply concerned with the operation of memory on an individual level and, as with Park, the often complex and inconvenient ways in which we narrate our past:

It's harder to tell a story, though, than you'd think. As I said earlier, lives aren't orderly, and nor is memory: the mind doesn't work like that. We make it so, when we narrate things – setting them in straight lines and in context – whereas in reality things are all mixed up, and you feel several things, even things that contradict each other, or that happened at separate times, or that aren't on the surface even related, all at once.<sup>63</sup>

Lara is clear about what she wants from her storytelling process: “to tell my story, and set the past to rights, and to rest, and to understand”.<sup>64</sup> Of course, as the novel proves, it's not as easy as tell your story, feel better and then move on. The road to healing and recovery is individual and complex. Lara's creative writing course allows Caldwell to refer back constantly to the mechanics of narration: “It taught me that writing isn't self-expression, vomiting self-pity onto the page. It's the taking and shaping of things, carefully, again and again, until they make a sort of sense that not only you but others can understand, and maybe benefit from”.<sup>65</sup> Here, Caldwell advocates for more than just a melancholic recycling of the traumatic event, but rather a re-telling that, importantly, considers an outside audience rather than speaking to one's own community. As she begins to shift her focus, the mechanics of narration are constantly commented upon, with Lara reflecting on how clichéd her expressions of mourning are: “I began with the utter devastation of the toxic nuclear landscape. How much more obvious can you get?”<sup>66</sup> The shift in the novel occurs when Lara realizes the active role she can play in the curation and narration of her own memories (“I want to remember these moments and hold every one of them, hold us, in my mind's eye, for as long as possible. Cast my net of words around us and draw it tight”) and reaches out to other stories and lives outside of her immediate experience.<sup>67</sup> Rather than the ossified tribal memory of commemoration, this casts memory as an active process in which subject and memory-event can interact. Writing and reading can be seen as simultaneously a way to craft meaning from trauma in a ‘post’-conflict situation but also as an exploration of the frustrations inherent in trying to homogenise these experiences.

Writing about two earlier Northern Irish novels, Stefanie Lehner asserts that “empathy is evoked as a collective responsibility for the rights to safety, security, wellbeing, commemorating and mourning of the subaltern other”.<sup>68</sup> It is clear here that Caldwell aims to advocate for a similar empathic imperative within Northern

Irish fiction: “People always talk of fiction as if it’s an escape from the world, but it’s not that, or not just that. It’s an escape out of ourselves and into the world, too”.<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler echoes this view: “I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must”.<sup>70</sup> It is in the acknowledgement of this precariousness, in the narrative faltering, in the act of trying, that a new generative ethics of Northern Irish fiction can be produced. Caldwell’s is not a Troubles novel, but the anxiety produced by the conflict is mingled with Lara’s childhood anxieties about her absent father. The conflict comes, like Lara’s memory, in shards and fragments with glimpses of the physical horror of violence that her father must attend to as a plastic surgeon: “Belfast surgeons were regarded as the best in the world. It was on account of the practice they had, with gunshot and baseball-bat and bomb-blast victims”.<sup>71</sup>

Belfast, for Lara, will always represent the traumatic journey with her pregnant mother to confront her father’s second family so it becomes, for her, ‘That squalid, hateful city’<sup>72</sup>. Her father’s absence leads Lara to speculate in a constant state of anxiety about every news report: “All you ever saw on the news were snarling dogs and faceless policemen in riot gear, the blackened, mangled remains of a bus or shop or a car, the balaclavas and guns, the loose-face, glazed-eyed families of the victims. But behind it was a whole layer of other lives, lives like ours”.<sup>73</sup> However, through her journey to find her half-brother, the meaning of Belfast alters radically. Ironically, once an archetypal site of trauma, it becomes a place of reconciliation:

If you don’t know Belfast, if all you know of it is the litany of murders and maimings, the annual images of marching and rioting, the hardened male voices defending or accusing on the radio, there’s nothing to prepare you for how beautiful it is [...] lying low against the lough, nestled on all other sides by hills. Belfast is a city cupped, cradled in the palm of a hand; a broken creature, something precious.<sup>74</sup>

Here, the city traumatised by violence becomes the very agent of healing.

Robert Eaglestone notes that “fiction is the place to investigate” how our relationship to the past has changed and this imperative is particularly strong in post-

conflict societies engaged in a complex and multi-faceted reconsideration of recent history.<sup>75</sup> While I do not want to go as far as Joseph O’Neill’s pronouncement that “with writers like David Park, the novel can itself be a kind of truth commission”, these novels demonstrate that contemporary Northern Irish fiction is engaged in a complex re-consideration of the relationship between memory, narrative and a contested past.<sup>76</sup> Rather than a melancholic recycling of a traumatic past, they offer stories of maladaptive responses and false epiphanies, depicting people traumatised by the ‘wrong’ objects. Both of these novels contain moments of revelation which are propelled by encounters outside of Northern Ireland. They are stories of people who do not fit in to the Northern Irish memory archive, and offer important fractures and fissures to a dominant representational paradigm. They advocate, in different ways, for the power of storytelling and its relationship to notions of empathy. As Judith Butler writes: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something”.<sup>77</sup> The novel, then, can be a way to recover what has been missing when dealing with the past in contemporary Northern Ireland. And, if we sincerely want to deal with the past, as these novels show us, we must to some degree be prepared to be undone.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Sansom, ‘David Park: A Life in Books’. *The Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012, accessed 6<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life* (London: Verso, 2006), 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert F. Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); and Kathryn Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish Nationalist Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 122.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Garratt, *Trauma and History*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Joep Leerssen, ‘1798: the Recurrence of Violence and Two Conceptualizations of History’, *Irish Review* 22 (1998), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Graham, “‘Let’s Get Killed’: Culture and Peace in Northern Ireland,” in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, ed. Wanda Balzano, Anne Mulhall, and Moynagh Sullivan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 180.

<sup>11</sup> See Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 3

<sup>12</sup> Cillian McGrattan details the influence of Maurice Halbwachs’ ideas on group and individual memory on Ian McBride’s work in the Irish context. See Ian McBride, ‘Introduction’, *Memory and national identity in modern Ireland*, in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, edited by Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Cillian McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013), 147.

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- <sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Reflections on a new ethos for Europe', in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Praxis*, ed by Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), p. 7.
- <sup>15</sup> Simon Prince, 'Narrative and the Start of the Northern Irish Troubles: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition in Comparative Perspective'. *The Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011), p. 944.
- <sup>16</sup> McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity*, p. 18.
- <sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/northern-ireland-new-report-slams-failure-deal-past-2013-09-11>, accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014; Louise Mallinder, 'Dealing with Northern Ireland's past', Open Democracy <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/louise-mallinder/dealing-with-northern-ireland%E2%80%99s-past-guide-to-haasso%E2%80%99sullivan-talks>, accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014
- <sup>18</sup> Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past? Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies 2001), 140.
- <sup>20</sup> McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity*, 61.
- <sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke UP: Durham, 2010).
- <sup>22</sup> Ian Sansom, 'David Park: A Life in Books'.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> David Park, *The Light of Amsterdam* (London, Bloomsbury, 2012), 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Ian Sansom. 'David Park: A Life in Books'.
- <sup>27</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Alan Bairner, 'Where did it all go right?: George Best, Manchester United and Northern Ireland', *Manchester United: a Thematic Study* (London: Routledge, 2004), 141.
- <sup>29</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 232.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 233.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 329, 329, 28.
- <sup>32</sup> John Cronin. "'The Dark' Is Not Light Enough: The Fiction of John McGahern". *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 58 (Winter 1969), 427-432; Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 367-8.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 216.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 273.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 336.
- <sup>36</sup> Michael G. Cronin. "He's My Country": Liberalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Gay Fiction. *Éire-Ireland* 39.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2004).
- <sup>37</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 37.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 175.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 176.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, 250.
- <sup>41</sup> Lucy Caldwell, *All the Beggars Riding* (London: Faber, 2013), 37.
- <sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914-1916)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 1999), 244.
- <sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 57-8.
- <sup>44</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 364
- <sup>45</sup> Ian Sansom. 'David Park: A Life in Books'.
- <sup>46</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 306.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 309.
- <sup>48</sup> Michael J. Gilmore. *Tangled Up in the Bible* (New York, Continuum, 2004).
- <sup>49</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 310
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- <sup>52</sup> Ibid, 314.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, 326.
- <sup>54</sup> Ian Sansom. 'David Park: A Life in Books'.
- <sup>55</sup> Park, *The Light of Amsterdam*, 370.
- <sup>56</sup> Ian Sansom. 'David Park: A Life in Books'.

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- <sup>62</sup> Ibid, 138.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid, 8.
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- <sup>65</sup> Ibid, 238.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid, 241.
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- <sup>72</sup> Ibid, 106.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, 48.
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