

The Poetics of Reconciliation

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1. Reconciliation and the Arts

The potential of the arts to facilitate reconciliation in conflict-affected societies has been repeatedly pointed out in recent peacebuilding research.¹ There is broad agreement that by appealing to the “moral imagination”,² the arts can “open space for dialogue grounded in mutual respect”³ and thereby encourage tolerance of difference and pluralism, which are conducive to maintaining peace.⁴ Furthermore, there is a multi-disciplinary consensus that the arts provide “a means of dealing with trauma”.⁵ In this regard, the visual arts have often been cited: “artistic interventions have potential to fill a gap in which everyday language is inadequate to relay the extent of trauma and the depth of emotions that survivors experience”.⁶

In comparison, the role of literature, and more specifically of lyric poetry, in promoting recovery and reconciliation has received less scholarly attention. This is remarkable, since in recent history, poems – and not other forms of literature or visual artwork – were widely shared after large-scale traumatic events.⁷ Drawing on current models developed in trauma therapy and peacebuilding research, this brief makes the case for the hitherto largely unexplored potential in lyric poetry to deal with trauma in the aftermath of genocide and internecine violence. By taking the example of

Michael Longley’s poems about the Northern Ireland conflict, it shows that lyric poems offer a creative pathway to reconciliation by integrating the aesthetic and the ethic.

The lyric genre possesses an especially wide range of artistic means to express the scope of trauma and the intensity of feelings it generates. Moreover – and this is crucial to our argument about the conciliatory capacity of poetry – the lyric genre has potential not only to vent strong emotions, but also to channel and contain them. Poems about violent conflicts and their aftermath that realize such potential share a set of features: from a vantage point of safety and distance, they create a ritual site for remembrance and mourning, aspire to a consensual view of the past and of a potential future, draw commonalities and challenge dichotomies between conflicting parties, open up a reparative space for reconnection and reconciliation, and recast the relationship between hostile parties by making them recognize each other’s humanity. In other words, they parallel the psychological stages of recovery as outlined in trauma research and feature key elements of the reconciliation process identified in conflict resolution scholarship.⁸ However, this thematic congruence of interdisciplinary concerns does not imply a levelling of differences between poetry, psychotherapy, and peacebuilding practices. The following considerations will specify both the commonalities between these discourses and the generically specific contribution of lyric poetry to the multi-faceted process of reconciliation in the aftermath of atrocity.

2. Reconciliation and the Lyric: A Case Study

The complexity of lyric poetry’s approach to tragic events in the community is shown in an exemplary manner by the work of the contemporary Northern Irish poet Michael Longley. By spotlighting the variety of ways in which artistic means can be conducive to ethical ends, the ensuing close reading of “The Ice-Cream Man” – an elegy for the victim of a sectarian killing – will explore the potential of the lyric to cope with trauma and to facilitate the process

¹ Rachel Kerr, “The ‘Art’ of Reconciliation”, FICHL Policy Brief Series No. 78 (2017), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher (‘TOAEP’), Brussels, 2017; John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; and Peter D. Rush and Olivera Simic (eds.), *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity*, Springer, New York, 2014.

² Lederach, 2005, see above note 1.

³ Kerr, 2017, p. 3, see above note 1.

⁴ Ervin Staub, “Reconciliation after Genocide, Mass Killing, or Intractable Conflict: Understanding the Roots of Violence, Psychological Recovery, and Steps toward a General Theory”, in *Political Psychology*, 2006, vol. 27, no. 6, pp. 867–894.

⁵ Kerr, 2017, p. 3, see above note 1; Judith Herman M.D., *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, New York, 1997; Lederach, 2005, see above note 1.

⁶ Kerr, 2017, p. 3, see above note 1; see also Eugene McNamee, “Fields of Opportunity: Cultural Invention and ‘The New Northern Ireland’”, in Peter D. Rush and Olivera Simic (eds.), *The Arts of Transitional Justice*, Springer, New York, 2014, p. 22.

⁷ Cf. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 341.

⁸ Herman identifies three main stages in the process of recovery: the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection (Herman, 1997, above note 5). On the key elements in the peacebuilding process, see Lederach, 2005, above note 1 and Staub, 2006, above note 4. Cf. also Galtung’s definition of reconciliation as “the process of healing the traumas of both victims and perpetrators after violence, providing a closure of the bad relations”: Johan Galtung, “After violence, reconstruction, reconciliation and resolution. Coping with visible and invisible effects of war and violence”, in M. Abu-Nimer (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence*, Lexington Books, New York, 2001, p. 3.

of reconciliation.

“The Ice-Cream Man”, published originally in *Gorse Fires* (1991), conveys the shock of violent death and its painful aftermath. It grapples with the extremely difficult questions of how to do justice to the victims of political violence in a work of art and how to console oneself as well as a bereaved community:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
Yarrow, lady’s bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel.⁹

The poem is addressed to the poet’s daughter.¹⁰ By memorializing the victim and by representing *as well as* performing the act of mourning, the poem corresponds chiefly to the second stage of the psychological process of recovery. The daughter’s floral tribute is a spontaneous expression of personal grief; at the same time, it is a readily recognizable ritual act, a public gesture that a mourning community can identify with. In comparison, the father’s botanical incantation is more elusive. At first sight, the disproportionate length of the response – 6 out of the poem’s 10 lines – suggests that it is meant as a counterpoint to the loss spelled out in the first four lines. It soothes the reader by changing the setting and diverts attention away from the scene of the crime towards a faraway rural place of beauty and peace. Thus, like all poems that draw on the pastoral tradition, it runs the risk of coming across as escapist. However, Longley works against such a simplified reading in various ways. The departures from the traditional elegy, the symbolically charged geographical references, the diction, as well as the generically specific poetic devices, all contribute to the poem’s complex ethical impact.

The traditional elegy laments and praises the dead while consoling the living by “finding solace in meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values”.¹¹ Moreover, “elegists have always tried to order death and their grief into meaningfulness in whatever way possible”.¹² Compared to the canonical elegies in the language,¹³ the lament in “The Ice-Cream Man” is terse, the praise indirect. The poem abstains from giving meaning to the victim’s death and remains reticent about consolation. By eschewing explanations – the murderers are merely referred to as “they” and their motive remains unspecified – it precludes excuses, as no reason justifies this crime. Even if the profusion of flora echoes traditional appeals to nature for solace, it

does so in a decidedly unconventional manner.

On the propositional level, the connection between the death of the ice-cream man and the floral cornucopia is not explained, thus leaving the gesture open to interpretation.¹⁴ It may be construed as a verbal wreath, in which the 21 flowers match the 21 flavours the ice-cream man used to serve in his shop; alternatively, it could be read as an act of defiance, as a plea for the “reception of nature as a joyous inventory”;¹⁵ or, as we shall see later, it can be grasped as a funeral march. Moreover, the list itself is a wild mixture that cannot simply be subsumed under the heading ‘peace and harmony’: it intermingles medicinal herbs, poisonous weeds, and carnivorous plants. The ambiguity of nature is reproduced on the lexical level: vocables such as *sweet* and *angel* are offset by *strife* and *blade*. The structure of the poem displays a similar complexity: the catalogue of flowers in the closing sentence parallels the assortment of flavours in the opening one; the recollection of the murder and the daughter’s mourning ritual are inserted in the second sentence in between the two euphonic lists, as if to contain the pain within a realm of sensuous pleasure.

Psychologically, the gesture of naming can be construed in contrasting ways, too. Whereas the overwhelming number of items conveys a sense of despair and helplessness, as if the speaker were entrapped in an endless litany, the extraordinary botanical expertise is a demonstration of knowledge as power, for the ability to name is a form of assuming control. All this makes it evident that there is room for interpretation as to what exactly the evocation of nature means in this poem; in any case, easy conclusions are pre-empted, as are notions of reconciliation. Reconciliation as a concept itself is complex, and the poetry of reconciliation parallels and enacts this complexity both formally and semantically.¹⁶

The geographical references, the Lisburn Road in Belfast and the Burren in Co. Clare, also contribute significantly to the ethical impact of the poem. The scene of the crime, the capital city of Northern Ireland, is juxtaposed to the rural landscape in a national park in the Republic of Ireland. Putting these regions side by side can be taken for a political statement, as a vision of peaceful co-existence: A poet from Northern Ireland evokes a landscape from the Republic of Ireland and weaves a wreath for a victim of sectarian violence from remembered and real flowers coming from both parts of the island. This symbolic act rises above dualistic polarities and paves the way for reconnection and reconciliation. The poem conveys profound grief but also reaches beyond the stage of remembrance and mourning; by envisioning the possibility of transcending the violence, it avoids the pitfalls of a harmful memorial culture.¹⁷

⁹ Michael Longley, *Collected Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2007, p. 192.

¹⁰ Cf. the open-air recording of this elegy in Belfast, near the site where the ice-cream man was murdered (Brian John Spencer, “Michael Longley on the Ice Cream Man”, YouTube, 12 May 2016, 2:28, available on www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfS85Leqh9Y). Longley also quotes a letter he has received from the ice-cream man’s mother, who has pointed out to him that the 21 flowers in the poem match the number of flavours in his son’s ice cream shop.

¹¹ Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, p. 324.

¹² Iain Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Continuum, London, 2012, p. 7.

¹³ See, for instance, Milton’s “Lycidas”, Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”, or Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”.

¹⁴ On this point, see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “Conflict, Violence, and ‘The Fundamental Interrelatedness of Things’”, in Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine (eds.), *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 2000, p. 93.

¹⁵ The phrase is used by John Wilson Foster to describe the effect of the rhetorical device of ‘aggregation’, that is, of natural catalogues, in medieval Irish literature, see John Wilson Foster, “Encountering Traditions”, in J.W. Foster (ed.), *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 33. On the relevance of this rhetorical device for Longley’s poem, see Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Writing and Environmentalism: The Wearing of the Deep Green*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, pp. 52–53.

¹⁶ Cf. Birju Kotecha, “The Complexity of Reconciliation”, FICHL Policy Brief Series No. 79 (2017), TOAEP, Brussels, 2017.

¹⁷ Cf. Vamik Volkan’s concepts of “bad inscription” and “chosen trauma”, in Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1998, pp. 48, 68ff.

So far, we have considered artistic strategies that potentially all literary genres can employ: the adaptation of received literary forms, the symbolism of topical references and structural patterns, and the presentation of different modes of dealing with trauma may serve ethical ends in fiction, drama, and poetry. However, in addition, Longley resorts to a range of generically specific features of the lyric – above all *melos* (sound patterning), *opsis* (visual patterning), lyric address, and brevity – which are instrumental to the ethical impact of the poem.¹⁸ *Melos* and *opsis* “are aspects of the lyric that help it establish itself in its specificity as iterable form”;¹⁹ together with the so-called “triangulated address”, they constitute the dominant ritualistic dimension of the genre which distinguishes the domain of the lyric from fictional and dramatic representations.²⁰ The term “triangulated address” refers to the “address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else”.²¹ An important implication of this device is that “there are aspects of the poem which do not make sense as spoken to the ostensible addressee but are crucial to the address to a wider audience of readers”.²²

The tonal pattern reveals the emotional complexity of the poem’s engagement with the act of mourning. The aggregations and alliterations (*rum, raisin, rhyme, ragged robin*) in the frame sentences create a poetical soundscape, and this contrasts sharply with the prosaic middle part which recounts the fact of murder and the daughter’s act of mourning; the resulting break in tone intensifies the shock effect. Moreover, the slow pace and the heavy stresses of the exceedingly long closing sentence invite comparison to a funeral march or dirge like Beethoven’s *Allegretto* of Symphony No. 7. The recitation of flowers in uniform 12-syllable lines acquires a solemn, dignified, ceremonial quality; it becomes a “continuous requiem” for the ice-cream man.²³ Thus, the melic aspect of the lyric works most powerfully against an escapist reading of the flower passage as clichéd consolation, and it provides a means both to express *and* to contain intense feelings.

The optic dimensions of the poem perform memorial functions. As regards the visual construction, the 10 lines arranged into one single stanza create the impression of a solid block, possibly imitating the form of a tombstone slab.²⁴ Regarding the imagery, the bouquet of carnations laid outside the ice-cream shop is a sign of respect for the dead and may serve as a “memorial image” for the living, holding “consolation and desolation in a single thought”.²⁵ The strategy of forging memorable images and metaphors which call forth a complex emotional response by evoking a wide range of affective states is brought to perfection in Longley’s later poems about internecine violence such as “Kindertotenlieder” and “Ceasefire”.²⁶

Longley explained that the poem is addressed to his daughter, but even without knowing this biographical background, a reader can easily infer from the playful rhyming off of ice-cream flavours that the addressee is a child. However, that’s only half the story: the generically specific device of “triangulated address” expands

the scope of recipients to a large readership that includes members of the bereaved community. This set-up enables readers belonging to a conflicted society to identify with a child in mourning and thereby to share a potentially transformative emotional experience: the acute sense of the remoteness of a prelapsarian world represented by the child’s innocence. In turn, the lyric “I” conforms with traditional figurations of the poet as a man of integrity from whom a community may seek moral guidance. Indeed, the “I” is a role model who commemorates the victim without engaging in sectarian discourse: he emphasizes the communal aspect by identifying the ice-cream man not by his name but by his function in the community, and opts for an emotionally complex gesture, the evocation of nature, in place of an explanation for the murder. The recital of plants’ names makes therefore more sense if we assume that it is spoken primarily not to the ostensible addressee, but to a wider audience of readers.

Finally, the characteristic brevity of lyric poetry is conducive to its ethical impact, too. As opposed to fiction and drama, lyric poetry is more concise and can create moments of extraordinary intensity that may acquire a revelatory force. In this connection, John Paul Lederach singles out the haiku to speak of the “haiku moment”, which “connects the eternity of truth with the immediacy of experience”.²⁷ Since “the practice of the haiku is [...] to embrace complexity through simplicity”,²⁸ the insights generated in and by this form surpass the results of cognitive analysis and lead to a deeper understanding of the conflict.²⁹ As the close reading of “The Ice-Cream Man” has shown, this feat can be accomplished not only in a haiku, but in any other lyric form. Lederach’s proposition about the capacity of the haiku to facilitate the processes of reconciliation can be therefore generalised to apply to the genre of the lyric *per se*: “It is a place where simplicity and complexity meet. I happen to believe that this is also the place where the heart of peacebuilding pounds a steady but not often perceived rhythm and where the source of the moral imagination finds inspiration.”³⁰

3. Conclusion

As this case study has shown, the capacity of the lyric to stimulate the moral imagination, and hence to facilitate reconciliation, is grounded in the strategy to integrate different stages of recovery and several facets of the process of peacebuilding in an accomplished work of art. A lyric poem that deals with violent conflict and its aftermath can therefore participate in trauma work on both the personal and public levels. Yet to create an artwork which addresses atrocity is to risk the instrumentalization of the victims. For Theodor W. Adorno, this state of affairs constitutes an ethical quandary, an *aporia* even:

It is the situation of literature itself and not simply one’s relation to it that is paradoxical. [...] The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. [...] The aesthetic stylistic principle [...] makes the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of justice.³¹

In Adorno’s view, art about atrocity is a moral imperative, yet

¹⁸ Cf. Culler, 2015, see above note 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 186, 258.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²³ Cf. Longley’s “All These People”, in Longley, 2007, p. 253, above note 9, where the recitation of flavours becomes a “continuous requiem” for the ice-cream man.

²⁴ The same strategy is employed by Longley in “The War Graves”, Longley, 2007, pp. 256–257, above note 9.

²⁵ Twiddy, 2012, p. 41, above note 12.

²⁶ Longley, 2007, pp. 61, 225.

²⁷ Lederach, 2005, p. 66, above note 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, Sh.W. Nicholsen (trans.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 88.

injustice is intrinsic to it.³² Whether the argument about the inherently paradoxical situation of literature is generally valid or not is a question we shall return to below. In any case, it is indisputable that artists who make the suffering of others the subject of their art are confronted with an ethical issue and have to find ways to handle this precarious situation.

It seems likely that due to generic reasons, lyric poetry is theoretically better equipped to solve this ethical problem than other forms of literature and art.³³ Frequently, a lyric poem is an “epideictic” discourse that includes praise, blame, “statements of value”, and judgments “which are not relativized to a particular speaker or fictional situation but [are] offered as truths about the world”.³⁴ As opposed to a prototypical fictional, dramatic, or visual work of art, a lyric poem is not mimetic and it does not create an aesthetic illusion of ‘reality’. It is not the representation of an event but a speech act, that is, it is the event itself. Ethical objections to the *representation* of violence and suffering do not therefore pertain to lyric poetry.³⁵ Moreover, due to its iterable and ritualistic qualities, a lyric poem is functionally akin to song and prayer.³⁶

The significance of these generic features for the ethical impact of Longley’s poems about the Northern Ireland conflict is underlined both by the response of the ice-cream man’s family and by the critical reception of Longley’s work. Poetry cannot compensate for lost lives, but, as the mother’s graceful letter of thanks to the poet revealed, it can be a form of consolation. As Longley explained, “[s]he is accompanied in her sorrow by a poem or by the person who wrote the poem. [...] You go side by side with the person to the grave”.³⁷ Moreover, in criticism, Longley’s work about the

³² Adorno’s dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” is the most explicit and controversial expression of this paradox (Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society”, in *Prisms*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 34). On the reception of this often-misinterpreted phrase, see Robert Kaufman, “Poetry’s Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion”, in *New German Critique*, Winter 2006, no. 97, pp. 73–118.

³³ This is not to say that other forms of art are unsuitable to deal with atrocity, only that lyric poetry is in a theoretically more advantageous position to do so.

³⁴ Culler, 2015, pp. 128 and 35.

³⁵ Cf., for instance, Catherine M. Cole’s criticism of theatrical representations of Apartheid atrocities: “So the interpreter raised his hands along with the victim, nodded, and impersonated the demeanor of the survivor giving testimony. Yet many wondered about the appropriateness of this. Was it ethical? These stories were told at great personal cost. What was one’s responsibility in retelling the tale? Stories from the TRC are so compelling that they demand to be retold, and yet they are in some ways *impossible to represent*”. See “Theatres of Truth, Acts of Reconciliation: The TRC in South Africa”, in John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (eds.), *African Drama and Performance*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2014, pp. 219–226, p. 223, emphasis added.

³⁶ Cf. Culler, 2015, pp. 12–13.

³⁷ Richard Rankin Russell, *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley*,

Troubles is cited in proof of poetry’s power to aid a conflict-ridden community by sounding “a humane poetic *voice asking calmly to be heard* amid violence and misunderstanding”.³⁸

The fact that in these accounts there is no mention – not even by the mother of the murdered ice-cream man – of any sense of injustice done to the victims is eminently important. This empirical finding calls for a refinement of Adorno’s theory about the inherently paradoxical situation of literature. The case study in this brief has made it clear that poetry (at least) has the potential to address atrocity and its aftermath without instrumentalizing the victims. As we have demonstrated, this is accomplished primarily by the skilful deployment of artistic devices, by the intricacy of poetic language and form. Hence, the aesthetic stylistic principle, which was for Adorno at the core of the moral quandary, is in fact the key to solving the ethical dilemma. An accomplished poem can thus succeed in integrating the aesthetic and the ethic.

Poetry may be a marginalized form of public discourse in our time, but it has enormous potential to facilitate recovery and reconciliation in the aftermath of atrocity. It could play a role in education, in prevention programmes, and in projects aimed at coping with the past and transcending violence. We are expressly not proselytizing the routine application of lyric poetry as a spiritual panacea in conflict resolution. What we claim is that engaging with aesthetically and ethically accomplished lyric poems which imagine possibilities of coming to terms with trauma may be beneficial to all parties involved in the complex and challenging process of peacebuilding.³⁹ By directing attention to the generically specific resources of the lyric in dealing with the aftermath of political violence, we propose putting lyric poetry on the map of reconciliation scholarship.

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Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2010, p. 301.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³⁹ We concur with Lederach that poetry can become a “pathway to peacebuilding” (Lederach, 2005, p. 66, above note 1), but instead of emphasizing the benefits of *writing* poems, we stress the conciliatory potential of *reading and discussing* poems that integrate the aesthetic and the ethic.