Promoting Awareness and Empathy through World Literature

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Introduction

In his 1995 Nobel lecture, "Crediting Poetry," the Irish poet Seamus Heaney reflects upon the power of poetry "to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed" (430). Heaney describes in his lecture the "unsympathetic reality" of political and sectarian violence, which had dominated life in Northern Ireland since the 1960s. Northern Ireland's violent history is one of many conflicts around the world that have flashed briefly on our televisions, across computer screens, and appeared on the margins of our newspapers.

Heaney acknowledges that when we "channel-surf over so much live coverage of contemporary savagery, [we are] highly informed but nevertheless in danger of growing immune, familiar to the point of over-familiarity" (429). "The documents of civilization have been written in blood and tears," Heaney declares. And, though much of the political or sectarian violence we witness occurs in far-away places like Iraq, Afghanistan, sub-Sahran-Africa, or Israel, the "blood and tears [are] no less real for being very remote" (423). According to Heaney, art—be it poetry, painting, music, or literature—"brings us to our senses" (429) by providing clear and unblinking images of life's hard truths, while also reminding us of the basic human "yearnings for sweetness and

trust" (428). For Heaney, art finds the sympathetic, the beauty, and the goodness amid the tragic, the violent, and the hopeless.

By exploring literature from some of the "wounded spots on the earth" (Heaney 423), students can combat the mind-numbing, sympathy-sapping deluge of violent conflicts documented in our media. Even a superficial survey of the world's conflict literature reveals experiences and feelings common to all people regardless of nationality, race, or religion. Fiction that portrays individuals caught in violent societies often marginalizes the "newsworthy" historical, political, and religious details in favor of more universal themes such as love, prejudice, loss, hunger, alienation, identity, or reconciliation.

Cal and Northern Ireland

This article examines a 1983 novel titled *Cal*, by Bernard MacLaverty. Cal tells the story of the Irish "Troubles" from the point of view of the eponymous character, who is trapped in the cycle of violence and retribution that brutalized Northern Ireland for decades and that has only recently subsided into a fragile peace. Cal's sense of alienation from his community, his religion, and even from himself is a dominant theme in MacLaverty's novel. Cal questions what he believes, where he belongs, and he struggles with an overwhelming-feeling of powerlessness and lack of self-determination.

Cal's private battle with himself, though set against a backdrop of sectarian violence, is a battle experienced by many adolescents during their transition from childhood to young adulthood. Identifying this common thread between their own coming of age and that of the characters in novels like Cal, may not only heighten student awareness of troubled spots around the world, but, better still, encourage empathy for those suffering under the threat of daily capricious bloodshed.

A Brief History of the Troubles

Ireland was a colony of the British Empire for more than eight hundred years. From the reign of Henry II, to Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I, Britain established a system of plantations that appropriated Irish land for English and Scot-

tish settlers and enforced a penal code that stripped the Irish of their language, their religion, and their schools. Ireland labored under extreme poverty, famine, and brutality until a civil war broke out with the Easter uprising in 1916. The Treaty of 1921 effectively ended Britain's domination of the entire island, but the partition that resulted from the treaty opened a new, complicated and ultimately bloody chapter in Irish history.

The treaty divided the island into two states—six counties in the northeast province known as Ulster, where most beneficiaries of British colonization lived, and the Republic of Ireland, or Free State. The Protestant majority in the North (about two-thirds of the population)—often called unionists or loyalists—wanted Northern Ireland to remain a self-governing member of the British Empire. Yet, the British government at Westminster, long seeking an answer to the thorny "Irish Question," eased itself out of direct control in Northern Ireland. The British withdrawal heightened the unionists' need for security and desire to retain power over the Catholic minority in the North, most of whom were in favor of reuniting the divided Ireland. (They are often called nationalists or republicans.)

The unionist mandate led to a sectarian system of political, economic, and social discrimination that rendered the Catholic population powerless, impoverished, and dangerously demoralized. The Northern Irish government, known as Stormont, employed political gerrymandering, corrupt housing laws, and segregated public education that so deflated Catholics that "protests beyond the strictly rhetorical were uncommon: there simply seemed little or no point, so that, for example, attempted IRA [Irish Republican Army] campaigns ignominiously petered out" (McKittrick & McVea 232).

Seamus Heaney describes Northern Ireland's descent into sectarian conflict after a somewhat hopeful civil rights campaign during the late 1960s. Stormont's inability to quash the escalating violence in the province forced the British government to move troops into Northern Ireland in 1969. Unfortunately, the neighborhoods in cities like Belfast had already been gravely altered by sectarian violence. McKittrick and McVea describe

Belfast as "permanently and physically scarred by ugly barricades across many of its mean streets...as the years passed and violence continued...larger and more substantial permanent brick and metal structures [were] erected by the authorities. These 'peacelines' were to last into the twenty-first century" (56).

The military presence in their streets excited the young nationalists' sense of persecution and injustice and their verbal abuse and physical attacks with rocks, bricks, and Molotov cocktails placed the equally young British troops under extreme stress. One of the worst incidents occurred in Derry, on what is known as Bloody Sunday, 1972. A peaceful civil rights and anti-internment march erupted into violent confrontation, when agitated paratroopers opened fire on the demonstrators with live ammunition, killing fourteen, many young men under the age of twenty. A prominent Derry priest declared: "'In later years many young people I visited in prison told me quite explicitly that they would never have become involved in the IRA but for what they witnessed, and heard of happening, on Bloody Sunday'" (McKittrick & McVea 77). Bloody Sunday, like Easter 1916, became part of the Irish nationalist mythology and is an invaluable recruiting tool for paramilitary organizations.

The unionist mythology thrives on the long-standing presence of radical political figures such as the Reverend Ian Paisley, whose self-professed hatred of Catholicism aggravates sectarian divisions (www.ianpaisley.org), and the strength of groups like the Orange Order, which unites the diverse Protestant and unionist societies, bolstering their considerable political power. The Orange Order has successfully maintained a contentious tradition of seasonal marches through the neighborhoods of Northern Ireland commemorating the 1690 victory of the Protestant William of Orange over the Catholic King James II at the battle of the Boyne. The marches are dominated by the persistent, violent beat of large drums, making King "Billy's" victory as resonant in present-day Ireland as it was three hundred years ago.

Nationalist and unionist mythologies and bitterness fueled the conflict through the 1980s and into the nineties until peace talks led to a temporary ceasefire in 1994 and then a peace accord, the

Good Friday Agreement, in 1998. Violence and political maneuvering still disrupt life in Northern Ireland; though the lethal violence has diminished, the politics often teeter toward dissolution.

Trapped in the Troubles

Heaney cites a 1976 roadside massacre at Kingsmills, County Armagh, as emblematic of the Irish Troubles. As twelve workers rode home on a minibus, they were stopped by armed men, ordered out of the vehicle, and lined up on the side of the road. The assailants told every Catholic in line to step forward. All the workers but one were Protestant. Certain that he was about to be shot by loyalist paramilitaries, the single, shocked Catholic began to move. At that moment one of his comrades reached out and squeezed his hand, as if to say, "...no, don't move, we'll not betray you...." The Catholic had already taken a step, however, and the gunmen shoved him out of the way and executed his Protestant coworkers. Heaney concludes, "The birth of the future we desire is surely in the contraction which that terrified Catholic felt on the roadside when another hand gripped his hand, not in the gunfire that followed..." (422).

The stress and fear of living in a violent society often contributes to a feeling of alienation in those caught up in the strife. Like the lone Catholic in the line of condemned workers, fear, mistrust, guilt, and centuries of blame can alienate the individual from loved ones, from the community or nation, from religion, and the self. Yet, as Heaney highlights in his Nobel lecture, while the random gunfire and blind hatred alienate individuals and paralyze the present, it is the contraction of a warm hand, an extension of compassion and expression of solidarity that is the future Northern Ireland desires (422).

Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* depicts a young man who demonstrates the need that "consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand, the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust" (Heaney 428). Cal McCluskey encounters the tension Heaney describes between the hard truths and "unsympathetic reality of

the world" and the "base of our sympathetic nature" (430).

Though the nationalist ideal of Ireland and Irishness may not be achievable, nor the loyalist concept of an Ulster state within Great Britain, these conflicting ideologies produce very real consequences. Not the least of which is the effect that the sectarian bigotry and resultant violence have visited on Northern Ireland's citizens, especially the young. Cal, no doubt, represents many of the young men who make up the statistics compiled by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In a 2005 report, the PSNI indicated a rise in republican and loyalist paramilitary punishment attacks, "with vigilante style beatings and shootings escalating since the ceasefires and the advent of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement" (McCready et al.). Ninety-eight percent of the victims of these assaults were male, mostly in their early 20s, though young men under 19 had been increasingly vulnerable to attack. The preponderance of victims was Catholic and poor, living in highly-segregated areas of Belfast. Though Cal fits the profile of the most vulnerable to attack in Northern Ireland, the power of his story resides in the novel's excruciatingly detailed picture of what the life of one of these statistics must be like.

Cal's Secret

Cal's life, at the age of nineteen, is marked by his alienation. He is estranged from his family, his friends, from religion, his community and, most painfully, from himself. Cal wishes to tell Heaney's truth "hard and retributive," yet he also longs for the sympathetic "squeeze of the hand." He has become caught up in his country's violent conflict to the point that he has acquired an oppressive secret and debilitating guilt. Cal believes that to tell the hard truth—his secret—will alienate him forever from any hope of a sympathetic connection with others. He is complicit in a murder and, however the extenuating circumstances may mitigate his guilt, his anguish over this act condemns and estranges him far more than any public censure ever could.

Cal's story most likely begins in the mid to late 1970s, after Bloody Sunday, when the IRA bombing campaign in London was at its most deadly peak. The unionist community in Ulster

responded to republican attacks with equal opposing force and fear. Cal is "caught between the jaws" of these forces (83). He is motherless, living with his dad, Shamie, the only Catholics in a Protestant neighborhood, where Union Jacks fly and the curbs are painted British red, white, and blue. In exchange for the use of an illegal handgun to protect them from their increasingly hostile neighbors, Cal is recruited against his will to "drive for funds" for the IRA. His recruiter is a school mate, Crilly, who is the kind of bully IRA leaders use as enforcers of their will. The novel begins about one year after an event that changes the direction of Cal's life. One year earlier, Cal had driven Crilly to a farm and waited in the driveway as Crilly murdered an off-duty RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) reserve officer in his front doorway and seriously wounded the policeman's father. The dying officer's call to his wife—"Marcella!"—haunts Cal mercilessly.

Cal is on the dole and doesn't have the stomach for Shamie's work at the abattoir. He wiles away his time in his room listening to American blues or at the local library, where he discovers Marcella has gone back to work after the death of her husband. Cal becomes obsessed with Marcella and finds a way to insinuate himself into her life. Marcella, lonely and isolated on the farm with her in-laws, becomes attracted to the attentive, sensitive Cal. Cal is torn between wanting to share his secret with Marcella and knowing his secret will destroy them; he is torn between the threats of Crilly and the republican ideologue, Skeffington, and his revulsion for the violence that has poisoned his life and his hope. Ever the realist, MacLaverty's ending for Cal is the ending that countless young men have faced in Northern Ireland—captured by the authorities, facing certain torture, dying for relief and peace.

Alienation from His Community and Loved Ones

Cal's alienation is evident in his physical aspect. MacLaverty describes Cal as a young man who wishes to hide from the powerful forces that buffet him. His face is usually obscured by his curtain of hair, "screening him from the world"

(10), or covering the blush he feels helpless to prevent when he speaks with Marcella. He tics his head to one side, shaking his hair over his eyes, "like an attempt to rid himself of something, an overspill which resulted in spasmodic movement" (10). His self-loathing manifests itself in the pidgin French he makes up to curse himself. Phrases like "dirty vache" or "you big crotte de chien" stay "with him like indigestion" (10).

Cal's stomach throughout the novel is tight, aching, twisted in knots, indicative of his state of mind and his position in the world. In the first line of the novel, MacLaverty reveals Cal's stomach to be "rigid with the ache of want" (7). Whether he is hungry (though he has no appetite), nauseated by the abattoir—his only sure source of employment—or aching to tell Marcella the hard truth of what he has done, Cal repeats often that he has "no stomach" for what is expected of him. Cal's stomach often clenches as he walks the daily gauntlet through his loyalist neighborhood. The Union Jacks are flying when they should have been taken down after the annual Twelfth of July marching season (the Orange Order parades) and the painted curbstones seem to Cal to be directed at himself and Shamie. Other Catholic families have moved out long ago, but Shamie's sentiment remains, "No Loyalist bastard is going to force me out of my home. They can kill me first." Cal muses, "But it wasn't a single bastard that worried [him], it was an accumulation of them. The feeling of community that they managed to create annoyed him and the stronger their sense of community grew the more excluded and isolated the McCluskeys felt" (9).

Cal and Shamie must keep nocturnal watch on a regular basis. They receive a warning note one night that advises, "Get out you Fenyan scum or we'll burn you out. This is your 2nd warning. There will be no other. UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force (a paramilitary organization)]." As they have many times before, Cal and his dad fill the bathtub with water and lay a blanket beside it in case a fire bomb is thrown into their home. Their vigil is conducted in near silence, sensitive to the slightest noises. Shamie observes, "Isn't it a terrible thing... that those bastards have us whispering in our own house" (28).

Part of what attracts Cal and Marcella to each other is their shared sense of isolation from those around them. After Marcella's husband, Robert Morton, is murdered, she stays on with his parents and her daughter Lucy. Marcella is a Catholic woman of Italian descent (her maiden name is D'Agostino) living with her Irish Protestant in-laws, who seem to keep her on out of respect for their martyred only child, rather than real affection for his widow. Marcella confides to Cal that she often feels like Rapunzel from her daughter's nursery stories—trapped in her life of duty, alienated from her husband's family and community by temperament, creed, and religion. As they discuss the British presence in Northern Ireland, she tells Cal, "I thought I was detached from the whole thing. Being called D'Agostino kind of distances you from it. But when somebody kills your husband you're involved whether you like it or not" (118). Despite her very personal loss, Marcella can still see the Northern Irish conflict as an outsider, noting that Ireland is "like a child," concerned only for the past and present, with no thought for the future (118). She records in her diary her deep shame for Ireland when twenty people are killed in a bombing allegedly carried out by the IRA; and, she feels equal revulsion for the Orangemen's parade and men like the Morton's farm foreman, Cyril Dunlop. Sizing up the self-importance of the prideful Orangemen, Marcella cites their leader, Dunlop, "strutting like a rooster...He's a big man but a wee coat fits him" (127).

Cal's empathy for Marcella's situation demonstrates that, despite his lonely, alienated state—no mother, barely speaking to his father, living in a segregated neighborhood and, then, squatting in an abandoned cottage—Cal manages to be a part of what Heaney calls the sympathetic base of this world. The squeeze of the hand is evident when a distraught Shamie shakes Cal's hand after they are burned out of their house. Marcella instinctively reaches for Cal's hand, which thrills him deeply. Cal comforts his depressed father in a typical display of his solicitude for others. From his sometimes lame attempts at humor and often mature insights into Marcella's life with her in-laws, Cal is capable of great sympathy and sweetness.

Cal's profound alienation cannot be assuaged by fleeting moments of self-realization or brief scenes of love and empathy with Marcella. Her warm stares and the touch of her hand give Cal a passing thrill of pleasure, yet despite his intense desire for her, Cal fears that "as far as Marcella was concerned, he had gelded himself that dark winter's night" (138), the night of her husband's murder. He is "gelded" in that he cannot make love with Marcella without also reliving the murder, but also gelded in the sense that he is no longer able to form meaningful relationships with others. He is estranged from other people by virtue of his guilt, separated by his dissent from militant republican ideology, by his revulsion for violence, and by his highly developed sense of his own impotence.

Cal's estrangement is dramatized by MacLaverty in the library as Cal, with heavy irony, is described peering at Marcella between the shelves of the Irish history section; all but his eyes are hidden from her. As Cal imagines lying down in the warm library, among the books, waiting for Marcella's touch to rouse him, he turns to books on the shelves that shake him (and the reader) out of his romantic fantasy. The pages of Irish history show the all-too-human players in the drama of the Troubles: Sir Edward Carson, Reverend Paisley, and Padraic Pearse—the men whose actions in part have shaped Cal's world, and his role in it.

Cal's alienation from others is portrayed most convincingly through MacLaverty's references to the moon and the force that separates it from the earth. In 2003, MacLaverty wrote and directed a short film titled *Bye-Child*, based upon a Seamus Heaney poem of the same title. The poem describes a young child, confined to a shed in the backyard of his family's home. Heaney depicts the child, "little henhouse boy," putting his eye to a chink in the wall of his "kennel," seeing the glow of the kitchen light from his family's back window across the yard. The boy is "sharp-faced as new moons," "little moon man...luminous, weightless" (Heaney 73). In his interview with *Shooting People*, MacLaverty draws a parallel between the lone child in the shed, watching his family's world from his fixed point—from "lunar distances" (Heaney 73)—and Cal's belief in the impassable separation between

himself and others. Citing the poem as an inspiration, MacLaverty establishes Cal as a "moon man," describing Cal's experience (after he and Shamie are burned out) as a yet undiscovered squatter in the derelict cottage behind the Morton's farmhouse:

> He got the feeling that the house was the earth and the cottage the moon orbiting it. At night sometimes when the wind was in the right direction he could hear the distant rattle of dishes. He would keep a kind of vigil and see the lights come on in different rooms and wonder whether it was Marcella or not. Although she was light years away from him he felt the enormous pull of her. And yet, like the moon and the earth, he knew that, because of what he had done, they could never come together. (90-91)

MacLaverty references the moon and stars throughout the novel. Cal listens so hard in his silent room, waiting for the inevitable attack from his hostile neighbors, that he begins to hear static, imagining it is the echoes of the Big Bang, the birth of the universe; he knows that the loyalist attack would come in a "blinding flash and a bang before you could take your hands out of your pockets..." (29). His fear is heightened when he is at his most vulnerable, bowed over a basin rinsing soap from his face, lying in the dark just before sleep when his blanket becomes "hard and pitted like the surface of the moon..." (49). Exile is most keenly felt when Cal contemplates the distance between himself and Marcella, the permanent distance caused by his sin (91). As he sums up all of his sins against Marcella—spying on her, taking advantage of her family's hospitality to hide out from the IRA—Cal realizes, "If touching her thigh with the back of his hand in church was an extra inch between them then slaying her husband put him on the outer edge of the galaxy" (92).

Alienation from Religion

Cal's firm belief in his isolation, that he is somehow alien, as if he exists on another planet, is reinforced by religious dogma that tells him sin is "outlawing yourself from God...A man damned himself" (91). Cal reflects, "He hadn't been to confession for over a year and never would go again...the thing he had done

was now a background to his life, permanently there, like the hiss that echoed from the event which began the Universe" (39).

Cal knows he cannot look for forgiveness from God for what he has done. He fears that, unlike the mother in Marcella's legend of Maria Goretti, who took communion with her daughter's murderer, Marcella would not forgive his complicity in Robert's murder. Cal believes that he is damned; sacrificial suffering is his fate. Though Cal has "outlawed" himself and holds no hope of redemption, he still attends mass faithfully and thinks in the language of religious faith. When he is alone with his thoughts, he "eats again the ashes of what he had done" (15) and often reflects on monks and hermits and the hair shirts they wear that are "designed to cause suffering" (102).

Religion is a powerful force in Cal's society and in his own family. Much of Cal's self-loathing may stem from his inability to live up to his mother's example of absolute religious devotion and self-discipline. Gracie took communion daily and led her family in the rosary every evening. Her missal "bulged with memoriam cards, novenas and special prayers...The little colored strings for marking the place were worn past the point where they should have hung out at the bottom of the page" (33).

Cal wonders if his memory of his mother is so idealized because she died when he was eight years old, before adolescence changed his innocent view of the world and his parents. Cal knows that as he reached adulthood, he began to see Shamie as a fallible human being. Gracie died before his childish illusions about her could be shattered; therefore, Cal imagines her to be close to sainthood, an ideal to aspire to, but never to be reached. As he ponders his inability to affect the course of events in his life, he concludes that if he had his mother's discipline, he would not feel such a failure. "Gracie ruled her own life with a hand of iron," making material and spiritual sacrifices for God and her family. Her "answer to everything" was "to turn pain and sorrow into a gift for God" (105).

Religion is no comfort to Cal. Instead, the religious dogmatism around him has instilled great fear and confusion. His early exposure to Catholic teaching in school is depicted early

in the novel, when Cal is in his third year. After pornographic photographs are discovered, one of the teachers, Father Durkin, announces to Cal's class that a great transgression has taken place: "If I could lay my hands on the gulpin who is poisoning the minds of the pupils of this school I'd flay him to within an inch of his life. There is such a thing as righteous anger" (18-19). Father Durkin delivers the broad hint (directed at the budding bully, Crilly) that the school's staff "would be looking the other way if anything happened" to the "worm" that was distributing the photos (19). Crilly enlists Cal's help as he hunts down the culprit and administers a severe, priest-sanctioned beating.

MacLaverty accomplishes two things with these passages. He draws a parallel between the self-righteous, unforgiving, retributive Church of Cal's formative years and the self-righteous fanaticism of political militancy practiced by the IRA and the UVF. Father Durkin perpetuates the violence in Northern Irish society; he began the work on the child Crilly that Skeffington exploits in Crilly's young adulthood. Durkin encourages and uses Crilly's abusive tendencies to control his students; Skeffington fosters Crilly's cruelty to control boys like Cal who want out of the shadow of the IRA. MacLaverty writes, "It was Crilly who was largely responsible for Cal's stomach having felt like a washboard over the past year" (20). Moreover, it is possible that MacLaverty is condemning the Church's contribution to the culture of unforgiving, retributive violence in Northern Ireland by repeating Durkin's vocabulary—expressing his desire to flay a transgressing boy to "within an inch of his life"—in the last line of the novel, when Cal is finally grateful that he will be beaten to within an inch of his life.

Alienation from His Country

Cal's alienation from the religiosity of republicanism is as complete as his estrangement from traditional religion. MacLaverty presents Finbar Skeffington as the archetypal IRA zealot, who wishes in all sincerity that the British would "let the Paras loose in Derry again" (67), justifying further IRA violence. Cal's personal distaste for Skeffington reflects his broader dissent from nationalist mythology. Skeffington's evocation of Pearse's call to

arms, the poem "Mother," does not rouse in Cal the guilt he may feel for not living up to Gracie's supposed nationalist sympathies (66). All Cal knows is that Finbar is leaving out "the shit and the guts and the tears" of the Troubles (67), and Cal wants no part of it.

Cal does pay lip service to republican values; he professes the desire to see the British army leave Ireland and for the North and South to be united. When he crosses the border, Cal feels as if he is in the real Ireland, "out from under the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster" (39). He engages in brief debate with Dunlop, asking, "What's so terrible about a united Ireland anyway? One island, one country." Dunlop retorts, "And be ruled from Rome? A state told what to do by priests and nuns. Sheer voodoo, Cal. Mumbo-jumbo. Ulstermen would rather die than live under the yoke of Roman Catholicism. Not an inch. It's a good saying" (111). Cal knows there is nothing more he can say. His conversation with Dunlop, like the political machinations of the Troubles, always ends in stalemate. Therefore, Cal disengages from the conversation, from the conflict, disavowing any identity he might claim in the dream of a united Ireland. One scene from the novel illustrates the intransigent nature of the Troubles and Cal's overwhelming sense of alienation from his country. Cal and Marcella take Lucy to pick berries. MacLaverty describes the setting in stereotypical, mythical Irish fashion:

> The countryside, a deep winter green, fell away to the blue mountains of Slieve Gallon. It was crossed by dark random lines of trees and hedges. Here or there a red barn or a white gable stood out and far off a window shone like a diamond. Cows all facing in the same direction grazed their way across a field. (117)

Cal is typically unaffected by the romantic vision. He is unable to enjoy the beauty of his own country, because he knows that it is all illusory. True to Cal's vision, "the air is ripped apart by an explosion. Cal felt the shock-wave of it beat through him like the thump of a drum" (120), like the drums in an Orange Day parade. A cow has stepped on a landmine, and as Cal stands frozen, afraid of stepping on another mine, he sees one of the

Preacher's tin signs thrown up into a tree; it proclaims, "The Kingdom of God is within You." Again, with heavy irony, Cal vomits twice, ridding himself of any promise of God or country (121).

Alienation from Himself: Or, The Power of Imagination

Cal's thorough alienation from others, from religion, from any sense of national identity contributes to his final, most tragic, alienation from his own sense of self. The fact that Cal cannot locate himself within, or despite, his environment speaks to the postcolonial question of imagination. As the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains, "In our efforts to decolonize our minds from the devastating effects of colonial and neocolonial control, we must begin to gather and grasp our resources and means of imagination" (Rao 162). Cal cannot imagine himself away from his oppressive environment, created by political violence, intractable mythologies, and religious dogma. He is unable to conceive of a place or time when he would be forgiven for his sin and released from the vicious cycle of political and sectarian malice and the subsequent violent attacks and retribution.

In his book *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State*, Joe Cleary laments the lack of postcolonial imagination in Cal on a political rather than personal level. If, as Cleary argues, Cal and Marcella's star-crossed, romance-across-the-divide is a metaphor for the geopolitical reunion of North and South, then Cal's surrender to the authorities at the end of the novel represents to Cleary

> a paralyzing ambivalence...ultimately derived from its own confessional conceptualization of the conflict in Northern Ireland as a zero-sum game of all-or-nothing control, the only imaginable outcome of which is either a resigned acceptance of the Northern state...or its violent overthrow...That the conflict might be susceptible to some more emancipatory political resolution is something the novel seems unable to imagine. (129)

Suggestions for the Classroom: Novels about Violent Conflict

Ultimately, the value in Cal may lie, not in finding a political solution to an eight hundred year old problem, but in the portrait of a young man's life brought down by political strife and religious zeal. MacLaverty's strength as a writer is his ability to provide an unflinchingly realistic look at Heaney's hard truths. Cal's struggle, his loneliness, his alienation, his love for Marcella are feelings and experiences that resonate independent of Cal's setting. While students in the United States may more readily identify with a Western European character and setting, an analysis—such as the one above— of literature from non-Western countries will evoke as much empathy and compassion as *Cal*. The key is the focus on what Heaney calls the "sympathetic base"—identifying and examining the universality of human needs, emotions, familial ties, and the desire for peace.

A classroom unit on conflict novels might include the following.

- A selection of novels such as *Cal* (see list below);
- A brief review of the geography, political or religious history, and culture depicted in each novel. If the selected novels are from an area of the world in the news (e.g. Iraq or the Sudan), ask students to submit related newspaper clippings, web articles, or summaries of television or radio broadcasts;
- Compile a glossary for the unit noting terms that are unique to the culture or conflict, and those that are found in multiple conflict novels (e.g. colonial, sectarian, landmine);
- Ask students to define the term "universal theme." Create a list of these motifs, characters' experiences, and emotions from the novels;
- Encourage discussion or assign an essay in which students examine ways that they identify with characters. Consider what their world—community, family, friends, school—would be like if they were caught in social upheaval, political violence, or civil war. How

would the students react personally to experiences similar to those in the novels? What feelings might arise in these adverse conditions?

• Consider the role that imagination (as discussed by Ngũgĩ) can play in liberating individuals—and their societies—from violent conflict and oppressive regimes.

Selected Novels

Northern Ireland

Undergraduate-level

Cal (Bernard MacLaverty) W.W. Norton & Co. 1995

Eureka Street (Robert McLiam Wilson) Ballantine 1999

Breakfast on Pluto (Patrick McCabe) HarperPerennial 1998

Junior/Senior High School

Reading in the Dark (Seamus Deane) Vintage International 1998

Trilogy: *Starry Night, Frankie's Story, and The Beat of the Drum* (Catherine Sefton a.k.a. Martin Waddell) (reprinted in 2001 by Martin Waddell) Walker Books Ltd.

Bosnia/Sarajevo

Undergraduate/Senior High

Pretty Birds (Scott Simon) Random House Trade 2006

Junior High

Zlata's Diary (Zlata Filipovic) Penguin 1995

My Childhood under Fire (Nadja Halilbegovich) Kids Can Press 2006

Kenya

Undergraduate/Junior/Senior High

Weep Not, Child (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o) Heinemann 1990

Mozambique

Grades 6-9

Secrets in the Fire (Henning Mankell) Annick Press 2003

Nigeria

Grades 5-8

The Other Side of Truth (Beverley Naidoo) Penguin 2000

El Salvador

Undergraduate/Senior High

One Day of Life (Manlio Argueta) Vintage International 1991

Afghanistan

Junior High

The Breadwinner (2001) and *Parvana's Journey* (2003) (Deborah Ellis) Groundwood

Israel and Palestine

Junior High

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