

Colin Graham

Foreword: ‘Crumpled metal’ and ‘A Gift of a Melon’: The Future in Northern Irish Culture

I.

Paul

Crumpled metal.

Malcolm

Yes, the crumpled metal. I walked past this fence all the time and it kept reminding me of that memory to the point where I had to take a photograph of it.¹

Paul and Malcolm’s enigmatic dialogue is not from a play but from a conversation between the photographers Paul Seawright and Malcolm Craig Gilbert. The conversation was facilitated by the critic Sarah Tuck, and was part of a series exploring of the role of art photography in post-Peace Process Northern Ireland. Malcolm Craig Gilbert is explaining why he took a photograph of a distorted piece of corrugated iron, and why this image became so important to him.

Craig Gilbert, whose best-known work involves dramatic and stylized stagings of moments of violence, explains his own work and its background thus:

I was born and raised in East Belfast from a working class background and after leaving school at 16 I worked in local industries until the age of 20 when I became a police officer, serving in Northern Ireland for 18 years before being medically retired due to the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder in 2003.²

Craig Gilbert’s experiences point us back to the legacy of the Troubles. He describes his photography as ‘a way to become more reconciled

with [his] past', via a 'pastiche of memories', in the case of his *Post Traumatic Exorcism*, and much more directly via the threat and terror which an ordinary urban and suburban environment holds in *Flashbacks*, the series in which the photograph of the 'crumpled metal' is found. Craig Gilbert's work is explicitly, painfully, and knowingly about the aftermath of the Troubles, both in how that affects an individual, but also, because of his interest in mediated images of violence, and in the banality of an historically charged environment, how that individual experience stands for the complexity, perhaps the impossibility, of a wider society's exit from civil conflict.

There is a distinction between the kind of work that Craig Gilbert practices and the personal, confessional, often therapeutic mode of other artists, which relies for its power on the personal experience of the artist who makes it. As a result, Craig Gilbert's work can be read as relatively representative of post-Troubles culture in Northern Ireland, in that it positions itself exactly at the 'liminal'³ nexus of conflict and peace at which the peace is dependent, at both the abstract and practical/political level, on what precedes it.

As Kant notes, a 'state of peace among men living together is not the same as the state of nature, which is a state of war. For even if it does not involve active hostilities, it involves a constant threat of their breaking out.'⁴ Kant's recognition that any peace includes the war which comes before it is a useful way to begin to account for the 'post-' in Craig Gilbert's post-traumatic, and the peace in Northern Ireland's post-Agreement period. But Kant's definition also works as a deconstructive bind, a kind of entrapment of peace inside the frame of war in which peace is always preceded and thus defined by war. Discussing this unpalatable paradox, Derrida points out that when Emmanuel Levinas sees the traumatised individual, the persecuted, offering 'hospitality', Levinas breaks with Kant (and Hegel) in offering a 'juridico-cosmopolitanism' that is already inherent in language, since "'the essence of language is friendship and hospitality"'⁵ Whether peace exists within and is framed by the possibility of war, or whether it is possible, like Levinas, to understand that 'the unity of plurality is peace . . . in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other',⁶ is not only the philosophical choice offered by the peace in Northern Ireland, but also a way in which to understand the future of the peace. To move from what Levinas describes as peace understood via 'cemeteries or future universal empires' to peace, that is, the 'desire and goodness' for the other, may also be a matter of time, of a 'fecundity of time', in Levinas's terms.⁷

In other words, reconceptualizing peace beyond the trauma of war may take time, and a different conceptualization of time. Perhaps

it takes generational change, and with that a new attitude to 'juridico-cosmopolitanism', 'lineaments of a reality that is not subordinated to the State'.⁸ Malcolm Craig Gilbert's art shows and knows that it is framed by and indebted to a conflict-ridden notion of the State, even in a time of 'peace'. The question for those coming after the foundation of the 'peace' is whether, or how, it is possible to reconceptualize the peace in terms of the State, and how to bring a new critical 'juridico-cosmopolitan' attitude which understands that State not through war but through its obligations to the idea of perpetual peace.

II.

When you open it,
 you won't really
 have opened it: it
 will still be wrapped
 up in itself, in its
 ridged & musty
 skin. I think maybe
 this is part of the
 fun, one reason why
 the smoothest,
 roundest fruits
 command such
 dizzying expense.

Yes, I'm beginning
 to see why a melon
 might just be the
 perfect thing to
 offer when the dead
 are pressing their
 hungry mouths
 against the paper-
 thin divide which
 keeps them out of
 our towns, our
 houses. I hope you
 enjoy it.

Padraig Regan, 'A Gift of a Melon'⁹

Padraig Regan's pamphlet, *Delicious* (2016), is a consciously sensuous set of poems which constructs a first-person voice via the experience of looking and tasting. Regan's poems are replete – with food, with drink, with spectacle, and with sensation. Held in place by the self-affirming rhetoric of an 'I' (an 'I' in process, not in established egoism), these poems (which are, as it happens, mostly shaped like an 'I'), come to the world with confidence in their language and with a plea to the 'you' to whom they are often addressed. Their world is both individuated and knows its own dependence on another, the other, who is their addressee.

Poetically, 'A Gift of a Melon' draws on Yeats's 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid', and for its column-like poetic structure on Anne Carson's *Red Doc >* (2013), but it resonates most locally with Louis MacNeice's 'Snow'. Indeed, to some extent, 'A Gift of a Melon' can be thought of as a lovingly ironic rewrite of 'Snow', and, in that, also an ironic rewrite of other Northern Irish poems which have rewritten MacNeice's 'Snow' – Paul Muldoon's 'History', for example, and Ciaran Carson's 'Snow'.¹⁰ If MacNeice's poem 'arises from the culture it [has been] held up to as a focus for aspiration' (by President Clinton, for example),¹¹ its slantwise 'historicisation' in Muldoon's poem, and its translation into Carson's Belfast, confirm that the poem's declensions are generational revisions and its place in Northern Irish poetic discourse is fluidly revised. Padraig Regan's re-imagining of 'Snow' in 'A Gift of a Melon' is tangentially related to MacNeice's original (whereas Muldoon's and Carson's poems depend on MacNeice's for their intertextual purchase) and Regan chooses not 'history', and not the unstated class and social privilege which allows MacNeice's poem to come into being (which underpins Carson take on MacNeice), but instead its central sensuality, its interest in the visually spectacular, and its appeal to taste as evidence of being alive as the poem's point of purchase on this intertext.

While MacNeice peels and portions the tangerine in 'Snow', Regan's poem imagines 'you' opening a melon, and so the poem feels like it is about to repeat the lush smells, odours, and tastes of other poems in *Delicious*. But this poem hints at the underside of its own fascination with food, delicacy, and sensuality because it understands commodification and it understands hunger. The 'paper-/thin divide', broken over the remnants of traditional line endings, which keeps 'the dead' 'out of/ our towns' deliberately haunts this poem's, and this pamphlet's, hedonistic trajectories. The pattern of the poems in *Delicious* is very precisely one which, formally, rhetorically, and semantically, seems to wish to inhabit an 'I' which is bodily replete and corporeally intense, but never allows this desire to fall into indulgence. If 'A Gift of a Melon' is a poem which draws on MacNeice's 'Snow'

as a model of plurality which has been read as a lesson in non-sectarianism pluralism, the importance of Regan's work (and the work of other artists and writers of this generation in Northern Ireland) is that the plurality is being expanded beyond the binary dichotomy traditional to Northern Ireland. In the assertion of an 'I' which needs, à la Levinas, an other, a 'you', for its multifarious existence (inside and outside identity politics), a 'unity of plurality' is hinted at.

Northern Irish culture, in its recent manifestations and its new generations, is beginning to redefine its 'I', seeing that first person as, for example, economic, as much as it is constitutional, and understanding that 'I' as being bodily-defined by a State unwilling to shift its confessionally-inflected terms of identity definition. Post-Agreement Northern Ireland shows signs of a wish, generationally, for a new 'juridico-cosmopolitan' understanding of citizenship, a wish to allow for, as happens in 'A Gift of the Melon', the free expression of desire alongside a holding up of the 'you' of the 'other'.

III.

As Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly point out, in both general terms and talking specifically of the Northern Irish Peace Process:

Where new institutional structures are created to ensure fair and equitable accessibility to political power, the tendency is towards a 'coexistence view of reconciliation'.¹²

Insofar as the outworkings of the Peace Process (via the Good Friday Agreement and its subsequent renegotiations) had a 'plan' for how a future Northern Ireland should or could unfold, the consociational model of peace- and consensus-building provides a future which is both aspirational and unrealized, and so the bridge between a managed administrative structure, in which elected representatives co-operate, and a 'shared identity', in which the general populous cohabit in new ways, remains largely unexplained. The use of consociationalism in the context of the Northern Irish Peace Process was predicted, very guardedly, in 1989 by Brendan O'Leary, and has been analysed by political scientists ever since.¹³ One relatively recent and systematic exploration of consociationalism, assessing twenty years of its attempt to create a co-operative trickle-down to the electorate, finds, perhaps unsurprisingly, that 'a genuinely common identity ... is not being realized' in Northern Ireland and that there are few signs that consociationalism has a long-term 'ability to mitigate identities'.¹⁴

Arend Lijphart, largely credited with devising the consociational method via his work on how 'consensus democracy' can be assessed, measured, and evaluated, ends his book *Patterns of Democracy* (1999) with a very direct argument that there are

four areas of government activity in which the kinder and gentler qualities of consensus democracy are likely to manifest themselves: social welfare, the protection of the environment, criminal justice, and foreign aid. My hypothesis is that consensus democracy will be associated with kinder, gentler, and more generous policies.¹⁵

Consociationalism is meant to lead to this 'consensus democracy', and is therefore to some extent underwritten by narratives of progress and notions of democratic maturity, twinned with a belief in political leadership as preceding rather than being led by the electorate. Lijphart himself, in retrospect, gave some indication of the potential difficulties in his theory of democracy, and in particular its role as a goal for societies moving out of conflict, in the way in which he attempted to defend it. Just before Lijphart suggests that this 'kinder, gentler' version of democracy, if emergent, will turn to social and environmental issues, he genders this version of democracy by describing it as 'the more feminine model', citing Jane Mansbridge's notion that a feminist conception of democracy would, in Mansbridge's terms, be characterized by 'connectedness' and 'mutual persuasion'.¹⁶ Setting aside, if we can, the gendered essentialisms here, Lijphart's attempt to collapse environmentalism, the redistribution of social capital and, potentially, issues of gender, perhaps suggest the anticipation of a critique of the foundations which underpin consociationalism. Put simply, that is, that consociational agreement happens at the level of a political elite who are elected on the basis that they represent a static, agreed, and foundational identity or political position. Consociationalism may be based on a desire to move beyond this static position – beyond what Jarrett, quoted above, calls simply 'identities' – (trusting in time, and in the discussions and negotiations necessary to make this happen), but, rather than providing the mechanism for this process, consociationalism provides the incentive for elected representatives to stay entrenched in their positions because those very positions are legitimized by the structures of the process. Most obviously, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the designation of MLAs as Unionist or Nationalist was an example of this entrenchment.

Northern Ireland has, then, been wrenched by this underlying dynamic since the Good Friday Agreement – a political settlement

which is founded on a restatement and legitimization of sectarian divisions, with the goal of a vague and supposedly emergent future of a 'kinder, gentler' democracy, but without the road map to this future being apparent to the society, and with structures in place which arguably prevent that future actually occurring.

IV.

In the Referendum on whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union 440,707 people voted in Northern Ireland to Remain and 349,442 people voted to Leave. Turnout was 62.7%.¹⁷ If there are cultural (or electoral) signs that Northern Ireland is shifting, slowly, towards the kind of 'shared future' in which 'identity' is 'mitigated', then that is taking place largely despite the political structures in place in Northern Ireland, whether the Assembly is functioning or not. The *perception* that the pro-Brexit vote is based, primarily, on resurgent British nationalism reinvigorates (national) identity politics in the UK and, as a side-effect, in Northern Ireland.

Not all commentators see Brexit as a playing out of a hardening identity politics. Gerard Delanty, for example, argues that the general UK vote to Leave cannot be attributed to identity politics because Leave voters cut across both the left and the right of the political spectrum. This seems to assume that left-wing or Labour voters could find no kinship with UKIP and Conservative voters when immigration, race, or xenophobia is made an electoral issue. This is, at best, an optimistic view of left-leaning voters in the UK, and one that is not really borne out by the actual vote. Delanty, as it happens, suggests that the only part of the UK in which 'identity [was] a primary force' was in 'the leave vote in Northern Ireland' which was 'mostly due to the Unionist voting population, for whom their primary identity is the unity of the UK [sic].'¹⁸ Actually, this is not entirely true. Turnout in the Referendum vote was higher than for the 2015 General Election for example (at which turnout was 58.4% for all of Northern Ireland¹⁹). On this basis, and taking Delanty's logic that Unionists voted Leave on the basis of their British identity, Northern Ireland should have registered an overall Leave vote. But it didn't, and the recent Northern Ireland Life and Times report finds that if the vote were to be rerun (the question was asked in December 2016), 62% of people in Northern Ireland would vote Remain and 28% would vote Leave. Contra Delanty, 49% of Protestants would vote Leave and 43% vote Remain – a majority of those Protestants who know which way they would vote in a rerun of the Referendum are in favour of Leaving, but not overwhelmingly so, and there is no easy equation of unionism with the Leave vote. And, in the category of all 18–24 year-olds, 75% would vote Remain and only 14% would vote Leave.²⁰

Clearly the Brexit phenomenon is a complex one – its causes and outcomes are multifarious, unpredictable, and, as yet, unknowable, both in the UK and in the EU.²¹ But there is evidence that Brexit, because of the uncertainty it creates, has pushed the electorate in Northern Ireland further away from any reconciling or ‘shared’ position. Since the Brexit referendum, for example, and despite the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey noted above, the Democratic Unionist Party’s overall vote went from 184,260 in the General Election of 2015, to 225,413 in the March 2017 Assembly Elections, to 292,316 in the General Election of 2017. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr Colin Coulter, for drawing attention to these figures and for his observation that the underlying factors in this dramatic upturn in the numbers of people voting for the DUP was the near-miss in the Assembly elections, when Sinn Féin almost overtook the DUP as the largest party, and the post-Referendum insecurity which has led Sinn Féin and others to discuss the possibility of a border poll on foot of the UK leaving the EU. Whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations and, for example, the status and nature of the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, for the moment it seems that Brexit retrenches national identity across the UK and does so with a particular, predictable and destabilizing force in Northern Ireland. Edward Burke summarises the likely hardening of political positions thus:

Sinn Féin may opt for a populist approach – a united Ireland as the only solution. Loyalists would respond in turn, possibly with violence. The potential for dangerous escalation is obvious. So far there are few signs that London is willing to make the difficult compromises required to stabilise its ailing province.²²

V.

Northern Irish culture sits at a point of emergence and promise. There is, embodied inside the Peace Process, a pledge to deliver an end to civil and political violence, and a pledge to establish local political representation. But both the consociational model and natural logic suggest that this should herald a new dispensation which is less temporarily peaceful and more like ‘perpetual peace’. There are signs that such a culture, if not such a politics, is nascent – a culture which is differently political, at odds with its electoral representatives (for example, 91% of people in Northern Ireland, asked whether they respect others no matter what their sexual orientation, either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement²³); a culture which is concerned with standards of living, and with personal freedom; more broadly, a culture which begins to address the everyday ‘you’.

a culture is emergent, then literary production is one place in which it will be seen and in which it can be nourished. Brexit, and the forces it harnesses and unleashes, have the capacity to slow this process – let's hope these signs of new cultural assertion have the strength to circumvent the forces of Brexit politics and, like the gift of Padraig Regan's poem, are able to open up Northern Ireland and 'enjoy it'.²⁴

NOTES

1. Paul Seawright and Malcolm Craig Gilbert in conversation in *After the Agreement: Contemporary Photography in Northern Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Tuck (London: Blackdog, 2015), p.131.
2. Sarah Tuck, *After the Agreement*, p.129.
3. See Birte Heidemann, *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature: Lost in a Liminal Space?* (London: Palgrave, 2016).
4. Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' in *Political Writings*, ed. by H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.98.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.91.
6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.306.
7. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.306.
8. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.306.
9. Padraig Regan, 'A Gift of a Melon', in *Delicious* (Belfast: The Lifeboat, 2016), p.21.
10. Paul Muldoon, 'History' in *Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber, 1980), p.27; Ciaran Carson, 'Snow', in *Belfast Confetti* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1989), pp.20–1.
11. Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.160.
12. Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly, 'The Challenge of Reconciliation in Post-conflict Societies: Definitions, Problems and Proposals', in *New Challenges for Power-Sharing: Institutional and Social Reform in Divided Societies*, ed. by Ian O'Flynn and David Russell (London: Pluto, 2005), p.189.
13. For surveys of the role of consociationalism in developing the Northern Irish Peace Process see: Brendan O'Leary, 'The Limits to Coercive Consociationalism in Northern Ireland', *Political Studies* 37.4 (1989), 562–87; James Tilley, Geoffrey Evans and Claire Mitchell, 'Consociationalism and the Evolution of Political Cleavages in Northern Ireland, 1989–2004', *British Journal of Political Science* 38.4 (2008), 699–717; John Garry, 'Consociationalism and Its Critics: Evidence from the Historic Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2007', *Electoral Studies* 28.3 (2009), 458–66.
14. Henry Jarrett, 'Beyond Consociational Theory: Identity in Northern Ireland and Brussels', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 22.4 (2016), 429.
15. Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p.294.
16. Lijphart is citing Jane Mansbridge, 'Reconstructing Democracy' in *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, ed. by Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano (Boulder: Westview, 1996). See Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, p.293.
17. Source: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information> [Accessed 17.7.2017].

18. Gerard Delanty, 'A Divided Nation in a Divided Europe: Emerging Cleavages and the Crisis of European Integration' in *Brexit: Sociological Responses*, ed. by William Outhwaite (London: Anthem, 2017), p.113.
19. Source: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/uk-general-elections/2015-uk-general-election-results> [Accessed 17.7.2017].
20. Source: http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Political_Attitudes/BRXVTENW.html [Accessed 17.7.2017].
21. The best academic analysis of Brexit so far published in Kenneth A. Armstrong, *Brexit Time: Leaving the EU – Why, How and When?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
22. Edward Burke, *Ulster's Fight, Ulster's Rights? Brexit, Northern Ireland and the Threat to British-Irish Relations* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2017), p.12.
23. Source: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Respect/RSSEXOR.html> [Accessed 17.7.2017].
24. A useful point of comparison here is a recent discussion of how Brexit might affect a sense of future identity politics in Scotland – see Daniel M. Knight, 'Anxiety and Cosmopolitan Futures: Brexit and Scotland', *American Ethnologist* 44.2 (2017), 237–42.

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