‘Visceral Music’

Shifting Perspectives on Northern Irish Violence in the Novels of Bernard MacLaverty

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Whether as background, middleground or foreground, the conflict in Northern Ireland figures as a stone to trouble the waters in the fiction of Bernard MacLaverty. This paper takes as its focus MacLaverty’s very different perspectives on it in Cal and Grace Notes and asks questions about the kinds of radically different positionings implicit in these fictions. In what ways has MacLaverty’s speaking position, and perhaps identity, shifted between 1983 and 1997? Is the change of focus possible because the later novel is written from outside the province? Does this perhaps make possible a postmodern postnationalism? Is it the cause célèbre it is (nominated for the Booker Prize in 1997) because of its aestheticisation of the conflict? Or is the novel attempting something more radical politically and intellectually than that? A postmodernism of resistance? I would argue that the conflict in Northern Ireland, which has of course troubled two generations of writers, is beyond speech and yet urgently demanding it, and that this novel dramatises that condition. Furthermore, MacLaverty daringly chooses the most unlikely symbol, that of a Lamneg drum, as a way of focussing on the metacognitive and metanarrative issue of how symbols, even the most heavily emotionally invested ones, are open to manipulation.

In Cal, the ideological centre of the novel seems to be a postmodern pessimism focused on the impossibility of effective individual autonomy because of the deterministic ways in which identity is shaped by race, religion and politics in the North. Each of the main characters expresses this sense of lack of autonomy in their different ways: Cal would like to explain to his lover

how he seemed unable to influence what was going on around him. He had a recurring dream of sitting at the wheel of a car driving and at a critical point turning the wheel and nothing happening. (p. 152)

The violence keeps intruding on the Romeo and Juliet-style lovers, and Cal, reluctant though he be to take up arms in the sectarian conflict, cannot help but be implicated in it, against his will and better judgment. His choices are made for him by the impersonal forces of history, by the ghetto mentality and the thuggish bully, Crilly, who had
enlisted him as unwilling deputy at school. Propinquity and sectarianism doom Cal, however insistent he is on moving out of Crilly’s ambit. Similarly, Marcella, liberal enough to marry across the sectarian divide, nonetheless finds the 12 July drums an expression of hypocrisy, animality, hatred and fear, though the banners are seen as folksy, ‘nice’ though crude (p. 127). The novel has an edge of despair to it, as does his earlier novel, _Lamb_, in which a compassionate murder - if that’s not a contradiction in terms - is seen as a better option than returning a child to a life of violence at the hands of supposedly beneficent Christian monks who run the orphanage. At the end of _Cal_, there is a hint of redemption which takes the form of a faint hope that Cal might redefine himself as a pacifist by writing about his experiences in the form of a confessional letter from jail. If this constitutes an impulse to address the issue of sectarianism in the North through art, then it is an extremely tentative and heavily qualified one. The fictional world created in that novel would seem to move powerfully in a very different direction: the novel exposes the limited options available to the pacifist in the Northern situation, the hard and fast binaries of Prod and Taig. The political realities are sharply binarised.

All of MacLaverty’s novels can be read at one level as encoding very difficult love relationships, and they explore brilliantly those social and cultural forces which impede and stultify those relationships. However, in this paper, I want to explore what I see as a larger and more difficult debate which MacLaverty is having with his identity and positioning as an Northerner, and I am keen to track a shift in his thinking between _Cal_ and _Grace Notes_, which to some extent echoes the emergence of transnational political groupings in the North, partly as a response to European Community imperatives. I see MacLaverty’s shift as in part the result of his new life outside the province (like the heroine of the novel, he initially taught on Islay before moving into Glasgow), and the novel’s more optimistic political stance seems to be rooted in its quite new (for him) metafictive foray, using the metaphor of music, into the nature of symbols and the possibility of radically deconstructing them. The novel has become more pertinent since its Booker nomination because of its intriguing deployment of that most potent symbol of division in the North, the Lambe drum, what Ruth Dudley Edwards refers to as ‘the ultimate tribal symbol in Ulster’, and also in the light of Drumcree and heightened tension around the issue of Orange Parades.

_Grace Notes_ warns us twice against reading it simplistically in modernist terms: as the dissident artist redeeming the North through art. In the context of a discussion of the killing of Jews in Kiev in 1941 at Babi Yar, Catherine reflects on the similarities between these two liminal places, Kiev and Belfast:

> Catherine thought of the geography of the places of death in her own country - it was a map which would not exist if women made the decisions - Connmarket, Clady, Teebane Crossroads, Six Mile Water, the Bogsides, Greysteel, the Shankill Road, Long Kesh, Dublin, Darkley, Enniskillen, Loughinisland, Armagh, Monaghan town. And of places of multiple deaths further to the east - Birmingham, Guildford, Warrington. It was like the Litany. Horse Guards Parade. Pray for us. Tower of London. Pray for us. Alone or with others. For the dead it didn’t matter how many companions they had or where it happened. It was awful to think that if she wrote the most profound music in the history of the world it would have no effect on this litany - it would go on and on adding place names. (p.127)
I’d like to analyse this quotation more fully, but let me point out a semantic structure which seems germane to this extract and to the novel: its curious conjunction of religious discourse, the discourses of sacred sites and the naming of politically explosive events/practices. One thinks of the hundreds of patriotic songs, on both sides of the sectarian debate, which serve as aides-mémoires, and which stand in the popular imagination as a kind of perverse or alternative history. A perverse Litany, a litany which legitimises and even invites the creation of more sacred sites, more sectarian murders. What is even more revealing is MacLaverty’s deconstruction of whom this form of memorialising serves, and he contests the conventional piety that it is the dead. I think this suggests that his fictional project is quite different from a nationalist one, and also, and this is the case I hope to make, from a modernist one, that it in short intimates postmodernity. My argument is that the link between ‘profound’ art and conflict amelioration is one that MacLaverty puts under scrutiny. This claim is further supported by Miss Bingham’s and Catherine’s complicity of understanding what the symphony is not; in the face of the English press’s insistence that it is ‘a story about cementing the divide, or bridging the sectarian gulf’, Catherine claims, rather more emphatically and simplistically than perhaps MacLaverty does, that ‘it’s the kind of drum a child wants to play’ (p.105). He seeks to find a way of enacting being a Northern (wo)man which strips away two centuries of Catholic prejudice about Orangeism and its triumphalist practices and confers ethnic dignity onto an instrument which still powerfully evokes Protestant domination over Catholics. In the process, in a novel that is quite metafictive in the way it operates, he highlights the systemic nature of structures of sociability, the ability of language and more so music to interrogate them and effect change, but also how fundamentally difficult that is.

Earlier I referred to Belfast and Kiev as liminal places, and by that I mean that the state culture and the subversive religious cultures bleed into one another in a violent symbiosis. In the case of Kiev, the secular, anti-religious state gives glorious voice to the suppressed Russian church-music, whether as simple rounds sung by the childlike monks who toss notes to each other like players in a friendly ballgame, or through the tintinnabulation of the expertly rung old bells, or by way of the choirs which perform their grace notes which their audience absorbs with rapt attention. Russian church music is dramatised and idealised, presented as sustaining and nourishing, though much is made of the actual quotidian physical deprivation of contemporary Russia (food is scarce and, ironically, only salt is cheap), and the racism, specifically anti-Semitism, which is the rotten underbelly of modern Soviet life.

Belfast and Kiev are represented in the novel as mirror images of each other in musical terms: Catherine as a middle-class child may not lack physical sustenance or even exposure to music (thanks to her devoted music teacher, and to a lesser extent her father). She is represented as apprehending the world through her ears, and the tragedy is that it comes to her mediated by a family and society which is less than generous in its sympathies, extremely rigid in its religious and ethical self-definitions, and perverse in how it expresses love, sending her away when they most want to draw her into their bosom. The novel makes clear that this rigidity is not confined to one side of the sectarian divide.

The dilemma which is central to MacLaverty’s new formulation of what makes a
Politically and aesthetically significant work of art is most neatly encapsulated by Huang Xiao Gang’s question: ‘Do you compose the music or does the music compose you?’ (p.32). The relationship he posits is, I think, most clearly seen in ‘Vernicle’, the piece with which the novel climaxes, but before examining the poetry of that passage, it is important to track through the novel MacLaverty’s most energetically used structural symbols.

Two central symbols are called into service to make this multi-layered work cohere: the Lambe drum and a secularised version of the term, transubstantiation, for which there are other metaphors which to some extent stand in apposition – ’homophone’ and that optical illusion (beloved of gestalt psychology) whereby an image can be viewed in two contrasting ways depending on what one pays attention to. To take the Lambe drum first. The child is exposed to it as a ferociously dangerous symbol from early childhood: her mother rolls her eyes, and her father typifies it as ‘nonsense’, ‘a bloody dunderin’ designed to let the Catholics know ‘the Prods rule the roost’ (pp.7-8), and furthermore uncritically transmits the myth that ‘On the Twelfth they thump them so hard and so long they bleed their wrists’ (p.8). Catherine, a child who apprehends the world primarily through her ears, and who later in life will describe herself as ‘thran’ (p.111), cussed and awkward, does not subscribe to this ideological overlay. She can hear the complex and different rhythms played independently by each hand that her father has only heard of but not heard, and she knows instinctively of its tribal edge of fear, but is ‘thrilled’ by the phenomenon. Her father’s lived experience of the marches no doubt justifies his analysis of them as racist, and as not susceptible to amelioration via the usual civilising forces of education. Brendan McKenna laments:

\begin{quote}
Around the Twelfth the Prods’ll say, ‘Hello.’ Any other time of the year they’ll say, ‘Hello, Brendan.’ And it’s not just the guttersnipes. If anything, the bloody lawyers and doctors and businessmen are worse – men who’ve been educated. (p.9)
\end{quote}

In a township which enjoys a measure of integration, certainly in the pub and at funerals, this degree of tribalism is experienced as threatening, rather than as an index of anxiety and a siege mentality. They are not given equal billing. This reading of the Lambe is shared by many Northern writers, among them even the appeasing Seamus Heaney who writes of Lambe drums in North (in a poem curiously dropped in his Selected Poems) thus:

\begin{quote}
Orange Drums, Tyrone 1966

The lambe balloons at his belly, weighs
Him back on his hunches, lodging thunder
Grossly there between his chin and his knees.
He is raised up by what he buckles under.
Each arm extended by a seasoned rod,
He parades behind it. And though the drummers
Are granted passage through the nodding crowd
It is the drums preside, like giant tumours.
To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,
His battered signature subscribes ‘No Pope’.
The goatskins sometimes plastered with his blood.
The air is pounding like a stethoscope.
\end{quote}
Frank McGuinness, in his play, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme,* makes a similar conventional use of the drum, focussing on its ability to bond the sons of Ulster not only against the Fenian enemy but also the ‘Hun’. Similarly, Seamus Deane in *Reading in the Dark* has the dying grandfather tell of his murderous part in the wrongful assassination of Eddie to the accompaniment of the ‘savage tom-tom’ of Lambegs. And Richard Murphy in ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ sequence refers to the drums as ‘atavistic…Claiming Aughrim as if they’d won/Last year, not 1691’ (‘Orange Drums’). I am unaware of literary accounts of these drums which celebrate their artistry, though some journalistic accounts refer their combination of terror and excitement and their enactment of the carnivalesque.

Catherine’s reason for her counter-cultural use of the Lambeg drum in her symphony, as discussed with Miss Bingham, is quite simple: ‘I just liked the sound…they are a great sound – they inspire intense feelings. Really complicated rhythms’. (p.105)

It is, however, when the Lambeg symbol is deployed in the closing section of the novel that MacLaverty’s reinscription and resignification of it is seen to best advantage. Catherine’s slow return to health from the double-blows of postnatal depression and domestic abuse at the hands of her alcoholic partner is signalled by the painfully arduous writing of the (secular) mass written to celebrate her daughter’s birth, *Vernicle.* Its composition is the sign of her having been on a pilgrimage, and significantly in its formal aesthetic structure, it takes the shape of a hinged scallop shell (the symbol of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, a sign of her husband’s occupation as well as a signifier of absence, of what he refuses her).

It is quite clear from the preliminaries to the performance that the Lambeg drums do not have an established place in the serious musical repertoire. The working-class Portadown men who do the performance are lured to Glasgow on the promise of football tickets; their body-language, vernacular and costume (that of the Bridgtown Flute Band) all mark them as interlopers in classical music circles. The point is also made that the concert venue, a deconsecrated Church of Scotland (a not-accidental allusion in the context of Northern politics), is alien to these instruments: Cammy drily comments ‘We very rarely bate a trevaly on the drums indoors…Because the buildings fall down afterwards.’ (p.258).

It is perhaps not accidental either that so much of this novel is intimately concerned with a woman’s experience, and with the politics of women as composers, a woman wearing with pride the honorific of ‘maestra’. The difficulties (and opportunities) faced by women in pursuit of this vocation are central to the action of the novel: the symphony is dedicated to the daughter whose birth it celebrates, but who is its chief impediment and interruptor, the one who continually interrupts the composition. It comes into existence only because a *thran* daughter has the courage (which is required in super-abundance of an only daughter) to walk out on a family whose culture values respectability more than honesty, and one that puts more pressure on a woman than a man in such a circumstance. The symphony can exist only because a *thran* wife refuses to re-enact marriage to a drunken lout. The dark first half of the symphonic mass plaitst these ordinary but sacred domestic realities into its texture, and the language that is used is derived from religious discourse: Catherine’s surrender to the drama of her quotidian life is represented as a form of incarnation, except that there is only one
‘Visceral Music’

party to this gestation: ‘Filling herself with her own grace’, she required bravery, ‘faith’ and ‘trust’ (p.271). Images of her own young motherhood (in its most positive phase) and of herself as her mother’s child are interrupted by the entrance of the Lambegs:

It is almost like machine-gun fire. A short burst – enough to kill and maim. Silence. It’s the kind of silence induced by a slap in the face or the roarings of a drunk. (p. 271)

The symbolic meanings enacted are multivalent: the primary reference is Catherine’s personal descent into an underworld of depression, though the vehicle of the metaphor is Northern violence, and these climax in two passing references to Shostakovich’s evocation of the Nazi advance on Russia:

The strings try again but darken. The sections of the orchestra begin to ask who or what is that – what is going on? What right have they to elbow their way in here? She feels a remembered angst and is momentarily afraid the music will induce it again for real. Oh Jesus. Even a memory of the blackness of her depression startles her. It was that bad. It was worse than that bad. For a second time the Lambegs open fire. This time it is a sustained burst. The subsequent silence is longer. The vault throbbing with the echoes of the huge drums. The orchestra begins again, stating and restating an inversion of the five-note motif of the opening. Annoyance has crept in. The orchestra is angry and shrill now as it has a post-mortem on the intervention and what can be done if it happens again. Clarinets and flutes squeal, the trombones rasp. Then, almost with nonchalance, with a swagger one drum begins, then the second, then the third and fourth. Insistent, cacophonous rhythm. Disintegration. The tormented orchestra tries to keep its head above the din of these strangers. The black blood of hatred stains every ear. The brass, like hatchets, chopping into the noise. Eventually, after an intense struggle, the orchestra falls away section by section until only the drums are left pulsing. It reminds her of the candle flames snuffing out beneath the invisible tide of suffocating gas. Step after step. Dark after dark. Four toads ballooning out their throats, blattering the air above them and leaving it throbbing....Their aggression, their swagger put her in mind of Fascism. She was not trying to copy the vulgarity of Shostakovich Seven – the march of the Nazis on Leningrad – but that was the effect. A brutalising of the body, the spirit, humanity. Thundering and thuddering and thuddering and thuddering. When the drums stopped on a signal from Randal the only thing that remained was a feeling of depression and darkness. Utter despair.

The audience remained petrified for some moments. Intimidated. Stunned. (pp. 272-3)

The notion of music as memory, as a force capable of restoring one to a past emotional state is strong here, as is the designation of the drums as both within her and outside her. They are construed in terms which owe much to her father’s prejudices about them and their cultural significance. The embedded and sustained metaphor of the drums as warlike and capable of silencing the rest of the orchestra is mobilised throughout, and the first half of the symphony is represented as having an utterly annihilating, despair-inducing effect on its hearers. The motif of the CO2 which snuffs out the candles, and which earlier in the novel is mobilised as an image of depression, is re-deployed strategically.

The second movement of the symphony works to transform, or to use the novel’s key metaphor (significantly derived from religious discourse), to transubstantiate the signifiers of the first movement: whereas the first movement had dealt in warfare
and domination, the second movement offers a more generative and depoliticised range of metaphors – of play, of giving birth (c.f. pregnant body like a Lambeg, p.141), of journeying (downhill on skis). ‘Sheer fucking unadulterated joy’ (p.276). The transformation involves ‘stripping the Lambegs of their bigotry’ and releasing their ‘pure sound’. It is a transubstantiation which has its origins and inspiration in Kiev’s bells and Melnichuk’s use of them both under the Soviet regime and afterwards, but it is also, and self-consciously, a decontextualisation of a musical sound which stresses the competence of its performers, and it is designed to celebrate the intrinsic musicality of the drums and to exploit their huge emotional impact.

MacLaverty is very explicit about the metafictive nature of his enterprise and draws attention to the ways in which such powerful symbols need to be radically reinscribed, and the moment at which he does this has been prepared for from the opening pages of the novel:

What happens next is difficult to explain. It is in sound terms like counterpoint – the ability unique to music to say two or more things at once. But it is not like counterpoint – more like an optical illusion in sound....The same thing could be two things. Transubstantiation. How could the drum battering of the first movement be the same as the drum battering of the second movement – how could the same drumming in a different context produce a totally opposite effect? The sound has transformed itself. Homophones....— the same sound but with a different meaning. Catherine heard it inside her head and knew that it was possible to achieve it, once the idea was conceived. At the moment when the music comes to its climax, a carillon of bells and brass, the Lambegs make another entry at maximum volume. The effect this time is not one of terror or depression but the opposite. (p. 275)

To deploy the drums thus is to enact a consciously counter-cultural positioning\(^5\) on Catherine’s part. In this symphony she acts out more fully what she performed as a child: a refusal to stand for for the Hallelujah Chorus just because Unionists had done so for 300 years. To use the remarkable Lambeg entails both owning and admiring what they can achieve musically and affectively, and for a Catholic woman to enact this position is an improbable but empowering scenario; however, to use them in ways which replicate their significance to Catholics in the first half and then to draw them into a definition of psychic health and play in the second movement is to have engaged in a form of cultural appropriation with alterior motives. It is certainly a more radical cultural manoeuvre than taking Janacek as model and writing an Elegy for the Fleck boy would have been. To do that would have been to regress to the well-practised role of outraged nationalist victim. Despite Catherine’s disavowal of her reformist and conciliatory agendas, I’m inclined to trust the early (and abandoned) titles for her symphony (Metamorphoses and Reconciliation) and to think that the diasporic experience for MacLaverty, as in the case of Joyce, has enabled a more thorough-going analysis and deconstruction of the symbols of race- and religion-based bigotry, and to point to an urgent need to reconfigure their significations.
REFERENCES

6. Bill Rolston (‘Music and Politics in Ireland: The Case of Loyalism’ in J.P. Harrington and E.J. Mitchell (eds), Politics and Performance in Contemporary Northern Ireland, Amherst, 1999, p. 33) points out that the nationalist tradition of propagating a mythic history is well understood but that similar work on Unionist songs has not been undertaken by revisionist historians. He also offers an interesting analysis of the contentions that the songs lead to conflict, or arise out of it.
7. The Vernicle Lambeg-players contest this claim as Catholic propaganda (‘to make us look like fanatics’, Grace Notes, p. 259). Frank McGuinness (Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, London, 1986, pp. 52, 58) subscribes to Catholic claims with McIlwain judging the success of his drum-playing by his ability to draw blood on his wrists.
13. Curiously, in popular culture, the ESB Millennium Drum, which fuses the Unionist Lambeg drum with the Irish nationalist bodhran in a giant sixteen foot diameter drum designed for drum spectacles at festivals, constitutes an attempt to hybridise these nation-specific forms of ethnic music, presumably with a view to deconstructing and reconstructing their meanings (URL: http://www.millennium-ireland.com/drum1.asp). There have also been recordings of Lambeg drums which recuperate them as ethnic instruments embodying elaborate techniques.