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## Reconciliation and the Politics of Friendship in post-Troubles Literature

Stefanie Lehner

Jan Carson's title story from her collection *Children's Children* (2016) envisages a necessitated union between the last young inhabitants from an island's split northern and southern sides:

They were leftover children ... married for the good of the island, both northern and southern sides. [...] They understood entirely but had not been given a choice. The arrangement was a simple mathematical equation; if more people were not soonly made, there would be no one left to keep the island afloat. They would marry for the good of everyone, themselves included.<sup>1</sup>

Their transgenerational responsibility for securing the future, however, poses unexpected difficulties when it comes to deciding where to make that future happen: "They could not settle upon a side, for the land changed shape the moment you crossed the border."<sup>2</sup> In this way, "Children's Children" both imitates and parodies the fictional form that has become most notably associated with attempts to reconcile the ethno-national divide that has marked Ireland historically: the "national tale".

With the fictions of early nineteenth-century novelists such as Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (*Lady Morgan*) as significant literary precursors, the popular version of the "national tale" in modern Northern Irish literature has been the "love-across-the barricades" (or "romance-across-the-divide") plot, in which the union of characters from opposing sides of Northern Ireland's political divide allegorically stands for larger social (re)conciliation. The young adult novels of the Scottish-born but Belfast-based author Joan Lingard set a paradigm for subsequent romance fiction set in Northern Ireland, so much so that the title of her second

novel – *Across the Barricades* (1972) – has become synonymous with the form. However, as Joe Cleary has argued, the desired union across the political divide is achieved by suppressing the politics of the constitution and escaping into the domestic sphere, and this omission works not only to avoid troubling questions of national and state allegiances but also to accept the political and constitutional status quo. Cleary sees this as “a sign of imaginative failure ... to imagine a transformed social order.”<sup>3</sup>

This chapter suggests that a discernible trend in recent Northern Irish fiction and drama is to revisit and revise the plot of “love across the barricades”, and in this way to (re)imagine new forms of political community beyond the communitarian divide as the basis for a wider transformative politics of reconciliation. Carson’s story foregrounds the politics of the imagined union, which is not the result of private desire but of public arrangement, and which poses a literal geopolitical threat to the island. The bond of ‘northerners’ and ‘southerners’ demands an arrangement that is and is not a compromise, as they retain their positions, divisions, and differences, yet come together, being “neither north nor south, foreigner or familiar, but rather a brave new direction, balanced like a hairline fracture in the centre of everything.”<sup>4</sup>

This precarious “brave new direction” that aspires to but, at the same time, pre-empt a reconciliatory reunion resonates with the tenor of the 1998 Agreement. The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement promises in its “Declaration of Support” a “new beginning”; yet, its consociational arrangements ultimately safeguard the different constitutional positions, aims, and beliefs of Northern Ireland’s “two communities,” founded and sustained by the dominant ideologies of Unionism and Nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Hence, where the Agreement promotes “the achievement of reconciliation,” this reconciliation seems confined to what I have elsewhere called *filiative* reconciliation, which uses the natural bonds and attachments of the family or communal “tribe” as its primary ideological paradigm.<sup>6</sup> This notion of *filiative* reconciliation

is captured on the cover image of the Agreement, which pictures a nuclear family watching a sunset over the sea together, supposedly symbolizing the new dawn that awaits Northern Irish society. Yet, rather than being constitutive of a radical “fresh start,” as envisaged in the Agreement’s Paragraph 2, which would be constituted by the existence of *affiliative* relationalities, that connect and intersect ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, geography, profession, and so on, *filiative* reconciliation is directed towards the past and predicated upon an already agreed identity politics along ethno-national lines.

Such a model of filiative reconciliation is, for instance, apparent in the award-winning film *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel and written by Guy Hibbert. Based on a real incident concerning the murder of a Catholic teenager in 1975, *Five Minutes of Heaven* imagines a possible face-to-face encounter between the killer, former Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) member Alistair Little (played by Liam Neeson), and the victim’s younger brother Joe (played by James Nesbitt). Initially, their meeting is to take place as part of a TV show that stages reconciliation encounters along the lines of the controversial BBC series “Facing the Truth,” chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu who presided over the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However, Joe, driven by desire for revenge, refuses to co-operate and their encounter is postponed. When it eventually takes place, it is first marked by Joe’s aggression towards Alistair, after which the latter gets to tell his story about what happened, releasing Joe with the words: “tell [your family] you’ve killed me off. [...] And live your life for them.”<sup>7</sup> The film accordingly ends with Joe reconciling with his family rather than with his former enemy. As Hirschbiegel’s film exemplifies, the filiative narrative avoids troubling political questions of responsibility, guilt and justice, while foregrounding the reintegration of the (mostly) male individual into the apolitical realm of the family, ultimately working to separate the private from the public sphere.

### Affiliative Reconciliation in Northern Irish Drama

Like *Five Minutes of Heaven*, Owen McCafferty's play *Quietly*, first staged at the Abbey Theatre's Peacock auditorium in November 2012, is based on a real-life incident and features a meeting between a perpetrator and a victim in a Belfast pub that was the scene of a devastating bomb attack, which killed 6 people in May 1974: Ian, a former UVF volunteer who had hurled the bomb into the Rose and Crown Bar, has arranged to meet Jimmy, who lost his father in the attack. If their initial encounter is, similarly to the film, marked by a retributive headbutt by Jimmy, their meeting is not a one-sided sharing of one man's story but a ferocious, honest, and brave dialogue between the two men, overheard by the Polish bar man who functions as an important witness to it. Their talking and listening to each other's stories is repeatedly punctuated by antagonism, interruptions, disagreement, but also assent. Crucially, their encounter is premised on Ian's realisation that they are "the same age": "we were both sixteen an now we're both fifty-two."<sup>8</sup> Their exchange of fundamentally incommensurable perspectives is thus predicated on a sense of commonality, which extends at the end towards understanding. As Jimmy explains: "some good did come from it – we met – we understand each other – that's enough."<sup>9</sup> Before he leaves, Ian offers Jimmy his hand, which he accepts and shakes. Evoking the historic handshake between the Queen and ex-IRA chief and then Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, in June 2012, their handshake is a readily recognized symbolic gesture of friendship and reconciliation. This *affiliative* gesture offers an alternative to the *filiative* model of reconciliation that is depicted at the close of *Five Minutes of Heaven* in the form of a restored unity predicated on consanguinity. Building on Andrew Schaap's theory of "political reconciliation," an *affiliative* politics of reconciliation, by contrast, presupposes "a plurality of potentially incommensurable perspectives" but entails "striving for a sense of commonness."<sup>10</sup> It foregrounds the establishment of new forms of relationships for which the family is no longer envisaged as the ultimate horizon. As such it is

set against a restorative conception of reconciliation predicated on the ideal of a stable community with a common identity. As Schaap explains, “political reconciliation begins with the invocation of a ‘we’ that is not yet and proceeds from the faith in its possibility towards a shared understanding of what went before.”<sup>11</sup> Arguably, Carson’s story also seems to anticipate such an affiliative politics in its ending, which posits the seemingly impossible coming together of the two sides as a “brave new direction,” framing both the clash of, but also the fascination with, their different world views within the context of what Schaap describes as a community that is “not yet.”

Schaap develops his theory on the basis of Hannah Arendt’s conception of friendship, which presupposes the irreducible plurality of viewpoints as a basis for dialogue about the common world. For Arendt, this honest and potentially agonistic exchange with others does not need to reach a conclusion or achieve concord. Instead, it constitutes a political space which respects the irreducible difference of the other-as-friend yet, in so doing, facilitates an understanding of the other’s perspective:

More than his friend as a person, one friend understands how and in what specific articulateness the common world appears to the other, who as a person is forever unequal or different. This kind of understanding – seeing the world (as we rather tritely say today) from the other fellow’s point of view – is the political kind of insight par excellence.<sup>12</sup>

Like Jacques Derrida, Arendt’s understanding of friendship rejects its canonical association with fraternity, which tends to eliminate difference, making it apolitical in tenor, and aligns it instead with the *filiative* model of reconciliation described above.<sup>13</sup>

Friendship can thus offer a model for an affiliative politics of reconciliation. This is illustrated in McCafferty's companion piece to *Quietly, Fire Below (A War of Words)* (2017), which continues its reflections on reconciliation by exploring the politics of friendship between two neighbouring couples "across-the-divide": the Catholic Gerry and Rosemary, and the Protestant Tom and Maggie. The title of the play cleverly works at both literal and metaphorical levels. The main action involves the four characters sharing several glasses of wine, while waiting for the annual Eleventh Night celebratory bonfire to be lit in the estate below. But their conversation comes to expose the "fire below" their apparent liberal, middle-class understanding and acceptance of each other's differences. Tom is learning Irish and banters happily with Rosemary to the irritation of the others, Gerry takes his children to see Ulster in the rugby, and all four share the belief that the middle classes have been left out from the peace process, "held to ransom by the working classes."<sup>14</sup> As Gerry remarks, "we're not real protestant and catholics, are we ... we're way beyond that."<sup>15</sup> Yet, the assumption that "once you get educated there should be a natural drifting away from all that," meaning the array of sectarian beliefs and activities associated by all of them with the working class, is severely tested when they come to discuss the dangerously explosive political material of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which functions as a displacement for the filiative ideologies of the Northern Irish conflict. Although aware of the reductionist association of "protestants and israel" and "catholics and gaza and the west bank," their exchange leads to a fundamental clash between their incommensurable perspectives that are underpinned by sectarian sentiments:

Gerry	go on and fuck off – take your cheap wine down to the bonfire – it's where the two of you belong
Tom	why don't you two fuck off down to Dublin – that's where you really want to be – leave this country to us – we built it – its ours. <sup>16</sup>

Although Tom and Maggie leave, their return at the play's conclusion affirms their continuous willingness to engage with their neighbour's irreducible differences, which becomes the basis for a process of affiliative reconciliation.

The play importantly extends the understanding of reconciliation not just as a process that involves a perpetrator and a victim-survivor, or as an event which follows a specific act of violence, but, in Schaap's sense, as an aspiration that posits the agonistic clash of perspectives as an opportunity to imagine a community that is still to come. Depictions of friendship in post-Troubles literature thus allow a political reimagining of the reconciliatory ethos of the "love-across-the-divide" plot. Concentrating on Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1996), Glenn Patterson's *The Rest Just Follows* (2014), and Mary O'Donnell's *Where They Lie* (2014) as three indicative examples, this chapter suggests that, rather than a *filiative* reconciliation within the apolitical domestic sphere, the politics of friendship in these novels can constitute the imagining of alternative community, beyond the tribal ideologies of nationalism and unionism.

#### The Politics of Friendship in Contemporary Northern Irish Fiction

Perhaps the most notable example of friendship in post-Troubles fiction is Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street*, written in the context of the 1994 ceasefires and peace negotiations. Its provocative subtitle (*A Novel of Ireland Like No Other*) and opening line ("All stories are love stories") frame it as an allegorical love story about Ireland. Yet, it is the friendship across the political divide between Jake Jackson and Chuckie Lurgan that is, as Danine Farquharson notes, "the most enduring relationship in the novel."<sup>17</sup> Their friendship precedes and postdates the frame of the novel and works to balance their oppositions, establishing both their commonalities and differences: where Jake's idealism sits against Chuckie's pragmatism, the



acerbic first-person account of Jake is set against the grotesque exaggerations of Chuckie's third-person narration. Indeed, the novel does not detail their first encounter but presupposes the existence of an affiliative bond with the sectarian "other," which is founded on "moderation" and mutual recognition of "an absurdity in this hatred, in this fear."<sup>18</sup> Throughout the novel, while Chuckie is dreaming up a financial empire and Jake searches for love, the two protagonists turn to each other, support each other, and care for each other. Despite his frequently biting comments towards Chuckie, Jake looks out for his distressed friend during a riot, putting himself at considerable personal risk: "What were friends for? Something else, probably," he notes with his usual sarcasm.<sup>19</sup> In turn, in face of his emerging political career as the leader of a new non-sectarian political party, Chuckie turns to Jake: "He needed his Catholic friend's guidance. He thought with pride of their friendship. Protestant and Catholic, their casual brotherliness was the ultimate example of what he meant when he said that no one he knew had been fighting. He and Jake had a friendship that the world supposed could not exist."<sup>20</sup> Instead of the sameness of fraternity, friendship here forms the basis for an affiliative politics of reconciliation, which celebrates plurality and diversity and is set against a monocular logic that leads to violence, hatred, and destruction, as exemplified by the bomb explosion in a Belfast sandwich shop depicted in chapter eleven of the novel that literally ends the stories of several new characters. The novel can be seen to underscore the importance of Arendt's crucial political insight by positing that the ability to take on the other's viewpoint can work as a counter to violence, as Jake notes:

To understand the consequences of our actions we must exercise our imaginations. We decide that it's a bad idea to hit someone over the head with a bottle because we put ourselves in their position and comprehend that if we were hit over the head with a

bottle, then, my goodness, wouldn't that hurt! We swap shoes. If you do this – if you can do this – then violence or harm becomes decreasingly possible for you.<sup>21</sup>

The politics of such an understanding are exemplified in the way in which chapter eleven makes us aware of the carnage of a bomb explosion through the murder of several new characters. With extreme care and empathy, the narrator records in the following chapter the reactions of his cast of characters to this devastating event, emphasising their recognition of a common vulnerability and fragility of existence. Their common response is summarised as their “silent but complete rejection” that “this act had supposedly been committed on their behalf.”<sup>22</sup>

The rejection of the filiative ideologies that had claimed and caused this event is underpinned by the various kinds of affiliative relationalities with which the novel closes. Indeed, the family backgrounds of both Chuckie and Jake challenge the conventional family unit. Jake is a foster child, and Chuckie is raised by his widowed mother who realizes late in life, after witnessing the bomb explosion, that she is in love with her long-term friend, Caroline. The end of the novel abounds with other ‘unorthodox’ relationships, which include romances between Muslim and Jew (Rajinder and Rachel); Catholic and Protestant (Slat and Wincey); queer (the newly out-of-the-closet Donal and Pedro); as well as Jake’s paternal relationship with the street urchin Roche, who becomes a kind of foster, or replacement, son for Jake.<sup>23</sup> Both friends’ acceptance of difference is also suggested in their respective sexual unions: whereas Chuckie fathers a child with his American girlfriend Max, the novel ends with Jake reconciling with his erstwhile enemy, the formerly Republican Aoirghe Jenkins, her political rhetoric now softened. The celebration of affiliative bonds that cut across former fault lines constitutes a “brave new direction” which Carson’s story gestures towards: the novel anticipates the “fresh start” posited by the 1998 Agreement as a basis for a not yet community which can be glimpsed beyond the tribal filiative ideologies that have determined Northern

Ireland. Yet, as the Agreement's Paragraph 2 recognizes, such a "fresh start" must be predicated on remembrance and necessitates dealing with the legacy of a troublesome past. This can be seen to be explored in Glenn Patterson's novel *The Rest Just Follows*.

Where *Eureka Street*'s anticipation of an affiliative reconciliation is only proleptic, as Neal Alexander has suggested,<sup>24</sup> *The Rest Just Follows* is, by contrast, largely retrospective. Its exploration of friendship, however, provides what Patterson calls "new perspectives" on the past and present, and therefore also future, that revise the filiative politics of the peace process.<sup>25</sup> The novel follows the lives of three characters who become close friends, growing up in Belfast in the 1970s, through the Troubles and peace process, to the (almost) present day. Craig, St John, and Maxine all come from a Protestant background, yet their affiliations cross class and gender. Both outsiders, Craig and St John first meet in school when they are seated together in class. While Craig is called "a fruit and a snob" by the other kids in his working-class estate for passing the Eleven Plus and going to a grammar school, "Sinjin," labelled "the freak" for his "ridiculous" name, Saint John Nimmo, is only there by virtue of his eccentric mother being able to pay the fees.<sup>26</sup> Maxine, who went to the same primary school as Craig, only properly meets him later, and she is introduced to St John at a party. Though Maxine has romantic relationships with both men, the friendship among the three endures but is marked by repeated antagonisms and breaks, which test the limits of their openness to each other's viewpoints. All three suffer the loss of an important figure in their respective lives, each caused by Northern Ireland's political situation.<sup>27</sup> St John's father abandons his family after he is interned under the Special Powers Act for his subversive politics and thrown out by his wife for having an affair. In turn, Maxine's brother Tommy disappears after being arrested and released, with rumours quickly spreading that he was a police tout. And Craig's beloved history teacher, Alec Harrison, is shot by the IRA, presumably for publishing a subversive article on the republican politics of the hunger strikers and/or for having links with loyalist paramilitaries.

Each of these events shapes the friends' future directions and influences their different ways of dealing with the past, which leads to antagonisms between them. Craig initially acts as a substitute version of his lost mentor Harrison, accepting a job as a history teacher at a local school, becoming later an advisor for a unionist party and participates in the negotiations leading up to the 1998 Agreement. In his professional roles, Craig aims to inspire alternative perspectives on the past and thereby future, motivating his students to uncover a variety of historic affiliations, as when he introduces the historic figure of Robert Shipboy McAdam (1808-1895), "a Presbyterian and an Irish speaker."<sup>28</sup> After school, St John leaves Northern Ireland and settles in England where he makes a career in broadcasting, becoming a television personality. When offered an opportunity to make a program entitled "*Where I'm Coming From*," he plans to reconcile not only with his personal past – aspiring towards a *filiative* reunion with his father – but also with Northern Ireland's troubled past more broadly, particularly by revisiting the possible reasons for Harrison's murder. As he explains to Craig, "The idea isn't to condemn, but to understand – why people made the choices they did in those days."<sup>29</sup>

For Craig, such an objective uncovering of the past is not possible as his own identity is far too dependent on his personal remembrance of his teacher. Instead of facilitating the desired reconciliation with the past for St John, Craig impedes his project. He reveals incriminating evidence about St John's own past, information confidentially shared by his closest friend. Where St John's desire to perform a truth and reconciliation process in front of a running TV camera lacked an understanding of the complexity of emotions which would inevitably be triggered by this, Craig's breach of confidence similarly disregards his friend's trust. Their refusal to consider the other's emotions and viewpoints causes a seemingly irreparable breach of their friendship, and also impacts on the already fragile marriage between Craig and Maxine that is ended when Maxine discovers he has been having an affair.

Despite being hurt, Maxine retains her friendship with both St John and Craig and traces the outlines of an affiliative politics of reconciliation, enabled by her own traumatic reencounter with the past. Shortly after being briefly reunited with her brother Tommy at their father's funeral, Maxine is threatened by the paramilitary godfather who caused his exile. But instead of allowing herself to be intimidated by him, she dismisses previous dreams about leaving, vouching "She would stay here. She would outlast him and his kind. Whatever it took."<sup>30</sup> Her resolve to remain and thereby defy the filiative politics of tribalism, hatred, and fear that caused her brother's exile and sustained the conflict is underwritten by cultivating an affiliative politics of hospitality, care and responsibility for the "other." When she encounters a drunken woman one night, she invites her back to her house, even her bed, looking after her, despite feeling somewhat outside her comfort zone. This woman, Gerry, responds to that gesture by offering her a job in her business and both women become professional partners and friends. In joining the feminist cross-community party, "Women in it Together" – Patterson's fictional version of Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition, which was founded in 1996 to safeguard the representation of women in the negotiations – Maxine affirms her commitment to an affiliative politics, which is set against the masculinist, filiative nature of the peace process.

If the official peace process has pushed such affiliative politics to the backstage, in Patterson's novel they emerge through a temporary but very symbolic reunion of the three friends in a scene that recalls and notably revises the iconography of the Agreement's cover image. After the historic first meeting of the Northern Ireland Forum in June 1996, the three friends watch "the wake of the new day" inebriated and elevated on top of the Europa Hotel: with their "arms up around the others' shoulders," they share a moment of mutual forgiveness: "Let's not be too hard on ourselves here. I mean, OK, there's a whole lot we could have done differently – done better – but you think of all the things that might have happened ...."<sup>31</sup> Craig

recalls in this moment the closing lines from Seamus Heaney's poem "Tollund" (1996), in which Heaney, after the 1994 ceasefires, reflects upon his earlier poem "The Tollund Man," written at the height of the Troubles in the early 1970s. Heaney now distances himself from sentiments of "atavistic isolation" in "The Tollund Man".<sup>32</sup> Instead, the speaker of "Tollund" feels himself "footloose, at home beyond the tribe," eager "to make a new beginning:/ And make a go of it, alive and sinning, / Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad."<sup>33</sup> This reconciliatory sentiment both towards the past and the other, affirming the (renewed) freedom and plurality of other identities and viewpoints ("Ourselves again, free-willed again"), while embracing potential failures and shortcomings ("sinning," "not bad"), is notably set beyond the *filiative* logic of family or tribe, and encapsulated when Craig, "pulling them in until their three foreheads touched," suggests: "We haven't done too bad, have we?"<sup>34</sup>

If such an ethics of openness is not always sustainable, specifically when it concerns thorny issues of the past (as seen in the break between Craig and St John in relation to the television programme), it is with and through Maxine that the novel offers a reconciliatory return to the past which opens it to a more optimistic future. At the close of the novel, Maxine, now separated yet in "slow rapprochement" with Craig, is looking for a new home in the city center.<sup>35</sup> This search unintentionally returns her to a significant location of her own past, which had, at the time, provided her with a new beginning. In 1979, at a low point in her life after her brother's disappearance, she is invited up to a hairdresser's called "Berlin" in the Corn Market: "It was amazing. Stepping through that door really was like stepping into another city, not Berlin – not yet – but a version of Belfast past." Replete with its signs and sounds, "Maxine read 'shipping broker' in passing and something that looked very like 'furrier'. From behind another door she thought she heard the sound of sewing machines."<sup>36</sup> This version of Belfast's past offers an alternative to the Troubles past that has dominated official versions of the city, and which, in turn, suggests an alternative future for both Belfast and Maxine. For Maxine, in

1974, it meant meeting Max and the other hairdressers, encountering an alternative world to what she has known. And this also entails forging a friendship with Craig and, through him, St John.

In a way, the three friends' relationships throughout the novel resemble the steel arcs of the enormous sculpture, *Spirit of Belfast*, that is referenced in the last pages of the novel, when Maxine revisits Corn Market. The individual arcs touch at several points but never fully merge; their trajectory remains seemingly in flux – open, temporarily ended, incomplete. In the novel, the sculpture is described as a “giant unravelled spring,” and as much as the place itself, it recalls past, present, and future, with its materials reflecting Belfast's industrial histories of linen manufacture and shipbuilding.<sup>37</sup> This openness to the not yet future is further symbolised by the fact that the sign that formerly carried the name “Berlin” is now “gone, but the brackets, tantalisingly, remained,” available to be inscribed with the still unwritten future of the place and self.<sup>38</sup> This unknown future captures the openness and incompleteness of an affiliative politics, which posits reconciliation as an aspiration yet resists its tendency to enforce closure, as exemplified in the dispute between Craig and St John.

Whereas Patterson's novel employs friendship to explore the unresolved and ongoing debate about how to deal with the troublesome legacies of the past, Mary O'Donnell's *Where They Lie* introduces friendship as that which enables a tentative coming to terms with a traumatic past. Perhaps even more than the two novels discussed thus far, O'Donnell traces an ethics of friendship that is based on responsibility and care for the other while respecting her/his irreducible difference.

O'Donnell's novel considers the traumatic impact the disappearance of her twin friends has on Gerda, her ex-lover Niall, her brother Gideon, and her sister-in-law Alison, who was also the sister of the twins. Whereas disappearances happened in Northern Ireland mainly during the period of the Troubles, *Where They Lie* sets the murders in the 1990s, with Gerda

and her family trying to come to terms with the loss in a post-Agreement landscape. The novel is based on O'Donnell's 2008 short story "Storm Over Belfast" and, similarly, focuses on the relationship between Greta, a Northern Irish Protestant, and Niall, her Southern ex-boyfriend. It self-consciously nods to the love-across-the-divide format by referencing not only the horrific punishment of such a union in the North, in the form of tar and feathering, but also its fictional representation (Niall remembers reading Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales*, 1992, for example).<sup>39</sup> Yet, *Where They Lie* is more interested in exploring the politics of friendship than the traditional consideration of sexual union, as a basis for an *affiliative* reconciliation between different perspectives. Despite the fact that Gerda and Niall separated a year before the novel commences and despite her depression, which causes repeated irritations and antagonisms between them, Niall remains in regular contact, comes to see her in Belfast, and helps her. "The bond must be stronger than either admitted," thinks Gideon.<sup>40</sup> It is based not only on their casual sexual affairs, but an anxious fascination with otherness: "he dreaded coming to her and he dreaded going from her."<sup>41</sup> As the only person not directly affected by the disappearance, Niall – despite, or perhaps rather because of his status as an outsider – becomes a crucial figure of sympathetic support, not only to Gerda but also to her brother and sister-in-law: he looks after Gerda, takes Gideon for a drink, and goes to an evangelical church with the religiously fundamentalist Alison.

O'Donnell repeatedly emphasizes the differences, prejudices, and seeming incommensurabilities between Northern (Protestant) and Southern (Catholic) viewpoints. For instance, entering Northern Ireland, Niall feels as if he has entered "a foreign country, the imagined loyal province of Saxon and Briton. [Gerda] had never understood how comical he found it, and why it made him smile."<sup>42</sup> As an Irish language teacher, he likes to "drip feed scraps of Irish whenever he could, sometimes as a joke ... but occasionally too for the sake of aggravation, as if letting them know there was an entirely different language that they might



try to acknowledge.”<sup>43</sup> In turn, Gideon “still suspected Niall,” simply by virtue of him being “southern Irish.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, their encounters are marked by an openness and willingness to listen to the other, while remaining attentive of this otherness, as exemplified by Gideon and Niall’s friendship: “There was a fundamental liking, an enjoyment and pleasure in one another’s company, but to achieve it, they usually spent some time setting down certain borders, points of view about one another’s societies.”<sup>45</sup> Their friendship allows them to accept and embrace different perspectives in other areas of their lives as well, which signifies a slow process of healing and recovery. When Gerda, planning to make a documentary about what she calls the “norths, plural, because they were multiple as demons,” contemplates colonial expansion, she realises that “once too ... this island of Ireland was Irish ... They were the colonised.”<sup>46</sup> In turn, in her job as a nurse, Alison becomes acquainted with one of Niall’s Irish students, Treasa, and “surprise[s] herself” by engaging in a dialogue with her about her private life: “She was crossing boundaries, she knew, by allowing this conversation to continue. One of the great unspoken rules was that you never told a Taig anything about yourself or who you knew.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite the somewhat crude assumptions referenced in these statements, the novel makes a strong case for an affiliative politics of reconciliation based on a passionate if potentially antagonistic engagement with the other. These bonds are tested when all four travel together to a remote island to search for the remains of the disappeared twins, after a clue from an apparent insider source. Yet, instead of uncovering their bodies, their visit unearths Gerda’s complex relationship with the dead twins, which involved not only sex but also implicated her in accumulating information, which may have caused their murders. These suppressed details cause a ferocious fight between Gerda and her sister-in-law, yet they forgive each other soon after. Later, Greta recalls their journey with “a certain fondness”: “despite the pain of discovery, they had managed to pray together, even if the versions were different. The prayer was like themselves: different versions, but edging towards something like a general

consensus.”<sup>48</sup> As suggested here, the understanding of differences comes to constitute a common space which can offer both respect as well as forgiveness. Although they go separate ways afterwards – with Alison and Gideon expecting twins, and Niall and Gerda separating for good – a bond remains between them all, and the novel closes with the anticipation of a reunion between them, arranged by Gerda.

As Melissa Lane points out, friendship in strands of ancient Greek thought often operated as a kind of *infrapolitics* – a subterranean level outside institutional or routinized practices.<sup>49</sup> Rather than a turning-away from contention and conflict encouraged by a quietist anti-politics, *infrapolitics* speaks to the sublimation of competition, dissensus, and tension into discretion and esteem. For the Epicureans that Lane references, this kind of politics cultivated community as friendship in a cosmopolitanism that transcended regional or ethnic identities. Arendt draws comparable conclusions: “The equalization in friendship does not of course mean that the friends become the same or equal to each other, rather that they become equal partners in a common world—that they together constitute a community. Community is what friendship achieves.”<sup>50</sup> In their different ways, McLiam, Patterson, and O’Donnell affirm friendship as a political principle that can give rise to affiliative reconciliation in invoking a not yet community beyond ethno-national lines. The delineation of friendship in the novels studied here helps to fashion ways of working with the legacies of a divided and violent past while anticipating a more peaceful, inclusive, and just future. These works overturn filiative tropes and usher in new imaginings of reconciliation and change based on affiliative identities. In resisting filiative bonds – not by turning away, but by actively troubling them – the turn to friendship in contemporary Northern Irish fiction represents a point of departure from which the hoped-for reconciliation of 1998 can be imagined.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jan Carson, “Children’s Children,” *Children’s Children* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2016), 184-190 (185).
- <sup>2</sup> Carson, “Children’s Children,” 190.
- <sup>3</sup> Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115.
- <sup>4</sup> Carson, “Children’s Children,” 190.
- <sup>5</sup> The Belfast Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations, 10 April 1998 (also known as the Good Friday Agreement), Paragraph 2. Available from [www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement) (assessed 5 June 2018). For a critique of the “institutionalised sectarianism” of the Belfast Agreement, see, for instance, Pete Shirlow, “Northern Ireland: A Reminder from the Present,” *The End of Irish History?*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 192–207, 196.
- <sup>6</sup> See Stefanie Lehner, “Post-Conflict Masculinities: Filiative Reconciliation in *Five Minutes of Heaven* and David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner*,” *Irish Masculinities: Critical Reflections on Literature and Culture*, eds. C. Magennis and R. Mullen (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 65-76. For the theoretical distinction between “filiation” and “affiliation”, see Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1983), pp.16-20. For the relevance of these terms to Northern Ireland, see Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Guy Hibbert, Script of *Five Minutes of Heaven*, p.50.
- <sup>8</sup> Owen McCafferty, *Quietly* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 24
- <sup>9</sup> McCafferty, *Quietly*, 53.
- <sup>10</sup> Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation* (London: Routledge, 2005), 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 77.

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 71.3 (2004): 427-454, 436.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 30; Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005), viii. See also Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 2-3. For a detailed discussion of Arendt's and Derrida's conception of friendship, see Marieke Borren, *Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world* (Amsterdam: F & N Eigen Beheer, 2010), Chapter 5.

<sup>14</sup> McCafferty, *Fire Below (A War of Words)* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), 47.

<sup>15</sup> McCafferty, *Fire Below*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> McCafferty, *Fire Below*, 51, 56-7.

<sup>17</sup> Danine Farquharson, "The Language of Violence in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street*," *New Hibernia Review* 9.4 (2005): 65-78, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (London: Vintage, 1997), 31.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 359.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 389.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 62-3.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 238.

<sup>23</sup> See Patrick Hicks, "The failure of parenting and the success of love in Robert McLiam Wilson's Ripley Bogle and Eureka Street," *Irish Studies Review* 16:2 (2008): 131-141.

<sup>24</sup> Neal Alexander, "Remembering to Forget: Northern Irish Fiction after the Troubles," *Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices*, Eds. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 274-81, 274.

<sup>25</sup> Glenn Patterson, "Butchers' Tools," *Fortnight* 331 (September, 1994): 44.

<sup>26</sup> Glenn Patterson, *The Rest Just Follows: or Up Here* (London: Faber, 2014), 19; 13.

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<sup>27</sup> See Marianna Gula, “‘Where I’m Coming from’: Modes of Returning to the Past in Glenn Patterson’s *The Rest Just Follows*,” *RISE (Review of Irish Studies in Europe)* 1.1 (2016): 48-60.

<sup>28</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 328.

<sup>30</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 201.

<sup>31</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> Juan Ráez Padilla, “Moving Backwards to Reach Forwards: Seamus Heaney and The Living Past,” *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 34 (2013): 245-255, 248.

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Tollund,” *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), 69.

<sup>34</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 307.

<sup>35</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 354.

<sup>36</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 368.

<sup>38</sup> Patterson, *The Rest*, 368.

<sup>39</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 110; 64.

<sup>40</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 104-5.

<sup>47</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 159.

<sup>48</sup> O’Donnell, *Where They Lie*, 221.

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<sup>49</sup> Melissa Lane, *Greek and Roman Political Ideas* (London: Penguin, 2014), 230.

<sup>50</sup> Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 436.