Intimate Weavings

Tracing Urban and Corporeal Others in Sinéad Morrissey's Poetry

Lena Pfeifer

1 Introduction

Few people would nowadays question that 'the personal is political' given the ever-continuing divide between different social, cultural, or religious communities and identities on a global scale. Under such conditions, the relation between aesthetics, politics, and ethics comes to the fore and newly claims relevance. Within the context of (Northern) Irish literature and culture of the last 200 to 150 years, such a correlation between literary production and politics has frequently been the subject of scholarly debate. At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, cultural production concerned with politics was primarily dominated by voices claiming independence from Britain, and the perceived connection of literature and politics has remained significant ever since. The early 2000s present a particularly tense period: While the dynamics of globalisation played an increasingly important part in Northern Ireland, a culture of remembrance prevailed strongly even after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and peace was still a process rather than an acquired state of affairs.[1] The conflict repeatedly called 'the Troubles' can be traced back to a civil rights march in Londonderry on 5 October 1968 and is said to have officially been ended by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) on 10 April 1998. Nonetheless, nationalist movements of the early 20th century need to be understood as having paved the way for an atmosphere as heated and politically loaded as that of the 1960s, its repercussions being perceivable down to the present day. For the purposes of this article, the context of the Northern Irish Conflict is not meant to function as a set framework for my analysis. Instead, it shall foreground recurring aspects or moods within the period addressed: first, a sense of disillusionment and disorientation when facing the past. In his Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*, Seamus Heaney characterised the atmosphere in Northern Ireland prior to the 1994

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[1] Even after the ceasefires agreed upon in 1994 and the official signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, bloody contentions between Catholics and Protestants have still been a daily and very real risk. Renewed activities of dissident Republicans made it impossible for the social sphere to clear entirely from hazard and fear; in the political sphere, the suspension of the Northern Irish Assembly between 2002 and 2007 destabilised the counties' autarchy. Sinéad Morrissey explicitly cites the dissolution of the Assembly by Peter Mandelson as an incisive political event, the anger over which fuelled her writing of "Tourism" (see Sinéad Morrissey, "Interview", with Declan Meade. In: *The Stinging Fly* 1/14 [2002]).

ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as "a quarter century of life-waste and spirit-waste, of hardening attitudes and narrowing possibilities".[2] Second, a perceived fragility when facing the future can be seen to manifest itself. The vacillation between ceasefires and their breaking, their culmination being the final signing of the Good Friday Agreement, led to an atmosphere shaped by fragile hope and cautious optimism to broaden what Heaney perceived as the "hardening attitudes and narrowing possibilities".[3]

After decades of armed conflicts, ruthless killings, and a far-reaching social division across the island, the conflict gradually steered into a phase of anticipated peace. In August 1994, the Provisional IRA and the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds at the time agreed on the first ceasefire. It took four more years for the official signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 to be decided by way of popular vote. While 94% of the population of the Republic voted for the agreement, 29% of Northern Ireland's population voted against it (see *Northern Ireland Elections*). In addition to the official establishment of a Northern Irish Assembly in Belfast and several institutional arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic, the Good Friday Agreement proclaimed a specific politics of commemoration, remembrance, and future-orientedness.[4] The mediation between past and future also involves mediating between different social, religious, and political groups and their respective experiences of alterity.

These longstanding tensions between different social, religious, and political groups have triggered various responses by artists from both parts of the island: Grounded in a century-long reputation of poetry, the profession of the poet has remained well-esteemed, both culturally and institutionally and in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic. The Belfast Poet Laureateship (established in 2013) and the *Saoi*, a highly prestigious honour awarded by the Irish artist association Aosdána, attribute institutionally anchored relevance to the art of poetry. As the youngest winner (by the year 1990) of the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award, Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey entered the poetic stage of the Republic and the Northern Provinces in the early 1990s. Born in 1972, during the early and mid-years of the Conflict and one generation after the "[p]oet [b]eyond [b]orders"[5] and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, Morrissey was raised in Belfast, studied in Dublin from 1990 onwards, and then spent a number of years in Asia and New Zealand before finally returning to Belfast. Morrissey only started to publish poetry when the peace negotiations between Northern Ireland and the Republic were already afoot. The experience of frequently changing places and the need to adapt to new

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[2] Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry. The Nobel Lecture*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995, p. 24.

[3] Ibid., p. 24.

[4] The second article of the 'Declaration of Support' states: "The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all." (*Northern Ireland Peace Agreement*, p. 2)

[5] Fintan O'Toole, "Poet Beyond Borders". In: *The New York Review of Books*, 4 March 1999, pp. 43-46, p. 43.

situations and cultural customs find expression in the general agenda of much of her poetry, most prominently her two collections *Between Here and There* (2002) and *The State of the Prisons* (2005). In *Between Here and There*, no matter how strongly the subject's position oscillates between various places, cultures, and languages, the focus always shifts, at one point or another, back to Belfast and "a very definite sense of where she is from".[6] Her later collection *The State of the Prisons* then assembles poems on various forms of imprisonment, both literal and metaphorical. In an interview for the magazine *The Stinging Fly,* Morrissey told of her initial reluctance to ever return to the country of her childhood, before finally realising that she "was fascinated to come back and see Belfast under the peace".[7]

Not least because of her status as a young prize-winning poet and the first Belfast Poet Laureate, Morrissey is expected to react to and comment upon, as she phrases it, "Belfast under the peace".[8] But how are the religious and political tensions that have shaped Belfast for centuries represented in Morrissey's poetry? How do these texts relate to ethical questions of alterity and sameness, belonging and alienation? And what form of relationship between the city of Belfast and Northern Ireland of the early 2000s is presented? By analysing a selection of Morrissey's poems composed in the early 2000s, I attempt to examine textual representations of otherness and alterity in the context of post-Troubles Belfast. I argue that Morrissey contributes to a discourse on alterity by means of two forms of (poetic) movement: A movement inward directs the focus onto the body and its corporeality, whereas a movement outward situates this very body in the larger context of time and space.

2. An Ethics of Alterity

For centuries and across the disciplines, the relation between self and other has been of chief interest for philosophers and cultural critics. Emmanuel Levinas[9] has distinctly attempted to bridge the gap between ethics and the political. In his conception of phenomenology, the other (*l'autre*)[10] is intricately linked to the self or the same (*le même*). While comprising the perceiving subject, *le même* also entails

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[6] Rory Waterman, "Sinéad Morrissey: *Through the Square Window*". In: *TLS: Times Literary Supplement*, 30 July 2010, p. 23.

[7] Sinéad Morrissey, "Interview". Interview with Declan Meade. In: *The Stinging Fly* 1/14 (2002–2003), p. 9.

[8] Ibid., p. 9.

[9] Levinas's philosophical writings are deeply shaped by the European and global socio-political climate of the 20th century and need to be read within this context, most notably the rise of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the genocidal interventions that took place in the second half of the century (Bosnia, Ruanda, Cambodia). These contexts are essential for understanding his, at times very strong, opinions on metaphysical concepts and the postulation of ethics as 'first philosophy'. On the argument that "for Levinas human existence is ethical all the way down", see Michael L. Morgan. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*. Cambridge 2011, p. 4.

[10] Levinas distinguishes between 'other' and 'Other'; while the former is the general category for alterity, the latter designates the human other, that which is given a (human) face and thereby transformed from *l'autre* into *l'autrui*.

the world the perceiving subject is embedded in, and her perceptions and ways of knowing are conditioned by that which can be subsumed as other.[11] Even more so, the self becomes a subject by way of confrontation with the other in the form of positive as well as negative forces and by making herself vulnerable through "exposition à l'outrage, à la blessure".[12] Hence, the relation between self and other is not circumstantial but, as Morgan puts it, necessarily "pre-conceptual, pre-articulate, pre-reflective".[13] For a cultural history as heavily shaped by dual constructions of identity as that of Northern Ireland, Levinas's thinking about ethics provides a helpful theoretical framework for exploring concrete manifestations of alterity in cultural production.

In 1976, one generation prior to Morrissey, Seamus Heaney published a poem – "Singing School" – as the ultimate piece of his collection *North*. In the sixth part of "Singing School", its speaker contemplates an encounter with elements perceived as foreign, as not pertaining to oneself and as standing in opposition to a feeling of homeliness and belonging:

> As I sit weighing and weighing
> My responsible *tristia*.
> For what? For the ear? For the people?
> For what is said behind-backs?
> . . . .
> I am neither internee nor informer;
> An inner émigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful; . . .[14]

Entitled *Exposure*, this part of the poem references a state of being left "without shelter or defence [...] being subjected [] to any external influence" ('exposure', *OED Online*).[15] Being exposed to any such "external influence" implies being exposed to something which is perceived as distinct from oneself and might therefore be designated as 'other'.

The form of alterity sketched here is one in which difference functions as dynamic rather than essentially binary. The urge of the self to cognitively grasp these dynamics and the otherness with which it is confronted become apparent in a

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[11] I will use the form of the generic feminine throughout this article when referring to people of potentially all genders. When I specifically reference Sinéad Morrissey as the author of the poems discussed or any female characters, I will clarify accordingly.

[12] Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague 1978, p. 18. Translated as: "exposure to outrage, to wounding" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh 1998, p. 15).

[13] Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 64.

[14] Seamus Heaney, "Singing School". In: Seamus Heaney, *North*. London 1976, pp. 66-67, ll. 21-24, 30-32.

[15] Not only is the speaker of Heaney's "Singing School" disclosed to that which makes him feel like "[a]n inner émigré" (l. 31), but she is also confronted with the task to "weigh[] and weigh[]" (l. 21) the alternatives of speaking and of remaining silent. The speaker asks herself what or whom she does the 'weighing' for: "For what? For the ear? For the people? / For what is said behind-backs?" (ll. 23-24)

cognitive constitution of the other; according to Levinas, this exterior manifestation of the other is the face (*le visage*), which is not necessarily a bodily face but one in which "l'Autre [se présente], dépassant *l'idée de l'Autre en moi*".[16] Recognising the face of the other means recognising her as another being or entity, which constitutes a fundamental form of exposure (*exposition*):

> Visage qui n'est pas dé-voilement mais pur dénuement de *l'exposition* sans défense. Exposition comme telle, *exposition* extrême à la mort, la mortalité même. Extrême précarité de l'unique, précarité de l'étranger. Nudité de pure *exposition* qui n'est pas simplement emphase du connu, du dévoilé dans la vérité: *exposition* qui est expression, premier langage, appel et assignation.[17]

The extreme form of exposure calls for an immediate reaction and an act of positioning as it is at once "appel et assignation";[18] Levinas states that by having decided to recognise the other, the relation is already an ethical one revolving around a sense of responsibility deeply grounded in having given the other a face. Hence, the very driving force for the self is a form of responsibility arising from the encounter with the other.[19]

This encounter takes place in three steps – exposure, recognition, appeal –, which means that every encounter with the other is, at the same time, also an encounter with language and communication. In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974), Levinas distinguishes between the 'Said' (*le Dit*) and the 'Saying' (*le Dire*). The category of the Said encompasses language as a symbolic system that caters for both its "practical and theoretical uses";[20] it is thereby grounded in the very structural organisation of language. The Saying, in continuation of the Said, comes into play when language is used as a "vehicle"[21] for encountering and communicating with the other.[22] Levinas describes the Saying as "proximité de l'un à l'autre, engagement de l'approche, l'un pour l'autre"[23] – a responsibility to con-

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[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague 1961, p. 21. Translated as: "the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht, Boston, London 1991, p. 50).

[17] Levinas, "Paix et proximité", p. 343ff. Translated as: "Face that is not unveiling but pure denundation of defenseless exposure. Exposure as such, extreme exposure to the precariousness of the stranger. Nakedness of pure exposure that is not simply emphasis of the known, of the unveiled in truth: exposure that is expression, a first language, call and assignation" ("Peace and Proximity". In: Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. London 1999, pp. 131-144, pp. 139-140).

[18] Ibid., p. 344.

[19] See Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 127.

[20] Ibid., p. 176.

[21] Ibid., p. 134.

[22] The distinction between the *Said* and *Saying* correlates with the Saussurian differentiation between *langue* – language as a system of elements with principles of combination – and *parole* – as the particular uses of language in a specific context.

[23] Levinas, *Autrement*, p. 6. Translated as: "the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other" (Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 5).

sider communicative interaction or intervention. Following this, the Saying can be described as "the ethical matrix"[24] for language as communication; or, to put it in Levinas's terms, "[l]anguage as *saying* is an ethical openness to the other".[25] Linking the primordial exposure to the other to language, Simon Critchley alludes to exposure as a format that is inherent in every linguistic act: "The Saying is my exposure – corporeal, sensible – to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach. It is the performative stating, proposing, or expressive position of myself facing the Other".[26]

Emmanuel Levinas links ethics not only to the political in general but also to the concept of peace more specifically. In "Paix et proximité" (1984), he argues that peace is not so much about unity with the other as it is about acknowledging the other as Other (*l'autrui*). Every state of peace, following Levinas's reasoning, originates in the individual encounter a person has with an other – be it another person, an object, or a situation perceived as other. Levinas thereby refutes the Kantian ideal of a perpetual peace grounded in unity and radical identity in favour of an ethical peace (*la paix éthique*)[27] which rests upon a relation with the other as "logiquement indiscernable".[28] Peace accordingly is no absolute but a relative concept that depends on ongoing re-evaluation and taring. Neal Alexander subsumes that "[p]eace is not [...] dependent on overcoming difference, otherness, and division but is itself always *a relation with alterity*".[29]

3. "For we have hallways to discover in one another like nerves" – Moving Inward to Encounter the Body as Other

What lies at the very centre of Levinas's thinking about alterity is the human Other (*l'autrui*). Encountering the human Other can take the form of either direct intersubjective relations or indirect discoveries of the other through and in one's own consciousness. This section investigates to what extent Morrissey's poetry

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[24] Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 135.

[25] Qtd. in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy. Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York 2004. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, p. 80; emphasis in the original.

[26] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas.* 3rd ed., Edinburgh 2014, p. 7.

[27] Levinas, "Paix et proximité", p. 342.

[28] Ibid., p. 343. Translated as: "logically indiscernible" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity". In: Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. London 1999, pp. 131-144, p. 138).

[29] Neal Alexander, "Remembering the Future. Poetry, Peace, and the Politics of Memory in Northern Ireland". In: *Textual Practice* 32, 1-2 (2018), pp. 59-79, p. 63; emphasis added. In that peace is always related to a specific conflictual state, it is also connected to temporality, to means of remembering or commemorating the past and imagining the future. Alexander contends that issues of remembrance and forgetting even lie at the very core of questions about what peace actually entails – both as a concept and as a practiced state of mind. If "[t]he duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self" (Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, London 2004, p. 89), and every encounter with the other is profoundly ethical, then remembering itself is an ethical process.

performs an inward movement in which the post-mortem dissection of bodies allegorically accounts for a philosophical inquiry into the other.

One of Morrissey's poems which most explicitly features scenes of anatomical inquiry and dissection is "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", first published in *The State of the Prisons* in 2005. The poem opens with the speaker's reminiscence of an anatomical dissection, which leads her to reflect on the bodily connectivity between surface and depth. Only in the second half of the poem does the speaker's current position at a party become clear:

> Or this evening, for instance,
>
> in which darkness and a river
> play both mother and father
> in supporting a glass room?
>
> There is a party going on. There is wine
> and a light fixture being obedient
> unto itself. And then there is this spillage
>
> in the centre
> from somewhere stranger and more extravagant
> which has drawn us all here.[30]

It is the instance of a "spillage"[31] – interrupting the ambivalent atmosphere of the glass room – that makes the speaker "think of the second lesson of the anatomists"[32] and indulge in a reflection upon the relation between surface and depth. The glass room symbolises a setting in which surface and depth become blurred and the boundaries between inside and outside as well as those between the private and the socio-civic body become indistinct.[33]

The opening lesson of the anatomists – "*See how the inside belies our skin*"[34] – is the only line of the poem rendered in a near-perfect dactyl; an additional stressed syllable at the end of the line endows the statement with a sense of urgency. The focus is here placed on the inside of the human body and on the question – in the double meaning of the verb 'to belie' – whether the "*baffl*[ing] *and seeth*[ing]"[35] of the organs and intestines wrongly depicts or even disappoints expectations as to what the skin pretends to cover. In asking "[a]re all skins as

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[30] Sinéad Morrissey, "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *The State of the Prisons*. Manchester 2005, p. 11, ll. 12-21.

[31] Ibid., l. 18.

[32] Ibid., l. 22.

[33] See Miriam Gamble, "'A Potted Piece/Lily'? Northern Irish Poetry Since the Ceasefires". In: Fran Brearton/Alan Gillis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*. Oxford 2012, pp. 668-83, p. 677.

[34] Morrissey, "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", l. 1; emphasis in the original.

[35] Ibid., l. 6; emphasis in the original.

effortlessly deceptive as this?",[36] the speaker lets his reflection shift direction from the belying power of the human inside to the outside. The inserted spondees emphasise the phrases "all skins", "effortlessly", and "deceptive", by which the concealing function of the surface level is rendered in a more negative light than in the initial six lines.[37] While the opening part is spoken by the anatomists themselves, the succeeding lines are focalised through the speaker herself:

> *See how the inside belies our skin*,
> say the anatomists,
> after showing us how freakishly we split;
>
> *the outside smooth and assiduous*
> *unto itself, while the inside*
> *baffles and seethes* [...]
>
> The lung-wonder held over the heart-wonder
> and the heart-wonder bleeding, emptying, re-bleeding,
> and spit, in different colours, oiling their hands.
>
> Are all skins as effortlessly deceptive as this?[38]

In this account, the corpse's insides give the impression of vitality and vividness as opposed to its lifeless outward appearance. Kept in a state of limbo between cerebral and ultimate physical death, the inside organs still show signs of vitality in their "*baffl*[ing]" and "*seeth*[ing]" and "spit[ting]".[39] The achieved effect on the speaker oscillates between abjection and wonder, between amazement and defamiliarisation.

The process of dissection foregrounds the universality of the human body and thereby establishes a common ground on which self and other can be brought into relation. Towards the end of the poem, the impression gained from the singularity of the corpse leads to a universally human epiphany:

> For we have hallways to discover in one another like nerves.
> And childhoods and love affairs, and drownings, and faithfulness
> by which language had occurred.[40]

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[36] Ibid., l. 10.

[37] A similar poetic treatment of "surface unity and polish" (Gamble, "'A Potted Piece / Lily'?", p. 676) can be found in Morrissey's poem "& Forgive Us Our Trespasses", a sonnet from the earlier collection *Between Here and There*, published in 2002. The ultimate two lines powerfully generate the ambivalence noted by Gamble: "Accept from us the inappropriate / by which our dreams and daily scenes stay separate" (p. 21, ll. 13-14).

[38] Morrissey, "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", ll. 1-10; emphasis in the original.

[39] Ibid., ll. 6, 9.

[40] Ibid., ll. 25-27.

The inclusive pronoun 'we' implies commonality, even bodily universality and wholeness: All human beings have bodies and they all have "hallways [...] like nerves".[41] In that sense, Morrissey's "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists" offers a powerful account of the body's call – as the Levinasian call of the other – and the impulse towards interaction.[42] The encounter of the other takes place in its post-mortal state which, given that birth and death overlap in the circle of life, is at the same time primordial. In fact, the encounter is happening outside the symbolic realm of language and foreshadows the possibility of language being used as a vehicle with which to respond to alterity.

In addition to the dissected body of "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", which is endowed with a form of vitality evocative of the primordial universality of the human body, Morrissey's earlier poem "Post Mortem", published in *Between Here and There* (2002), gives another account of bodily vitality. In contrast to the analeptic structure of the first poem and the two-fold position of the speaker – physically present at the party while mentally reminiscing about the past –, "Post Mortem" recounts a structured dissection conducted by the collective of its speakers. On a formal level, the opening-up of the body and the intrusion into its inwards is mirrored in the three-step indention of subsequent lines throughout the entire poem:

> We found ambition caked around his heart,
>   hard as permafrost. Slowly
>   we unpacked it, chipping it
> block by block into a bucket. It was crude and unforgiving,
>   like cement, and came away from the bone
>   in white quartz chunks.
> He had them fooled. They never guessed in all his airy silence
>   how tuned to the pulse of the world he was.[43]

What was described earlier as the ambiguity between ordinariness and estrangement – or, between amazement and abjection – is metrically exerted in the very first few lines. The initial iambic pentameter as the metre most common in the English language evokes a sense of familiarity and steadiness, which gets interrupted by the catalectic, trochaic trimetre followed by the spondee of "[s]lowly" soon after.[44]

The dissection reveals a surprising discovery, namely that of "discursive marks inside the body",[45] which brings the corpse's corporeality in line with its degree of linguistic vitality:

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[41] Ibid., l. 25.

[42] See Grzegorz Czemiel, "'When China Meets China'. Sinéad Morrissey's Figurations of the Orient, or the Function of Alterity in Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricœur". In: *Text Matters* 4/4 (2014), pp. 116-131, p. 122.

[43] Sinéad Morrissey, "Post Mortem". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There*. Manchester 2002, p. 30, ll. 1-8.

[44] Ibid., l. 2.

[45] Czemiel, "'When China Meets China'", p. 121.

> Both kidneys were filled with the by-product of not speaking,
>   a viscous residue, yellow where the light had spilled,
>   into the indecision, visibly oxidising.
>
> We found his gifts, variously coloured or stored in variously-
>   coloured liquids. His perfect pitch
>   a perfect indigo, borrowed from a rainbow,
> under an armpit. [...]
> [...] Out of the throat
>   we prised a throat stone –
>   originally cream, but shaded grey in places
> with pain; the stunning span of his vocabulary worn to a solid entity
>   by being understood.[46]

Its kidneys are said to be "filled with the by-product of not speaking",[47] the silence of which is described as a result of not using the linguistic devices at hand: The throat stone, "grey [...] / with pain",[48] symbolises the unrealised linguistic potential of a person that never gave expression to her internal workings. Pervaded by a sense of gravity, even commiseration, and motionlessness, the poem creates a setting in which the corpse's "silence was the immovable object / the weight of all his talent solidified against".[49] On the one hand, the central fate of the corpse under autopsy becomes her former failure to make her perceptions and experiences heard. On the other hand, the "discursive marks"[50] evoked earlier on symbolise the universality of cultural experience in the primordial body.

Arguing in line with Levinas and Czemiel, focusing on the body as body can be interpreted as opening up "a new ethical knowledge – a responsibility for the other".[51] With *l'autre* being located right inside of *le même*, the encounter with alterity takes place within the individual body, which becomes universal in the process of dying when it returns to that which all life originates in. The anatomical procedure is hence presented as a form of addressing the temporally universal, since a corpse, in an intermediate state between living and being buried, exists to some extent outside of ordinary time. Extending the scope from the individual to the universal also means embedding the individual and her encounter with the O/other within a larger space-time continuum, in which she is set in relation to other people and events across time and space.

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[46] Morrissey, "Post Mortem", ll. 14-27.
[47] Ibid., l. 14.
[48] Ibid., ll. 25-26.
[49] Ibid., ll. 36-37.
[50] Ibid., l. 2.
[51] Czemiel, "'When China Meets China'", p. 128.

4. "More real, even, with this history's dent and fracture" – Moving Outward to Encounter the City as Other

The second movement Morrissey's poetry performs in representing alterity is directed outwards and situates the single body within its temporal and spatial context. The relation between that which is being situated and the corresponding surroundings oscillates between alterity and similarity. This alternating motion is particularly strong in Morrissey's city poem "In Belfast", first published in the collection *Between Here and There* in 2002. After having lived abroad for some time in Germany, Japan, and New Zealand, Morrissey forwards a collection of poems aptly discussing the dichotomies of closeness versus proximity and foreignness versus sameness. A sequence preceding the two main sections of the collection depicts a movement from 'there' to 'here': "*My voice slipped overboard and made it ashore / the day I fished on the Sea of Japan / within sight of a nuclear reactor*".[52] As the initial poem of the first group of texts, "In Belfast" opens with a deictic preposition; information about the concrete locality is only conveyed through the poem's title and a range of cityscape markers:

> Here the seagulls stay in off the Lough all day.
> Victoria Regina steering the ship of the City Hall
> in this the first and last of her intense provinces,
> a ballast of copper and gravitas.
>
> The inhaling shop-fronts exhale the length
> and breadth of Royal Avenue, pause,
> inhale again. The city is making money
> on a weather-mangled Tuesday.[53]

Objects and abstract entities are personified and given organic qualities such as "inhaling" and "exhal[ing]".[54] "[T]he seagulls",[55] however, as the only entity that actually is vital, do not appear on the scene. What is a movement inward in the poems dealing with scenes of dissection here turns outward; objects are provided with agency and become even more animate than living beings. While the speaker of the poem remains covert in the first part, it gets increasingly ambivalent towards the middle of the second stanza who or what does the in- and exhaling: "The inhaling shop-fronts exhale the length / and breadth of Royal Avenue, *pause, / inhale again*. The city is making money".[56] The parenthesis "[p]ause, / inhale again"[57] can be read either as part of the in- and exhaling shopfronts or as an interjection by the speaker of the poem, who seems to be wandering around the

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[52] Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, p. 9.

[53] Sinéad Morrissey, "In Belfast". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There*. Manchester 2002, p. 13, ll. 1-8.

[54] Ibid., l. 5.

[55] Ibid., l. 1.

[56] Ibid., ll. 5-7; emphasis added.

[57] Ibid., ll. 6-7.

city or standing at a point from which to perceive her surroundings and give a description of the "inhaling shop fronts", the "Transport Workers' Union", and "Albert Bridge".[58]

The second part then opens with the speaker commenting on her own whereabouts, followed by elaborations on the atmosphere as conveyed in the first part:

> I have returned after ten years to a corner
> and tell myself it is as real to sleep here
> as the twenty other corners I have slept in.
> More real, even, with this history's dent and fracture
>
> splitting the atmosphere [...][59]

For one thing, these scenes of anthropomorphising can be interpreted as an attempt to give the city a face – a body even –, thereby turning it into the other which the speaker can relate to. For another, the concomitant numbing of the "seagulls"[60] as the only living beings gives the city an air of unease. This ambiguity – the oscillation between vitalising and devitalising forces – acquires a particular relevance when reading the poem as a specifically post-Agreement text: The speaker is allowed to move freely around the city, which, prior to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was accompanied by huge risks. At the same time, a strange sense of uncanniness is entailed in the economic vibrancy of a city devoid of any form of human interaction.

Still, and even though the prevalence of economic imperatives remains strong, an individual voice enters in the second part of the poem:

> More real, even, with this history's dent and fracture
>
> splitting the atmosphere. And what I have been given
> is a delicate unravelling of wishes
> that leaves the future unspoken and the past
> unencountered and unaccounted for.[61]

The speaker's presence oscillates between a tentative agency and the passivity of being externally directed. Once again, the poem shows a strong movement between the self and its surroundings. Having returned after a period of ten years, she encounters a version of Belfast which challenges traditional notions of home and belonging as homogenous concepts.[62] Instead of a clear sense of place, the

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58 Ibid., ll. 5, 9, 11.
59 Ibid., ll. 13-17.
60 Ibid., l. 1.
61 Ibid., ll. 16-20.
62 See Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "In Belfast". In: Fran Brearton/Alan Gillis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*. Oxford 2012, pp. 456-472, p. 468.

speaker is given only a "delicate unravelling of wishes"[63] by a city that repeatedly shows signs of agency in the poem's closing stanza:

> This city weaves itself so intimately
> it is hard to see, despite the tenacity of the river
> and the iron sky; and in its downpour and its vapour I am
> as much at home here as I will ever be.[64]

Just as the city is ambiguous in its early animacy, gloomed by its meteorological conditions, so too it remains ambiguously hard to grasp: The city paradoxically "weaves itself so intimately / it is hard to see" and leaves the speaker "at home", but only "as much [...] here as I will ever be".[65] The poem ends on a note of belonging and thereby sheds a rather positive light on the instability of identity established throughout; feeling at home is made possible through acts of acknowledgement in spite of indetermination.

It has been argued that "In Belfast" presents the encounter with and attempt to apprehend the other as strongly ambivalent. The simultaneity of distance and proximity, of familiarity and estrangement, is a feature Elmer Kennedy-Andrews views as being characteristic of a younger generation of poets whose debut works have been published during or after the ceasefire period.[66] Much of their work, according to Kennedy-Andrews, is shaped by the experiences of global capitalism and sketches out a multiplicity of spatial constellations. The discernible distance between the speaker of "In Belfast" and her surroundings can be interpreted as a staging of in-betweenness and the concurrency of wanting to or being forced to be at home in different places at the same time. It is the speaker's acceptance of the unknown and unfamiliar – the "unravelling of wishes"[67] is precisely and tenderly done – that finally allows her to create a sense of home that does not necessarily need to adhere to traditional understandings of the concept. What Jonathan Bolton observes with regard to Morrissey's later collection *Through the Square Window* also applies to "In Belfast": "[I]mages and memories from abroad often encroach upon, and meld with, [...] perceptions of home, which has the effect of both estranging [...] from Belfast but also of re-establishing a basis for familiarity".[68]

The gloomy and fragmented depiction of the city is reminiscent of other poems by Morrissey also set in Belfast. The opening of "Belfast Storm", one of Morrissey's earlier poems published in *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), sketches an atmosphere akin to that of "In Belfast": "With a rain like that lashing into the city /

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[63] Morrissey, "In Belfast", l. 18.

[64] Ibid., ll. 21-24.

[65] Ibid., ll. 21-22, 24.

[66] See Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home. Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968–2008*. Cambridge 2008, p. 249.

[67] Morrissey, "In Belfast", l. 18.

[68] Jonathan Bolton, "'I cannot rub this strangeness from my sight'. Contemporary Belfast and Sinéad Morrissey's *Through the Square Window*". In: *Irish University Review* 47 (2017), pp. 416-431, p. 427.

And a wind that blew streets dark before you could blink –".[69] By delineating a similar setting, "Cycling at Sea Level", published in *Through the Square Window* (2010), depicts the city's fragmentation and its default in offering a coherent sense of identity by means of a bicycle ride – "pass[ing] under a wheel's circumference" [70] – during which the speed of movement only allows for fragments of images to be taken in. Both Kennedy-Andrews and Bolton have argued that the pervasive sense of estrangement is realistically "unillusioned"[71] where it gives the speaker's "experience a contemporaneous feel for life in post-Troubles Belfast".[72] A chasm emerges in the midst of history and living is either made possible or necessitated by that very chasm since Morrissey's speaker integrates "this history's dent and fracture"[73] into her perception of the city. "In Belfast" comes along as a comparatively sober rendering of the city's historical past, which is indicative of an amalgamation of historical consciousness and tentative hope.

With regard to poetry written in the post-Agreement period, Neal Alexander contends that these texts "frequently set[] [them]sel[ves] at odds with the rhetoric of 'normalisation' [... of] the official political discourse of the Peace Process".[74] He quotes from the documents of the Good Friday Agreement, in which 'remembering' is substituted by 'not forgetting' and in which the focus is firmly displaced onto the future:

> The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights at all.[75]

Remembrance is defined as the injunction to not forget, which is accompanied by a shift of focus from past to future, thereby gesturing towards a rhetoric of normalisation that blurs the past to the benefit of future progress. Progress in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement is, as Aaron Kelly has argued, fundamentally economic rather than ethical: "a reconciliation with the dynamics of a world system and the postmodern, an ideology whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe".[76] He uses the phrase 'geopolitical eclipse' to characterise the way Northern Ireland is becoming part of a rapidly globalising world.

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[69] Sinéad Morrissey, "Belfast Storm". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *There Was Fire in Vancouver*. Manchester 1996, p. 17, ll. 1-2.

[70] Sinéad Morrissey, "Cycling at Sea Level". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *Through the Square Window*. Manchester 2010, p. 22, l. 25.

[71] Kennedy-Andrews, "In Belfast", p. 469.

[72] Bolton, "'I cannot rub this strangeness from my sight'", p. 419.

[73] Morrissey, "In Belfast", l. 16.

[74] Alexander, "Remembering the Future", p. 61.

[75] *Northern Ireland Peace Agreement*, p. 2.

[76] Aaron Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse. Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland". In: *Third Text* 19/5 (2005), pp. 545-553, p. 547.

The aspect of economic growth and progress in the post-Agreement period is reflected, for instance, in the increasing number of tourists visiting the northern part of the island every year, with figures rising. Sinéad Morrissey's poem "Tourism" – also published in *Between Here and There* – can be read in the light of Kelly's assumption that ethical progress has been much overpowered by economic growth and political endeavours to globalise Northern Ireland. The poem opens with a reference to the tourism sector:

> Like the relief of the markets,
> their saffron-coloured cloths and carpets,
> purification where two rivers cross, or the widening line of light
> entering Newgrange on the winter solstice –
>
> a manufactured prophesy of spring –
> the Spanish and the Dutch are landing in airports
> and filing out of ships. Our day has come.
>
> They bring us deliverance, restitution,
> as we straighten our ties, strengthen our lattés,
> polish our teeth. [...][77]

After the scene has been set in the first six lines, the syntactical flow is interrupted by the proclamation that "[o]ur day has come",[78] a statement that ambiguously pervades the poem at large. As an intertextual reference to the nationalist Republican slogan 'Our day will come' (*Tiocfaidh ár lá*), it is reminiscent of the hunger strike of 1981, during which Bobby Sands, one of the Maze Prison inmates, ended his prison diary *One Day in My Life* on that sentence. Through a shift from the future tense to the present perfect, the poem invokes a time after the fight for national liberation, which is (against earlier traditions) in no sense shaped by traditional notions of 'Irishness', seclusion, or other kernel identity markers. Instead, the vision Morrissey presents is, in fact, one of a post-national era in which pluralism and multiculturalism have supplanted national homogeneity. Kennedy-Andrews proposes a reading of the poem as affirmatively "welcom[ing] 'infection' from outside, and plead[ing] for a new post-nationalist, European state".[79] Morrissey's use of language, however, does invoke a strong sense of unease: In its strong evocation of nationalist wording ('gene pool'), her diction appears to be an attempt to align post-nationalist Belfast in its plurality with nationalist movements, therein debunking their failure by creating a sense of estrangement.

Right from the beginning, the splendour of the growing city is shown to be nothing but "a manufactured prophesy of spring",[80] an artificial – perhaps even

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[77] Sinéad Morrissey, "Tourism". In: Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There*. Manchester 2002, p. 14, ll. 1-10.
[78] Ibid., l. 7.
[79] Kennedy-Andrews, "In Belfast", p. 469.
[80] Morrissey, "Tourism", l. 6.

fallacious –, polished version created by the market with its "saffron-coloured cloths and carpets"[81] and the tourist industry emulating the incidence of the solstice sunlight into the passage tomb of Newgrange by electric light. Even though an atmosphere of fragility in the artificial nature of progress and splendour is created in the first two stanzas, the third paragraph contends that "the Spanish and Dutch"[82] tourists, representing commodification and present-day capitalism,[83] turn the ambiguity of Judgment Day for a better. However, this setting of outward splendour is soon to be rephrased in the conditional mode of "as though it's all over and safe behind bus glass",[84] indicating that, in fact, the city is still "splintered".[85] The speaker uses the form of a communal 'we' throughout the poem, which can be read as a sign of mutual recognition of self and other, both of whom "[u]nabashedly" declare that "this is our splintered city".[86] Just as in "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", the dichotomies of inner and outer are dissolved in favour of a more oscillating relation.

The continuous presence of economic imperatives ties in with Kelly's critique of governmental means of disguising the peace process as economic progress while the bridging of sectarian and social cleavages falls short. Kelly contends:

> The Peace Process seemingly offers the people of the North of Ireland a space in which to decide their future more equitably and ethically, but instead imposes an economic reconciliation on that society which is the peremptory logic of global capitalism that instantiates a new set of political codes, financial and power structures increasingly inaccessible to the lived experience of ordinary people.[87]

The speaker's sarcastic characterisation of the city and its inhabitants leaves no doubt as to the menace of economic growth overpowering the need for ethical consolidation.[88] Interestingly enough, it is not the tourists who are depicted as other but the way the city presents itself or is represented by its inhabitants: The traditional antithesis between 'native' and 'visitor' no longer holds. The act of "straighten[ing] our ties, strengthen[ing] our lattés"[89] symbolises a focus on

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[81] Ibid., l. 2.

[82] Ibid., l. 6.

[83] See Charles I. Armstrong, "Tourism, Cross-cultural Space, and Ethics in Irish Poetry". In: Pilar Villar-Argáiz (ed.), *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland. The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*. Manchester 2015, pp. 201-213, p. 203.

[84] Morrissey, "Tourism", l. 12. Also note the interesting reference to the material of glass, reminiscent of the glass room of "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists". Just as I interpreted the glass room as blurring the differences between depth and surface, inside and outside, so the situation described here is only as if it was "safe behind bus glasses" (Morrissey, "Tourism", l. 12), even though the inside of the bus separated from the outside only through the glass window is only marginally safer than the roaring outsides.

[85] Ibid., l. 13.

[86] Ibid., l. 13.

[87] Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse", p. 553.

[88] see Alexander, "Remembering the Future".

[89] Morrissey, "Tourism", l. 9.

outward appearance (and imported products such as the latté). This, however, is countered by the conjunctive mode of the following lines, leading towards a profound discrepancy, as in "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", between outer grandeur and inner essence:

> Next, fearing summary,
> we buy them a pint with a Bushmills chaser
> and then on to the festering gap in the shipyard
> the Titanic made when it sank.
>
> Our talent for holes that are bigger
> than the things themselves
> resurfaces again at Stormont, our weak-kneed parliament,
>
> which, unlike Rome, we gained in a day
> and then lost, spectacularly, several days later
> in a shower of badly played cards. Another instance, we say,
> is our beat-off, headstrong, suicidal charm.[90]

What pervades the above-quoted stanzas – a poetic example of what Brewster and Parker depict in negative terms as the tourism industry "yok[ing] together commerce and culture"[91] – is a strong ambiguity of estrangement and belonging for one thing, and the image of Belfast as a developing city and site of hollow glory for another. Gamble argues that the question of identity has been complicated rather than simplified due to what she describes as "surface glitter of 'normalisation'".[92] Both the shipyard of the Titanic and the Parliament buildings of Stormont emblematise fleeting splendour and a reduction of "archival curio, cultural treasure or commodified and reified remnant"[93] to "touristic spectacle".[94] Though emptied of their original significance, these signs are continuously held up as flagships for a culturally and politically vibrant city. Kelly makes explicit reference to the construction and staging of the Titanic Quarter, the area surrounding *Titanic Belfast*, a massive visitor attraction built as maritime heritage in 2012, a century after the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Based on "market-driven imperatives",[95] *Titanic Belfast* and the Titanic Quarter synecdochically convey an image of Belfast as vibrant, however irrespective of and not catering to the "holes that are bigger/ than the things themselves".[96] Through its internal ambiguity, "Tourism" is an intervention against and a complication of the privileged public discourse of Belfast

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[90] Ibid., ll. 15-25.

[91] Scott Brewster and Michael Parker, *Irish Literature Since 1990. Diverse Voices*. Manchester 2009, p. 18.

[92] Gamble, "'A Potted Piece/Lily'?", p. 669.

[93] Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse", p. 550.

[94] Alexander, "Remembering the Future", p. 61.

[95] Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse", p. 551.

[96] Morrissey, "Tourism", ll. 19-20.

as a city driven by "the motors of [economic] progress"[97] and "shot through with gaps and holes, literal and metaphorical".[98] The poem therein presents a powerful counter-argument to the prevalence of economic progress by opposing an oscillation that lies at the very core of what Levinas terms "la paix éthique", an ethical variant of peace as a relational and continuously reassessed concept.[99]

5. Conclusion

The political and cultural climate of Northern Ireland after the peace is one particularly informed by questions of belonging and alterity. In a city that was under the constraints of sectarian violence for centuries and in which movement meant putting oneself at risk, experience is strongly corporeal. This article has taken as its subject two different forms of experiencing encounters with alterity in the poetry of Sinéad Morrissey: one of which foregrounds the body, the other dealing with movement through the city of Belfast. Firstly, Morrissey's post-mortem poems present explorations of the human body as a form of philosophical inquiry and a reflection on the relation between depth and surface as well as between estrangement and familiarity. By emphasising the universality of the human body – "the hallways [...] like nerves"[100] –, commonality is given priority over difference. Secondly, Morrissey's city poems have been chosen as examples for encountering the other in a space-time continuum as well as in the form of the city itself. Both "In Belfast" and "Tourism" feature encounters with the spatio-temporal other in the form of an economically vibrant, commodified, and consumerist city of Belfast. Both texts are pervaded by a strong ambiguity of belonging which remains unresolved until – yet is acknowledged towards – the end. While Morrissey admits that economic imperatives leave a pervasively strong mark on the city in post-Agreement times, she nonetheless contends that accepting the spatial other as other creates a basis for a sense of belonging to emerge out of fraction, friction, and imperfection. The encounter with alterity is shown to be a movement that manifests as (bodily) engagement with the speakers' various environments. Both Morrissey's post-mortem poems and her renderings of Belfast dismantle the binaries of life and death, familiarity and estrangement, and self and other, while under the guise of its post-modern cityscape, Belfast itself takes the shape of a post-mortem creation.[101]

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[97] Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse", p. 549; also see p. 551.
[98] Michael Parker. *Northern Irish Literature. Volume 2. 1975–2006. The Imprint of History*. London 2007, p. 227.
[99] Levinas, "Paix et Proximité", p. 342.
[100] Morrissey, "The Second Lesson of the Anatomists", l. 25.
[101] See Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse", p. 552.

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