

Lanta Davis



Redemptive Suffering in the Isenheim Altarpiece and Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*

In a 1996 interview, Bernard MacLaverty asserted that his 1983 novel *Cal*—generally regarded as one of the foremost novels of the Troubles—is “more about Catholicism than it is about the Troubles.”¹ A powerful strain in Irish nationalism had long fused elements of Catholicism into its narrative, so that the redemptive suffering of Christ became a model for the suicidal self-sacrifice of hunger strikers, a call for blood to pay the debt for past wrongs, and an emblem of violence as a means toward redemption. Unsurprisingly, MacLaverty’s characters often grapple with their complicated relationship with Catholicism; even protagonists who declare their atheism grapple with faith, often in the tension between belief and unbelief. MacLaverty himself dwells within this tension. Though he “think[s] he has] rejected Catholicism,” he admits that Catholicism imbues its adherents “with itself for the rest of your life,” as its images and symbols still make up one’s “mental furniture.”²

There are many ways to explore Catholicism within his work, but a key starting point is to examine how MacLaverty embeds Catholic images, symbols, and rituals into his novels. He is clearly interested in considering what remains of Catholic forms—after “religion has been extracted.” He compares them to a shell, asking, “What is a shell but a beautiful structure whose life has been removed? It still looks beautiful and architectural.”³ MacLaverty explores such “shells” in many of his works. He considers love, hope, and self-sacrifice in *Lamb* (1980), and further examines grace and redemption in *Grace Notes* (1997). But *Cal*’s protagonist moves these concerns to another level: Cal McCrystal actively re-purposes a Catholic image, Grunewald’s Crucifixion, and the Catholic

1. Interview with Christian J. Ganter, “Bernard MacLaverty, Glasgow, In Interview,” *Anglistik* 7, 2 (1996), 13.

2. Richard Rankin Russell, “An Interview with Bernard MacLaverty,” *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall, 2006), 22. The mental furniture comment is from Ganter, 15.

3. Marisol Morales Ladrón, “‘Writing Is a State of Mind Not an Achievement’: An Interview with Bernard MacLaverty,” *Atlantis* 23, 2 (December, 2001), 208.



The Isenheim Altarpiece (front view). By permission of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York.

sacrament of penance, when he finds himself equally unable to believe or to find a suitable alternative to belief.

Cal is a lapsed Catholic haunted by guilt from his participation in a murder. He seeks to atone for his crimes and receive forgiveness by imitating the Catholic models and rituals he learned as a boy, fixating particularly on images and practices of redemption and atonement. Though no longer a practicing Catholic, Cal wonders if something like penance can still lead to forgiveness and reconciliation outside the liturgy of the church, or if a suffering Jesus need not be the Son of God to function as a useful symbol of an atoning, suffering love. Throughout, Cal is surrounded by images and references to the crucifixion, and is even gradually transformed into a kind of crucifixion image himself. This repeated crucifixion imagery aligns with MacLavery's view of fiction, which he as "a series of pictures . . . for my kind of writing anyway."⁴

One crucifixion image on *Cal*, in particular, becomes a touchstone: Matthias Grünewald's famous sixteenth-century crucifixion painting. Several critics, notably Richard Rankin Russell and David Holderman, have considered the painting's symbolism in the text, agreeing that it is a pictoriographical representation of Cal's attempts to understand suffering and penance after his involvement in a murder.⁵ What has not been noted, though, is the significance of the fact that Grünewald's *Crucifixion* is itself only one part of a series of pictures. The *Crucifixion* is only the front view of the multilayered Isenheim Altarpiece, which unfolds to reveal two other distinct views, with a total of nine panels and four sculptural scenes. Only the crucifixion painting is mentioned explicitly in *Cal*, but many of the novel's images reflect the other panels of the altarpiece. MacLavery's images are not simply duplicates of those found in the altarpiece. Rather, they serve as a kind of skewed mirror or interpretive simulation, and function to further highlight the differing ways in which the altarpiece and Cal respond to questions of suffering, forgiveness, and redemption.

4. Interview with Paul Campbell, "In the Beginning Was the Written Word: Paul Campbell Interviews Bernard MacLavery," *Linen Hall Review* 1, 4 (Winter, 1984–85), 5.

5. See especially the work of Richard Rankin Russell and David Holdeman, "Afterword: Looking at Art in Bernard MacLavery's Fiction," in *Bernard MacLavery: New Critical Readings*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). Holdeman analyzes how MacLavery creates a critical distance to examine the role of art and to consider the inherent problems in "profiting aesthetically from suffering" (166). He points to MacLavery's use of the Grünewald painting to show the tension between proper and distorted uses of art. This idea relates well to Russell's interpretation of painting, as he connects the use of propaganda and images employed during the Troubles with the physicality and visual motifs present in *Cal*. My focus on the full altarpiece adds further support and development, in particular, to Russell's article, "The Mortification Motif in Bernard MacLavery's *Cal*," *Literature and Belief* 33, 1 (2013), wherein he focuses on Cal's self-identification with the painting, especially its emphasis on suffering to expiate sin, and likewise argues that Cal's attempts at mortification are problematic.

The Isenheim Altarpiece—now displayed at the Unterlinden Museum in Alsace—was commissioned for St. Anthony's Hospital around 1512. It is a polyptych, with multiple unfolding panels, offering three distinct views. The most well-known is the closed, front view: the *Crucifixion*, a painting that portrays an anguished Christ on the cross, his fingers outstretched in pain, blood dripping from his sore-covered body, and his face tilted to the side in defeat and exhaustion. John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, John the Apostle, Mary, and a lamb bear witness to Jesus' death, with paintings of Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony, two of the patron saints of St. Anthony's Hospital, depicted on the side wings. The painting of the crucifixion opens to reveal an entirely new view, which depicts other key narrative events of Jesus' life: the Annunciation, his birth, and his resurrection. Those panels unfold for one final view, with two more Grünewald paintings of St. Anthony complementing Nicolaus of Hagenau's wood sculptures of St. Anthony, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome. There are also two views to the predella, the panel on the bottom of the altarpiece: Grünewald's painting of the lamentation of Christ and Nicolaus of Hagenau's sculpture of the Last Supper.

The altarpiece deliberately speaks to the suffering patients who would have gazed at it in St. Anthony's Hospital, and its layers unveil a complex, nuanced Catholic theology of suffering, sin, and atonement. In its original context, the altarpiece served as a meditation on suffering for those who were experiencing—or about to experience—great pain. Theologically, the altarpiece does more than merely depict the narrative events of Jesus' life; it also invites its viewers to align their suffering with Christ's and witness the despair of death be transformed into the redemptive hope of Christ's resurrection promise.⁶

6. On the Isenheim Altarpiece, see: Andrée Hayum *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989) and, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *The Art Bulletin* 59, 4 (December, 1977), 501–17; Stephen S. Kayser, "Grünewald's Christianity," *Review of Religion* 5 (1940); Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim: Reflections of Popular Belief in Grünewald's Altarpiece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Uta Henning and Marry Rasmusen, "Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece," *Early Music* 30, 2 (May, 2002), 312–16; and Katherine Anderson-Tuft, "The Breathing Instrument: An Iconographic Study of the Concert of Angels in Master Matthias's Isenheim Altarpiece," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 38 (2007), 87–114.

Because the Isenheim Altarpiece was commissioned for a hospital, it was intended to parallel and transfigure the pain and suffering of the patients. St. Anthony's Hospital specialized in treating patients suffering from ergot poisoning, commonly known as St. Anthony's fire. Few survived the disease, and those who suffered from it were often in great pain. Symptoms included burning, hallucinations, convulsions, and skin decay, which often led to gangrenous limbs and dismemberment. Grünewald's depiction of Jesus mirrors the external effects of the disease, with Jesus' skin covered in sores and sallow in color. The predella depicts Christ's dead body and slides apart, splitting his body in two and acting as a reflection of the dismemberment many of the patients would experience, either from the disease itself or from medical amputation.

Cal views Catholic practices of penance and self-mortification as models to follow, and these practices do, in fact, provide a form that seemingly gives his suffering some meaning and context. In the end, however, MacLaverty classifies *Cal* as a tragedy.⁷ As Russell notes, the novel reflects “negativity,” “disappointment,” and “gloom.”⁸ Further, Cal’s attempts to atone for his sin become, as one critic notes, a “weird, sexualized penance” that adds further pain to the lives of an already grieving family.⁹ Contrasting corresponding images from the Isenheim Altarpiece and the novel illuminates how the leftover “shells” that Cal re-purposes outside of their original source and purpose within the Catholic tradition fundamentally change in form, function, and end. Cal twists Catholic images and practices and applies them in self-serving ways. His actions demonstrate the dangers inherent whenever religious forms are divorced from their original context and reinserted them into a new narrative.

The patients who gazed at Grünewald’s crucifixion painting suffered from a physical affliction. Cal McCrystal suffers not from a disease, but from the inner turmoil stemming from his participation in the murder of a Royal Ulster Constabulary officer, Robert Morton. When Cal tries to quit the IRA, he finds himself cast out of both sides of the political divide, and when his house burns down, he becomes both metaphorically and physically homeless. Drawn to Robert Morton’s widow, Marcella, Cal starts working and living at the Morton farm, finding a home in the precise landscape of his guilt. Because, as Reid Makowsky notes, his “patterns of thought regarding sin, atonement, and redemp-

The picture of Christ’s glorified resurrection is literally the reverse side of Christ’s death, a symbolically charged placement that emphasizes the Christian hope of life arising from anguish and suffering. Similarly, the depiction of the patron saint of the monastery, St. Anthony, folds over the resurrection painting, contrasting the “bodily torture” of Anthony with the “bodily transcendence” of Christ, which Kayser says reminds viewers of the “possibility of divine intervention[,] personal transcendence, and afterlife.” Kayser, 512. The St. Anthony painting also links physical pain with spiritual torment. In one of the paintings, Anthony is beaten, clawed, and tormented by various monstrous demons, a reference to his being tempted and beaten in the desert by the devil. Hayum argues that this painting, which is the final layer under the resurrection scene, acts as a reminder that suffering is often a “testing ground for true faith,” and that “what is to be dreaded is not . . . death,” but losing one’s faith. Hayum, “Hospital Context,” 507.

The three views of the altarpiece compose an entire narrative and theological meditation. It is not, moreover, intended simply to be looked at and admired. Leonard Barkan, for instance, asserts that it is the “ultimate reference in the physical and spiritual cure of [those] placed in front of it.” Leonard Barkan, “Feasts for Eyes, Food for Thought,” *Social Research* 66, 1 (Spring, 1999), 240. To gaze upon the many layers of this polyptych is not only to gaze upon a complex theological statement on the nature of Christian suffering, but to be drawn into its narrative reality.

7. Russell, Interview, 22.

8. Ladman, “Interview,” 206.

9. Jeanette Shumaker, “Rivalry, Confession, and Healing in Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal*,” *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 9 (1997), 9.

tion have been shaped by the Christian narrative,” Cal seeks a kind of spiritual cure.¹⁰ His participation in the murder, for instance, is not simply wrong, but a “sin.” He believes he must practice the Catholic cure for sin—penance—to atone for it.¹¹

Cal is especially drawn to the Catholic understanding of redemptive suffering. In addition to his fascination with the Grünewald painting, Cal is inspired by two people: his mother and Matt Talbot. Cal learns about the Venerable Matt Talbot, a converted alcoholic, when a priest mentions him in a homily. When Talbot died, the priest explains, examiners discovered chains absorbed into his flesh, a consequence of years of wrapping them tightly around himself. Like monks who wear hair shirts or practice self-flagellation, Talbot used mortification as a means of penance: “suffering for the love of Jesus.”¹² Cal’s mother, symbolically named Gracie, likewise exemplifies how an active participation in grace can transform suffering. Gracie often “denied the body” because she sought “spiritual” food instead. (C 117). Cal admires her strength, affirming that she “ruled her own life” (C 116) and refused to bow to any trouble or pain. Her “answer to everything,” Cal notes, is to “turn pain and sorrow into a gift for God,” to “offer it up” (C 117).¹³ Both Talbot and Gracie espouse a Catholic understanding of redemptive suffering: to offer one’s pain or suffering to Christ is to embrace suffering as a way to unite with Jesus and participate in the work of the atonement. The *Catholic Catechism* explains that “by configuration to the Savior’s redemptive Passion,” suffering “acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.”¹⁴ For

10. Reid Makowsky, “Two Ways of Responding to ‘Troubles’: Bernard MacLaverty’s Use of the Blues and the Western in *Cal*,” *ANQ* 25, 1 (2012), 41.

11. The sacrament of penance—which includes confession, penance, and reconciliation—is often described by Catholics as the “medicine” for the soul. It helps to cure the sickness of sin and restore spiritual health. Much as Cal singles out the crucifixion in Christ’s narrative, he also singles out the act of penance from the other parts of the sacrament of penance. He never confesses nor reconciles.

12. Bernard MacLaverty, *Cal* (New York: George Braziller, 1983), 40; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (C 40).

13. This is a common Catholic practice, as is the phrase “offer it up.” In the morning offering, for instance, one’s “prayers, works, joys and sufferings” are committed in offering for “the reparation for sin” and “for the intentions of the Holy Father,” *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (Washington: USCCB, 2017), 48.

14. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1521. John Paul II develops this concept further in *Salvifici Doloris*, explaining that “faith in sharing in the suffering of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person ‘completes what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions;’ the certainty that in the spiritual dimension of the work of Redemption he is serving, like Christ, the salvation of his brothers and sisters.” Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the Bishops, to the Priests, to the Religious Families and the Faithful of the Catholic Church on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1984), 27.

both Talbot and Gracie, suffering is neither meaningless nor a means of despair; rather, their hope in the one they believe has suffered for them, suffers with them, and will eventually redeem and end all suffering transforms their suffering into salvation.¹⁵

Cal admires various models of redemptive suffering—the Grünewald painting, Talbot, and his mother—but, as he is no longer a practicing Catholic, he extricates these models from their source within the Christian narrative and inserts them into his own narrative. When he tries to atone for his participation in Morton's murder, Cal considers his mother's example and wonders if "the gift of suffering might work without Him [God]," so that he might "offer it not up but *for* someone," an act he deems "even more selfless" (C 117). Notably, Cal makes a small but crucial change to the Catholic practice. In Catholicism, one offers one's suffering up for the good of another in order to participate in the work of the cross and thus become co-redemptors with Christ. But Cal forgoes offering it up to God. In his case, Marcella, the "someone" Cal offers his suffering for, becomes both the object and recipient of his gift of suffering. He wants her to be his savior, and he to be hers. Consequently, although Cal's understanding of redemptive suffering may stem from Catholic models, this seemingly small alteration in Cal's formulation of the practice changes both the ends and the means of the Catholic understanding of redemptive suffering. Cal will practice, for instance, self-mortification and penance as a way to embody the selfless suffering he finds so compelling in Catholic practice—but with the ends and the means of such suffering changed, the practices end up looking very different. These changes are especially evident when comparing the images of the Isenheim Altarpiece with their corresponding images in *Cal*.

The color red, for instance, dominates the altarpiece and is also the color most frequently noted when MacLaverty describes Cal's surroundings. Cal is "surrounded by red images," Russell notes, imagery that he interprets as Cal's belief in blood being shed for payment of sin.¹⁶ But the blood and suffering offered by Jesus in the closed, crucifixion view of the altarpiece become, in *Cal*, blood payments, unwilling sacrifices, and pleasurable, self-serving suffering. In the Grünewald painting, a lamb pierces its own flesh with a cross and pours its

15. It is important to note a difference in the approaches to mortification between Gracie, who offers up her existing suffering, and Talbot, who inflicts suffering upon himself through mortification. Although mortification has been abused and come under criticism by many within and outside of the Catholic church, the idea behind it follows the same principles as outlined above. Inflicting suffering on the body is a penance for sin, an attempt to further participate in the redemptive work of the cross, and an offering for those suffering in purgatory. Mortification is not merely, therefore, a self-punishment, but a taking on of suffering so that others' sufferings may be relieved.

16. Russell, "The Mortification Motif in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*," *Literature and Belief* 33, 1 (2013), 115.

blood into a chalice, symbolizing Christ the Lamb freely offering his blood as the cup of salvation. In *Cal*, the image has been skewed to no longer symbolize salvation and life, but death. The novel begins with a troubling image of a man drinking blood, evoking the human tendency to feed off suffering. A preacher, “tall and thin, with the Adam’s apple of a vulture” (C 7) and extremely pale skin, fills a cup with the blood from a dead cow’s carcass and drinks it. His own blood is not healthy (he has anemia), so he drinks the blood of this unwilling sacrifice to alleviate his disease.¹⁷ The vulture-like look of the priest evokes death, destruction, and a feeding off of victims—in effect, the opposite of the life-giving blood of the Lamb.¹⁸ There is, of course, a long history within Irish nationalism of viewing bloodshed as cathartic and retributive, a purging and cleansing of Ireland. Cal, for instance, reads Patrick Pearse’s assertion “that the heart of Ireland would be refreshed by the red wine of the battlefields, that it needed its bloody sacrifice” (C 81). Many of the characters in *Cal* carry out this idea, restituting violence with violence, and shedding blood as payment for bloodshed. In the altarpiece, images of the red blood of Christ’s sacrificial crucifixion in the closed view transform, in the middle view, to the red or resurrection, and throughout Christian iconography red symbolizes not just blood, but also charity, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit. But in *Cal*, the hope of the resurrection seems to be missing, and there is only more bloodshed and more death.

McLaverty’s character tries to stop this barrage of bloodshed by imitating Christ and offering his own body in self-sacrificial suffering. Cal bears marks that resemble the suffering of Christ throughout the course of the novel. Much like Christ’s bleeding from his crown of thorns, Cal’s face is scratched and his head bloodied; similar to the nails and wounds in Christ’s hands, Cal develops sores, blisters, and black welts in the palms of his hands; like Christ’s sallow body, Cal turns a jaundiced yellow from being beaten; reminiscent of Christ’s crown, Cal gets caught by thorns while picking blackberries. He wears the dead Morton’s “y-front” underwear as a kind of penance, an image that evokes the Y-shape of Christ’s body on the cross, and carries a “frame bed on his bowed back,” (C 109) echoing Christ carrying his own cross.

Cal’s narrative not only resembles the story of Christ, but also St. Anthony, the other key figure in the altarpiece. A desert father of the third and fourth

17. This portrayal is remarkably similar to the Christian conception of sin as a universal disease, with the blood of a sacrifice (Christ) as the means toward life, but here, is reconceptualized to signal death rather than life.

18. Peter Mahon also pointed out the negative connotations of this vulture-like priest, and even uses similar language to describe him. He argues that the Preacher “becomes an allegorical figure of the religion and politics that needs to feed off of the blood of the Northern Irish people—the freshly slaughtered cows” Peter Mahon, “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal*,” *English Literary History* 77, 1 (Spring, 2010), 74.

century, Anthony retreated to the solitude of the wilderness to become a hermit; he is also known for his battle with demons. According to Athanasius's hagiography, Anthony closed himself up in a tomb, where the devil then waged an attack, calling a multitude of demons to beat the saint. Cal echoes both of these events in Anthony's life. He retreats from the city to ascetic solitude; he stays in a kind of tomb, inasmuch as he lives where Morton, the man he helped kill, died; and he also is beaten, both physically and spiritually. Grünewald depicts St. Anthony brutally tormented by various monsters and creatures, an image that comes to life in the novel through Cal's external and internal torments. In Grünewald's painting, the demons rip at Anthony's hair, beat at him with a stick, and tear at him with their claws. When Cal is being beaten by loyalists, the description of his attack is similar to the visual image of Anthony's: the red and yellow streetlights and the denim blue his tormentors wear evoke the colors of Anthony's tormentors in the painting; one tormentor grabs at the front of Cal's jacket, another clubs him in the mouth, another kicks at him while Cal smashes out with his fists and feels his head "jerked back" (C 49–50)—descriptions that also could be applied to Anthony. After the beating, he resembles the figure in the corner of the painting, a figure that evokes some of the pains and convulsions of ergot poisoning. Cal's body is covered in "blue-black bruises," with "welts" on his shoulders, and he vulnerably "grop[es] with outstretched arms" (C 53).¹⁹ Cal recovers from the fear of a physical attack only to reflect on another, looming fear: a deeper, spiritual terror. Cal thinks of the "enormity" of going to hell for "all eternity," and of the devil coming for him, admitting that this spiritual fear is actually more "intense" than the fear of being beaten, because at least fearing the men who hurt him was a "specific" fear, which one could "take precautions against" (C 54).

This shift from a physical fear to a spiritual one—of an external struggle leading to an internal struggle—mirrors the St. Anthony painting. In the bottom corner of the painting is a small piece of parchment that reads, "*Ubi eras Jhesu bone, ubi eras, quare non affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea?*" or "Where were you, good Jesus, where were you? And why did you not come and dress my wounds?" The words on Anthony's parchment echo Christ's words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" St. Anthony's sense of abandonment posits pain as spiritually isolating; Cal not only experiences the chosen, ascetic isolation of St. Anthony, but also the spiritual isolation of pain and sin. Cal "thought of himself as a monk in his cell not only deprived of light and comfort but . . . deprived of God" (C 92). Like the demons ripping at St. Anthony in the painting, Cal's "sin clawed at him, demanding attention" (C 92), ripping his soul to shreds just as fiercely as the thugs beat his body. Though he

19. St. Anthony is the patron saint of those suffering from skin diseases.

tried to distract himself from thinking about his sin, he “turned inside himself . . . and saw again the terrible thing that he had done” (C 92). He tries to forge a relationship with Marcella to alleviate his loneliness, but he knows that “because of what he had done, they could never come together,” that his “sin kept them apart” (C 101). Cal feels as if “he had a brand stamped in blood in the middle of his forehead which would take him the rest of his life to purge” (C 99). His physical and spiritual isolation appear to him in his dreams, too, where he sees himself at the “bottom of a gully, buried in an avalanche of his own making” (C 132). Cal acknowledges that he is the source of his own isolation and loneliness and remembers a priest telling him that “after death God did not point the finger and say, ‘Depart from me, ye accursed.’ You realised your sinfulness and remained outside. A man damned himself” (C 101). Cal’s embedded Catholic understandings of sin and penance cause him to seek atonement, to wash the brand of his sin away through a kind of penance—his work and his suffering. But he also never confesses, and therefore keeps the barrier of his sin firmly in place, remaining “outside.” Much like a less hopeful version of St. Anthony, then, Cal feels locked in a tomb, shut out from the world, and beaten by his own demons.

Cal’s choice to “remain outside” is reflected in the differences between the novel’s and Grünewald’s use of curtains. The curtains in Grünewald’s paintings of the Annunciation and Incarnation symbolize the temple curtain, which separated the Holy of Holies—God’s presence—from everyone except the high priest, who could enter once a year. In the Annunciation painting, the curtain is hanging down, but in the Incarnation painting, it is pulled up. The theology is explicit: the raised curtain signifies that Jesus is the new temple, unifying within his person the divine and human natures. God now dwelt among us, no longer separated by the veil and walls of the ark of the covenant. Moreover, the curtain connects the altarpiece’s middle view—Christ’s birth—with the front view of Christ’s death, because when Jesus died, the temple curtain ripped, theologically signifying that God’s presence was no longer separated from humankind, but instead had entered the world. The subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit allowed all humans to join together, in the body of Christ, to become God’s temple.

In *Cal*, however, curtains (of varying sorts) do not unveil and reveal, but separate and conceal. Cal’s hair, for instance, is worn long, a kind of “tent,” and “hung like curtains on each side of his face . . . screening him from the world.” (C 10). He often uses it to retreat, “hoping to hide . . . behind the curtain of his hair” (C 79). Marcella, too, is connected with curtains that separate her from Cal. In secret, Cal watches her as she “came to the window and with a gesture like a priestess pulled the heavy curtains together” (C 91), shutting him out from her home. Marcella shutting Cal out through the drawing of curtains

pales in comparison to what is truly separating them: Cal's involvement in the murder of Marcella's husband. The night of the murder, Cal watched from the car as the "curtain twitched," the door opened, and Crilly shot Morton twice. Then Morton "very slowly genuflected" and shouted Marcella's name (C 96). The image of the curtain being drawn, combined with Morton's genuflection, evokes another reminder of the temple curtains and a dark, corrupted version of the Holy of Holies. To see the "shit and the guts and the tears" (C 74) is to see what is normally guarded behind the veil of the human body. The language and the almost ritualistic remembrance of Morton's genuflecting death connote that Cal witnesses something paradoxically both horrific and holy. Unable to either face or forget what he saw, Cal withdraws, keeping tight curtains and boundaries around himself to conceal his guilt and shame and to shut others out.²⁰

The Isenheim Altarpiece offers an alternative, however, to being shut out and damning one's self. The inner view of the altarpiece juxtaposes the solitude and isolation of Grünewald's Anthony wing with another image mirrored in *Cal*: the community of the Eucharist. The predella's depiction of the Lamentation slides apart to reveal Hagenau's sculpture of the Last Supper. The unfolding layers of the triptych remind the viewer that the darkness of the cross is overcome by the light of the resurrection; similarly, the predella points to the hope on the other side of death. The predella reminds the viewer that to experience Christ's resurrection, one must also participate in his death, therefore concluding the altarpiece's theological meditation on redemptive suffering by tying Christ's birth, death, and resurrection to communion. The very word "passion," to describe Christ's experience of the cross stems from the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering or enduring: through the mystery of the cross, Jesus' passion teaches us how to transform *passio* into *com-passio*, suffering with. To suffer with Christ is to participate in Christ's crucifixion and, subsequently, his resurrection. Catholics do so by remembering and reenacting Christ's death: they drink his blood and eat his body in the sacrament of communion. Finally, then, *passio* culminates in *com-union*, to unify with, so that in the Eucharistic communion, to eat Christ's body and drink his blood is to unify with Christ and enter into the entire passion narrative.

An anecdote within *Cal* mirrors this transformative quality of the Eucharist. Marcella tells Cal the story of Maria Goretti, one of the youngest saints ever canonized by the Catholic church. At only twelve years old, she resisted her killer's sexual advances and died forgiving him for raping and murdering her. At Maria's canonization, Marcella recalls, Maria's mother "received communion side

20. Cal even speaks through different voices, as if escaping into different identities. Although I interpret this as an escape, this characteristic can also be interpreted in a positive light. See Makowsky, "Two Ways of Responding to 'Troubles,'" for a positive interpretation.

by side" with Maria's killer, an "amount of goodness" that Marcella says made her think "it was the mother who should have been made the saint" (C 146). Maria's mother partakes of the blood of Christ alongside her daughter's killer, so that rather than retaliating blood for blood, she unifies with her daughter's. Through this sacrament—through the *com-passio* and *com-union* with Christ—Catholics die in Christ and resurrect in Christ. The altarpiece's predella acts, therefore, as the foundation for its message of redemptive suffering: it invites the viewer into the transforming narrative of the Eucharist.

Cal desperately seeks the kind of transformation communion offers. Once again, however, his secularization of a sacramental act skews its purpose. In the same way that he offers his suffering not up to God, but to Marcella, Cal seeks communion not as a union with God, but as a union with Marcella. Cal wants "to talk to her," to "share his guilt," and to "commune with her and be forgiven" (C 157). But Cal's inability to confess keeps the two from true communion, even as they become intimate with one another. Cal seeks his salvation in the sexual act; but, lapsed Catholic or not, he would surely recall that the Catholic church deems intercourse outside of marriage a mortal sin—which, by definition, connotes death and separation, not redemption and union.²¹ Even as they physically unite their bodies, Cal subconsciously acknowledges the deep separation between them: Marcella's eyes penetrate Cal, "all the time staring unblinkingly at him" when they begin to try to make love, but Cal's mind keeps flashing back to Morton's death, and he finds himself "unable to meet her eyes," worrying that he had "gelded himself" (C 153). He is finally able to become aroused with Marcella's "face turned away from him," and they then succeed at making love. In the biblical language of the King James Version, to have sex with someone is to "know them," and Cal grapples with the tension between his physical and emotional desire to know Marcella and his fear of her rejecting him if she were to fully know him.

Cal seeks peace and hope from his relationship with Marcella, but their relationship cannot Eucharistically transform and transcend the violent tearing of the body and shedding of blood. Their relationship is founded on a violent act and sustained by Cal's violent secret: that violence lurks within even their happiest moments together. When Cal's mother dies, he gives himself "love-bites" as he grieves, connoting, as Russell argues, "Cal's inability to separate sex from self-mutilation."²² His relationship with Marcella takes on a similar quality: he combines pleasure with suffering, so that it becomes not the selfless sacrifice of

21. Sin, in the Catholic understanding, is always a separation from God and from others, with the sacrament of confession the means toward reconciliation and the Eucharist the means toward unification and redemption.

22. Russell, "Mortification," 113.

Christ, but a sort of sexualized, self-inflicted act of atonement. The first time Cal kisses her, Marcella gently rebukes him, and he repays her by telling her how young cows are killed if they are too big to be born: "they cut them up with cheese wire . . . [and] they get born in bits" (C 147). On their last night together, she shows him the Grünewald painting after they have sex, and Cal absorbs the image of a naked, cross-legged Marcella holding an image of the suffering Christ between her hands. Through Cal's gaze, the traditional Pietà scene is transformed: the image of Mary's tender, loving cradling of Jesus' body is substituted for a sexualized Mary whose body is violently grasped by a nearly dead Christ. Christ's hands, lifted in agony toward God, now cup Marcella's breasts.²³ The image of the Grünewald crucifixion superimposed over a naked Marcella captures Cal's confluence of pleasure and pain, of sex and violence. As much as Cal tries to recant of his violence through self-sacrificial suffering for Marcella, his suffering contains an element of self-pleasure that perverts any good intentions he may have.

Cal simultaneously sexualizes and divinizes Marcella, a perception confirmed by the correlations she has to the Grünewald painting. Cal conceptualizes his offering of blood and sweat as a payment for the lost blood of Marcella's husband: she becomes the recipient of Cal's "gifts of suffering," and thus becomes a kind of Christ-substitute. She is also a kind of Mary figure, described by Cal in terms that might equally be applied to Grünewald's Mary: Marcella "seemed to match the wood colours" of the library, and looks "foreign," with a "sallowdness" (C 13) of skin tone and a seemingly ageless face. Marcella becomes the image of hope and new birth for Cal, but his perception of Marcella transforms her into a perverse version of Mary. He offers his penance for her, and he expects her to be his pathway to salvation, envisioning himself "never get[ting] up until she came with her pale decorated hands and raised him to life again" (C 80). Cal conflates Marcella with an ideal of virginity, but here, she takes Cal's virginity. Marcella is neither Christ nor Mary, and however much she is drawn to Grünewald's suffering Christ over the "deodorized" pictures of Christ, she distances herself from real-life suffering. She admits, "I hate watching people suffer. I get so annoyed with them . . . I'm so callous it worries me sometimes" (C 119).

Cal subconsciously acknowledges this characteristic in Marcella even before she confesses it to him, as he dreams of her looking on, disinterested, while a train runs over a man. Even though he "signalled frantically" to her, "she didn't seem interested in the plight of the man," and the train went forward until "blood fountained and gushed," splattering onto Marcella and the crowd

23. David Holdemann, "Afterword: Looking at Art in Bernard MacLaverty's Fiction," in *Bernard MacLaverty: New Critical Readings*, 170.

of onlookers, who all “did not seem to mind” (C 118). This dream, and Cal’s perceptions of Marcella throughout the novel, should not be mistaken as a fully accurate portrayal of her. In contrast to Cal’s dream and to her own words, Marcella does act compassionately and kindly toward Cal, a suffering stranger. Regardless, Cal’s impressions suggest that he is deeply mistaken in his belief that she can be a pathway to his redemption. Marcella cannot fulfill the promise of life as a Mary figure, “raise [Cal] to life again,” receive the suffering he “offers” her, nor transform them into the resurrection of the Eucharist.

As the novel concludes, it is precisely during the liturgical season of waiting and hope, on Christmas Eve, that Cal finds himself not only unable to reconcile with Marcella, as he had hoped and fantasized, but instead, arrested. He jestingly calls his move to the shed “operation stable”—but it more resembles Good Friday. Cal carries his bed on his back and wears Morton’s Y-fronts, which, as Peter Mahon explains, “recall not only the y-shaped or forked cross, which are commonplace in medieval depictions of Christ’s crucifixion, but also the shape of the tortured Christ figure in the Grünewald Altarpiece.”²⁴ On Christmas Eve morning, “almost as if he expected it,” Cal awakes not to birth but death: “the police arrived to arrest him and he stood in a dead man’s Y-fronts listening to the charge, grateful that at last someone was going to beat him to within an inch of his life.” (C 170). The novel ends with Cal wondering again if he could ever tell Marcella the truth, with Marcella “jack-knif[ing]” and “closing him out” (C 170) when he tries to touch her, and with Cal’s arrest and beating.²⁵ The Eucharistic-like unification he seeks results in division, and he is metaphorically and physically closed out from his vision of paradise and salvation: sex with Marcella. His body is not purified and made whole in his communion with her. Quite the contrary: it is beaten and fragmented. Just when Cal allowed himself to hope for a new life with Marcella, he loses everything. In the Altarpiece, Good Friday transforms into the new life of Christmas, but for Cal, the hope of Christmas becomes the despair of Good Friday.

This bleak ending, then, casts doubt upon Cal’s success at answering the question of how to find forgiveness without God. The Christian “shells” he hopes will provide the path toward some kind of redemptive suffering, such

24. Mahon, 90.

25. Cameron Moore points out that the novel also ends with a thaw, and therefore a message of hope, and Richard Russell also supports this view, suggesting that Cal’s confession will signal his renewal. J. Cameron Moore, “Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water, Right Enough: The Rural Landscape in Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal*,” *ANQ* 25, 1 (2012), 36; Russell, “Mortification,” 122. I, too, hope for hope in *Cal*. Yet I cannot help but think that the thaw is ironic, much like the irony of its Christmas Eve timing. The reader—and Cal—may think that everything is getting better and his life is starting anew, but in fact, it is about to be beaten down and stripped away. A forced confession does not carry the same sense of cleansing and rejuvenation.

as the symbol of the crucifixion or the practice of penance, do not lead to resurrection and reconciliation for Cal. These empty shells of the church may still be beautiful, but for the unbelieving Cal, they are now empty and lifeless, and point only to death. Though Cal may share characteristics with Grünewald's suffering Christ, in the end, his story becomes a near-exact inverse of the altarpiece's narrative: in the Isenheim Altarpiece, death opens to birth and life; in *Cal*, instead of the new life and promise of Christmas, Cal finds darkness and something near death.

INDIANA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Lanta.Davis@indwes.edu

Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation. 1. Title of publication: *New Hibernia Review*. 2. Publication no.: 1092-3977. 3. Date of filing: 29/9/18. 4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly. 5. No. of issues published annually: 4. Annual subscription price: \$40 US, \$50 foreign. 7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication (Street, City, County, State and ZIP + 4 Code): Center for Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas, Mail #5008, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1096. 8. Complete mailing address of the headquarters of general business offices of the publisher (not printer): Center for Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas, Mail #5008, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1096. 9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor. Publisher: Center for Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas, Mail #5008, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1096. Editor: James S. Rogers, Center for Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas, Mail #5008, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1096. 8. Managing Editor: none. 10. Owner (If the publication is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as those of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, give its name and address.) Full name: University of St. Thomas. Complete mailing address: 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1096. 11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities (if there are none, so state). None. 12. Tax Status. For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at special rates: Has not changed during preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Name: *New Hibernia Review*. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: Spring 2018 (Vol. 22:1). 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: a. Total No. Copies (Net Press Run): 339. b. Paid Circulation (by Mail and Outside the Mail): 1. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 245. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: none. 3. Paid Distribution Outside the Mail, including sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS*: none. 4. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail through the USPS (e.g. First Class Mail*): none. c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b1, 2, 3, and 4): 245. d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail). 1. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County: none. 2. Free or Nominal Rate In-County: none. 3. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes through USPS: 47. 4. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means): 28. e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d 1, 2, 3, and 4): 75. f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e): 320. g. Copies not distributed: 19. h. Total (Sum of 15f and g): 339. i. Percent Paid (15c/15f x 100): 76%. No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: a. Total No. Copies (Net Press Run): 330. b. Paid and/or request circulation: 1. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 238. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: none. 3. Paid Distribution Outside the Mail, including sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: none. 4. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail through the USPS (e.g. First Class Mail*): none. c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b1, 2, 3, and 4): 238. d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail). 1. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County: none. 2. Free or Nominal Rate In-County: none. 3. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes through USPS: 40. 4. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or Other Means): 23. e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d 1, 2, 3, and 4): 63. g. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e): 301. g. Copies not distributed: 29. h. Total (Sum of 15f and g): 330. i. Percent Paid (15c/15f x 100): 79%. 16. Electronic Copy Circulation. Average No. Copies Each Issue During the Preceding 12 Months. a. Paid Electronic Copies: none. b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a): none. c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a): none. d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100): none. No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. a. Paid Electronic Copies: none. b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a): none. c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a): none. d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100): none. 17. Publication of Statement of Ownership. Publication of this statement will be printed in the Autumn, 2018 (22:3) issue of this publication. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties): James S. Rogers, Managing Editor, September 29, 2018.