In the introduction to her anthology, *Later On: The Monaghan Bombing Memorial Anthology*, published in 2004, as part of the commemoration of the bombings of May 17, 1974 in Dublin and Monaghan, Evelyn Conlon writes: “We are used to the notion of the solid structure of the visual as memorial, but it is indeed unusual to attempt to have a book play a similar role” (p. 10). I think this is quite true, and if it is unusual to think of a book as “standing” as a memorial, it is because a book and the solid, silent, visual memorial not only stand in stark contrast with one another – but are perhaps mutually exclusive.

The most immediate difference between the book and the solid, visual memorial is that the latter has a place, and often is in immediate contact with a place, standing in the place of that which it commemorates, that which has happened, while the book is mobile and has, in a sense, no place at all. This leads us to consider another significant difference: with the solid, visual memorial, we must go to where it is, whereas with the book memorial, language can bring something which is elsewhere to us who are afar. Alternatively, even if we were there on the very spot where an event took place, the language that we read, although concerned with that spot, displaces us, or de-centers us just ever so slightly such that we are always slightly elsewhere, other than where, there we are.

The difference, then, between a book and the solid visual structure of the memorial is significant, and becomes more accentuated if that solid memorial is on the very spot it commemorates, at one with that place. When this is the case, such a memorial is so close to what it refers to, or would signify, that in a sense it no longer does the work of signification; the play of the signifier, or the rumor and noise of language ceases. With the solid visual memorial which marks the spot, we are the ones who have to be there, on the spot; and all the signifying systems of maps, signs, guide books, even books like *Later On*, which we may have brought with us, would be set aside, laid down, inasmuch as they are signifiers which, with our being there, on the spot, so close to what we can call the signified itself, would seem to have become superfluous. Which is why there is that silence and solemnity of being there: that silence expresses, or pays homage to what should be a moment of signifiers coming home, coming to be at one with their signified. And when the signifier would come to be at one with its signified, the result is silence. Just as we are struck dumb in our silent awe.

Anyone familiar with the thought of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida will recognize that I am talking about the solid, visual memorial in terms of the logic of what he called *phallogocentrism*. And it is certainly not by chance that so many of our visual, solid memorials are in the form of columns – phallic structures which do indeed presume to stop the movement of the signifier, to bring language to a halt, bring us to close our books – as if signifiers, words, and language are not called for here, when we are on the spot. Here is where the rumor of the signifier ceases – in reverential silence.

While I have juxtaposed the book memorial of Evelyn Conlon with the silent, visual, columnar memorial, as an opposition between the continual rustle and noise of the movement of language over and against the silence of what would be the signifier coming to a final rest, at one with a signified, Conlon is not entirely immune to the claims that the silent, visual memorial makes. In her introduction, she also writes that the “purpose of this [book memorial] is not merely to satisfy the eternal curiosity of the history student within us all; it is a right, particularly for the bereaved and injured; and it is essential in order to curb the growth of rumor, which flourishes in a state of ignorance” (p. 10). That she would be attracted to such a claim is not strange. It is the claim of truth, the claim that the movement of words would finally come to a kind of silent halt, having found a final truth. But while truth might bring silence, silence does not entail truth, and while the silent, visual memorial might evoke silence, the book memorial, with its rustle of language, as Barthes once said, calls for the rumor of language, a rumor which is no doubt what makes the very discourse of truth possible. And it is to the rumor of truth, and the truth of rumor that Evelyn Conlon remains faithful. With a nod to the possibility of bringing signifiers to a halt in the name of knowledge and truth – represented more by the visual, columnar, granite-like memorial of silence – she produces nonetheless a book memorial which keeps open the rumor of language.

What marks this book even more as a memorial of the order of the signifier, of pure language, is the fact that there are no photos, maps, or drawings – nothing of the non-verbal visual – no image that would claim to stand for a place, or bring us to a halt before the image of a person. Conlon seems to have wanted this book to be not too tightly tied to any one physical place, time, or person. It is a book purely of the movement of the signifier; it stands as a kind of memorial which is an anti-memorial in the sense that it wants to avoid that kind of silence one has when one is on the spot, in front of a memorial stone marking “the” spot – as if that spot, where indeed a bomb blast occurred, could contain the moment. With the book, there is that continual murmur which tells us that whatever happened, did happen there, yet likewise elsewhere, and otherwise.

But true to the movement of the signifier, the book wants to keep us moving – and it does this. Conlon writes of wanting the book to give the reader the “notion of town, going into town, going into the town, downtown, uptown, down the town” (p. 10), and one has this sense. We enter the town through the first chapter of Patrick Duffy who introduces us to a brief history of the town, but then, after his introduction, rather than a kind of organized, guided tour, it is as if we begin to simply walk across the main square of the town, and as we cross, we happen to stop someone crossing that same square, and ask him or her if they are from Monaghan Town, and does he or she know of May 17 1974. And we find that some had actually been there when the bomb exploded, and they tell us about it. And then there are those we stop who are from Monaghan, know of the bomb, but weren’t there at that moment, or they know of the bombing of course, but have no specific link to that moment.

And then there are the seven who died in the bombing, the seven who can no longer speak for themselves. We hear of them from those who were closest to them, but those who tell us of them are not people who we would meet by chance as we cross the square. In the book, we come across their seven statements right at the very heart of the book, at its very center, page 63 of a book of 125 pages. And they are all seven together. They stand to the book as a memorial would stand to the town of Monaghan, were it placed in its center. The difference is that the book’s center is constituted of language; it is not silent nor does it impose silence; and as language, it remains of the same order as the rest of the book – which is that of a certain drift of
But of course it is precisely because of that inherent drift in language that there is in these words of the people of Monaghan an attempt to resist its movement. We can even sense this in the title of the book: *Later On*. The sense of time of this adverbial phrase is that whatever does happen “later on” is still connected to what went on before. It is not a temporal sense of the preterit – a past which is past. While this book came out 30 years after the bombing, much of the book remains close to home, as it were. But because what is “close to home” is nonetheless and perhaps in spite of itself, in a book, in language, it can and does drift far away from home, go elsewhere. Here in my hand, for instance. It is here that there is indeed a great tension, a great diffidence; there is the desire and need to put things into words, things which are close to home, close to your heart, yet the diffidence of knowing that your very words will drift away from home, beyond your control, out into the hands of a public who, precisely because of those words, might think it can understand how things stand at home.

Let me give a simple example of this diffidence, this reticence. In the first chapter, entitled, “The Town of Monaghan: A Place Inscribed in Street and Square,” Patrick Duffy, the author, mentions the building of St. Patrick’s Church right on the town square. The time he is referring to is 1836, and in parenthesis he notes that, “Mrs. Jackson gave £1000” (p. 19). What is strange isn’t simply that this is the first and last time a “Mrs. Jackson” is mentioned in Duffy’s account, but that it is said as if he were referring to a contemporary, and one the reader should readily know. One could say that Mr. Duffy is not altogether clear about who his audience is, or that it reflects a kind of provincialism. But it can also be read as a kind of sign which tells the reader that if you cannot “read” this, then you cannot know of what is written here. Perhaps it is not by chance that Patrick Duffy is a geographer, not a historian – as if in order to read Ireland, one has to be able to read the lay of the land, the signs that have been inscribed in its very earth, and that in order to read them, you have to be of that earth, of the town – you have to have been there.

Iris Boyd, whose father was killed in the bombing, provides another example. She wrote a poem about her father entitled, “Would You Know Him?” The diffidence is clear. And what can I say but “no,” in fact, I would never have been able to know your father by how he walked, how he drove a team of horses, or by his tone of voice. Yet...

Putting things into words is always open to putting things in other words. What we say will always be “put” otherwise and elsewhere than where we might think it belongs. But that is what makes what we call understanding possible. To take us back to our point of departure, this movement of language, this continual displacement, is precisely what the solid, visual memorial columns would perhaps claim to stop.

The title of Iris Boyd’s poem to her father, the title of her memorial, is a question – which in spite of its diffidence, calls for, not silence, but a response, an engagement – the rumor and rustle of language and life. And so does in such a moving way this memorial by Evelyn Conlon.