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**SEAMUS HEANEY AND THE POETIC(S) OF VIOLENCE**

**by**

**Thomas George McGuire**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English Language and Literature)  
in the University of Michigan  
2004

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## ABSTRACT

Seamus Heaney and the Poetic(s) of Violence

by

Thomas George McGuire

Chair: Linda K. Gregerson

“Seamus Heaney and the Poetic(s) of Violence” reconsiders the key importance of violence as an aesthetic, political, and cultural category in Heaney’s poetry and translations. This dissertation begins by asking how the relation between violence, literature, and nationalism might be understood in the Irish postcolonial context. Taking Heaney’s work as the primary focus of my research, I detail how specific explosions of postcolonial violence as well as broader cultural manifestations and perceptions of violence have motivated and informed some of the key aesthetic developments and major projects in this poet’s career. By examining a wide range of representations from his oeuvre, I detail Heaney’s deft negotiation of the related problems of violence and decolonization through a complex and compelling poetic of violence.

Specifically, I examine Heaney’s conception and development of the lyric as a field of force, his employment of the pastoral as an anticolonial mode of resistance, and his translations of canonical texts as acts of counter violence carried out at the level of the vernacular and form. Through close readings of Heaney’s verse, translations, prose, journalism, I demonstrate how many of his writings can be profitably read as part of an ongoing attempt to intervene textually in a Northern Irish culture of violence. I also argue that Heaney’s often conflicted, occasionally uneven, and frequently brilliant attempts to outface violence through writing have necessitated a remarkable degree of experimentation and adaptation at the level of form, language, and genre.

By bringing into interactive and critical focus a study of poetics and postcolonial criticism, I attempt to demonstrate that a particular set of violent conditions and perceptions (which are endemic to postcolonial situations) have, to a remarkable degree, informed Heaney's highly innovative transformations of inherited cultural materials. In short, I argue for Heaney's poetic of violence as a poetically significant and socio-politically efficacious means of countering, containing, and redressing various forms of violence within the Irish (post)colonial context.

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For my wife and children

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violence. Without an understanding of violence in all its forms and consequences, these future military leaders, like their commanders, could well run the risk of abusing the power and responsibility of their office.

Finally, this space seems inadequate to acknowledge the debt owed to my family. This work would not have been completed without their support, love and patience. I am most grateful to my wife, for scrupulous and sympathetic readings of term papers and drafts, which became portions of this essay. More importantly thanks are due to her for being a friend and ally in the midst of the most difficult phases of this three-year whirlwind adventure. To my amazingly patient and hope-filled kids, thank you for your patience, understanding, and prayers. At the end of the day, I must thank my parents who blessed me with life, taught me to respect all people, and gave me a healthy love of learning and desire for God.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In recent decades numerous literary critics, historians and political commentators have explored the vexed relationship between violence and Irish literature. Denis Donoghue, in his influential essay "The Literature of Trouble," remarks, "It is well known that much of Irish literature has been provoked by violence, and that images of war soon acquire a symbolic aura in this country."<sup>1</sup> In the now-famous essay "An Unhealthy Intersection," Conor Cruise O'Brien takes a somewhat different view of the issue in his commentary on the vexed intersection of violence, politics, and literature in Ireland: "I have come to suspect the relation between literature and politics, certainly the tragic relation. Ours is a small country, much afflicted by ballads, and by persons shooting and bombing their way to a place in the ballads to be. In these conditions one develops . . . an aversion to the ballad form, a horror of the manic passages in the poetry of Yeats, and a tendency to see the influence of literature over politics, in the tragic mode, as a contagion to be eradicated where possible."<sup>2</sup> Seamus Deane offers yet another view of the matter in his introduction to the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*: "One stereotype of Ireland . . . is that of a country where political violence and the literary arts flourish together in ways not emulated (nor sought by) other countries. It is possible to demolish this popular conception, but it is perhaps wiser to wonder at its

prevalence and at the elements of reality it contains. If there is an association between violence and writing, how can it be understood?"<sup>3</sup> Informed by the insights of each of these commentators and scores of others like them, who have commented on the relation between violence and literature in the Irish context, this project makes a modest attempt to deal with this complex issue and to craft a partial answer to Deane's question by examining the work of the contemporary Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

Why Seamus Heaney and violence? This move may take some readers by surprise given the fact that in many circles outside Ireland he is often regarded as a supreme stylist or an interesting, albeit atavistic, formalist and pastoralist, but certainly not a lyricist of violence in the same mold as writers like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, or Roque Dalton. In fact, this study began taking its present shape when I first encountered two remarks about the central role of violence in Heaney's poetry, two remarks of which I was initially rather skeptical. The first comment came from Heaney's own description of his poetry in the essay "The Redress of Poetry" in which he writes, "the nobility of poetry 'is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without'. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality."<sup>4</sup> At the time, my idea of poetry was closer to Wallace Stevens's idea of verse as a necessary supreme fiction or Rilke's and Mallarmé's conception of the lyric as essentially a kind of praise.<sup>5</sup> Frankly, the notion of lyric poetry as a perhaps necessary and indeed even efficacious form of "counter violence" seemed forced at best. I have since come to a different point of view.

The second remark about the intersection of poetry and violence appears in Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995), where Kiberd writes of Heaney: "no Irish artist since Synge has given a fuller account of the relation between poetry and violence."<sup>6</sup> Given

what I falsely deemed to be a solid familiarity with the work of both authors, this comparison of Synge's and Heaney's work took me by surprise. Well aware of the incendiary history of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and its role in the formation of the modern Irish nation, I still generally thought of Synge as pastoral lyricist who, though he could be uproariously impious and rakish, was generally more predisposed to praising the waters and the wilds of the Wicklow Mountains and the burrens of the Aran Islands in gorgeous neo-Georgian strains than to exposing cultures of violence. Similar preconceptions guided my thinking about Heaney, notwithstanding his notoriously violent collection *North* (1975). I saw Heaney's poetry as springing from a similar source and having a similar intent as Synge's — a desire to render lyrically, yet with an almost Thoreauvian precision, a deep sense of wonder for the natural world of rural Ireland. This constituted Heaney's considerable appeal for me -- at least in those works I knew best, his earliest collections, which are memorable for their exquisite evocations of the measured rhythms of life in rural County Derry and their abundance of sensuous bucolic imagery. What I had not seen in my early encounters with Heaney was that at some moment early in the Ulster conflict the madness of that crisis had hurt him into a new kind of poetry, one that came to be preoccupied with the problem of violence.

A close reading of Heaney's oeuvre demonstrates that a staggering number of the poems and translations Heaney has produced since the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969 have at their core some form of actual or potential violence, the force of which is overwhelmingly destructive and dehumanizing. Significantly, Heaney wrote many of these texts during outbreaks of benumbing brutality, violence that has been meted out on all sides of the Northern Irish sectarian and ideological divide with

sometimes-predictable regularity. Though it would be inaccurate to suggest that the external violence of the Ulster conflict is the only creative ground and subject driving Heaney's production of verse following the outbreak of hostilities in the late sixties, violence seems to be everywhere in his work, particularly in the poetry that emerges in the first decade-and-a-half of conflict. In poem after poem, Heaney is drawn to the subject with an almost manic intensity and frequency. His work in this period is everywhere bruised and bloodied by graphic signs and psychological scars of the Ulster conflict. This is the case in such tonally and stylistically diverse collections as *Wintering Out*, *Stations*, *North*, *Field Work*, and *Station Island*. But this preoccupation also extends, although in far more muted tones, into more recent collections such as *The Haw Lantern* and *Electric Light*. Much of this poetry of violence has at its core some act of physical force or coercion that is politically or religiously motivated (the two being often inextricably intertwined), or it focuses on the psychological and bodily effects of culturally and politically-cultivated hatreds and antagonisms. These poems typically allude at some point to specific historical and/or contemporary acts of brutality, and then move, sometimes tentatively and other times decisively, to a conclusion in which Heaney seeks to better "understand the exact tribal revenge" (Heaney's controversial phrase in the poem "Punishment").

Heaney's translation projects also attest to his preoccupation with such troubling subject matter. In these works, the centrality of violence as an informing subject and creative impetus for Heaney's writing comes into perhaps even sharper focus when we consider the frequency with which Heaney uses translation to register his response to sectarian and state-sponsored violence. Remarkably, it is impossible to find a single

major work of translation from Heaney's hand that is not shot through with specific acts of atrocity and cruelty. This holds true for each of his translations of major canonical source texts; the Old English *Beowulf*, Sophocles's *Philoctetes* (Heaney's adaptation is *The Cure at Troy*) and his adaptations of key cantos of the notoriously violent first volume of Dante's *Commedia*, the *Inferno*. It is also true of adaptations of the important Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne*, a work which Heaney renders in its entirety in a translation entitled *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and partially in a number of so-called Sweeney poems in *Station Island*. Each of these important works of textual recovery is remarkable for the way in which it contributes to what Heaney, after Yeats's famous line in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," has aptly called his search for "befitting emblems of adversity."

Encouraged by a generous letter I received from Declan Kiberd four years ago, in which he agreed there is still much work to be done on Heaney's poetry of violence, I launched what I believed would be a relatively simple and short-lived study of Heaney's unique negotiation of the problem of violence. Given my professional perspective as an Air Force officer and extensive contact with war literature through studying and teaching it, I assumed that I possessed a good deal of requisite knowledge for such a project. Added to this, I had previously pursued three separate research projects in which I had explored the key role of war in the novels of another lyricist of violence, Paul West. In short, I believed I was fairly well equipped to explore the relationship between violence and literature. What I quickly discovered, however, is that the intersection between literature and violence in all its myriad forms is infinitely more expansive and amorphous than the comparatively tame subject of war writing. Examining the relation between violence and literature becomes even more complicated in the Irish context where society

and individual writers continue to grapple, in often-controversial ways, with a dialectic of violence that is inextricably connected to the Irish (post)colonial experience. Thus, as I gradually became more conversant with the maddening complexity of the violent circumstances out of which Heaney's poetry emerges, my task proved far more challenging than I had initially imagined.

The most immediate and modest aim of this project is to document and assess the significance of Heaney's evolving *poetic* response to the recent conflict in Northern Ireland, a study which by extension considers both the contentious reception of Heaney's poetry and the central role of violence as a key political and cultural factor in the formation of modern Ireland. But I must admit from the outset that a broader and vastly more abstract concern has insinuated itself into my conceptualization and execution of this project. Research into Heaney's poetics has led me to conclude that if we wish to understand the full force and specific gravity of Heaney's assault on the problem of violence, some degree of theoretical engagement with the distinct, but not entirely unrelated, problems of violence and postcolonialism is helpful, if not perhaps absolutely indispensable. Since both of these phenomena and the theoretical disciplines engaged in studying them have been the subject of considerable controversy and confusion, a few preliminary remarks outlining my working definitions and theoretical presuppositions seem, at this point, to be in order.

### **Violence Defined**

The task of neatly defining and categorizing violence presents the present-day researcher with considerable difficulty. Nearly a century ago, Georges Sorel, one of the earliest major theoreticians of violence, quipped, "The problems of violence still remain

very obscure.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this has been a long-standing problem, and still today so many misunderstandings and disagreements inflect discussions concerning the subject that even ninety-five years later Sorrel’s observation retains its force. One reason for this quandary is that the subject of violence *per se* was long marginalized, or outright ignored, by thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition. Until 150 years ago, the subject was rarely taken up by itself as a theme worthy of serious philosophical speculation.<sup>8</sup> Relatively speaking, it has only been recently -- roughly the last forty years -- that the study of violence has become a focus of vigorous intellectual inquiry.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, the burgeoning mill of violence studies has sometimes served to obfuscate rather than further our understanding of the issue. Now the term “violence” appears in a dizzying and constantly shifting frame of reference. No longer limited to its historical function as a descriptor for war or a pejorative term for “irrational” social behavior (e.g., subaltern insurrection or terrorist activity), “violence” is now part and parcel of the critical vocabulary used to describe and critique a vast array of institutional forms and relationships at all levels of human activity (social, economic, political and even linguistic). Given that the term “violence” is applied to such a diverse set of contexts and disciplinary studies ranging from poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of the discursive formation to clinical studies of personality disorders, some commentators have argued that the concept has come to signify a multiplicity of phenomena so diverse in nature that it has lost its force altogether. In this regard, the political scientist Thomas Platt captures some of my own discomfort over the tendency to neologically extend the term *ad infinitum*: “Having reached the point of needing to

institute such a categorization as 'quiet violence' one can hardly avoid wondering if the discovery of 'non-violent violence' is to be the next step in the process."<sup>10</sup>

One alternative to such loose usages of "violence" is to employ the kind of precise and discriminating definition that is often favored by political scientists and theorists of violence. Sorel provides one such definition by specifically locating violence in acts of physical aggression carried out from below in the course of subaltern rebellion: "we should say ... that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs while violence tends to the destruction of that order."<sup>11</sup> In this schema, violence possesses positive value insofar as it absolutely explodes and replaces existing structures. This dynamic, which is the *sine qua non* for a new order in Sorel's view, is therefore always already creative and emancipatory.<sup>12</sup>

If strict definitions such as Sorel's help to mitigate some of the confusion caused by the indeterminate and ever-expanding application of the term, they also betray a bias which, to paraphrase Thomas Mann, seeks to present the destiny of man purely in political terms. The fundamental difficulty arising from a definition that limits violence to state-sponsored or revolutionary force is, of course, that it obscures the significance of other forms of violence.<sup>13</sup> Specifically for my purposes here, I contend the issue of textual, and more especially poetic, violence must be seriously considered. In terms of the relation between literature and political violence, we must ask when and how the former might be said to cause or militate against the latter. That such a relation exists between textual and political force is borne out by myriad cultural and historical examples, not the least of which includes the complex relation between violence and literature in the Irish context.<sup>14</sup> None of this is meant to suggest that textual violence

ought to be put on par with acts of brute political force. To do so would be to trivialize the sheer magnitude and lasting physical and psychological injury inflicted by armed conflict. But, as Lawrence Venuti reminds us, we cannot deny the power of textual violence to demean foreign or subaltern cultures and peoples, and thus potentially to figure in and, in many cases, incite racial discrimination, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, wars of conquest and liberation, and a myriad of other forms of brutality.<sup>15</sup>

For these reasons, I propose to employ a more versatile definition, one that retains some sense of the important difference between physical force and other forms of violence, yet acknowledges potential connections. Raymond Williams provides just such a conception of violence in his dictionary of cultural terms, *Key Words*. In a rather lengthy entry, Williams tells us that ours is not the only epoch that has struggled with the term. In fact, the word has a long and vexed history of contested and contradictory denotative and connotative meanings (e.g., “threat,” “unruly and unauthorized behavior,” and “the use of physical or military force”). In this regard, Williams writes:

It is a longstanding complexity. **Violence** is from **fw** *violence*, oF, *violentia*, L – vehemence, impetuosity – ultimately from **rw** *vis*, L – force. **Violence** had the sense of physical force in English from [the last third of the thirteenth century], and was used of hitting a priest in 1303. From the same period we hear, in what seems a familiar tone, the world is in a state

Of filthe and corrupcion  
Of violence and oppression.

But this use is interesting, because it reminds us that **violence** can be exercised both ways, as Milton insisted of Charles I: ‘a tedious warr on his subjects, wherein he hath so farr exceeded his arbitrary violences in time of peace’ (1649). There has been obvious interaction between **violence** and violation, the breaking of some custom or some dignity. This is part of the complexity. But **violent** has also been used in English, as in the Latin, for intensity or vehemence . . .<sup>16</sup>

I quote Williams's definition at length not only because it represents the tone and tenor of the theoretical discussions concerning violence Heaney almost certainly would have been privy to during the period in which he began developing his poetics of violence (the late 1960s and early 1970s), but also because it exemplifies the type of nuanced and at the same time catholic understanding of violence I apply to my study of Heaney's poetics of violence. As Williams indicates, the term comes from the Latin root *vis* (force), but we should note that *latus* the past participle of *fero* (meaning "to carry") completes the etymology. Thus violence involves a carrying forth of force against something or someone; it is an intense pressure directed at an object in order to move, change, injure or annihilate that object. Violence makes things happen. In Milton's time, as in Heaney's, extreme violence has the capacity for turning the world upside down (to borrow Christopher Hill's image) and reshuffling all kinds of socio-political and cultural relationships. It is with an eye to precisely this kind of multi-faceted dialectic of violence (epistemological, military, psychological, socio-economic, political, cultural, etc.) that I use the term "violence" in the broadest sense. More specifically, however, the question becomes how might a poet be said to be responding to various violent conditions and pressures. In other words, we must ask how such a poet's verse serves as a kind of violence in its own right. In light of this multidirectional dynamic, we can speak of the making function of poetry (i.e., as *poiesis*), a poetic not only born out of violence, but one that presses back against and succeeds in somehow checking and outfacing the onslaught of overwhelming external force. In this sense, the making function of poetry can be said to have all sorts of salubrious consequences for both individuals and society. Thus, this dissertation seeks to detail how Heaney is both caught in the middle of and makes his

own contribution to a unique and deadly dialectic of violence in late twentieth-century Ireland.

### **The Postcolonial Defined**

Agreement on a definition of the postcolonial is just as hard to come by. In this project, I use the term “postcolonial” with reference to those events subsequent to colonization in which various forms of resistance are mounted to counter and dismantle the institutions and mechanisms of colonial occupation and hegemonic culture.<sup>17</sup> I do not restrict the “postcolonial” to the period subsequent to the withdrawal of the colonial occupier.<sup>18</sup> In fact, as various scholars have demonstrated, resistance to colonial rule and its legacy is a time-phased and often- recidivistic process carried out on both sides of the moment when colonial power “officially” ends its occupation and physically divests itself of the colony. As David Spurr notes, “new flags fly, new political formations come into being,” but both prior to and after gaining political independence a colonized people typically engages in a difficult search for *alternatives* to the discourses of colonialism, a process which inevitably entails “certain crises of identity and representation” for the postcolonial society.<sup>19</sup> In short, the relations between colonizer and colonized remain neither the same during colonial rule nor do the pre-liberation relations and conditions abate entirely once a postcolonial people gains independence.<sup>20</sup> In neither the historical nor the cultural sense does the postcolonial succeed in entirely severing ties with the colonial. In my view, it is precisely the difficulties incumbent upon first marking and then making some kind of substantial break from the existential experience and cultural memory of life under colonialism which characterizes a key element of “postcoloniality.”<sup>21</sup> This interstitial dynamic has all kinds of interesting and complex

implications for postcolonial writers, implications which affect not only the development of the creative consciousness but also the formal, linguistic, and thematic concerns of a writer like Heaney.

If the postcolonial is defined in this way, what is the relationship between postcoloniality and the multi-faceted dialectic of violence described by Williams? To answer this, it is useful to consider the thrust of the major paradigm shift that has affected the way critics and scholars approach the traditional Western literary and philosophical canon. Although a variety of historical and sociological factors have contributed to this trend, a widespread push to offer a thoroughgoing critique of colonialism has played a significant role in this shift. In the wake of the fitful and often bloody retreat of the Western colonial enterprise, a robust body of studies has emerged over the past few decades which focuses on the key constitutive elements of colonialism: its psychology, political and administrative policies and structures, literature, history, and language. These studies have demonstrated how, in many cases, a certain "colonial-speak" or rhetoric developed in each of these areas as well as for the overall colonial project. The phrase "colonial discourse" has come to denote the various languages, anthropological and philosophical assumptions, and narratives, all of which constituted the process whereby the specific operations, aims, and justifications for colonialism were simultaneously formulated, promulgated, and executed.<sup>22</sup> A key premise in many of these studies has been that textuality -- including administrative writing, journalism, legal tracts, historiography, and imaginative literature -- was an integral component of colonial discourse, and therefore key to the dynamic of colonization. This has led to the now well-worn observation that the colonial situation was in part imagined and generated in a

kind of recursive scripting of the colonial adventure. This accounts, at least in part, for the widespread critique of the colonial paradigm by means of an interrogation of the Western philosophical and literary canon, and more particularly the ideals of the so-called Enlightenment tradition, all of which are believed to have fueled the colonial project.

For the purposes of this study, one of the most intriguing consequences of this interrogative approach to colonial discourse has been a frequent and incisive critique of the myriad forms of violence that have been instrumental in achieving political and cultural control in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In a telling and important development of twentieth-century intellectual history, a large and significant body of scholarly and philosophical studies concerned with the problem of colonial violence surfaced in conjunction with widespread liberation struggles carried out by colonized peoples across the globe following the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> Many of these attacks on the colonial contagion built their critique around a powerful and controversial extension of various revolutionary theories of violence. Taking the lead of thinkers like Sorel and Bataille, seminal works in postcolonial studies such as Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth* [1961]) and Jean Paul Sartre's *Critique of Reason* extend earlier theoretical explorations of violence to the (post)colonial condition, and therefore highlight the centrality of various forms of violence in (post)colonial discourse. Accordingly, postcolonial theory has been interested in documenting the specific nature, causes, and consequences of the violence by which colonialism secures and tightens its stranglehold on political and cultural power. Conversely, such studies often identify the kind and degree of violence deemed necessary for achieving liberation. As a result,

postcolonial theories and literatures provide their own distinctively rich lexicons and incisive critical and imaginative lenses for exploring how the players in this violent intercultural confrontation employ physical force violence and a variety of psychological, epistemological, and cultural forces in order to respond to the violence(s) perpetrated by the colonial “other.”

From its inception, postcolonial theory has been deeply invested in unmasking and combating various forms of violence inherent in colonial discourse and practice. As a means of distinguishing the kinds of violence Heaney resists and enacts in his writing, I occasionally turn to some of these models in this dissertation. One such study of colonial violence, *Wretched of the Earth*, stands as a seminal text in the field and provides one of the most useful generalized frameworks for understanding the kind of totalizing violence that has characterized the colonization of cultures and territories ranging from southern Africa to Indonesia and the Indian Subcontinent to Ireland. In the chapter entitled “Concerning Violence,” Fanon writes, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” In his view, this is so because violence forms the bedrock of colonialism, a foundation that can only be undermined by responding with uncompromising “absolute violence” in return. Written during a brutal war of liberation, Fanon’s lapidary and at the same time penetrating prose identifies a multi-front campaign of violence at the heart of colonialism’s effort to implant and promulgate itself. Describing the “Manichean world” of colonialism as a world “cut in two . . . [with] the dividing line, the frontiers . . . shown by barracks and police stations,” Fanon identifies territorial occupation, physical violence, and a forced and rigorous division between colonizer and colonized as the cornerstones of colonialism.<sup>24</sup> Once territory is secured, the campaign of violent

intrusion and destruction shifts to indigenous cultural forms. "The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world," Fanon notes, seeks to destroy "the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life" and carries this project out by "a violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed."<sup>25</sup> Finally, colonialism tightens its grip on power through "a systematic negation of the other person," a bodily and psychological denigration and effacement of the colonized other's humanity, a program of negation ultimately founded upon racist ideology.<sup>26</sup>

Following Fanon's lead, a number of postcolonial studies have detailed various facets of colonialism's totalizing violence and have argued that even imaginative literature became infected by "colonial-speak." It is precisely this relation between violence, literary representation, and the discourse of imperial domination that some of the most potent postcolonial critiques seek to expose. Edward Said's landmark study *Orientalism*, for example, exposes various instances of discursive violence contained in occidental misrepresentations of the Near and Far East, many of which were used to underwrite and justify Europe's imperial project of military conquest and socio-political domination.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even the act of translation, a discursive site often considered to be a secondary literary activity in other contexts, becomes a locus of imperial power and an occasion for textual violence.

If critics once studied translation and other forms of violent discourse primarily as unidirectional processes, postcolonial scholars have in recent years emphasized how colonized subjects produce texts that contravene hegemonic violence through a variety of aesthetic and revolutionary strategies of resistance. In this way, literary and cultural studies concerned with the issue of decolonization have shifted their emphasis to a

consideration of what might be called a violent re-scripting of the postcolonial experience and vision. These studies examine anticolonial discourse by detailing the vast body of richly imaginative and highly conflicted textual responses to the related problems of decolonization and violence. In its literary manifestations, the anticolonial critique entails, on one hand, an interrogation of the misrepresentations, distortions, whitewashing of the brutal realities and goals engendered by colonial discourse and practice. On the other hand, this critique involves a highly conflicted negotiation of the cultural traditions and forms imported from the metropole into the colonies and a difficult recovery of badly damaged indigenous cultural and linguistic inheritances. Thus, it is possible to speak of the “counterviolence” contained in works that demonstrate the empire’s efforts to write back, with the best of these studies demonstrating how postcolonial writing serves as an ongoing search for alternative representational modes and ways of knowing the world. In this respect, postcolonial writing, which has often been read as a textual event in terms of the “contact zone” (Pratt) or “third space” (Bhabha), might, in some cases, more aptly be described as a “combat zone.”

Viewed in terms of this violent dynamic, literary texts and the act of writing itself serve as critical flash points within the contentious and often violent intercultural confrontation that constitutes the (post)colonial experience. Describing the “essential confrontation that opens communication between peoples and cultures, even when that communication is not practiced under the banner of colonial or military oppression,” Jacques Derrida coins the phrase *anthropological war* in his commentary on Claude Levi-Strauss’s study of Brazilian indigenes.<sup>28</sup> Insofar as such (post)colonial conflict entails a clash of hegemonic and counterhegemonic socio-linguistic and cultural

positioning, it entails a “violence of the letter,” whereby the dividing lines of “difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations” become the basis for political, social, and economic differentiation and conflict.<sup>29</sup> A broad range of perspectives within postcolonial studies and allied fields has suggested that this cross-flow of cultural and political positioning extends well beyond the moment of first contact. In all of this, writing acts as a kind of fulcrum of cultural production through which hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces struggle to leverage various forms of violence as they vie for representative and representational power. The pursuit of a poetics corresponding to such concerns figures prominently in the writings of a number of anticolonial lyricists both in Ireland and in other postcolonial contexts (e.g., Thomas Davis, Patrick Pearse, Césaire, Senghor, Derek Walcott, to name only a few). In light of this, this study asks the postcolonial field to reconsider the unique function of poetry as a response to and potential participant in this kind of anthropological war. More specifically, it asks when and how we might sometimes identify Heaney’s verse and translations as a “combat zone” and at other times as a “contact zone” or something in-between.

### **Sites of the Postcolonial Revised**

Critics are likely to raise a number of objections concerning my attempt to bring Heaney and the Irish context into the orbit of the postcolonial. To what extent can the broad-based descriptions of (post)colonial violence I have been describing be applied to the Irish context? More particularly, how does this violent dynamic apply to Heaney’s poetic negotiations of violence? While I want to consider each of these issues at some length in the following pages, from the outset it is important to note that I have made this

potentially controversial theoretical move for two reasons. First, I believe many of the particular forms and moments of violence to which Heaney responds in his writing can be accurately categorized under the postcolonial rubric. Secondly, I submit that in many respects Heaney's poetics of violence resemble to a remarkable degree the hybrid and dialogic strategies of a number of anticolonial poets and translators.<sup>30</sup>

Considering the content and tone of recent debates over the correctness of including Ireland in discussions about postcoloniality, these claims will no doubt provoke considerable resistance in certain quarters. At issue in these contentious discussions -- debates which have taken place in both postcolonial and Irish studies -- is Ireland's anomalous status as a postcolonial society. In recent years, a number of prominent critics have argued that Ireland shares little or nothing in common with other postcolonial societies and that Irish literature cannot be profitably submitted to the postcolonial lens.<sup>31</sup> On this score, Denis Donoghue, one of the most vocal critics of efforts to bring Irish literature under the postcolonial microscope, writes: "it is improbable that a critical or theoretical vocabulary designed to meet certain political conditions in Algeria, Germany, France, India, or Palestine can be usefully transferred to Ireland and enforced upon Irish literature."<sup>32</sup> In some respects, Donoghue is correct. The term "postcolonial" can be misleading if it muddles our sense of the current power differences between cultures and peoples or encourages oversimplified comparisons of each local experience of colonialism and decolonization. No doubt, the Irish encounter with colonialism and its legacy has been different, in some cases substantially different, than other postcolonial societies. But it does not follow that the Irish postcolonial experience completely resists comparison with other postcolonial societies.

Gross overgeneralizations will not do when it comes to discussing the Irish question in postcolonial terms. Because of its proximity to the metropole, Ireland was frequently a testing ground for various forms of colonial policy and practices, many of which were later introduced elsewhere in the empire. The combination of geographical proximity and a unique set of economic conditions has meant that the historical relations between England and Ireland developed along sometimes similar and sometimes vastly different lines than those between England and Commonwealth postcolonial nations. Furthermore, significant socio-economic and historical differences separate present-day Ireland from many “Third World” postcolonial societies. Specific differences in the forms of oppression, for example, and the “legal” conquests of the Tudor period and the integration of Ireland into Great Britain through the Act of Union in 1800 make the Irish case somewhat anomalous.

Despite key differences, Ireland’s fitful and centuries-long progress from colonization to liberation parallels the experience of other postcolonial societies in significant ways. To say otherwise, as Donoghue suggests, is to engage in a suspect form of revisionary history. In both its broad trajectory and specific details, the story of Ireland’s encounter with (post)colonialism conforms to several elements of the typical three-pronged colonial assault outlined by Fanon. As an island nation that has suffered successive waves of colonial occupation from the twelfth-century onward, Ireland was England’s first colony, subdued well before the discovery and conquest of the New World. In the 800 years since that first contact, colonial occupation, epistemic violence, and cultural negation were staples of the Irish experience. As in nearly every other colony, the English implemented a systematic plantation policy that drastically and

irrevocably altered the indigenous cultural patterns and environment of Ireland. At numerous moments between the early modern period and the late twentieth century, the Irish have been subjected to various forms and degrees of territorial and cultural dispossession, economic oppression, political and religious discrimination, and disenfranchisement. Some historians have argued that ethnic cleansing, if not outright genocide, was sometimes central to the English colonial project in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, if the staples of colonialism are racism, degradation, and a divide-and-rule policy, the Irish have certainly been brutalized in such manner. During England's long history of intervention and occupation of Irish territory, state-apparatuses (colonial officials, the media, and military forces) have, at various times, used the stereotype of the violent, irrational native to dehumanize the Irish and thereby justify the application of various forms of violence to suppress them.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the systematic eradication of a native Irish cultural inheritance was integral to the establishment of English hegemony. Persistent attempts were made to efface or eradicate Irish culture and language by force or dint of imposed penalties. The disastrous course for the disintegration of Irish culture was partially set in motion with acts such as the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 (by which English colonists outlawed the use of Irish language and customs) and extended through the seventeenth-century reconquest and recolonization of Ireland. Finally, the systematic eradication of a native Irish cultural inheritance was integral to the establishment of English hegemony. A persistent program that had the effect of effacing Irish culture and language by armed force or dint of imposed penalties. The disastrous course for the disintegration of Irish culture was partially set in motion with acts such as the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 (by which English colonists outlawed the use of Irish language and

customs), but the programmatic negation of Irish cultural forms extended through the seventeenth-century reconquest and recolonization of Ireland.

Such colonial violence was not restricted to the medieval and early modern conquests of Ireland. Cultural stereotypes built around the image of the drunken, violent stage-Irishman or simianized portraits of the “barbarous” Irish can be found not only in nineteenth-century British newspapers, but also more recently in twentieth-century popular culture depictions of the Irish in the English media.<sup>35</sup> Such damaging stereotypes bolstered public opinion concerning repressive British policies toward Ireland. From the eighteenth century through the twentieth, the Irish have suffered various periods of armed occupation and suppression of basic human rights. The imposition of the Penal Laws, compulsory English language education, and the remapping of Ireland through the Land Ordinance Survey have all contributed to the demise of the native Irish inheritance. To all of this, we can add a series liberation movements and collective and individual literary-cultural efforts carried out over several centuries to resist and reverse the effects of this colonial experience, efforts which run parallel to similar struggles in other postcolonial situations.

Even during Heaney’s own lifetime, the people of Northern Ireland have lived with the legacy of the former divide-and-rule system. Northern Irish society has continued to bear many ostensible marks of the colonial Manichean-split: overt racism, discrimination, gerrymandering, severe unemployment, job discrimination, and lack of housing. Regarding more immediate outbreaks of violence, the tragic story of the recent Troubles is well known. For over thirty years, the lion’s share of his career, Heaney has had more than ample material out of which to forge a vast body of work dealing with the problem

of violence. Beginning in 1968-69 the citizens of Northern Ireland witnessed the suppression of a vibrant Irish civil rights movement in Ulster which was soon followed by the first fatal sectarian clashes in July 1969; subsequently, an extended period of armed conflict ensued bringing with it more atrocities and an increasingly egregious abrogation of basic human rights. In August 1971, Britain introduced internment in Northern Ireland, a policy denying *habeas corpus* to more than 1,500 people by the end of that year. In this period's most infamous incident, British paratroopers opened fire on unarmed civil rights protestors in Derry on January 30, 1972, leaving thirteen protestors dead and twelve wounded. Subsequently, Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries ramped up campaigns of indiscriminate murders and bombings of civilians. Eventually, the conflict spread to the Republic with the detonation of Loyalist bombs in Dublin and Monaghan in 1974. During the next two decades, Ireland buckled under the strain of a relentless cycle of sectarian murders, paramilitary bombings, and counterattacks, resulting in the loss of thousands of innocent lives.<sup>36</sup> In many respects, then, the story of contemporary Ulster has become a grotesque rehash of many aspects of the brutal and lethal colonial narrative.<sup>37</sup>

Though it is perhaps more challenging, at least in some respects, to locate contemporary Ireland and its present-day writers within the strict confines of the current postcolonial paradigm, it is not impossible. The historical record and, even more importantly, countless twentieth-century collective and individual responses to the colonial contagion in Ireland underscore the poignant truth of Luke Gibbons's claim that "Ireland is a First World nation, with a Third World memory."<sup>38</sup> Memories die slowly in postcolonial societies, as Fanon and Cabral remind us, because colonial mechanisms

were so geared to the task of wiping out subaltern memory. This partially explains the currency of Louis MacNeice's observation that "the past never dies / especially never in Ireland." This remains as true today as it was in the first half of the twentieth century. The Irish experience of colonial occupation, racial discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and cultural dispossession often recalls various forms of violence directed at scores of other once colonized peoples. This is not to obscure real differences between contemporary Ireland and other postcolonial societies, nor is it to engage in a kind of perverse study of comparative victimization. The socio-economic and political opportunities open to a present-day Derry resident are admittedly a far cry from the brutalized existence of millions of displaced postcolonial citizens from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, or any number of other nations. What the denizens of each of these former colonies share in common, however, is a living sense of the deep and still-festering wounds inflicted by colonialism. In Ireland, these traumas indeed continue to play themselves out in the streets of Belfast, in the psyches of citizens from both the Republic and Ulster, and in the verse of contemporary Northern Irish poets.

It is precisely because the marks of Ireland's and Heaney's postcoloniality are often anomalous but sometimes held in common with other postcolonial societies that I have found it rewarding to bring these cases under the postcolonial microscope. I am not alone in making this move. Taking the lead of Homi Bhabha's remark in the *Location of Culture* (1990) that the "Irish question has been reposed as a post-colonial problem," several major critics have begun placing Irish writers, to include Irish poets, under the postcolonial microscope.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, key aspects of the postcolonial perspective help elucidate rather than obscure not only our understanding of the conflicted relationship

between Ireland and England (as well as the unique literature it has spurred), but also our appreciation of Heaney's complex negotiations of various forms of postcolonial violence. The finest examples of postcolonial theory and criticism repeatedly demonstrate that the kind of strict identitarian readings of literature against which Donoghue and others rail are, in fact, of little interest or use to the most adept critics in the discipline. If postcolonial theorists have been deeply interested in exploring how power imbalances are brought to bear on literary expression and vice versa, they have also broadened the analysis of postcoloniality to include the study of the interstitial relations between colonizer and colonized, transcultural and interpersonal exchanges which reach well beyond anything we might call partisan politics. Several leading postcolonial critics have thus significantly extended the field's range of interests to include transcultural relations that inform various aspects of literary expression: the psychological (Bhabha's "Third Space" and Nandy's psychology of the postcolonial), the anthropological (Mary Louise Pratt's description of the "contact zone" and autoethnographic writing), and the socio-linguistic aspects of poetic expression (Jahan Ramazani's examination of the implications of the kind "artistic hybridization" he sees at work in much postcolonial poetry). Each of these perspectives can cast the Irish situation and Heaney's work in a new light.

Even as some in the field still cling to postcolonialism's early emphasis on teasing out fictive formulations of colonial/postcolonial discourse in the so-called "Third World" by employing a critical methodology that privileges the mimetic tendencies and functions of novelistic representation, an increasing number of postcolonial critics have offered exciting explorations of poetry's role in the discourses of colonization and decolonization. As such, these studies offer the possibility of examining Irish

postcolonial discourse from a refreshing angle, one that differs significantly from the important, but perhaps now-overdone, disciplinary emphasis on the deconstruction of grand narratives or the recuperation of fictive and dramatic works that contributed to the recovery and reconstruction of indigenous politics, sociological relations, and historical perspectives in postcolonial societies. Regarding the Irish context, a number of important cultural and literary critics have recently focused on the signal role of poetry and poets in Ireland's long struggle to secure cultural and national autonomy. Such studies cover a diverse group of poets ranging from the nineteenth-century Young Irelanders to Patrick Kavanagh, and from the poets of the eighteenth-century Gaelic-speaking bardic poets to the Rebel Poets of 1916. Even Yeats, despite Donoghue's proscriptions, has been read as a major postcolonial voice by critics such as Edward Said and Jahan Ramazani, two critics among many who argue for Yeats's lyric poetry as a key discursive site of postcoloniality.<sup>40</sup> Finally, there are a growing number of excellent articles and monographs dealing with the postcolonial tendencies in several contemporary Northern Irish poets, including Heaney, Paul Muldoon, John Montague, Medbh McGuckian and Tom Paulin.

While this project situates Heaney's poetics within larger discussions of postcolonial theory and criticism, it seeks to qualify that placement and interrogate some of the assumptions of the field's practitioners. My research into Heaney's evolving poetics and its relation to the problem of violence has ultimately led me to join a number of other critics in asking whether a rethinking of the boundaries, parameters, and biases that inform the study of postcolonialism is not in order. Heaney represents a particular brand of writer who inevitably confounds many of the conceptions of postcoloniality. As

a poet who writes primarily in the lyric mode, his work does not neatly conform to many of the rigid critical assumptions, analytical frameworks, and categorizations that have been institutionalized in the field. As I have noted, lyric poetry is still marginalized, if not outright ignored, by many postcolonial critics. Accordingly, this dissertation challenges the field to ask why it has generally not made room in the postcolonial pantheon for a writer the likes of Heaney: a Northern Irish poet who, as a self-professed constitutional nationalist, has increasingly resisted the lure of armed revolution and virulent anti-humanism over the years.

For all of these reasons, the postcolonial move has proven to be a challenging, but ultimately rewarding, approach to Heaney's extensive poetry of violence. Postcolonial theory has been particularly useful in helping me untangle many of the strands constituting the complicated web of socio-political and cultural forces that impinge upon Heaney's consciousness and inform his poetics. Employing the discipline's rich vocabulary and incisive critical lens for exploring how physical force violence and a variety of psychological, epistemological, and cultural forces are directed against the colonial other (from the top down and from the bottom up), I have found them to be flexible, yet productive critical frameworks for examining Heaney's poetic response to the Northern Irish crisis.

If the postcolonial paradigm has assisted me in identifying some of the overarching concerns relevant to postcolonial poets, novelists, and dramatists alike— concerns such as the problems of cultural dispossession and recovery, the deterritorialization of language, the function of minority literature, and the role of radical historicity in subaltern literatures – it has been far less helpful in providing a practical means of tracking the

evolution of Heaney's aesthetic. The postcolonial field as a whole offers few precedents for considering poetics at all. Apart from Ramazani's important reading of postcolonial poetry and Barbara Harlow's solid section on the relation between poets and liberation movements in her book *Resistance Literature* there are few English language models in the field that consider poetry as a primary discursive site in postcolonial societies. Even those critics who have read Irish poets in postcolonial terms typically steer free of formal and prosodic issues and instead focus on broad thematic considerations. Why this has been the case is difficult to pinpoint. Perhaps it has occurred because postcolonial criticism was for some time grounded in mimetic presuppositions about literature and therefore often uninterested in the formal and linguistic strategies of poetry. Or perhaps it is due to a prejudice that formal issues are not political issues. Whatever the cause, the neglect of aesthetics is somewhat frustrating and myopic -- particularly with regard to Ireland, a country where formal and linguistic issues are never strictly aesthetic concerns, but rather matters of substantial socio-political and cultural significance.

### **Defining The Poetics of Violence**

In *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), Heaney provides a detailed and comprehensive explanation of his aesthetic. On the first page of this collection of lectures delivered between 1989 and 1994 during his tenure as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, Heaney cites Wallace Stevens's dictum that "the nobility of poetry 'is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without'. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality."<sup>41</sup> Coming from the modernist Stevens, whose verse often

conjugates up an enameled world excised of brutality, the mention of violence may surprise us. But we should recall the speaker in "Sunday Morning" who proclaims, "Death is the mother of beauty." Considering Heaney's own career and oeuvre, however, his use of Stevens's phrase should come as no surprise. Repeatedly throughout his career, Heaney has demonstrated a conviction that writing is a violent act, which takes violence as its subject matter. But there is more to the poetics of violence than this, as Declan Kiberd notes when he identifies Heaney as the contemporary Irish writer who has "most fully explored the points of intersection between poetry and violence."<sup>42</sup> Exploring in some detail these contact points constitutes the most immediate aim of this study.

What it has meant for Heaney to explore this intersection has proven a point of bitter contention in Irish critical circles. The jury is still out on the artistic, socio-political, and ethical (yes, even ethical) significance of Heaney's poetics of violence because the jurors are still deliberating a number of key questions pertaining to Irish decolonization. Some of these key questions include: At what stage of decolonization does absolute violence derail progress toward liberation? What is the political function of poetry in Irish society? And, ultimately, what is the relationship between poetry and various forms of violence (linguistic, epistemic, cultural, political – forms of violence with which Irish postcolonial society continues to grapple in the aftermath of a long history of oppressive colonial rule and sectarian division)?

Insofar as Heaney's poetry responds to and generates such questions, I contend we can speak of it in terms of a "poetics of violence." In the first place then, I elaborate the phrase "poetics of violence" in a rather broad sense -- the process by which individual and communal notions of literature's function and effect in society are formulated and

contested.<sup>43</sup> I use this phrase because behind all of the preceding questions there stands perhaps the most fundamental question of all: Does the poetic representation of violence function only on a reproductive and symbolic level, or does it somehow become a generative or catalytic force in the dialectic of violence?<sup>44</sup> The question essentially becomes whether poetry is more than just a mirror of private subjectivity, an interior response to external violence, or whether it can, and in fact does, participate in the politics of violence. If poetry is indeed a player in decolonization and therefore creative of what Benedict Anderson might call the Irish imagined community, we need to ask how a poet like Heaney goes about the task of responding to, challenging, and perhaps even changing the socio-political status quo via linguistic and formal means. Thus, in the following pages, I refer to the broader cultural dynamic in which the relationship between literature and violence is formulated and debated as “field poetics.”<sup>45</sup>

It may be asked what warrants the exploration of field poetics in a reading of Heaney. First of all, I believe it is a fundamental philosophical mistake to assume that individual and communal notions of poetics are spawned in isolation. I therefore contend that an acknowledgement of the critical and cultural climate out of which any poet's aesthetic arises is a legitimate point of enquiry. Though this may compromise our desire to grant poets a broad margin of imaginative autonomy, in Heaney's case one cannot understand fully the why and wherefore of his sometimes-Byzantine poetic strategies without at least recognizing the troubled critical and cultural mosaic out of which they issue. Secondly, if we begin to understand the vexed relation between Heaney's poetry, the critical and public reception, and various forms of violence in Irish society, then

perhaps we can lay the groundwork for asking similar questions about other postcolonial situations.

Another benefit of attending to field poetics is that it opens a window on the unique status of poetry in Irish postcolonial society. What the local critical reception makes quite evident is that literary representations of violence are widely believed to have a palpable impact on Irish society. This holds true for drama and novels as well as lyric poetry (an art form considered to be marginal and relatively innocuous in many cultures). In Ireland, however, things are different. Clair Wills succinctly sums up the status of verse in Ireland when she writes, "poetry has a critical function in so far as it intervenes in, and comments on, the construction of the political sphere."<sup>46</sup> Thus, when it comes to Heaney, it is impossible to detail fully how his poetry at once participates in and spurs critical and cultural conflict without being cognizant of field poetics. Indeed, many Irish commentators have argued that Heaney's poetry, for better or worse, has exerted considerable influence on the course of the recent Troubles. A telltale sign of this is that critics frequently discuss the relation between Heaney's poetry and violence in highly literal terms in an attempt to determine the causal relation between his poetry and Northern Irish political violence.

That such discussions of an Irish poet's work should occur is not entirely surprising, particularly given that we are dealing with a cultural context where "popular political culture . . . is filtered through the aesthetic, and through mythic archetypes (rather than 'hard facts')." <sup>47</sup> Heaney's rising stock and almost pop-star status from the mid-1970s onward gave him tremendous access to popular political culture. Indeed, Heaney's poetry is widely read in Ireland and Britain (so widely read that thirty thousand copies of

*North* sold in the first two years after its publication in Britain). Additionally, much of his verse deals with mythic archetypes and issues pertaining to decolonization in highly complex and often ironic ways. All of which not only justifies the claim that Heaney's work filters popular political culture through the aesthetic, but also explains why there has been such heated debate concerning Heaney's poetic response to the problem of violence.

At the risk of oversimplifying a highly complex field of critical responses, the reception of Heaney's poetry of violence can be divided into roughly three camps. First, there are those who go so far as to brand Heaney a votary of violence, "an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for the 'situation', in the last resort, a mystifier."<sup>48</sup> Arguing that Heaney's work (most specifically the collection *North*) engages not only in a crass but also morally and politically bankrupt aestheticization and mythicization of violence, critics such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, Edna Longley, and the Belfast poet Ciaran Carson see an "unhealthy intersection" between Heaney's poetry and politics. The upshot of much of this criticism in the 1970s is that Heaney was tacitly underwriting, if not exacerbating, violent tensions in Northern Ireland.<sup>49</sup> Curiously, others, including some of Heaney's most implacable detractors, followed suit by severely rebuking him for what they see as his fundamental failure to address the recent Irish experience of violence with any degree of evenhandedness or artistic integrity.

Initially led by the post-nationalist commentator Desmond Fennell in the 1980s, this second camp levels the charge that Heaney shirks his duty to act as a kind of Northern Irish unacknowledged legislator by failing to address the conflict in any substantive or efficacious manner. According to Fennell, rather than saying too much about the

problem of political violence, Heaney's corpus "says nothing, plainly or figuratively, about the war, about any of the three main parties to it, or about the issues at stake . . . Heaney says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight which we hardly need to read poetry for."<sup>50</sup> Since Fennell published his cranky condemnation in a pamphlet entitled *Whatever You Say Say Nothing*, numerous variations of Fennell's reading have subsequently surfaced arguing that Heaney's poetry says nothing of merit about the recent conflict. Perhaps the most virulent variation on this theme emerged in the wake of Heaney's reception of the Nobel Prize in 1995. In an invective-laced essay entitled "The Glittering Prize," which appeared in the influential Belfast monthly *Fortnight*, the Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Wilson asks, "Can there be any real doubt that he has largely avoided writing a great deal about political violence in Northern Ireland?" Wilson's answer, along with a number of other critics, is a resounding "No." Laying out the prosecution's case, Wilson argues that the Nobel committee had wrongly praised Heaney for responding to the conflict with "ethical depth" because "he has not spoken to both traditions in this divided island. . . . [Heaney] has left out that unpoetic stuff, that very actual mess."<sup>51</sup>

If Heaney has weathered his fair share of adversarial criticism, a number of prominent Irish voices have taken up his cause, often with considerable vigor. Lead by influential figures in Irish letters such as Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, and Denis Donoghue, Heaney's champions have produced numerous encomiastic analyses of Heaney's poetry of violence. Such critics have suggested that the poet's work, though problematic in many respects, contains a salubrious alternative response to the problem of Irish violence, a response that exercises an ameliorative effect in Irish society. Deane,

for example, begins from the assumption that Heaney's writing is profoundly influenced by the knowledge that "the roots of poetry and violence grow in the same soil." Because Heaney's poetry so consistently and variously grapples with the issue of cultural and physical violence, Deane concludes that Heaney's work amounts to a courageous "revision of our heritage," one that "is changing our conception of what writing can be because it is facing up to what writing, to remain authentic, must always face – the confrontation with the ineffable, the unspeakable thing for which 'violence' is our helplessly inadequate word."<sup>52</sup> In other celebratory essays, there is a strong suggestion by his supporters that Heaney's poetry of violence has in fact raised him to the status of a kind of "poet of witness."<sup>53</sup>

What is at issue in most of these arguments is a question concerning the role literary figures and works are expected to play in shaping the course of Irish public life. By extension, these arguments also question what responsibility Heaney bears for the politics of violence. Given the starkly contradictory terms of this debate, it seems we have some sorting out to do. How is it that Heaney has been an "apologist" for sectarian killing while at the same time essentially saying "nothing" of substance about the Troubles? How is Wilson able to conclude that Heaney elides "the actual mess" even as the *Irish Times* was defending Heaney's Nobel honors: "A writer who had nothing adequate to say about the hatred and violence of those years would not deserve to be honoured at home, let alone abroad"?<sup>54</sup> How is that critics such as Kiberd, one of Ireland's most evenhanded scholars, and Seamus Deane, an unabashed Irish nationalist and poststructuralist, can conclude that Heaney's poetry of violence generally acts as a necessary and persuasive corrective to those forces in Irish society which seek to co-opt

everything and anything at their disposal in the cause of physical force nationalism, while others contend that Heaney's aesthetic is complicit in imperial ideology? In response to these various arguments and counterarguments a number of more general questions and themes arise. Is Heaney's penchant for addressing violence in highly complex, and at times labyrinthine, poetic language a mystification of the problem of violence, or can it be seen as a sort of de-mystification and clarification? Does Heaney's practice of using the former colonizer's forms and language in order to condemn hegemonic and sectarian violence alike equate to complicity with imperial ideology? Can Heaney's poetics of violence be properly located, as some critics imply, in the same category as the ideological aesthetics of the Young Irelanders's or that of the Rebel Poets of 1916, two groups which cultivated a poetics that openly endorsed physical force nationalism through a rarified variant of a romantic aesthetic?

In light of such standing questions -- questions that have perhaps unduly burdened the criticism -- there is yet room for a comprehensive and more systematic reading of Heaney's poetry of violence. Though it is impossible here to disentangle all of the ways Heaney's poetry contributes to this vexed and historically-complex socio-political dynamic, I would hope my engagement with these issues might facilitate a more systematic and comprehensive consideration of what it has meant for Heaney to forge a poetic response to the problem of violence.<sup>55</sup> If this dissertation seeks, among other things, to reopen the causality debate, I do not claim to provide anything more than provisional answers to these questions. But by asking a series of tough questions about the complex liaison between violence, creative literature, and reception in Ireland, a connection whose complexity I have only just begun to understand, we can begin to see

which of these various contradictory criticisms of Heaney withstand the test of closer scrutiny.

If this project originated in a desire to respond to the issue of "field poetics," reliable answers to the questions above will only emerge from an examination of Heaney's poetry itself. Though the critical discussion about Heaney's poetry of violence is quite fascinating, it can also be quite frustrating. The tragic and dizzying complexity of the Northern Irish situation has led to a number of attenuated and at times overdetermined readings of Heaney's poetry of violence in which overbearing ideological or identitarian arguments squelch any discussion of aesthetics. In short, what often goes missing in discussions of the political in Heaney is the poetry itself. This is not to say that matters pertaining to ideology and identity are unworthy of consideration, but before we can assess the impact of Heaney's poetry upon collective behavior and understanding, we must first look at the sources of the poetry itself.

Apart from trying to cast new light on some fairly well-trodden critical discussions of thematic issues, I seek to redress previous imbalances in some of the criticism by extending the discussion of Heaney's poetry of violence into what often gets overlooked in all of the political and theoretical wrangling: the formal, linguistic, and generic details of Heaney's verse. Only by expanding our consideration of poetics in terms of what one critic has aptly called "poetic artifice" can we determine exactly what Heaney says about violence. This statement gives rise to a number of questions. How have the problems of overwhelming violence and protracted socio-political upheaval affected the deep structures of Heaney's form and prosody as well as his overall conception of poetry? Can violence can be said, in some way, to be an efficient cause of Heaney's work poetry

in the period following the outbreak of violence in 1969, and if so how? In short, I seek to detail how external manifestations of violence get into the very form and language of Heaney's poetry and translations.

Thus another angle of approach to the intersection between violence and Heaney's poetry, one that has yet to be employed in any systematic and extended manner by Heaney's critics, is to consider how thoroughly violence insinuates itself into the very core of what I call his "concrete poetic." Here I elaborate the phrase "poetic of violence" in my title not simply in terms of topically linked poems, which are in some way a thematic response to a specific political issue or event. Rather, I use it to denote the study of the formal, generic, and linguistic tools employed by Heaney as he seeks to filter and transform his experience of violence into verse. Such transformations occur at various verbal and non-linguistic levels of poetic signification. Thus, my study of Heaney's innovative use of poetic artifice includes taking stock of his deployment of general literary elements (genres, motifs, symbols, tropes, etc), but even more specifically the specialized devices of the poetic craft which differentiate verse from prose: poetry's unique formal, syntactical, rhythmic, phonetic, verbal, and rhetorical features. It is at this level of detailed study that I seek to explore some of the most intriguing, but perhaps least appreciated, aspects of Heaney's response to the Ulster conflict.

In my reading of Heaney's strategic deployment of poetic artifice, I contend that through an ongoing and sometimes dramatic series of stylistic and formal makeovers Heaney continuously pushes the aesthetic envelope. The result of Heaney's experimentations and adaptations in this regard is a rich and potent response not only to specific moments and events pertaining to the Ulster conflict but also to a whole set of

violent mechanisms which underpin and perpetuate a Northern Irish culture of violence. In some of his finest poems, Heaney works various elements of poetic artifice into a powerful field of force for resisting even the most injurious external pressures engendered by the conflict. To the same end, Heaney gradually adds a tactical use of a potent anti-pastoralism and a highly personalized and hybridized practice of translation to battle political and cultural violence. Thus in his poetics of violence, various patterns of artifice sometimes imaginatively enact at the formal level the poet's conceptual and emotional response to external and internal conflict. At other junctures, Heaney's lineation, imagery, rhythmic phrasing, and syntax may act as a kind of temporary stay against destruction and confusion (to borrow a phrase from one of the poet's major influences, Robert Frost), with each of these elements conspiring to contain and even momentarily stop dead in its tracks all sorts of violence on and off the page. At still other moments, Heaney goes on the offensive by assaulting and exploding some of the very forms and structures of prosodic and linguistic artifice behind which the agents of colonialism have taken cover as they have taken over. In various ways, then, scores of Heaney poems and translations create a kind of sovereign space in which a consciousness can perhaps catch its breath, confront the humiliations and depravations of oppression, or in some cases simply enjoy the palliative of a brief lyric reprieve from the ravages of quotidian violence.

In this regard, my project is an attempt to identify and articulate in a theoretically-informed framework how external conflict insinuates itself into a particular poet's imagination. But more specifically, I am interested how external forms of violence find themselves reincarnated in the internal workings of the constitutive elements of any given

poem or translation project. None of this is meant to advance an overly reductive argument that armed conflict alone causes poetry or that violence serves as the sole impetus for the emergence of any given set of aesthetic assumptions and practices. Poets do, of course, develop aesthetic principles and practices for a myriad of reasons. But if it is impossible to single out definitively the prime impetus behind an aesthetic trend in any given poet's work, there are nonetheless certain signposts that mark distinctive stylistic and thematic shifts in interest. This is certainly true of Heaney's evolving poetics of violence.

Significant changes occurring after 1969 in Heaney's "concrete poetics" suggest that we can profitably explore the relation between violence and poetic form in my proposed manner. During the first few years immediately following the resumption of fighting, the effects of external violence are felt everywhere in the most basic building blocks of his lyrics. Whereas Heaney cultivated a concrete poetics in his pre-conflict poetry that established its emotional register through image-complexes painted in various shades of a kind of green-thoughts-in-a-green-land reverie and inscapes reminiscent of Hopkins, after 1969 the imagery to which Heaney turns most frequently is that of gun-toting soldiers, British-run internment camps ringed with barbed wire, and the mangled bodies and psyches of present-day *mutilés de guerre*. In this period, Heaney's search for poetic fields of force is not limited to symbol and image; he extends it to include the full range of poetic artifice. Abandoning his preference for long, graceful lineation, mellifluous and sometimes highly contrived diction, and peaceful iambs echoing the quiet rhythms of country matters, Heaney begins to adopt a voice marked by entirely new

measures and sound like the staccato rhythms of street talk, an almost reportorial form of detached journalese, and a penchant for squat, hard-hitting two-beat quatrains.

Indeed, it is remarkable how Heaney abandons or places in storage many of the comfortable and by then somewhat predictable formal, prosodic, and linguistic conventions he had grown accustomed to using in his well-made poems. In the wake of renewed fighting in 1969, Heaney's often troubled and highly uneven efforts to find more adequate and responsive ways of expressing his experience of violence result in a frequent and occasionally frenzied revamping or jettisoning of old or inadequate forms and modes of lyric expression. On multiple levels, violence seems first to grate against and then render obsolete numerous elements of Heaney's previous sense of good form as well as the linguistic and conceptual proprieties of his earlier work. He all but abandons, at least for several years, his predilection for more conventional structural patterns and strict forms and begins to subvert a number of the formal and generic modes that had formerly been mainstays of his lyric poetry; instead he adopts a variety of innovative dialogic formal strategies for resisting and combating external violence. In lieu of his former affinity for making well-wrought sonnets and ballads, for instance, Heaney often turns to a new form of prose poetry that stresses graphic violent imagery and a hard-hitting vernacular, a move which amounts to a kind of poetic version of the new journalism. In a number of poems he parodies or subverts traditional strict forms like the sonnet or ballad. In poems like the highly uneven "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" -- a poem that few critics have attended to -- Heaney often mocks and parodies lyric form and experiments. Similarly, in the heteroglossic Irish street ballad "Craig's Dragoon's," he undercuts the conventional ballad tradition. Heaney also moves away from a comfortable

liaison with some of the more conventional elements of pastoral and nature poetry and shifts into a more pronounced anti-pastoral mode. And when none of this works, he invents exciting new forms such as the artesian stanza poem. In all of this, I perceive a dynamic at work in which external violence destabilizes Heaney's aesthetic in ways that few critics have previously detailed.

Insofar as concrete poetics, field poetics, and external conflict intersect, we can speak on various levels about the poetics of violence. Such a discussion of the poetics of violence as they pertain to Heaney is long overdue. When we consider in detail how Heaney's concrete poetics directly respond to external violence, it becomes difficult to maintain that Heaney's poetics represent an aesthete's retreat into "the refuge of form," as some of his critics have suggested. For Heaney, formal elements are seldom an isolated phenomenon divorced of social or political significance. On the contrary, Heaney brings both personal and collective perceptions and experiences of violence into what he calls "the jurisdiction of form." In the process, his formal and linguistic operations not only cast new light on the problem of violence, but they also construct alternative responses to the problem. Thus, in reading the most basic properties of Heaney's prolific lyric poetry and translations as the products of distinct historical and socio-political conditions, I take seriously Antony Easthope's challenge in *Poetry as Discourse* that we must begin to consider more thoughtfully how history is inscribed within a poem rather than outside it. Additionally, I follow the lead of John Brenkman, who, in his study of Blake and other poets, "encourages us to counter the habits of Marxist and non-Marxist criticism alike by recognizing that society and politics shape the very project of a poet's work and the inner dynamics of poetic language itself."<sup>56</sup> At

numerous junctures in his own work, Heaney himself invites this type of evaluative approach to his poetic and the poetics of fellow Northern Irish poets. In his essay "Place and Displacement," Heaney discusses at length "the profound relation ... between poetic technique and historical situation." Citing the example of contemporary Northern Irish writers and their response to "violent conditions," he likens the representational binds of these writers to crises of conscience and representation that William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot found themselves confronting during the French Revolutionary period and the First World War respectively. In short, Heaney believes "it is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions."<sup>57</sup> Rather, what Heaney suggests and demonstrates in readings of the contemporary Northern Irish poetry of war is that the development of new poetic language and form is often spurred by the need to address violent external circumstances in a manner that maintains both political and artistic integrity.

By detailing the relationship between specific explosions of postcolonial violence, broader cultural perceptions of intercultural conflict, and Heaney's concrete poetic, I seek to demonstrate how external political conflict and a variety of other forms of violence have motivated and informed some of the key moments and major projects in his career. Thus, my project not only tracks the diverse creative processes and pressures which increasingly led Heaney to view his verse as what he calls "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without." It also details the vexed socio-political context in which Heaney came to conceive of and deploy poetry as "a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance."<sup>58</sup> In the face of benumbing and overwhelming violence, Heaney developed a commitment to balancing a sense of poetry as "mode of

redress” (a means of “proclaiming and correcting injustices”) with a commitment to redressing “poetry as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means.”<sup>59</sup> It is precisely the tensions created by these conceptions of poetry’s force and function that I seek to explore in the following exploration of Heaney’s poetics of violence.

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## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> Denis Donoghue, "The Literature of Trouble" in *We Irish* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1996), p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, "An Unhealthy Intersection," *New Review*, 2 16 (July 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), pp. xxv-xxvi.

Despite this acknowledgement of the relationship between literature and violence in Ireland, there are relatively few detailed studies of the subject. To my knowledge there is no literary history akin to Richard Slotkin's massive three-volume study of the myth of "regeneration through violence" in American culture and politics. In his first volume, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600 – 1860*, Slotkin argues that colonists and pioneers saw in the American frontier an opportunity to "regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation," but the means of regeneration were almost invariably violent (Slotkin 5). I have traced many of the same themes in early modern colonial literature such as Spenser's *A View To the Present State of Ireland*, a work that is deeply imbued with Calvinist notions of regenerative violence.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 1; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (R 1).

<sup>5</sup> As Northrop Frye notes the notion of lyric as a kind of praise for these two poets did not involve a quest for some kind of "prefabricated heaven," but rather it entailed an encounter with "an earthly paradise we stumble on accidentally, like the castle of the Grail." See Frye's essay in Patricia Parker, *Lyric Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> See Declan Kiberd's impressive history of modern Irish literature and culture *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 596. Kiberd makes the point about Heaney and violence in a brief, but nonetheless perspicacious overview of the poet's career.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, "Introduction to the First Publication (1906)" (reprint New York: Harcourt, 1961), p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> On the history of violence as a subject of philosophical and political enquiry see Hannah Arendt's *Crisis of the Republic*. New York, Harcourt, 1969. Also see Birinder Pal Singh's *Problem of Violence* (Rashtrapati Nivas: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), pp. 24-33, for a succinct overview of the historical neglect of violence in the Western philosophical tradition and more recent efforts to correct this oversight.

<sup>9</sup> Since World War II, there has been an dramatic increase in the number of specialized studies on violence across a broad and diverse range of disciplinary interests, a trend that literary scholars have engaged in with a mixed degree of interest.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Platt, "The concept of violence as descriptive and polemic," *International Social Science Journal*, 132, Vol. XLIV, No. 2, 1992, p. 186.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (reprint New York: Harcourt, 1961), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Since Sorel's theory of violence influences the work of several theorists of violence – writers such as Arendt, Fanon, Sartre who comment on or conduct the postcolonial critique of violence – it is perhaps useful to briefly outline Sorel's definition. By defining violence in positive terms as the proletarian revolt against the stranglehold of the middle-class and State, Sorel restricts the term to subaltern acts of political rebellion. Furthermore, he rejects the customary practice of using the terms force and violence interchangeably to describe repressive authority and legitimate revolt. For Sorel, like many radical theorists of violence, it is important to note that there is always already an essentially creative element in the employment of physical violence from below.

<sup>13</sup> Some forms of non-physical violence may more amenable to objective measurement (at least according to the standards of the physical sciences or statistical analysis of political science), but a variety of theoretical perspectives ranging from psychology to poststructuralism have demonstrated that a wide range of social and cultural phenomena which other disciplines identify as violence (but which are not political in nature) can nonetheless have very real and lasting concrete consequences.

<sup>14</sup> Here I am also thinking of the wide-ranging and deleterious effects of discursive formations such as those documented by Edward Said and others in their discussions of Orientalism.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Venuti, "Translation as cultural politics: regimes of domestication in English," *Textual Practice*, 7:2 (Summer, 1993), p. 208.

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976), pp. 278-79.

<sup>17</sup> This designation opens a potentially vast period of study in the case of Ireland. Various critics have suggested that postcolonial studies might reach back to twelfth century Ireland in some cases. I do not possess the expertise to evaluate the accuracy of such a claim, but based on my current understanding, I do not believe the typical apparatuses and components of the strategic formation that characterize state-sponsored colonialism were sufficiently in place in the medieval period so as to warrant this designation. I do believe, however, these elements began taking shaping in the early modern period, and thus, I accept Declan Kiberd's fixing of the advent of Irish postcolonial writing in the seventeenth-century when native Irish writers began formulating texts "committed to cultural resistance" (*Ilire* pp. 5-6). In any case, the type of postcolonial writing one typically associates with the field undoubtedly began to take shape in the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries first under the auspices of groups such as the Young Irelander movement and later during the Irish Revival with recognized postcolonial writers such as W.B. Yeats.

<sup>18</sup> The emphasis on post-occupation seems to dominate many early postcolonial studies. In contrast, my use of the word "postcolonial" emphasizes not only on the kind of narrow demarcation of the discipline that characterized it early on (i.e., the study of an historical situation marked by the dismantling of traditional institutions and of colonial power [i.e., the practical liberationist struggle]) but rather on a broader sense of the complex, multi-phased processes whereby a colonized people engages in a search for alternatives to the discourses colonialism before and after the colonial power ends its occupation of the colony. Whereas earlier formulations of postcoloniality tended to stress the concrete historical and political process in any given colonial situation after which the colonial occupation is terminated -- normally through the recovery of a suppressed cultural and linguistic inheritance, nationalistic rhetoric, oppositional politics, armed resistance, etc. Later formulations tend to stress both a practical political project and a trans-cultural condition that includes, along with new possibilities, certain crises of identity and representation (Fanon's who am I?). In the case of Ireland, the use of the word "postcolonial" to denote a post-divestment phase is problematic given the contested status of the six Northern counties and significant asymmetries of power (social, economic and political) between Ireland and other British colonies. Nonetheless, I will retain the term in this essay in its broadest sense in which it applies to indigenous cultures once subjugated under colonial rule and responding to the lingering effects of colonialism.

<sup>19</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Incorporate above or nix. The first usage signifies the concrete historical process in any given colonial situation whereby the colonial occupation is terminated -- normally through the recovery of a suppressed cultural and linguistic inheritance, nationalistic rhetoric, oppositional politics, armed resistance, etc.. The second is both an intellectual project and a trans-cultural condition that includes, along with new possibilities, certain crises of identity and representation (Fanon's who am I?). In neither the historical nor the cultural sense does the postcolonial mark a clean break with the colonial.

<sup>21</sup> Particularly in the Irish case, it is extremely important to note that the moment of divestment marks neither the beginning nor end of postcoloniality, as is evidenced, in part, by the on-going political and cultural wrangling over the destiny of the residents of Ireland's six northern counties since the Irish War for Independence in 1921-22.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see David Spurr's superbly documented account of colonial writing in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> In fact, what had long been almost exclusively the domain of political and social philosophers concerned with the phenomena of war and revolution, became a central feature of the work of some of colonialism's most ardent critics in the 1950s and 1960s. Two of the most incisive minds behind the emerging anticolonial movements of this period, Jean Paul Sartre and Fanon, forged their critique of the colonial contagion around a powerful and controversial conception of violence that has inspired a generation of scholars from various disciplines to focus their attention on the problem of violence with an unprecedented degree of intensity and rigor.

<sup>24</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 38-39; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (WE 38). Ibid. Insofar as colonialism derives authority from the barrel of a gun rather than the consent of the governed, it brooks neither dialogue nor dissent. In colonial countries, "the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain

contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts . . . the agents of government speak the language of pure force."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 40. Amílcar Cabral speaks of this kind of cultural negation in similar terms: "domination . . . can be maintained only by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned. . . In fact, to take up arms to dominate a people is, above all, to take up arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize, to paralyze, its cultural life. For, with a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 42. On this score, Fanon writes, "At times the Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's creeping motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary."

<sup>27</sup> Said constructs what amounts to a monolithic, unidirectional theory of colonial discourse based on a quasi-Foucauldian model. Later Said revises and refines his theory of colonial discourse in *Culture and Imperialism* and admits the possibility of resistance and intercultural exchange.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (trans.) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 107-108.

<sup>30</sup> Anticolonialism is the term preferred by many literary critics as opposed to postindependence or postcolonization. This broad formulation of postcoloniality stresses resistance to the discourses of colonization both before and after independence. In the case of Heaney, the designation "anticolonial" is useful given the conflicted status of Ireland's six northern counties. The trajectory of Heaney's career shows that he worked in a distinctly nationalist mode early in his career, but in the early 1980s he distanced himself from decidedly nationalistic anticolonial rhetoric and engaged in a search for an alternative, less antagonistic mode of anticolonial discourse.

<sup>31</sup> This argument has come from all points on the ideological spectrum. Space limitations do not permit an extended discussion of Ireland's contested postcolonial status. The central terms of this issue can be found in numerous contributions to the debate about the omission of Ireland from the now famous anthology *The Empire Writes Back*. A recent issue of the *Irish Studies Review* (7.2 [Aug. 1999]) examines the problematics of viewing the Irish context according to the existing postcolonial paradigm.

<sup>32</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Chronicle of Higher Learning*, "Yeats: The New Political Issue," p. 365. Donoghue cites an additional objection in his argument, which warrants further mention. Arguing that an unhealthy intersection will inevitably form between postcolonial criticism and discussions of the Northern Irish problem, Donoghue writes:

Not only is the postcolonial approach ill suited to the Irish situation, it sacrifices literary understanding on the altar of politics. . . . Yet according to the rhetoric of cultural studies, where postcolonial theory has come to roost, we are to remain fixated on identity politics and engrossed with the postcolonial issue. We are to cede the initiative to historians and rebuke them only when they claim to be impartial. We are to approach a work of literature only for its symptomatic value as an illustration of some attitude already at large in the rhetoric of Irish identity" (Donoghue B4-5).

Indeed Donoghue and others are correct to caution against the danger of reducing literary study to discussions of identity politics, to a series of denunciations about sectarian-motivated murder or national security policies, or to attempts at brokering solutions to territorial conflicts like those playing out in Ireland's six northern counties or the West Bank. There is increasingly a role for criticism in all of this, but this is not the whole of literary studies. When this kind of project becomes the gist of literary criticism, we may as well cede the study of literature to the diplomats, generals, political scientists and historians.

<sup>33</sup> Though historians continue to debate the culpability of official British policy for the events surrounding the Great Famine of 1845-50, a tragedy which decimated a full quarter of the Irish population as more than two million people died or emigrated, there is solid historical evidence that this tragedy which has deeply scarred the Irish psyche resulted, in some respects, from disastrous colonial management and indifference on the part of the English. There is considerably more evidence to substantiate the claim that colonial adventurers and administrators in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did in fact consider genocide as a viable option.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, see Seamus Deane's excellent "Civilian's and Barbarians," in *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Utichinson, 1985), pp. 33-44.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, L. Perry Curtis. *Apes and Angles: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> See Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 587-92.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the difficulty of saying Ireland has moved beyond its colonial past, Anne McClintock wrote in 1994, The term 'post-colonialism' is, in many case, prematurely celebratory: "Ireland may, at a pinch, be 'post-colonial', but for the inhabitants of British-occupied Northern Ireland, not to mention the Palestinian inhabitants of the Israeli Occupied Territories and the West Bank, there may be nothing 'post' about colonialism at all."

<sup>38</sup> Luke Gibbon, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, Ireland: Cork U P, 1996), p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 229. In addition to Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, a number of outstanding studies address the issue of Irish postcoloniality, including David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Movement* (1993), David Cairns's and Shaun Richard's *Writing Ireland*, and R.F. Foster's *Modern Ireland*.

<sup>40</sup> In a move that sparked a storm of controversy, one that continues to rage in Yeatsian studies, Edward Said's groundbreaking "Yeats and Decolonization" characterizes Yeats (together with Césaire, Senghor, Fanon) as one of the "great artists of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism"(73). As distinguishing marks of postcoloniality, Said identifies Yeats's nativist tendencies which he claims situate Yeats near negritude's project: "with the new territoriality there comes a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications; all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, these too are enabled by the land. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language" (79)

<sup>41</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 1; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (R 1).

<sup>42</sup> See Declan Kiberd's impressive history of modern Irish literature and culture *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 596. Kiberd makes the point about Heaney and violence in a brief, but perspicacious overview of the poet's career.

<sup>43</sup> Here and throughout this dissertation I adopt a multi-fold definition of the poetic(s) of violence. On one hand, I use the phrase "poetic of violence" to indicate is an inventory of Heaney's various deployments of poetic artifice: prosody, voicing, syntax, linguistic and generic experimentation, motifs, prototypical characters and themes, and symbols, etc. The phrase "poetics of violence" pertains to what I call "field poetics," that which pertains to individual and collective notions concerning role of literature within society, and more specific its role as it relates to the politics of violence. In this sense, my study of Irish field poetics is an attempt to describe the prevailing forms, codes, and concerns of the literary and critical community within which Heaney works and to which he sometimes responds in his writing. A poetics is also an attempt to describe or prescribe the theoretical or conceptual assumptions governing the role of literature in society.

<sup>44</sup> In the case of Ireland, I contend we do not fully understand the extent to which Heaney's poetry and the work of other Northern Irish poets have contributed to the discussion concerning the relation between violence and the formation of a national community.

<sup>45</sup> Understanding the signification "poetics" from my title in this broad sense, I contend we still do not fully understand how much of the general debate over poetry's place in contemporary Irish society as well as the more specific Irish critical conversation over Heaney's poetry has been driven and defined by the Ulster conflict. There remains, it seems to me, much work to be done regarding the issue of how explosions of intense conflict uniquely inform the evolution of communal aesthetic trends. Here I am, of course, interested how this dynamic works in the Irish context. But this is not a specifically Irish issue. Whether it be in relation to the English Civil War of the mid-1600s, the changes in European poetic form wrought by two world wars, or the debate between Sartre and Camus over the proper imaginative response to the Algerian war of liberation, it seems to me we have much learn by examining this issue further.

<sup>46</sup> Claire Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Claire Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> For these remarks see Ciaran Carson's "'Escaped from the Massacre'?", *The Honest Ulsterman*, 76 (Winter 1975), 183-85.

<sup>49</sup> A far more ideologically-charged variation of this claim resurfaced a decade and a half later in David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Movement* (1993). In this influential and brilliant collection of essays, which identify Ireland as a postcolonial situation and consider the impact of (post)colonial violence on the work of Yeats, Joyce, Beckett and a variety of other Irish writers from the late Romantic period through the present, Lloyd argues that Heaney is a "minor" regional poet because his "conservative" verse formally and substantively conforms to a well-worn neo-Romantic aesthetic which is given to reinforcing root-bound organicist notions of nationalist solidarity. In this Marxist reading, Lloyd underscores what he sees as the perilous irresponsibility of Heaney's early aesthetic: rather than challenging "imperial ideology" Heaney underwrites the aesthetic and territorial pieties of Irish nationalism (all of which Lloyd implies amounts to a subaltern mimic's move that *mutatis mutandis* reduces Heaney's poetics to a reverse mirror image of colonialist aesthetics). (AS 13-37).

<sup>50</sup> See Desmond Fennel, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991, pp. 16-17.

Despite Fennel's crankiness, the remainder of Fennel's comment cited above is worth quoting because it exemplifies a significant segment of the general critical reception of *North*: "Of course, in the minds of readers, especially if they are at a distance from the scene, the poems about prehistoric bodies in a Jutland bog, and about particulars of the Northern Ireland war, may fuse together as 'poems about irrational violence'; and that is certainly their collective suggestion. But Heaney says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight which we hardly need to read poetry for." Since Fennel published his cranky condemnation of Heaney in a pamphlet entitled *Whatever You Say Say Nothing* (taken from the title of a controversial Heaney poem that I explore at length), variations of this view have surfaced recurrently since the 1980s, but perhaps the most virulent recent version of it emerged in the wake of Heaney's reception of the Nobel Prize in 1995. In an invective-laced essay entitled "The glittering prize," which appeared in the influential Belfast monthly *Fortnight*, the Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Foster asks, "Can there be any real doubt that he has largely avoided writing a great deal about political violence in Northern Ireland?" Foster's answer, along with a number of other critics, is a resounding "No." Laying out the prosecution's case,

<sup>51</sup> Wilson concludes, "Those who would maintain that in writing about hedges and blackberries, Heaney has actually treated the manifestations of political violence in a different manner are entirely fraudulent and must be termed so." See Robert McLiam Wilson, "The Glittering Prize", *Fortnight*, 344 (Nov. 1995), p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> See Seamus Deane's essay "The Timorous and the Bold" in *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 180. Deane argues that Heaney's poetic after *North* productively opened up new ways of dealing with the crisis. Kiberd largely shares this sentiment. While he is rightly critical of certain lyrics which are "too patently allusive" ("too obviously destined for the university seminar") in their treatment of political and sexual violence, Kiberd contends that the strength of Heaney's response to the conflict resides in its "great middle range," and it is there that Heaney most effectively "answers the Irish experience in his generation."

<sup>53</sup> I borrow the phrase from Heaney's essay "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," a piece in which he discusses the tragic yet ironically productive effect violence has exercised on the creative imaginations of countless twentieth-century poets. Heaney notes that the "poet of witness" is "a type of poet who increasingly appears in the annals of twentieth-century literature, and who looms as a kind of shadowy judging figure above every poet who has written subsequently. The shorthand name we have evolved for this figure is the 'poet of witness,' and he represents poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, the under-privileged. The witness is any figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with oppressed becomes necessarily integral with act of writing itself."

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*. 06 Oct. 1995, 21.

<sup>55</sup> To do full justice to the cantankerous debate over Heaney's poetry of violence, the discussion must be contextualized within a distinct, and dare I say naturalized, historical pattern of violent conflict in Irish

culture, a pattern that inflects the critical discussion with a vocabulary and narrative force of its own. Though a broad treatment of the historical context is beyond the scope of this dissertation, some brief remarks in this regard are warranted. In all of this wrangling over Heaney's treatment of violence, there is a certain element of *déjà vu*, a kind of recycling of key political and cultural debates in Ireland during the past century and a half concerning the related issues of using violence as instrument of power and as a subject of imaginative literature. In significant ways, the discussion over Heaney's poetry of violence rehashes key cultural and political battles which have occurred between constitutional and armed force nationalists. Such issues are apparent at a number of junctures in modern Irish history: the struggles between the pacifist Daniel O'Connell's and the militant Young Irelanders in the 1840s; again during the first two decades of the Irish Revival; and later in the 1920s and 1930s. At the core of these discussions lies a central philosophical and pragmatic concern with the need to stake out the proper relation between political violence and literature. The problem is no less acute in Heaney's time than it was in Yeats's or Thomas Davis's. But it is also important to note that compared to previous conflicts and instantiations of this debate over the past 150 years, there is a difference in the critical and public conversations concerning the relation between poetry and violence in the Irish context. It is vitally important to remember that like much of Heaney's poetry of violence, this discussion played itself out during a time of tremendous social and political instability—a phase in the process of Irish decolonization when scores of innocent victims on both sides of the sectarian divide were dying on the streets of Belfast, Dublin, and Derry. This daunting and fluid mix of bloody conflict, ideological wrangling over the utility of further bloodshed, and a heightened discussion of the relation of poetry to these grave matters has left its mark on poets and critics alike. As is typically the case with high-intensity conflicts, the white heat of the recent Ulster crisis has perhaps served to blur both the actual and perceived distinctions between virtual and actual violence. In this context, charges of complicity in violence are certainly more than matters of idle speculation and need to be taken seriously. In this round of the Troubles, however, there has no doubt been a heightened sense of urgency of the need to question publicly the relation between poetry and violence, a point that is borne out not only by the fact that Conor Cruise O'Brien succeeded in having traditional rebel ballads banned from government sponsored radio in the Republic of Ireland, but also by the intensity of debate over literary representations of violence in general.

<sup>56</sup> John Brenkman, "The Concrete Utopia of Poetry: Blake's 'A Poison Tree,'" in *Lyric Poetry*, (ed.) Patricia Parker, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement* (Cumbria, England: Frank Peters, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> In a 1979 interview with James Randall (*Ploughshares*, 19-20), Heaney describes the influence of American writers such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly on his own work: "There was a strong sense of contemporary American poetry in the West . . . rejecting the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry and going for the mythological. I mean everyone wanted to be a Red Indian, basically. And that meshed with my own concerns for I could see a close connection between the political and cultural assertions being made at the time by the minority in the north of Ireland and the protests and consciousness-raising that were going on in the Bay Area. . . . So that was probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley, that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance."

<sup>59</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 6.

## Chapter 2

### **“How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?” Violence, Hybridity, And A Changing Poetics (1969-1975)**

“Art’s opposition to the real world is in the realm of form.”

Theodor Adorno

“The nobility of poetry ‘is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without’. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.”

Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*

#### **Siting the Postcolonial Turn In Heaney’s Verse**

In the introduction to his recent translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney makes clear his commitment to an anticolonial project aimed at resisting and reversing the baleful effects of colonial violence. Describing his decision to refer to Hrothgar’s hall with the Ulster dialect word *bawn*, a word originally derived from the Irish *bo-dhun* (meaning cattle fort) and appropriated by early English settlers to signify the fortified dwellings built to keep dispossessed Irish natives at bay, Heaney explains that “it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches . . . every time I read the lovely interlude that tells of the minstrel singing in Heorot just before the first attacks of Grendel, I cannot help thinking of Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Fairie Queen* to Sir Walter Raleigh,

just before the Irish would burn the castle and drive Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court.”<sup>1</sup> For Heaney, putting a *bawn* into *Beowulf* (instead of more commonly used words such as *fort* or *keep*) therefore serves as a subtle, yet deliciously subversive means of recalling Spenser’s travail at Kilcolman Castle, an edifice which Heaney elsewhere calls “the tower of English conquest and the Anglicization of Ireland, linguistically, culturally, and institutionally.”<sup>2</sup> Through numerous such hybrid transformations of *Beowulf* -- a text which has often been cited in scholarly discussions concerned with issues of national origins and imperialism and which has also been used to further racist claims of cultural and linguistic superiority made certain Anglo-Saxon scholars over the past two centuries -- Heaney seeks to come to terms with a “complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more ‘willable forward / again and again and again.’”<sup>3</sup>

Several years before he began deploying translation in an effort to outface the violent legacy of colonialism, Heaney was already putting his original verse to work in an anticolonial project of historical recovery, formal hybridity, and linguistic reinscription. In opposition to the overwhelming brutality and oppression that characterized the most recent Northern Irish conflict, Heaney set out in the late 1960s and early 1970s “to make the English lyric eat stuff that it has never eaten before . . . like all the messy, and it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North.”<sup>4</sup> In a fashion reminiscent of much anticolonial poetry, Heaney’s work in this period typically grates against the grain of received English forms and language by parodying, subverting, and transforming the prosodic and linguistic mainstays of the English lyric tradition. Inscribing cultural and

ideological resistance into the very sinews and bones of his verse, the concrete poetics, Heaney thus writes a considerable body of anticolonial poems which serve as poetic versions of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "artistic hybridization."<sup>5</sup> This is to say Heaney filters his experience of external violence while providing alternatives to the discourse of colonialism in poems that function as "intentional hybrids" in which different "socio-linguistic points of view" are "set against each other dialogically" on multiple levels of signification (formal, linguistic, bibliographic).<sup>6</sup> Thus even more so than his anticolonial translations of ancient English and Irish texts, Heaney's poetic response to the problem of (post)colonial violence represents a comprehensive and sustained effort to grapple with a complex past and present narrative of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism.

Despite Heaney's statements concerning his commitment to an anticolonial/antiviolence agenda and a solid body of textual support for his claims, critics have long been divided on the question of the political and aesthetic status of his work. Heaney's poetry has been alternately described as nationalist/anticolonial or as derivative from and therefore complicit with imperial aesthetics. Such diverse readings may indeed reflect, as Raphael Ingelbien notes, an unwillingness on the part of the poet's detractors to acknowledge a key paradox in Heaney's approach to postcolonial nationalism, his ironic use of self-projections that were at least partly created by the colonial power.<sup>7</sup> But nonetheless a considerable portion of Heaney's oeuvre, particularly the pre-conflict verse, lends credence to the notion that his early poetry reflects a somewhat passive acceptance of the political and poetic status quo imposed by English hegemony. In his first two collections, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), Heaney

generally adopts neither the tone nor the subject matter of a typical anticolonial or nationalist poet. Apart from its extensive concern with rural Irish themes and its mildly subversive insertion of prosodic effects drawn from classical Gaelic poetry such as the use of *deibidhe* rhymes,<sup>8</sup> the highly conventional and largely apolitical pre-conflict poetry seems to reveal a poetic sensibility primarily concerned with carving out a niche in the English lyric tradition. This search for poetic identity is usually informed by a congenial and fluent negotiation of numerous strands of the English lyric tradition.

Indeed, much of Heaney's early verse relies upon a concrete poetics derived from a poetic pedigree which one critic has called the "long English line," a line of lyric expression which runs from Wordsworth to the Movement lyric."<sup>9</sup> In one sense, this is to say that many of the early poems bear the deep imprint of linguistic and stylistic effects derived from major lyricists who operate in this poetic tradition. With their elaborate sound structures, sensuous diction, thick consonance and assonance, and stately rhymed-pentameters, the majority of the poems produced prior to 1969 typically echo the work of poets such as Wordsworth, Hopkins, Keats, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, and Robert Frost. In other respects, much of Heaney's pre-conflict verse demonstrates the young poet's adherence to the Movement lyric principles of common sense, meticulous craftsmanship, and explication that he learned at the foot of Philip Hobsbaum in the mid-1960s. An early poem like "Personal Helicon" exemplifies the qualities of the so-called "well-made lyric," a strain of verse characterized by its formal discipline and uncomplicated syntax:

As a child, they could not keep me from wells  
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.  
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells

Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

Once, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.  
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket  
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.  
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

...

Others had echoes, gave back your own call  
With a clean new music in it. And one  
Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall  
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

*(Death of a Naturalist 57)*

Such exquisite, but largely private meditations set the tone for much of the Heaney criticism over the past three decades. Subsequently, a considerable number of critics have alleged that on the political and prosodic level Heaney's work has largely avoided dealing with the Northern Irish conflict. Commenting on Heaney's purported unwillingness to grapple with the crisis, a number of reviewers in the 1970s joined Calvin Bedient in arguing that "Heaney scarcely projects a point of view. Most of what he writes is no more, if no less, than potato deep earth-bound if earth-enriched, placidly rooted in top soil, far from unfathomable."<sup>10</sup> Various versions of this view of Heaney as an atavistic, apolitical pastoralist persisted into the 1980s and 1990s, well after the publication of breathtakingly brutal collections such *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979), two volumes which dramatically diverge from the pre-conflict poetry both in terms of their violent content and concrete poetics. At this advanced stage of the conflict when

Heaney's response to the protracted fighting had in fact metastasized into a full-fledged poetics of violence, critics such as A. Alvarez were still arguing that Heaney's work "challenges no presuppositions, does not upset or scare, is mellifluous, craftsmanly, and often perfect within its chosen limits. In other words, it is beautiful minor poetry."<sup>11</sup> In a similar argument from the 1980s, the Irish nationalist commentator Desmond Fennell maintains Heaney is a minor poet because he shirks his duty to act as a kind of Irish unacknowledged legislator and avoids addressing the conflict in a substantive manner: "[Heaney's poetry] says nothing, plainly or figuratively, about the war, about any of the three main parties to it, or about the issues at stake . . . Heaney says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight which we hardly need to read poetry for."<sup>12</sup> Finally, in a more recent instantiation of the "Heaney-as-minor-disengaged-poet" argument, the influential Marxist and postcolonial critic David Lloyd argues that Heaney, whom he calls "the most institutionalized of recent poets," unwittingly conforms to a well-worn neo-Romantic aesthetic, one given to reinforcing root-bound organic notions of nationalist solidarity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, according to Lloyd, rather than challenging "imperial ideology" Heaney's poetics essentially mimic colonialist aesthetics.

Whether his detractors are arguing that Heaney's work instances an atavistic brand of Northern Irish neo-Georgianism or that "[a]lmost without exception, [Heaney's] poems respond compliantly to analysis based on assumptions about the nature of the well-made lyric poem,"<sup>14</sup> such critics ultimately suggest that Heaney's verse amounts to nothing more than a kind of purified, monologic utterance which avoids addressing the vexed problem of Northern Irish violence in any substantive manner. While many of the

critics cited above offer perceptive insights at certain junctures, what often goes missing in their accounts of Heaney's work is an appreciation of the evolving poetic and political complexity of his poetry in the initial phase of the conflict. Between 1969 and 1975, Heaney not only transitions into a distinctively anticolonial and dialogic mode of poetic representation, but he succeeds in performing the Yeatsian trick of "remaking" his poetic identity. Indeed, the poetry from this period more often than not displays a range of voice, formal innovation, and linguistic experimentation that reveals a far more conflicted and combative lyric sensibility than the portrait painted by his detractors. Specifically, Heaney develops a number of rhetorical and formal strategies that are aggressively aimed at unmasking and countering (post)colonial violence. In the pages that follow, I seek to detail the strife-riven and dialogic character of Heaney's work in this period by considering his poetic struggle to redistribute what he calls "the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order."<sup>15</sup> As such, I identify a distinct postcolonial turn in his verse and document his movement from the prosodic and linguistic conventionality of his early poetry into a remarkable period of formal experimentation and innovation.

### **"The Voice of Sanity is Getting Hoarse": Troubled Early Representations of the Troubles<sup>16</sup>**

"The recent English language tradition does tend towards the 'well-made poem', that is towards the insulated and balanced statement. However, major poetry will always burst that corseted and decorous truthfulness. In so doing, it may be an unfair poetry; it will almost certainly be one-sided." Seamus Heaney in a 1977 Interview with Seamus Deane

"If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture

differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity.” Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*

The story of Heaney’s development as a poet during the early years of the conflict reveals an often tortured, but always dogged commitment to tackling the related problems of violence and decolonization through the medium of poetry. Reflecting on his response to the first lethal sectarian clashes in 1969, Heaney explains how such events and the burgeoning conflict suddenly altered his conception and practice of poetry:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory *verbal icon* to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. . . . I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry . . . it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. . . . The question, as ever, is “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?” And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity.’”<sup>17</sup>

In this important early formulation of his poetics of violence, Heaney articulates the specific moral and poetic imperatives that informed his aesthetics in the early years of the crisis. The escalation of hostilities forced him into a new mode of poetic representation in which the corseted and balanced statement of his pre-conflict poetics (“the satisfactory verbal icon”) would no longer suffice. Granting the violence its deplorable authenticity now meant developing a new poetics whereby he could confront the problem of Northern Irish violence. Such a task involved not only probing what he calls the “numen” of the “tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power,” but also exposing “the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing.”<sup>18</sup> But if addressing the related issues of violence and decolonization became a necessary preoccupation, the imperative of confronting these matters also

severely challenged his linguistic and poetic powers. Citing the tensions created by these imperatives, Heaney notes the need to discover a “field of force,” a poetic sovereign space where the need for political statement is tempered by a respect for poetic integrity.

Gradually, Heaney developed a variety of highly complex formal and rhetorical strategies that enabled him to transform simultaneously his sense of outrage and beauty in powerful lyric moments, but the tensions created by these competing demands often had the effect of destabilizing his trademark lyric voice in the early phase of the conflict. Finding an adequate language, form, and poetic register to embody both his understanding of violence and anger proved to be one of the most difficult challenges of his early career. The conflicted and increasingly dialogic character of Heaney’s work in the initial phase of the conflict thus becomes painfully apparent at times in “Craig’s Dragoon’s” and “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” two blistering satirical poems that dramatize a distinct postcolonial turn in Heaney’s verse. Watersheds in the evolution of Heaney’s poetics of violence, these poems embody his growing “awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance,”<sup>19</sup> but they also demonstrate the extent to which Heaney is often confounded and sometimes even stumped by the problem of translating his antipathy to violence and colonialism into poetry.

Written in direct response to the Royal Irish Constabulary’s assault on civil rights marchers in Derry in October 1968, the caustic ballad “Craig’s Dragoon’s” demonstrates the formal and linguistic hybridity of Heaney’s emerging poetics of violence. “Craig’s Dragoon’s” accrues a considerable measure of dialogic potency by drawing upon rhetorical and prosodic effects derived from the Irish street ballad tradition. Originally a

nineteenth-century example of postcolonial pastiche, but resurrected in a number of Irish poems produced in response to the Northern Irish conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Thomas Kinsella's "In The Ringwood" among others), the Irish street ballad has long provided an "intimate register of the processes of hybridization."<sup>20</sup> Through its representations of a heterogeneous and unjust Irish society wracked by the forces of industrialism, imperialism, and militarism, the Irish street ballad has often been deployed to combat intolerable colonial conditions and various forms of socio-political violence. Frequent among the form's themes are the failed 1798 uprising, the Famine and its aftermath of mass immigration, British campaigns of forced conscription, grinding poverty, and imprisonment under English law<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the street ballad becomes a logical and culturally resonant choice for Heaney's scathing attack on hegemonic violence.<sup>22</sup>

In "Old Derry Walls," a report written for the BBC publication *The Listener*, Heaney details the sequence of events which provoked the writing of this protest poem, the brutal police action carried out by the Northern Irish Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig, and his constabulary forces:

[The marchers] represented, after all, the grievances of the [Derry] Catholic majority: unemployment, lack of housing, job discrimination, and gerrymandering in electoral affairs. They were asking to be accepted as citizens of Derry also; they want at least the right, too long the prerogative of the minority [Derry Protestants], to demonstrate and express themselves in public. . . . Mr. Craig. . . thought not. He considered that a demonstration on behalf of the rights of the majority was a danger to public law and order, though opinion in Derry did not agree with him then or since. He placed the police. He alerted a reserve force. The rest was violence. It seems now that the Catholic minority, if it is to retain any self-respect, will have to risk the charge of wrecking the new moderation (of Captain O'Neill) and seek justice more vociferously.<sup>23</sup>

Heeding his own call to "seek justice more vociferously," Heaney commemorates these events in "Craig's Dragoon's," a piece originally published as part of an editorial commentary by Karl Miller<sup>24</sup>:

*Craig's Dragoons* (Air : "Dolly's Brae")

Come all ye Ulster loyalist and in full chorus join,  
Think on the deeds of Craig's Dragoons who strike below the groin.

And drink a toast to the truncheon and the armoured water-hose  
That moved a swathe through Civil Rights and spat on Papish clothes.

We've gerrymandered Derry but Croppy won't lie down,  
He calls himself a citizen and wants votes in the town.  
But that Saturday in Duke street we slipped the velvet glove –  
The iron hand of Craig's Dragoons soon crushed a croppy dove.

Big McAteer and Currie, Gerry Fitt and others too,  
Were fool enough to lead the van, expecting to get through.  
But our hero commando, let loose at last to play,  
Did annihilate the rights of man in noon time of a day.

They downed women with children, for Teagues all over-breed,  
The used the baton on men's heads, for Craig would pay no heed,  
And then the boys place in plain clothes, they lent a loyal hand  
To massacre those Derry ligs behind a Crossley van.

O William Craig, you are our love, our lily and our sash,  
You have the boys who fear no noise, who'll batter and who'll bash.

They'll cordon and they'll baton-charge, they'll silence protest tunes,  
They are the hounds of Ulster, boys, sweet William Craig's Dragoons.

Here Heaney achieves some measure of dialogic potency by voicing this ludicrous version of the Derry riots from the perspective of a monocular bigot. In a

characterization of his speaker that is highly reminiscent of Joyce's Citizen in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*, Heaney moves to explode the rhetoric and the psychology of those who do the killing. But it is through his subversive manipulation of the received form of the ballad tradition that Heaney makes his strongest bid to undermine the speaker's bankrupt rhetoric.

Registering his outrage over the handling of the Derry protests in the stylistic and tonal extravagance authorized by the hybrid Irish street ballad, Heaney unmasks and satirizes official versions of the police action and riots, accounts which unsurprisingly exonerated Craig's police forces. In *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Luke Gibbons provides a valuable framework by which to evaluate the balladic qualities of "Craig's Dragoons" when he notes that the Irish street ballad has long been a hybrid weapon of choice for Irish writers who critique the violence of contemporary colonial discourse and occupation through a demystification of imperialist and nationalist ideology. Explaining why many contemporary Irish artists such as Heaney and Paul Muldoon turned to the ballad and other "discordant strains in Irish vernacular culture" with the resurgence of armed conflict in the late sixties, Gibbons underscores the discursive strength of the street ballad and locates the form's hybridity in its intertextual reliance on an orally preserved repository of cultural and historical memory that is then translated into printed songs. With their dual focus on the past and present injustice of colonialism, street ballads function as moments of revisionary history intended for popular consumption; thus, these songs assume an added resistive strength once they enter into print form and provide "powerful alternative perspectives on the past to the official versions, and may be seen as modern equivalents of the endangered 'history from below.'"<sup>25</sup>

Like many other poems and songs in the street ballad tradition, "Craig's Dragoons" cross-textually constructs a dual critique of colonialism and physical force nationalism; it does this in typical street ballad fashion by ironically drawing upon a repository of cultural and historical memory. Residing at the intertextual and formal heart of "Craig's Dragoons" are two key balladic commemorations of nationalist violence (one derived from the Irish Republican tradition and one from the Loyalist tradition). The poem's title puns on the nationalist ballad "Clare's Dragoon's," Thomas Davis's celebration of the Wild Geese, Irish émigrés exiled to France following the failed 1798 Uprising. Exemplifying the glamorization of physical force nationalism characteristic of many of Young Irelander ballads, Davis's cavalier ballad valorizes the military exploits of the Wild Geese, some of whom, in league with the French, fought against the British in a unit called "Clare's Dragoons": "Viva la, the new brigade?/Viva la, the old one too!/Viva la, the rose shall fade,/And the shamrock shine for ever new."<sup>26</sup> But equally important to Heaney's debunking of the nationalist ballad tradition is the title note's reference to the Protestant song "Dolly's Brae," a Loyalist celebration of the violent sectarian clashes between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics during the revolutionary period 1848-49. In this ballad, the speaker commemorates the slaughter of rebel forces:

And when we came to Doll's Brae they were lined on every side,  
 Praying for the Virgin Mary to be their holy guide;  
 We loosed our guns upon them and we gave them no time to pray,  
 And the tune we played was "The Protestant Boys" right over Dolly's  
 Brae.<sup>27</sup>

Through dual references to nineteenth-century texts, both of which were used to underwrite violent nationalism, "Craig's Dragoons" places the contemporary crisis in a

larger historical perspective and thus brings past colonial violence into an ironic relationship with present brutality. Heaney bolsters his critique of this bankrupt cultural form through the prosodic excesses of his piece. In contrast to the nationalist ballad, a form which proceeds according to a purist logic of cultural refinement and cultural homogeneity, Heaney relies upon a typical street ballad strategy of postcolonial pastiche and burlesque, heteroglossic voicing, and rough-hewn metrics -- all of which is entirely foreign to the nationalist ballad tradition. With his satirical merger and debunking of two songs from the ballad traditions of opposing nationalist camps, Heaney exposes the similarities between the Republican and Loyalist ethos; both emerge from the same ideological ground in which the valorization of violence is seen as a *sine qua non* for furthering the nationalist agenda. Consequently, art is placed in the service of the formation or preservation of the nation-state, a state always already built on a foundation of violence. In contrast to the aesthetic politics contained in the source ballads, Heaney thus creates a contemporary hybrid of these tunes that turns on its head the pietistic mythologization of violence. But if Heaney's ballad is recalcitrant to the aesthetic politics of armed force nationalism, it is equally resistant to the imperialist project insofar as it counters official versions of William Craig's handling of the demonstration.

If "Craig Dragoon's" succeeds on multiple levels in debunking Ulster's culture of violence through its satirical representation of the cultural forms, rhetoric, and social psychology used to cultivate sectarian divisions, it also illustrates the specific perils inherent in the writing of explicitly political poetry. While the overattenuated arguments advanced by some critics that "Craig's Dragoon's" reifies "religious factionalism"<sup>28</sup> or that it is "designed solely to stir Catholic emotions and promote solidarity"<sup>29</sup> miss

altogether the point of social satire in a time of crisis, the poem does perhaps raise tough questions about the appropriateness of satirically representing the suffering of victims of sectarian and state-sponsored violence. But the poem nonetheless marks a key moment in Heaney's development because it demonstrates that Heaney was no longer willing to rest content with a comfortable search for the "satisfactory verbal icon." At the same time, the poem also suggests that his art could not sustain itself on the language of politics alone. As the skein of cruelty and suffering widened with the burgeoning conflict, Heaney continued his struggle to close the gap between the political and poetic in his representations of violence. Over the next several years, Heaney's challenge was to find a way to expose the socio-political roots and the human cost of the crisis in verse while still maintaining the sovereignty of the poetic space.

The long sequence poem "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," Heaney's first major public response to the Ulster crisis following his return from a year of lecturing at Berkeley, demonstrates a more nuanced sense of how poetry can serve as a force and mode of resistance. Such a sense of poetry was precisely what Heaney needed when he returned to Belfast in September 1971. The effects of internment without trial had exacerbated an already volatile situation and had transformed the city into a virtual war zone; in the four months following his homecoming, state-sponsored and hegemonic violence exploded with an even greater vehemence that left one hundred forty-four people dead by year's end. The strain of living and writing under such conditions becomes apparent in his prose piece "Belfast's Black Christmas," which appeared in *The Listener* on 23 December, 1971:

It hasn't been named martial law but that's what it feels like. Everywhere soldiers with cocked guns are watching you – that's what they're here for – on the streets, at the corners of streets, from doorways, over the puddles on demolished sites. At night jeeps and armoured cars groan past without lights; or road-blocks are thrown up, and once again it's delays measured in hours, searches and signings among the guns and torches. . . . Fear has begun to tingle through the place. Who's to know the next target on the Provisional list? Who's to know the reprisals won't strike where you are?<sup>30</sup>

Insofar as “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” levies an assault on this kind of hegemonic and counterhegemonic brutality in a manner that nonetheless retains a claim to calling itself poetry, it figures as an important early moment in Heaney's stand against the problem of violence. The poem holds additional significance as a critique of a Northern Irish society that has resigned itself to the inevitability of the situation. Reflecting on this matter, Heaney told an interviewer in November 1971 that his return to Belfast was “like putting on an old dirty glove again.” Being in Berkeley, he notes, had given him “the idea that I would have to come back and say that this place is a kind of disease preventing personality from flowering gracefully. It is a very graceless community, a very scared and stunted community.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the poem also warrants reconsideration in that it serves as a kind of Joycean “nicely-polished looking glass” in which Heaney attempts to give Northern Irish society one final good look at itself before it self-destructs.<sup>32</sup>

Many of Heaney's readers have not seen the poem this way. Focusing on it as a performance of failed public and poetic utterance, most critics either entirely omit the poem from their readings or gloss over it, paying little or no heed to the significance of its formal, non-linguistic, and material codings, many of which endow the poem with a considerable degree of dialogic potency. In a cranky dismissal of the piece, Desmond

Fennell identifies the poem as a kind of synecdoche for Heaney's overall poetic achievement: "Heaney's poetry takes as its motto 'Whatever you say, say nothing' from his Northern Catholic background. It makes no quotable statements about general matters and . . . its images of particular and private subjects convey these and nothing more. . . . In short, his poetry – like much good but minor poetry – is poor in word and meaning and says nothing of general relevance [*echoes of Lloyd here*]." <sup>33</sup> In her excellent reading of Heaney's war poetry, Edna Longley similarly disparages the poem in the brief span of a few lines calling it "a clichéd condemnation of clichés." <sup>34</sup> But in their objections to the poem, what these and other critics fail to acknowledge are the ways in which Heaney succeeds in his attempt to expand his political and poetic field of force in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing." He does this through his publication strategy and by melding anticolonial statement with a distinctly new kind of poetic language and arresting imagery that are at times powerfully fresh and forceful.

To appreciate fully the political and poetic force valences of "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," it must be understood as a direct and immediate response to the increasingly dangerous and volatile Northern Irish situation. The gravity of the circumstances that provided the inspiration for the poem's composition and publication are borne out by its initial publication context. Published for the first time in the October 14, 1971 issue of *The Listener*, this poem appeared under the headline, "Whatever you say, say nothing – Seamus Heaney gives his views on the Irish thing" (See Figure 1). By publishing "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" in the journalistic context of *The Listener* (a publication in which dozens of Heaney's poems of violence appear), Heaney joined a long line of anticolonial poets who have enlisted the resources of mass media to speak

## Gerald McAuley's mother speaks about his death

He must have been about the only one in that street at that particular time, when the sniper got him. And the thing that mostly kills me about that is that he wasn't in a mob: he was just innocently enough coming out of the side of that chapel. If he had been in a mob, I would have said he would have just been unfortunate. But I have been told that he was shot in the chest and tried to make his way up the street and they gunned him in the back. It would take an animal to do such a thing, to just pick on an innocent child. I would rather that nobody would touch this person, whoever they may be. Because the longer that this person lives, the longer he will suffer in his own way, and I pray God to forgive him. I honestly mean that. He is suffering now, I'm sure, if he has a conscience at all. Because I think if it was me that committed such a cowardly act, that child's face would never leave my sight.

## Alec Robinson, a Catholic bricklayer, identifies the enemy for Jim Douglas Henry

The enemy these days is the British Army. That's our enemy. That's the people we want out of this country.

*And what about the Protestants?*

If it were possible to live with Protestants, we would live with them, but I'm doubtful whether the Protestant wants to live with us.

*What do you think your situation would be here if the British Army did withdraw? What do you think would happen?*

Civil war right away. Definitely civil war. There are over a million Protestants in this country, and half a million Catholics. The odds are two to one against us, and if the British Army moved out of here this Government would bring back the B Specials, and we would really be in trouble then. But we have always got a chance of getting assistance from the South. I don't think Mr Lynch would let us down.

*So that you would like to see the Army go and bloodshed in large quantities?*

If we could achieve what we really want to achieve—a united Ireland. And we will achieve that. I think myself that until we achieve a united Ireland, this fighting will continue between Catholic and Protestant.

Mrs Megarry and Mr Robinson took part this time last year in 'Christians at War—Two Families' (BBC 2). They were heard from again last week, in a BBC 1 programme—from which these extracts are taken—designed to recall the previous programme and bring it up to date.

*Above, evacuating a Protestant street in Belfast. Right, Hugh Herron on his wedding day; described as a gunman, he was shot dead in August during an ambush of British troops in the Bogside*



## Whatever you say, say nothing —Seamus Heaney gives his views on the Irish thing

### 1.

I'm writing just after an encounter with an English journalist in search of 'views on the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter quarters where bad news is no longer news,

where media-men and stringers sniff and point, where zoom lenses and Uhers and coiled leads litter the hotels. The times are out of joint but I incline as much to rosary beads

as to the jottings and analyses of leader writers or those marvellous men who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas to gelignite, whose day begins at ten,

who proved upon their pulses 'escalate', 'backlash' and 'crack down', 'the Provisional wing', 'polarisation' and 'long-standing hate'. Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,

expertly civil-tongued with civil neighbours on the high wires of first wireless reports, sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree,'  
'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse,'  
'They're murderers,' 'Internment, understandably...'  
The 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse.

### 2.

Men die at hand. In blasted street and home the gelignite's a common sound effect: as the man said when Celtic won, 'the Pope of Rome's a happy man this night.' His flock suspect

in their deepest heart of hearts the heretic has come at last to heel and to the stake. We tremble near the flames but want no truck with the actual firing. We're on the make

Figure 1

"Whatever you say, say nothing — Seamus Heaney gives his views on the Irish thing"  
(The Listener, 14 October, 1971)

as ever. Long sucking the hind tit  
cold as a witch's and as hard to swallow  
leaves us fork-tongued on the partition bit:  
the liberal papist note sounds hollow

when amplified and mixed in with the bangs  
that shake our hearts and windows day and night.  
(It's hard here not to rhyme on 'labour pangs'  
and diagnose a rebirth in our plight

but that would be to ignore other symptoms.  
Last night you didn't need a stethoscope  
to hear the eruption of Orange drums  
allergic equally to Pearse and Pope.)

On all sides 'little platoons' are mustering—  
the phrase is Cruise O'Brien's via that great  
backlash, Burke—while I suffer this pestering  
drouth for words at once both gaff and bait

to lure the tribal shoals to epigram  
and order. I believe any of us  
could cut a line through enmity and sham  
given the right line, *aere perennius*.

### 3.

'Religion's never mentioned here,' of course.  
'You know them by their eyes,' and hold your tongue.  
'One side's as bad as the other,' *never* worse.  
Christ, it's near time that some small leak was sprung

in the great dykes that always barricade  
the dutchmen from the jacobites among us.  
Yet for all this art and sedentary trade  
I am about as capable as fungus

of breaking my soft grip on the sick place  
or its on me. Of the 'wee six' I sing  
where to be saved you only must save face  
and whatever you say, you say nothing.

And I belong to that strange generation  
who got the message on the road to school  
that 'party tunes' made up for segregation:  
'Fenian' and 'Prod' and 'fanny', 'ball' and 'tool'

dirtied our cleanish tongues at dinner-time.  
But we learnt the rules of company, sang dumb  
for to be found out was the only crime.  
We learnt to be too sweet and not wholesome.

Enter, in our twenties, the great O'Neill.  
The Great O'Neill! Those 'two cultures' again!  
He might as well have never turned a wheel.  
The tone was raised and things went down the drain.

And at the age of thirty-two I hear  
the old mythologies explode with death  
and lie with my fellow brutes, with my ear  
to the ground, lie, sick of my bad breath.

### 4.

This morning from a dewy motorway  
I saw the new camp for the internees,  
a bomb had left a crater of fresh clay  
in the roadside and over in the trees

machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.  
There was that white mist you get on a low ground  
and it was *déjà-vu*—some film made  
of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up  
on a wall down town. Competence with pain,  
coherent miseries, a bite and sup:  
we hug our little destiny again.



Figure 1 (continued)  
"Whatever you say, say nothing – Seamus Heaney gives his views on the Irish thing"  
(*The Listener*, 14 October, 1971)

out against hegemonic violence.<sup>35</sup> Within this journalistic, “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” extends its socio-political impact in a manner not afforded by mere verbal signification or other purely literary conventions. Indeed, on the page of this publication that was widely circulated throughout Britain and Ireland, the “field of composition” expands in a way that adds a powerful new level of meaning to Charles Olson’s original sense of the term.<sup>36</sup> Flanking the poem on the left are two eye-witness testimonies on recent violence which bear the headlines “Gerald McAuley’s mother speaks about his death” (an account from a mother whose son was murdered by a sniper’s bullet in the back) and “Alec Robinson, a Catholic bricklayer, identifies the enemy for Jim Douglas Henry” (a short interview which calls the British Army the enemy, but predicts civil war if they pull out). Additionally, two photographs frame the poem. Directly above its headline/title stands a shot of terrified Protestants hastily evacuating their Belfast neighborhood. On the facing page, the poem’s bracketing is completed by a page-length wedding photo of an alleged IRA gunman, killed by British troops in the notorious Derry battle of the Bogside. Expanding its socio-political commentary in this fashion, this instantiation of the poem aggressively counters postcolonial violence by constructing meaning not only *within* and *across* but also *beyond* the field of the poem. The journalistic context thus invites the reader to consider the implications of this work of art in terms of immediate political violence, rather than in terms of a sequence of other poems. Far from saying nothing as Fennell suggests, the poem not only comments on the Troubles, but also publicly participates in the political discourse of the day; it is not just a product but part of a public process shaping the ongoing formation of the Irish imagined community.<sup>37</sup>

Combined with the images of chaos and social disintegration in the surrounding *Listener* reports and photographs, the significance of Heaney's anti-imperial critique and his reflections on the damaging psychological and social consequences of the crisis come into sharper focus. The final three stanzas of the poem in particular stand as one of Heaney's most successful early attempts to merge socio-political commentary and outrage in a potent anticolonial emblem of adversity. In these twelve tightly construed lines (lines that would later reappear as Heaney's dedication of the collection *Wintering Out* to his friends Michael Longley and David Hammond), the poet-speaker bitterly condemns the British suspension of *habeas corpus* and the introduction of internment that left more than 1,576 people imprisoned without trial by the end of 1971:

This morning from a dewy motorway  
I saw the new camp for the internees,  
A bomb had left a crater of fresh clay  
In the roadside and over in the trees

Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.  
There was that white mist you get on a low ground  
And it was *déjà-vu*--some film made of  
Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up  
On a wall down town. Competence with pain,  
coherent miseries, a bite and sup:  
we hug our little destiny again.

Here Heaney demonstrates his emerging capacity for creating sovereign lyric spaces, spaces in which he erects a *field of force* where he can grant the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry. Combining arresting imagery, impressive formal control, and the power of non-linguistic signification, this lyric fragment figures as a highly concentrated

attack on the conditions and consequences of neo-colonial violence. Significantly, it documents what Frantz Fanon has called the “Manichean world” of colonialism, a world “cut in two. . . . [with] the dividing line, the frontiers . . . shown by barracks and police stations.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in a postmodern gesture that blurs and interrogates the boundaries between fact and fiction (art and life), the stanzas reinforce the critique of British hegemony by alluding to a newsreel depicting Stalag 17. As the subaltern subject peers through the twin mists of actual experience and memory, he processes his perception of British internment camps in terms of an “already seen” image, an image gleaned from documentary scenes of Nazi violence, thus underscoring the perniciousness of state-sponsored coercion in Northern Ireland.

Beyond making the English lyric eat images of a postcolonial conflict zone replete with internment camps and bomb craters, Heaney employs these concluding stanzas to explore one of Northern Ireland’s most damaging obsessions, the existential paralysis and destructive social psychology resulting from the brutality of colonial violence. In these quatrains, Heaney renders a colonial subject haunted by a deterministic vision of cyclical violence. The *bête noire* of history, the recurring nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus had hoped to awaken but which returned in 1939, has returned yet again in the form of British hegemonic violence. The circularity and *intertextuality* of the two conflicts under consideration would perhaps suggest that there is no escape from the cycle – violence simply keeps repeating itself. Heaney reinforces this theme by carefully developing his compositional field. At the typographical level, he underscores the notion of doubling and historical circularity as he exploits the sonic and visual effect created by the letter “o.” The visual impact and frequency of these marks (24 in the course of 12 lines)

complements their aural function: in five cases the typographical “o” is read as a long “o” (“motorway,” “roadside,” “low,” “no,” “coherent”), an effect that produces a kind of prophetic wail of lamentation. By emphasizing this fatalistic resignation to a state of perpetual conflict and submission to hegemonic violence, Heaney underscores the paralyzing social psychology that infects the speaker and his community. To “hug our little destiny” suggests a passive acceptance of the cycle of violence as a given, as predetermined. Significantly, the shift from first person to the collective closure of “we hug our destiny again” places the speaker and his community on the same footing.

How are we to read this closure? Does Heaney himself condone such a psychological disposition that naturalizes violence and fatalistically resigns itself to the notion that conflict is simply a given? Certain critics have argued as much, contending that Heaney reinforces obscurantist notions of history and Irish identity in his poetry.<sup>39</sup> But such readings inadequately account for the poem’s preceding three sections which ironize both the speaker’s and the community’s point of view and therefore serve to distance Heaney from these perspectives. In sections 1-3, through the use of rhetorical and prosodic effects that highlight the failure of public and poetic discourse, Heaney repeatedly brings irony to bear on the speaker’s and the community’s response to the crisis. Perhaps more than any other work in Heaney’s corpus, the poem’s first three sections come the closest to approximating the tonal irony, stylistic extravagance, and metrical roughness of “Craig’s Dragoon’s.” Despite its clear anti-lyric tendencies, some critics have tried to adjudicate “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” according to the standards of “well-made” lyric; however, it is anything but an example of insulated and balanced poetic statement. The employment of a highly discordant and polyphonic

method of voicing in the poem's opening section is a strong early indicator that Heaney is not interested in neatly resolving contradiction and crisis through the stable voice of a detached "lyric-I":

I'm writing just after an encounter  
With an English journalist in search of 'views  
On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter  
Quarters where bad news is no longer news

Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,  
Where zoom lenses and Uhers and coiled leads  
Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint  
But I incline as much to rosary beads

As to the jottings and analyses  
of leader writers or those marvelous men  
who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas  
to gelignite, whose day begins at ten,

who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',  
'backlash' and 'crack down', 'the Provisional wing',  
'Polarisation' and 'long -standing hate.'  
Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,

expertly civil-tongued with civil neighbours  
on the high wires of first wireless reports,  
sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours  
of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree'  
'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse,'  
'They're murderers,' 'Internment, understandably . . .'  
The 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse. (lines 1-24)

Drawing upon quotations and sound bites from a variety of voices, each of which offers a vacuous and ineffectual assessment of the conflict, the first six stanzas dialogically recreate a sense of the chaotic and morally bankrupt nature of public discourse in Northern Ireland. Criticizing the media for its exploitation of the crisis, the speaker castigates opportunistic photojournalists who sniff out the carnage, point their cameras,

and shoot. Blasting the empty catch-phrases used to describe the hostilities (“Polarisation,” “long-standing hate,” “backlash”), he wonders if prayer might be more productive than the banal writings of “leader writers” or the “jottings and analyses” of phrase-making reporters (“marvelous men”) whose empty rhetoric amounts to “scribble.” But the media is not the only object of his satire. Throughout the first three sections of the poem, a chorus of voices representing a conflicting range of interests and political identities underscores the impotence of public and private utterance in a dire situation where force has replaced constructive dialogue as the usual mode of discourse. Thus, the “voice of sanity” is replaced by the menacing bombast of Unionist “speech” (“the eructation of Orange drums”) and that of citizens entirely blind to social justice (“Internment, understandably. . .”). Threatened with violence on all sides, citizens succumb once more to the “tight gag of place,” and the famous Northern reticence expresses itself in the clichéd utterance issuing from the noncommittal and anonymous voices private Belfast citizens (“Oh, it’s disgraceful, surely, I agree,” “One side’s as bad as the other,” “They’re murderers”). Individually and collectively this polyphonic chorus offers nothing of substance to resolve the conflict. Working at cross-purposes, these voice fragments recreate the entropic din of a “scared and stunted community” babbling incoherently as it teeters on the brink of self-destruction. Each voice contains its own agenda, but ultimately they all offer a grimly similar plan for surviving in a situation where “to be saved you must only save face / and whatever you say say nothing” (lines 63-64).

If the unacceptability of remaining silent during a period of intense and dehumanizing civil strife emerges as one of Heaney’s central themes in “Whatever You

Say Say Nothing,” he is equally critical of his own inability to fashion an adequate and responsible response. In a relentless self-parody of his difficulties in adequately representing the Troubles, Heaney portrays his speaker as consistently doubting his moral and poetic capacities and lamenting his lack of linguistic and formal resources, the poetic tools that might allow him to forge befitting emblems of adversity. Again and again in the first three sections of the poem, the most rudimentary tools of the poetic trade, voice and prosody, are ludicrously uneven and inept. Complaining that his songs of resistance rehearse the same kind of evasive clichés he exchanges with “civil neighbours,” the poet-speaker registers the extreme pressure placed on the language of poetry, a strain that has the effect of silencing the lyrical voice: “On all sides ‘little platoons’ are mustering-- / the phrase is Cruise O’Brien’s via that great / backlash, Burke—while I suffer this pestering / drouth for words at once both gaff and bait” (lines 41-44). To break the “drouth,” the speaker invokes the towering voice of Yeats and his magisterial lyric response to the problem of Irish political violence in “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” but just as quickly as he adopts this voice he undercuts it with a vertiginous shift in tone and diction: “Yet for all this art and sedentary trade / I am about as capable as fungus” (lines 58-59). Such wild tonal and metrical swings between each section, and at times from line to line, dramatize the struggles of a lyric voice laboring and repeatedly failing to find an adequate register. The flat, prosaic quality of this first section, for example, attempts to simulate the response of a community quailed into emotional and moral paralysis by the threat of overwhelming violence, but by delivering these emotions in a combination of prosaic grammar and syntax, laborious and unimaginative polysyllabic diction, and lengthy lineation, the poem nearly stalls in its tracks. Later in contrast to the

paralyzing pace, emotional detachment, and clichéd language of the opening section, the second section quickens the measure and introduces a degree of linguistic realism by translating some sense of the external violence into the language of the poem: "Men die at hand. In blasted street and home / the gelignite's a common sound effect" (lines 25-26). Drawing from the matter-of-fact reportorial language of newspaper reports, these lines create a staccato rhythm that vituperatively mimics the sound of gunfire through the alliterative combination of hissing sibilance and harsh plosives (note the ubiquitous "t's" and "s's" in "blasted," "street," and "gelignite's"). But here again, the language and experience of poetry suffer.

Heaney's frenetic, multi-voiced performance in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" occasionally amounts to an imaginative recreation of the moral and emotional wasteland resulting from a legacy of colonial violence. Whether the poem works on an intellectual or emotional level is certainly open to debate. In some respects, the piece's stylistic and tonal extremes are perhaps successful in evoking the disintegrative and destabilized state of social and political life in Northern Ireland in late 1971, but the juxtaposition of the far more balanced and restrained fourth section with the earlier rough-hewn section introduces a tonal rupture that leaves one unprepared for the impact of the powerful closing anticolonial imagery. This type of instability and uncertainty is one of the predominate features of Heaney's most troubled early responses to the Ulster conflict. While poems such as "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" and "Craig's Dragoons" place in sharp relief Heaney's struggle to make poetry into something more substantial than a search for achieving the satisfactory verbal icon, they also illustrate the considerable formal and linguistic challenges that Heaney would have to overcome if he

hoped to balance his sense of outrage with an ample dose of beauty. His answer to this dilemma was not to abandon his commitment to using poetry as a “mode of redress,” as an “agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices.” Instead, the solution, as Heaney describes it, was to increasingly “redress poetry as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means.”<sup>40</sup> In the wake of his troubled attempts to represent the conflict, this conviction becomes a central tenet of Heaney’s poetics of violence. For a response to be adequate -- that is to say “strong enough to help” as Heaney puts it borrowing a phrase from George Seferis’s notebook -- the poetic assault on external violence must be registered without sacrificing the essential difference of poetic utterance. Citing the work of the Greek poets of witness Seferis and Makriyannis as examples of “an adequate response to conditions in the world when the world was in crisis and Greece was *in extremis*,” Heaney articulates one of the key principles that would guide him in the future: “the idea of poetry as an answer, and the idea of an answering poetry as a responsible poetry, and the idea of poetry’s answer, its responsibility, *being given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it*, that too has been one of my constant themes”(emphasis mine).<sup>41</sup> Consequently, in the face of relentless brutality, Heaney expands his critique of colonialism and violence by harnessing the heteroglossic potential of a series of anticolonial strategies that he executes at the level of concrete poetics.

### **The Amazing Anticolonial Artesian Line and Stanza**

“The force of the line is sinister, rushing always out of the left, as language or speech originates from the left side of the brain, into the virgin space of the right. We have the

sense of moving constantly, in the line as in the whole poem, from the curious ambiguous to structure.”

Robert Morgan, *For Good Measure*

“When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a wood carver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory.”

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

“To break the pentameter, that was/ the first heave.” Ezra Pound, *Canto LXXXI*

Given the unacceptability of remaining silent in the face of rampant violence and oppression, Heaney’s intensified search for adequate emblems of adversity led to one of the most significant formal innovations in his entire career, the development and refinement of what some critics have suggestively called the “artesian stanza.”<sup>42</sup> This form, which is most often discussed in terms of the much anthologized bog poems where Heaney violently yokes images of Iron Age/ Scandinavian and contemporary Irish atrocity, actually provides the structural framework for dozens of other lesser-known poems in which Heaney carries out his twin critique of violence and colonial discourse. Serving as the formal framework for a quarter of the poems in *Wintering Out* (1972) and nearly half of *North* (1975), the artesian stanza surfaces repeatedly in Heaney’s poetry of violence between 1971 and 1975. It thus becomes the primary formal vehicle in which he counters myriad types of violence and resists what he calls, at one point, “the tyranny of English versification.” In this regard, what has seldom been discussed in the criticism is the extent to which the concrete poetics of the artesian poems are inscribed with the politics of decolonization.

Within the artesian structure, Heaney strengthens his formal, generic, and thematic attack on the legacy of imperialism by building a potent prosodic field of force in which he combines the line, image-complexes, sonic effects and even page layout of the poem into powerful synergies which aggressively unmask and counter postcolonial violence. In a significant expansion of his lyric field of composition, Heaney creates meaning not only through verbal signification, but also through the non-linguistic and visual qualities of his new stanzaic pattern. In the following facsimile display of three stanzas from the poem "Kinship," note how the stanzas bear down through the white space of the page and thus enact visually the kind of etymological and archeological excavation described in the passage:

...

But *bog*  
meaning soft,  
the fall of windless rain,  
pupil of amber.

Ruminant ground,  
digestion of mollusk  
and seed-pod  
deep pollen bin. . . .

Insatiable bride.  
sword-swallower,  
casket, midden,  
floe of history.

Ground that will strip  
Its dark side,  
nesting ground  
outback of my mind.

What is most immediately noticeable about this new form is the visual display created by the narrow blocks of dark text rapidly descending through the white space of the material page. As they bear downward through the broad blank margins of the page, these short lines and stanzas are, as Blake Morrison suggests, “to be seen as drills, wells, augers, capillaries, mine-shafts, bore-holes, plumb-lines.”<sup>43</sup> In the case of “Kinship,” Heaney employs this stanzaic pattern to visually enact the kind of complex etymological and historical excavation of the mysteries and meaning of the Irish *bog*. On one level, the term signifies the actual Irish landscape that acts as both “midden” and “casket” and contains the detritus of colonial occupation. At another level, *bog* serves as a stand-in for the creative (sub) conscious of the colonial subject, that “outback of the mind” where the colonial subject considers “the floe of history.” Viewed from a linguistic perspective, the sign metonymically serves as a trace of an imperiled Irish language pushed to the brink of oblivion by epistemic and ecological violence but which continues to survive and surface as a remnant, a persistent trace of the old tongue now assimilated into the colonizer’s dominant language.<sup>44</sup> Thus at the level of concept and concrete poetics, Heaney’s artesian stanza plumbs the complex interaction of language, history, and environment that informs the speaker’s conception of a familiar feature of the Irish landscape.

Apart from the impact of the new stanza’s unique visual display and the possibilities it offers for probing the damaging effects of the colonial past, this new form also exemplifies an entirely new prosodic orientation in Heaney’s poetry. In typical early poems, many of which explore vanishing rural trades and crafts such as churning, dowsing, divining, and forging, Heaney embedded his rural themes in iambics as finely tuned and perfectly wrought as an Elizabethan sonnet:

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,  
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together  
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,  
And left them gaping at his Midas touch.

(“Thatcher,” *Door into the Dark*)

When you have nothing more to say, just drive  
For a day all round the peninsula.  
The sky is tall as over a runway,  
The land without marks, so you will not arrive

(“The Peninsula,” *Door into the Dark*)

But given the exigencies of the crisis, Heaney felt, as he tells Frank Kinahan, that “the musical grace of the English iambic line was some kind of affront. It needed to be wrecked.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, in stark contrast to the leisurely pace, conventional rhyme schemes, and almost perfect metric regularity of these pre-conflict quatrains, what emerges in the artesian poems is a new kind of prosodic power that accrues through the explosive combativeness of the artesian line and stanza. Two important bog poems, both of which conflate acts of modern-day sectarian brutality with images of Iron Age sacrificial victims, demonstrate the prosodic energy that Heaney is able to harness through this new line and stanza:

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

....

I can see her drowned  
body in the bog,  
the weighing stone,  
the floating rods and boughs.

under which at first  
she was a barked sapling  
That is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firken . . .  
("Punishment," *North*)

I could risk blasphemy  
Consecrate the cauldron bog  
Our holy ground and pray  
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed  
Flesh of labourers  
Stockinged corpses  
Laid out in the farm yards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth  
Flecking the sleepers  
Of four young brothers, traile  
For miles along the line.  
("The Tollund Man," *Wintering Out*)

Here in contrast to the soothing images, broad pentameters, and mellifluous diction of the pre-conflict verse, the interplay of the artesian line and stanza, with its typical violent imagery and abundance of plosives (note the plethora of harsh stops -- "c", "t" and "k" -- and the fricative "s"), produces an entirely different musical and emotional register. Propelled by a rhythmic energy no longer dependent on regularized meter and end rhyme, but one rather created through concision, short bursts of speech, and a pattern of line and stanza which creates a choreography for rapid eye movement across and down the theater of the page, every line of these artesian quatrains produces a rapid-fire burst of energy; the effect of this is a greater sense of prosodic urgency and movement, or what the poet

Robert Morgan in his general theory of the line calls “a gathering of force, a staging ground for the flight to the next.”<sup>46</sup> Moving rapidly, these lines build considerable momentum through a drumbeat of irregularly stressed and unstressed syllables, frequent heavy caesurae, and numerous jolting end-stops. All of this not only discourages regular scansion but also helps to create multiple self-standing miniature emblems of adversity. In each of these respects, the artesian line and stanza represents a distinct departure from the sometimes placid predictability of the pre-conflict iambics, a departure that nonetheless enables Heaney to filter his response to (post)colonial violence with a degree of precision and control that enhances rather than compromises the experience of poetry.

In addition to the dramatic prosodic repositioning represented by the artesian line and stanza, there is also a leveraging of diverse cultural influences at work in the artesian form. The diverse range of possible influences for the artesian stanza underscores the fact that at this point in his career Heaney moves well-beyond the predominantly English influences of his early poetry to a more syncretic mix of poetic traditions. At the visual and conceptual level, the artesian stanza likely takes its cue from the compact and short four-line quatrains that appear in numerous sections of the Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne*.<sup>47</sup> This classic Irish-language saga, whose basic poetic unit, as Heaney notes in a commentary on his translation of this medieval work, is the “thin small quatrain . . . kind of drills or augers for turning in . . . long and narrow and deep,” appears to serve as a partial inspiration for the conceptual and visual effect Heaney wishes to achieve with this new form.<sup>48</sup> On another score, the artesian poem bears the unmistakable imprint of prosodic influences brought to Ireland by invading peoples. Specifically, Heaney’s typical artesian line recalls the Anglo-Saxon line with its four stressed syllables and a

mid-line break. Additionally, Heaney appropriates the Old Norse *kenning* or compound-noun device (“Earth-pantry,” “bone-vault,” “sword-swallower”), a prosodic effect which also serves as a prominent feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry. But if the hybridity of the artesian form is partially derived from pre-colonial poetic influences, it also bears the imprint of modern American poetry. As noted earlier, Heaney’s squat, narrowly lineated stanzas aspire to the same kind of visual and rhythmic effects achieved in the object poetry of William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson. In each of these respects, the artesian stanza thus serves as a reminder of the sometimes violent, but nonetheless fertile fusions that can occur from the yoking of disparate cultural traditions.

### **Revising The English Lyric Tradition and Colonial History in “Bog Oak”**

“Memory is actually a very important factor in struggle . . . If one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. It is vital to have possession of their memory.”  
Michel Foucault

Given its characteristic downward thrust, retrospective impetus, and preoccupation with the subject of (post)colonial violence, the artesian poem becomes a powerful vehicle for staging the kind of historical recovery that is “an urgent and pervasive imperative” of many postcolonial writers.<sup>49</sup> That historical recovery has been central to Heaney’s project is made apparent at numerous junctures in his prose essays and interviews.<sup>50</sup> Explaining his sense of poetry “as a restoration of the culture to itself,” Heaney argues for the necessity of historical engagement on the part of Irish poets in a 1974 essay entitled “Feeling Into Words”: “In Ireland in this century [this restoration]

has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed.”<sup>51</sup> This is a point, as we have seen in his introductory remarks to *Beowulf*, that Heaney repeatedly returns to throughout his career. His deployment of the artesian structure in many of the poems from the collections *Wintering Out* and *North* carries out this project of revisionist historiography, a project that increasingly becomes an integral part of Heaney’s re-imagining of the form and function of the English language lyric.

In an important early attempt to rewrite literary and colonial history, Heaney expands his assault on the English lyric tradition in the artesian poem “Bog Oak,” a memorable allegory of political and poetic violence. Extending his anticolonial critique by crafting a lyric that once again undermines the notion of poetic discourse as insulated, monologic utterance, Heaney also mounts his attack on the English lyric tradition by skirmishing with a revered patriarch in the English canon, Edmund Spenser.<sup>52</sup> By infusing “Bog Oak” with the shadowy presence of this colonial English poet/ planter and his violent text, Heaney emphasizes the lingering aftermath of Spenser’s violent writings concerning the Irish colony. From his keep at Kilcolman Castle, the edifice Heaney calls the “tower of English conquest and the Anglicization of Ireland,” Spenser disseminated his imperialistic schemes through the production of various works such as *The Fairie Queen*, but it was through *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, his posthumously published allegorical dialogue between the characters Eudoxus (“good judgment”) and Irenius (Ireland), that Spenser scripted his highly influential and brutal scenario for

subduing Ireland.<sup>53</sup> It is this text that provides the intertextual backdrop for Heaney's anticolonial positioning in "Bog Oak."

Challenging the idea of lyric as the creation of an autonomous, self-sustaining subjectivity or, as Frank Lentricchia puts it, of "an ideal, integrated consciousness" entirely detached from the social sphere and the pressures of the historical onslaught, Heaney renders his lyric as an intersubjective space in which a postcolonial subjectivity does battle with the colonial subjectivity of Spenser.<sup>54</sup> It is perhaps more accurate, however, to say the poem serves as a kind of postcolonial riff on the traditional psychomachia found in much medieval and early modern literature. Ironically, in Heaney's rendition of this allegorical device it is the Spenserian voice which haunts and therefore destabilizes the private pastoral reverie of the poem's speaker. Although he opens the poem with a deceptively peaceful meditation on the provenance of a rafter hewn from the extensive bog oak forests that once covered Ireland, Heaney transmogrifies this lyric meditation into a colonial house of terror as the speaker's rustic idyll is invaded by two unsettling fragments from *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, both of which point to the brutality of Spenser's colonial schemes:

A carter's trophy  
Split for rafters,  
A cobwebbed, black,  
Long-seasoned rib

Under the first thatch.  
I might tarry  
With the moustached  
Dead, the creel-fillers,

Or eavesdrop on  
Their hopeless wisdom

As a blow-down of smoke  
Struggles over the half-door

And mizzling rain  
Blurs the far end  
Of the cart track.  
The softening ruts

Lead back to no  
'oak groves' no  
cutters of mistletoe  
in the green clearings.

Perhaps I just make out  
Edmund Spenser,  
Dreaming sunlight,  
encroached upon by

geniuses who creep  
'out of every corner  
of the woodes and glennes'  
towards watercress and carrion.

(*Wintering Out* 14-15)

The speaker's culminating vision here builds around two direct quotations from Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, which makes a brief commentary on that text essential for understanding the remarkable perspective of Spenser's own poetics of violence that Heaney's poem invokes. Written during an intense period of colonial violence just prior to the sacking and burning of his 3,000 acre colonial estate at Kilcolman, County Cork, this allegorical dialogue amounts to no less than a scheme for garrisoning and starving Ireland into submission, but Spenser couches his colonial design in the poetic language of pastoral drama. Gazing out upon a besieged English settlement, Eudoxus and Irenius declare from the outset they will make the Irish colony's "malady be knowne" and then will offer a plan of treatment to "cure and redress it."<sup>55</sup> Casting the Irish problem in terms of theological and agricultural metaphors, together they identify

the “the evils which seme to be most hurtful to the common-wale of [Ireland]” and invoke the gospel parable of the true vine in an effort to legitimize a program of totalizing violence meant to purge Ireland of its depravity.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in typical colonialist fashion, they argue that the “reformation” of Ireland must be won at any cost, “[e]ven by the sworde; for all those evilles must first be cutt awaye with a stronge hande, before any good cann be planted; like as the corrupt branches are first to bee pruned, and the fowle mosse censed or scraped awaye, before the tree cann bringe forth any good fruicte.”<sup>57</sup>

Spenser’s terms for ensuring the success of the Irish colony call for the systematic destruction of every obstacle blocking the cultivation of English cultural and political dominance. Linguistic and cultural domination stand as the ultimate goal of this project, for native Irish language and oral traditions have corrupted English settlers, and thus have stalled the colonial venture. Decrying the adoption of the Irish tongue by settlers, Eudoxus notes the lessons of history which teach the need for linguistic imperialism: “It semeth strang to me that English should take more delight to speake that language [Irish] than their owne, whereas they should (me thinkes) rather take scorne to acquainte ther tonges thereto: for it hath always bene the use of the conqueror to dispose the language of the conquered, and to force him by all meanes to learne his.”<sup>58</sup> The corruption of the colony is further exacerbated by settlers who, in their blind admiration of Irish culture, “venture upon the histories of auncyent tymes, and leane too confidently unto the Irishe Cronicles which are moste fabulous and forged.” Absence rather than substance, Eudoxus argues, is the defining mark of Irish culture: “noe monument remaynes of her begynninge and [firste] inhabitinge there; specially havinge bene allwayes without letter, but only bare tradicions of tymes and remembrances of bardes, which use to forge and

falsifye every thinge as they liste to please or displease any man.”<sup>59</sup> For Spenser, the *inauthenticity* of Irish history, monuments, and poets, and particularly, the lack of script-based literature, testifies to the corrupt nature of Irish culture. Thus, by constructing this view of ontological lack and depravity -- a view, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, that amounts to “a perception of the not-self, of all that lies outside, or resists, or threatens identity”-- Spenser simultaneously negates the indigenous culture and re-affirms a positive image of English cultural identity. By securing what Greenblatt calls “the principle of difference which is necessary to fashion the self,”<sup>60</sup> Spenser builds his justification for eradicating Irish culture “root and branch” and supplementing it with English language, customs, and laws.

If linguistic and epistemic violence are central to Spenser’s colonial project, more immediate, tangible forms of violence are necessary for achieving these ends. The specific lines quoted at the end of “Bog Oak” precisely prescribe the methods for violently compartmentalizing and starving Ireland into submission. When the speaker of “Bog Oak” envisions a “long seasoned” rafter-beam, he traces its origin back to the colonial deforestation schemes outlined in Spenser’s text.<sup>61</sup> The artesian lines “no / ‘oak groves’ no / cutters of mistletoe / in the green clearings” point to several passages in *A View* that echo the claim of Lord Deputy Grey de Wilton that civilization would not take hold in Ireland before “force have planed the ground for foundation.”<sup>62</sup> Already writing with the kind of mathematical precision and scientific codification that later spurred massive ecological transformations of overseas territories during the heyday of European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>63</sup> Spenser simultaneously argues

for the destruction of the ecosystems integral to native life patterns and for the imposition of an English way of life based on commerce and trade:

And first I wish that order were taken for the cuttynge downe and openinge of all paces thorough woodes, so that a wide waye of the space of c. yards might be layde open in every of them for the safety of treavellers, which use often in such perilous places to be robbed, and sometimes murdered. Next, that bridges were builte upon all rivers, and all the fordes marred and spilte, so as none might passé any other waye, but by those bridges, and every bridge to have a gate and a small gatehouse sett thereon. . . . Moreover, that all high wayes should be fenced on both sides, leavinge onely fortye foote bredthe for theeves and night robbers might be the more easely pursued and encoutred . . . And lastly there doth nothinge more enrich any contry or realme then many townes; for to them will people drawe and bring the fruicte of their trades, as well to make money of them . . . and the contrymen will also be the more industrious in tillage, and rearing all husbandry comodities, knowing they shall have redy sale for them at those townes: and in all those townes should there convenient inns be erected for the lodginge and harboringe of all travellers . . .<sup>64</sup>

But if the conquest and partitioning of the native landscape is meant to endow the colonial wilderness with a new ontological significance derived from commerce, trade, and agrarian productivity, it also has a more pernicious objective. Eudoxus proposes this deforestation plan in the context of a broader divide and conquer strategy, one aimed at starving the Irish into submission. By displacing and depriving the Irish of their traditional means of sustenance, Eudoxus notes, they will cannibalistically turn upon their own and “quickly consume themselves and devour one another.”<sup>65</sup> In response to this ghastly notion, when Heaney writes of Spenser “[d]reaming sunlight / encroached upon by / geniuses who creep / ‘out of every corner / of the woodes and glennes’ / towards watercress and carrion,” he explodes the quaint image of the genteel English pastoralist

composing green thoughts in a green land. In its place, he conjures a radically different image of a colonial planter reveling in the gruesome defeat of the colonized:

Out of every corner of the woodes and glennes they came creeping foorth  
upon theyr handes, for theyr legges could not beare them; they looked like  
anatomyes of death, they spake like ghostes crying out of theyr graves; they  
did eate of the dead carrions, happy were they yf they could finde them, yea,  
and one another soone after, insoemuch as the very carcasses they spared not  
to scrape out of theyr graves; and yf they founde a plotte of water-cresses or  
shamrokes, there they flocked as to a feast . . .<sup>66</sup>

Given the stunning range of epistemic, ecological, and physical force violence proposed by Spenser, Heaney's appropriation of these brutal textual fragments amounts to a significant rewriting of colonial history, one in which past violence allegorically comes into a significant relation with the present. By inserting traces of Spenser's document into the mind of a contemporary speaker, Heaney suggests that Spenser's colonial project continues in some way to inform contemporary discourse and perceptions of Ireland. In this way, Heaney plays the part of deconstructive poet-historian and corroborates Walter Benjamin's contention that documents in the history of "civilization" like *A View of the Present State of Ireland* are also very often documents in the history of "barbarism." In this respect, "Bog Oak" instances the kind of "radical historicity" or history from below that Benjamin argues is necessary to "brush history against the grain," tell the truth of an oppressed past, and show how, in some sense, the past is never "over and done with."<sup>67</sup> To break the cycle of historical violence engendered by the colonial imaginary, an alternative episteme and conception of the relation between the postcolonial subject and his world becomes necessary. Heaney constructs just such an alternative epistemological, poetic, and linguistic perspective in a number of other artesian poems in *Wintering Out* and *North*.

## Resisting Cultural and Territorial Displacement in the *Dinnseanchas* Poetry

A stagger in air  
as if a language  
failed, a sleight of wing.

A snipe's bleat is fleeing  
its nesting ground  
into dialect,  
into variants

transliterations whirr  
on the nature reserves—  
(from "The Backward Look," *Wintering Out* 29)

Responding to the need for a viable and constructive alternative to the discourse of colonialism, Heaney follows a path of resistance traveled by many postcolonial intellectuals as he expands his project of revisionist historiography in his so-called place-name poems. Insofar as the "perverted logic" of colonialism "turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it," Fanon notes, "[the] work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance . . . [as] native intellectuals [have] decided to go back further to delve deeper down" in an attempt to retrieve a useable past.<sup>68</sup> This kind of backward glance occurs in a number of artesian poems from *Wintering Out* where Heaney attempts to recover a viable sense of an Irish territorial, linguistic, and poetic inheritance that has been irrevocably altered by colonial violence.<sup>69</sup> In some of his most memorable recuperative acts, Heaney expands the formal hybridity of the artesian stanza by using it to reincarnate the ancient Gaelic *dinnseanchas* or place-name poetry, an important genre of toponymic lore in early Irish literature which constituted part of the body of knowledge medieval Irish poets (*fili*) were expected to

master.<sup>70</sup> In the *flidh* and bardic traditions, *dinnseanchas* (literally, “knowledge of the lore of places”) were recited to explain the origin and development of native Irish place names. In these poems, existing place names were explained by means of linking legends to them, pseudo-etymological techniques, or the telling of fictitious stories. As with many indigenous peoples, however, the naming of place for the native Irish was more than a mere appellative exercise. The telling of the *dinnseanchas* became a story of creation and mythological origins as well as an ordering of time; in addition, they frequently existed to give historical legitimacy to territorial claims.<sup>71</sup>

Part of a wide-spread interest in constructing a distinctive brand of historical and linguistic geography that emerged in Northern Irish writing in the early years of the recent Troubles, Heaney’s resurrection of the *dinnseanchas* tradition serves a purpose similar to representations of place in other postcolonial texts. Noting the primacy of the geographical in the anti-imperial imagination of W.B. Yeats and other postcolonial writers, Edward Said explains that “[f]or the native the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored.” Such a quest is made necessary because the colonial project proceeds according to what Said calls “geographical violence,” a strategic assault “through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.”<sup>72</sup> Given this assault on a complex web of interconnected indigenous cultural and material spaces (particularly indigenous land, language, and cultural traditions), it thus becomes the task of the anticolonial writer to replace the linguistic ordering and geographical layout imposed by the colonial imagination.

Reflecting on his own conception of place, Heaney writes: "when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced that it is to "the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity."<sup>73</sup> If a semblance of cultural and linguistic continuity is what is sought, the history of Irish consciousness that emerges from the story of place is often one of discontinuity, displacement, and antagonism. Discussing the divided sense of place he experienced growing up in a rural Northern Irish community, Heaney writes:

For if this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division. Like the rabbits that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. In the names of its fields and townlands, in their mixture of Scots and Irish and English etymologies, this side of the country was redolent of the histories of its owners.<sup>74</sup>

In spite of the political implications entailed in such statements and the distinctive socio-political codings of his place-name poems, some critics have criticized Heaney's revival of the *dinnseanchas*, detecting in it a strain of essentialist thinking and determinist historicism based upon "the old Celticist idea of a people foredoomed by landscape and character to an ineffable melancholy."<sup>75</sup> But upon closer scrutiny, Heaney's place-name poetry seldom warrants such criticism. Neither essentialist, melancholic, nor fatalistic, Heaney's formal and linguistic positioning in his *dinnseanchas* more closely approximates the resistive strategies found in other anticolonial representations of place. For Heaney, as for many anticolonial writers, the retrieval of postcolonial place entails far more than a nostalgic longing for a return to a pre-colonial, prelapsarian state of bliss; rather the trope typically provides a colonized subject the opportunity to resist the colonial condition and imagine his or her world anew. Such a re-imagining is made possible as the subaltern subject reconfigures place through a "complex interaction of

language, history, and environment.” Viewed from this perspective, the trope of place in postcolonial literature therefore serves as a “metonym of the continual process of reclamation, as a cultural reality is both posited and reclaimed from the incorporating dominance of English [formal, linguistic, epistemological, and political] domination.”<sup>76</sup>

It is precisely this kind of dialectic of textual violence that plays out in place-name poems such as “Toome.” In this intriguing attempt to revive his Gaelic poetic and linguistic inheritance, Heaney reincarnates the *dinnseanchas* tradition, but he enhances the political and poetic freight of this ancient form by drawing upon the multiple levels of signification afforded by the artesian stanza. Reconstructing the violent history of a locale near his boyhood home in the Bann Valley, the site of a major campaign during the 1789 Rising, Heaney conjures up a tale of colonial domination and anti-imperial insurgency:

My mouth holds round  
the soft blastings,  
Toome, Toome,  
as under the dislodged

slab of the tongue  
I push into a souterrain  
prospecting what new  
in a hundred centuries’

loam, flints, musket balls,  
fragmented ware,  
torcs and fish-bones  
till I am sleeved in

In these lines Heaney employs the full visual and aural force of the artesian stanza to suggest that the violence of colonial discourse is inscribed deeply into both the Irish landscape and the postcolonial subject’s perception of native place.<sup>77</sup> Conjuring a sense

of place that begins with the suggestively explosive “mouth blastings” of the local name “Toome,” a faint linguistic vestige of the Irish *tuaim* (meaning “grave”), Heaney moves to resurrect his Gaelic linguistic and formal inheritance. Descending the ladder of the artesian stanza, the lyric consciousness enters a “souterrain” or underground burial chamber; there it forms a perception of place configured in terms of the colonial instruments of force by which the native landscape and language have been irrevocably altered. Significantly, the remainder of the poem contains only one other trace of the native language, the compound “bogwater.” For the rest, the *dinnseanchas* is realized in the colonizer’s tongue. Like the flints and musket balls left in the wake of colonial conquest, the English language becomes an occupier of sorts in the formal landscape of the *dinnseanchas* tradition.

In the place-name poem “Anahorish,” an implicit tale of linguistic and territorial domination unfolds in the course of Heaney’s etymological excavations, but Heaney also attempts to undo the damage of colonialism through a virtuoso reinscription of place:

“Anahorish”

My ‘place of clear water’  
The first hill in the world  
Where springs washed into  
The shiny grass

And darkened cobbles  
In the bed of the lane.  
*Anahorish*, soft gradient  
Of consonant, vowel-meadow,

After-image of lamps  
Swung through the yards  
On winter evenings.  
With pails and barrows

Those mound-dwellers  
Go waist-deep in mist  
To break the light ice  
At wells and dunghills.  
(*Wintering Out*, 33)

What initially, and perhaps primarily, secures our attention and assent in this lyrical evocation of a favorite haunt near Heaney's boyhood home is the sumptuous sound system created by the fused "gradients of consonant" and "vowel-meadow." But beneath the exquisite imagery and soothing ear-music of this piece lies a hybridized verbal landscape that seeks to resist the effects of colonization. Formally, the poem exercises great fidelity to the *dinnseanchas* tradition in that a single word can serve, as Heaney notes, as an "etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments."<sup>78</sup> The history of "Anahorish" as both place and word significantly bears the impress of colonial translation. Instead of using the original Irish name *anach fhior uisce* (literally, "place of clear water" or "place of whiskey") to tell this story of place, Heaney uses the now predominant anglicized version of the place name, "Anahorish," a transliteration of the native Irish name which fell into disuse following the renaming of all Irish place names by the nineteenth-century British Ordnance Survey. Thus once again the colonizer's tongue dominates the postcolonial subject's perception of place. But if, in one sense, this particular story of Irish place speaks of fragmentation and discontinuity, it is also a tale of a revitalized linguistic and poetic inheritance now assimilated into, but also resisting, the word-hoard and formal dominance of the colonizer. What becomes so most remarkable then about this revival of the *dinnseanchas* is how Heaney uses the hybridized place-name to serve as a kind of "concomitant of

difference, the continual reminder of the separation, and yet of the hybrid interpenetration of the coloniser and colonised.”<sup>79</sup>

That Heaney sees the *dinnseanchas* as a crucial instrument in his struggle to deterritorialize his linguistic and poetic inheritance is made clear in his seminal essay “The Sense of Place.” In this piece, Heaney suggests that the separation from a once viable, but now largely effaced linguistic and cultural inheritance has in fact rendered the native sense of place nearly unintelligible. “The whole of the Irish landscape,” Heaney notes “is a manuscript we have lost the skill to read.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, the imposition of a colonial linguistic, formal, and epistemological grid on Irish consciousness thwarts the postcolonial subject’s efforts to construct a viable sense of indigenous place. Indicating his commitment to rewriting the manuscript, Heaney continues, “I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate, unconscious, the other learned, literate, conscious.”<sup>81</sup> The resurrection of the *dinnseanchas* tradition therefore becomes a crucial part of Heaney’s reinscriptive project whereby he envisions poetry as a “restoration of a culture to itself.”<sup>82</sup>

Heaney’s inclusion of Ulster dialect words and remnants of the Irish language in a number of *dinnseanchas* signals a deepening engagement with one of the defining characteristics of Irish postcoloniality, the issue of language and identity. Given that the history of the Irish language has been “a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture,”<sup>83</sup> the question of which language (and by extension which poetic form) to use in the renaming of oneself and one’s culture naturally assumes tremendous political significance. Not surprisingly then,

in Ireland as well as other postcolonial contexts, the vexed issue of linguistic identity has been a constant center of gravity within postcolonial resistance and nationalist liberation struggles. Ranging from Douglas Hyde's nineteenth-century call for cultural and linguistic independence in "The Necessity of Deanglicizing Ireland" to the contemporary Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o's rejection of the English language in his prescription for "decolonizing the mind," a common response to the problem of linguistic identity has been to abandon English and revert entirely to one's native language as a means for restoring an ethnic or national identity embedded in the mother tongue.<sup>84</sup> For many postcolonial writers, however, the rejection of the colonizer's language serves as neither a practical nor entirely desirable solution. Discussing his own ambivalence over the language question in a 1975 speech entitled "The African Writer and the English Language," Chinua Achebe describes the plight of many postcolonial writers: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it."<sup>85</sup> Nine years earlier, the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella explained that Irish writers must grapple with essentially the same dilemma, one which divides and isolates writers in Ireland:

A writer who cares who he is and where he comes from looks about him and begins by examining his colleagues. In that very act a writer in Ireland must make a basic choice: do I include writers in Irish among my colleagues? Or am I to write them off as a minor and embattled group, keeping loyal—for the best reasons—to a dead or dying language? Some of the best writers in Irish believe that their language is doomed, rejected by its people. They are pessimistic, but my instinct tells me they are right. So I turn only to those who are writing in English.<sup>86</sup>

Like Achebe and Kinsella, Heaney has never considered writing in Irish to be a viable option, although his Irish is said to be impeccable. But his decision to write in English was not an easy one in the early years of his career. In a fashion reminiscent of Stephen Dadaeus, who refers to English as “acquired speech . . . his before mine . . . so familiar and so foreign,”<sup>87</sup> Heaney notes that his decision to write in English caused him considerable consternation: “Sprung from an Irish nationalist background and educated at a Northern Irish Catholic school, I had learned the Irish language and lived within a cultural and ideological frame that regarded it as the language that I should by rights have been speaking, but I had been robbed of. . . . I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either / or conditions rather than both/and . . .”<sup>88</sup> Particularly in the wake of spiraling sectarian and state-sponsored violence, English became for Heaney what he calls “not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon.”<sup>89</sup> Subsequently, Heaney began subverting standard English during the early years of the conflict by frequently infusing his *dinnseanchas* and other artesian poems with hibernizations and neologisms, all of which have the effect of deanglicizing his poetic language in much the same way Césaire or Senghor de-frenchify the French language.<sup>90</sup>

Such a decolonization of the mind occurs in the closing lines of “Toome.” Whereas in the first three stanzas of this poem Heaney employs the colonizer’s language to expose the violence of the imperial project, in the final stanza he masterfully slips the shackles of linguistic and territorial domination by transforming the English language. Leaving the detritus of colonial wars behind, the poem’s speaker burrows more deeply into an almost urphilological sense of place, one constructed prior to linguistic and territorial domination, where he discovers a language and image of release beyond

colonial violence. At poem's end, the speaker finds himself "sleeved in/ alluvial mud that shelves/ suddenly under/ bogwater and tributaries,/ and elvers my hair." Here the phrase "bogwater" the Irish word *bog* (meaning "soft") gently merges with the English *water*, a coupling that realizes the meaning of the Latinate phrase *tributaries* (denoting "a channeling of material or supplies into something more inclusive"). The poem's conclusion clinches the transformation wrought by Heaney's retelling of this story of place. The exquisite, defamiliarizing image in the final line flows out of a kind of Joycean riverrun of language. Here Heaney adopts the Old-English-derived noun "elver" (denoting "a small cylindrical eel") and creates an image that spreads the speaker's hair into a dazzling image of liberation, one that is almost unmistakably derived from a familiar iconographic representation in Celtic mythology, that of the severed head (see Figure 2), an image which the Celtic scholar Ann Ross describes as "a kind of shorthand symbol for the entire religious outlook of the pagan Celts."<sup>91</sup>



Figure 2  
Celtic severed head mask from *Aquae Sulis* (Bath), Somerset

With this reinscriptive performance, Heaney diverts attention from the nominalist negations of imperialism and reorders the layout of “Toome” based on a sense of place that transcends colonial violence and division.

## **Conclusion**

Following his early troubled attempts to translate his experience and understanding of violence into explicitly political verse such as “Craig’s Dragoons” and “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” Heaney increasingly turned to discovered forms such as the artesian stanza, *dinnseanchas*, and street ballad in order to contain, control, and channel his critique of myriad forms of (post)colonial violence. While many of his critics might still prefer that Heaney had given his account of violence in the language of political manifestos and sectarian shibboleths, it is precisely by expanding the scope of his poetic artifice and distancing his poetry from the plain-speak of politics that Heaney’s “statements” about the conflict gather some of their greatest force. Heaney’s anticolonial poetic project of resistance and reinscription proves to be remarkably powerful in its own right. Indeed, the poetry that emerged in the early 1970s demonstrates how the poetics of violence and politics of decolonization are often inscribed into the concrete poetics of Heaney’s verse on multiple levels of signification (formal, linguistic, and bibliographic). To discount Heaney’s efforts in this regard, as many of his detractors do, is to miss the discursive power of lyric poetry in the Irish postcolonial context. Since the struggle for the power to name one’s history and environment as well as one’s cultural and political future is often enacted within words and texts, Heaney’s formal and linguistic acts of resistance contribute to the process of decolonization in significant ways. As such,

artesian poems like “Bog Oak,” “Toome” and “Anahorish” must not be read as mere precious, socially-disengaged *objets d’art*. Rather, they illustrate the powerful transformations of culture that can occur in the sovereign space of the postcolonial lyric.

In this regard, what comes to mind as a point of comparison with Heaney’s subtle, yet powerful politicization of the lyric is the work of several embattled postcolonial poets whose postcolonial lyrics militate against hegemonic structures through a similar project of linguistic, formal, and epistemological rebellion. Consider, for instance, the work of Césaire or Senghor, two lyricists of violence for whom poetic expression was central to their respective projects of decolonization. Each added the lyric as a particularly effective weapon to his anticolonial arsenal by employing form to expose and resist the violence of colonialism. Indeed, Heaney’s own extensive prosodic and formal experiments frequently resemble the poetics of violence contained in collections such as *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* and *Les armes miraculeuses*, volumes in which Césaire assaults colonialism through a violent overthrow of hegemonic attitudes, language and formal conventions.<sup>92</sup>

What becomes clear then from a reconsideration of Heaney’s emerging poetics of violence is the powerful and strangely wonderful transformations the postcolonial lyric can undergo when a poet feels compelled to translate his or her experience of brutal and dehumanizing external forces into verse. Far from instancing the kind of purified and monologic utterance many of Heaney’s detractors see as the predominant mode in his corpus, Heaney’s hybrid poetry of violence stages a decisive campaign against the violent discourse of colonialism, a discourse that in some ways sadly continues to plague contemporary Northern Ireland. Largely through the construction of complex formal and

linguistic strategies, Heaney thus makes a substantial bid to provide an alternative to both the violent discourse of imperialism and armed force nationalism. His undaunted commitment to developing the lyric as an anticolonial field of force in the early years of the Northern Irish conflict establishes Heaney as a major voice of Irish decolonization.

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## Notes to Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 199; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (R 199).

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>4</sup> See interview in *Irish Times*, 28 Dec, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Since “hybridity” is by now such a well-worn and polysemous phrase, I declare my intention to use “hybridity” in this chapter primarily in the sense suggested by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 298-362. “What is a hybridization?” asks Bakhtin, “It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (*Dialogic Imagination* 358). Bakhtin describes “intentional hybridization” as a contestatory and politicized authorial unmasking of another’s speech through language that is “double-styled”:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical [syntactic] and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages’, two semantic and axiological belief systems. We repeat, there is no formal – compositional and syntactic – boundary between these two utterances, styles, languages, belief systems; the division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a single sentence. It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction – and consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents. (358-9)

Thus, for Bakhtin hybridization describes the ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance. Building off Bakhtin’s theory of “hybridity,” critics such as Ramazani, Robert Young, and Mary Louise Pratt have documented the ingenious ways in which postcolonial writers have translated the colonizer’s language and generic conventions into a potent form of heteroglossia.

<sup>6</sup> By extending Bakhtin’s theory of hybridity to poetry, my reading of poetry’s capacity for dialogic statement diverges significantly from Bakhtin’s original use of the term which applies only to the novel. Bakhtin contends that poetry is monologic and divorced from the realm of political discourse. For my own reading of Heaney’s linguistic and formal hybridity, I am indebted to Jahan Ramazani’s *The Hybrid Muse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), a work which cogently argues for the formal and linguistic “hybridity” in the work of several postcolonial poets. Noting anticolonial poetry is typically distinguished by what Walcott calls a “mulatto style,” Ramazani locates the “artistic hybridization” of such works in a clash of disparate fragments of imagery, myths, and words drawn from the two halves of postcolonial inheritance. For him hybridity “highlights the cultural in-betweenness of writers who inhabit, explore, and articulate the *after*-colonial interrelationships between the imposed culture of the colonizer and the native culture of the colonized.” (Ramazani 36). I see such a dynamic at work in Heaney’s poetry as well.

<sup>7</sup> Raphael Ingelbien, “Decolonizing Ireland/England? Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes,” in Deborah Fleming’s (ed.) *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the *deibidhe* convention, see Bernard O’Donoghue’s excellent *Seamus Heaney and The Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 29-33.

<sup>9</sup> John Powell Ward, *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 1-16. In his reading of the prevailing tendencies in twentieth-century British poetics, Ward identifies the “English line” and “Modernism” as the two predominant strains of mid-century English poetry. The latter, according to Powell, translates its exuberant confidence in the power of poetic imagination and language to “make it new” into a dizzying pursuit of formal and syntactical

experimentation and a preference for classical and mythological subjects over pastoral ones. In contrast, Ward's "English line" runs from William Wordsworth to the Movement lyric. This mode is distinguished by "verbal reserve and the pragmatic and laconic suspicion of the visionary or the extravagant." Longing for a lost or vanishing relationship with a threatened or declining cultural inheritance, the predominant mood of poetry in this mode is melancholy.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin Bedient, "The Music of What Happens," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*. 8.1 (Fall-Winter 1979): 110.

<sup>11</sup> A. Alvarez, "A Fine Way with the Language," *The New York Review of Books* 27.3 (March 6, 1980): 16.

<sup>12</sup> Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991), pp. 16-17. Despite Fennell's crankiness, the remainder of Fennell's comment cited above is worth quoting because it encapsulate a widely held perception of *North* among a number of Irish critics: "Of course, in the minds of readers, especially if they are at a distance from the scene, the poems about prehistoric bodies in a Jutland bog, and about particulars of the Northern Ireland war, may fuse together as 'poems about irrational violence'; and that is certainly their collective suggestion. But Heaney says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight which we hardly need to read poetry for" (Fennell 17).

<sup>13</sup> David Lloyd, "'Pap For The Dispossessed,'" in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 17-34; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (AS 34). Lloyd argues Heaney's verse formally and substantively conforms to a well-worn neo-Romantic aesthetic which is given to reinforcing root-bound organic notions of nationalist solidarity. Lloyd sees this tendency to be potentially dangerous because rather than challenging "imperial ideology" it underwrites the aesthetic and territorial pieties of Irish nationalism (all of which, according to Lloyd, amounts to a mimic's move that reduces Heaney's poetics to a mirror image of colonialist aesthetics).

<sup>14</sup> (AS 35). Lloyd curiously outlines the qualities of the well-made poem: "that it will crystallize specific emotions out of an experience; that the metaphorical structure in which the emotion is to be communicated will be internally coherent; that the sum of its ambiguities will be an integer, expressing eventually a unity of tone and feeling even where mediated by irony; that the unity will finally be the expression of a certain identity, a poetic 'voice.'"

<sup>15</sup> R 189.

<sup>16</sup> Troubles: the term commonly used to refer to two period of crisis in modern Irish history; 1916-1923, the Easter Rising through the Anglo-Irish War and subsequent Civil War; and 1968-1998, the resumption of sectarian fighting in Northern Ireland through the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), pp. 56-57. hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (P 56).

<sup>18</sup> (P 57).

<sup>19</sup> James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney," *Ploughshares*. 5:3, 1979, pp. 7-22.

In this piece, Heaney describes the influence of American writers such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly on his own work: "There was a strong sense of contemporary American poetry in the West . . . rejecting the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry and going for the mythological. I mean everyone wanted to be a Red Indian, basically. And that meshed with my own concerns for I could see a close connection between the political and cultural assertions being made at the time by the minority in the north of Ireland and the protests and consciousness-raising that were going on in the Bay Area. . . . So that was probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley, that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance."

<sup>20</sup> (AS 94).

<sup>21</sup> (AS 93-94).

<sup>22</sup> In the political poetry of contemporary Northern Irish writers such as Heaney, the street ballad becomes a powerful formal weapon for resisting essentialist notions of aesthetic and national purity. In its original nineteenth-century instantiation and in its twentieth-century poetic incarnations, street ballad poetics signal a hybridized resistance to imperial and nationalist culture alike through subversive strategies that are designed to undercut any sense of linguistic or formal stability. Many Irish street ballads and their poetic cousins destabilize traditional English airs, for example, through an enforcement of Irish-language fragments into the predominantly English-language text, the incorporation of Gaelic musical speech

rhythms and syntax, a distortion of English pronunciation, and, in many cases, an emphasis on traditional Gaelic poetic techniques such as alliteration and internal rhyme. But while street ballad poetics may work to establish elements of a native Irish tradition, they simultaneously subvert any gesture toward idealization of an essential Irishness through the celebration of metropolitan forms and influences.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney "Old Derry Walls," *The Listener*, 24 October 1968, p. 522.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Miller, "Opinion," *The Review*, 27-8 (Autumn-Winter 1971/72), pp. 41-52. According to Miller, the ballad was first circulated anonymously.

<sup>25</sup> Luke Gibbon, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork UP, 1996), pp. 16-17, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Davis, "Clare's Dragoons," in Patrick Galvin's (ed.) *Irish Songs of Resistance* (New York: Folklore Press, 1962), pp. 19-20.

<sup>27</sup> "Dolly's Brae" printed in Georges-Denis Zimmermann's (ed.) *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1967), pp. 311-313.

<sup>28</sup> August Gering, "To Sing of '98: The United Irishmen Rising and the Ballad Tradition in Heaney and Muldoon," *Literary Interpretation Theory*, 2 (October 1999), pp. 149-179.

<sup>29</sup> Molino, Michael, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Washington D.C.: Catholic UP, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Belfast's Black Christmas," *The Listener*, 23 December, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> "The Poet who came back," *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 November, 1971.

<sup>32</sup> This is the phrase Joyce uses to describe his intention with *Dubliners*. See *Letters of James Joyce*, Ed. Stuart Gilbert. (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 64.

<sup>33</sup> Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say Say Nothing* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991), pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> George Bornstein makes a similar point about Yeats's condemnation of police brutality against striking workers in "September 1913" and its appearance in *The Irish Times*; see "Yeats and Textual Reincarnation" in *The Iconic Page*, eds. George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998), 240.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Olson, *Collected Prose* (Berkeley, University of California Press), p. 243. In the essay "Projective Verse," a piece subtitled "(projectile (percussive (prospective vs. The NON-Projective)," Olson explains the concept behind the field of composition, a concept that Heaney seems to extend significantly with his own use of bibliographic codes and the material page: "(We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used. . . . every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality . . . these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world."

<sup>37</sup> While *The Listener* is not a daily newspaper, its mass circulation enabled Heaney's poem to reach a large, influential audience, thus enabling this poem to contribute in some way to what Benedict Anderson calls "the extraordinary mass ceremony" of newspaper consumption that informs communal identity in modern societies. See *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 34-36.

<sup>38</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 38-39; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (WE 38).

<sup>39</sup> Lloyd, for example, argues that Heaney perpetuates a strain of historical obscurantism which associates the repetitiveness of Irish history "with a persuasive insinuation that the reasons for repetition lie in the nature of Irish identity." See (AS 19).

<sup>40</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995). pp. 5-6; cited parenthetically hereafter, thus: (RP 5).

<sup>41</sup> (RP 191).

<sup>42</sup> Noting that some of William Carlos Williams's and Robert Creeley's poetry looks rather like the display created Heaney's new stanzaic pattern, Morrison suggestively coins the phrase "artesian stanza" to describe this form as it is used in *North*. Morrison does not, however, seize the opportunity to fully demonstrate this point about Heaney's use of the page. He does not reproduce an example of Heaney's stanza; thus, his point functions only at the conceptual level but not the visual level. These remarks appear in Morrison's

insightful and indispensable early study of Heaney, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), 44-46; cited parenthetically hereafter, thus: (SH 45).

<sup>43</sup> (SH 45).

<sup>44</sup> For reader's unfamiliar with the origin of this word it is important to note that bog, meaning soft in Irish, is a word that English colonial planters assimilated into the English language.

<sup>45</sup> Frank Kinahan, "Artists on Art: An Interview with Seamus Heaney." (*Critical Inquiry*, 8, 3 [Spring 1982]), pp. 404-414.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Morgan, *Good Measure* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994), p. 34

<sup>47</sup> Heaney knew this work from his study of J.G. O'Keefe's 1908 bi-lingual edition. This edition is the text Heaney studied at Queen's College. He began translating it in 1973 and published his version as *Sweeney Astray* in 1983.

<sup>48</sup> Heaney quoted in Ciaran Carson, "Sweeney Astray: Escaping from Limbo" in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Tony Curtis (ed.) (Bridgend: Dufor, 1985), p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> In Heaney's case, historical recovery has been a staple of his anticolonial critique. From the late 1960s, Heaney work betrays a strong investment in radical historicity, an attitude which evidenced by his remark in a 1972 *Irish Times* interview: "I have been writing poems out of history. It is the hump we live off. I have my tap root in personal and racial memory. The Famine, the '98 Rebellion, things like that have surfaced in my imagination and they are living language here . . ." Heaney interview quoted in (eds.) Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop's *Irish Literature, A Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1987), p. 380.

<sup>51</sup> (P 60).

<sup>52</sup> Although Edmund Spenser has been dead over 400 years, his memory and legacy loom like a specter over the landscape of Irish postcolonial literature and scholarship. It has become a commonplace in histories of modern Irish literature to begin with an account of Spenser's activities in Ireland. Edmund Spenser (1552-99) born in London, he became the greatest nondramatic English poet of Elizabethan England; spent 19 years of his life in Ireland as a colonial planter, official, and writer; secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton in Ireland, 1580; Irish Court of Chancery clerk, 1581; granted a 3,000 acre estate at Kilcolman, County Cork, 1586, where he composed most of *The Fairie Queen*; appointed Secretary to the Council of Munster, 1588, and Sheriff of Cork, 1598; witnessed sacking and burning of Kilcolman Castle during the *sugan* Earl of Desmond's attempt to repossess his father's lands in October, 1598; escaped to London where he died in January, 1599.

<sup>53</sup> Though it is impossible to reconstruct the precise impact of this text, there is evidence that it influenced a generation of key colonial officials charged with the pacification and reformation of the intractable Irish colony. See, for example, Nicholas Canny, *Making Ireland British: 1580-1650* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), cf. 58. According to Canny and other historians, *A View* became a primer of sorts for officials charged with the governance of Irish affairs, including Fynes Moryson, Sir John Davies, Sir Francis Bacon, and Sir George Carew. Editions of the text continued to be published and read by government officials as late as the 1690s and Oliver Cromwell is said to have admired the work.

<sup>54</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), p. 109.

<sup>55</sup> Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (London: Eric Partidge, 1934), p. 2; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (VI 2).

<sup>56</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more" (John 14:31).

<sup>57</sup> (VI 50-51). As many commentators have noted culture and colonization are etymologically as well as historically related. The Latin *colere* (to cultivate, to inhabit, to take care of a place) is the root for both words. See, for example, David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 5. Spurr notes that *colonus* designated both a farmer or husbandman and a member of a settlement (a *colonia*) of Roman citizens in barbarous, hostile territory. *Cultura* denotes both the act of tilling the soil and the state of refinement in education and civilization.

<sup>58</sup> (VI 36).

<sup>59</sup> (VI 20).

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), p. 177.

<sup>61</sup> Briefly stated, Spenser's land improvement scheme was aimed not only at establishing England's physical control of territory, but also at eradicating a myriad of traditional native Irish practices and belief structures. In traditional Irish culture, for example, forests were sacred sites imbued with tremendous symbolic meaning. In terms of group identity, social cohesion was dictated and maintained by commitment to the land as opposed to the holding of property. As R.F. Foster notes, "'some kings ritually 'wedded' their domains, like Venetian doges. Within the *tuath* (a tribal or kindred unit of land), chieftan, freemen, and serfs maintained a mobile structure of client relationships.'" The English utilitarian and capitalistic attitude toward land use seriously disrupted the native Irish relationship with the land.

<sup>62</sup> Lord Grey de Wilton, quoted in introduction to Spenser (VI xxiv).

<sup>63</sup> For an excellent analysis of how European colonists immediately began to consciously remake local habitats in the image of European place in territories as distant from Europe as Australia and South America, see Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).

<sup>64</sup> (VI 191)

<sup>65</sup> (VI 55)

<sup>66</sup> (VI 176)

<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 253-264.

<sup>68</sup> (WE 210)

<sup>69</sup> The effect of sixteenth-century colonial projects of cultural "reform" (i.e., the eradication of the Irish language) and the alteration of indigenous biospheres on the vitality of Irish language is now hotly debated. These policies, a series of famines, and the institution of English language education have long been identified as central causes for the demise of the Irish language. But some recent scholars challenge this view. The extinction of a language is a complex issue, but recent examples such as Atatürk's Westernization and centralization of Turkish language and culture (at the expense of dialects and languages such as Kurdish) testifies to the real and long-term effects of official policy on the survival of a linguistic and cultural inheritance.

<sup>70</sup> In his role as the communal memory-keeper, the *fili* was custodian and interpreter of the historical tradition, he controlled all that concerned the "history" of the tribe; genealogies, regnal lists, origin legends, and the wide-ranging miscellany of mythical, heroic and topographical lore that provided the raw material for his "historical" compositions.

<sup>71</sup> Ciaran Carson, "Sweeney Astray: Escaping from Limbo," p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonization," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990), p. 77.

<sup>73</sup> (P 149).

<sup>74</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Mossbawn," *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 20.

<sup>75</sup> See Declan Kiberd's impressive history of modern Irish literature and culture *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 599.

<sup>76</sup> For several theoretical discussions of postcolonial place see Bill Ashcroft, et al, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge), p. 391; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (PSR 391).

<sup>77</sup> A classic example similar to Heaney's can be found in V.S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* which characterizes the Caribbean landscape as a repository of violences which have been inscribed into the postcolonial space and then reinscribed into the postcolonial writer's imagination and text: "There is slavery in the vegetation. In the sugarcane, brought by Columbus on that second voyage when, to Queen Isabella's fury, he proposed the enslavement of the Amerindians." See V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), p. 61-62.

<sup>78</sup> (P 150).

<sup>79</sup> (PSR 391).

<sup>80</sup> (P 132).

<sup>81</sup> (P 132).

<sup>82</sup> (P 60).

<sup>83</sup> Tom Paulin, "A New Look at the Language Question," *Ireland's Field Day*, p. 10.

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<sup>84</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James, Currey, 1981).

<sup>85</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 62.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Kinsella, "The Irish Writer," a paper delivered to the Modern Languages Association, New York, December, 1966. Reprinted in *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson?* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 57.

<sup>87</sup> James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxvii.

<sup>89</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Interesting Case of John Alphonsus Mulrennan," *Planet*, 40 (January, 1978), pp. 34-40.

<sup>90</sup> Heaney hibernizations and explosions of standard English resemble the violations of the French language by postcolonial poets such as Césaire and Senghor, a dynamic which Jean Paul Sartre famously describes in his essay "Orphee Noir": "the black evangelists [will answer] the colonist's ruse with a similar but inverse ruse: since the oppressor is present in the very language they speak, they will speak this language in order to destroy it. The contemporary European poet tries to dehumanize words in order to give them back to nature; the black herald is going to *de-Frenchify* them; he will crush them, break their usual associations, he will violently couple them..."

<sup>91</sup> In his essay "Feeling Into Words," Heaney quotes and discusses this comment from Ross's *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1967).

<sup>92</sup> This is particularly true in key portions of the *Cahier*, a work which combines a quasi-epic quality with a distinct lyricism through the use of short, potent stanzas strung together in much the same way as Spenser's *Fairie Queen*. For an account of Césaire's poetry of violence see Abiola Irele's introductory remarks to Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2000), p. xvii-lxxii.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Et in Hibernia Ego: Violence and the Arcadian Dream in Heaney's Postcolonial Versions of the Pastoral**

Anne McClintock's essay "The angel of progress: pitfalls of the term 'post-colonialism'" examines the postcolonial as a cultural phenomenon in flux as well as a controversial field of enquiry riddled by a crisis of identity. Among the many valuable insights McClintock provides is her commentary on the "almost ritualistic ubiquity of 'post-' words in current culture (post-colonialism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-Cold-War, post-Marxism, post-apartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, post-feminism, post-national, post-historic, even post-contemporary)." <sup>1</sup> In the ten years since the publication of McClintock's article, a number of significant "post-" phrases have joined her already lengthy litany, the most notable recent being the "post-September 11<sup>th</sup>" phenomenon. Does all of this perhaps indicate we have entered a new phase of human experience, one that will increasingly render old cultural paradigms and fields of symbolic reference obsolete? Given the dizzying pace of change in our time, which we reckon in terms of rapidly altering geopolitical and cultural landscapes, technological development, and worldwide ecological decline, one is now left wondering whether William Butler Yeats's youthful pronouncement that "The woods of Arcady are dead" has actually come to pass. In our radically different twenty-first-century world, shall we now add the phrase "post-pastoral" to McClintock's list?

But if McClintock is correct in rescuing the postcolonial from the scrap heap of “post-isms,” perhaps we should also reassess the attempts of some critics to relegate the pastoral to the bone yard of literary anachronisms. Although critics have been prematurely sounding the death knell of pastoralism for centuries and the intensity of such clamoring has grown in this century, many others have long argued for the genre’s pertinence. Ever since Dr. Johnson, for example, announced the mode’s lack of emotional and cultural currency in his famous diatribe on that “easy, vulgar” poem called “Lycidas,” some of the world’s greatest literary talents have successfully stalled the dawning of a post-pastoral era by crafting innovative and compelling versions of the pastoral. Particularly in recent decades, a number of leading critics and writers have built a case for pastoral as a still-evolving and, therefore, relevant form of literary expression. William Empson’s *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1950), Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* (1973), Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and The Pastoral Ideal in America* (1974), Annabel Patterson’s *Pastoral and Ideology* (1987), and Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1996) figure as major critical studies which variously demonstrate that the pastoral tradition not only survives but thrives in a diverse range of contemporary cultural and literary contexts. And right up to the end of the last century, writers such as Phillip Roth (*American Pastoral*) and Robert Hass (*Sun Under Wood*) continued to craft intriguing versions of the pastoral. Such evidence thus suggests that Arcadia, though changed utterly, is not dead. As Andrew Ettin notes, “Arcady is still with us because ‘pastoral forms and attitudes’ (in Harold Toliver’s phrase) are still with us.”<sup>2</sup>

In his innovative adaptations of pastoral forms and attitudes, Seamus Heaney not only establishes himself as a major figure in the pastoral and anti-pastoral traditions; he repeatedly transforms the dead wood of the genre's language and imagery into remarkably compelling postcolonial commentaries that militate against the violent legacy of Ireland's encounter with colonialism. Working from a broad conception of pastoral, Heaney has long exploited the mode's capacity for making condemnatory as well as consolatory statements about socio-political injustice. Responding to the benumbing violence that came to predominate Northern Irish life early in his career, Heaney launched what might best be described as a "violent assault . . . upon the genteel citadel of English pastoral verse" (to borrow a phrase from Heaney's valuable discussion of Wilfred Owen's wartime antipastorals).<sup>3</sup> Executing this assault, Heaney often alludes to the violent conditions of Northern Irish life via distinctively pastoral themes and images. Such pastoral commentaries often resemble the work of writers like John Clare and the Irishmen Patrick Kavanagh and John Montague, two poets whose work often challenges the kind of idealized and sentimental celebrations of rural folk and virtues. These counterpastoralists thus deconstruct the simplistic pastoral ideology used by Irish nationalists to forge the Irish national psyche, a socio-political construct in which Ireland is portrayed as a kind of Arcadian idyll.<sup>4</sup> In like fashion, many of Heaney's pastorals contravene such an idyllic image of Ireland. Heaney's early pastorals often reveal a consciousness that is, as Declan Kiberd notes, "repeatedly astonished by the way in which violence insinuates itself into even the most everyday activities."<sup>5</sup>

Infused with an edge of rage and a keen sense of the precariousness of life on the "farm," Heaney's complex pastorals typically set images of violence and destruction set

against his most evocative lyric celebrations of the rural and natural worlds. By juxtaposing pastoral and counterpastoral elements in this way, Heaney positioned himself early in his career within a tradition of resistance writing in which pastoral has been used not only to counter hegemonic corruption and brutality, but also to stage a kind of metaphysical protest. In contrast to the *fin de siècle* pastorals of Yeats and other nationalist Irish poets (who often “sing the peasantry and Hard-riding gentlemen” in cloyingly false strains), Heaney’s earliest pastorals are often much closer to the vision of that “terrifying poet” Robert Frost, whose quintessentially pastoral vision is not meant to reassure by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties, but rather, as Lionel Trilling notes, to unsettle and dislodge complacencies through “the representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way.”<sup>6</sup> Following the outbreak of violence in 1969, the scope of Heaney’s antipastoral vision expanded exponentially. Although his early explicit use of the pastoral briefly abated in the early 1970s, a strong pastoral strain re-emerged in Heaney’s poetry during the 1980s and 1990s. This was particularly true in those works concerned with extending a poetics of violence. The highly acclaimed collection *Field Work* (1979) exemplifies this trend by offering a number of poems in which “the most brutal civil violence is described in the most traditionally pastoral terms.”<sup>7</sup> More recently, Heaney’s latest collection, *Electric Light* (2000), ushered in the new millennium by proving to be his boldest and most explicit embrace of the pastoral ever. In this volume, Heaney signals a return to a full-fledged engagement with the ancient counterpastoral tradition instituted by Virgil. By including the sonnet sequence “Sonnet From Hellas” and three classical eclogues, Heaney clearly wishes to enter into a dialogue with this tradition. By serving up contemporary versions of Virgilian pastoral, Heaney

also provides several timely translations of a seemingly dead selection of classical pastoral poems and tropes. He thus capitalizes on the mode's intricate language of socio-political reference and judgment, thereby offering a unique pastoral perspective on the related problems of Irish decolonization and violence.

Heaney's employment of pastoral has been controversial in several respects. Perhaps the most persistent point of debate concerns the claim that Heaney's pastoralism represents an escape into a cultural form that is at once over-aestheticized and atavistic, and therefore constitutive of an irresponsible and socially-disengaged poetics. In short, his detractors argue Heaney's pastorals elide the brutal realities of contemporary Northern Irish life. Playing off Calvin Bedient's controversial remark that Heaney's writing "is no more, if no less, than potato deep earth-bound if earth-enriched, placidly rooted in top soil, far from unfathomable," David Lloyd declares the central weakness of Heaney's poetry is that it rests "[s]ecure in its protected pastoral domain," a poetic "haven" where Heaney seeks the "shelter of the English tradition and voice."<sup>8</sup> Criticism of this ilk also emerged in a number of articles following Heaney's reception of the Nobel Prize in 1995. In an essay entitled "The glittering prize," which appeared in the influential Belfast monthly *Fortnight*, the young Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Wilson asks, "Can there be any real doubt that he has largely avoided writing a great deal about political violence in Northern Ireland?" Wilson builds his case by resurrecting the image of Heaney as a "peat-and-potato pastoralist" when he writes, "Those who would maintain that in writing about hedges and blackberries, Heaney has actually treated the manifestations of political violence in a different manner are entirely fraudulent and must be termed so." The Nobel committee, Wilson concludes, had

wrongly praised Heaney for responding to the conflict with “ethical depth” because “he has not spoken to both traditions in this divided island. . . . [Heaney] has left out that unpoetic stuff, that very actual mess.”<sup>9</sup> Antony Easthope has also jumped on the Heaney-as-atavistic-pastoralist-bandwagon, labeling him a “backward-looking Neo-Georgian,” whose Northern Irish background might suggest that his “pastoralism could make a claim to political discourse . . . [but] [t]errible as the situation has been in Northern Ireland, it has staged something backward-looking and atavistic, not a genuinely contemporary politics.” For Easthope, Heaney’s treatment of the conflict has been “able to sound very serious and authoritative without treading on anyone’s toes.”<sup>10</sup>

Such readings essentially suggest Heaney’s work is a kind of late-twentieth-century Northern Irish throwback to the well-wrought urns and naively patriotic celebrations of country life found in the pre-World War I poetry of Edward Thomas and the Neo-Georgian verse of Rupert Brooke. The underlying premise behind such readings of Heaney, and in criticism of the pastoral mode in general, reads something like this: if the pastoral mode’s central image of cultivated rural land or untamed natural settings gives rise to a symbolic motion away from centers of civilization toward their opposite (viz., away from sophistication toward so-called rural simplicity), then art works which embody this movement are necessarily sentimental and naïve. To put this another way, the assumption is that pastoral simply bears no relation to the political exigencies and psychological complexity of modern-day existence. Indeed, such an assessment of certain versions of pastoral is warranted in many cases. But to cast all pastoral in such terms oversimplifies a richly diverse and powerful mode of allegorical representation, the kind of which has found expression in variety of postcolonial and resistance literatures.<sup>11</sup>

What often goes missing then in the debate over Heaney's pastoralism is an awareness of how the most compelling and aesthetically successful pastoral texts typically manage to contain an "anti-pastoral" element that contravenes the Arcadian dream. Discussing this aspect of the pastoral tradition, Leo Marx writes, "Whether represented by the plight of a dispossessed herdsman or by the sound of a locomotive in the woods, this feature of the [pastoral] design brings a world which is more 'real' into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision . . . if only by the unmistakable sophistication with which they are composed, these [complex pastoral] works manage to qualify, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture."<sup>12</sup> In short, the most enduring pastoral representations are often those that ingeniously incorporate a tension created by the clash of the Arcadian ideal with a startlingly violent counterforce. This kind of tension characterizes the most compelling and successful pastorals. Indeed it is present in Jeremiah's Old Testament depiction of decimated flocks and wasted pastures, the anti-pastorals of World War I poets who use the mode "as a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable" brutality of trench warfare, or Derek Walcott's brutal satires of the Great House tradition and its violent exploitation of slaves and the Jamaican landscape.<sup>13</sup> Such is the case in much of Heaney's work as well. With this brand of pastoralism in mind, I thus argue for a reconsideration of Heaney's pastoral vision, a vision that generally admits of a larger, complicated reality beyond Arcadia. By introducing elements of (post)colonial violence into the pastoral equation, Heaney transforms the complacencies of pastoral imagery and language into what might be called "hard pastoral"<sup>14</sup> – a hard-driving version of the mode that repeatedly exploits the tension between the dream of Arcadia and the violent impingement of a punishing external

reality. As such, Heaney's pastoralism figures as a significant and sustained extension of his poetics of violence.

### **Heaney and the Virgilian Tradition of "Hard Pastoral"**

The guests in their summer colors have fled  
Through field and hedgerow. Come, let's pick  
The bones and feathers of our fun  
And kill the fire with a savage stick.

The figures of our country play,  
The mocking dancers, in a swirl  
Of laughter waved from the evening's edge,  
Wrote finis to a pastoral.

Stanley Kunitz, "The Last Picnic"

There is a common, and not altogether unwarranted, perception that the unprecedented scope and decidedly "un-pastoral" nature of modern forms of violence (e.g., global war, genocide, and worldwide ecological destruction) have been responsible for writing finis to the pastoral. But even in the classical period, perspicacious pastoralists were already shaking a savage stick at the notion of Arcadian bliss. At numerous points in the *Eclogues*, for example, Virgil undercuts idealized images of life in bucolic landscapes by depicting the precariousness of existence in an empire wracked by brutal murders, evictions, disease, crop failure, floods, theft, rape, infanticide, cannibalism, suicide, and a variety of other lethal threats. Although Virgil is not alone among the ancients in this regard, he is certainly one of the greatest practitioners of the "hard pastoral" tradition. Responding to this frequently unacknowledged aspect of classical pastoral, Heaney's latest collection, *Electric Light* (2000), revives a number of

Virgil's themes and poems to explore the intersection between violence, pastoral, and the vagaries of his country's socio-political climate.

If the clash between pastoral and counterpastoral obtains throughout *Electric Light*, this tension becomes especially apparent in the sequence of six travel poems entitled "Sonnets from Hellas," a group of poems in which Heaney hits the road and chronicles a trip to Peloponnesus, the Greek region that came to be identified as the site of Arcadian bliss. Particularly in poems such as "Into Arcadia" and "Pylos," and "The Augean Stables," Heaney explores a variety of pastoral themes and landscapes. It is in the latter poem, however, that he brings the pastoral into the most explicit and ironic relationship with the actual mess of Northern Irish violence. In the octave of "The Augean Stables," the speaker finds himself in the *real* Arcadia contemplating an exquisitely wrought representation of Heracles's sixth labor. The experience is worlds away from Ireland and seems more concerned with aesthetic bliss than violence:

My favourite bas-relief: Athene showing  
Heracles where to broach the river bank  
With a nod of her high helmet, her staff sunk  
In the exact spot, the Alpheus flowing  
Out of its course into the deep dung strata  
Of King Augeas' reeking yard and stables.  
Sweet dissolutions from the water tables,  
Blocked doors and packed floors deluging like gutters . . . (lines 1-8)

Why is this the speaker's favorite bas-relief? He may simply find it beautiful. But his attraction to this representation of Heracles' labors may also stem from an appreciation of the sculptor's handling of the thematic oppositions commonly found in complex pastoral. The bas-relief, like much classical pastoral, renders its otherwise abject subject matter in highly stylized form. The burnished and exquisite forms wrought from hard, white stone make the timeless perfection and immutable beauty of the Arcadian dream come alive.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the object's subject matter betrays an element that subverts the illusion of untrammelled beauty.

Behind the elevated presentation of the façade lies an important element of the classical pastoral design: the incursion of baseness. Turning on the fact that Heracles essentially functions as a farmhand in his purging of King Augeas' stables-- stables where the mythic hero stands knee-deep in horseshit --the sonnet gradually works to explode the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture. Before undercutting the Arcadian illusion, the first two lines of the sestet serve to reinforce the pastoral dream through images of "green willows" and the "lustral wash and run of river shallows." But juxtaposed with these soothing lines are four hard-hitting concluding verses which make it clear that the retreat into Arcadia offers scant protection from the reality of violence back home in Northern Ireland:

And it was there in Olympia, down among green willows,  
The lustral wash and run of river shallows,  
That we heard of Sean Brown's murder in the grounds  
Of Bellaghy GAA Club. And imagined  
Hose-water smashing hard back off the asphalt  
In the car park where his athlete's blood ran cold. (lines 9-14)

Given the site of the murder (Bellaghy's Gaelic Athletic Association) and the GAA's traditional ties to Irish Republicanism, the poem leaves no doubt that Sean Brown has become the latest victim of Northern Ireland's relentless cycle of violence. Recalling the overwhelming repugnance of the dung-stained Augean stables, the poem bitterly concludes with the image of hose-water washing away the remains of a wasted human life.

"The Augean Stables" is also exemplary in that it embodies an intriguing formal response to the classical pastoral. As is often the case in his poetry, Heaney works

against the grain of formal convention. By rendering the familiar subject matter of classical pastoral in the form of a sonnet, Heaney seems to create an artifact as highly stylized and apparently traditional as the bas-relief admired by his speaker. But as is the case with much postcolonial writing, the employment of received forms in this poem involves a cunning act of subterfuge as the sonnet works against the grain of the sonnet and pastoral traditions. Refusing to conform to Spenserian or Shakespearean sonnet rhyme schemes, Heaney constructs an anomalous sonnet to cut across the pastoral. In his construction of an elaborate sound structure – one that relies heavily upon assonance and consonance, sometimes in a manner reminiscent of Hopkins or Keats -- Heaney packs the octave with harsh plosives (“bank,” “sunk,” “gutters,” “dung” – two of which function as key line breaks). He thus subverts the contrasting gestures toward pacification—a mood that the octave’s softer Latinate sounds and pastoral imagery may otherwise suggest. In this way, the poem exploits the sonnet form’s habit of passionate or vehement speech, underscoring the turbulence enforced by the tight form. In various respects, then, Heaney’s deft negotiation of sonic, formal, and thematic crosscurrents serves to undermine any sense of Arcadian stability or calm that may linger in the reader’s mind.

Through his unflinching, yet artful representation of contemporary political violence, Heaney follows in a tradition established by Virgil, the Roman court poet whose pastoral imagination was similarly forged in a crucible of civil unrest and imperial violence. In one of the great ironies of literary history (given *The Aeneid*’s status as the national epic of imperial Rome), Virgil stands at the heart of the tradition of pastoral as resistance, for his *Eclogues* subversively critique imperial policy and attempt to exercise influence at court through representations of a politicized countryside. Just as Heaney’s

pastorals typically expose the violent political and cultural structures ravaging Irish society, Virgil's "hard pastorals" reveal imperial power at its worst and demonstrate the mode's remarkable capacity for countering hegemonic violence and corrupt authority. Given the similarities and differences between Heaney's and Virgil's deployment of the pastoral as a response to violent political conditions, it is useful, at this point, to recall briefly the specific use to which Virgil put the pastoral mode.

In her monumental study *Pastoral and Ideology*, Annabel Patterson notes that Virgil establishes the pastoral mode as a subversive form of political allegory: "[In the *Eclogues*], especially as their implications were developed in the ninth eclogue, the ground was laid for early recognition that Virgilian pastoral referred to something other than itself, and specifically to the historical circumstances in which it was produced."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the poet's own personal suffering during the civil wars of the Old Republic during the tumultuous first-century B.C. likely lies behind *The Eclogues*.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from the first lines of "Eclogue I," Virgil makes it clear that he is concerned with creating something larger than a simple wish-image of bucolic pleasure. In his revelation of a conflicted countryside and two farmers quite differently affected by socio-political turmoil, he immediately establishes a contrast between the pleasures of rural life and the very real threat of loss and eviction. The dispossessed shepherd Meliboeus opens the eclogue with the following complaint:

You, Tityrus, reclining under the spreading shelter of the beech,  
Meditate pastoral poetics on your slender pipe; we are leaving the  
Borders of our country and its sweet fields. We are in flight from our  
Fatherland; you, Tityrus, relaxed in the shade, teach the woods to  
Echo the name of fair Amaryllis. (lines 1-4)

These verses proleptically outline key thematic concerns Virgil will subsequently develop in each of the ten eclogues. Tityrus, the piping shepherd, has been granted leave to stay behind, to rest and sing in the umber of sheltering trees. In contrast, the evicted farmer, Meliboeus, is forced to wander through a landscape wracked by chaos: "All around the farms are so disturbed. I'm tired and yet / drive my goats on" (line 12-13). Later, Meliboeus attributes his troubles to the new regime's land redistribution schemes: "Shall the impious soldier possess these well-tilled grounds? / A barbarian possess these crops? See where the fighting has brought our / miserable countrymen. See for whom we have sown our fields!" (lines 70-72).

By establishing the contrast between Arcadian illusion and socio-political reality, Virgil not only deconstructs the pastoral idyll, but suggests that the most significant elements in complex pastoral are indeed psychological and political rather than formal. As Meliboeus and scores of other dispossessed farmers head for "thirsty Africa / or Scythia and the rapid Oaxes chalky stream" (lines 66-67), Tityrus will remain on fertile lands that are miraculously immune to various forms of entropy. Marvelling at Tityrus' good fortune, Meliboeus emphasizes the disparity and inequity of the shepherds' comparative conditions:

And they're enough for you although the bare rock  
And the marsh with all its reeds and mud abut your fields.  
No unfamiliar fodder will tempt your pregnant ewes,  
Nor will any disease from a neighbor's flock bring harm to them.  
Fortunate old man, here between the rivers  
You know and the sacred springs you'll lie in the cool shade.  
Here your hedge, as it always has, at your neighbor's line  
Will pasture on willow buds those Hyblaeon bees,  
Which soon will coax you to sleep with their light murmuring hum.  
There beneath the high rock the vinedresser  
Will sing to the breeze and all the while your horse pigeons  
And your turtle dove, high in the elm, will murmur and coo. (46-58)

Here, within the bounds of Tityrus's enclosure, lies the very portrait of the Arcadian idyll, an image first suggested by Theocritus and subsequently incorporated into countless pastoral poems across the centuries. This idyll represents the *locus classicus* of the Golden Age. Each epoch has imparted its own imprint to the image, but essentially it suggests a kind of uninterrupted calm and rural ease which, in another pastoral context, Raymond Williams aptly calls an "enameled world" -- a world excised of all living tension and danger.<sup>17</sup> But if Virgil creates a momentary glimpse of the Golden Age through this field set apart, he subsequently complicates the image. Meliboeus' division of his speech in the opening lines into the "you" of Tityrus and the "we" of the dispossessed not only exposes the gap between "haves" and "have-nots," between the powerful and the marginalized, but it also lifts the poem into the realm of political discourse and psychological insight. This relation, as Patterson and others note, is "not between the ego and its audience but between 'tu' and 'nos, a plural that immediately confronts Tityrus and hence the reader with a choice of identifications" and socio-political allegiances. Thus, as Meliboeus departs, Tityrus is left to his private Arcadia, but the knowledge of Meliboeus's unjust plight will continue to plague not only Tityrus's consciousness, but also the sensitive reader's. In this way, Virgil explodes the Arcadian dream and underscores the essentially psychological and political nature of the pastoral impulse.

By negotiating the tension between the illusion of Arcadia and the meaner aspects of reality, "Eclogue I" not only presages the thematic and political concerns explored in each of the other eclogues; it also recommends a potent rhetorical framework for later poets who employ pastoral as a political and cultural weapon. In Heaney's case, the kind

of hard pastoral inaugurated by Virgil becomes a centerpiece of many of his collections and individual poems. Responding to the problems of violence and decolonization, Heaney's pastoral imagination constructs a sense of place marred by political brutality and grave social discord. Filtering both his private quotidian experience and the broader political turmoil of his native land through a pastoral lens, Heaney produces some startling fusions of violence and the pastoral. Many of the early pastorals are set in the farm of Heaney's youth; these poems thus become a poetic space where images of violence and destruction constantly militate against Heaney's most lyrical and evocative depictions of rural life and the natural world. In his first collection, *Death of A Naturalist* (a volume composed mainly of rural poems that were widely "praised for their evocation of the natural world [but] . . . abound[ing] in images of man-made violence"<sup>18</sup>), Heaney often transforms the most mundane rural pursuits into moments of martial confrontation: frogs are "poised like mud grenades"; crocks used for churning butter become "large pottery bombs"; and the speaker of the famous poem "Digging," who contemplates the relation of writing to potato digging, says the pen "between his finger and thumb" rests "snug as a gun." In this regard, Thomas Foster concludes that *Death of a Naturalist* does not provide "poetry for agrarian sentimentalists," but instead "testifies throughout to the small-scale violence of rural life."<sup>19</sup> While this is certainly true, such small-scale violence simultaneously figures as an allegorical commentary on the culture and politics of violence infecting Northern Irish life.

An early dramatization of the political and psychological violence plaguing Northern Irish society in the 1960s, "The Early Purges" stands as one of Heaney's most troubling indictments of a community in which violence is part of the status quo:

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.  
Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shifts',  
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din  
Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout  
Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure isn't it better for them now?' Dan said.  
Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced  
Them on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung  
Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains  
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back  
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows  
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments  
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown  
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town  
Where they consider death unnatural,  
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.

("The Early Purges," *Death of a Naturalist* 23)

Here, in what is perhaps an echo of Frost's bitter closure to "Out, Out" ("And they, since they/ were not the one dead, turned to their affairs"), Heaney may, on one level, be exploring the terrible actualities of life on the farm; but he seems to indict something more than cruelty to animal. Coming from the pen of an Irish nationalist in the mid-1960s, a period when social and economic conditions for minority Catholics in Northern Ireland were becoming increasingly intolerable, the poem recalls the indifference of government policies aimed at keeping minority Catholics in check. Dan Taggart's callously utilitarian approach to maintaining the farm thus becomes a metaphor for

abusive colonial rule in Ireland, and Taggart's brutality presages the strong-arm tactics that government officials would increasingly rely upon as the Northern Irish situation deteriorated. But this is not the most penetrating aspect of Heaney's socio-political critique. The movement in the speaker's outlook reveals how easily a childhood consciousness can coarsen to social rituals of violence. By poem's end, the grown man's tone betrays a consciousness long removed from childhood sensitivities. The speaker echoes Taggart's earlier "wee scraggy shits" with his own statement of indifference: "Bloody pups." The implication here is clear: in a culture where brutality is regularly cultivated, it is difficult to avoid becoming inured to the rituals of naturalized violence.

As the Northern Irish situation deteriorated during the 1970s and 1980s, Heaney's pastoral polemics became far more pointed and confrontational in tone. In collections like *Field Work*, Heaney describes postcolonial violence in traditionally pastoral terms. Instead of using shepherds as figures of the disenfranchised and displaced, however, Heaney employs Northern Irish farmers as modern-day equivalents of Meliboeus. In this regard, Heaney bucks the tendency of many "soft pastorals" in the English tradition. Such works typically erase the working classes from the English countryside or aestheticize them into irrelevancy. Oftentimes, the rural laborer in this kind of "enameled world" tends to be viewed from a distance by a condescending observer. The farmer is thus "merged with his landscape" and becomes lost amid "the general figure of nature."<sup>20</sup> In contrast to such representations of farmhands, Heaney constructs polemical pastorals in which he depicts the plight of farmers and endows them with a large measure of personality and agency.

One such poem is the antipastoral piece “The Toome Road,” a poem that depicts a conflicted landscape as seen through the eyes of a defiant Ulster farmer. In this sequel to the early *dinnseanchas* “Toome” (an artesian poem where Heaney reconstructs a sense of Irish place through a complex interaction of language, history, and environment), Heaney revisits the topos of postcolonial place, but he posits the idea in terms that are more recognizably pastoral, thereby extending the process of de-territorialization that he began in the earlier place-name poems:

One morning early I met armoured cars  
 In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,  
 All camouflaged with broken alder branches,  
 And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.  
 How long were they approaching down my roads  
 As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.  
 I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,  
 Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,  
 Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds  
 Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell  
 Among all those with back doors on the latch  
 For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant  
 Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?  
 Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones . . .  
 O charioteers, above your dormant guns,  
 It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,  
 The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

(“The Toome Road,” *Field Work* 15)

Voiced from a highly articulate farmer’s point of view, this representation of place, like the earlier “Toome,” is shot through with a sense of the savage history of colonial occupation. Registering his outrage over the violation of his land as he wakes to see and hear his land invaded by British occupying forces, the speaker emphasizes the disjuncture between the pastoral scene and the invasion of his pastures. Instead of birdsong, what greets his ear is the perverse “warbling” of armored vehicles “that are

camouflaged with broken alder branches,” a distinctive machine-in-the-garden image. Deepening the irony of his commentary, the speaker also evokes a strong sense of the interplay between past and present forms of imperialism. When he asks, “How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?,” the farmer suggests it has been centuries; and the subsequent apostrophe, “O charioteers, above your dormant guns,” connects the image of the British mechanized infantry with imperial armies of Rome. In this way Heaney might appear to be suggesting a kind of cyclical notion of history, a theme he and Virgil frequently explore. An abundance of typographical and sonic “o’s” as well as key images reinforce the idea circularity, or repetition of historical ages.

But if colonial oppression is as persistent as the cycles of violence that reach back through history to Rome and earlier empires, so too is subaltern resistance. In the face of overwhelming force, the farmer defiantly stands his ground. By poem’s end, he invokes his “omphalos” as a source of unassailable power that remains unintelligible to the invaders. Significantly, his omphalos is not synonymous with Buck Mulligan’s parody of the Martello Tower as mock- omphalos in *Ulysses*.<sup>21</sup> Rather it stands for an empowering sense of place, one that is not accessible to the invader and one that refuses to be shaken by the threat of overwhelming violence.

### **Heaney’s Pastoral Palliatives**

Poetry responds to suffering . It answers to it. But the sheer amount of suffering in the world, so much of it nameless, may also threaten to swamp the voice of the poet. This becomes an aesthetic as well as a moral problem . . .

Edward Hirsch

If many of his pastorals gather force by ingeniously deconstructing the political and psychological structures erected by colonialism, others are notable for their attempts at assuaging the pain of unspeakable suffering and giving voice to victims of violence. One poem from the 1980s that warrants brief mention in this regard is "Widgeon." Although not a pastoral in the strict sense of the term, it is one of the finest lyrics in the entire Heaney corpus:

It had been badly shot.  
While he was plucking it  
he found, he says, the voice box --

like a flute stop  
in the broken windpipe --

and blew upon it  
unexpectedly  
his own small widgeon cries.

(*"Widgeon," Station Island*)

If "Widgeon" stands as singularly moving commentary on the simultaneous power and limitation of elegiac lamentation, the contemporaneous elegies from this phase of his career are just as powerful. In these pieces, Heaney gives a human face to daily casualty reports that became a fixture in Irish newspapers and periodicals. In a manner often reminiscent of Milton's deployment of the classical pastoral elegy in "Lycidas," Heaney deploys the pastoral elegy in order not only to mourn the untimely deaths of friends and family killed in the Ulster conflict, but to critique the violent politics of his time.

In the poem entitled "The Strand at Lough Beg," Heaney laments the slaying of his second cousin Colum McCartney, a farmer and innocent victim of a random shooting

in 1977 as he returned home from a Gaelic football match in Dublin. Appearing in the same volume as "Toome Road," this poem is the first of three elegies in *Field Work* decrying the senseless deaths of friends and relatives who fell prey to sectarian violence. Partly composed of translated fragments from two works Heaney set to translating in the 1970s, the Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne* and Dante's *Commedia*, this elegy thus filters contemporary atrocity through ancient intertextual sources that are themselves steeped in violence. After opening the poem with a translated epigraph from the first canto of the *Purgatorio*<sup>22</sup>, Heaney combines his graphic account of McCartney's murder with other portions of *Purgatorio* and section 64 of the *Buile Suibhne*. Additionally, he recounts his cousin's death according to the typical tripartite stanzaic structure of the Pindaric ode. Thus, like Milton's "Lycidas," a pastoral elegy which, as George Steiner notes, rigorously depends on "implicit citation, on the postulate of allusion, echo, and counterpoint,"<sup>23</sup> "The Strand at Lough Beg" is as much a recovery of seemingly dead texts as it is an attempt to salve the sting of death.

If "The Strand at Lough Beg" is notable for its incorporation of canonical texts and classical conventions, its innovative translocation of ancient literary devices and themes into an Irish context is perhaps equally noteworthy. By rendering his pastoral elegy in terms specifically derived from a long-suppressed repository of ancient Irish culture, Heaney performs the elegist's duty of preparing a deceased soul for entry into the afterlife even as he turns the classical elegy on its head. The first stanza, for example, follows the classical convention of invoking figures from myth; however, the mythological frame of reference is neither Greek nor Roman, but rather Irish. Aptly invoking the uncanny quality of the Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne*, Heaney sets the scene for

his recreation of McCartney's murder by conflating an image of present-day atrocity with the strange meat of the famous severed head passage from section 64 of the *Buile Suibhne* (Heaney's adaptation and insertion of the Middle Irish text is indicated in italics):

Leaving the white glow of filling stations  
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields  
You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton  
*Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars—  
Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim's track  
Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,  
Goat-beards and dogs' eyes in a demon pack  
Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.*  
What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?  
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling  
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?

Here Heaney likens the attack on McCartney to a scene in the *Buile Suibhne* in which the legendary Suibhne Geilt is tormented by a horrifying pack of headless demons. By contextualizing contemporary brutality in this way, Heaney strives for a kind of *ostranie* effect, to use Victor Shklovsky's now famous phrase, which is to say he disrupts "habitualization" to contemporary violence by "devouring" ordinary frames of reference. By destabilizing familiar points of reference, Heaney's renders the environment "unfamiliar."<sup>24</sup> In this way, Heaney forces an examination of present-day violence from a different perspective, one of ambiguity. By setting McCartney's murder in a mythic landscape that is inscribed with the blood of a relentless cycle of pursuit and savagery but also dotted with "a soft treeline of yew" (yew being an ancient symbol of immortality), Heaney pits a certain fatalism against a kind of transcendent hope.

In the second and third sections of the tripartite narrative, Heaney continues his makeover of the pastoral elegy by infusing the ancient form with a portrait of real Irish

people burdened and nearly broken by the strain of (post)colonial violence. Unlike the classical tradition, Heaney's elegy does not idealize the peasantry; rather it underscores the silent suffering of ordinary people beaten down by centuries of oppression and brutalizing conflict. Referring to these voiceless victims of violence as "Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round/ Haycock and hindquarters, talkers in byres, /Slow arbitrators of the burial ground," Heaney puns on a family name (his father's relatives are Scullions) and thus suggests his intimate knowledge of their pain. Lacking the nobility of the classical shepherd, these farmers are people who "fought shy,/ Spoke an old language of conspirators / And could not crack the whip or seize the day." In a significant sense then, these common people who lack agency in both life and death are dependent on the poet, who, in writing this poem, tries to do what all elegists attempt to do, give voice to the terminally voiceless.

The closing stanza completes Heaney's rewrite of the classical form. In contrast to the conventional classical elegy, all of nature does not mourn the peasant's death in Heaney's poem. As the speaker and the ghost of McCartney move in tandem across pasturelands, the cousin's cattle indifferently "turn their unbewildered gaze" toward them. But if McCartney's murder goes largely unnoticed in this pastoral landscape that has been marred violence, Heaney refuses to let death have the final say. At poem's end, Heaney stoops to pick up his wounded and fallen cousin. Attempting to raise him to new life, Heaney resurrects the scene in the *Purgatorio* when Cato, the guardian of the mount, instructs Virgil to wash Dante's face with dew in preparation for his purgatorial ascent and entry into paradise:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees

With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you with brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Thus, like T.S. Eliot, who seeks to breed lilacs out of a dead land, and Keats, whose “realm of flora” serves as a poetic space where death, division, and loss are transformed, Heaney weaves an elegiac wreath out of Irish flora in order to launch his cousin into the afterlife. In this way, he rehearses the classical decoration of the bier in decidedly Irish terms. “Moss” (meaning *soft* in Irish) is used to wipe his cousin’s, which grassy rushes, which suggestively “shoot green,” are woven into the traditional “scapulars” used to dress the coffin of dead Catholics.

Critics have long questioned Heaney’s motives in elegies like “The Strand at Lough Beg,” poems in which he attempts to invoke the palliative power of poetry as a form of consolation. The problem with weaving such a lyrically entrancing elegiac wreath like “The Strand at Lough Beg” is not, as Johnson says of “Lycidas,” that “[w]here there is fiction there is little grief,” but rather that pretty pastoral elides the actual mess of the Northern Irish conflict. The difficulty in this and indeed all fictionalizations of human pain is that, as Theodor Adorno famously remarks, the poetics of violence introduce an element of “aesthetic gratification” alongside of, but also structurally integral with, their presentation of horrific subject matter. Warning of the “barbarism” inherent in “the so-called artistic representation” of another’s pain, Adorno argues that the aestheticization of violence is morally suspect because such representation

“contains the power . . . to extract pleasure out of it. . . . Through aesthetic principles of stylization . . . the unimaginable ordeal appears as if it had some meaning; it is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror and this in itself already does an injustice to the victims.”<sup>25</sup> This is true no matter how sensitive or tasteful the portrayal of the horrific may be-- which is another way of saying the poetics of violence prey parasitically, and often deceptively, on the suffering of others.

Well aware of this problem, Heaney addresses it at numerous junctures in his poetry and prose. In *Station Island* (1984), for example, he self-reflexively interrogates himself when the ghost of his cousin Colum McCartney returns to chastise him for eliding the grisly details of his death: ““you whitewashed ugliness and drew/the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*/ and saccharined my death with morning dew.”” Heaney has, in fact, always wrestled with a nagging self-doubt concerning the wisdom of repeatedly (some would say obsessively) making violence the focus of his writing. Expressing discomfort with the idea that his commitment to a poetics of violence has turned into a “feeder off battlefields,” he notes in the poem “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” that this casts him in the unenviable role of a subaltern Hamlet, one who is essentially a “skull-handler, parablist, smeller of rot / in the state, infused / with its poisons, / pinioned by ghosts and affections, / murders and pieties, / coming to consciousness / by jumping in graves, / dithering, blathering.” Playing the role of the antagonist who seeks to expose and understand violence has exacted a considerable cost in both personal and moral terms. But if Heaney has often questioned the legitimacy of his commitment to addressing the problem of violence, he has just as frequently defended this penchant. Answering those who question his motivations for writing violence into his verse,

Heaney has said, "I just don't know why I'm hesitating to say violence is a . . . legitimate subject . . . I think that the greatest poetry gazes upon it as a factor in human experience, recognizes it as deplorable, but then somehow must outface the deplorable or at least gaze levelly at the deplorable and put it in its place."<sup>26</sup> And this is precisely what Heaney continued to do in collections like the controversial war collection *North*.

### **Exploding the Myth of Regenerative Violence in the Antipastoral Bog Poems**

"There is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better."

Theodor Adorno, *Mimima Moralia*

Gazing at the deplorable and putting it in its place is undoubtedly the primary purpose of Heaney's much-discussed bog poems. Like the poet Jabes, who, in response to Adorno's observation that there is no poetry after Auschwitz, wrote, "To Adorno . . . I say we must write. But we cannot write as before," Heaney found himself responding to the widening scope and brutality of the Ulster conflict by radically expanding his poetic critique of postcolonial violence in the bog poems. There is simply nothing quite like the bog poem in the rest of Heaney's corpus; for this reason alone this controversial group of poems warrants our attention. But more importantly for our purposes here, the bog cycle demonstrates the unceasing metamorphosis of the pastoral mode even as it acts as a powerful counterweight to a firmly entrenched culture of violence in postcolonial Ireland.

While some critics characterize the bog poems as "elegiac wreaths" or embodiments of "pastoral nostalgia," most tend to disregard the pastoral elements in

these poems in favor of an approach that emphasizes the question of what it means for Heaney to aestheticize and mythologize violence as he does in the bog cycle. Specifically, some readers find a kind of objective correlative in Heaney's conflation of Iron Age and contemporary atrocity; others see the poems as an essentially private, confessional response to the problem of nationalist violence. Still others argue that the mythological treatment of contemporary brutality imputes to the Northern Irish conflict a kind of fatalistic determinism.<sup>27</sup> To this contentious debate, I offer yet another reading. By examining Heaney's bog cycle as an extension of the "hard pastoral" tradition, I seek to extend and bring into sharper focus certain aspects of this notoriously contentious critical discussion.

Placing these poems under the pastoral lens can, I believe, facilitate a more precise definition of the bog cycle's complex contours. But since most readers have not considered the bog poems in pastoral terms, a brief caveat concerning the mode's elasticity is perhaps useful at this stage. In his excellent book, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes*, Harold Toliver provides relevant advice for a pastoral reading of the bog poems. Commenting on the pastoral elements in works by writers as diverse as Marvell, Spenser, and Saul Bellow, Toliver writes: "Whether or not the texts examined here need all be considered 'pastorals' is not as important finally as our discovering something in them through this lens that would be less noticeable through another."<sup>28</sup> But all such qualifications aside, the bog poems ultimately recommend a pastoral reading insofar as they contain a landscape that is at once politicized and psychologized. As such, the bog cycle instances an innovative and elaborate counterpastoral myth, one in which Heaney examines what he calls "the anthropology and politics of our condition."<sup>29</sup>

Such an examination became increasingly imperative as the escalation of paramilitary violence led Heaney to reassess his relation to the political conditions of Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Discussing his views concerning the use of armed force for political ends, Heaney told Henri Cole in a recent interview: "Everything changed for writers in Northern Ireland once the Provisional IRA began to inflict their own violence on people. I had been quite propagandistically involved early on in 1968-70, but it was my own propaganda so to speak, expressing a minority viewpoint in places like the *Statesman* and *The Listener*."<sup>30</sup> Whereas everything may have changed for Heaney and his colleagues after 1969, it became quickly apparent that the engines of socio-political change were grinding to a standstill as the two-handed engine of war replaced dialogue and mediation. "So pervasive and permanent has violence become," writes Michael MacDonald in his 1986 study of this period, *Children of Wrath: Political Violence in Northern Ireland*, "that it serves less to change than to define Northern Ireland."<sup>31</sup> The crisis was, in other words, becoming a case study of what Rene Girard describes in another context as a "mimetic process of violent intensification," one in which the increasing brutal exchanges between warring factions had become nothing more than a dumb repetition of gestures that were turning the sectarian antagonists and intractable British government into doubles of each other.<sup>32</sup>

Responding to this situation, Heaney began noting the baleful effects of violent nationalism and the propagation, within certain segments of Irish society, of a powerful myth of regenerative violence. Inspired by his study of Iron Age sacrificial rites in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* and a visit to Jutland, where he viewed the preserved corpses of the so-called "bog people," Heaney began to realize "just how persistent the barbaric

attitudes are, not only in the slaughter but in the psyche.” Addressing these words to the Royal Society of Literature in a 1974 lecture that coincided with the completion of *North*, Heaney acknowledged that while “barbaric attitudes” might be remote from the “agnostic world” of economic interest and political brokering, it was certainly not remote from the “bankrupt psychology and mythologies” of the Ulstermen and Irishmen who do the killing.”<sup>33</sup> Exploring this psychology and mythology thus became a focus of his bog myth.

*The Bog People* serves as a particularly rich framework of anthropological reference for Heaney’s exploration of socialized forms of violence. Containing photographs and commentary on what Heaney notes are “preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times,”<sup>34</sup> Glob’s book provided a compelling basis for exploring various levels of mythic and historical congruence between ancient and contemporary forms of ritualized violence. According to Glob, the “bog people” were “[t]hrough their sacrificial deaths, themselves consecrated for all time to Nerthus, goddess of fertility—to Mother Earth, who in return so often gave their faces her blessing and preserved them through the millennia.”<sup>35</sup> Seeing a reflection of Ireland’s terrifying situation in the faces of these anonymous sacrificial victims, Heaney began to draw implicit connections between the Iron Age sacrificial cults and contemporary political violence:

The Tollund Man [from the Jutland village of the same name] seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside. . . . And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to

make a connection between the sacrificial, ritual, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to Scandinavian influences, there are several interesting parallels between the contemporary structuralist critique of violence and Heaney's hybrid bog myth. Heaney reinforces the sense that he is in fact digging through layer upon layer of historical and cultural sedimentation by embodying the majority of the bog poems in the drill-like artesian stanza, a formal move which suggest he is carrying out what might be called a series of Foucauldian archeological digs into the deep structures of Irish culture. This combined with his abiding interest in mythic archetypes suggests Heaney's bog poems may have more in common with structuralism than most critics have previously suggested.<sup>37</sup>

If the mythological and formal framework of the sequence recalls the structuralist critique of violence, Heaney's mythopoetic method also testifies to the effect American counterculture poets had on his evolving poetics of violence. Noting the influence of poets he encountered during a teaching stint at U.C. Berkeley from 1970-71, Heaney explains how he came to understand myth's capacity for resisting various forms of political and cultural violence:

There was a strong sense of contemporary American poetry in the West . . . rejecting the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry and going for the mythological. I mean everyone wanted to be a Red Indian, basically. And that meshed with my own concerns . . . So that was probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley, that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than fostering an alternative consciousness founded on a recuperated indigenous myth in the manner of, say, Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*, however, the bog

cycle concerns itself primarily with diagnosing and deconstructing a pathological dimension of the Irish psyche. In this respect, Heaney's extensive use of the bog metaphor can be profitably likened to the ironic use of the frontier trope in numerous American counterpastorals. On this score, Heaney, in fact, notes that while teaching at Queens University in the late 1960s he read "about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up—or rather, laid down—the bog as an answering Irish myth."<sup>39</sup> Thus, while critics have generally neglected this association, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of Heaney's attempt to play off the frontier motif, a polyvalent pastoral image of the American aspiration for national self-definition. Like the frontier, the Irish bogscape similarly provides a window on the damaging psychological and socio-political effects of the violent quest for national self-definition.<sup>40</sup>

In his development of the multivalent bog metaphor, Heaney sets the pastoral and counterpastoral in fierce juxtaposition. In some descriptions of the bog, a sense of the land as a benign force seems to prevail. In this respect, the trope parallels the use of the frontier as a kind of Arcadian idyll and a locus of boundless opportunity and self-discovery. In several poems and prose pieces, Heaney actually describes the bog in similar terms, a sort of garden of plenty and a site of spiritual initiation or renewal. In the early essay "Mossbawn," for example, he explains how the "moss" (the Irish word for *bog*) captivated his imagination: "To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or a train, possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them ... my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty

years ago, when another boy and I stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck . . . coming out smeared and weedy and darkened.”<sup>41</sup>

Describing the enticements of the metaphor, Denis Donoghue sees the bog as a “meeting-place between mineral and vegetable life, a state of nature which is soft, yielding, maternal, and full of secret lore.”<sup>42</sup> This is indeed the sense conveyed by the early artesian poem “Bogland”:

We have no prairies  
To slice a big sun at evening –  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Encroaching horizon,

Is wood into the cyclops’ eye  
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They’ve take the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up  
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They’ll never dig coal here

Only the waterlogged trunks  
Of great firs, soft as pulp.  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before,

The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless.  
(“Bogland,” *Door Into The Dark* 55-56)

Later bog poems contain similarly enchanting pastoral imagery. Describing his attraction to the bogland, the speaker of the suggestively titled artesian poem “Kinship,” a poem which figures as a kind of structural and thematic centerpiece of *North*, declares that he is standing “at the edge of centuries/facing a goddess.” From his perspective, the bog is a place where, unlike Yeats’s widening gyre, the “centre holds/and spreads.” So enraptured with its seeming boundless fecundity, the speaker first describes the bogland as a “sump and seedbed/ a bag of waters” and then launches into a kind of Keatsian catalogue detailing the natural delights of this uniquely Irish realm of flora:

The mothers of autumn  
Sour and sink,

Ferments of husk and leaf  
Deepen their ochres.  
Moss comes to a head,  
Heather unseeds,  
Brackens deposit

Their bronze.  
This is the vowel of earth  
Dreaming its root  
In flowers and snow,

Mutation of weathers  
And seasons,  
A windfall composing  
the floor it rots into

I grew out of all of this  
Like a weeping willow  
Inclined to the appetites of gravity.  
(“Kinship,” *North* 43)

But if Heaney's bogscapes are initially reminiscent of an inviting frontier, a landscape that beckons and entices curious explorers with its remarkable capacity for spiritual renewal, fertility and discovery, a more sinister link between the American West and the Irish bog quickly emerges. By the end of "Kinship," the speaker's pastoral reverie is replaced by an image of the bog depicting it as a colonial-killing-field. In the poem's final section, the speaker laments: "observe how I make my grove/ on an old crannog/ piled by the fearful dead/ . . . Our mother ground/ is sour with the blood/ of her faithful,/ they lie gargling/ in her sacred heart/ as the legions stare/ from the ramparts."<sup>43</sup> As violence invades the garden, the bog -- like the frontier in American literature and cultural -- is thus transformed from Arcadian idyll into a terrifying landscape, one where a seemingly eternal return of the repressed/oppressed is enacted.

A central feature of Heaney's bog myth is his thoroughgoing thematic exploration of regenerative violence. Just as the frontier is often depicted in American settler literature as a kind of holy ground where colonists violently attempt "to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation," Heaney's bogland figures a kind of nationalist altar where the beatification of so-called political martyrs occurs and the rituals of regenerative violence are enacted by subaltern votaries of violence.<sup>44</sup> Detecting a key corollary between the bogland sacrifices described in Glob's book and the IRA's cult of blood sacrifice, Heaney explained this link in a 1972 *Listener* essay entitled "Mother Ireland": "You have a society in the Iron Age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is

associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. . . . It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time."<sup>45</sup> Viewed in relation to the cultic celebration of the iconic Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Heaney thus saw the Iron Age practice of blood sacrifice as more than an "archaic barbarous rite." It became, as Heaney says, an "archetypal pattern" as "the unforgettable photographs [from Glob] . . . blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles."<sup>46</sup>

By violently yoking exquisite, detailed descriptions of natural processes with unsettling reminders of the relation between past and present forms of ritualized murder, Heaney develops an ironic and highly critical response to an endemic and well-documented cult of blood sacrifice in modern Ireland, a cult founded on the nationalist creed of regeneration through violence. Inspired in part by radical interpretations of Protestant or Catholic theology, this myth has appeared in the speeches and writings of many nationalists over the past 150 years. Neither exclusively Republican nor Loyalist, it figures as a central tenet of armed force nationalism on both sides of the sectarian divide. Perhaps the most ardent champion of this doctrine was the rebel poet Patrick Pearse, who, in developing his own radical poetics of violence, argued for the necessity of blood sacrifice as a prerequisite for restoring Ireland's former national greatness.<sup>47</sup> So compelling was Pearse's claim that "bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing" that by January 1916, James Connolly, a rebel leader who a year earlier had rejected the concept of war as an elevating or civilizing force, began adopting similar language in his

call to arms: "no agency less potent than the red tide of war on Irish soil will ever be able to enable the Irish race to recover its self-respect ... we recognize that of us, as of mankind before Calvary, it may be said: 'Without the shedding of Blood there is no Redemption.'"<sup>48</sup>

It is precisely this aspect of the Republican ethos that Yeats's poem "Song" would immortalize through an imaginary dialogue between Pearse and Connolly. Drawing upon the pastoral image of the "right rose tree," Pearse explains how the withered Rose Tree of Ireland requires the kind of nourishment that only blood sacrifice can offer:

But where can we draw water  
Said Pearse to Connolly  
When all the walls are parched away?  
O plain as plain can be  
There's nothing but our own red blood  
Can make a right Rose Tree.

Foreign as these nationalist formulations may appear to postmodern sensibilities, many commentators have argued the concept of regenerative violence is still operative in certain radical strains of Irish nationalism.<sup>49</sup> In "Myth and Motherland," an essay which traces the contemporary "cultic celebration" of political martyrdom to the ideology of blood sacrifice espoused by revolutionaries like Pearse, Richard Kearney contends that the "IRA's ideology is *sacrificial* to the degree that it invokes, explicitly or otherwise, a sacred tradition of death and renewal which provides justification for present acts of suffering by realigning them with recurring paradigms of the past and thus affording these acts a certain timeless and redemptive quality."<sup>50</sup> It is precisely this sacrificial element of nationalist ideology that Heaney seeks to expose in his bog poems.

Taking aim at these destructive paradigms – paradigms which Kearney argues are best understood as deviant manifestations of a prevailing mythic consciousness – Heaney thus vigorously attacks a contemporary cult of blood sacrifice, one that was practiced on both sides of the sectarian divide. In “The Grauballe Man,” Heaney sets the brutal killing of a Republican fighter against the background of an Iron Age rite of blood sacrifice. Constructed around a complex web of intertextual reference, this poem is based in part on an image in Glob’s book, that of a man from the Jutland town of Grauballe. With his throat slashed from ear to ear, the ancient sacrificial victim served as offering to the earth-goddess during winter fertility rites meant to hasten the onset of spring in the fourth century B.C (see Figure 3). But in Heaney’s poem, the Grauballe Man finds a modern corollary in the image of IRA fighters killed by Protestant paramilitaries who typically hooded and mutilated their victims before executing them.<sup>51</sup> But this is not the only cognate in Heaney’s conflation of past and present forms of atrocity. As Henry Hart astutely notes, Heaney’s reference to the victim as the “Dying Gaul” likely derives from David Jones’s book *The Dying Gaul*, a text which quotes Virgil in its description of the Gauls’s sacking of Rome: “They were assaulting the stronghold of a female earth-spirit, as well as the hill of Saturn and the mound of the buried head—and of course, also, a virtually impregnable military position.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, the naked Gaul becomes an “emblem of the colonized provincial dying as he seeks revenge on an indomitable imperialist.”<sup>53</sup>

At the heart of Heaney’s examination of the IRA cult of blood sacrifice lies a discussion of what it means to aestheticize political violence. Detailing the process by which a grisly death can be transformed into an instance of political martyrdom, Heaney

ANNE: I like to make sure one's read the papers in some shape or form during the course of the day. But other than a book which has been highly recommended—the only time I ever read a book is on a long flight, and then I read it from cover to cover and that's it.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of television programmes do you like to watch, if you watch television?

ANNE: Well, Monday night is a good night, isn't it?

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS: Monday night is a very good night.

ANNE: We shan't tell you which channel.

INTERVIEWER: Would you count fox-hunting as one of your pastimes?

ANNE: No.

INTERVIEWER: You did try it at one time.

ANNE: Yes, and I shall probably try it again. I don't call it a pastime because I don't do it that often. I shall do it if I have time, and possibly if I've got a young horse who needs educating.

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS: I think it does one's riding a lot of good as well.

ANNE: He's convinced it does one's riding a lot of good.

ANNE: Nobody thought I was going to get round Badminton the first time because I'd never been hunting.

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS: That's not true.

INTERVIEWER: You would attribute that to hunting, your success?

ANNE: Never been hunting, had I?

INTERVIEWER: But the people who criticise fox-hunting, does their criticism worry you?

ANNE: I don't mind when the criticism is informed and sensible. I am very sorry to say it, but I think that most of the criticism of fox-hunting is from people who know absolutely nothing about it. And I think that's dangerous. I know sometimes one can't help oneself criticising things which one doesn't know about, but one shouldn't do it. One should jolly well find out the facts first.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you feel it is misinformed?

ANNE: It's misinformed as to the way the hunting is actually conducted. The sort of people who do it. And indeed what happens at the end. Unless you have actually seen it, there is no way you can understand what people are talking about. I thought it was rather important to find out. Having found out, I decided that the criticisms were grossly over-exaggerated.

INTERVIEWER: You're remembered as having been 'boisterous, bossy and moody' at school.

ANNE: I don't know who you quoted it from, but if it was the *Observer* Colour-Supplement, I don't know where they got it from either.

INTERVIEWER: It was drawn from previous school-friends, perhaps.

ANNE: No friends of mine.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think that you had any of those traits at school?

ANNE: No. If you actually asked any of my own school-friends, they wouldn't tell you that either.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you've lost touch with some of your school-friends?

ANNE: When I first started, there were five who went round together—there were six of us altogether—and we remained firm friends from the moment I arrived and we still are. Some of them live out of London and one doesn't see them very often, but if they ever came to London or if they were in need of help, one would certainly see them. There are three who live in London that I see quite a lot of.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you can talk completely openly to your friends?

ANNE: To my school-friends above all, yes. They knew me much better than anybody else. Very little to anybody else.

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS: One has found out over the last six months who one's friends are and just who aren't.

ANNE: It's almost another aspect of the press, because it's very difficult for people who get involved with us not to get involved with the press also. You have to be reserved because you've no idea how they're going to react under that sort of pressure.

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't you go on to university?

ANNE: I wasn't interested.

INTERVIEWER: What did you want to do?

ANNE: I thought that what I could get from university I could probably get more from outside travelling and seeing life itself. I know people don't think we do see much of life. I reckon I've seen more than the average university graduate.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say had been the happiest moments of your life?

ANNE: I don't know. I think perhaps I've been very lucky. There are numerous occasions I can put down to being really happy.

INTERVIEWER: Have there been unhappy ones?

ANNE: Yes, but one doesn't remember

## The Grauballe Man by Seamus Heaney



As if he had been poured  
in tar, he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.  
The grain of his wrists  
is like bog-oak,  
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan's foot  
or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge  
and purse of a mussel,  
his spine an eel arrested  
under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts,  
the chin is a visor  
raised above the vent  
of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened.  
The cured wound  
opens inwards to a dark  
elderberry place.

Who will say 'corpse'  
to his vivid cast?  
Who will say 'body'  
to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair,  
a mat unlikely  
as a foetus's.  
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,  
a head and shoulder  
out of the peat,  
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies  
perfected in my memory,  
down to the red horn  
of his nails,

hung in the scales  
with beauty and atrocity:  
with the Dying Gaul  
too strictly compassed

on his shield,  
with the actual weight  
of each hooded victim,  
slashed and dumped.

*The Grauballe man is the preserved body of an Iron Age man found in 1952 in a bog near Grauballe in Jutland. The photograph is taken from 'The Bog People' by P. V. Glob, published by Faber*

Figure 3  
"The Grauballe Man" (*The Listener*, 15 November, 1973)

examines how an imagination informed by the myth of regenerative violence might try to sanctify a victim's wounds and suffering, thus rendering them into a signification of sainthood. Possessing transformative powers similar to those found in a bog, such an imagination envisages the victim's mutilated body parts in exquisite naturalistic similes that, like the bog itself, seem to transform the victim into a sacrifice who is not only worthy of the territorial numen, but joined in a procreative embrace with the earth-goddess:

As if he had been poured  
in tar, he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.  
The grain of his wrists  
is like bog oak,  
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan's foot  
or a wet swamp root.

his hips are the ridge  
and purse of a mussel,  
his spine an eel arrested  
under a glisten of mud.

("The Grauballe Man," *North* 35)

Here, except for a brief mention of the victim's "weeping," the rhetoric of regenerative violence erases all traces of the IRA-man's pain. Such elisions continue as the following two artesian stanzas serve to valorize the victim's death. Culminating in a kind of pastoral cameo inset, the final lines of the poem's opening section obscure the man's

status as a trained killer by likening him to a knight and curing his horrific wounds through an exquisite series of strangely soothing images:

The head lifts,  
the chin is a visor  
raised above the vent  
of his slashed throat

That has tanned and toughened.  
the cured wound  
opens inward to a dark  
elderberry place.

(“The Grauballe Man,” *North* 35-36)

Curing is indeed what occurs here on multiple levels. Possessing the same kind of preservative and generative powers as a bog, the imagistic precision and lyricism of these lines serves to transform the victim’s into a soothing moment of consolation. All signs of the mutilated throat bleed and fade into the pastorally evocative phrase “a dark elderberry place.” Thus, this elaborate conceit suggests a kind of idyllic retreat, one that combines with the illusion of a knight’s protective armor to deflect attention away from the actual mess of a brutal murder.

Prettifying death with such pastoral imagery implies that beauty is ultimately born out of terror (to borrow Edna Longley’s phrase), but this is not, as some critics suggest, an ideological position to which Heaney blindly or naively subscribes.<sup>54</sup> In fact, just as this orgy of organic metaphor becomes nearly too much, Heaney uses the artesian stanzas to dig deeper into the myth of regenerative violence in an attempt to undermine it. In the poem’s second half, a dramatic tonal shift signals a move toward a distinct counterpastoral vision, one intended to explode the pastoral reverie of the opening stanzas. Accusingly, a voice of incrimination demands, “Who will say ‘corpse’ / to his vivid cast? / Who will say ‘body’ / to his opaque repose?” (lines 21-24). In a culture of

violence where victims of political violence are fetishized, the answer is clear: no one will. "Perfected" in the bogland of nationalist "memory," the victim lies "hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity: / with the Dying Gaul / too strictly compassed on his shield, / with the actual weight of each hooded victim, slashed and dumped." By demystifying the earlier aestheticization of the murder in this fashion, the poem leaves little doubt concerning its judgment on the cult of blood sacrifice. The beatification of so-called IRA martyrs leaves them doubly violated: first, by their killers, and, secondly, by who those turn their bodies into commodities of cultic adoration.

In "Punishment," a graphic meditation of triangulated desire and loathing, Heaney resurrects a female victim of Iron Age violence and conflates her suffering with that of Catholic women subjected to the IRA practice of tar and feathering for "collaborating" (sexually) with the enemy. Once again the inspiration for the poem comes from Glob's book, in this case the first-century A.D. "Whindeby girl," a fourteen-year-old who "was led naked out to the bog with bandaged eyes and the collar round her neck, and drowned in the little peat pit."<sup>55</sup> With her shaved head -- a special punishment for adulteresses according to Glob -- and her face blackened by the preservative bog-processes, the Whindeby girl recalls, for Heaney, the suffering of Irish girls who are similarly punished by having their "flaxen hair" reduced to "a stubble of black corn" and being "cauled in tar." But another prototype for "Punishment" is clearly the mythic figure of the scapegoat. Referring to the girl as "my poor scapegoat," the poem's speaker identifies the girl as both a victim and cause of the community's troubles.

In her specifically gendered role as *pharmakos*, "the little adulteress" of Heaney's poem is thus considered both the poison infecting the community and the antidote for

curing its ills. On this score, Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism provides a useful framework for understanding Heaney's critique of IRA scapegoating practices. "The function of ritual," Girard argues, "is to 'purify' violence; that is to 'trick' violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals."<sup>56</sup> But in order to "purify" the violent act, it is essential "the persecutors believe in the guilt of their victim; they are imprisoned in the illusion of persecution that is no simple idea but a full system of representation."<sup>57</sup> In a misogynistic warrior society such as the IRA, the "guilt" of a "polluted" female who has transgressed the tribal taboo against miscegenation becomes indisputable; therefore, the punishment exacts no reprisal.

In order to circumvent reciprocal violence, the victim's guilt must be translated into a full system of representation. The semiotics of the IRA's actual and symbolic reign of terror demand that the contemporary scapegoat, like the *pharmakos* of ancient rites, must become a kind of symbolic sponge used to sop up impurities; subsequently, the victim must be publicly humiliated, banished, or killed in a communal ritual. It is precisely this kind of representational dynamic and its insidious psychological effects that Heaney attacks by exposing the speaker's disturbingly voyeuristic objectification of the victim's body. Recalling the scapegoat's violation in quasi-pornographic terms, the speaker describes a moment of simultaneous pain and pleasure in which his sadomasochistic imagination is pricked by a vision of the victim's torture:

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging

of her ribs.  
("Punishment," *North* 37)

The hard-driving, drum-beat of these artesian lines, with their heavy caesurae and multiple plosives ("tug," "nape," "neck," "naked," etc.) subverts any notion that this is an instance of pastoral emotion recollected in tranquility; rather the speaker clearly revels in this highly sexualized *re-presentation* in his consciousness of the victim's public humiliation.

At the moment the speaker begins moving toward an ecstatic union with the victim, however, the tone shifts, and repulsion replaces the initial sense of attraction. Seeing her body "in the bog" (of his own imagination and that of the collective consciousness), he distances himself and begins judging the woman according to tribal law. Consequently, she becomes "a little adulteress" whose body is once again objectified. This time the scapegoat is transformed not into an object of sadomasochistic desire, but rather of ridicule as the speaker imagines her to be "a barked sapling / that is dug up / oak-bone, brain firkin" and sarcastically calls her "noose" a "ring to store/ the memories of love."

The second half of "Punishment" enacts what Girard calls the "second transfiguration" of common persecution myths. "The apparent cause of disorder," writes Girard, "becomes the apparent cause of order because she is a victim who rebuilds the terrified unity of a grateful community, at first in opposition to her, and finally around her."<sup>58</sup> Such a transfiguration occurs in Heaney's poem when the speaker's fear and hostility toward the victim is supplanted by adoration and remorse. Calling the victim "my little scapegoat," the speaker expresses a mixture of guilt and gratitude for the

sacrifice offered by the girl as he admits that his own inactivity and complicity allows the outrageous punishment:

I almost love you  
But would have cast, I know,  
The stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur

Of your brain's exposed  
And darkened combs,  
Your muscles' webbing  
And all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb  
When your betraying sisters,  
Cauled in tar  
Wept by the railings,

Who would connive  
In civilized outrage  
Yet understand the exact  
And tribal, intimate revenge.  
(“Punishment,” *North* 38)

Some critics have suggested these lines, which are arguably the most problematic in the entire Heaney corpus, reflect the poet's own misogynistic impulses or perhaps a sense of ambivalence concerning the use of political violence in Irish society.<sup>59</sup> The Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson, for example, contends that “Punishment,” and the bog poems on balance, serve as a kind of endorsement of ritualized violence: “It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution. It is as if there . . . never will be any political consequences of such acts; they have been removed to the realm of sex, death, and inevitability.” For Carson, this establishes Heaney's credentials as “an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for the ‘situation’, in the last resort, a ‘mystifier.’”<sup>60</sup> But how exactly do these poetic portrayals

of socialized violence, which betray a remarkable understanding of the nationalist myth of regenerative violence, amount to authorial connivance? Does not the fact that Heaney writes such penetrating mythopoeic analyses of deeply embedded social pathologies make it rather difficult to count him among those who “cast the stones of silence”?

That Heaney ultimately wishes to undermine the paradigm of sacrificial violence is made eminently clear in “Strange Fruit,” the poem that immediately follows “Punishment” in *North* and *The Selected Poems, 1965-1975*. In a fashion consonant with previous bog poems, this sonnet begins by seductively transforming the severed head of a young girl into an object of worship. Describing the girl’s appearance in what Edna Longley aptly calls “decorative dawdle” (“Pash of tallow, perishable treasure”), the octave beatifies her through a meticulously realized description of her “leathery beauty.” But in the sestet, Heaney renders his final judgment on those who, through their indifference, enable the cult of blood sacrifice. Heaney closes the poem by referring to Diodorus Siculus, the Roman historian who, in forging his documents of “civilization,” turned a story of barbaric nation-building into a sanitized myth extolling the virtues of *natio* and *imperium*:

Diodorus Siculus confessed  
His gradual ease among the likes of this:  
Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible  
Beheaded girl, outstarring axe  
And beatification, outstarring  
What had begun to feel like reverence.

Here and throughout the bog cycle, Heaney counters the myth of regenerative violence by exposing it for what it is: a deviant nationalist myth that renders its sacrificial victims murdered, forgotten, and nameless. If the beatification of such victims begins to feel like

reverence in several bog poems, that is precisely the point. Just as Pearse couched the doctrine of blood sacrifice in theological terms, so too do contemporary proponents of sacrificial violence. Like the beheaded girl of "Strange Fruit," Heaney seeks to undermine this marriage of religion and violence by outstarring axe and beatification. By means of his elaborate anti-myth, Heaney thus succeeds in diagnosing what has become an insidiously destructive blight on the Irish psyche. To suggest that bog poems like "Punishment" and "The Grauballe Man" condone sectarian violence therefore amounts to a terrible misprision of Heaney's compelling deconstruction of the myth of regenerative violence.

**"The End of Art Is Peace": Reviving Virgilian "Hard Pastoral" and the Classical Eclogue in *Electric Light***

After decades of registering his response to postcolonial conflict in pastoral terms, Heaney has, in recent years, found himself surveying a changed Irish political and social landscape. Since the signing of the Anglo-Irish peace accords in 1984, Northern Ireland has inched fitfully, but steadily toward peace. In this tenuous end-game state, sporadic violence has erupted, but a number of significant developments have held out the promise of lasting rapprochement. Significantly, the IRA instituted a ceasefire from 1994 to 1996. Although this was lifted in February 1996, the ceasefire was renewed in July 1997. Even more importantly, in April 1998, the "Good Friday" Agreement was signed by the British and Irish governments and by most Northern Irish political parties (including Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionist Party), a development that subsequently paved the way for more substantial terms of peace.<sup>61</sup> Reflecting this improved situation, Heaney's latest

versions of the pastoral in *Electric Light* admit some degree of hope concerning Ireland's future, but at the same time they continue to militate against the illusion of Arcadia.

The complex handling of pastoral concerns and themes in *Electric Light* represents an innovative and highly relevant return to the tradition of complex pastoral established by Virgil. This reengagement with Virgilian pastoral is evident not only in poems like "The Augean Stables," but also several pieces which borrow thematically and structurally from Virgil's "Eclogue I" and "Eclogue IV." Additionally, a third eclogue in this collection is a direct translation of Virgil's "Eclogue IX." By resurrecting what some would consider irrelevant classical texts, Heaney once again fashions intriguing versions of the pastoral as a response to the on-going process of Irish decolonization.

In "Bann Valley Eclogue," the first of the Virgilian adaptations appearing in the collection, Heaney addresses Northern Ireland's changing fortunes by rewriting "Eclogue IV" in the form of a dialogue between two fictive characters, Poet and Virgil. Heaney opens the poem with an epigraph from Virgil's original, "*Sicelides Musae, Paulo maiora canamus* (Sicilian Muses, let us sing a nobler theme), but he clearly wishes to cast the ancient eclogue in terms of the Northern Irish situation, for he changes its setting to his own home turf, the Ulster Bann Valley region, and invokes Irish muses. The nobler theme of which Heaney's version speaks is the prospect of a new age of peace and prosperity accompanying an end to civil strife. In this sense, Heaney's poem follows the general trajectory of Virgil's original eclogue, which centers on a prophecy indicating a return of the Golden Age. Written in response to the dynastic marriage of Antony and Octavia and the Pact of Brundisium – two events which helped end nearly a century of Roman civil war and thus promised to secure a lasting peace and a legitimate line of

succession – Virgil’s famous “messianic” fourth eclogue celebrates the Cumaean Sybil’s prophecy, an oracle which held that now, after a period of 110 years, Artemis’ twin brother would be reborn and the Iron Age would end:

The last age of the Cumaean Sybil’s song has come.  
The mighty sequence of ages is born and begins anew.  
Now the Maiden returns. The reign of Saturn returns.  
Now a generation descends from heaven on high.  
At the birth of the child in whose time the iron race  
Shall cease and a golden race inherit the whole earth,  
Smile, O chaste Lucina: now your Apollo reigns. (lines 4-10)

By announcing the birth of a child and a new era, Heaney’s updated eclogue envisages a possible end to the kind of “Iron Age” brutality he so ably documents in earlier pastorals like the bog poems. But if the Poet desires “[b]etter times for her and her generation,” his optimism is tempered by an acknowledgment of how tenuous the peace may be, especially after decades of murderous conflict. To ease the Poet’s fears in this regard, the fictive Virgil promises a more hopeful future for the child:

Eclipses won’t be for this child. The cool she’ll know  
Will be the pram hood over her vestal head.  
Big daisies will get fanked up in the spokes.  
She’ll lie on summer evenings listening to  
A chug and slug going on in the milking parlour.  
Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions. (lines 25-30)

Here the optimism of Heaney’s Virgil may surprise somewhat, for he seems to conjure up a pastoral image that more closely resembles the “enameled world” of neo-classical pastorals than the complex pastoral vision developed by the real Virgil. But optimism drives only half the story of “Eclogue IV” and Heaney’s “Bann Valley Eclogue.” In the original, Virgil admits that before the noble boy comes of age, “Still, slight traces of our old iniquity / will make us tempt the sea in ships, fortify / our towns with walls, cut furrows in our soil. / There will be another Tiphys, another Argo’s /

chosen crew, and there will be other wars, / and mighty Achilles will be dispatched once more to Troy” (lines 31-36). Accordingly, the fictive Virgil qualifies his promise of better times by admonishing the Poet and his people:

Here are my words you'll have to find a place for:  
*Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens.*  
Their gist in your tongue and province should be clear  
Even at this stage. Poetry, order, the times,  
The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth  
And flooding away of all the old miasma. (lines 7-12)

Here Heaney selects and highlights just a few key words from a source passage which reads: “*Vltima Cumaei uenit iam carminis aetas; / magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo* (The last age of the Cumaean prophecy has now come, and a great temporal order is born anew).” His adaptation of the original lines underscores a fundamental difference in Heaney’s assessment of how a new order can be established. Whereas “Eclogue IV” associates the mythical Golden Age with the birth of great new warrior king, Heaney’s selection of *Carmen* (song, poem, poetry, prophecy), *ordo* (order), *nascitur* (is born), *saeculum* (generation or age), and his addition of *gens* (family, race, tribe, nation) seems to suggest that he believes a new understanding of these terms and their positive relationship in Ireland’s body politic must be struck. A positive relationship among these terms and their referents in Irish society requires a reassessment of the role of violence in the political sphere. Heaney reinforces this point again when the Poet says, “*Pacatum orbem*: your words are too much nearly,” a phrase that alters another key moment in “Eclogue IV”: “*pacatumque reget patriis uirtutibus orbem* (And rule a world made peaceful by his father’s virtue).” Although the original Virgilian phrase speaks of peace, it is loaded with martial significance. Specifically, the verb *paco* is generally used in Latin and in several instances by Virgil to describe peace achieved

through military conquest.<sup>62</sup> By changing the original lines to "*Pactum orbem . . .* " and placing them in the incredulous Irish Poet's mouth, Heaney not only suggests that the thought of peace on earth may be impossible, but he suggests the full implication of Virgil's original phrase is "too much" in the Irish context. After decades of sectarian and hegemonic brutality, Heaney's rejection of Virgil's original lines suggests it is absurd to believe further violence and militarism will bring about genuine peace. The fictive Virgil emphasizes this point when he notes that if the Northern Irish people hope to fulfill the promise of better times, they must recognize the following: "Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves: / Earth mark, birth mark, mould like the bloodied mould / On Romulus's ditch-back." The words "stain" and "bloodied mould on Romulus's ditch-back" recall Virgil's original phrase "our sin" in "Eclogue IV," a reference to the belief that the near destruction of Rome and Romulus' progeny during the civil wars resulted from Romulus's fratricide of Remus. This reference implies, of course, that all concerned Northern Irish parties, like the Roman factions, must find a way to stop the cycle of fratricidal violence. Only then, the fictive Virgil notes, will "the waters break / Bann's stream will overflow, the old markings / Will avail no more to keep east bank from west. / The valley will be washed like the new baby." (13-18)

In "Virgil: Eclogue IX," Heaney revives one of Virgil's strongest indictments of a pastoralism which does not recognize a larger socio-political reality beyond the Arcadian dream. But Heaney emphasizes this theme and relates it to the Irish context by translating the dialogue between the shepherd-singers Lycidas and Moeris into a distinctively Anglo-Irish idiom. This endows the eclogue with a large measure of psychological and political currency, while at the same time retaining the powerful

emotional and poetic force of the original. The translation also bears other signature statements of a pastoral imagination fully appreciative of the original's psychological and socio-political density, but also deeply concerned with the current Irish situation.

"Virgil: Eclogue IX" builds its narrative around the typical point-counterpoint structure of complex pastoral. At many points, the poem is the very portrait of Arcadian bliss. Rendering such moments in his ravishingly beautiful idiolect, Heaney often seems to challenge Virgil's status as the classical pastoralist *par excellence* by brilliantly translating scenes like the singing competition between Moeris and Lycidas:

What's in the sea and the waves that keeps you spellbound?  
Here earth breaks out in wildflowers, she rills and rolls  
The streams in waterweed, here poplars bend  
Where the bank is undermined and vines in thickets  
Are meshing shade with light. Come here to me.  
Let the mad white horses paw and pound the shore. (lines 42-47)

Here Heaney not only resurrects Virgil's original, but also displays his gift for lyric song and pastoral description. Later, in his translation of Lycidas's riff on an old song by Moeris, Heaney again proves himself to be perhaps the ideal translator of Virgil's

*Eclogues*:

... Daphnis, Daphnis, why  
Do you concentrate your gaze on the old stars?  
Look for the star of Caesar, rising now,  
Star of corn in the fields and hay in haggards,  
Of clustered grapes gone purple in the heat  
On hillsides facing south. Daphnis, now is the time  
To plant the pear slips for your children's children. (lines 45-51)

So exquisite are these pastoral idylls the question might arise whether, in reviving such moments, Heaney is actually slipping into the kind of pastoral escapism of which his detractors accuse him. But if the thought of planting pears slips in the wake of horrific sectarian and hegemonic violence may seem too quaint for some, "Virgil: Eclogue IX"

also contains an equal measure of the hard pastoral realism we have come to expect from both Virgil and his upstart Irish rival.

For Heaney, translating "Eclogue IX" seems, at various junctures, to provide a means for reflecting on the personal and collective toll taken by what Heaney has aptly called "a quarter-century of life waste and spirit waste." In this regard, Heaney's translation serves as a sort of final pastoral commentary on the relation between violence, his still-evolving pastoral vision, and the on-going formation of the Irish imagined community. Accordingly, Heaney rejects the simple wish-image of the pastoral dream in "Virgil: Eclogue IV" by recalling the terrible price exacted by the Northern Irish war. In what easily passes as a commentary on the recent occupation of Northern Ireland, Moeris, the elder poet, reminds the young Lycidas of the "things we have lived to see . . . The last thing / You could've imagined happening has happened. / An outsider lands and says he has the rights / to our bit of ground. 'Out, old hands,' he says, 'This place is mine'" (lines 2-6). Like Heaney, who left Northern Ireland in the mid-1970s amidst threats on his life and increased criticism concerning his reluctance to take explicit political stands in his poetry, Moeris is forced into exile. Consequently, Lycidas expresses surprise at the news of his friend's misfortune, for he assumed the renowned poet Menalcas (a figure many critics have identified with the court-poet Virgil) had saved the local lands with his songs: "The story I heard was about Menalcas, / How your song-man's singing saved the place, / Starting from where the hills go doubling back / And the ridge keeps sloping gently to the water, / Right down to those old scraggy-headed beech trees" (lines 8-12). But in response, Moeris sadly recalls how Menalcas has been

assaulted and become “nearly one of the missing” for resisting the land confiscations by writing songs of protest:

That's what you would have heard. But songs and tunes  
Can no more hold out against brute force than doves  
When eagles swoop. The truth is, Lycidas,  
If I hadn't heard the crow caw on my left  
In our hollow oak, I'd have kept on arguing  
And that would've been the end of the road, for me  
That's talking to you, and for Menaclas even. (lines 13-19)

If, in all of this, there emerges a reflection of Heaney's plight and his now familiar questioning of poetry's efficacy in the face of overwhelming violence, a larger commentary on the function and outcome of political violence also emerges. The clearest indicator of such a commentary appears in Heaney's highly idiomatic translation of Virgil's original phrase “*nunc uicti, tristes, quoniam fors omnia uersat*” (defeated and sorrowing now, since fortune reverses all—trans mine). In his choice of “All's changed” for the translation of the Latin original harks back, of course, to two of Yeats's great statements concerning the relation between regenerative violence and the formation of the Irish nation-state. “In Easter 1916,” Yeats ambivalently speaks of the intersection between violence, political change, and the marginalization of the great Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists in his famous lines: “All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born” (Yeats 180, lines). Fifteen years later an echo of this line appears in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (a poem that not only bears a heavy debt to the traditional pastoral elegy, but also registers Yeats's deep regret over the missed opportunities of the Irish revolution and over the passing of the literary revival that sparked that revolution). Evoking a keen sense of elegiac lamentation, Yeats inscribes an echo of “Easter 1916” in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”: “But all is changed” (245, line 46). At the heart of these two poems,

each of which deal with a common theme of revolutionary violence in vastly different ways, is the question of literary and national foundations built upon acts of violence and regeneration. What commanded Yeats's attention in the earlier poem was how the Irish nation came into being not through the intermediary of poetry, but in consequence of violence. In the intervening fifteen years between the composition of "Easter 1916" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," what Yeats eventually learned was how illusory and ultimately destructive an undying nationalist adherence to a myth of regenerative violence could actually prove to be. Registering this insight in an unmistakable counterpastoral image at the end of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats speaks of the failed promises of Republicanism and revolutionary violence in terms of the demise of Lady's Gregory's once-lovely garden:

A spot whereon the founders lived and died  
Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral tree  
Or gardens rich in memory glorified  
Marriages, alliances, and families,  
And every bride's ambition satisfied.  
Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees  
Man shifts about – all that great glory spent  
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.  
We were the last romantics – chose for theme  
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
Whatever's written in what poet's name  
The book of the people; what most can bless  
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;  
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

Deft allusion to a poem other than Virgil's thus significantly colors Heaney's contemporary pronouncement on the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland. Like Yeats, Heaney is well aware how quickly nationalist celebrations of regenerative violence can give way to further strife. Often behind the façade of the Arcadian idyll drifts a swan

“upon a darkening flood.” Just as the promise held out by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922 quickly gave way to civil war and a highly repressive form of theocratic rule in the Irish Free State, Heaney knows the current Northern Irish situation is far from settled. Thirty years of desolation, temporary truces, and broken cease fires have taught him this.

No matter what course the current process of Irish decolonization takes, critics will certainly continue to debate whether an essentially pastoral poet such as Heaney actually exercised any measurable influence over the course of Ireland’s troubled march away from its colonial past toward liberation. Heaney’s commitment to forging a poetics of violence, a poetics that often bears the impress of a pastoral tradition deemed by many to be passé, will no doubt lead some critics to continue questioning his contribution to the process of Irish decolonization. If such detractors typically begin by assuming lyric poetry changes nothing (and they often do), they frequently attempt to seal their case by arguing pastoral poetry represents the worst sin of omission in the political sphere. Though such claims are ultimately impossible to refute in any definitive manner, perhaps the most convincing apology for Heaney’s pastoral verse is the complexity and richness of the poetry itself. By refining his pastoral art over the course of four decades, Heaney repeatedly demonstrates the genre’s dual capacity for making condemnatory and consolatory statements about political and psychological violence. Like other “hard pastoralists” (poets such as Virgil, Senghor, Owen, and Walcott, who have deployed the mode as an effective means of visionary resistance and lyric consolation), Heaney’s postcolonial pastorals provide powerful socio-political and lyric commentaries on the Irish situation. Given that his pastorals often chart a political and psychic landscape wracked by hegemonic and counterhegemonic violence, this poetry can indeed be said to

be a key battleground in the kind of “anthropological war” that is still taking place in Ireland, a war in which the terms of decolonization are constantly being redefined. From his early antipastoral depictions of dispossessed farmers to his bog myth and from his pastoral elegies to his revival of Virgilian eclogues, Heaney’s pastoral verse does what all important postcolonial writing does; it offers provocative alternative perspectives concerning the current status and potential future shape of postcoloniality. In this respect alone, Heaney makes a compelling case that the pastoral ought not be tossed onto the scrap heap of “post-isms” enumerated by Anne McClintock, for his pastorals repeatedly provide a vision for reconstituting the Irish imagined community. Perhaps most importantly, Heaney’s pastorals are a statement on the relationship between violence and the national longing for peace and a new form of being. Ever wary of the Arcadian illusion, Heaney seems equally ready to reject Fanon’s famous formulation that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” For genuine liberation to occur, at some point, the “is always” of Fanon’s phrase must change to “was” so the myth of regenerative violence can be transcended. As the Sibylean prophetess of Heaney’s poem “Triptych” warns, “Unless forgiveness finds it nerve and voice, / Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree / Can green and open buds like infants’ fists/ And the fouled magma incubate/ Bright nymphs . . . our very form is bound to change...” – unless such a change takes place there is little hope of anybody planting pears slips or singing safely in the cool umber of the Right Rose Tree.

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### Notes to Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Anne McClintock, "The angel of progress: pitfalls of the terms post-colonialism" in Francis Baker's (ed.) *Colonial Discourse/postcolonial theory* (New York: Manchester UP, 1994), p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984), p. 1. Ettin provides a compelling definition of the form, but it is only one among many. This is a question critics and writers of imaginative literature alike have been grappling with for centuries. Since the range of answers to this question have been as varied and complex as primary source materials and the vast body of scholarship covering the 2,500-year history of Western pastoral, it is impossible to offer here a comprehensive and fully satisfying definition of the pastoral. Scholars such as Ettin and Empson have devoted entire volumes toward such a definition. Nonetheless, in recent decades several specialized studies have provided useful frameworks for evaluating different aspects of Heaney's diverse treatment of the genre. "What is Pastoral?" asks Paul Alpers in another excellent study of the form, and, for him, the key to understanding pastoralism is "the central fiction that shepherds' lives represent human lives." Frederick Garber, on the other hand, argues that pastoral is a mode of spiritual reorientation that "always implies that we are returning in the fiction, to where we used to be." Arguing for a far more eclectic conception of the term that transcends the largely "obsolete classical conventions," Lawrence Buell uses "pastoral" broadly to refer to "all literature that celebrates an ethos of rurality or nature or wilderness over against an ethos of metropolitanism." At various points in the corpus, Heaney's treatment of pastoral encompasses each of these definitions. For the purpose of this discussion, the term pastoral will denote those modes of expression which employ rural imagery and subject matter to comment on larger social and political issues as well as the tension between art and life. Literally, Arcadia of course denotes a mountainous region in Greece, but it connotes the idealized pastoral milieu which Virgil substituted for Theocritus' Sicily as the site of Arcadian bliss.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988), p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the crucial role pastoralism played in the formation of the modern Irish nation-state see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988). From the early nineteenth-century onward, both literary and political nationalists celebrated rural folk and virtue in a fashion that often outstripped similar celebrations in nationalist movements across Europe. In the 1800s, nationalists like Thomas Davis and Sir Charles Gavan Duffy propagated an Irish version of Jeffersonian agrarianism, but their vision was more generally informed by a Romantic ethos. Both espoused a concept of an inclusivist nation whose ideal was a society of peasant farmers "not need or desiring great wealth, but enjoying free, simple lives" attuned to nature rather than social systems producing "the stricken legions who serve the steam engine and waterwheel" (Duffy qtd in Cairns and Richard, p. 64). Even as late as 1943, Eamon De Valera, the President of the Irish Free State, articulated his dream of an essentially pastoral Irish idyll as the basis for his economic and social policy. In his 1943 St. Patrick's Day speech, De Valera spoke of Ireland as "the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age" (DeValera qtd in Cairns, p. 133.)

<sup>5</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 591.

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robbery Frost: A Cultural Episode," *Partisan Review*, Summer 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Sidney Burris, *The Poetry of Resistance* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1990), p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> For Bedient's remark see "The Music of What Happens," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 8.1 (Fall-Winter 1979): 110. For Lloyd's assessment see David Lloyd, "Pap For The Dispossed," in *Anamolous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 17-34; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (AS 34). I made this point in the previous chapter on form, but it bears repeating in the present discussion of Heaney's pastoralism. Lloyd argues Heaney's verse formally and substantively conforms to a well-worn neo-Romantic aesthetic which is given to reinforcing root-bound organic notions of nationalist solidarity. Lloyd sees this tendency to be potentially dangerous because rather than challenging "imperial ideology" it underwrites the aesthetic and territorial pieties of Irish nationalism (all of which, according to Lloyd, amounts to a mimic's move that reduces Heaney's poetics to a mirror image of colonialist aesthetics).

<sup>9</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, "The Glittering Prize", *Fortnight*, 344 (Nov. 1995), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Antony Easthope, "How Good is Seamus Heaney?", *English*, 46/184 (Spring 1997), pp. 21-36.

<sup>11</sup> Commenting on pastoralism's ability to adapt to the most unlikely circumstances, Lawrence Buell cites the postcolonial literary movement known as Negritude as an instance of what he calls indigene pastoral: "Just as settler culture has tried to convert its perceived rusticity into cultural capital, so indigenes have used pastoral as a weapon against cultural dominance" (63). Characterizing Negritude as the most influential form of indigene pastoral nationalism, Buell quotes Negritude's first theorist, Leopold Senghor, and his description of the movement's pastoral impulse as "the communal warmth, the image-symbol and the cosmic rhythm which instead of dividing and sterilizing, unified and made fertile" (qtd in Buell 64). According to Buell, Negritude qualifies as pastoralism because "it evokes a traditional, holistic, nonmetropolitan, nature-attuned myth of Africinity in reaction to and critique of a more urbanized, 'artificial' European order" (64). What Buell does not explore is how many Negritude poets also contravene the easy appeal of a green-thoughts-in-a-green-land pastoralism, and ironically use the language of pastoral to point out the deceptions and violence inherent in imperial ideology.

<sup>12</sup> (MG 25). Marx notes the idea of a violent counterforce within a pastoral framework is applicable to a good deal of twentieth-century American writing: "The anti-pastoral forces at work in our literature indeed seem to become increasingly violent as we approach our own time. For it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (MG 26).

<sup>13</sup> On the structural and thematic oppositions of complex pastoral see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 1-33; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (MG 32). Old Testament examples of "hard pastoral" are abundant in the Psalms and Jeremiah (25: 34-36). For a discussion of the (anti)pastoralism in World War I literature see Paul Fussell's chapter on this subject in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 1975) where he writes, "Pastoral reference is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself." Dereck Walcott's "The Star-Apple Kingdom" is the work to which I refer here.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this wonderful phrase from Annabel Patterson's *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987). Patterson uses the term to describe Wordsworth's use of the form to critique socio-political injustice in poems like "Michael." In using the phrase to connote the tension between the pastoral ideal and the intrusion of violence, I diverge somewhat from the sense in which Patterson uses the term.

<sup>15</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> From our vantage point, it is easy to forget Virgil did not always enjoy the privileged status of court-poet accorded him when he wrote *The Aeneid*. Like Heaney, Virgil was the son of a small farm owner. As such, he was intimately familiar with the threat of eviction that followed in the wake of land redistribution schemes after the Old Republican Civil War. Some scholars suggest Virgil wrote "Eclogue IX," which was probably composed before "Eclogue I," as an appeal to the local governor, Varus, to save his father's farm from confiscation in 41 B.C. In that year, Roman officials instituted a land distribution program to reward veterans who had served on the side of the victorious Antony and Octavian in the last phase of the Old Republican Civil Wars (Fowler xi).

<sup>17</sup> Caroline pastorals in Milton's time are famous for this kind of excision. In eighteenth-century England, the "enameled world" was replaced by a socially-aware pastoral in which painful longing for a settled, traditional rural way of life was combined with criticism of the enclosure system. On this point, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 18-20, 96; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (CC 96).

<sup>18</sup> Jon Stallworthy, "The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney," in Robert F. Garratt (ed.), *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1995), p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> (CC 62).

<sup>21</sup> In *Ulysses* Buck Mulligan mocks the notion of the tower as an adequate place of exile for Stephen Dedalus: "But ours is the *omphalos*" (Joyce 15). In *The Odyssey*, Homer calls Calypso's island, Ogygia, an *omphalos* (navel of the sea). In modern Irish literature, the figure appears frequently. Joyce renders the Martello Tower as a parody and affirmation of Irish resistance to invasion. Yeats' tower can be interpreted in light of late-nineteenth-century Theosophist interpretations of the *omphalos* as the place of "the astral soul of man," the locus of consciousness and well-spring of poetic and prophetic inspiration.

<sup>22</sup>“All round this little island / on the strand / Far down below there, where the breakers strive / Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.” Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 100-103.

<sup>23</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 467.

<sup>24</sup> See Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12. In fact, both Heaney’s world and Suibhne’s are significantly defamiliarized by the act of translation. Heaney’s condensation and versification of section 64 gives new life to the long prose fragment from the *Buile Suibhne*. It is equally true, however, that his representation of violence is nourished by this act of translation which gives new life to the *Buile Suibhne*. The uncanny imagery and content of the translated source material puts the contemporary reader’s consciousness in significant contact with the otherworldly quality of the Middle Irish text. While Heaney derives significant nourishment from his cannibalization of the source text, it would be a mistake to characterize this exchange as a one-way flow from the source to the target text and culture.

<sup>25</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Engagement,” in *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 423.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Seamus Heaney in David Montenegro, *Points of Departure: International Writers on Writing and Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1991), p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to recount this debate in its entirety, but some of the more vehement attacks on Heaney are worth noting. Arguing that the poems rely on unconvincing historical parallels which ignore key differences between contemporary and prehistoric violence, Heaney’s harshest detractors have assailed the poems with a vehemence seldom found in literary criticism. Blake Morrison charges Heaney with giving the killings in the North a kind of “historical respectability” not provided by the daily press. Conor Cruise O’Brien calls Heaney’s adoption of his “ahistorical” approach to the contemporary Troubles a “bleak” and “pessimistic” vision born out of a sort of tragic fatalism: “Heaney’s relation to a deeper tragedy is fixed and pre-ordained; the poet is on intimate terms with doom.” In contrast, Denis Donoghue in his book, *We Irish* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 187-94, contends Heaney’s mythic approach to the Troubles provides a degree of necessary aesthetic distancing, a movement which opens onto an “area of feeling somehow beneath the field of violence and ideology,” a space where readers can sense that, despite differences in “times and technologies,” there are “archaic processes still alive.” Donoghue thus concludes that the bog-myth offered a necessary consolation which “release[s] the reader . . . from the fatality which otherwise seems inscribed in the spirit of the age.”

<sup>28</sup> Harold Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984), p. vii. Beyond this general disclaimer, there are additional grounds for submitting the bog poems to the pastoral paradigm. Specifically, the pastoral lens facilitates an understanding of how the bog cycle exploits pastoralism’s inherent capacity for exploring the interface between culture and natural processes. On this score, Andrew Ettin’s *Literature and the Pastoral* provides another useful commentary on the mode. In this seminal study, Ettin argues that while not all nature writing is pastoral, certain attitudes concerning the intersection of the natural world and human experience are central to the mode: “In pastoral literature, experiences and emotions are contained within finite limits. Those limits are implied by the patterns revealed within the natural world and within the pastoral way of life, consonant with the patterns of the natural world. The containment is necessitated by the fragility or delicacy of the experiences and emotions, or by tension between pastoral and nonpastoral experience.” For these comments, see Andrew Ettin’s *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984), p.22. This excellent work not only examines the role of pastoral in the work of predictable authors such as Theocritus, Milton, and Spenser but also seemingly unlikely writers like Unamuno and Hemingway.

<sup>29</sup> Heaney interview with Seamus Deane, “Unhappy and at Home,” *Crane Bag*, 1.1 (1977), pp 61-67.

<sup>30</sup> Henri Cole, “Seamus Heaney: The Art of Poetry LXXV,” Interview with Heaney, *Paris Review* 144 (Fall 1997), pp. 89-138.

<sup>31</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Children of Wrath: Political Violence in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> In multiple analyses of the essentially mimetic nature of violence in society, Girard argues that violence intensifies and simplifies the mimetic aspect of any conflict; this is particularly true of physical violence, a situation in which one antagonist blocks as the other strikes, and so on goes the cycle of retributive violence. Thus a violent exchange is reduced to a dumb repetition of the same gestures. As the conflict drags on, this dynamic of silent and mindless repetition becomes clearer. Violence of this sort ultimately

reduces enemies to mirror-images of one another. For a succinct overview of the main tenets of Girard's theory of violence see *Violence and Truth*, ed. Paul Dumochel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), pp. 1-26.

<sup>33</sup> (P 57-59).

<sup>34</sup> (P 57).

<sup>35</sup> P.V. Glob, *The Bog People* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 392.

<sup>36</sup> James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney." *Ploughshares*. 5:3, 1979, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to this formal probing into Ireland's culture of violence, several of his bog poems also bear distinct traces of Levi-Strauss's notions of naturalized violence and Girard's notion of mimetic violence.

<sup>38</sup> James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney." *Ploughshares*. 5:3, 1979, pp. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> (*Preoccupations*, 55).

<sup>40</sup> In my extensive readings of Heaney criticism, I have never seen mention of the parallel Heaney draws between the frontier and the bog. For an excellent discussion of the frontier as a trope of national self-definition in the American context, see Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), especially Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>41</sup> (P 19).

<sup>42</sup> Denis Donoghue, *We Irish* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 192.

<sup>43</sup> Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), 45.

<sup>44</sup> As American literary historians suggest, this myth of regeneration through violence is not uniquely Irish. See, for example, Richard Slotkin's massive three-volume study of the myth of "regeneration through violence" in American culture and politics. In his first volume of this trilogy, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600 - 1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan U P, 1973), Slotkin argues that colonists and pioneers saw in the American frontier an opportunity to "regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation," but the means of regeneration were almost invariably violent (Slotkin 5). See also Chapter 2 of this study where I trace many of the same themes in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, a pastoral dialogue that is deeply imbued with Calvinist notions of regenerative violence. Other notable examples of regenerative violence include Fanon's espousal of armed resurrection in the chapter "On Violence" in *Wretched of the Earth* and Sartre's controversial introduction to the same book.

<sup>45</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Mother Ireland," *The Listener*, 7 December, 1972, p. 790.

<sup>46</sup> (P 57-58).

<sup>47</sup> Touting armed uprising as a prelude to such a restoration (no matter how hopeless its chances for success), Pearse sums up the doctrine of blood sacrifice in his famous funeral oration for O'Donnovan Rossa: "Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. . . - they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace" (Pearse quoted in James Kee, *The Green Flag* [New York: Delacorte], pp. 531-34).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.479.

<sup>49</sup> Like many radical ideologies, violent Republicanism functions according to a complex system of cultural myth. The Republican cult of Mother Ireland attempts to distil an essential part of the world vision and historical sense of the people and culture. The myth of regenerative violence and cultic worship of martyrs reduces centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors that recapitulates the people's experience in their land, rehearses their vision of that experience in relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm of eternal return.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Kearney, "Myth and Motherland," in *Ireland's Field Day*, edited by Field Day Theatre Company (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1986), p. 66. This compelling essay first appeared as "Myth and Terror," *Crane Bag*, Vol.2, No. 1 & 2, 1978. Kearney revises the earlier article extensively for *Ireland's Field Day*, a book to which Heaney contributed with his satirical poem "An Open Letter" and through his role as a director of the Field Day project.

<sup>51</sup> Pat Coogan's *The IRA* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1987), p. 580, documents this practice which became widespread by 1972: "Scores of young Catholics were found with hoods over their heads and bullets through their brains. Others were found in a condition better imagined than described, with mutilations, throat cuttings and every form of atrocity."

<sup>52</sup> Virgil qtd. in David Jones, *The Dying Gaul* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), pp. 50, 52. I am indebted to Henry Hart for this citation.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1992), p. 91.

<sup>54</sup> This of course is a key issue taken up by numerous influential thinkers before Heaney. It appears perhaps most notably in Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In this often (mis)quoted text, Benjamin not only argues that the "logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life," but he also targets the "war is beautiful" manifesto of the futurist Marinetti: "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war." It is extremely difficult for art and ideology not to corrupt one another.

<sup>55</sup> P.V. Glob, *The Bog People* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 114, 153.

<sup>56</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), p. 36. The scapegoating mechanism can only be sustained if the persecutors and their accomplices view the violence directed against the victim as generative. In other words, the violent act, as Girard notes, must be considered to be "at least the indirect origin of all those things that men hold most dear and that they strive most ardently to preserve." This is why, within the sacrificial system, the violence directed at the surrogate victim can be perceived as just, for it helps restore cultural order by reinforcing matrimonial regulations and other cultural taboos. (93)

<sup>57</sup> Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), p. 50.

<sup>59</sup> Many readers, including a growing number of feminist critics, have, in my opinion, collapsed too entirely the misogyny espoused by a few speakers in poems in *North* with Heaney's point of view. In an otherwise excellent reading of Heaney's treatment of violence in *North*, Charles L. O'Neill in his essay "Violence and the Sacred in Seamus Heaney's *North*," in Catharine Molloy (ed.), *The Shaping Spirit* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1996): 91-105, makes no attempt to acknowledge the fact that the speaker of "Punishment" is a constructed figure which cannot be entirely identified with Heaney. A similar critical neglect of the fictive nature of poetic voicing occurs in Patricia Coughlan's "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney" in Toni O'Brien and David Cairns (eds.), *Gender in Irish Writing* (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1991): 89-111. In her reading of "Acts of Union," Coughlan sees "a crucial ambiguity" in Heaney's "autobiographical" treatment of the violent act of sexual conquest which he conflates with the early modern English (male) conquest of feminine Ireland, thus she detects a highly ambivalent representation of rape or seduction by a male force "whose energy is attractively irresistible?" Though she never says as much, this reading places "Act of Union" in the same company as Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," a poem that I believe Heaney has in mind here and which in some of its versions is fraught with far more ambivalence about the terms of sexual seduction than "Act of Union." Nonetheless, Coughlan argues that while the stereotypes of male conquest and female resistance may vividly render "the complications, the tangled intimacy, of Anglo-Irish political relations," we must conclude from the clear absence of irony in the poem that the text ultimately demonstrates Heaney's complicity in "gender triumphalism." What is so startling when one begins to look more closely at this reading and various others in this otherwise intelligent and incisive essay is Coughlan's near total disregard of poetic artifice and its integral role in the construction of meaning. No mention is ever made of the fact that "Act of Union" is composed of two perfectly wrought sonnets which are always separated and numbered (in each version of the poem), thereby highlighting their sonnet form. Nor does Coughlan consider the possibility that this formal coding contributes to the construction of a highly complex figure of voicing which ironically gives the lie to the hypocrisy of the speaker's highly formalized and contrived expressions of love and concern for his victim. With reference to other poems in her essay, Coughlan may sometimes be quite correct in expressing concern over Heaney's treatment of the intersection of gender inequality, sexual conquest, and imperialism, but her "autobiographical" reading of "Act of Union," a reading which fails to attend to Heaney's deft poetic artifice, results in a grossly misplaced and *misinformed* attack on what is clearly a dark formal parody of the imperial invader's jaded concern for the colonized.

<sup>60</sup> For these remarks see Ciaran Carson's "'Escaped from the Massacre?'," *The Honest Ulsterman*, 76 (Winter 1975), 183-85.

<sup>61</sup> More recently, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> prompted the IRA to begin disarming.

<sup>62</sup> Wendell Clausen, *A Commentary on Virgil: Eclogues* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 122.

## Chapter 4

### Violence, Vernacular, and Transcreative Translation In Heaney's "Ugolino," *Sweeney Astray*, and *Beowulf*

Or, He's Just After Telling The "Troubles They'd Come Through" &  
"What They'd Tholed"\*

Having already considered Heaney's hybrid transformations of received poetic forms and his innovative adaptations of the pastoral mode, I turn in this chapter to his extensive body of translations, a third front on which this Irish poet grapples with the related issues of violence and (post)colonialism. This little studied aspect of Heaney's work warrants reconsideration because translation in the Irish context can rarely be viewed as an innocuous, transparent activity; rather it must be seen as involving various relationships of inequality between texts, authors, cultural traditions, and social groups.<sup>1</sup> Thus, far from being a marginal aspect of his anticolonial critique, translation has increasingly become a central feature of Heaney's project. That he has put translation to such use is borne out not only by Heaney's cunning rendering of numerous source texts but also his extensive remarks in the introduction to his recent translation of *Beowulf*. Noting how the act of translation serves as a potent manner of responding to and perhaps even reversing the effects of colonial violence, Heaney writes that translation proves to be a particularly effective means for an "Irish poet to come terms with a complex history

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\*My subtitle derives from Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, lines 14-15.

of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more ‘willable forward / again and again and again.’”<sup>2</sup>

In putting *Beowulf* to work for such purposes, Heaney augments an already impressive body of previous translations, works in which he consistently demonstrates a remarkable capacity for revising and resisting the narrative of (post)colonial violence. As early as 1972, Heaney began producing hybrid transformations of time-honored cultural materials and canonical cornerstones of the European, Irish and English literary traditions. As is the case with many of his finest lyrics and longer narrative poems, the subject of Heaney’s translations are typically shot through with images of brutality and atrocity, images which he then deftly engineers to reference political and cultural violence in the Irish context. This holds true not just for his *Beowulf* but also for several other adaptations of canonical source texts: *The Cure at Troy* (a version Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*), the long poem “Ugolino” (a translation drawn from parts of the notoriously violent Cantos XXXII and XXXIII of Dante’s *Inferno*), *Sweeney Astray* (a version of the Middle Irish text *Buile Suibhne*), and, most recently, *Antigone*.

Although each of these rewritings of canonical literature figures as a significant moment and embodiment of Heaney’s evolving poetic of violence, most of these works have received scant attention from critics.<sup>3</sup> In the pages that follow, I want to argue that these acts of textual recovery warrant further consideration for at least two significant reasons. On one hand, his transformations of various source texts figure as key extensions and instantiations of what Heaney, after Yeats’s famous line in “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” has aptly called a search for “befitting emblems of adversity.” In

other words, his translations provide a means of figuring the violence(s) of Ireland's postcolonial present by recovering and reproducing time-honored representations of past brutality. Additionally, these works illustrate the dogged consistency with which Heaney draws upon and merges a variety of formal, linguistic, and cultural traditions in an effort to redistribute what he calls "the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order."<sup>4</sup> In various ways, then, I argue for the centrality of Heaney's translations within his larger critique of colonialism and violence. Through close readings of three representative texts, "Ugolino," *Sweeney Astray: A Version of the Irish*, and *Beowulf*, I thus seek to detail in this chapter how translation becomes an integral, yet largely misunderstood and often neglected aspect of Heaney's evolving poetic of violence.

### **Translation, The Language Question, and Conflicted Literary Traditions**

Any discussion dealing with a contemporary Northern Irish poet's translation activity must initially take account of the conflictual history of translation in Ireland's long march from colony to independent nation. Furthermore, some account must be given of the way translation runs parallel to the complicated history of language, identity, and literary tradition in Ireland. A brief account of such matters is necessary because translation figures prominently not only in the conquest of Ireland but also in this island nation's slow march toward decolonization, a process involving all sorts of literal and figurative acts of translation that touch upon the issues of language, identity, literary tradition, and nationalism. But first I want to consider the significance of translation in the Irish context.

Arguing for translation as a key site of (post)colonial discursivity, Maria Tymoczko notes that with regard to Ireland during the past seven centuries translation has alternately been “a locus of imperialism” and “a site of resistance and nation building as well.”<sup>5</sup> Detailing the history of this dialectic in her cogent and painstakingly documented *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, Tymoczko argues that translation in Ireland eventually came to constitute a key form of resistance and later became central to national formation because, from the early fourteenth-century onward, English colonists and administrators deployed translation as a powerful tool of colonization, a practice not only geared toward translating the Irish and their culture into a carbon copy of English culture, but a practice that took the form of “tangible, physical oppression” and dramatic cultural change.<sup>6</sup> Understandably, the Irish have seldom taken such impositions and violence lying down. Deployed as a form resistance and used to recuperate a badly damaged native Irish linguistic and cultural inheritance, translation has long been a significant locus of Irish anticolonial discourse. “From the time of Macpherson to Seamus Heaney,” writes Tymoczko, “the translation of early Irish literature has been a significant fact of literature in English, and, in the case of the Irish literary revival, translation and adaptation of Irish literature characterized an entire literary movement.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Ireland travelled the path from being England’s first major colony to being the first modern people to decolonize in the twentieth century, translation was key to this process. Considering how this dialectic between subordination and resistance has played out in the Irish context, it is not surprising that translation theorists and postcolonial critics have recently begun to detail the role of translation in an attempt to understand the unique dimensions and parameters of Irish postcolonality

The Irish engagement with translation entails a dialectic similar to the narrative of colonialism and resistance repeated by subaltern writers and translators throughout the postcolonial world. Indeed, it has by now become a commonplace to describe colonization and decolonization in terms of the metaphor of translation. This seems to be case not only because the metaphor aptly describes the process whereby colonialism attempts to transform or “translate” indigenous societies into mirror images of the metropole, but also because, in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, translation itself served as a primary tool by which colonizing powers disseminated their languages, cultural and political institutions, and *Weltanschauungen*. Eric Cheyfitz, for example, cogently argues in *The Poetics of Imperialism* that translation was “the central act of European colonization and imperialism in America.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar study, but one situated in the much different colonial context of colonial India, Tejaswini Niranjana argues for “translation as a significant technology of colonial domination” and identifies the destructiveness of colonial translation activities: “By employing certain modes of representing the Other—which it thereby also [brought] into being—translation reinforce[d] hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them to acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representation or objects without history.”<sup>9</sup>

If it is possible to speak of translation as a staging ground for the exercise of colonial “violence,” it is equally possible to consider the counterforce contained in translations that embody the empire’s efforts to write back. Judging from the Irish context alone, this is certainly true. Thus, translation, which in regard to other postcolonial context has often been read as a textual event that occurs in the “contact zone” (Pratt) or “third space” (Bhabha), becomes a key battleground with the larger

“anthropological war” that defines the Irish processes of colonization and decolonization. In our consideration of Heaney’s translations, it is helpful, then, to distinguish between the textual “violence” that occurs in a kind political and intercultural “combat zone” and the resistance to various forms of violence that emerges in aspects of his translation which instance a kind of productive transculturation and transcreative hybridity.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding this dialectic of translation in the Irish context becomes critical for an understanding of Heaney’s deployment of this form of writing because an intensification of this “translational” process emerges in contemporary Ireland after 1965, particularly within the intimate community of Ulster writers to which Heaney belonged. Coincident with the early stages of the recent Ulster conflict, scores of Irish writers turned to translation as a means of combating and critiquing various forms of violence, particularly the rise of intractable nationalism and separatism on both poles of the Northern Irish political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> Drawing their materials from a once-vibrant native Irish literary tradition, several prominent Irish poets produced a number of acclaimed translations. Many of these works reflect a narrative of brutal conquest, foreign domination, and resistance to hegemonic violence, including Thomas Kinsella’s *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, Paul Muldoon’s poem “Immram” (an adaptation of *Immram Mael Dun*) as well as several early Irish poems translated and anthologized by John Montague in *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the translations done by Heaney and his contemporaries represent a conscious effort to enter into the mode of translation embraced by cultural nationalists like Samuel Ferguson, Douglas Hyde, and Lady Gregory, but the translations of these contemporary poets are far less concerned with

recovering of loss origins and restoring national pride; instead, they often following Ezra Pound's advice to "make it new."

This upsurge in the production of translations by Irish writers over the last several decades can be fully understood only by first examining the vexed relation between language, identity, literary tradition, and nationality in Ireland. In other words, translation takes on such colossal importance in the Irish context because of its inextricable connection to the language question, the formation of national identity, and the (de)construction of literary canons.<sup>13</sup> As a prelude to my discussion of Heaney's translations, the story of the relation between the English and Irish languages warrants a few preliminary remarks because it is, in Tom Paulin's words, "a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture."<sup>14</sup> This narrative involves not only the attempt to impose Standard English as the linguistic norm in Ireland, but also, frequently, involves a prejudice in favor of English literature.<sup>15</sup> For this reason alone, the intersection of language and tradition, both of which are key sites and signs of imperial domination in Ireland, must be outlined briefly before we can understand or appreciate Heaney's specific contribution to decolonization in his work as a translator.

But if language and literary tradition have been integral components of the colonial project in Ireland, they have also been crucial in "the formation of a national counter-hegemony."<sup>16</sup> For at least the past three centuries, the question of which language to use in the renaming of Irish cultural and political reality has assumed tremendous cultural and political significance. Writing on the role of such matters in the process of Irish decolonization, Heaney himself has remarked, "In any movement toward liberation, it

will be necessary to deny the normative authority of the dominant language or literary tradition.”<sup>17</sup> In Ireland, this process began as early as the seventeenth century, when, as Declan Kiberd shows, native Irish writers began formulating texts “committed to cultural resistance.”<sup>18</sup> By the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, after more than six centuries of colonial occupation in which the edifice an Anglicized Ireland was almost fully cemented, such resistance became increasingly difficult. It was with renewed vigor that resistance began taking up the issue of language and tradition in the 1840s as nationalism swept the rest of Europe. In essays infused with essentialist romantic ideology – essays such as “Our National Language,” a piece which anticipates the work of the Gaelic League by several decades -- Thomas Davis argued for Irish language and literature as the *sine qua non* of restoring the Irish nation’s identity and past greatness. Fifty years later, nationalists like Douglas Hyde resumed Davis’s project during the Irish Renaissance (circa 1885-1940). In a famous essay entitled “The Necessity of Deanglicizing Ireland” (1892), Hyde argues for the “deterritorialization” of the Irish mind by means of a recovery of Irish forms and language.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, the push to de-anglicize Ireland in the twentieth century has been closely connected to translation activity. Translation not only came to play a crucial role in the works of scores of twentieth-century Irish writers, writers ranging from Flann O’Brien to Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge. The contribution of the latter two to the Irish Renaissance “had been essentially an exercise in translation, in carrying over aspects of Gaelic culture into English, a language often thought alien to that culture,” but even more recently it has been central to the work of numerous contemporary Irish writers ranging from Heaney and Thomas Kinsella to Paul Muldoon, Brian Friel, and Tom Paulin.<sup>20</sup>

If some have touted the abandonment of English cultural and linguistic forms as the only solution for restoring viable forms of Irish identity and sovereignty, many others, including politicians and poets, consider the thought of completely jettisoning the English language and literature a rather quixotic proposition, one that is neither practical nor desirable for overcoming the problem of linguistic and cultural imperialism.<sup>21</sup> The Irish poet Thomas Kinsella sums up the dilemma facing Irish writers in this regard:

A writer who cares who he is and where he comes from looks about him and begins by examining his colleagues. In that very act a writer in Ireland must make a basic choice: do I include writers in Irish among my colleagues? Or am I to write them off as a minor and embattled group, keeping loyal—for the best reasons—to a dead or dying language? Some of the best writers in Irish believe that their language is doomed, rejected by its people. They are pessimistic, but my instinct tells me they are right. So I turn only to those who are writing in English.<sup>22</sup>

Choosing to write in English, however, has had profound implications for Kinsella and other Irish writers. As Kinsella notes, the force of history and his own relation to the Irish language creates a rift of sorts between himself and a fabulously rich tradition of Irish language poetry, a tradition that stretches from the major poet Aogán Ó Rathaille at the end of the seventeenth-century back a thousand years, a native poetic and linguistic inheritance full of dazzling riches and variety:

Poetry as mystery and magic, in the earliest fragments and interpolated in the sagas; poetry as instant, crystalline response to the world, in a unique body of nature lyrics; poetry as a useful profession – the repository of historical information and typography and custom; love poems of high dignity and craft; conventional bardic poetry stiff with tradition and craft. Here, in all of this, I recognise simultaneously a great inheritance and loss. ... The greatness of the loss is measured not only by the substance of Irish literature itself, but also by the intensity with which we know it was shared; it has an air of continuity and shared history which is precisely what is missing from Irish literature, in English or Irish [today].<sup>23</sup>

Thus like Hyde, Gregory, and Synge before him, Kinsella has responded to this situation has frequently turned to translation as a means both of resisting and reversing the effects of cultural imperialism. Explaining his decision to translate into English the great Old Irish epic from the Ulster Cycle, *Tain Bo Cuailnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley), Kinsella writes:

It's an act of responsibility. It's ours, Irish, and it deserved new currency; I'm also translating some from the Middle Irish. ... It's a commitment to tradition; and understanding of them, as part of our past, is an understanding of our totality.<sup>24</sup>

For his part, Heaney has similarly been quite interested in the problem of dual linguistic inheritances, bifurcated literary allegiances, and split cultural traditions. Heaney's prose and poetry bear out this point. Exploring the language question in the opening lines of "Traditions," an artesian poem that appeared in 1972, Heaney's speaker depicts the loss of the native Irish linguistic and cultural inheritance in terms of a grand deception:

Our guttural muse  
was bulled long ago  
by the alliterative tradition,  
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten  
like the coccyx  
or a Brigid's Cross  
yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that 'most  
sovereign mistress',  
beds us down into  
the British isles.

("Traditions," *Wintering Out* 31)

Heaney's language warrants closer scrutiny. In addition to casting linguistic imperialism in terms of a kind of dirty ruse, Heaney's choice of the verb "bulled" also suggests a "forced mating," a connotation that likens the marriage of the English and Irish tongues to an act of rape rather than a union based on mutual consent.<sup>25</sup> Thus, by playing off ideas of English as a dominant masculine form, and Irish as a subservient feminine one, the combative voice of this poem reinforces the notion that English colonialism destroyed the Irish language through a systematic program of violence and domination.<sup>26</sup>

For Heaney's critics, the question frequently raised with regard to this and similar poems is whether this conflicted voice reflects Heaney's own attitude.<sup>27</sup> By Heaney's own admission, it would seem that, at least in his youth, Heaney was indeed "bulled" into a kind of binary thinking concerning the language question. Describing his experience as a child growing up in "the split culture of Ulster," Heaney writes in the early essay "Belfast" that he found himself in something of a confusing linguistic and cultural bind:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet, in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and *ban* is the Gaelic word for white. So might the thing not mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster.<sup>28</sup>

Heaney's experience of being pulled toward two distinct linguistic and cultural traditions, traditions that were typically portrayed as antithetical to one another, thus produced in him the kind of cultural and linguistic alienation experienced by many postcolonial subjects. Writing in the introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney notes the considerable pressure he felt as a result of the tension between English and Irish culture: "Sprung from an Irish nationalist background and educated at a Northern Irish Catholic school, I had learned the

Irish language and lived within a cultural and ideological frame that regarded it as the language that I should by rights have been speaking, but I had been robbed of.”<sup>29</sup> In short, like Joyce’s character Stephen Dedalus, a character who refers to English as “acquired speech . . . his before mine . . . so familiar and so foreign,”<sup>30</sup> Heaney was plagued for a long time by a similarly problematic sense of linguistic and cultural ambivalence.

This troubled sense of language loss and cultural dispossession permeates a number of other early prose pieces by Heaney. One such occurrence appears in an early prose discussion of the word *lachtar*, a discussion recounted by Heaney in the introduction to *Beowulf*. Describing the “thrill” he experienced upon discovering that *lachtar*, a dialect word his aunt used with regard to a flock of chicks, was, in fact, derived from the Irish language and, more specifically, from his home county of Derry, Heaney recalls in the introduction to *Beowulf*:

here it [*lachtar*] was, surviving in my aunt’s English speech generations after her forebears and mind had ceased to speak Irish. For a long time, therefore, the little word was—to borrow a simile from Joyce—like a rapier point of consciousness pricking me with an awareness of language-loss and cultural dispossession, and tempting me into binary thinking about language. I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either / or conditions rather than both/ands, and this was an attitude which for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with whole vexed question – the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland.”<sup>31</sup>

For Heaney, a minority Northern Irish Catholic who spoke English as a first language while growing up in the antagonistic political and cultural conditions of Lord Brookeborough’s Northern Ireland, the act of articulating his experience of language loss and cultural bifurcation has been nothing like a kind of “pap for the dispossessed” (as

some critics have suggested). Nor was it the stuff of idle speculation. It was no less than a necessary, if not salutary, response to a very real existential and creative quandary.

If a single word like *lachtar* reveals how Heaney was bullied into a kind of essentialist thinking about language – the type of thinking still espoused by *Sinn Féin* and Ulster separatists in their ongoing debates over the Irish language question -- Heaney's reflections on other words taken from the Hiberno-English lexicon suggest that quite early in his writing career it became imperative for him to seek a way out of the binary bind created by colonial history. As an illustrative point, let's turn briefly to Heaney's commentary on the dialect usage of "tundish" by Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, a commentary which has become something of a *locus classicus* for critics wishing to parse out Heaney's views on the problem of language and tradition.

Discussing Stephen Dedalus's thoughts on the problem of language in his essay "The Interesting Case of John Alphonsus Mulrennan" (1978), Heaney expounds on the troubled relation between language, identity, and tradition. Significantly, Stephen is a young Dublin artist and intellectual keenly aware of the force words and accents, a point emphasized by Heaney. Hypersensitive to the linguistic and cultural divide separating him and the Dean of Studies at University College Dublin, Stephen engages with this Jesuit priest in a conversation which turns on the young artist's use of "tundish." Since he has never heard the word before, the Englishman concludes it must be Irish. As the episode concludes, Stephen casts himself as a kind of homeborn slave (a kind of Irish *verna*) trapped in the master's prison house of language:

- *How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired*

*speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay.  
My soul frets in the shadow of his language.*<sup>32</sup>

Though Heaney does not explicitly make this point, the conversation in the novel clearly centers on the difference between standard and local usages of English, a difference which underscores the sense of alienation, indignation, and defiant pride felt by the subaltern speaker Stephen. It also highlights the false pretensions to cultural unity as well as the monologic tendencies of colonial culture. Even at novel's end, Stephen cannot let go of such emotions, but here he begins to effect his own liberation:

April 13: That tundish has been on my mind for a long time. I looked it up and find it English and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us? Damn him one way or the other.<sup>33</sup>

Providing his own take on this scene, Heaney writes:

...Stephen feels excluded from the English tradition, which he senses as organic and other than his own. His own tradition is linguistically fractured. History, which has woven the fabric of English life and landscape and language into a seamless garment, has rent the fabric of Irish life, has effected a breach between its past and its present, and an alienation between the speaker and his speech. . . . Whether we wish to locate the breaking point of Gaelic civilization at the Battle of Kinsale and the Flight of the Earls in the early seventeenth century or whether we hold out hopefully until the Jacobite dream fades after the flight of the Wild Geese, there is no doubt that the social, cultural and linguistic life of the country is radically altered, and the alteration is felt by the majority of Irish people as a kind of loss, an exile from an original whole and good place or state.<sup>34</sup>

What his critics often fail to mention is Heaney's revealing corollary to these remarks at the end of his essay. There, Heaney concludes his discussion by shifting focus to Joyce's handling of the language question, a shift in focus that illuminates his own treatment of language in his poetry and translations. What is important for Heaney is not so much Stephen's response to the Jesuit's presumptions and prejudices, but rather

Joyce's response to whole vexed issue of tradition and language. In Heaney's estimation, Joyce becomes an exemplary figure for all Irish writers trapped in the web of Ireland's split culture because he manages to become a liberated *verna*, a homeborn slave who frees himself from the prison-house of the master's language through his own resourcefulness, cunning, and liberating creativity. Flying the nets of "language, religion, nation," Joyce does not abandon his Gaelic inheritance or "disdain the Gaelic resources." Rather, as Heaney puts it, Joyce "batten[s] onto them . . . as historical reality." Even more important in Heaney's eyes, however, is Joyce's capacity for artfully celebrating that which is local, dialect, pidgin: "Joyce's great root was in an Irish city with its own demotic English." But this demotic English is enriched by a voice and vision that derives its sustenance from more than just an English or Irish tradition: "His work took hold of the European rather than just the Irish heritage, and in the end it made the English language lie down in the rag-and-bone shop of its origins and influences. . . . His achievement reminds us that English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon."<sup>35</sup> Five years later in yet another discussion of the "tundish" episode, Heaney reinforces his belief that Joyce's great contribution was to show that someone like Stephen could find what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "line of escape" out of English-Irish antithesis created by purists and separatists on both sides of the political and cultural divide.<sup>36</sup> Stephen does this not only by embracing both traditions, but more importantly, as Heaney notes, by embracing local dialect, a vibrant fusion of these languages:

What had seemed disabling and provincial is suddenly found to be corroborating and fundamental and potentially universal. To belong to Ireland, to speak its dialect, is not necessarily to be cut off from the world's banquet because the banquet is eaten at the table of one's own life, savoured

by the tongue one speaks. Stephen now trusts what he calls “our own language.” And in that trust he will go to encounter what he calls the “reality of experience.”<sup>37</sup>

In this instance, Heaney’s remarks are noteworthy because they reflect his own experience as a child of Ulster’s “split culture” and the path he has chosen to overcome the Manichean divide imposed by colonialism. In unraveling the Gordian knot of language and identity, Heaney has followed the kind of flight path to freedom taken by Stephen, a path mapped and traveled, of course, by Joyce in his own life. From the early 1970s onward, Heaney has built a career around a poetic dependent upon dialect as means of egress from the kind of linguistic ambivalence many Northern Irish writers have with regard to the English language. For this reason, I shall argue in the remainder of this chapter for the primacy of the vernacular in Heaney’s translational aesthetic. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate how Heaney’s translations deploy Hiberno-English dialect as means of releasing the English and Irish languages and peoples from what has too often been a history of conquest, antagonism, and resistance. To this end, I detail the story of Heaney’s translations of Dante’s *Cantos*, *Buile Suibhne*, and *Beowulf*. In doing so, I trace in some detail Heaney’s often troubled initial attempts to render these source texts. This serves the purpose not only of showing the relation between the creative process and external violence, but also helps to explain why Heaney eventually settles on the voice and home key of the vernacular in many of his translations. Additionally, I hold up these translations as representative moments of an on-going and increasingly sophisticated attempt on Heaney’s part to leverage translation as a tool of decolonization, an effort to redistribute, so to speak, the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order. In this regard, I detail how Heaney’s translations are integral to a larger

project in which he develops and refines what I shall call, *faux de mieux*, a vernacular-based “representational” poetic.<sup>38</sup> By means of this project, Heaney succeeds in putting a new face (or new voice, if you will) on the contemporary conversation concerning the related questions of language and canonicity.

### **The Trouble with Heaney’s Translations?**

If the majority of Heaney critics have tended to overlook the central role played by translation in his evolving poetic, a few take great pains to dress down Heaney for putting his translations in the service of things other than art. Typically, these critics seize on Heaney’s translations as examples of “the unhealthy intersection” between politics and poetry they perceive in Heaney’s work. At issue for them is Heaney’s affinity for alluding to the recent Northern Irish Troubles through a variety of strategically placed alterations to his source texts. Edna Longley, for example, upbraids Heaney for attempting to vernacularize and politicize early translations such as *Sweeney Astray*, calling such efforts “ahistorical bayonets.” The implication being that in violating the source text Heaney not only fails in his task as a translator but also alters history by transforming documents of culture into something they were not in their original form. Arguing from a slightly different and less polemical angle, Denis Donoghue and Ciaran Carson have also express disapproval over Heaney’s attempt to modernize *Buile Suibhne* by recasting it in his trademark style.<sup>39</sup> At issue here is the effect of Heaney’s willingness to violate the sense and integrity of the original Middle Irish work. Such corruptions, they argue, are evidenced by Heaney’s frequent use of dialect, his

deployment of his own distinctive idiolect, and various formal liberties taken in Heaney's adaptation of the poem.

In these discussions, what emerges is an implied suggestion that Heaney doesn't quite appreciate the leveling and damaging aesthetic effect wrought by his vernacularizing and recontextualizing of the source texts. Donoghue, for example, sees Heaney's love affair with dialect as perhaps stemming from a sort of unwitting indebtedness to "Patrick Kavanagh's protection," a poet who speaks to Heaney from the double vantage of "rural piety and rural cunning."<sup>40</sup> Heaney is much better off, Donoghue suggests, when, for inspiration, he turns to greater masters – among others, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Hardy, Eliot, and Dante. The implication is quite clear: the local, the news from the parish, the language of the folk is simply not the stuff of adequate translation. For Donoghue, Heaney goes astray precisely at those moments when he embraces dialect with all the abandon of a local yokel.

Some of the responses to Heaney's recent translation of *Beowulf* take a similar tack in denigrating Heaney's employment of the vernacular, seeing it as a dumbing down of the Anglo-Saxon tongue and the epic greatness of the poem. In this regard, the greatest and most public "roar" over Heaney's reworking of *Beowulf* has come, not surprisingly perhaps, from Old English scholars. Writing in a *New Republic* essay entitled "Scullionspeak," Nicholas Howe, a specialist in the Germanic roots of Anglo-Saxon mythology, constructs much of his largely unfavorable review of Heaney's *Beowulf* around the observation that Heaney "sets out to make an Irish poem," a move which purportedly results in an unfortunate and unsettling adulteration of the epic. Interestingly, Heaney's greatest transgression as a translator, at least in Howe's view, is

his employment of a demotic English, an idiom that is used “polemically,” a move that recasts the stately language of the poem in a crass “political dialect” that simply does not belong in a poem concerned with “heroic achievement.”<sup>41</sup> In some respects this assessment sounds much like Donoghue’s: dialect is unworthy of such a masterpiece. Howe’s ultimate rebuke and warning to Heaney is that he is better off leaving politics out of poetry.

The thought that Heaney’s stills needs to be cautioned about the pitfalls and pratfalls of bringing politics and translation to the same table is rather amusing. Heaney learned the hard way, and quite early in his career, that responding to the exigencies of the political moment could kill a translation in an instant. Heaney’s first attempt to translate *Buile Suibhne* is, in fact, a prime example of the difficult lessons Heaney first learned as politically and poetically sensitive translator, lessons which were put to good use in his later work. The pressures of the spiraling Northern Irish conflict had, as I have noted in previous chapters, severely tested Heaney’s lyric capacities and caused for him something of a representational crisis. The same troubles infected his translation. Guided by what he has called “a strong sense of bending the text” to his own purposes, he decided to try his hand at this intriguing Middle Irish text for a variety of conflicted reasons. After having moved out of Belfast in 1972 (following, among other things, death threats from Loyalist paramilitaries), Heaney had established his family in a residence on the old Synge Estate at Glanmore in the Wicklow Mountains, Republic of Ireland. Once there, he immediately began foraging the rag and bone shop of native Irish literature for material to translate. In *Buile Suibhne*, the story of the king and poet Suibhne Geilt (Sweeney in Heaney’s version), Heaney discovered a compelling angle of

approach for coming at the issue of colonialism and violence. The source text's impressive range of voice, its prosodic reach, and its overriding obsession with the relation between violence and poetry all seem to have contributed to Heaney's interest in the poem. But he was also keenly aware that the plight of *Buile Suibhne*'s protagonist and the violence that turns the poet-king's world upside down could serve as a reflection of the chaotic and brutalizing world in which Heaney himself was living.

*Buile Suibhne* is presented in the form of a prosimetrum, a narrative poem that alternates between prose and verse segments revolving around the themes of violence, intercultural conflict, and exile. As Heaney notes in the introduction, *Sweeney Astray* is the product of a literary imagination "clearly in the grip of a tension" of tremendous cultural change, a clash "between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older recalcitrant Celtic temperament," and the work is informed at nearly every step by the consequences of war and brutality.<sup>42</sup> Given its extensive narrative treatment of violence and exile, much of which is set in ancient Ulster, *Buile Suibhne* provided Heaney a ready-made emblem of his country's own adversity, much like he was struggling to create in contemporaneous the poems "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" and "Craig's Dragoons" (see Chapter 2). Perhaps even more important, however, was the fact that the story of *Buile Suibhne*, particularly its embattled protagonist, could so readily serve as a kind of emblem of Heaney's own adversity, a metaphor of the very crises of conscience and representation with which Heaney had to grapple in the early seventies.

From the outset of this medieval romance, Sweeney's irascibility becomes immediately clear. Two pages into the story, Sweeney quarrels with both the monastic hierarchy and his fellow bards. In his role as a Celtic pagan king of Dal Araidhe (what is

now Country Antrim in Northern Ireland), he resists the evangelical and imperial intrusions of St. Ronan Finn's Christian expansion into his kingdom. This antagonism boils over when the priest attempts to mark out a church on Suibhne's land. The king flies into a rage and throws Ronan's psalter into a lake. In response, Ronan curses the king for his sins. Later, when one of Ronan's monks blesses Sweeney with holy water at the battle of Magh Rath (an actual battle in 637 AD), Sweeney bursts into another fit of anger and kills him with a spear. Driven mad and outlawed by the community, he thus becomes estranged from his wife, Eorann, who was once his Muse. Exiled, he trusts no one and finds solace only in the works of nature among animals and trees of the forest. Thus, Robert Graves is quite correct when he writes of Suibne's plight in *The White Goddess* that "[t]his must be the most ruthless and bitter description in all European literature of an obsessed poet's predicament."<sup>43</sup>

Heaney's successful translation of *Buile Suibhne*, a translation that was more than ten years in the making from start to finish, is noteworthy in many respects, not the least of which is its ability to capture the emotional force of Sweeney's descent into madness. In both the original and Heaney's version this downward spiral is precipitated by Sweeney's own violence and his exposure to the horror of war. As he stands on the battlefield, the horrors and carnage of war drive the warrior-king insane. Ronan seals his fate by uttering another curse which has the two-fold effect of transforming the king into a neurasthenic bird and prophesying Sweeney's violent death at "spear-point." Heaney's version of the warp-spasm scene at Section 11 -- the pivotal moment in this section where Sweeney descends into madness standing among the carnage of battle -- is rendered in almost comic book fashion, a rendering which brilliantly captures some of the great

comic spirit of the original and demonstrates the level of proficiency and confidence

Heaney achieved as a translator by the time he published *Sweeney Astray*:

There were three great shouts as the herded armies clashed and roared out  
their war cries like stags. When Sweeney heard these howls and echoes  
assumed into the traveling clouds and amplified through the vaults of space,  
he looked up and he was possessed by a dark rending energy.

His brain convulsed,  
his mind split open.  
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings  
and launchings came over him,  
he staggered and flapped desperately,  
he was revolted by the thought of known places  
and dreamed strange migrations.  
His fingers stiffened,  
his feet scuffled and flurried,  
his heart was startled,  
his senses were mesmerized,  
his sight was bent,  
the weapons fell from his hands  
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion  
like a bird of the air.  
And Ronan's curse was fulfilled.

Given the loose parallels between Heaney's experiences in the 1970s and the trajectory of Sweeney's troubles, it should come as no great surprise that Heaney seized upon the tale as translation fodder. From his life in "exile" to his growing sense of displacement and guilt over having "escaped from the massacre" playing out in Northern Ireland, Heaney found a kindred spirit of sorts in Sweeney. As he told Seamus Deane in a 1977 interview entitled "Unhappy and at Home," Heaney saw in the story a way of coming at his own obsessions and divisions:

In this Sweeney story we have a Northern sacral king, Sweeney, who is driven out of Rasharkin in Co. Antrim. There is a sort of schizophrenia in him. On the one hand he is always whining for his days in Rasharkin, but on the other he is celebrating his free creative imagination. Maybe here there was a presence, a fable which could lead to the discovery of feelings in

myself which I could not otherwise find words for, and which would cast a dream or possibility or myth across the swirl of private feelings: an objective correlative.

Eventually Heaney's rendition of the *Suibne* story would become a powerful metonym of his own experience of postcolonial conflict, but Heaney's initial attempts to transform the medieval text into an image of his own suffering and exile were fraught with considerable difficulty and frustration.<sup>44</sup> This had much to do with Heaney's recasting of the Middle Irish text in terms of recent political developments and baldly political idiom. Butchering the original sense of the medieval poem and forcing correspondences between the Ulster of 637 and 1973, Heaney created a fragmented version of the poem that recommends Sweeney as a figure of a brutalized and brutalizing postcolonial subject, but it was a version Heaney described as "too infected by the idiom of the moment," a version he was simply unwilling to publish.<sup>45</sup> This early version more closely resembled a young artist's attempt at unfettered satire than a mature poet's attempt at self-reflection and self-revelation. His attempt to infuse the draft with political slogans and unabashed references to hegemonic violence produced the kind of text that critics like Howe would later charge Heaney with producing in *Sweeney Astray* and *Beowulf*. As a point of comparison, this is a point worth bearing in mind in reading these finished translations.

Wisely, Heaney abandoned *Buile Suibhne* for six years. If Heaney's efforts to translate the medieval text were to succeed, what he desperately needed was a viable linguistic and methodological approach to the task of translation. Heaney discovered such an approach through his experience of reading and translating the work of Dante Alighieri, a poet translator who is notable not for his production of "high art," as

Donoghue suggests, but rather a master lyricist of violence, one who seals his claim to literary fame through the down-to-earth buoyancy of a vernacular-based poetic. In turning to Dante, then, Heaney comes to a poet whose claim to greatness rests not in the use of the rarified idiom of the dominant culture or the blunt political idiom of his day, but instead in the deployment of what Dante calls “vulgar eloquence” or the “illustrious vernacular.”

### Apprenticed to Dante and the “Illustrious Vernacular”

**Vernacular** \ *adj* [L *vernaculus* homeborn, native (fr. *verna* homeborn slave, native)] **1a**: using a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured or foreign language ...

**2**vernacular \ “ \ *n* –s **1**. vernacular language, expression, or mode of expression as **a**: the native language or dialect of a country, region, or person **b**: a language that is spoken or written naturally at a particular period: **LIVING LANGUAGE**.

Of these two kinds of speech [Latin and vernacular] also, the Vulgar Tongue is nobler, as well because it was the first employed by the human race, as because the whole world makes use of it, though it had been divided into different forms and utterance and words. It is also the nobler as being natural to us, whereas the other is rather an artificial kind.

Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*

When Heaney resumed work on *Buile Suibhne* in 1979, the same year in which he published his poem “Ugolino,” he knew by this time what kind of chord he now wanted to strike in his original poetry as well as his translations. What Heaney sought to emulate, he expresses in a 1979 review of his friend Derek Walcott’s *The Star Apple Kingdom*. In this essay entitled “The Language of Exile,” Heaney admires Walcott’s ability to achieve a brilliant fusion of dialect and poetic artifice, a fusion that creates a distinctive living language. Specifically, Heaney devotes considerable attention to an

analysis of Walcott's voice in the collection's opening piece, "The Schooner Flight." Calling this poem "epoch making," Heaney admires it because, in his view, Walcott succeeds in forging "a language woven out of dialect and literature, neither folksy nor condescending, a singular idiom evolved out of one man's inherited divisions and obsessions." Such an idiom, Heaney concludes, "allows an older life to exult in itself and yet at the same time keeps the 'cool' of the new."<sup>46</sup> In short, Heaney locates the power of Walcott's verse in what might be called a "translational" aesthetic and a language drawn from a diverse assortment of local and literary sources. Deeply concerned with the cultural tensions and violence endemic to the postcolonial experience, but also capable of somehow outfacing hatred and antagonism, Walcott's poetic succeeds in constructing a hybrid and liberating vision of what the postcolonial can become.

Seeking to develop a similar register in his own work, Heaney took a crash course in translation and the art of writing dialect. To this end, he apprenticed himself not to Joyce or Walcott, but rather to Dante, a figure who had helped guide both Joyce and Walcott through and beyond the debilitating nets of language, religion, and nationality. Heaney and Dante were in many ways a perfect match, for here was a besieged medieval poet whose work revels in the vernacular even as it develops a translational aesthetic, one that instances a medieval poetic of violence. Coming to Dante in 1978 after finding himself stuck in what Darcy O'Brien describes as a "funk," Heaney began translating this medieval poet in hopes of breaking out of the formal and emotional doldrums brought on by the controversy over *North* and distress over the deteriorating Northern Irish situation. What began, however, as an exercise in lengthening his lines, experimenting more with rhyme, and loosening his syntax, soon proved to be the start of an engagement with

serious translation that significantly bolstered Heaney's ability to deal artfully with the problem of violence in verse. Indeed, the experience of reading and translating Dante resulted not only in a significant expansion of Heaney's formal repertoire; it also helped the struggling poet arrive at a deeper understanding and appreciation of the power of translation.

Dante's story and poetic provided Heaney with an inspiration and example of how to perform the Yeatsian trick of reinventing himself, both as a poet and translator. In desperate need of such a change, the thirty-seven-year-old Heaney was more homesick than ever and in need of a new voice and frame of reference for filtering his response to the conflict. Discussing this phase of his career in an interview, Heaney notes that his work with Dante:

... coincided with a desire to come to the whole subject of Northern Ireland by some other route. The "Northern" emphasis of the imagery and mythology in *North* was all very well – but it only represented one part of me [...] The "Catholic" part of me, the person who lived in a folk church, as it were, and grew up with a double sense of myself as a member of the Northern Irish minority and of the great radiant mythology of the holy Roman and Apostolic Church – that part of me was seeking some way into print. And the Dante readings came into my writing at that point.<sup>47</sup>

Equally important, however, is the specific example provided by Dante's innovative handling of violence in verse, a poetic that develops as a kind of natural and necessary response to the devastating internecine struggle between Guelf and Ghebelline factions in fourteenth-century Florence. Despite the scourge and pressures of living first with a brutal civil war and later with the pain of exile, Dante achieves a larger vision of reality, one that transcends quotidian violence and therefore somehow succeeds in outfacing violence. Moreover, in the sovereign space of vernacular-based aesthetic, Dante endows

his verse with a sort of representational power, a power at once supremely artful as well as political.<sup>48</sup> But perhaps what Heaney, the post-imperial poet, came to appreciate most in Dante is what Maria Fumagallia calls a “naturalness of tone.” This a point born out by Heaney in an essay specifically devoted to the art of translation entitled “Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet,” in which Heaney disparages what he calls T.S. Eliot’s “misreading” of the Italian poet in the essay “Dante”:

To listen to Eliot, one would almost be led to forget that Dante’s great literary contribution was to write in the vernacular and thereby to give the usual language its head ... Eliot underplays the swarming, mobbish element in the Italian ... What I first loved in the *Commedia* was the local intensity, the vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades, the way personalities and values were emotionally soldered together. ... The way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and transcendent, this too encouraged my attempt at a sequence of poems which would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country.<sup>49</sup>

What Heaney finds in Dante, then, is not only the inspiration he needed for extending the complexity and reach of his poetic of violence, but also a model for successfully negotiating the vexed issues of nationality, history, and language in a vernacular-based poetic.

The first fruit of Heaney’s apprenticeship was his translation entitled “Ugolino,” a poem based on Cantos XXXII (lines 124-39) and XXXIII (lines 1-90) of the *Inferno*. In these cantos, Dante recounts the tale of Count Ugolino, the head of one Guelf cadre. Ugolino seeks to unseat his grandson Nino, who heads a rival group of Guelfs, and the count does this by entering into an alliance with Archbishop Ruggieri (Roger). Once Nino is deposed, however, the archbishop turns on Ugolino and imprisons him, two of his sons, and two grandsons in what later comes to be known as the “the Tower of Famine,”

where they slowly die of starvation. For their treachery, Ugolino and Ruggieri are condemned to the deepest recesses of hell. Their punishment: Ugolino spends his eternity gnawing on the brain meat of Archbishop Ruggieri's skull.<sup>50</sup> The point in Dante's text at which Heaney picks up the story reads:

Noi eravam partiti gia da ello,  
Ch'io vidid due ghiacciati in un buca,  
Si che l'un cap a l'stro era cappello;  
E come 'l pan per fame si manduca,  
Cosi 'l Sovran li denti a l'altro pose  
La 've 'cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca:  
Non altrimenti Tideo si rose  
Le tempie a Menalippo per disdegno,  
Che quei faceva il teschio e l'altre cose.\*

(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 124 – 129)

Here Heaney effects multiple changes, many of which serve to bring this ancient story of internecine brutality and cannibalism into a more meaningful relationship with Ireland's brutal past and present. A comparison with the original demonstrates how Heaney subtly, yet significantly alters Dante's lines (see footnote below):

We had already left him. I walked the ice  
And saw two soldered in a frozen hole  
On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,  
Gnawing at him where the neck and head  
Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain  
Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread.  
So the berserk Tydeus gnashed and fed  
Upon the severed head of Menalippus  
As if it were some spattered carnal melon.

("Ugolino," *Field Work* 61, lines 1-9)

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\*For the purpose of comparing Heaney's adaptation to a more closely literal translation, I include Allan Mandelbaum's rendering of these lines in his prose translation of the *Inferno* (Berkeley CA: Barry Moser, 1983): "We had already taken leave of him, / when I saw two shades frozen in one hole, / so that one's head served as the other's cap; / and just as he who's hungry chews his bread, / one sinner dug his teeth into the other / right at the place where brain is joined to nape: / no differently had Tydeus gnawed the temples / of Menalippus, out of indignation, / than this one chewed the skull and other parts."

Here Heaney hibernicizes the text in several provocative ways. But the most telling change comes when he transforms Dante's line "*e come 'l pan per fame si manduca*" (a line containing no reference to "famine" and usually translated with something like "and as starved men tear bread, they tore the poll"). In this, Heaney subtly, yet unmistakably alludes to tragic events in Ireland's past. Coming from the hand of an Irish poet, the phrase "famine victim" spiders across a palimpsest of Irish and Italian history and draws an unmistakable parallel between Ugolino and his sons' death by starvation and the periodic Irish famines, some of which resulted from England's colonial policies and indifference and led to the deaths of millions of Irish in the 1840s.<sup>51</sup> Heaney further reinforces the Irish connection at several junctures in the poem. But he often directs his ire at the violence of the Irish themselves. In the final stanza, for instance, he transforms the Italian "Ugguiccone" into the proper name "Hugh," a common enough name in Northern Ireland, suggesting that the murdered children in the poem might be seen as medieval analogs to Ireland's sons and daughters. In short, they are equally victims of a local community that, like Joyce's proverbial Irish sow, savagely eats her farrow.

Altering the source text in this manner, Heaney transforms Dante's vision of cannibalistic violence into an image of his own making and imaginative needs. As such, Heaney's performance amounts to nothing less than a form of cannibalistic translation, or what Haroldo de Campos calls anthropophagic or "transcreative" translation.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Heaney voraciously feeds off and is nourished by Dante's image of the man-eating Ugolino, but he transforms the original into an emblem of his own and his people's adversity. In this way, the translation not only reflects but also realizes Heaney's imaginative need to find a new way of coming at the Ulster conflict. He accomplishes

this throughout his translation of Cantos XXXII and XXXIII by masterfully accommodating both the political and poetic, by pulling Dante's material into the orbit of local cultural forms, contemporary events, and history without sacrificing the sovereignty of the poetic space.

At several points, Heaney's cannibalization of Cantos XXXII and XXXIII reveals a growing willingness on the Irish poet's part to weave various, and indeed often discordant, strains of voice and cultural inheritances into the fabric of his own verse. In "Ugolino," such amalgamation occurs on multiple levels, to include tone, prosody, and language. In terms of voicing, "Ugolino" bears the clear impress of Dante's voice in the *Inferno*, a distinct register whose home key might best be described as "*selvaggia e aspera e forte*" ("wild and harsh and strong"). As I have already noted, the voice of the vernacular is the driving force behind the *Commedia* because it not only enables Dante to handle the subject of violence in an entirely new and convincing way; it allows for a demonstration of Dante's conviction that "of the two kinds of speech [Latin and the vernacular] . . . the Vulgar Tongue is nobler . . . [it is] the nobler as being natural to us, whereas the other is rather an artificial kind."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, in the *Convivio*, Dante parlays this belief in the nobility of artfully presented local dialect into the notion of the "illustrious vernacular." Employing this kind of voicing and poetic diction, Dante produces numerous memorable riffs on a variety of Italian dialects and poetic styles.<sup>54</sup> Take for example the lines at the close of Canto XXXIII where he demonstrates the poetic and political possibilities offered by the deployment of his "vulgar eloquence." The Italian of these lines brilliantly mocks the speech of the treacherous Pisans:

Ahi, Pisa, vituperio de le genti  
Del bel paese la dove 'l si suona,

Poi che I vincini a te punir son lenti,  
Muovasi la Capraia e la Gorgona,  
E faccian siepe ad Arno in su la foce,  
Si che'elli annieghi in te ogne persona!  
Che se 'l conte Ugolino aveva voce  
D'aver tradita te de le castella,  
Non devei tu I figliuoi porre a tal croce.

*(Inferno, lines 79-87)*

Commenting on the vernacular potency of lines such as this in his essay "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet," Heaney marvels at Dante's ability to construct an exquisitely wrought, yet politically-engaged sound system, one rooted in the cadences, accents, and implied power relations inherent in local speech. As Heaney notes, this is perhaps what he most appreciates in Dante, a perfectly tuned ear and an immense capacity for reproducing what Wordsworth would later call the sound of a "man talking to men":

It seems to me that Dante made careful study of all speech defects, listening closely to stutterers and lispers, to nasal twangs and inarticulate pronunciations, and that he learned much from them.<sup>55</sup>

For Heaney, a poet deeply interested in local speech and accents, Dante's great appeal ultimately seems to rest in his ability to do Tuscany's troubles in different voices. At this stage of his career, it is precisely this kind of voicing to which Heaney aspires in his own poetry and translations, a representational poetic in which the qualities of spoken language (especially local dialect) are transformed into an aesthetically pleasing and socio-politically significant event through their formal embodiment in verse.<sup>56</sup>

In his translation of Dante's diatribe against the Pisans, Heaney clearly employs what amounts to a cannibalistic method of translation, the method he will deploy in nearly all of his future translations. Wisely refraining from any temptation to mimic the

prosodic complexity of the original, Heaney's rendition of lines 79-87 does not try to reproduce the daunting formal and aural density of Dante's lines. Instead he approximates the sense and sound of the source text by reincarnating the original in the most appropriate formal, conceptual, and sonic frameworks provided by local tradition.<sup>57</sup>

Pisa! Pisa, your sounds are like a hiss  
Sizzling in our country's grassy language.  
And since the neighbour states have been remiss  
In your extermination, let a huge  
Dyke of islands bar the Arno . . .

For the sins

Of Ugolino, who betrayed your forts,  
Should never have been visited on his sons  
Your atrocity was Theban. They were young  
And innocent: Hugh and Brigata  
And the other two whose names are in my song.

("Ugolino," *Field Work* 63-64, lines 95-116)

Here Heaney avoids the temptation to reconstruct the inimitable complexity of Dante's style, a style built on a revolutionary willingness to mix a rough and tumble Tuscan vernacular with the exacting formalism of *terza rima*. While he may not scale the full range of Dante's dazzling prosodic and verbal universe, Heaney's version is successful in its own right because it manages somehow to reproduce the vehemence of Dante's voice while at the same time making it new.

Heaney achieves this end by translating the emotional import of the source passage into a contemporary idiom and form, a translation move which succeeds in bringing the contemporary Irish situation to bear on Dante's song of unspeakable violence. In his attempt to recreate the emotional force of what Dante early in Canto XXXII describes as "rough grating verses," Heaney renders these lines in the intentionally "roughened" meter and vocabulary characteristic of many of his early lyrics of violence. Here and elsewhere

in “Ugolino,” Heaney specifically recasts the original terza rima in iambic pentameter, a meter frequently embraced by the poet after he abandoned the narrow, irregular and unrhymed artesian line and stanza following the publication of *North*. In this case, however, Heaney’s is an anomalous iambic pentameter, “roughened” through a variety of technical variations that bring Irish poetics into conflict with this quintessentially English meter. Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that most of the lines of Heaney’s version are linked by assonance (a key feature of Gaelic poetics). Furthermore, when his verses do rhyme, the rhyme scheme often functions according to the Gaelic *deibidhe* pattern (“hiss/remiss,” “huge/ deluge”), a device that serves to subvert the smooth, well-measured cadence of conventional iambic English verse.

If Irish prosodic effects can be said to be “invading” the traditional English iambic pentameter, Heaney infuses the iamb with a taste of the local tongue. This occurs primarily in the strong alliterative quality of these and other lines. Heaney has variously described the heavily consonantal Ulster dialect as “energetic,” “staccato,” “angular.” Indeed, these lines seem to mimic this quality. Note, for example, the, ubiquitous “ts” and “s” in the lines cited above, where Heaney invests them with the hiss and sizzle of an overwhelming dose of sibilance and plosives (“hiss,” “grassy,” “sizzling,” “states,” “atrocious”), they begin to sound like the hard-edged, consonantal speech spoken by the people of Ulster.<sup>58</sup> Through strategically deployed dialect words, local speech patterns, and historical references, Heaney thus provides an artful and updated reproduction of Dante’s rebuke to treacherous Pisans. Moreover, he brings Dante’s poem further into the orbit of the Ulster Troubles and thereby casts a rather critical commentary on present-day brutality through his *re-presentation* of past atrocities.

When Heaney resumed work on his translation of *Buile Suibhne* in 1979, he was well served by the lessons gleaned from his reading and translation of Dante's treatment of the vernacular. Heaney's encounter with the *Commedia* and the lessons he learned concerning the translator's task would pay tremendous dividends in the future. In his adaptations of *Buile Suibhne* and *Beowulf*, Heaney goes on, as we shall see, to produce even more nuanced and "transcreative" translations. His cannibalizations of the cantos not only seem to have taught Heaney how to be a more effective amalgamator of discordant cultures and languages, but also that politics and the sovereignty of the poetic space were not necessarily antithetical; he also began to see how translation could be used to bring tradition and history into a significant relation with the present. But most importantly, for our purposes here, Heaney discovered the poetic and political potential offered by the use of the "illustrious vernacular" or "vulgar eloquence". In discovering the "illustrious vernacular," Heaney discovers a living idiom, which will serve as a point of entry into the ancient voice and vision of *Buile Suibhne* and *Beowulf*.

### Making *Buile Suibhne* Strange

Attempting to define what they correctly see as the emergence of a new register in Heaney's poetry during the late 1970s, some critics have described this nascent voice as a kind of "middle voice." In an excellent discussion of Heaney's lyric poetry entitled "Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry," Bernard O'Donoghue generally describes the "middle voice" as a kind of linguistic, formal, and tonal *via media*, a poetic middle ground where Heaney increasingly seeks to assimilate a broader range of linguistic and prosodic influences and inheritances. In a more specific sense of the term, O'Donoghue

and others such as Neil Corcoran see the “middle voice” as a means of mediating “between standard and local usage.” Taken in this sense, the “middle voice” might be said to be already at work in dialect poems such as “Fodder,” “Anahorish,” “Toome,” and “Broagh,” all of which appeared in *Wintering Out* (1972). But if the “middle voice” involves a kind of “mixed diction” meant to mediate between standard English and the vernacular, it also entails something far greater than this in these artesian poems as well as later pieces like “Ugolino.” The “middle voice” might just as easily be used to signify Heaney’s innovative exploration of various linguistic and socio-political tensions, tensions between English and Irish poetics, between standard and local usage, between loyalty to the local and the broad mainstream of literature, between the “purely” political and the “purely” poetic. It is through the middle voice, then, that Heaney yokes (sometimes quite violently) discordant strains of quite diverse linguistic, formal, and cultural inheritances. All of this recalls Dante’s cunning embrace of the so-called “illustrious vernacular,” for what seems to emerge in Heaney during the late seventies is a more confident lyric voice and vision, one distinguished by its willingness to embrace the living language of local dialect, but also more willing than ever to go beyond the local so as to embrace a syncretic mix of linguistic and poetic traditions.

There is yet another way we might understand what it means for Heaney to deploy a “middle voice.” This final sense of the phrase emerges in the much-quoted poem “Making Strange,” the poem in which Heaney actually adopts the phrase “middle voice” himself as a kind of touchstone for his emerging poetic and translational method. In “Making Strange,” a poem that invokes the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranie* and lays out the *ars poetica* for the middle phase of Heaney’s career, the

poem's expatriated speaker gives an account of an experience he has upon returning home from abroad. Having arrived in what is presumably rural Northern Ireland, the speaker finds himself acting as an interpreter, a go-between for an outsider and a local:

I stood between them  
the one with his traveled intelligence  
and tawny containment,  
his speech like the twang of a bowstring

and another, unshorn and bewildered  
in the tubs of his Wellingtons,  
smiling at me for help,  
faced with the stranger I'd brought him.

Then a cunning middle voice  
came out of the field across the road  
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect' . . .

(“Making Strange,” *Station Island*, 32)

In this poem, the exhortation of the “middle voice” clearly entails more than just a call to linguistic and formal cross-fertilization. Here the quandary faced by all parties involved is essentially a problem of translation. Although each speaks the same language, they cannot fully understand one another. Differentiated linguistic, cultural, and personal dispositions separate the “unshorn and bewildered” native farmer wearing his Wellingtons, the outsider with his “travelled intelligence,” and the one-time farm boy turned cosmopolitan-poet.

To bridge the cultural and communicative gap requires no less than a renegotiation and remaking of identity (both collective and personal) through the mediating act of *reinterpretation* and *translation*. On all sides, such translation requires cunning, resourcefulness, and re-learning, as well as a willing change of perspective, taking the risk to “go beyond what’s reliable.” It requires a “making strange” of one’s self and the

“other” through the act of transcreative interpretation and the adoption of a certain “middle voice” so as to further the attempt at understanding. By poem’s end, the poet-speaker appears to take this step. Heeding the advice of the interlocutive “cunning middle voice,” the poet speaker adopts his own “cunning middle voice” as he finds himself “driving the stranger / through my own country, adept / at dialect, / reciting my pride / in all that I knew, that began to make strange / at the same recitation.”<sup>59</sup> This suggests that the successful interpreter/translator is one capable of rendering the dialect like an adept or *adeptus*, the Latin word used to signify the alchemist capable of turning base metals into gold. Trafficking in the give and take of transcreative translation, a process entailing various moments of familiarization and defamiliarization, the *adeptus* thus changes not only the dialect but also the normative language. The ultimate hope is that such transcreative translations might even give way to the creation of what Salman Rushdie calls the making of “radically new types of human being,” in the context of his own need to constantly reinvent himself through the act of translation.<sup>60</sup>

When Heaney resumed work on *Buile Suibhne* in 1979, the same year in which he published “Ugolino” and his essay on Walcott’s *Star Apple Kingdom*, he began producing a version that differed radically from the tirade his first draft had become. This was made possible because the translation he produced, *Sweeney Astray*, largely follows the logic of the *ars poetica* contained in “Making Strange,” an aesthetic and political logic no longer directed toward resistance and division but rather a logic placed in the service of understanding and integration. Heaney’s impulse led to a surprisingly favorable critical reception, for the translation was widely praised by a diverse range of critics from all parts of the ideological spectrum. What sets Heaney’s translation apart

from previous renderings – such as J.G. O’Keefe’s bi-lingual, parallel- text edition of *Buile Suibhne* (published by the Irish Texts Society in 1913) and Flann O’Brien’s adaptation of fragments from the Middle Irish text which appear in *At Swim Two Birds* (1939) – is the majestic tonal balance and sheer force of the language that Heaney achieves. Noting this aspect of *Sweeney Astray*, Mary Kinzie writes, “Above all, Heaney restores to the lines before us what anyone reading the O’Keefe version realizes is a promise of electrifying keenness . . . Heaney elevates the poem from archeological curiosity into a text with enormous urgency.”<sup>61</sup>

But not all critics have greeted the translation with unqualified enthusiasm. As I noted earlier, Denis Donoghue and Ciaran Carson mildly rebuked Heaney for violating the sense of the “original” and failing to reproduce the lexical and formal richness of the Middle Irish verse. For these detractors, Heaney goes too far in making *Buile Suibhne* strange through his attempts to recast the poem in a contemporary English idiom and form.<sup>62</sup> The upshot of such criticism is that Heaney “corrupts” the “original” *Buile Suibhne* by, in Henry Hart’s elegant phrase, “recasting the complex patterns of meter, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration of the Gaelic original into a simulacrum of his trademark style.”<sup>63</sup> To some extent, this seems to be an accurate characterization of Heaney’s adaptation, and it is perhaps a valid criticism if one subscribes to the notion of translation as mimetic reproduction. But Heaney is not about literal translation at this point in his career. For him, translation is as much about remaking a viable and tolerant tradition as it is about turning a source text into a reflection of his own “imaginative needs,” his own “artistic inclinations and procedures.”<sup>64</sup>

By virtue of its syntactical sophistication, rich formal density, and sometimes perplexing narrative idiosyncrasies, *Buile Suibhne* not only establishes itself as a major medieval work of literature; it also greatly complicates the translator's task. If an unmediated rendering of the text's medieval Irish language and verse forms is what some of Heaney's critics seem to demand, such an English-language translation would have to be accompanied by an explanatory apparatus three times as thick as the text itself. Like many medieval Irish compositions, the incredibly rich narrative of *Buile Suibhne* is presented in a prosimetrum (i.e., alternating sections of prose and verse). As such, the text blends an off-kilter presentation of otherworldly realities into a mix of sublime lyricism and breath-taking, pared-down naturalistic detail, a mix that creates a strange sense of reading a minimalist and then baroque work. In its dazzling prosodic complexity, the original poem contravenes the notion that pre-contact Irish bardic or monastic verse is somehow inferior to English poetry, as Edmund Spenser and other colonial writers were wont to suggest.<sup>65</sup> Remarkably, the poem contains eleven different types of quatrains (each carrying unique cultural codings that are achieved through a complex set of metrical, assonantal, and alliterative rules).<sup>66</sup>

Faced with the rather imposing challenge of rendering *Buile Suibhne* in readable Modern English, Heaney adopted, as he had with "Ugolino," the cannibalistic method of translation. We have already seen how, from his earliest attempts to transform this text, Heaney proceeded with "a strong sense of bending" it to his own purposes. Judging from the finished product and introductory commentary, Heaney's objective was never to produce a word-for-word translation. What quickly becomes clear from a formal and

narrative standpoint is that *Sweeney Astray* is a rewriting and retelling of a set story or, as his subtitle states, "A Version of the Irish."

In constructing this version, Heaney notes that O'Keefe served as his "guide to the interpretation of the line-by-line meaning," but he diverges from the more literal impulse of O'Keefe's translation by "invest[ing] the poems with a more subjective tone than they possess in Irish."<sup>67</sup> In this way, Heaney produces a translation that brings the Middle Irish into a significant relationship with his own poetic voice and vision. But Heaney's more subjective tone is not the only means by which he violates the "purity" of the source text. In his introductory comments, Heaney tells us he alters a number of prose passages and omits some "original stanzas."<sup>68</sup> Additionally, he deletes four key stanzas (without acknowledgement) from section 45, apparently in order to reconcile narrative inconsistencies. All of which suggests that Heaney is not terribly concerned, as certain purists might be, with safeguarding a "tradition" deemed sacred, static and inviolable.

It is interesting to note, however, that there is something rather "traditional" (in the sense of "carrying over" a cultural practice) in Heaney's various efforts to update and reinvigorate the text. Like the Irish *fili* in Gaelic oral culture, Heaney adopts an improvisational approach to a basic narrative outline and a series of set poems. By drawing upon the memory bank of ancient Celtic culture that is *Buile Suibhne*, he recreates all of this material through a dazzling riff on the set pieces. In this there is indeed something of the impulse of oral tradition, for such improvisations and retellings are part and parcel of oral literatures, according to scholars such as Albert Lord, the framer of the theory of oral composition of epics such as the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and *La Chanson de Roland*.<sup>69</sup> But even if Heaney's attempt to imbue the text with a certain

improvisational flavor are generally successful, Heaney himself acknowledges that key aspects of tradition go missing in his transcreative translation, namely the tremendous suggestiveness and reach of classical Irish poetics. As Heaney notes, “The stanza forms employed [in *Sweeney Astray*] do not reflect the syllabic and assonantal disciplines of the original metres.”<sup>70</sup> Insofar as the work represents a kind of primer of lyric genres – laments, dialogues, litanies, rhapsodies, curses – Heaney’s hope is “that the variety of dramatic pitch in the English will compensate to some extent for the loss of metrical satisfactions in the Irish.”<sup>71</sup>

Whatever the merits of a more loyal translation may have been, it is perhaps far more interesting to consider what is gained rather than lost as a result of Heaney’s transcreative method. A discernable advantage to his method is that it enables a far more productive and confident way of looking at the whole vexed issue of language, identity, and nationalism. Ultimately, what makes this alternative perspective possible is Heaney’s increasingly cunning, resourceful, and dialogical handling of the “middle voice.” As Heaney notes in the interview “Unhappy and At Home” (1978), his early experiments in the *dinnseanchas* genre (“Anahorish,” “Broagh,” and “Toome”) had already demonstrated the immensely suggestive and integrative potential offered by a vernacular-based approach to writing poetry. These poems, Heaney tells Seamus Deane, were a kind of “erotic mouth music by and out of the anglo-saxon [sic] tongue,” but they were also proud statements of his own familiar local language and voice, poems in which he “could be faithful” both to his “non-English origin” as well as to “the nature of the English language.” “It was the quest for such a repetition,” Heaney tells Seamus Deane, “that led me to translate *Buile Suibhne*.”<sup>72</sup> By recasting much of the Middle Irish in his

own local dialect and idiolect, Heaney cultivates the middle ground, a liminal space that falls somewhere in-between his dual linguistic and cultural inheritances. In this way, *Sweeney Astray* is more “contact zone” than “combat zone.” It strives for a sort of transcendence linguistically and formally, and ultimately a transcendence of consciousness beyond the obsessions and divisions of strict identity and language politics which dragged down his initial draft of the translation. In other words, *Sweeney Astray* becomes a means of moving beyond what John Montague has called the Northern Irish “partitioned intellect” and into what Heaney calls “an effort at two-mindedness.”<sup>73</sup>

The integrative qualities of Heaney’s transcreative translation become particularly apparent when read alongside two of the major English-language adaptations of the *Buile Suibhne*: J.G. O’Keefe’s parallel text edition of the poem (1913) and the fragments of the poem Flann O’Brien translated and incorporated in his prototypical postmodern novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). One could choose any number of passages to illustrate the comparative effect of Heaney’s method of hybridization, but the celebrated Tree Catalogue scene (Section 40) perhaps best demonstrates how Heaney’s version of *Buile Suibhne* moves toward what might be called a more amicable fusion of English and Irish influences. In this scene, Sweeney responds to the bellowing of a stag by launching into a song of praise for the stark beauty of the natural world, something he does quite often to assuage his suffering and homesickness. O’Keefe and O’Brien’s respective renderings of the opening stanzas from this section stand at opposite poles of the English/Irish divide. O’Keefe’s (cited below on the left) is largely informed by received English forms and language, while O’Brien’s (on the right) resists the influence of English by reproducing

the metrical and syntactical strangeness of the original Middle Irish verses from Section 40:

O little stag, thou little bleating one,  
O melodious little clamourer,  
sweet to us is the music  
thou makest in the glen.

Bleating one, little antlers,  
O lamenter we like  
delightful the clamouring  
from your glen you make.

Longing for my little home  
has come on my senses—  
the flocks on the plain,  
the deer on the mountain.

(O'Keefe, 63-5)

[stanza omitted by O'Brien]

(O'Brien, 99)

In contrast to these earlier renderings, Heaney travels a *via media* in his translation, cutting a path right through the middle of the English and Irish poetic and linguistic traditions:

Suddenly this bleating  
and belling in the glen!  
The little timorous stag  
like a scared musician

startles my heartstrings  
with high homesick refrains—  
deer on my lost mountains,  
flocks out on the plain.

(*Sweeney Astray*, 36)

Here a number of prosodic and linguistic effects produce a far more hybrid version than the earlier translations. Whereas O'Keefe's adaptation represents a rather domesticated version of the Middle Irish (driven as it is by a highly regular iambic pentameter and lyricism reminiscent of something like Blake's "Songs of Innocence"), and whereas O'Brien's reproduces some of the syntactical and prosodic foreignness of the original Middle Irish *deibidhe* line (a strict heptasyllabic line), Heaney's lines

represent a fusion of his dual inheritance. Here Heaney abandons the syllabic-based metrics of classical Irish poetry in favor of an irregular meter which he “roughens” with effects drawn from the storehouses of English and Gaelic prosody. As a means of linking his lines, Heaney sometimes opts for the Anglo-Saxon prejudice in favor of heavy consonance (note the multiplicity of “ts” and “hs” as well as the alliteration in the onomatopoeia of the stag’s “bleating” and “belling”). But Heaney also draws upon his Irish poetic inheritance by “roughening” these lines with now-familiar Irish *deibidhe* rhyme (“glen/musician,” “mountains/ plains”), the very un-English technique of rhyming a monosyllable with a disyllable or trisyllable stressed on a syllable other than the rhyming one.<sup>74</sup> This rough-hewn effect tends to make these lines sound as if an inexperienced and “scared musician” was producing them. But Heaney knows exactly what he is up to here. By deploying the *deibidhe* pattern as a roughening device, these “rough-grating” verses serve to complement alliteration of the stag’s “bleating and belling,” thus reinforcing the sense that one is indeed listening to the sound of a lost and distraught stag. In this way, Heaney creates a kind of mouth music that brilliantly reproduces the oral/aural richness of the original, music at once familiar and unfamiliar, which strikes a balance between his dual poetic inheritance.

Whereas Heaney’s prosody signals a movement away from certain debilitating notions of cultural purity into a more integrated poetic space, his deployment of poetic diction is perhaps an even stronger indication of such a move. In this regard, the impulses toward amalgamation and productive hybridity become particularly evident where the translation is steeped in the vernacular and Heaney’s distinctive idiolect. A telling example of dialect and idiolect occurs in Section 61, one of many occasions when

Sweeny buckles under the pain and deprivations of existence in exile. Whereas O’Keefe’s rather straightforward translation is firmly rooted in Standard English, Heaney recasts this section in language derived from his personal experience as child of Ulster’s “split culture.” Heaney’s adaptation appears on the right and O’Keefe’s on the left:

Wretched is the life of one homeless,  
 Sad is the life, O fair Christ!  
 A meal of fresh, green-tufted watercress  
 A drink of cold water from a clear stream.

Stumbling from withered tree-tops  
 Faring through furze-deep without falsehood-  
 Running wild among wolf-packs,  
 Racing with the red stag over the field.

(O’Keefe, 121)

All this is hard to thole, Lord  
 Still without bed or board,  
 Crouching to graze on cress,  
 Drinking cold water from rivers.

Alarmed out of the autumn wood,  
 whipped by whinns, flecked with blood,  
 a meal of fresh, green-tufted watercress,  
 Shying away with the red stag.

(Heaney, 68)

In a rejection of the field of Standard English, the normative language and register of Suibne’s speech in O’Keefe’s version, Heaney transforms the character’s speech into a vernacular field of force. In contrast to the “Wretched” used by O’Keefe to open the exiled poet-king’s lament, Heaney employs the highly idiomatic phrase, “All this is hard to thole,” a rendering which, in Denis Donoghue’s view, “lacks the force of the Irish.” This may be true if the phrase is taken out of context, but in this specific scene, it seems to me that the slightly defamiliarizing “thole” is a particularly apt choice. True, the Ulsterism “thole” may appear, as Donoghue protests, contrived and inaccessible to readers “outside Ireland”<sup>75</sup> Why inaccessible? “Thole” is a word derived from a language at once literary and archaic (John Crowe Ransom is fond of using it: “Sweet ladies long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole.”), but it’s also drawn from the lowly Hiberno-English dialect that Heaney heard growing up, a dialect and word still in use in parts of Northern Ireland. “Too pedestrian,” “too foreign,” “too literary for an

English-language” translation, this is the contradictory upshot of Donoghue’s criticism. Donoghue has trouble with other dialect and Irish words used by Heaney, including “scuts” (Hiberno-Irish, meaning “jerk”), “cantreds” (dialect for “one hundred townships”), “rath” (Ir. “fort”). But isn’t an element of defamiliarization and a “going beyond what’s known” precisely the sign and attraction of transcreative translation? I would argue this is precisely what speaking and writing in the “middle voice” is designed to do; it traffics adeptly in the dialect, thereby reinvigorating the language of the source text culture as well as the language of the receptor culture(s). The “cunning middle voice” undermines the tendency toward homogeneity and normativity because it is open to multiple influences. In short, the “middle voice” of Heaney’s translation resists the domesticating and leveling effect that a straight Standard English version would produce.

Heaney’s use of Hiberno-English also has much to do with his effort to give the medieval poem, Heaney says, a more “subjective tone,” thereby turning Sweeney into a kind of foil for himself. In other words, Heaney’s select use of words drawn from his local lexicon helps turn the poem into a chord of his own voice. In this regard, “thole” nicely exemplifies the good uses to which Heaney puts the dialect. Holding a prominent position in his distinctive idiolect from the late seventies onward, “thole” appears in a number of important works, including Heaney’s elegy for Richard Ellmann, “The Sounds of Rain,” as well as “Midnight Verdict” and, significantly for our purposes, his translation of *Beowulf*. In Heaney’s poetic universe, “thole” functions in the same manner as the local place-names found in *dinnseanchas* such as “Anahorish,” the dialect poem in which Heaney recalls a place from his boyhood (see chapter two). For Heaney, then, “thole” serves as an “etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history,

memory and attachments.”<sup>76</sup> Emphasizing this point in his introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney explains that “thole” (from the Old English *þolian* meaning “to suffer”) was the word “older less educated people would have used in the country [rural County Derry]. ‘They’ll just have to learn to ‘thole,’ my aunt would say about some family who had suffered an unforeseen bereavement.”<sup>77</sup>

Despite its apparent strangeness and literary air, then, Heaney’s “thole” actually emerges from the poet’s own idiolect, an idiom that is literate and dialect. Falling somewhere in-between, “thole” (and other Hiberno-English words like it) brings the language of the “unshorn and bewildered” native, the language of the outsider with his “travelled intelligence,” and the language of cunning go-between together in a salutary marriage of further language. While O’Keefe’s “Wretched” may do some of the same work as Heaney’s choice, it doesn’t pack the force of “thole,” spidering out as it does across a palimpsest of personal, local, and, yes, even transnational and transtemporal language. In this regard, Heaney notes, “thole” is not just:

a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage, one that involved the journey *þolian* had made north into Scotland and then across Ulster with the planters and then across from the planters to the locals who had originally spoken Irish and then farther across again when the Scots Irish emigrated to the American South in the eighteenth century. When I read John Crowe Ransom in the line “Sweet young ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole,” my heart lifted again, the world widened, something was furthered.<sup>78</sup>

In light of these associations, “thole” is perhaps the *mot juste* for approximating the sense of Suibhne’s suffering and pain. The perfect word not so much because it nicely approximates the sentiments expressed by Sweeny in his bitter complaint, *Duairc an bhetha bheith gan teach* (literally, “stern is the life of one cast out from home”), but

perfect because it reflects Heaney's own sense of exile and longing for the familiar comforts of home and local speech. It is important to recall that Heaney was at this time spending half the year in America and half the year in the Republic of Ireland. In both locations, he was something of a stranger in a strange land, an outsider in places where the locals didn't quite speak the same language. In all of these ways, then, it seems to me that "thole" and other Hiberno-English words prove that the dialect is indeed worthy of and adequate to a great work of art like *Buile Suibhne*. By putting the kinds of Ulsterisms used by common Northern Irish folk into the mouth of Sweeney, Heaney ultimately and lovingly pulls the medieval poem into the orbit of his own and his people's language for suffering.

Given his interest in transtemporal and transnational border-crossings, Heaney's method of translation might best be described in terms of the metaphors migration, displacement, transfer, and border-crossings. As Jahan Ramazani notes in *The Hybrid Muse*, these terms belong to the standard lexicon of postcolonial studies, but they also frequently emerge in various discussions of metaphor, a rhetorical mode that suffered some neglect in postcolonial studies. But as Ramazani and other postcolonial critics have begun to understand, "metaphor and postcoloniality are both conceived of in terms of the movement, transference, or alienation of discourse from one place to another, a movement that involves not only a one-way shift but inevitably a bi-directional hybridization."<sup>79</sup> To borrow from I.A. Richards's famous description of metaphor, the postcolonial and metaphor traffic in a "transaction between contexts." Metaphor, the postcolonial, and for that matter translation, involve a kind of bringing together of different contexts, a process that simultaneously makes that which is strange familiar and

that which is familiar strange. This type of dynamic is indeed the driving force behind Heaney's translation.

On multiple levels of signification and implication (including bibliographic as well as linguistic and formal codings), Heaney places an emphasis on a kind of bi-directional hybridization aimed more at bringing together than dividing the "split mind" of Ulster. Reflecting this impulse in his introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney asks his reader to consider for a moment that it is:

possible, in a more opportunistic spirit, to dwell upon Sweeney's easy sense of cultural affinity with both western Scotland and southern Ireland, as exemplary for all men and women of contemporary Ulster, or to ponder the thought that this Irish invention may well have been a development of a British original, vestigially present in the tale of the madman call Alan.<sup>80</sup>

Such editorial statements clearly reflect a desire to transform the divisions and violence of the past into the culture of the future. Heaney resists the temptation to conceive of *Buile Suibhne* in terms of the kind of binaries so central to the ideology of political and cultural separatists on both sides of the English/Irish divide. Heaney's comments amount to no less than a call for a kind of rhetorical ceasefire on the frontlines of nationalist antagonism, for such a ceasefire is necessary in order to create more productive and alternative senses of identity and belonging among all segments of Northern Irish society. This point is borne out further by Heaney's decision to publish the translation under the auspices of the Field Day Theatre Company -- a group formed, as its charter states, to "contribute to the solution of the present [Ulster] crisis by producing analyses of established opinions, myths, and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation."<sup>81</sup> The very act of publishing *Sweeney Astray* thus becomes what Heaney describes as:

a sign, a gesture, a form of solidarity; and I always thought that when Sweeney came out I would publish it in Ireland. When we started *Field Day*, I liked the idea of it being published in Derry. It's a kind of all-Ireland event situated just within the North, and there's a little bit of submerged political naughtiness in that. This was one of the reasons I translated the place names into their modern equivalents [i.e. in the modern-day anglicized form]; I hope that gradually the Northern Unionist or Northern Protestant readership might, in some miniscule way, feel free to identify with the Gaelic tradition.<sup>82</sup>

In short, Heaney tells Northern Unionists and Northern Protestants this is their inheritance, their poem as well. In this way, Heaney brings *Buile Suibhne* into a significant relation with contemporary Ulster culture wars as well as the larger on-going process of Irish decolonization.

Given the extent to which Heaney updates and politicizes the medieval text it could be argued that he never really allows the remarkable voice of the Suibhne-poet(s) to reach our ears. Some critics have suggested as much, arguing that Heaney's translation obscures the Middle Irish poetry's capacity for offering a glimpse of "an older life" and a vibrant native Irish poetic tradition. There are several moments in Heaney's translation that seem to recapture the power of the ancient Irish voice and compelling aesthetic sensibility behind the text. Although few critics have credited him with doing so, Heaney deftly reproduces many moments which put on display what Vivien Mercier has called the "Irish comic imagination," a quality that translators and commentators such as Flann O'Brien and Nora Chadwick identify as the central genius of *Buile Suibhne*.<sup>83</sup> But even more compelling are Heaney's renderings of the nature lyric sections that are so integral to the medieval text.

Because the native Irish nature lyric stands as one of the crowning achievements of the Irish poetic tradition, some brief remarks concerning this genre are warranted. Citing the local power of these poems to affect us, Heaney notes it is difficult to find poetry in

English literature after *King Lear* as “piercingly exposed to the beauties and severities of the natural world.” In fact, Heaney tells us, it was “the bareness and durability of the writing here, its double note of relish and penitence,” that inspired him to translate the medieval text in the first place.<sup>84</sup> Not surprisingly, then, it is in these moments of the translation that Heaney is often at his best. Consider, for example, Heaney’s revival of Section 43, where Sweeney breaks into a famished lament as he helplessly watches, lonely and cold in the shadows, while a woman plucks his dinner of watercress. Rendered with tremendous suggestiveness and a keen eye for natural detail, one marvels at the deftness of expression and technique with which the scene is translated:

Hugging these, my cold comforts,  
 still hungering after cress,  
 above the bare plain of Emly  
 I hear cries of the wild geese,

and still bowed to my hard yoke,  
 still a bag of skin and bone,  
 I reel as if a blow hit me  
 and fly off at the cry of a heron  
 ...

Gazing down at clean gravel,  
 to lean out over a cool well,  
 drink a mouthful of sunlit water  
 and gather cress by the handful—

even this you would pluck from me,  
 lean pickings that have thinned my blood  
 and chilled me on the cold uplands,  
 hunkering low when winds spring up.

morning wind is the coldest wind,  
 it flays me of my rags, it freezes—  
 the very memory leaves me speechless,  
 woman, picking the watercress.

(*Sweeney Astray*, 48-49)

Here the distinctive voice of the nature lyric finds perhaps its perfect modern medium in Heaney's experienced pastoral voice. The modern Irish poet proves amazingly adept at capturing the pathos and terrifying beauty of Sweeney's peregrinations through the wilds of ancient Ulster. Like the original poems of the Irish nature lyric genre, many of which were penned by anchorites living in monastic cells on the edge of wilderness, Heaney's rendering of these lines captures both the emotional register and simplicity of image and statement contained in the original. As such, Heaney's translation seems to emanate from an earned vision keenly attuned to the natural world's perilous beauty, a vision of the natural world that comes only by having lived in very close contact with it; hence a relatively rare vision in our time.

Heaney's ability to bring us into contact with this ancient landscape stems partly from the fact that Suibhne's kingdom (the present-day counties of Down and Antrim) is a territory which Heaney lived near for over thirty years, but also from his profound appreciation for the distinctive qualities of medieval Irish nature poetry. This unique brand of lyric is noteworthy for its ability to cut into one's consciousness with a degree of incisiveness and subtle implication that few other sorts of poetry can achieve, with the exception perhaps of the work of classical Japanese haiku such as Basho, Issa, and Buson. As Kuno Meyer notes, Irish nature lyrics do not typically give "an elaborate or sustained description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skilful touch. . . . they avoid the obvious and the commonplace; the half-said thing is dearest to them."<sup>85</sup>

Elsewhere Heaney reproduces what Flann O'Brien called the "steel-pen exactness" of the original nature lyrics. So impressive is Heaney's technical skill in this regard it is

worth illustrating by comparing Heaney's version (on the left) of the Tree Catalogue with O'Keefe's (right):

The blackthorn is a jaggy creel  
stippled with dark sloes;  
green watercress in thatch  
where the drinking blackbird goes

...

low-set clumps of apple trees  
drum down fruit when shaken  
scarlet berries clot like blood  
on mountain rowan.

...

Holly rears its windbreak  
a door in winter's face;  
life-blood on a spear-shaft  
darkens the grain of ash.

(Heaney 37-38)

O little blackthorn, little thorny one  
O little black sloe-tree;  
O watercress, little green-topped one,  
from the brink of the ousel spring

O apple-tree, little apple-tree,  
much art thou shaken ;  
O quicken, little berried one,  
delightful is thy bloom.

O holly, little sheltering one,  
thou door against the wind;  
O ash-tree, thou baleful one,  
hand-weapon of a warrior.

(O'Keefe 65-67)

Even though Heaney significantly alters the dramatic pitch of the original lines by eliminating such devices as apostrophe and personification – devices retained by O'Keefe – these lines from *Sweeney Astray* still attain to the quality of the original voice in a manner that starkly contrasts with O'Keefe's sometimes cloying rendition of the nature lyrics. Having given us an image of scarlet berries that “clot like blood,” Heaney reminds the modern-day reader that it is still possible to be “surprised by joy” by means of well-wrought representations of the natural world. At the end of the day, Heaney's hard-driving, pared-down reproductions of the nature lyrics are so memorable because they fall much closer to the concision and piercing lyricism of the Middle Irish verse. The same can be said for many other aspects of this translation. Through a virtuoso performance delivered in the “illustrious vernacular,” *Buile Suibhne* finds a sustainable afterlife. This is made possible in part by Heaney's keen sense of pastoral, but perhaps

even more importantly by Heaney's attention to art of being "adept at dialect." In short, his translation demonstrates a huge capacity for "going beyond what's known," as Heaney puts it in "Making Strange," and "reciting my pride / in all that I knew, that began to make strange / at the same recitation."

### Heaney's *Beowulf*: The Art of Being "Adept at Dialect" Refined

In any movement toward liberation, it will be necessary to deny the normative authority of the dominant language or literary tradition.

Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*

If "Ugolino" and *Sweeney Astray* represent turning points in the story of Heaney's development as a poet and translator, then his translation of *Beowulf* marks what will probably be remembered as the ultimate moment in this narrative. Heaney's translation is a major undertaking and significant accomplishment for a number of reasons. Given the complicated status of translation in Irish culture and Heaney's own early troubled relation to the English linguistic and literary traditions, it is useful to recall that, in coming to *Beowulf*, Heaney was ironically coming to a text that had long been used to establish the socio-political hierarchies and cultural divisions he had so assiduously resisted for much of his career. Often cited in scholarly discussions concerned with issues of national origins and imperialism, the study and recovery of *Beowulf* has been central to the quest for lost cultural origins, particularly the quixotic search for the "pure" well-springs of English character, language, and identity, a search that is bound up, in Conor McCarthy's words, with some of the "explicitly racist ideologies which have historically underpinned Anglo-Saxon studies."<sup>86</sup>

Given the problematic status of *Beowulf* as a cultural artifact, it is interesting to consider the varied and sometimes contentious critical response concerning Heaney's efforts to recontextualize *Beowulf* in terms of his own Northern Irish dialect and local frames of reference. Some recent critics have argued that Heaney's deployment of the vernacular in *Beowulf* endows the text with tremendous "historical suggestiveness," by which means Heaney casts an oblique light on Ireland's colonial past and all the inherent conflicts of language and culture engendered in that past. In Conor McCarthy's view, Heaney infuses the Old English with Irish words and Hiberno-English in order to work against the grain of previous translations, which generally show a "prejudice" in favor of Anglo-Saxon diction. For Joseph McGowan, Heaney's fusion of dialect, Irish words, and Standard English is more an "act of 'handselling,' a returning of the language upon itself."<sup>87</sup>

That Heaney is indeed intent on retelling the history of Ireland's encounter with colonialism as well as the troubled story of relations between the English and Irish language is a point made repeatedly in the translation itself as well as his introduction to *Beowulf*. One of the most striking examples of Heaney's effort rewrite the history of colonialism and the story of language in Ireland occurs at those moments in the text when he translates the Old English *reced*, the word used to denote Hrothgar's hall. Foregoing more standard selections such as "hall," "keep" or "fort" in favor of the Hiberno-English *bawn* -- a word originally derived from the Irish *bo-dhun* (meaning cattle fort) but used by early English settlers to signify the fortified dwellings built to keep dispossessed Irish natives at bay -- Heaney conducts a kind of etymological investigation into the history of language within the original story. Like "thole" *bawn* is a resonant word in Heaney's

idiolect, one loaded with personal and cultural significance at every turn. *Bawn* not only forms one half of the name of his boyhood farm (Mossbawn, meaning “farm on the bog”), but it appears in many essays and poems including the important “Belderg” from *North*.<sup>\*</sup> Explaining his rationale for using *bawn*, Heaney writes in the introduction to *Beowulf*:

it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches. Indeed, every time I read the lovely interlude that tells of the minstrel singing in Heorot just before the first attacks of Grendel, I cannot help thinking of Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Fairie Queen* to Sir Walter Raleigh, just before the Irish would burn the castle and drive Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court. Putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more ‘willable forward / again and again and again’.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, Heaney’s recent critics are correct to say the use of dialect endows the poem with renewed historical significance. And a delicious act of postcolonial subterfuge it is, for Heaney’s strategic deployment of dialect re-enacts the kind of linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization that has characterized the relations between Ireland and England for more than eight-hundred years. In this sense, Heaney is indeed concerned with the history of the English and Irish languages.

But in the remainder of this chapter I want to suggest that Heaney’s use of the vernacular is ultimately aimed at bringing the past into a significant relationship with the present. This works on two different levels. On one hand, Heaney unlocks the word-hoard of non-Standard English to redress various contemporary social and political imbalances related to the status of language in contemporary Northern Ireland. But

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<sup>\*</sup>“So I talked of Mossbawn, / A bogland name. ‘But *moss*?’ / He crossed my old home’s music / With older strains of Norse. / I’d told how its foundation / Was mutable as sound / And how could I derive / a forked hand root from that ground / And make bawn an English fort” (“Belderg,” *North* 14)

Heaney's vernacular-based poetics in this translation serve another purpose as well. His recasting of *Beowulf* in a "cunning middle voice" also enables him to recover the specific poetic power of the epic. Thus, as with his previous translations, it is through the deployment of an "illustrious vernacular" -- one that is neither condescending nor falsely folksy, but rather immensely literate and attentive to his long-standing interest in the related questions of language and identity -- that this upstart Irish poet-turned-translator is able to render the tremendous immediacy and power of the Old English in a living and life-giving idiom.

Widely praised by critics and scholars alike for its "marvelous language" and virtuoso metrical display, Heaney's *Beowulf* has been widely hailed as the *magnum opus* of his translation oeuvre. This has been the case in part because his translation is highly readable and in some ways more poetically sound than many of the sixty or so English-language versions of the complete poem. Much has also been made of the fact that Heaney's translation was produced for the canon-setting *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. All of which is to suggest that Heaney's *Beowulf*, like his transformation of *Buile Suibhne*, is meant to produce a canonized text or, more accurately, a re-canonized text.

What makes Heaney's achievement even more memorable, however, is that he has produced a truly artful translation, one which takes seriously J.R.R. Tolkien's famous charge encouraging critics to begin treating *Beowulf* as "a work of art," rather than an archeological curiosity (in Tolkien's words, "a quarry of fact and fancy" for literary historians). Writing in "Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics" (1936), an essay Heaney calls "epoch-making," Tolkien drummed up this exhortation because he believes many

Anglo-Saxonists had turned into criticism's version of Grendel, a baleful species of scholars given to mangling the poem and gobbling it up as a cultural artifact, but little concerned with the *poetic* achievement of the Beowulf scop. "Beowulfania is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one," Tolkien remarks, "[it] is poor in criticism that is directed to the understanding of the poem as a poem."<sup>89</sup> In short, Tolkien chides his fellow Anglo-Saxonists for treating *Beowulf* not as the product of an imaginative writer, but instead as what Heaney, in his commentary on Tolkien's essay, derisively calls "a kind of back-formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology."<sup>90</sup>

If, in their quest to discover lost cultural origins and uncorrupted, fixed sources of linguistic and cultural identity, Anglo-Saxonists have long neglected the poetry of this Old English epic, many of the modern English-language translations have done the same.<sup>91</sup> For his part, however, Heaney has done his level best to reverse this neglect and has sought to recover the specific *poetic* qualities, which distinguish *Beowulf* as a great work of art. Wherein does the epic's poetic greatness inhere and what constitutes its specific gravity? Writing in his learned and eloquent introduction to the poem, Heaney locates the source of *Beowulf's* poetic integrity and staying-power in a poetic sensibility possessed by great insight into the human condition, an ability to look squarely at the terrible actualities and ephemeral consolations of life with great clarity. In short, the epic contains an imaginative vision which finds expression in a voice that speaks, in Heaney's phrase, with tremendous "adequacy, dignity, and unforgiving truth."<sup>92</sup>

It was these particular qualities of voice and vision, Heaney says, that initially attracted and secured his attention and assent:

I came to the task of translating *Beowulf* with a prejudice in favor of forthright delivery. I remembered the voice of the poem as being attractively direct, even though the diction was ornate and the narrative method at times oblique. What I had loved was a kind of foursquareness about the utterance, a feeling of living constantly in the indicative mood, in the presence of an understanding that assumes you share an awareness of the perilous nature of life and yet are capable of seeing it steadily and, when necessary, sternly.<sup>93</sup>

In Heaney's view, the key to reproducing the force and sublimity of the original required discovering a voice by which he could reproduce some sense of the original's "foursquareness" of utterance," the sense given by the epic's voice of "living constantly in the indicative mood." But as Heaney notes, recognizing the tonal quality of the poem's prevailing voice is one thing; learning how to approximate it in a modern idiom is quite another. Just as his initial attempts to translate *Buile Suibhne* were marked by failure and frustration, Heaney was flummoxed by his early attempts to recapture the distinctive quality of the *Beowulf* scop's voice.

Often . . . the whole attempt to turn it into modern English seemed to me like trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer. What had been so attractive in the first place, the hand-built, rock-sure feel of the thing, began to defeat me.<sup>94</sup>

In need of what he calls a "tuning fork" that would give him the "note and pitch for the overall music of the work," Heaney realized that "without some melody sensed or promised" it would simply be impossible for him to open, in his words, a "right-of-way into and through" the Old English text.<sup>95</sup> Lacking such a tuning fork, he put the project on hold for some time, just as had done in the case of *Buile Suibhne*. Eventually, however, he found a point of entry into the voice and vision behind *Beowulf*; and he turned once again to the very register which guided his translation of the *Commedia* and *Buile Suibhne*, the home key of his local dialect.

Appearing at numerous junctures throughout the translation, particularly in the so-called “gnomic” sections where various characters dispense their wisdom, the force of the vernacular makes its presence felt not only through Hiberno-English and Gaelic words, but more specifically and frequently in the occurrence of speech habits and accents drawn from the dialect spoken in Heaney’s home county of Derry. As noted early, these local accents and habits of speech are distinguished by a curt, energetic, angular, and hard-edged consonantal quality as well as a certain aversion to loquaciousness and overstatement. More specifically, one of the primary registers of Heaney’s vernacular voice in this translation is a subspecies of the local dialect, a variation of Hiberno-English called, in Heaney’s phrase, “Scullion-speak.”

By settling on “Scullion-speak,” a form of utterance which he describes as “a familiar local voice, one that had belonged to relatives of my father’s, people whom I had once described in a poem as ‘big-voiced Scullions,’” Heaney returns to the voice and experience of family members whose language and experience of suffering he detailed in poems like “Station Island,” “Casualty,” and “The Strand at Lough Beg.” And from the very outset, Heaney makes good on his promise in the introduction to recast key parts of the poem in the voice of such people.

In transforming the very first line of the poem (*Hwaet we Gar-Dena in gear-dagum*) into a version of Hiberno-English, Heaney recast the Old English into a living idiom, one that is highly personalized but also relevant in terms of contemporary discussions concerning the politics of language in Northern Ireland. Specifically, he begins his translation with an Ulsterism that appears as a one-word sentence: “So.” In the homegrown dialect of “Scullionspeak,” the word “so” not only serves as an “exclamation

calling for immediate attention,” as Heaney says, but functions as an “expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative.”<sup>96</sup> Diverging as radically as it does from other translators’s renderings of *Hwaet* (other versions typically use “Lo,” “Hark,” “Behold,” “Indeed,” and “Attend”), Heaney’s selection of “So” may not obliterate all previous discourse and narrative concerning *Beowulf*, but it nonetheless sets the stage for shifting and refocusing the discussion about the status of *Beowulf* as a sign and site of English hegemony.

Heaney’s choice of “So” and other scattered dialect words has become the immediate focus of a brewing controversy in the half dozen or so extant scholarly essays on Heaney’s *Beowulf*. Writing in a rather unforgiving essay entitled “Scullionspeak,” Nicholas Howe, a specialist in the Germanic roots of Old English mythology, focuses his first criticism of the translation on Heaney’s “So.” This essay, which appears in *The New Republic*, essentially calls Heaney to task for “set[ting] out to make an Irish poem,” a move, which results in what Howe, sees as nothing less than a crass cannibalization of this holy grail of “high” culture. For Howe, Heaney’s greatest transgression as a translator is his interpolation of “Ulsterisms” and Irish words into the poem.<sup>97</sup> In this regard, Howe and other critics are certainly correct to underscore the prominent role by the vernacular in Heaney’s translation, for he strategically limns his version with several dozen such words. At various points, for example, Heaney deploys terms drawn from Gaelic society rather than medieval Anglo-Saxon society to designate key social relations and positions – thus, *maga* (“kinsmen”) becomes *clan*, Unferth’s court title *dyle* (“spokesman” 101) is rendered with the Gaelic *brehon*, and the Irish *sept* replaces *leode* (“people” or “tribe” 115).<sup>98</sup> Elsewhere, Hildeburh sings a *keen*, not a dirge or lament,

and features of the landscape become decidedly Irish: *windige naessas* (“windy headlands”) becomes “windswept *crags*” and *fen-gelad* (“path over the fen”) is rendered *keshes*.

But if Heaney’s subtle, yet subversive insertion of such words helps draw parallels between the Anglo-Saxon society depicted in the poem and certain aspects of contemporary Northern Irish society, many moments in the epic require little or no meddling to suggest this connection. At its core *Beowulf* is a moving depiction of a society in which, as Heaney says, “vengeance for the dead becomes an ethic for the living, [and] bloodshed begets further bloodshed.”<sup>99</sup> That this aspect of medieval Anglo-Saxon bears some resemblance to the society from which Heaney hails is not due to Heaney’s meddling. As early as his bog poems, Heaney simply has drawn attention to the fact that Ireland’s culture of violence finds an analog in ancient societies dependent on the rites of blood sacrifice and the dispensation of *wegild* (the “man price” exacted for the slaying of one’s kin). When Heaney thus renders specific phrases such as those found at lines 2027-2028, a phrase which reads *wael-faehda dael, saecca gesette* (literally, “portion of deadly feuds, of battles”), with a fairly faithful translation, “heal old wounds and grievous feuds,” the parallels between Anglo-Saxon society and contemporary Northern Irish society come into sharp relief with little help from his hand.

Concerning these intended and inherent parallels, the salient question for Heaney’s critics is rather clear: “What is the poetic and political implication of all this?” The answers have varied wildly. Several of Heaney critics have seen this tendency as an attempt to comment “historically” on old colonial divisions and antagonisms. Bernard O’Donoghue, for example, sees in Heaney’s hibernizations an attempt to produce a

certain degree of “historical suggestiveness,” a kind of veiled poetic commentary on the wrongs perpetrated by England in colonial Ireland. Joseph McGowan regards Heaney’s deployment of Hiberno-English and Irish as a kind of necessary response to “nine centuries of English dominance over Irish affairs, life, and language.” In other words, Heaney’s Irishisms are symptomatic of the poet’s “love-hate of the English language,” a phrase McGowan borrows from Conor Cruise O’Brien’s review of North “A Slow North-east Wind.”<sup>100</sup>

The most adversarial criticism of Heaney’s hibernizations has come from Anglo-Saxon experts. In this regard, I want to consider in some detail the Old English scholar Nicholas Howe’s response to Heaney’s recasting of the epic in dialect. On one hand, I turn to Howe’s argument because his remarks highlight some of the more rigid and monologic conceptions of language and textual transmission still prevailing in certain circles of Anglo-Saxon studies today. On the other hand, Howe’s diatribe is noteworthy because it seems to take some of the well-worn allegations directed at Heaney’s poetry over the years -- charges related to Heaney’s purported partisanship and “unseemly” meddling in political affairs -- and directs those charges against Heaney’s translation.

At issue in Howe’s detailed and erudite essay is Heaney’s attempt to “to make an Irish poem” out of *Beowulf*, a move which Howe locates in Heaney’s “sparing” use of “Ulsterisms” and Irish words.<sup>101</sup> In a fashion reminiscent of Donoghue’s *Sweeney Astray* review, Howe thus argues against Heaney’s reliance on the dialect for a variety of aesthetic and cultural reasons. In Howe’s view, Heaney’s use the declarative “So” in the first line of the epic stands not only as the first, but also the most unsuccessful of such corruptions. Objecting on one hand to this opening word because it demands to be read

“as a connection back to [Heaney’s] Ulster ancestry” and on the other because “it has no fixed semantic meaning,” this Anglo-Saxonist complains that not only will it confuse those “who use other varieties of English” but also that “‘So’ sounds too understated, too *domestic* for the start of a poem such as *Beowulf*” (emphasis mine).<sup>102</sup> According to Howe’s standards, then, the translation is simply “too domestic,” too homespun. For him, this translation of *Beowulf* ultimately becomes overly burdened by Heaney’s idiosyncratic prosody and propensity toward the local and dialect. If Howe had stopped here, we could perhaps say this boils down to differences in taste, and we might leave it at that (*de gustibus non est disputandum*).

But there is yet another, infinitely more troubling aspect of Howe’s critique that warrants consideration. In Howe’s view, Heaney’s translation is not simply a case of an Irish writer trying “to graft himself onto the English literary tradition,” but rather a rewriting of an inviolable cornerstone of English culture for political ends, a purpose which ultimately serves to reify separatist ideology and Irish identitarianism.<sup>103</sup> The resistance to Heaney’s *Beowulf* coming from Howe and other Anglo-Saxonists essentially stems from an ideological distaste for Heaney’s use of so-called “political dialect.” In this regard, Howe sees a basic incongruence between Heaney’s use of the vernacular and the poet’s stated desire to skirt the nets of language, religion, and nationality in this translation. In short, Heaney’s vernacularization of the poem has as much to do with a revisionist project as it does with the desire to settle old scores by exacting a kind of poetic *wergild*:

Yet Whitby-sur-Moyola is a curious place to work from as a translator of *Beowulf*. One might even argue that someone writing from there is not really a translator of the poem at all. He is, rather, a reinventor of the poem, who

turns Old English into Modern English to remake the literary and cultural history of the British Isles.<sup>104</sup>

This is to say, Heaney may have set out to create a kind of Whitby-sur-Moyola -- an imaginary place from Heaney's eponymous poem, a place where conflict is resolved, a place that conjures an image locus of political, cultural, linguistic, and religious harmony -- but his cunning rewriting of the epic in terms of local language and history renders the translation antithetical to such a project. In short, Howe implies that Heaney cannot have it both ways. He cannot raise the specter of history's Dark Angel -- a complex history of conquest and colony that Heaney says "must be clearly acknowledged by all concerned" -- and still hope to render this history "ever more 'willable forward / again and again and again.'"<sup>105</sup>

That Heaney's project involves a considerable element of "revisionism" is clear. Heaney says this repeatedly in his introduction. The more pressing question that needs to be asked is what kind revisionism is at work here. To my mind, this is a question that must now be asked with a greater degree of attention to the multiple versions of nationalism and nuances of identity politics in Ireland, the kind of nuance that is sorely lacking in Howe's otherwise helpful essay. In other words, I see a revisionist project in Heaney's translation, but not the kind suggested by Howe. Indeed, Heaney's rewriting of *Beowulf* tells a story of conquest, colony, absorption, resistance, dispossession, brutality, and antagonism. This of course is a story Heaney has relentlessly told over the years, a story begun to some degree in earlier translations such as "Ugolino" and *Sweeney Astray*. But as we have seen from these translations, as well as the dialect poems, Heaney's deployment of a vernacular-based poetics is ultimately concerned with much more than rehashing history and trying to open old battle scars. As I have been suggesting

throughout this chapter, Heaney's vernacular-based representational poetic aims at bringing the violence of the past into a significant relationship with the present. As such, it seeks to transform the violence of colonial history into a vision of what a more integrated and tolerant Irish society might ultimately look like.

In using a language and prosody steeped in the sounds, rhythms, and "blemishes" of Ulster's demotic English, Heaney proves himself worthy of the title *adeptus*, an *adeptus* supremely concerned with the poetry of the epic even as he is concerned with bringing the "unshorn" rural Irishman and the urbane English together rather than keeping them apart. Perhaps the most illuminating way to demonstrate this point is to return to Heaney's rendering of the poem's opening section, for this is the portion of the translation singled out by Howe and other Old English scholars as a particularly egregious instance of the aesthetic and political transgressions of Heaney's translation.

Just following the controversial "So," Heaney resumes his flight into the dialect that can be described as nothing other than the "illustrious vernacular." Illustrious why? Let's consider Heaney's rendering of lines 11- 14, the point at which the *Beowulf* scop memorializes Shield Sheafson's son:

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,  
A cub in the yard, a comfort sent  
By God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,  
The long times and troubles they'd come through ...  
(Beowulf, lines 11-14)

Here Heaney's diction is at once conspicuous and illustrious. While much could be made of Heaney's interpolation of the Latinate "nation" for *folc* (a word which occasionally gets translated as "folk" but more often as "people"), the two phrases immediately following this word are of particular significance. When Heaney recalls how Shield's

son “knew what they had tholed / The long times and troubles they’d come through,” there is no doubt a certain localizing effect. Coming from the hand of a Northern Irish poet, the word “troubles” requires no gloss of course. This is probably why Howe skips over it. But Howe skips over the entire passage for that matter, a passage that casts a revealing light on Heaney’s purported partisanship and the real significance of his revisionary project.

The specific Irish connotation suggested by this passage emerges not simply from the use of dialect and Irish words. Rather the inflection and patterns of Ulster speech also solidify the Irish connection here and throughout Heaney’s translation (a point Howe and others fail to make). In Heaney’s distinctive phrasing of passages such as those found at lines 11-13, we hear not only the voice of Heaney’s relatives (i.e., “Scullionspeak”) but also the sound of just about any common Ulsterman’s or Ulsterwoman’s voice talking. This has as much to do with the colloquial feel of the phrasing (“a cub in the yard,” “they’d”) as it does with Heaney’s syllabic stresses, which are modeled on the consonantal and staccato speech patterns of Ulster dialect. Take, for example, the multiple hard “c’s” (“comfort,” “child,” “cub,” “come”) and the well-placed series of alliterating “t’s” and “d’s” linking the two halves of transformed Anglo-Saxon line: “yard / comfort, sent,” “times, troubles / they’d” and “that / what, tholed” “thole” (note, in Ireland the “th” in “tholed” is falls closer to a “t” than to “th,” thus sounding like “told”). All of these aural devices serve not only to reproduce the alliterative tendencies of the original, but also to nicely approximate the spirant or fricative quality produced by the ubiquitous Old English “g” in the original’s opening passage.<sup>106</sup>

In this regard, the Ulster voice of Heaney's translation instances what we have been calling Heaney's vernacular-based representational poetic. Like many of Heaney's dialect poems, these lines can be called representational in that they "attempt to capture in writing the *apparently* immediate representationalism of spoken language, especially local dialect." (emphasis mine)<sup>107</sup> But such poetic mimesis does not occur solely at the level of local diction and syntax (and a sort of implied inflection and pronunciation); it also inheres in the sounds evoked by individual consonants and rhyming devices. One of the most persuasive and moving examples of Heaney's ability to render local speech patterns cunningly and artfully occurs in his translation of the Finnsburg fragment. Deploying an impressive array of sonic, rhythmic, visual techniques (note his exploitation of the page layout to emphasize the prosodic effects), Heaney re-enacts, at the level of sound, the grim scene recounted before us, a scene in which Hrothgar's scop recalls how the Half-Dane queen Hildeburh "tholes" at the untimely deaths of her kin:

|                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Then Hildeburh</i>         | <i>ordered her own</i>        |
| <i>son's body</i>             | <i>be burnt with Hnaef's,</i> |
| <i>the flesh on his bones</i> | <i>to sputter and blaze</i>   |
| <i>beside his uncle's.</i>    | <i>The woman wailed</i>       |
| <i>and sang keens</i>         | <i>the warrior went up.</i>   |
| <i>Carcass flame</i>          | <i>swirled and fumed,</i>     |
| <i>they stood round the</i>   | <i>burial</i>                 |
| <i>as heads melted,</i>       | <i>mound and howled</i>       |
| <i>spattered and ran</i>      | <i>crusted gashes</i>         |
| <i>The glutton element</i>    | <i>bloody matter.</i>         |

*flamed and consumed*  
*the dead on both sides.*  
(Heaney, *Beowulf* 77, lines 1115-1125)

Heaney brings to bear the full force of his own poetic talent in these lines, a talent keenly attuned to the sonic qualities of Ulster dialect. With the exception the Irish word *keen*, the diction of this dazzling prosodic display might be said to be drawn from plain-speak English that might be spoken anywhere in the world. When read aloud, the stressed halves of each line (emphasized here through the particularly strong caesurae created by the visual breaking of the line) reproduce the broken, strained breathing of the queen. Most speakers of English would reproduce this effect. But there is another quality of speech inherent in this sound system, which mimics the Ulster accent -- an accent Heaney has described as "generally a staccato consonantal one. Our tongue strikes the tangent of the consonant rather more than it rolls the circle of the vowel. . . . It is energetic, angular, hard-edged."<sup>108</sup> This is indeed what comes through as Heaney replicates the curt "w's" and the sputtering of plosives made up of "s's" and "t's" of the original lines. Far from being perfunctory evocations of local speech, which add nothing of substance to the poem, Heaney's insertion of dialect speech patterns functions according to the logic of his representational poetic.

This predominant voicing technique is the sign and site of an emerging political statement.<sup>109</sup> Now we come to the sticking point. Does it follow that by invoking such an Ulster voice Heaney embraces a kind of partisan and separatist politics? Since one of the unmistakable signs of being Irish is the "degenerate" Irish accent, the differentiating voice of Irish men and women ("their mis[use] of the English language" in Clair Wills's phrase), then how does one tell an Ulster Protestant and Ulster Catholic apart when each

repeats a phrase like “He knew what they had tholed / The long times and troubles they’d come through”? Both are white, both speak with the same accent. How does one tell them apart based on their pronunciation and intonation? The answer, of course, is one can’t tell the difference. The Catholic docker and the Protestant longshoreman sound the same. The IRA fighter and the Ulster Volunteersman sound the same. No single identity group or party can lay sole claim to the Ulster accent. In other words, by adopting the speech patterns endemic to the Hiberno-English spoken in Ulster, Heaney does the troubles in the voice shared by the majority of people in Ulster.

This is a point so simple it has been missed altogether by Howe and other Old English specialists whose ears are attuned to the sounds and nuances of the Anglo-Saxon tongue. But this is a point that makes all the difference when assigning “political” and “polemical” intentions to Heaney. By recasting *Beowulf* in the vernacular, Heaney does not appropriate the poem for some kind of narrow nationalist or separatist agenda. Indeed, even Howe admits that Heaney’s use of the vernacular is done “carefully and sparingly.” Much of the translation employs a sort of plain-speak English as well, one that is neither decidedly Irish, English, or American. At any rate, there is no specific sectarian or nationalist agenda at work in Heaney’s translation. Heaney politicizes the poem and begins to write an alternative history of Ireland; he depoliticizes it in another way as well, by releasing *Beowulf* from the constricting imperialist and racist purposes to which it has formerly been put.

There is no doubt that Heaney’s revisionist translation is a political statement. Political, because he rescues *Beowulf* from the dominion of Anglo-Saxon purists who come to the poem in search of lost origins and sacrosanct cultural artifacts, the kind of

material they have long used to prop up their implied claims of cultural superiority and to underwrite their monologic approach the politics of language. Political, because Heaney gives the song of suffering and endurance that is *Beowulf* back to the people. More precisely, Heaney gives *Beowulf* back to the people of many nations, the modern day equivalents of the people that Shield's son comes to comfort, people who have been so lightening blasted and calcined by various forms of violence they can no longer speak for themselves.

It is precisely such people whose story and song of suffering is mirrored in the *Beowulf* story. In this sense, the translation might be said to belong to countless humans who have witnessed the scourge of overwhelming violence and wanton destruction. That Heaney hopes to give the song of *Beowulf* back to them, at least on one level, is made clear in his discussion of the scene at poem's end in which the Geat woman laments the death of the fallen *Beowulf*, a scene he describes as being "at once immemorial and oddly contemporary":

The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her keen is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy and dignity and unforgiving truth . . .<sup>110</sup>

By taking the poem back from "fact-finding historians" and necromancing philologists and making it once again readable and engaging for common folk, Heaney has indeed, in one fell swoop, de-politicized the epic and made it fit for a new kind of canon.

There is another kind of politics at work in all of this, a kind grass-roots local politics as well as a kind of transnationalism, if you will. By telling *Beowulf* and the

Troubles slant, Heaney tells more of the truth in his rewrite of Irish and English history than most history books do. Never would a card toting political and cultural separatist give such a truthful and complete account of the Troubles. Seeking to whitewash his own “nation’s” history even as he excoriated the demon “other” for his sins against the nation, such a revisionist historian would not say: “The glutton element flamed and consumed /the dead of both sides” (line 1124). In this regard, Heaney’s translation is revisionist, but not for the purpose of settling old scores and exacting *wergild*. By telling history and this poem slant, by putting the song of the poem back into the mouths of regular people, he gives the poem back to many nations, all the diverse peoples of Ireland and Britain. By “peoples” I do not mean nation-states, but common people, republican and unionist alike, people such as the “big-voiced Scullions” and boyhood Protestant neighbors, people who must often silently suffer their own portion of *wael-faehda dael, saecca gesette*.

Finally, there is yet another representational aspect to Heaney’s translation. Insofar as it offers a radical new approach to the related issues of postcolonial translation, the language question, and the problem of identity, Heaney’s *Beowulf* represents an alternative political view. Heaney’s position is radical not in the sense of extremism, but radical in that it steps back from conventional wisdom and separatist politics. In recent years, Heaney has taken to arguing for such a politics in his essays. To this end, Heaney is fond of quoting Roy Foster’s call for a more productive way of looking at these matters: “We need not give up our claims on Irishness in order to conceive of it as a flexible definition. And in an age of exclusivist jihads to east and west, the notion that people can reconcile more than one cultural identity may have much to recommend it.”<sup>11</sup>

Coming as it does at the end of the essay "Frontiers of Writing," the closing essay in *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney stands by this radical view of Irishness. In fact he closes the essay by charging all people of Northern Ireland to make an effort at the kind of "two-mindedness" called for by Foster. As evidenced by his prose, poetry and translations, Heaney clearly suggests such two-mindedness is the only way to end Ireland's love affair with the politics of violence.

At the end of the day, Heaney's *Beowulf* offers a liberating postcolonial perspective, one, which demonstrates how one can succeed in finding an "escape route" out of the "split mind" of Ulster. The same can be said, as we have seen, concerning his translations of Dante and *Buile Suibhne*. The products of an imagination fired in the crucible of postcolonial conflict, Heaney's translations are sites of a postcolonial split vision trying to go beyond the binary. In his interpretative work, Heaney demonstrates the transnational, multilingual and transtemporal tendencies of his still-evolving anticolonial poetic. As such, Heaney's translations move increasingly beyond the divisions and antagonisms at the heart of the Northern Irish conflict. More frequently operating in the contact zone of transcreative hybridity than in the combat zone of sectarian and strict nationalist politics, these works emerge from and in turn create a kind of demilitarized zone of the imagination and spirit. To claim this much for Heaney's translations is not to say they effect a facile elision of real differences or seek to resolve all contradiction at the level of art. In fact, Heaney's translations often operate, as we have seen, within the binary by drawing attention to the Manichean divide, by recalling a complex history of colony and conquest. Ultimately, however, his translations find an escape route out of the "partitioned intellect" in that they typically recommend more

productive and confident ways of bridging divisions and respecting differences through the creation of a new language as well as alternative historical and political perspectives.

Within the sovereign space of his representational poetic, then, Heaney seems to create what Homi Bhabha calls the Third Space. As Bhabha reminds us, it is “the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.” But operating within such a space and carrying such a burden, Bhabha concludes, is ultimately what makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.”<sup>112</sup> That Heaney does this with in the sovereign space of poetry is a credit and testimony not only to the power of Irish postcolonial poetry, but also to his achievement as a major voice of Irish decolonization.

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## Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> In light of this relationship, some theorists argue it is possible to speak of the “violence” of translation – the forcible process whereby a culture or author deploys translation to render other cultures or authors comprehensible so as to make them palatable for consumption and/or to carry out the exercise of political power. Translation theorists such as Anuradha Dingwaney argues that translation can be said to involve “violence” because a disproportionate distribution of power is the norm in postcolonial situations; thus, translation not only becomes highly charged with socio-political meaning at almost every level of signification (formal, linguistic, bibliographic, etc.), but also serves as a representation staging ground from which campaigns of physical violence are often launched. Lawrence Venuti, one of the deans of translation theory, argues in “Translation as Cultural Politics,” *Textual Practice*: 7:2 (Summer 1993), p. 209, that “the violence of translation resides in its very purpose and activity: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts. Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader.” Talal Asad, another theorist who has written extensively on the problems associated with the “translation of [a non-Western] culture,” notes how the exercise of colonial power via translation can read as effort to reconstitute the “Third World” as an object of its knowledge. The “violence” of translation in such cases entails “purifying debased native texts” in order to make them more palatable for consumption in the metropole. For these provocative theoretical views on the so-called violence of translation see A. Dingwaney and C. Maier (eds.), *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation Cross-Cultural Texts* (Pittsburg: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995) and the introduction to Talal Asad’s (ed.) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Atlantic Highlands N.J.: Humanities Press, 1988.)

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>3</sup> There is still much work to be done on Heaney’s translations. Until Maria Fumagalli’s excellent reading of “Ugolino” appeared in *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), most critics had been content either to make only passing references to this piece or to ignore it altogether. As of early 2004, four years after the initial publication of Heaney’s *Beowulf*, the MLA bibliography contains only six scholarly articles on what is a major feat of translation judging from the accounts of respected reviewers. Heaney’s *The Cure At Troy* has fared even worse, with only four MLA citations. This has much to do, I believe, with the still-widespread prejudice that translation is not a *bona fide* act of creative writing. On the other hand, *Sweeney Astray* has fared far better than the other Heaney translations; most major Heaney critics consider this translation at length, but again their readings are not attuned to the fact that translation is always already a rewriting of a source text.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> See Maria Tymoczko’s *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), pp. 19-21, 37.

Edicts such as the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366, through which English colonists outlawed the use of Irish language and customs and began imposing English language and cultural forms, helped instigate the slow death of the Irish language. Over several centuries of colonial rule, native Irish language and culture were driven (some have argued systematically) to the brink of extinction. From the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, all variety of colonial policies and practices such as the Penal Laws, the implementation of Compulsory English language education, and the Land Ordinance Survey were all attempts to translate the native Irish into clones of their English masters by means of imposing a foreign language and culture on them, a process of translation that irrevocably altered the native Irish way of life and language. In contrast to Tymoczko’s account, scholars such as Declan Kiberd argue that the Irish lost their language from a conscious decision to abandon it in the nineteenth century. Kiberd attributes the decline of Irish to reasons stemming from concerns with socio-economic mobility rather than from centuries of linguistic imperialism: “It was ... in the nineteenth century that the native language declined, not as an outcome of British policy so much as because an entire generation of the Irish themselves decided not to speak it.” For this discussion see Kiberd’s helpful chapter on translation entitled “Friel Translating” in *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 614-23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from "The Tempest" to "Tarzan"* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Tejaswini, Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992), pp. 776, 774. According to critics such as Niranjana and Cheyfitz as well as others like Talal Asad, translation accrues a certain institutionalized status in the development of the strategic formation Edward Said describes, the process whereby subjugated cultures are first (mis)interpreted and (mis)represented and then remade in the image and likeness of the colonizer's language and worldview.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from these uses to which translation is often put, there are other ways theorists speak of the "violence" of translation, types of translational "violence" that are certainly at work in the Heaney translations under consideration here. In the essay "Living On/Border Lines," trans. J. Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), p. 175, Jacques Derrida notes that translation instances a kind of "violence of the letter." Discussing the difference between translators who regard their task in mimetic terms, with the goal being an exact reproduction of the source text, and translators who produce heterogeneous texts that are interrogative and transformative, Derrida identifies the latter type as master deconstructionists: "The line that I seek to recognize within translatability, between two translations ... one governed by the classical model of transportable univocality or of formalizable polysemia, and the other, which goes over into dissemination -- this line also passes between the critical and deconstructive." Derrida may be overstating the difference between univocal and heterogeneous translations. Even the most "faithful" translations entail some kind of rewriting, and therefore violate the source text to some degree. It might be argued that translation is never capable of establishing an identity; therefore translation always represents a lack and supplement. If this is so, translation is inevitably going to be "unfaithful" and, to a greater or lesser extent, "free." For another perspective on the violence of translation see A. Dingwaney and C. Maier (eds.), *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation Cross-Cultural Texts* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995), p. 6. Dingwaney argues that translation involves various forms of "violence" because this type of writing is governed not only by power relationships, but also by time, the vagaries of different cultural needs, authorial positioning, and the manipulations of the translator. What these various theories of translation share in common is a recognition that translations are never a transparent representation of a source text, but instead what the Brazilian translator and poet Haroldo de Campos Brazilian poet calls "transcreative" or "anthropophagic" translation, a rewriting of a source text that exposes multiple and divided meanings in the foreign text and displaces them with another set of meanings which are potentially just as divided and multiple.

<sup>11</sup> For a balanced general account of the rise of neo-nationalist rhetoric and maneuvering in the late 1960s see R.F. Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Press, 1988), pp. 569-98.

<sup>12</sup> Given the expansive cache of Irish-language sagas, poems, and annals at their disposal, it is telling that these contemporaries Irish poets have so frequently chosen source texts that are shot through with narratives of brutality and violent conquest.

<sup>13</sup> On the connection between translation and the emergence of new nation-states see Susan Basnett and Andre Lefevere (eds.), *Translation, History, and Culture*. New York: Pinter, 1990. On page 8 of the introduction to this useful collection of essays, Lefevere writes, "Translation becomes one of the means by which a new nation proves itself, shows its language is capable of rendering what is rendered in more prestigious languages... Translation, in this case, amounts to a seizure of power, more than anything else, any transfer of anything at all." Added to this, of course, is the process by which translation recovers "lost" or "marginalized" texts from local tradition and inserts them into the dominant language and canon.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Paulin, "A New Look at the Language Question" in *Ireland's Field Day*, Field Day Theatre Company (ed.), (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1986), p.10

<sup>15</sup> Clair Wills, "Language Politics, Narrative, Political Violence," *Oxford Literary Review*, 13.1-2 (1991), p. 29. For an expanded discussion concerning the emergence of English language and literature as predominant modes of cultural discourse in nineteenth century Ireland, see also David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 25-31, 43-9 and David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor-Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6, 15 ff.

<sup>19</sup> See Hyde in Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Dr. George Sigerson, Dr. Douglas Hyde, *The Revival of Irish Literature: Addresses by Duffy, Sigerson, and Hyde* (reprint New York: Lemma Publishing, 1973), p. 159-61. It is interesting to compare Hyde's program with the contemporary Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o's call for the rejection of the English language as a means of "decolonizing the African mind." See Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1981). This African writer offers a manifesto which is admittedly far more radical than the comparatively conservative program outlined by Hyde who says his is not "a protest against imitating what is best in the English people."

<sup>20</sup> Declan Kiberd sees the Irish Renaissance as a kind of a large scale and extended act of translation. For this discussion see the chapter "Translating Tradition" in *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 624.

<sup>21</sup> For an extended discussion of the dilemma facing Irish writers see Declan Kiberd's chapter "Deanglicization," in *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 136-54. Though the problem of being permeated by the colonizer's culture seems not to have been so acute in Africa or Asia, many postcolonial writers from these areas express sentiments similar to Kinsella's. Discussing his ambivalence concerning English in a 1975 speech entitled "The African Writer and the English Language," Chinua Achebe describes the plight of many postcolonial writers: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it." See Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Kinsella, "The Irish Writer," a paper delivered to the Modern Languages Association, New York, December, 1966. Reprinted in *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson?* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Kinsella interview with John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 112.

<sup>25</sup> For this reading, I am indebted to Aisling Maguire's explication of "Traditions" in *Selected Poems of Seamus Heaney* (Longman York Press, 1986), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Many language historians and cultural critics contend that the pressure exerted by colonialism on the Irish language was responsible for the loss of Irish as the first language of the nation. On this point see, for example, Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), pp. 19-20, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue contends "Traditions" is a humorous poem which has been taken much too solemnly by Heaney's critics. O'Donoghue contends such readings exemplify a tendency to too completely collapse Heaney's speakers's points of view with their that of their creator.

<sup>28</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p.35.

<sup>29</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxvii.

<sup>30</sup> James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 189

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, xxiv.

<sup>32</sup> James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 188-189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Interesting Case of John Alphonsus Mulrennan," *Planet 41* (January 1978), p.35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>36</sup> The phrase "line of escape" comes from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P 1986), especially chapter 3. For Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of "deterritorialization" seems to imply that experience and language are inextricably intertwined and always already political in nature. For a character like Stephen, who like his maker Joyce, shows a deep suspicion of the Irish Revival, the issue of language and identity often seems, in my view, to be more of an existential and aesthetic concern rather than a purely political concern.

<sup>37</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Among Schoolchildren": *A John Malone Memorial Lecture* (Belfast: Queen's University, 1983), pp. 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> In his excellent formalist reading of Heaney's original verse (i.e., a reading based on linguistic analysis), Bernard O'Donoghue the phrase "representational" to describe the use of the vernacular in Heaney's poetry. Heaney uses dialect, he says, in an "attempt[s] to capture in writing the apparently immediate representationalism of spoken language, especially local dialect"(emphasis mine). Such a process is, as I

demonstrate, at work in Heaney's translations. But Heaney's poetic can be said to "representational" beyond the realm of poetic diction and local speech. Heaney's poetry of violence often recreates a kind of vehemence at the level of sound, a kind of poetic artifice which mimics the sound of external violence, a kind of poetic mimesis that strives to reproduce the vehement "sound of sense" Heaney is writing about in any given piece dealing with violence. Finally, Heaney's poetic might be called "representational" in the sense that it often provides alternative political perspectives to the discourse of colonialism, nationalism, and cultural separatism.

<sup>39</sup> Donoghue and Carson argue Heaney's "corruptions" obscure the lexical and formal richness of the Middle Irish verse.

<sup>40</sup> Denis Donoghue, *We Irish* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1996) p. 268.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28, 2000, pp. 32-37.

<sup>42</sup> See Heaney's introduction to *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*. Derry: Field Day, 1983, p. ii. Originally transcribed by Irish monks between 1200 and 1500, *Buile Suibhne* likely derives from several different Gaelic oral versions composed between the seventh and ninth centuries. Insofar as this Middle Irish prosimetrium is a hybridization of various texts and cultural influences (Gaelic oral culture, the Latin-Gaelic script-based culture introduced by Irish monastics, and perhaps even the early medieval British "Wild Man of the Woods" story), it not only embodies a clash of heterogeneous sources and cultural influences, but is also a product of and response to a set of strife-riven circumstances that marked the history of seventh-century Ireland. Embodying a welter of existential crises and raw emotion -- emotions ranging from the despair of forced exile to rage brought on by cultural and political displacement -- *Buile Suibhne* offers an intriguing insight into the interstitial tensions and struggles that shaped early medieval Ireland: forced migrations, social instability, cultural uprootings. Combined with his introductory comments, Heaney's decision to translate such a narrative, particularly during a period of intense conflict, reinforces the notion that he was turning to distant historical events to cast an oblique light on the present.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 446.

<sup>44</sup> The currency of the source text's portrayal of intercultural conflict is in many ways rather uncanny. Imbued with a syncretic and multicultural perspective, *Buile Suibhne* is a precious literary gem whose tremendous appeal resides in its portrayal of a foreign and defamiliarizing *Weltanschauung*, the kind one encounters in the finest long poems in medieval literature such as *The Mabinogion*, *Beowulf*, or Chaucer's *The House of Fame*. And yet the text's fully-realized characterization of its peripatetic protagonist, its existential pitch, and its depiction of a social milieu wracked by violence and intercultural conflict invests the work with a kind of postmodern feel.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 134. In one instance, for example, Heaney directly alludes to the Unionist practice of intimidating minority Catholics through discriminatory "bully boy tactics" by adopting the politically-charged appellation "bully boy" to describe heavy-handed cleric Ronan and his attacks on Sweeney. For an expanded account of Heaney's initial draft see Neil Corcoran's *Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber, 1986, p. 133-34.

<sup>46</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Language of Exile," *Parnassus* 8 (1979), pp. 5-11. I quote here from Heaney's reprint of the slightly revised essay "The Murmur of Malvern" in *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Fumagalli, interview with Heaney quoted in *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), p. xii.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Singleton's *Dante's "Commedia": Elements of Structure* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1954) still stands as one of the finest and most useful studies of Dante's prosodic and linguistic achievement. For a reading of the intersection between Dante's vernacularized poetry and his politics see Joan Ferrante's *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1984).

<sup>49</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review*. 15 (Spring), p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ugolino is a man-eater in another sense. As several of Dante's translators and commentators have noted, the source text ambiguously suggests that Ugolino may have resorted to consuming his own sons in his famine-induced madness.

<sup>51</sup> Appearing just a couple of years to Irish prisoner's hunger strikes in the Maze, the phrase, at least in hindsight, takes on an almost prophetic ring.

<sup>52</sup> Heaney's method of translation is reminiscent of the translation method and philosophy de Campos's calls *Antropofagia*. Since the deliciously suggestive notion of postcolonial translation as a kind of

*Antrophagia* has been glossed by numerous commentators in recent years, perhaps de Campos's theory of translation needs no introduction for many readers. But it is worth recounting nonetheless. In his discussion of *Antropofagia*, de Campos likens postcolonial translation to the life-giving act of a blood transfusion (or in other contexts to a vampiric blood letting) describing translation in terms of a "transfusion. Of blood. Ironically, we could talk of vampirization, thinking now of the translator's nourishment." This metaphor for translation proves so powerful because it turns the colonial imaginary on its head and positively draws upon the idea "the native's ritual whereby feeding from someone or drinking someone's blood . . . was a means of absorbing the other's strength." Thus, de Campos's notion of *Antropofagia* carries a substantially broader meaning than earlier formulations; it is a sign of postcolonial polyphonic identity and suggests a kind of "amorous devouring" and imaginative fusion of the disparate strains of the subaltern subject's hybrid identity. In works like *Metalinguagem e Outras Metas* and "De Razao Antropogagica," de Campos argues that the liberated and liberating translator does not obsequiously bow down before the source text in an apish act of mimicry, but instead she or he ravishes and devours the original in order to derive necessary and invigorating nourishment from it. The transcreative translator is thus nourished by the life blood of the cultural and textual other, thereby drawing upon the other's strength, a strength that combines with one's own for greater vitality. As one of de Campos's commentators aptly puts it, "While undercutting the plentitude of any origin as the only source of strength, [anthropophagic "transcreation"] makes an incision and conjoining to unite the blood and marrow of the one [culture] with the other" (Viera 96). For this critical discussion of de Campos, a discussion to which I am greatly indebted, see Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira's "Liberating Calibans: Readings of Antopofagia and Haroldo de Campos' poetics of transcreation," in (eds.) Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi's *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 1999. pp.109-110.

<sup>53</sup> Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, trans. A.G. Ferrers Howell (London: Rebel Press, 1973), p. 16. As Maria Fumagalli notes the notion of "naturalness" must be qualified. Dante's "natural" vernacular is transform by art into a syncretic mix of various dialects. In the *Convivio*, Dante writes: "As the Vulgar Italian has so many discordant varieties, let us hunt after a more fitting and illustrious Italian language . . . we declare that the Illustrious, Cardinal, Courtly, and Curial Vulgar tongue in Italy is that which belongs to all towns in Italy, but does not appear to belong to any of them; and is that by which all the local dialects of the Italian are measured, weighed and compared" (*Convivio* 42-3). Fumagalli notes that Dante wants to assert that the "illustrious vernacular" should be the language of the court and curia (i.e., a language exalted by training and authority), a language used in a politically decentered Italy with no court and no curia. Since this state of affairs was not a reality for Dante, Fumagalli notes that Dante the "illustrious vernacular" is momentarily in exile.

<sup>54</sup> As I understand it, the "illustrious vernacular" for Dante essentially involves the amalgamation of various local dialects and poetic styles with the hegemonic poetics and linguistics of "high culture" (i.e., literature written in Latin).

<sup>55</sup> Seamus Heaney "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet," *Irish University Review*, 15 (Spring 1985), p. 15. On the qualities of voice in Dante's verse, Heaney writes: "When I began to study Italian and had barely familiarized myself with its phonetics and prosody, I suddenly understood that the centre of gravity of my speech efforts had been moved closer to my lips, to the outer parts of my mouth. The tip of the tongue suddenly turned out to have the seat of honour. . . . And something else that struck me was the infantile aspect of the Italian phonetics, its beautiful child-like quality, its closeness to infant babbling, to some kind of eternal dadaism."

<sup>56</sup> Insofar as this style challenged the mainstream poetics of his day, Dante can be said to be a progenitor of a revolutionary poetics in the *Commedia*.

<sup>57</sup> As de Campos's excellent commentator Viera notes, to transcreate means to derive "nourishment from local sources, nourishment that, at the same time, limits the universality of the original and limits difference."

<sup>58</sup> One is also reminded of the vehement soliloquies of Hamlet's ghost or Milton's Satan. So perhaps it is possible to argue Heaney is also relying upon a voicing technique common to many English-language texts which seek to suggest evil through a kind of serpent-like sibilance.

<sup>59</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Station Island*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, p. 33.

<sup>60</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1992), p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Kinzie, "Deeper Than Declared," *Salmagundi* (Fall 1988), pp. 40.

<sup>62</sup> It is something of a paradox that many of the critics who castigate Heaney for violating the source text and turning *Buile Suibhne* into a simulacrum of his trademark style also accuse him of being a traditional “revivalist” writer, which is to say Heaney is committed to “the backward look” and preoccupied with trying to recover lost origins, a sacred homeland and language, and a lost cultural identity.

<sup>63</sup> Hart, Henry, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1992), pp. 154-55). As Hart notes, such arguments recycle an age-old discussion concerning the issue of artistic freedom versus a kind of pietistic obeisance before the supposed purity and inviolability of “original” source texts. Heaney’s critics might do well to consider Octavio Paz’s reflections on what it means to translate poetry: “Not everyone shares my view, and many modern poets insist that poetry is untranslatable. Perhaps their opinion comes to their inordinate attachment to *verbal matter*, or perhaps they have become trapped in the snare of subjectivity.”

<sup>64</sup> The phrase are Heaney’s; they appear in his discussion of the way besieged twentieth-century poets seem to have made a habit of turning to Dante in times of duress. See Seamus Heaney, “Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet.” *Irish University Review*. 15 (Spring): 5-19.

<sup>65</sup> In Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, the character Eudoxus argues that absence rather than substance is the defining mark not only of Irish culture, but of its literary tradition and poets: “noe monument remaynes of her begynninge and [firste] inhabitinge there; specially havinge bene allwayes without letter, but only bare tradicions of tymes and remembrances of bardes, which use to forge and falsifye every thinge as they liste to please or displease any man.” For the colonizer, the *inauthenticity* of Irish history, monuments, and poets, and particularly, the lack of script-based literature, testifies to the ontological deficiency of Irish culture. (VI 20).

<sup>66</sup> In addition to the specific codings of these quatrain patterns, various parts of the prosimetrum functions according to a specific set of rules and expectations that are peculiar to medieval Irish culture. Prose sections in a Middle Irish prosimetrum, for example, delineate the story’s external narrative events; the verse, which constitutes the greater part of the work, recounts an inward, psychological journey.

<sup>67</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), p. ii. Reading *Sweeney Astray* in tandem with O’Keefe’s translation and the seventeenth-century Middle Irish manuscript belies Heaney’s suggestion that the difference in his translation resides primarily at the tonal level. Although Heaney may have adopted the 1913 edition of the poem as his guide, *Sweeney Astray* diverges from each copy-text far more than his comments suggest.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. In the introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney notes the omission of fourteen stanzas: “Six stanzas have been dropped from Section 16, seven from Section 40, and one from Section 43. In the first case, the material omitted is historical allusion; in the second, obscurity defeated ingenuity; and in the third, I felt that the English poem came to rest better at the penultimate stanza.” It is unclear why Heaney fails to account for the additional four deletions.

<sup>69</sup> Lord quoted in Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), p. 41. “The picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between the preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly told.” Oral version of the medieval tale of *Suibhne Geilt* seem to have followed a transmission pattern similar to the better-known poems studied by Lord. The Middle Irish story was originally transcribed by Irish monks between 1200 and 1500 but drawn from oral versions originating between the seventh and ninth centuries.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. ii.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. iii.

<sup>72</sup> Heaney interview with Seamus Deane, “Unhappy and at Home,” *Crane Bag*, 1.1 (1977), p. 65.

<sup>73</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 202.

<sup>74</sup> For excellent introduction to the *deibidhe* line see Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and The Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 28-36.

<sup>75</sup> Donoghue questions the use of other Ulster dialect words: “cantreds” and “scuts”). Few critics have bothered to ask whether something much greater is gained rather than lost by Heaney’s attempt to infuse the text with the stamp of his own voice as well as a kind of illustrious vernacular drawn from both sides of his linguistic and cultural inheritance.

<sup>76</sup> (P 150).

<sup>77</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xv-xvi.

<sup>78</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxvi.

<sup>79</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>80</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), p. ii.

<sup>81</sup> Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p.vii. As a politico-cultural enterprise founded by Brian Friel and Stephen Rhea in Derry City in 1980 (Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, David Hammond, and Seamus Deane later joined as directors), Field Day's stated aim was "[to] help contribute to the solution of the present [Ulster] crisis by producing analyses of established opinions, myths, and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation (Field Day Theatre Company, 1985, p.vii.). In the introduction to the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, Seamus Deane devotes an extended passage to the issue: "One stereotype of Ireland that has remained effective throughout the twentieth century is that of a country where political violence and the literary arts flourish together in way not emulated (nor sought by) other countries. It is possible to demolish this popular conception, but it is perhaps wiser to wonder at its prevalence and at the elements of reality it contains. If there is an association between violence and writing, how can it be understood?" (*Field Day Anthology*, xxv-xxvi).

<sup>82</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> Heaney's rendition of Section 67 (the scene in which Suibhne enters a leaping contest with the mill-hag) nicely captures the pastiche and burlesque qualities of the original.

<sup>84</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), p. ii.

<sup>85</sup> Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1948), p. 153.

<sup>86</sup> Conor McCarthy, "Language and History in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*," *The Journal of the English Association*, 50.197 (Summer 2001), p. 149. For an excellent introduction to this issue see Alan J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990). pp. 5, 22-26.

Citing the seminal role of Anglo-Saxon texts in the construction of British national identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Frantzen notes that the study of *Beowulf*, in particular, was a key discursive site of British nationalism and imperialism.

<sup>87</sup> Joseph McGowan, "Heaney, Caedmon, *Beowulf*," *New Hibernia Review/ Iris Eireannach Nua*, 6:2 (Summer/Samhradh, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>88</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>89</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1980), pp. 53, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xv-xvi.

<sup>91</sup> Being only modest proficient in reading Old English and poorly versed in Anglo-Saxon metrics, I defer to the experts on this point. One of Heaney's toughest critics, Nicholas Howe, a noted Anglo-Saxonist, writes: "Of the sixty or so translators who have done the complete poem into English, only two have had any larger literary reputation.

<sup>92</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. xxviii.

<sup>93</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. xxviii.

<sup>94</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. xxiii.

<sup>95</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>96</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. xxvii.

<sup>97</sup> Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28, 2000, pp. 32-37.

<sup>98</sup> At least two other critics have recently debated the merits of Heaney's decision to insert Irish words. In a discussion of this matter, Conor McCarthy argues the terms descriptive of Gaelic society are "suggestive of a comparable social structure" and "perhaps of the historical links between Gaelic and Scandinavian society." Viewed in this light, the poem's exploration of the themes vengeance and blood feuds could well be read as an extension of similar themes in the bog poems (see Chapter 3). But viewed in terms of Heaney's abiding concern with a creating a *re-presentational* poetic, these occurrence of the Irish seem to be more concerned with rewriting the story of *Beowulf* and indeed the story of the English and Irish languages in terms of the same type of radical history from below that we saw earlier in Heaney's "Bog Oak" and his revival of the *dinnseanchas* tradition.

<sup>99</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xiv.

<sup>100</sup> Joseph McGowan, "Heaney, Caedmon, *Beowulf*," *New Hibernia Review/ Iris Eireannach Nua*, 6:2 (Summer/Samhradh, 2002), p. 39.

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<sup>101</sup> Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28, 2000, pp. 32-37. Significantly, no mention is made of Heaney's attempt to cast the voice of the poem in an Ulster accent and the peculiar speech patterns of this version of Hiberno-English. Other reviewers similarly fail to treat this aspect of voicing in the poem.

<sup>102</sup> Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28, 2000, p. 34

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36. In describing Heaney use of dialect as counterproductive and "polemically" inspired, Howe puts forth some rather obvious objections: "the original does not use words from one specific dialect to make a larger political and poetic claim." But the real issue for Howe seems to be a concern with safeguarding the English language from the corrupting influence of dialect. Heaney's "Ulsterisms" simply do not belong in the text because they do not circulate widely "in the Standard English of either England or North America." The response to this would have to be that previous translations which have shown a prejudice in favor of Anglo-Saxon diction and Standard English make a political claim as well.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>106</sup> For a helpful note on the role of the alliterating *g* in the opening lines of the original, see *Beowulf: With the Finnsburg Fragment*, ed. C.L. Wrenn and W.F. Bolton, (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1988), p. 97, note 2. Contrary to Howe's claim that Heaney's opening "levels the diction" and "flattens their claim on the audience," I would argue these lines have quite the opposite effect. Indeed, when read aloud (as Heaney's translation ought to be read), even a British or North American pronunciation will reproduce some of the elaborate sound system Heaney has erected here.

<sup>107</sup> O'Donoghue, Bernard. *Seamus Heaney and The Language of Poetry* (New York:

Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 150. O'Donoghue is correct to say "apparently." The notion of unmediated representation is of course a contradiction in terms; Heaney knows this all too well and he plays off this fact. His explorations of the subject of representation demonstrate a solid appreciation of the fact that experience is always mediated in language and that literary language and artifice poetic artifice, no matter how transparent it may be, thickens the mediation.

<sup>108</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words," in *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 45.

<sup>109</sup> Beyond Howe's focus on what he sees as the inappropriate "flatness" of Heaney's Ulsterisms, much of his beef with Heaney's opening stems from the well-placed criticism that Heaney's opening diminishes the "ceremonial" quality of the original opening. For Howe, such a leveling occurs at the grammatical, and syntactical level (Heaney splits single grammatical units into two parts). As a result, Howe prefers the kind of rendering recently served up by the scholar Roy Michael Liuzza, exemplified by his version of lines 1-3: "Listen! We have heard of the glory in bygone days / of the folk-kings of the Spear-Danes, / how these noble lords did lofty deeds" (qtd in Howe, p. 34).

<sup>110</sup> Seamus Heaney (trans), *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxxi.

<sup>111</sup> *Seamus Heaney, The Redress of Poetry*, p. 202

<sup>112</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 38-9.

## Epilogue

### “The End of Art Is Peace”

Where do we situate Heaney on the basis of his *poetic* response to the problem of violence? Throughout this essay, I have argued that Heaney's efforts in this regard have contributed to the production of an impressively diverse and innovative body of poetry and translation, an oeuvre rich in implication and nuance. On balance, Heaney's attempt to redistribute the whole field of cultural and political force into a more tolerable order has been largely successful. In holding this view, I am not alone. A diverse group of influential critics from a broad spectrum of ideological orientations have also praised Heaney's handling of the Northern Irish conflict. Among Heaney's best-known champions are Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, Helen Vendler, Declan Kiberd, and Harold Bloom. In readings of select collections and poems, each of these critics holds up Heaney's work as an enduring example of poetry that is at once aesthetically sophisticated and socially responsible. That Heaney has done this during a period of tremendous socio-political upheaval is a testament to his achievement. Writing in the early 1980s, Seamus Deane, for example, points to Heaney's capacity to put poetry to work as a force for good in Northern Ireland's war-torn society. Deane calls Heaney's work a "revision of our heritage," one that "is changing our conception of what writing can be because it is facing up to what writing, to remain authentic, must always face – the

confrontation with the ineffable, the unspeakable thing for which 'violence' is our helplessly inadequate word."<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, Heaney's verse consistently instances a well-measured, yet powerful response to hegemonic brutality and sectarian strife. This essay amounts to nothing more than an extended attempt to document this claim. I have thus provided a diachronic formal and linguistic analysis of Heaney's poetic of violence. In detailing the critically under-represented story of Heaney's evolving poetic, I have sought to trace the causal relation between Heaney's formal and socio-linguistic concerns and the brutal conditions from which much of his work emerges. From the beginning, it has been my belief that the singular merits of Heaney's attempt to deploy poetry as a form of counterviolence does not rest solely on its political consequence. As such, I have resisted a tendency present in much of the extant Heaney criticism to de-emphasize textual and formal analysis in favor of readings aimed at teasing out political meanings and implications. Rather, from the outset I have contended we cannot begin to adjudicate the socio-political significance of Heaney's poetry or assess its impact on collective behavior before attending to the sources of the poetry itself.

My diachronic reading of Heaney's on-going experiments with poetic artifice and the art of translation suggests that he continuously pushes the aesthetic envelope in his search for befitting emblems of adversity. Through an evolving and sometimes dramatic series of stylistic and formal makeovers, Heaney repeatedly performs the Yeatsian trick of remaking himself and his poetry into something radically different and new. In his first two pre-conflict collections, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), Heaney ostensibly adopts neither the tone nor the subject matter of a typical

anticolonial poet. Apart from its extensive concern with rural Irish themes and its mildly subversive insertion of prosodic effects drawn from classical Gaelic poetry such as the use of *deibidhe* rhymes, the highly conventional and generally apolitical pre-conflict poetry seems to reveal a poetic sensibility primarily concerned with carving out a niche in the English lyric tradition. This search for poetic identity is usually informed by a congenial and fluent negotiation of numerous strands of the English lyric tradition.

Once conflict erupted in 1969, however, Heaney began developing a variety of formal and rhetorical strategies in an effort to outface the violent legacy of colonialism. In this regard, I have occasionally documented the similarities between Heaney's poetic of violence and the hybrid and dialogic strategies of a number of anticolonial poets and translators. Indeed, as the Northern Irish death toll escalated and atrocity became an everyday word in the Ulster lexicon in the early 1970s, Heaney began putting his original verse and translations to work in an anticolonial project of cultural resistance, historical recovery, formal hybridity, and linguistic reinscription. In opposition to the overwhelming brutality and oppression that characterized this conflict, Heaney set out in this period "to make the English lyric eat stuff that it has never eaten before . . . like all the messy, and it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North."<sup>2</sup>

In a fashion reminiscent of much anticolonial poetry, Heaney's work in the 1970s and 1980s often works against the grain of received English forms and language by parodying, subverting, and transforming the prosodic and linguistic mainstays of the English lyric tradition. In many poems, Heaney inscribes cultural and ideological resistance into the very sinews and bones of his verse, its structural and formal qualities. In this regard, Heaney's formal experiments become a poetic version of Mikhail

Bakhtin's notion of "artistic hybridization," instances of formal and linguistic dialogism whereby Heaney transforms his experience of external violence while simultaneously providing alternatives to the discourse of colonialism in poems which serve as "intentional hybrids" meant to dialogically set different "socio-linguistic points of view" against each other.<sup>3</sup>

The result of Heaney's hybrid experiments and adaptations is a rich and potent answer to the problem of violence. In this regard, Heaney's verse not only addresses specific moments and events pertaining to the Ulster conflict, but also a whole set of violent mechanisms which underpin and perpetuate a culture of violence endemic in certain segments of Ulster society, as well as the violent practices of Northern Ireland's government. In some of his finest poems, Heaney works various elements of poetic artifice into a powerful field of force that resists even the most injurious external pressures engendered by the conflict. To the same end, Heaney gradually adds a tactical use of a potent anti-pastoralism and a highly personalized and hybridized practice of translation to do battle against political and cultural violence.

While many Irish writers have frequently taken violence as their subject matter, no contemporary Irish poet rivals Heaney efforts to integrate his vision and understanding of violence into the internal workings of poetry. In Heaney's poetics of violence, various patterns of artifice sometimes imaginatively enact at the formal and linguistic level the poet's conceptual and emotional response to external and internal conflict. At other junctures, Heaney's lineation, imagery, rhythmic phrasing, and syntax may act as a kind of temporary stay against destruction and confusion (to borrow a phrase from one of the poet's major influences, Robert Frost), with each of these elements conspiring to contain

and even momentarily stop dead in its tracks all sorts of violence on and off the page. At still other moments, Heaney goes on the offensive by assaulting and exploding some of the very forms and structures of prosodic and linguistic artifice behind which the agents of colonialism have taken cover as they have taken over. In various ways, then, scores of Heaney poems and translations create a kind of sovereign space in which a consciousness can perhaps catch its breath, confront the humiliations and depravations of oppression, or, in some cases, simply enjoy the palliative of a brief lyric reprieve from the ravages of quotidian violence.

The full import of what it has meant for Heaney to turn the lyric and translation into a productive means of responding to the Ulster conflict and the legacy of colonialism has not been fully recognized in the criticism. If Heaney's formal and linguistic achievement has been noteworthy, so has the pressure that has been brought to bear on him in aesthetic and personal terms. For most of his career, Heaney, like all citizens of Ulster, was touched and changed by what he aptly describes in his Nobel acceptance speech as "a quarter-century of life waste and spirit waste." The threat of Republican and Loyalist campaigns of indiscriminate murders and bombings of civilians was exacerbated the pressure of state-sponsored violence such as the Bloody Sunday massacre and the impositions of armed occupation. For nearly three decades, Ireland buckled under the strain of a relentless cycle of sectarian murders, paramilitary bombings, and counterattacks, resulting in the loss of thousands of innocent lives. Like most other citizens of Ulster Heaney has been affected by this national tragedy; he has lost several friends, relatives, and acquaintances to this relentless cycle of violence. Moreover, his work has sparked the ire of paramilitaries and separatist on both side of the sectarian

divide, some of whom have taken such exception to his views on violence they have seen fit to levy death threats against this lyric poet.

Through all of this personal and communal upheaval, Heaney has sometimes joined his critics in questioning his motivation for writing violence into his verse. In what is perhaps the best answer to his staunchest detractors, specifically those who question his political and poetic allegiance, Heaney has said, "I just don't know why I'm hesitating to say violence is a . . . legitimate subject . . . I think that the greatest poetry gazes upon it as a factor in human experience, recognizes it as deplorable, but then somehow must outface the deplorable or at least gaze levelly at the deplorable and put it in its place." Heaney's reservations, as well as his ultimate willingness to tackle the problem of violence, are a unique reflection of his own sensitivities and concerns, but they are not altogether uncommon in contemporary Irish poetry.

A number of his Northern Irish colleagues have grappled with crises of conscience and representation similar to those faced by Heaney. The verse and prose works of a number of contemporary Irish poets, and particularly Ulster poets, are deeply inflected with a troubled and ambivalent sense of the need to respond in some way to the Northern Irish conflict. This work often reflects a dual awareness of the responsibility and dangers inherent in negotiating the vexed intersection between violence, politics, and literature in Irish society. Heaney's longtime friend Paul Muldoon, for example, betrays a painful awareness of the imperatives and pitfalls confronting Irish poets faced with the problem of how to address the recent Irish conflict in their work: "The trouble with this place (Northern Ireland) is that if you don't engage in it, you're an ostrich, (whatever 'engage' it means). If you do engage in it, you're using it as a kind of—you're on the make

almost, cashing in.”<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Muldoon is not unlike most Northern Irish poets of the last three decades, including Heaney.

Other Northern Irish poets have been equally circumspect in their treatment of the latest round of “Troubles.” Michael Longley, a highly regarded Belfast poet and friend of Heaney’s, has approached the subject of Northern Irish violence with considerable trepidation. In this regard, Longley says of the dilemma facing most Irish poets: “[it]uld be inhuman if he did not respond to tragic events in his own community. . . . I [myself] have written a few inadequate elegies out of bewilderment and despair. I offer them as wreaths. That is all.”

In contrast to Longley’s understandable reluctance to respond poetically to the conflict, another close friend of Heaney’s, Derek Mahon, has perhaps come closest to approximating the intensity of Heaney poetic of violence. In poems like “A Disused She in Co. Wexford,” which is arguably the best Irish poem of violence to emerge during the past thirty years, Mahon has created an impressive body of verse dealing with the issue of violence. In this work, writes Seamus Deane, Mahon exceeds “[Louis] MacNeice in his capacity to transmit, through a simple catalogue of things, a sense of dread . . . For Mahon’s essential landscape is Belfast and he constantly turns it, in poem after poem, into a bombed site, a vision of what it will all be like when the war is over and only the rubble has a voice.”<sup>5</sup>

The work of Heaney’s contemporaries reveals an intense struggle to articulate the conflict and crises engendered in the process of Irish decolonization. Calling the work of these writers some of the most powerful poetry to come out of post-World War II Ireland, Heaney identifies the poetry of his Northern Irish colleagues an effort to bring about a

redistribution of "the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order."<sup>6</sup>

In writing this, Heaney could just as well be describing his own work.

As a means of assessing the significance of Heaney's poetry of violence and that of his friends I return to another commentary on contemporary Northern Irish poetry quoted earlier in this essay, the 1984 monograph *Place and Displacement*. In this essay "Heaney discusses at length "the profound relation ... between poetic technique and historical situation," likening the work of contemporary Northern Irish writers and their response to "violent conditions" to the crises of conscience and representation that earlier lyric poets such as William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot found themselves confronting during the French Revolutionary period and the First World War respectively. For Heaney one of the great achievements of poems such as Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* is their ability to turn the "trauma of individual consciousness" into something more than just a reflection of "forces at work in the collective life." When it comes to the best work of Northern Irish poets this is also the mark of distinction. Mahon's "A Disused She in Co. Wexford," and Longley's "Self-heal" are memorable for their capacity to transform "an apparently intolerable conflict" into a form of "higher consciousness." Insofar as such consciousness is embodied in formal and linguistic qualities of great complexity and density, Heaney argues ultimately that "it is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets" to conceive of their lyric stances as "evasions of the actual conditions," as many critics are wont to suggest.<sup>7</sup> In short, Heaney suggests and demonstrates in this reading of contemporary Northern Irish poetry as well as his own work is that the development of new poetic language and form is often

spurred by the need to address violent external circumstances in a manner that maintains both political and artistic integrity.

What emerges in an extended reading of Heaney's poetry of violence is a sense that he has sought to emulate the procedures he sees at work in his contemporaries's poetry. From the earliest stages of the conflict Heaney began developing a commitment to balancing a sense of poetry as "mode of redress" (a means of "proclaiming and correcting injustices") with a commitment to redressing "poetry as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means."<sup>8</sup> It is precisely the tensions created by these conceptions of poetry's force and function that I have explored in this examination of Heaney's poetics of violence.

By focusing on Heaney's concrete poetic, I have sought to identify and articulate the various ways in which external conflict insinuates itself into the poetic imagination and then translates itself into a unique postcolonial voice and vision. At various points, but on a much smaller scale, I have also suggested that a similar process might be at work in the writings of earlier embattled poets with whom Heaney comes into contact. In this regard, Heaney brings his own experience of intense civil strife into a significant relation with the literature of violence produced by Virgil during the Republican Wars, Spenser during native Irish insurrections of 1598, and the exiled Dante during the Guelf and Ghibelline conflict. Since my efforts to detail Heaney's relation to other embattled poets, both past and present, has been rather limited, this aspect of his corpus certainly warrants further study.

My attempt to underscore the relation between socio-political violence and the production of art is not an advancement of a simplistic or reductive argument that armed

conflict alone causes poetry, nor is it meant to suggest that violence is the only impetus for the emergence of Heaney's aesthetic. Poets do, of course, develop aesthetic principles and practices for a myriad of reasons. But if it is impossible to single out definitively the prime impetus behind an aesthetic trend in any given poet's work, there are nonetheless certain signposts that mark distinctive stylistic and thematic shifts in interest. Insofar as I have pointed out potential connections between Heaney aesthetics and the politics of violence, I have tried to answer the initial question with which I began this dissertation. There I quoted Seamus Deane's still-highly relevant and somewhat neglected question which begins the *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*: "One stereotype of Ireland . . . is that of a country where political violence and the literary arts flourish together in ways not emulated (nor sought by) other countries. It is possible to demolish this popular conception, but it is perhaps wiser to wonder at its prevalence and at the elements of reality it contains. If there is an association between violence and writing, how can it be understood?"<sup>9</sup>

My attempt to detail the relation between external forms of violence and Heaney's poetry has led me to dwell not simply on the success stories, but also to reflect on some of the poet's more conflicted poems, pieces which reflect the various personal, political, and aesthetic pressures that were brought to bear on Heaney. On this score, it should be noted that some of his most uneven poems are rarely considered in the criticism. Such a consideration, however, has essential for establishing a measure by which to judge his achievement in the face of brutality and years of protracted conflict. As I have suggested, Heaney gradually developed a variety of highly complex formal and rhetorical strategies that enabled him to transform his sense of outrage and dismay into powerful lyric

moments, but the poetic and political challenges of transforming his experience of violence into verse often had the effect of destabilizing his trademark lyric voice in the early phase of the conflict.

The highly conflicted, increasingly dialogic, and sometimes manic character of Heaney's work during this period becomes apparent in a number of highly provocative, but rather uneven poems published during this period. In blistering satirical pieces such as "Craig's Dragoon's" and "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," Heaney's "awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance" becomes quite evident. These poems and a number of other early anticolonial statements such as the bog cycle and Heaney's translation drafts of *Buile Suibhne* demonstrate the extent to which Heaney is often confounded, and sometimes even stumped, by the problem of translating his antipathy to violence and colonialism into poetry. At times, this early poetry of violence seems to buckle under the strain of having to live and write during a time of unspeakable atrocity and brutality. As such, it instances the tension between Heaney's abiding concern with maintaining the integrity of poetic expression and the need for explicit political statement in the face of socio-political injustices and intense armed conflict.

In an attempt to understand Heaney's sometimes-Byzantine poetic maneuvers and stratagems, I have frequently foregrounded my discussion of key poems and collection with a survey of the "field poetics," the discussion concerning the function of literature in Irish society and the debate over the intersection between poetry and violence. In this regard, I have naturally privileged the Irish critical reception. Dissenting from the more favorable readings of critics like Deane and Kiberd, many of Heaney's detractors

variously complain that his work not only lacks artistic merit, but that it engages in the wrong kind of politics or no politics at all. Beginning in the early 1970s, a number of influential Irish critics branded Heaney as Ireland's "laureate of violence . . . an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for the 'situation', in the last resort, a mystifier."<sup>10</sup> In scathing reviews and essays directed at the collection *North*, critics such as O'Brien, Longley, and Carson attacked Heaney's work, citing it as a particularly crude and dangerous instance of the "unhealthy intersection" between poetry, nationalism, and violence. More recently, Robert McLiam Wilson mocked the poet's reception of the Nobel Prize because, in his view, Heaney has always been given to partisanship. Heaney fails to respond to the conflict with "ethical depth," writes Wilson, because "he has not spoken to both traditions in this divided island. . . . [he] has left out that unpoetic stuff, that very actual mess."<sup>11</sup> Others like Desmond Fennel contend just the opposite: "[Heaney's poetry] says nothing, plainly or figuratively, about the war, about any of the three main parties to it, or about the issues at stake . . . [Heaney] says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight which we hardly need to read poetry for."<sup>12</sup>

Several influential postcolonial critics, many of whom hail from Ireland and Britain, have recently joined the fray over Heaney's lyric poetry. Heaney's poetry has been alternately described as nationalist/anticolonial or as derivative from and therefore complicit with imperial aesthetics. Despite Heaney's statements concerning his commitment to an anticolonial/antiviolence agenda and a solid body of textual support for his claims, critics like David Lloyd challenges the notion that Heaney is a major voice of decolonization. Instead he calls Heaney a "minor" regional poet because his lyrics so

often conform to the poetics of the Movement lyric (the “well-made poem” of the 1950s and 1960s). In contrast, others such as Deane and Kiberd counter critics like Lloyd. Kiberd, for example, claims that no Irish postcolonial artist “since Synge has given a fuller account of the relation between poetry and violence, and that in a period when such accounts have been simplified into mere polemics.”<sup>13</sup>

In this essay, I have tried to suggest that the confusion over the status of Heaney’s postcoloniality may stem, at least in part, from an unwillingness on the part of the poet’s detractors to acknowledge a key paradox in Heaney’s approach to postcolonial nationalism, his ironic use of self-projections that were at least partly created by the colonial power.<sup>14</sup> In his first two collections, and in more subtle ways in subsequent collections, Heaney knowingly plays the part of the subaltern country bumpkin and simple Irish pastoralist. His ironic appropriation of colonial forms and language extends to poems in which he mocks the cultural stock-in-trade of revolutionary Irish nationalism. Particularly in the bog poems, Heaney undermines the kind of aestheticization of violence practiced by armed force nationalism. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, explode the myth of regenerative violence and exposes the ruse of couching the doctrine of blood sacrifice in mythic and prettified pastoral terms. Too few postcolonial critics have sought to understand this aspect of Heaney’s critique of violence and colonialism.

The confusion over Heaney’s postcoloniality stems from other reasons as well, many of which are indicative of the postcolonial field in general. In the first instance, there is in many postcolonial readings of Heaney’s work a persistent insensitivity to the dialogic potential of the poet’s formal and linguistic experiments. Secondly, Heaney’s postcolonial critics tend to allow abstract theoretical concerns to take precedence over

more down-to-earth considerations pertaining to historical context and textual materiality. I can understand the first tendency but take exception to it; the second, however, is beyond comprehension.

The first tendency seems to stem from the fact that we have spent the past fifty years fleeing the excesses and myopia of the New Criticism. Such corrections have generated a new kind of myopia, one that inordinately favors “identity politics and content galore,” in the words of one scholar, a myopia that dismisses any consideration of formalism as atavistic and complicit in hegemonic norms. Is this position warranted? If we elide formal considerations from our readings of postcolonial poets like Heaney, Derek Walcott, Césaire, and Dambudzo Marechera, then what are we left with? What else but considerations of poetic artifice will move us closer to an informed and accurate adjudication of these poet’s work.

As critics such as Jonathan Culler, John Brenkman, and Johnathan Arac have demonstrated, the study of form need not be antithetical to understanding the material conditions from which any given poem emerges. Recent research into the history of the lyric shows more and more “that society and politics shape the very project of a poet’s work and the inner dynamics of poetic language itself.”<sup>15</sup> Working from the assumption that we must begin asking how politics and history are inscribed within a poem rather than outside it, I have tried to strike a judicious balance between form and content. At various points my reading may appear quite similar to the New Critical analyses of Allen Tate, W. K. Wimsatt, and Cleanth Brooks, but it diverges significantly from the rigid aestheticism and ahistorical approach of the New Critics. In considering issues pertaining to textual instability, authorial intention, and the material page, I have resisted

the temptation to consider Heaney's poems and translations as isolated art objects. I have also been mindful that the kind of formalism espoused and practiced by T.S. Eliot and Robert Penn, for example, offers what is no doubt a necessary corrective to the tendency to read all contemporary poems as autobiographical statements of fact. To read Heaney as a straight confessional poet is to divert our attention from his deft manipulation of issues such as lyric subjectivity and speaking voice. While I certainly do not subscribe to a strait New Critical understanding of the lyric "persona," which New Criticism made such a major part of critical vocabulary, I do argue for the maintenance of some sense of the role of voice as a rhetorical figure. In this regard, we have seen how subtle, fluid, and artfully opportunistic Heaney's deployment of voice has been in a diverse set of poetic contexts ranging from the bog cycle to his translation of *Beowulf*. For various reasons, then, I believe postcolonial readings of Heaney's anticolonial lyric poetry will only benefit from a balanced consideration of both form and content. Only a judicious mix of the two will provide sufficiently limber and adequate readings of a poet as complex and challenging as Heaney.

Placing Heaney under the postcolonial microscope has paid dividends beyond my imagining. Despite Denis Donoghue's protest concerning the appropriateness of considering Ireland as a postcolonial society, certain aspects of the postcolonial perspective have, in fact, elucidated rather than obscured my appreciation of Heaney's response to various forms of (post)colonial violence. Employing the discipline's rich vocabulary and incisive critical lens for exploring how physical force violence and a variety of psychological, epistemological, and cultural forces are directed against the colonial other (from the top down and from the bottom up), I have found the postcolonial

paradigm a flexible, yet productive critical framework for examining Heaney's poetic response to the Northern Irish crisis. Many of the particular forms and moments of violence to which Heaney responds in his writing can clearly be categorized under the postcolonial rubric. Additionally, many aspects of Heaney's poetics of violence resemble to a remarkable degree the hybrid and dialogic strategies of a number of anticolonial poets and translators. Finally, the postcolonial paradigm has assisted me in identifying some of the overarching concerns relevant to postcolonial poets, novelists, and dramatists alike— concerns such as the problems of cultural dispossession and recovery, the deterritorialization of language, the function of minority literature, and the role of radical historicity and dialect in subaltern literatures.

There is much more postcolonial work to be done with regard to Heaney's writing, the work of other Irish poets, and the anomalous status of Irish postcoloniality. For my part, I have become particularly interested in teasing out the connection between Irish and Greek postcoloniality. With the help of Vassilios Lambropoulos, I have recently begun to see a distinct Greek-Irish connection in Heaney's work. For years, Heaney has had a growing fascination with Greek literature, both ancient & modern. He has also commented extensively on the troubled history of Greece, the only other European country which shares the kind of postcolonial anguish still prevalent in Ireland. In addition he has translated translating Sophocles's *Antigone* and *Philoctetes* (*The Cure at Troy*), work that has received far too little scholarly attention. In addition, Heaney has lectured and written extensively about the Greek poet George Seferis and C.P. Cavafy.

All of which suggests that it might be profitable to look at these Greek poet's and their country as a kind of foil to Heaney's experience and the case of Irish

postcoloniality. This would provide a sound basis for expanding my study of Heaney into a viable monograph in which I could pair the material from this doctoral project with two or three chapters on Heaney's interaction with these important Greek poets of witness. Beyond the literary connections, such a combined study would perhaps be a welcome addition to the postcolonial and Irish studies. This is especially true since the Greco-Irish connection figures prominently in Yeats and Joyce and resurfaces in contemporary Irish poets such as Heaney, Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, and Evan Boland with equal strength and remarkable post-colonial resonance.

### **Final Conclusions and Observations**

Considering the diverse range of responses to Heaney's poetry of violence, one walks away with several distinct impressions. Perhaps the most striking observation is that the debate over the relation between poetry and violence in Irish society in recent decades remains nearly as vexing as it was eighty decades ago when W.B. Yeats gravely asked in "Man and the Echo," "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot? / Did words of mine put too great strain / On that woman's reeling brain? / Could my spoken words have checked / That whereby a house lay wrecked?"<sup>16</sup> Posed in his inimitable style and a typical rhetorical reliance on a series of unanswered self-interrogations, the gist of Yeats's question continues to resonate in discussions surrounding Heaney's poetry of violence, for this is a question essentially concerned with the relationship between creative literature, violence, and the politics of decolonization.

If Heaney has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the proposition of gazing at the deplorable and outfacing it, it is no less true that he, like Yeats before him, often

wrestles with a nagging self-consciousness concerning the role of violence in his work. This often causes him to question the wisdom of repeatedly, and some would charge obsessively, making violence the focus of one's writing. In several poems, Heaney self-reflexively suggests he might indeed be seen as a kind of subaltern Hamlet, one who plays the role of the disenfranchised antagonist, a foil to the violence of the crown and malicious elements in the kingdom, a subaltern spoiler who sometime exact a small measure of social and political justice, but one who is no less a "a feeder of battlefields ... [a] skull-handler, parablist, smeller of rot / in the state, infused / with its poisons, / pinioned by ghosts and affections, / murders and pieties, / coming to consciousness / by jumping in graves, / dithering, blathering."

In more sober moments, Heaney's concerns over the adequacy of his response to the Northern Irish conflict take on a tone much closer to the gravity of Yeats's famous question. In numerous prose and interview statements, Heaney expresses serious concern over the charge that his verse is irresponsible or that it somehow connives in "the exact tribal revenge" because it sometimes seeks to understand the motivations for brutality even as it works to the baleful effects of it. In this regard, Heaney has increasingly become wary of

writing anything that, in the cause of truth telling, is an exacerbation [to violence]. . . . So the second demand that arises is that you beware of the fallout of your words, and perhaps I've been unduly aware of that, of the relationship between lyric and life, of the responsibility for what you say. Geoffrey Hill has three lines in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy*, "Must men stand by what they write / as by their camp-beds or their weaponry / or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?" In other words, do you have to take responsibility for the effect of your work? And in the North of Ireland, I think the answer is yes.<sup>17</sup>

What is often at stake, then, for Heaney and his predecessor Yeats, is a sense that the poet as public in Ireland must approach the issues of violence and decolonization with a certain measure of responsibility and accountability, if not trepidation. Such a view of the poet's role in Irish society is not the result of misplaced egotism or an unrealistic sense of poetry's importance; it stems rather from the recognition that in the Irish context poetry becomes, as Heaney notes, its own "force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance."<sup>18</sup> This is to say, poetry matters in Irish public discourse. This notion of course contradicts Auden's famous quip that "poetry makes nothing happen" (a phrase that by the way appears in Auden's elegy for Yeats). Poetry matters in Irish society not just because it fuels conversations conducted in scholarly journals and graduate seminars. It matters because it participates in and contributes to the discourse of decolonization, which is carried out in op-ed pieces and in the conversation of common citizens in Belfast and Dublin pubs.

Over the past four decades, Heaney's work has been at the heart of many such discussions. That his writing has been imbricated in such public conversation is borne out not by the criticism alone, but also by the very public fora in which Heaney frequently publishes both his poetry and journalism pieces. That non-academics take his poetry seriously, sometimes for the most wrongheaded reasons, is made clear by the fact that Heaney has been ostracized by certain segments of Ulster society and subjected to death threats for telling the truth as he sees it. The unusually vehement public reactions to Heaney's poetry of violence and his public "political" statements (such as his signing the book of condolences at the British Embassy in Dublin after the IRA murdered

Ambassador Ewart-Biggs in 1976) suggest that poetry does in fact make things happen in Ireland.

I raise these points at the end of this study in order to suggest that perhaps a refocusing and refinement of our perspective on the role of poetry in the process of Irish decolonization is warranted. I certainly do not mean to overemphasize the importance of poetry as a socio-political force in Irish society, nor do I wish to turn the study of Heaney's poetry into a discussion of identity politics alone. Rather, I wish to provide the kind of perspective on the nature and function of poetry in Irish society that Heaney has variously provided in his essays and lectures. For his part, Heaney has never been one to overestimate the social and political function of poetry. He knows its unique limitations as well as its potential.

In the final analysis, it is important to note poetry's unique limitations and potential to act as a force for good. On this score, I shall defer to Heaney's discussion concerning the efficacy of lyric poetry in the essay "The Government of the Tongue." There Heaney reflects at length on the necessity and apparent absurdity of writing poetry in a time of intense violence. Discussing T.S. Eliot's misgivings about the value of his work on "Little Gidding" in wartime London, Heaney notes the irony facing any writer who takes pen in hand in the face of such extreme adversity: "Here is the great paradox of poetry and the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil -- no lyric has ever stopped a tank. ... In another sense, it [poetry's efficacy] is unlimited. It is like [Jesus's] writing in the sand in the face of

which [his Pharisee] accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.”<sup>19</sup> Here Heaney alludes to Chapter Eight of John’s Gospel in which a woman caught in the act of adultery is dragged before Jesus and is called to answer for her crime. Writing in the sand, the rebel Jesus diffuses the perilous situation, saving the woman from certain violent death by stoning. For Heaney, the act of writing in the sand thus corresponds to poetry’s unique capacity for outfacing violence:

The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, “Now the solution will take place”, it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.

Here Heaney suggests that while poetry may serve to corroborate his statement in “The Harvest Bow,” the “*the end of art is peace*,” it also becomes, like the silent writing in the sand, its own form of quiet “violence,” a staring back from the point of view of the subaltern rebel, a staring back which concentrates the gaze of the oppressed on the oppressor. In doing so it cunningly and artfully checks all sorts of hatred, injustice, and abuses of power. Indeed, Heaney’s poetry of violence becomes a kind of writing in the sand, and herein rests his singular contribution as a voice of decolonization.

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## Notes to Epilogue

<sup>1</sup> See Seamus Deane's essay "The Timorous and the Bold" in *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 180. Deane argues that Heaney's poetic after *North* productively opened up new ways of dealing with the crisis. Kiberd largely shares this sentiment. While he is rightly critical of certain lyrics which are "too patently allusive" ("too obviously destined for the university seminar") in their treatment of political and sexual violence, Kiberd contends that the strength of Heaney's response to the conflict resides in its "great middle range," and it is there that Heaney most effectively "answers the Irish experience in his generation."

<sup>2</sup> See interview in *Irish Times*, 28 Dec, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 298-362.

<sup>4</sup> Muldoon qtd in Edna Longley "A Reply" *Crane Bag*, 9:1 (1985), 121. Abandoning his early strategy for negotiating his experience of violence through indirection or outright denial, Muldoon's approach to dealing with the vexed issue of Irish politics and violence was to resort to a strategy of cunning, exile, and periodic silence. After permanently resettling in the U.S. to write transnational/postmodern poems, however, Muldoon has frequently broken his silence about Irish violence in poetry that combines wonderfully bizarre mix of materials to speak figuratively about the conflict (elements from the Celtic *immram*- quest journey – Winnebago Indian myths and the adventures of IRA gunmen in Belfast).

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Deane, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 189; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (R 189).

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement* (Cumbria, England: Frank Peters, 1984), p. 7. The rest of Heaney's commentary on this point is worth quoted, for it reflects his abiding belief that "formal concerns are never just about form": "Their [Northern Irish poets] concern with poetry itself wears well when we place it beside the protest poetry of the sixties: the density of their verbal world has held up, the purely poetic force of the words is the guarantee of a commitment which need not apologise for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating. To attune it within the pit of their own consciousness, of course, not in the arena of dustbin lids and shoot-to-kill operations" (p. 7).

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), pp. xxv-xxvi.

<sup>10</sup> For these remarks see Ciaran Carson's "'Escaped from the Massacre?'," *The Honest Ulsterman*, 76 (Winter 1975), 183-85.

<sup>11</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, "The Glittering Prize", *Fortnight*, 344 (Nov. 1995), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> See Desmond Fennel, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991, pp. 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> See Declan Kiberd's impressive history of modern Irish literature and culture *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 596. Kiberd makes the point about Heaney and violence in a brief, but nonetheless perspicacious overview of the poet's career.

<sup>14</sup> Raphael Ingelbien, "Decolonizing Ireland/England? Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes," in Deborah Fleming's (ed.) *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> John Brenkman, "The Concrete Utopia of Poetry: Blake's 'A Poison Tree,'" in *Lyric Poetry*, (ed.) Patricia Parker, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> In these lines Yeats is, of course, acknowledging the political force of his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, a dramatic commemoration of the 1798 rebellion and celebration of heroic blood sacrifice for the rejuvenation of the Irish national spirit. Co-opted by physical force nationalists, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* became such a central political text for those seeking to overthrow British colonial rule in Ireland that Yeats was tormented by the possibility that he bore some responsibility for the actions of the fifteen martyrs of sent to the gallows for their role in the ill-fated Easter Rising.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview printed in Thomas Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Heaney in a 1979 interview with James Randall (*Ploughshares*, 19-20).

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988), p. 107.

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