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"VOWELS PLOUGHED INTO OTHER: OPENED GROUND": DIGGING THROUGH HISTORY IN THE HAUNTED LANDSCAPES OF SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY

Abstract

For the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, developing a sense of place is both a physical and spiritual experience. His poems explore his sensory delight in the landscape, its natural beauties and innate sense of freedom allowing him the space within which to develop his poetic imagination. Defining his identity through space also enables Heaney to transcend time, the marks made by different generations on the landscape turning it into a multi-layered text in which present realities and past experiences can coexist. For a Catholic nationalist growing up in the contested territory of Northern Ireland, the landscape offers Heaney a conduit to the pre-colonial past where there was a mystical linguistic harmony between the land and its inhabitants, a bond dissolved by the experience of colonialism, leaving the community feeling displaced and somewhat fractured. Heaney's aim as a poet is to employ his pen as a metaphorical shovel to dig through the layers of signifiers suffusing the landscape and reconnect with his spiritual roots. This paper explores the complex relationship Heaney has with the landscape of his childhood home in Northern Ireland. Although he is deeply emotionally and spiritually rooted in the landscape, he is also alert to the contentious, divided history that is ever-present in the placenames and borders that structure the surrounding space. Heaney's sense of inhabiting a present that is haunted by memories of the past is evident throughout his poetry and prose essays.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, landscape, placenames, boundaries, Trouble

In his essay "Mossbawn", named after the family farm on which he grew up, the Irish writer Seamus Heaney uses the Greek word *omphalos* to describe the sense of rootedness engendered by his contemplation of the landscape. The term, he explains, means: "the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world" (Heaney, 2002: 3). Heaney's connection to the landscape is thus partly physical, his own centre of being - his identity – umbilically connected to the surrounding space. However, *omphalos* has a second, aural, almost ritualistic function for him, its repetition magically transporting the poet back to the home of his youth: "repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door" (Heaney, 2002: 3). Heaney thus describes his sense of place as both a physical and spiritual experience. His sensory delight in its sounds and sights, and interest in exploring its history, makes him a keen documenter of both its topography and its character. Defining his identity through space also enables Heaney to transcend time, the marks made by different generations on the landscape turning it into a multi-layered text in which present realities and past experiences can coexist. In his essay "The Sense of Place" (1977), he summarizes the dualistic nature of his sense of place: "I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways

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which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other is learned, literate and conscious" (Heaney, 1980: 131). This paper will explore the complex relationship Heaney has with the landscape of his childhood home in Northern Ireland. Although he is deeply emotionally and spiritually rooted in the landscape, he is also alert to the contentious, divided history that is ever-present in the place names and borders that structure the surrounding space. Neil Jarman uses the term "social memory" to explain how members of a society situate themselves within the history of a location. Where more formal narratives of history follow: "a form of logic, of structure, of pattern, of narrative and of progress", social memory is more concerned with acts of repetition, where memories of the past are continually being recycled to make sense of the present (Jarman, 1997: 4). Heaney's sense of inhabiting a present that is haunted by memories of the past is evident throughout his poetry and prose essays. In his survey of historical interpretations of Irish identity, Roy Foster criticizes the tendency among historians to impose a neat, chronological structure on the past, stating that such projects always work to foreground hegemonic interpretations while marginalizing or eliding alternatives: "Irish historical interpretation has too often been cramped into a strict literary mode; the narrative drive has ruthlessly eroded awkward elisions" (Foster, 2001: 21). He calls upon contemporary historians to resist such simplifications and strive instead to develop a historical narrative that would: "make room for alternative truths and uncomfortable speculations" (Foster, 2001: 21). Foster's challenge to the historical metanarrative is echoed by Andy Bennett who argues that as a result of global mobility, spaces and societies that were historically homogenous have become increasingly pluralistic and fragmented, necessitating a more flexible and nuanced mode of reading: "Rather than espousing singular and essentialist meanings, they express a range of highly differentiated and contested meanings" (Bennett, 2005: 4). In order to accommodate these competing narratives of identity, contemporary cultural studies has increasingly foregrounded space as its structuring ethos. Michel Foucault's assertion that: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition" (Foucault, 1986: 22) clearly asserts the centrality of space in contemporary narratives of identity. His suggestion that the constricting, chronological narratives of history are being replaced by the more fluid, asynchronous narratives of space is of huge benefit to writers such as Heaney wishing to articulate the stories of generations of competing social groups inhabiting a single geographical location. The approach Heaney takes to space in his writings is akin to what Edward Soja suggests is the responsibility of contemporary cultural geographers: "to tamper with the familiar modalities of time, to shake up the normal flow of the linear text to allow other, more 'lateral' connections to be made" (Soja, 1989: 1). The effect of this "new geography" approach, in the words of Gerry Smyth, is the creation of a: "poststructuralist sensibility in which space was a 'text' subject to myriad cross-referenced, but ultimately unauthorised, meaning systems" (Smyth, 2001: 12).

Although much of the focus of cultural geographers has tended to be on the built environment, the natural landscape is increasingly scrutinized for its role in structuring both individual and communal narratives of identity. Richard Peet suggests that because it is perceived as natural and unmediated, landscape can be a powerful means of "framing the social imaginary" (Peet, 1996: 23). Moreover, because generations of people inhabit the same landscapes the meanings and identities constructed tend not to be limited to the present, but rather simultaneously mediate between past and present, thus facilitating the kinds of "lateral connections" demanded by Soja. The resulting approach to reading the landscape demands that its intertexuality be recognized: "signifying practices that are read, not passively, but as it were, rewritten as they are read" (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 5). A recurring image in Heaney's poetry is the discovery of Iron Age bog bodies – human remains found in bogs and often preserved to a remarkable degree by the acidic waters. Their significance for the poet is that they suggest a direct link to the past, their continuing presence in the landscape serving as a cipher that can open up previously hidden narratives. Reflecting on the impact a book of photographs of Iron Age burials in Denmark had on him, he begins first with a personal observation, noting the familiar features in the face of one of the bodies: "The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside" (Randall, 1979: np). This personal connection quickly develops into a broader sense of responsibility to tell the story of his community, a task Heaney defines as central to his role as a poet: "when I wrote that poem I had a sense of crossing a line really, that my whole being was involved in the sense of….being bonded to something, being bound to do something. I felt it a vow"

(Randall, 1979: np). This quote epitomizes Heaney's sense of landscape as intertextual space, his own interpretation respectfully making room for competing voices.

There is little doubt that the landscape has long played a central role in narratives of Irish identity. Smyth argues that the central theme of: "Irish (cultural, political and social) history would appear not to be historical but geographical – specifically, the presence and function of a 'special relationship' between people and place" (Smyth, 2001: 20). James Charles Roy traces this connection between people and place back to the time of the Celts, when the landscape underpinned people's sense of community by suggesting the existence of a special, mythical bond between space and its inhabitants: "dramatically situated, instantly recognizable, (a passport) to a different though accepted sphere of everyday life, the magical" (Roy, 1997: 235). This mythological sense of place survived in the form of *dinnseanchas,* a twelfth century collection of poems that explain the etymology of Irish place names. Heaney writes frequently of his interest in place names and their ability to serve as an imaginative conduit to the past: "these places now live in the imagination, all of them stir us to responses other than the merely visual, all of them are instinct with the spirit of the poet and his poetry" (Heaney, 1980: 132*).*

This conviction that there is a special spiritual bond between people and place was most significant during Ireland's long experience of colonialism, when ownership of the land and the linguistic right to name the landscape were both denied to the native Irish. The English Ordnance Survey project of the 1830s, in which Ireland's Gaelic place names and land boundaries were overwritten by the language and visual grammar of the colonisers, is perhaps the most overt act of linguistic colonialization of the Irish landscape. Smyth, commenting on the maps produced by the project, critiques their deliberate policy of robbing the Irish natives of their sense of place by replacing the Gaelic place names, with their references to historical events and mythical phenomena, with the phonetically spelled, often meaningless English ones: "The fact that Ireland was singled out for such a 'prestigious' undertaking signalled the need to contain this radically othered space on the Empire's own doorstep, so that it might be known, named and mapped within the Empire's own limiting terms" (Smyth, 2001: 50). The Irish natives are thus disinherited both physically and culturally as a consequence of colonialism. Reviving the original Gaelic place names and thus reasserting the mythological bonds between the Irish and their landscape was a central theme in nineteenth century romantic nationalist movements, and played a significant part in propelling Ireland towards independence. *Mise Éire* – I am Ireland – became a rallying call for nationalist groups eager to exploit what Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg call: "the old certainty that there is an immutable link between cultures, peoples, or identities and specific places" (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996: 1). It is notable that one of the first tasks of the Irish Free State government was to replace the colonial place names with Irish nationalist ones, thus publically proclaiming – indeed performing – its newly gained independence.

Thus, a significant task performed by the landscape is to provide its inhabitants with their sense of self. In other words, through its embodiment of narratives of history and identity, it constitutes a kind of concrete materialization of the myths of origin. Don Mitchell asserts that: "the fact that landscapes are meaning*ful* …. implies that they give off to the world a 'spirit' or a 'sense of place' – a *genius loci*" (Mitchell, 2000: 121). Of course, the situation is immensely complex in a contested space like Northern Ireland, its landscape and place names highlighting the ongoing divisions between the communities inhabiting them. Much like the murals which cover the streetscapes of urban areas in Northern Ireland, place names and the language used to claim ownership over the rural landscape continue to be a source of conflict and tension. As Jarman notes, there is no unifying term even to describe the state, with the consequence that terminology is contested at every level of social practice: "The two communities emphasize this difference by claiming allegiance to opposing political nations, the British and Irish, while living in a territory that remains contested by both states" (Jarman, 1997: 6). Names in Northern Ireland thus convey a significance beyond their literal meanings, with a huge amount of time and energy spent negotiating terminology. Jack Santino describes such activity as a form of ritual, in which tribal loyalties and allegiances are constantly being reasserted: "Indeed, it is through ritualizing space that many

profoundly important battles are fought and won, at least in the minds of the participants. Space – claiming territory and the power and right to name it, to traverse it, to celebrate it – is a recurrent trope in Northern Ireland" (Santino, 2001: 6). For the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, space is a richly-textured narrative in which the events and interpretations of history are constantly being disputed and control over language – particularly the power to name - remains a contentious issue. In an interview with Mark Carruthers, published in *The Irish Times* in 2015, Heaney explains that defining himself as a Catholic nationalist living in Northern Ireland was not straightforward, as his fellow community members were effectively excluded from using many key signifiers of identity: "For a long time the name Ulster was used by people of a unionist persuasion as a kind of signal that for them, Ulster was British" (Carruthers, 2015: np) It is for this reason that Heaney is so protective of his right to self-definition, a theme he addresses most defiantly in "Open Letter" (1983), a poem in which he challenges the inclusion of his poetry in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. The poem, which opens with a quotation from Gaston Bachelard about the harm caused by "hesitating to speak" and thus "accumulating silent things within us", stresses the importance of being allowed to inhabit language that defines us as we are rather than allowing our identities to be sublimated into signifiers constructed by others, whether it be for convenience, out of laziness or because of a more overt hegemonic desire to control: "I hate to bite / Hands that led me to the limelight/ In the Penguin book, I regret/ The awkwardness. But British, no, the name's not right./ Yours truly, Seamus" (Heaney, 1983: np).

Heaney's concern with the correct use of signifiers, particularly as they relate to space and identity, is apparent in the many poems and essays he devotes to the subject of place names, a theme of particular importance to the nationalist community who find themselves at historical and linguistic odds with many of the names attached to their localities. Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as: "an imagined….community" (Anderson, 1983: 6) emphasizes the importance of the perceived bonds that link disparate people together into a shared sense of destiny. Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson highlight the role of symbols in constructing the kinds of bonds suggested by Anderson: "All culture is based on shared symbols, and all social and political systems are structured and expressed through complex relations of symbols and rituals….Symbols give people a cognitive map of the world. They provide order and meaning to those who recognise them, and are bewildering, if not invisible, to those who cannot decode them" (Donnan and Wilson, 2001: 65). In his essay "The Sense of Place" (1977), Heaney discusses the role place names play in rooting us in our environments and giving us that sense of belonging within our locality:

> our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind….that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation (Heaney, 1980: 132).

This harmonious "marriage" between place and inhabitant is explored in many of his poems, which celebrate the sounds of the local place names and their almost magical ability to conjure memories of the past: "When they said *Carrickfergus* I could hear/ the frosty echo of saltminers' picks" (Heaney, "The Singer's House", 1998: 160); "I met a girl from Derrygarve/ And the name, a lost potent musk,/ Recalled the river's long swerve" (Heaney, "A New Song", 1998: 58). His delight in the resonance of the place names is reinforced in his playful linking of "Carrick" and "pick", "garve" and "swerve", the imperfect rhymes suggesting an easy, unforced act of remembrance. Michael Parker relates Heaney's sense of unity between sound and place to William Wordsworth's "melancholy longing for the eternal" (Parker, 1993: 17). It is reminiscent also of the faith expressed by Novalis, the German romantic writer, in the potential of poetic language to unlock the underlying magic of nature: "The world must be romanticized….By giving the common a higher meaning, the everyday a mysterious semblance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite, I romanticize it" (Novalis in Wood, 2007, xvi [If these are Novalis' words, Novalis should be quoted here, not Wood; using something like Novalis in Wood]). Heaney alludes to this magical potential of poetry in his essay "Feeling into Words" (1974) where he defines: "poetry as divination, poetry as

revelation of the self to the self" (Heaney, 2002: 14). Emphasising the value of personal enrichment gained through observing the world poetically, he also stresses the important role it plays in connecting us to the shared past which lies just beyond the reach of the present: "The landscape was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities" (Heaney, 1980: 132). In "Anahorish", a poem named after the townland in which Heaney went to school, he guides us through the process by which the place name invites a revelation of the past: "*Anahorish,* soft gradient/ of consonant, vowel-meadow,/ after-image of lamps/ swung through the yards/ on winter evenings" (Heaney, 1998: 24). Here the gentle sounds of the vowels conjure up a strong visual image, the "after-image", which transports the poet back in time.

However, even as it creates this magical link through time, the place name Anahorish simultaneously problematizes the poet's attempt to immerse himself in the past, reminding him of the layers of meaning that are lost to him as a consequence of history. In its current, anglicized form imposed by the colonial conquest of land and language, the place name is not literally meaningful. As a phonetic translation of the Gaelic *Anach fhior uisce* (Murphy, 2000: 23), Heaney can access the meaning of the original name only through translation: "My 'place of clear water'" (46). The place name, although evocative, thus symbolizes the destruction of the unity between signifier and signified. Pondering on the tradition of *dinnseanchas* which provided solace and a sense of belonging to our ancestors, Heaney bemoans the fact that this connection to the past is now more difficult to follow as a consequence of our linguistic disinheritance: "It now requires some degree of learning to know this….The whole of the Irish landscape….is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read" (Heaney, 1980: 131). In fact language constitutes a prominent source of anxiety throughout Heaney's writing, his unquestioned mastery of the English language simultaneously an acknowledgement that he has been robbed of easy access to the Gaelic tradition. His resentment at having to make do with the geographical language of the colonizer is expressed in "A New Song", in which he compares the natural bond between Gaelic words and the spaces they describe with the more discordant and forced sound of English: "But now our river tongues must rise/ From licking deep in native haunts/ To flood, with vowelling embrace,/ Demesnes staked out in consonants" (Heaney, 1998: 58). The gentle sensuousness of the Gaelic vowels epitomize the openness and fluidity that is restricted in the harder, more definite consonants of English. However, his tone at the end of the poem introduces a pragmatic, perhaps even rebellious note. He may have to live with the unresonating English place names, but perhaps the potential remains to romanticize and claim ownership of them by articulating them through the local accent: "And Castledawson we'll enlist/../Like bleaching greens resumed by grass - /A vocable, as rath and bullaun". The English "castle" in these lines is firmly reinscribed within the Gaelic tradition of *rath*, a word meaning "fort" which features frequently in Irish language place names.

The Irish language was not the only linguistic casualty of colonization. Heaney also addresses attempts by the unionist majority to take control over the English language by marginalizing accents and dialects, particularly those associated with the Catholic nationalist tradition. This use of language is identified by Bill Ashcroft et al as a key colonial instrument: "The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities….Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated" (Ashcroft et al, 1989: 7). A deep-rooted memory from Heaney's schooldays is the sense that his native accent was something to be ashamed of, something to be replaced if possible with the more acceptable cadences of received pronunciation. In "The Singing School", he reminds his former school friend Seamus Deane of the impact such attitudes had on them : "'Catholics, in general, don't speak/ As well as students from Protestant schools.' Remember that stuff? Inferiority/ Complexes, stuff that dreams were made on" (Heaney, 1998: 135). Later in the poem, he reflects on the additional scrutiny to which the Catholic inhabitants of Northern Ireland are subjected by the security forces, agents of what Heaney describes as "the ministry of fear". Instead of silencing him, their efforts to mock his Irish name rouse Heaney to demand back ownership of his right to self-definition. The English language may not be the language of his ancestors, but Heaney reclaims it as his own: "Ulster was British, but with no rights on/ The English lyric" (Heaney, 1998: 136).

Many of his poems thus work hard to recreate the mythical link between the inhabitants of the land and their history, in spite of the depletion of meaning caused by the anglicized place names. In "Broagh", Heaney acknowledges the loss of the phonic connection to its Gaelic signifier *bruach* (river bank), necessitating an explanation so that the reader understands the origins of the place name: "Riverback, the long rigs/ ending in broad docken" (Heaney, 1998: 54). In spite of this linguistic fracture, Heaney locates resistance in many aspects of the place name. The central "O" provides a visual connection to the boggy ground it names: "the shower/ gathering in your heelmark/ was the black *O*/ in *Broagh*"; while the elongated vowel sound conjures the atmosphere of the location: "its low tattoo/ among the windy boortrees". Most interesting is his suggestion that far from robbing the locals of their innate sense of ownership, the bastardized place name actually creates a unique bond as only those from the locality know how to pronounce its complex sequence of letters: "that last/ *gh* the strangers found/ difficult to manage". This theme of postcolonial resistance to the hegemony of the colonial place names emerges in several of his texts. Reflecting on the name of his family farm Mossbawn, he notes that it symbolizes both the disruption of the relationship between place and native caused by colonialism, but also crucially the pragmatic reassertion of linguistic ownership of the landscape by his family who have lovingly tended the land for generations:

> 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 *bán* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing 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 (Heaney, 1980: 35).

The childhood home thus becomes, as Parker notes: "an object for repossession in several senses – imaginative, linguistic, political, and spiritual – its Gaelic naming a family gesture against four hundred years of colonialism, or theft" (Parker, 1993: 7).

"Digging" (1966) is viewed by many critics as the poem in which Heaney begins the process of interrogating the historical differences inscribed in the landscape and forging his own narrative of identity and belonging. He describes the poem as a moment of transcendence, facilitating the development of an authentic poetic voice: "the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words….it is an interesting example of what we call 'finding a voice'" (Heaney, 2002: 14-16). The poem begins with an image of alienation: the poet sits in his room with his pen in his hand, as his father digs in the garden. Heaney reflects on the difference between his chosen career and the generations of his family who farmed the land: "By God, the old man could handle a spade./ Just like his old man" (Heaney, 1998: 3). In spite of the sensations and memories that come back to the poet when he smells the newly turned earth, he is aware that he has excluded himself from this inherited family tradition: "The cold smell of potato mould,…./Through living roots awaken in my head./ But I've no spade to follow men like them". The poem, as Helen Vendler suggests, is an act of both opening and closing, celebrating a life: "which the poet does not want to follow, could not follow, but none the less recognizes as forever part of his inner landscape" (Vendler, 2000: 21). In his essay "The Makings of a Music" (1978), Heaney introduces another one of his beloved linguistic coincidences, his discovery that: "'Verse' comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of a field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another" (Heaney, 1980, 65). Thus delving into history with his pen is allied with ploughing the land to uncover the vestiges of older civilizations buried underneath. In the final verse of "Digging", Heaney formalizes this link between spade and pen, and argues that through his writing he is also engaged in an act of reclamation that will connect him with the legacies of his forebears: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it" (Heaney, 1998: 4).

This sense of poetry as a physical activity is explored in many poems in which the act of digging becomes for Heaney a means of reconnecting with his ancestors, a literal sifting through the layers of the landscape to uncover the lost histories buried beneath. In "Glanmore Sonnets", he envisions his words delving through the soil to find the ghosts of his forebears, their resurrection

breathing new life into the landscape of the present: "Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground./…/Our road is steaming, the turned-up acres breathe./…./My ghosts come striding into their spring stations" (Heaney, 1998: 163). Before too long, this attempt to reconnect with his own ancestors broadens into a more ambitious desire to furnish his community with a central motif, in which all kinds of acts of reconciliation, linguistic, cultural and historic, could be accommodated. In his essay "Feeling into Words" (1974), Heaney explains the central role the motif of the bog begins to play in informing his poetic imagination: "I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood" (Heaney, 2002: 21). Andrew Murphy asserts that the "heterogeneity of the bog" makes it a particularly apposite symbol for Heaney to use, facilitating as it does the unearthing of layers of interpretations all of which can coexist in its preserving water: "It preserves whatever happens to fall into it, allowing multiple historical perspectives to emerge" (Murphy, 2000: 36). Heaney's use of the bog as a space thus enables him to reflect on how his own personal story in the landscape intersects with and is informed by its wider social and cultural history.

This discovery of the bog as text seems to release Heaney from the sense of constriction and paralysis noted above in his frustrated attempts to wrest back imaginative control from the language and spatial markings of the colonizers. Reflecting on his poem "Bogland", Heaney expresses the motif as one of unlocking and liberation: "From the moment I wrote it, I felt promise in 'Bogland'…I realized that new coordinates had been established. Door jambs with an open sky behind them rather than the dark. I felt it in my muscles, nearly, when I was writing the poem" (O'Driscoll, 2008: 90). His inspiration for the poem came from his desire to provide Ireland with a myth of origin akin to the role of the frontier in the American cultural imagination: "had been reading 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" (Heaney, 2002: 22). The poem begins with the acknowledgement that: "We have no prairies/ To slice a big sun at evening" (Heaney, 1998: 41). In comparison to the broad, confident vistas of the American landscape, the Irish bog initially seems meek and uninspiring: "Our unfenced country/ Is bog that keeps crusting/ between the sights of the sun". On further reflection, Heaney begins to realize that the bog serves as a literal source of memory for Ireland, its acidic waters allowing for the preservation of ancient historical remains: "They've taken the skeleton/ Of the great Irish Elk/ Out of the peat". This sense of Ireland's history coexisting with the present in the bog becomes for Heaney a site for the forging of a communal, unifying memory: "I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it" (Heaney, 2002: 22). It is precisely this facility the bog has, to retain its sense of the past even as the narratives of the present are being forged, that strikes Heaney as particularly significant in the Irish context: "Every layer they strip/ Seems camped on before…./The wet centre is bottomless" (Heaney, 1998: 42). In an interview about the poem, Heaney has suggested that his aim was to find a way to connect his personal story with the wider historical metanarrative of his community, describing the poem as: "a symbolic Jungian way" of linking the bog as the "repository and memory of the landscape, with the psyche of the people" (Walsh, 1975: 5). The bog thus becomes the kind of multi-layered text celebrated by cultural geographers, symbolically and literally accommodating: "underlying multivocal codes which make the landscape cultural creations" (Gregory, 1994: 45).

Some of Heaney's bog texts are immensely personal, celebrating its impact on his creativity in romantic, sensual language: "To this day, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms….possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am bethrothed to them" (Heaney, 2002: 5). The rush of energy he experiences from his proximity to the landscape of the bog is described in exhilarating terms: "I have a sense of air, of lift and light" (Heaney, 2002: 6), and he returns several times, in both poems and essays, to mark the moment when his poetic voice was forged in the bog: "the bog was a genuine obsession. It was an illiterate pleasure that I took in the landscape. The smell of turf smoke, for example, has a terrific nostalgic effect on me. It has to do with the script that's written into your senses from the minute you begin to breathe" (Randall, 1979: np).

Immersing himself in the imagery and idiom of the bog also enables Heaney to make peace with the competing languages and modes of representation he felt were alienating him from his

origins. In the appropriately entitled "Kinship", he rejects the use of learned, alien terminology like "Quagmire, swampland, morass", instead celebrating the native simplicity of the word "bog", which originates in the Gaelic word *bog*, meaning soft, and embodies the yielding of the terrain in its gentle vowel sound: "This is the vowel of the earth/…/I grew out of all this" (Heaney, 1998: 120). The motif of the bog also offers Heaney a way of discussing Ireland's contentious history of colonialism by suggesting an underlying sense of continuity even as the land itself undergoes a cycle of settlement and resettlement by competing groups. "Requiem for the Croppies" commemorates the rural participants in the 1798 Rebellion who were buried in the Irish landscape. Heaney notes that his poem was written in the context of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, an event that was commemorated with some degree of strain by Northern Irish Nationalists conscious of their exclusion from narratives of Irish independence (Heaney, 2002: 23). Returning to the 1798 Rebellion in the poem was a way to articulate 1916 as part of a continuum of Irish revolutionary movements thus avoiding references to the divided nature of mid-20th century nationalism. The poem focuses on the ordinary country men who participated in the 1798 rebellion to fight for freedom. With no military or organizational resources to match the might of the organized British army, they rely on their intimate knowledge of the countryside and the handfuls of barley they carry in their pockets to keep them alive: "The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley -/ No kitchens on the run, no striking camp-/ We moved quick and sudden in our country" (Heaney, 1998: 22). Inevitably, the sense of belonging expressed in the reference to "our country" is not enough to save the croppies from their slaughter at the hands of the British and their bodies are left to rot in the landscape they died to reclaim: "The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave./ They buried us without shroud or coffin". The visual shame of the hillside is not the only sign that their cause would continue. In the final line of the poem, Heaney suggests that the barley seeds uneaten in the pockets of the dead would go on to germinate subsequent nationalist movements: "in August the barley grew up out of the grave". Interestingly, the 1798 Rebellion was led by the United Irishmen, a group of 18th century predominantly Protestant revolutionaries, a number of whom were from Belfast. Choosing this particular revolutionary moment as a lens through which to commemorate 1916 was thus, for Heaney, symbolic of the unity that briefly transcended religious and cultural differences in Ireland: "1798….had much more sense of legend, drama, in placeness about it. I know that too much is probably made of that golden moment, but the memory of it was in the air as an imagining of a shared Ulster identity" (Carruthers, 2015: np).

It is indicative of the complexities of Irish history that the publication in 1969 of *Door into the Dark*, the volume to which "Requiem for the Croppies" belongs, coincided with Northern Ireland's descent into the catastrophic decades of violence, euphemistically called the Troubles. Heaney admits that he did not envision, when reflecting on this momentary alignment of Irish revolutionaries, that the divisions between the communities were too deep-rooted and bitter to be transcended: "I did not realise at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published" (Heaney, 1998: 23). However, the sense that the historical divisions were never buried too far below the surface was always present in his poetry. Even as a young boy, Heaney was aware of the dangers, both real and imaginary, that lay just outside the confines of his family land. Reflecting on his early incursions into the space outside the farm, he explains that: "for the first few hundred yards you were safe enough", but that before long: "there hung a field of dangerous force. This was the realm of bogeys" (Heaney, 1998: 4). Far more threatening to the harmony of the community than the mythical bogeymen were the very real, if rarely acknowledged, political divisions that underlay everyday interactions between neighbours. Far from symbolizing a multivocal accommodation of competing narratives of history, place names in Northern Ireland signify entrenched positions from which there would be little movement towards cooperation: "The lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. In the names of its fields and townlands, in the mixture of Scots and Irish and English etymologies, this side of the country was redolent of the histories of its owners" (Heaney, 2002: 6).

In his essay "Something to Write About" (1998), Heaney embarks on one of his frequent etymological explorations to try to understand the role of these borders in the Northern Irish imagination. He remembers the excitement he would feel as a child when he would venture right into

the middle of a stream and feel rootless, equally distant from each riverbank. He recalls this memory on a visit to Rome, where he sees a statue to Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries. He notes that the Romans located the statue of Terminus at a point in which the temple roof was open to the sky, as if to imply that: "all boundaries are necessary evils and that the truly desirable condition is the feeling of being unbounded, of being king of infinite space" (Heaney, 2002: 48). Although the Gaelic word *tearmann*, which derives from Terminus, is a common component in Irish place names, Heaney notes that its use denotes a far less transcendent attitude than its Roman origin suggesting, on the contrary, division and bordering, and functioning as: "a marker off of one place from another" (Heaney, 2002: 49). In marked contrast to the openness of the natural landscape, the built environment of his childhood reflects the deep-rooted divisions caused by its history of settlement: "I grew up between the predominantly Protestant and loyalist village of Castledawson and the generally Catholic and nationalist district of Bellaghy" (Heaney, 2002: 50). Rather than feeling enriched by the multiple layers of identity accessible to him through the history of the built landscape, the poet feels hemmed in and constricted by the weight of the many borders: "I never felt the certitude of belonging completely in one place and, of course, from the historical as well as the topographical point of view, I was right: all those townlands and parishes and dioceses that had once belonged firmly within the old pre-plantation, ecclesiastical geography of Gaelic Ireland had been subsumed in the meantime and had been taken over and taken into another system and another jurisdiction" (Heaney, 2002: 54).

This statement returns us to the issue of disinheritance discussed above. There may be a number of competing toponymic systems visible in the landscape of Northern Ireland, but there is only one that is officially acknowledged and it forces the Catholic nationalist community to express themselves in terms that undermine and diminish their history. Heaney's resentment at this imposition is clear in "The First Kingdom", in which he pares through the layers of representation overlaying the landscape. Noting that the first colonizers simply moved into pre-existing settlements: "The royal roads were cow paths", he attributes their conquest of the land to a variety of events, some less forgivable than others: "Time was a backward note of names and mishaps,/ bad harvests, fires, unfair settlements" (Heaney, 1998: 272). His tone reflects the frustration of a native expected to be grateful for the opportunity to remain on land that belonged to his ancestors: "And if my rights to it all came only/ by their acclamation, what was it worth?" The target of his resentment in this particular poem is the unionist population who may pay lip service to cross-community cooperation and peace initiatives, but hold firmly onto the reins of power, exhibiting the arrogant self-righteousness of the conqueror: "And seed, breed and generation still/ they are holding on, every bit/ as pious and exacting and demeaned".

Heaney returns to interrogate the entrenched positions in which the communities of Northern Ireland find themselves in the poem "Terminus", named after the Roman god of boundaries, which takes us back to the defeat of the Irish Earls by the forces of Elizabeth 1st at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, a moment that marked the final end of the old Gaelic world. The poem begins with a familiar image of the poet digging through the landscape and uncovering the remnants of both the natural world and its inhabitants: "When I hoked there, I would find/ An acorn and a rusted bolt" (Heaney, 1998: 295). Reflecting on his choice of verb, the poet explains that *hoke* is an undefinable word from his childhood, belonging neither to the English nor to the Irish languages, but "undislodgeably there, buried in the very foundations of my speech" (Heaney, 2002: 50). His need to draw strength from the subliminal language of his childhood is reflective of the rapidly deteriorating climate of Northern Ireland, where borders are proliferating and language is undermining rather than facilitating communication: "It's hard to grow up in Northern Ireland and not to be *forced* into second thoughts, sooner or later. With so much division around, people are forever encountering boundaries that bring them up short" (Heaney, 2002: 51). The poem captures the meeting mid-river between Irish Earl Hugh O'Neill and the Earl of Essex. Essex has been sent by Elizabeth I to capture O'Neill so that he can be tried for treason, but at the moment frozen in the poem, the men are engaged in a parley. Their meeting, for Heaney, represents the final moment in which a resolution to their seemingly irreconcilable positions could be found: "There was no way, given their historical circumstances, that O'Neill and Essex could cross to each other's side….And yet as we think about the scene, we want each of them to be released from the entrapment of history" (Heaney, 2002: 56). It is for this reason that he ends his poem before the final moment has been reached, with the Earl frozen mid-river, at the

terminus or boundary, before taking that last fatal step towards inevitable death: "Baronies, parishes met where I was born./ When I stood on the central stepping stone/ I was the last earl on horseback in midstream/ Still parleying, in earshot of his peers" (Heaney, 1998: 296). In the real world of the Troubles, no such opportunity for reflection or second thoughts existed. The poem was written in the mid-1980s, when Margaret Thatcher's policies and the IRA's terrorist campaign had sundered the communities from each other and locked inhabitants into positions from which they could not see an escape. The message of the poem, Heaney states, is that: "the inheritance of a divided world is a disabling one, that it traps its inhabitants and corners them in determined positions, saps their will to act freely and creatively" (Heaney, 2002: 56).

The similarities between these moments of transition reinforce Heaney's sense of the interconnections between the layers of history which suffuse the landscape of Northern Ireland. Historical atrocities in a contested space are never located in the past, but rather endlessly recycled, structuring present discourse and allowing historical antipathies to coexist with present hostilities. Commenting on the ongoing presence of history in the lived realities of both communities in Northern Ireland, Santino suggests that it is indicative of both an inability and an unwillingness to leave behind the old certainties in favour of new, more complex, narratives of identity: "both the Irish and the British residents of Northern Ireland have a very strong sense of historic grievance, they use the past to talk about the present" (Santino, 2001: 6). The awkwardness of the terminology Santino is forced to use to describe the different groups and their sense of place is indicative of the inability of language to accurately define identity, let alone negotiate potentially more inclusive signifiers. Communities identify according to the historic binaries of Irish or British, with little support for the potentially unifying Northern Irish. Identity in Northern Ireland is thus a performative act, one's sense of self created by participation in the rites and traditions of the community. Jarman notes that: "it is the active participation in ritual events that is the significant means of encoding social memory into the individual body" (Jarman, 1997: 8). Heaney views many of the atrocities of the Troubles as indicative of this need to publically perform one's group affiliation, the acts of violence thus having a ritualistic function. "Funeral Rites" begins with a description of the poet participating in a family funeral: "I shouldered a kind of manhood/ stepping in to lift the coffins/ of dead relatives" (Heaney, 1998: 96). This image of initiation into the ranks of the family men and the sense of comfort inherent in the traditions of the funeral rites is quickly displaced in the current climate by the ceaseless litany of violent deaths, which occur so often that the familiar rituals lose their ability to support the grieving families and enable them to make sense of their loss: "Now as news comes in/ of each neighbourly murder/ we pine for ceremony,/ customary rhythms". The series of funeral processions that now dominate the streets of Northern Ireland inspire Heaney to return to the motif of the bog bodies and reflect on the generations of dead entombed in the Irish soil. Far from taking comfort in the presence in the landscape of historic ancestors, the bog bodies now testify to the cruelty and barbarism evident throughout history. In "Punishment", the tortured body of the young woman buried in a bog: "I can feel the tug/ of the halter at the nape/ of her neck" foresees the punishment meted out by members of the nationalist community to any of their own daughters and sisters found guilty of consorting with British soldiers: "Little adultress,/ before they punished you/ you were flaxen-haired,/ undernourished, and your/ tar-black face was beautiful" (Heaney, 1998: 117-8). For Heaney, the revelation of the poem is not so much that he can see the similarities between the treatment of the two girls divided by the expanse of history, but that he can understand the anger of the communities who feel betrayed by their actions: "(I)…would connive/ in civilized outrage/ yet understand the exact/ and tribal, intimate revenge". His suggestion that he would have "stood dumb" and not intervened in the punishment inflicted on the victim conveys his growing sense that language is no longer an adequate or perhaps even reliable witness to the atrocities being committed.

It is no surprise that as the Troubles begin to overshadow Heaney's poems, the role of language and the landscape, once the repositories of his rich store of historical and topographic lore, become instead symbolic of the disintegration of the political and cultural life of the society. Images of rot and decay now suffuse the landscapes of his poems, marking the end of the Eden-like innocence Heaney had associated with his childhood home. In "Summer Home", he uses the foul smell hanging over the landscape to articulate his frustration and anger with the failure of the political system to

address the mounting sectarianism before it was too late: "Was it wind off the dumps/ or something in heat/ dogging us, the summer gone sour,/ a fouled nest incubating somewhere/ Whose fault, I wondered, inquisitor/ of the possessed air" (Heaney, 1998: 69). Heaney is careful to distance himself from political discourse on the Troubles, arguing in "Frontiers of Writing" that it is vital for poetry to transcend the realities of the present conflict in order to function as "a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony", in spite of concerted attempts to coerce poets to publically declare their political affiliations: "Among poets of my generation in the 1960s there was a general feeling of being socially called upon which grew as the polarization grew and the pressure mounted upon the writers not only to render images of the Ulster predicament, but also perhaps to show solidarity with one or other side in the quarrel" (Heaney, 1995: 193).

In spite of this call for poetry to remain neutral, Heaney clearly sympathizes with the Catholic nationalist community, who find themselves under threat not only from the unionist paramilitary groups but also from the forces of law and order whose role ostensibly is to protect them. "A Constable Calls" reflects the acute if illogical guilt a Catholic farmer feels when interacting with a policeman, the imposing body language and ominous sound of the departing bicycle conveying clearly the fear evoked by his presence: "He stood up, shifted the baton-case/ Further round on his belt, /Closed his doomsday book,/…His boot pushed off/ And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked" (Heaney, 1998: 138). He returns on several occasions to comment on the impact of the annual July marches on the nationalist population, forced to stand by as the unionist Orangemen exercised their state-sanctioned right to parade, thus publically proclaiming their authority over the landscape. Heaney suggests that the whole landscape echoes the threatening atmosphere created by the marchers: "The hills were a bellied sound-box resonating, a low/ dyke against diurnal roar, a tidal wave that stayed, that/ still might open" (Heaney, 1998: 84). The sense that the threat is about to overflow and overwhelm the fragile society of Northern Ireland is evident in the vivid imagery of the dams bursting, while the urgent, fractured lines of the poem suggest that this end point is urgently approaching. This same sense of constriction is evident in "From the Frontier of Writing", a poem which describes the emotions he experiences when passing through the numerous checkpoints that dot the landscape. Erected ostensibly to restrict the movement of paramilitaries, there is little doubt expressed in the poem that a significant part of their function is to intimidate and coerce the ordinary people. He describes the checkpoints as embodying the loss of any openness, stifling communication and turning the surrounding space into a vacuum: "The tightness and the nilness round that space/ when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect". Although cleared to pass the checkpoint, each experience leaves the poet a little more depleted, his sense of autonomy diminished: "a little emptier, a little spent/ as always by that quiver in the self,/ subjugated, yes, and obedient" (Heaney, 1998: 297).

One of the main difficulties Heaney has to contend with in his poetry about the Troubles is the imposition on all aspects of life there of the historic nationalist/unionist binary. His decision to leave Northern Ireland in 1972 was predicated partly on his reluctance to be aligned with a particular ideology: "I had the name for being a poet but I was also discovering myself being interviewed as, more or less, a spokesman for the Catholic minority" (Randall, 1979: np). His right to define himself is thus subjugated to his responsibility to represent his group: "a situation like that in the north of Ireland generates a great energy and group loyalty, and it generates a defensiveness about its own verities" (Randall, 1979: np). The problem, as Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd suggest, is that a divided society such as Northern Ireland tends not to offer its inhabitants the chance to occupy multiple perspectives or identities, forcing them to choose one of the two homogenous positions on offer: "communal division depends upon pre-existing constructs of self and other, whether 'Protestant/Catholic', 'Irish/British' or 'settler/native'" (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 5-6). By privileging historical allegiances above all other signifiers of identity, such subject positions inscribe people within roles they may not choose for themselves, rendering meaningful dialogue impossible. Richard Kirkland notes that: "As an example of identity's ability to disable communication just as it simultaneously appears to enable it, the North has become a byword for all that is most restrictive, least constitutive and ultimately fossilized in cultural exchange" (Kirkland, 2002: 2). In "Whatever You Say Say Nothing", Heaney reflects on the ease with which people in Northern Ireland can

categorize each other immediately as belonging to one or other "side". The centuries-long process of unacknowledged though very real segregation of communities into different schools and neighbourhoods, as well as their performance of cultural loyalty through their names, means that every element of a person's identity can be used to classify and thus confine them: "Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,/ Subtle discrimination by addresses/ With hardly an exception to the rule/ That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod/ And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape" (Heaney, 1998: 132). The seemingly jocular tone of these lines only emphasizes the debilitating impact such coded communication has on Northern Irish society: "O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,/ Of open minds as open as a trap". The poem ends with a familiar image of a bomb crater causing the blockage of a road, with the population seemingly trapped within an endless cycle of violence and death: "There was that white mist you get on low ground/ And it was déja-vu, some film made/ Of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound".

The short, staccato phrases of this poem had become indicative of what Heaney in an interview identified as a constriction that was becoming prominent in his writings: "The shortness of a line constricts, in a sense, the breadth of your movement" (Randall, 1979: np). Reviewing the poems he wrote about the Troubles, he notes a kind of defensiveness about them, a protective "burrowing inwards" (Randall, 1979: np). Returning to the metaphor of farm work, he reflects on a deliberate decision he made to return to the wide open spaces of his earlier landscape poems:

> with *North* and *Wintering Out* I was burrowing inwards, and those thin small quatrain poems, they're kind of drills or augers for turning in and they are narrow and long and deep. Well, after those poems I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out; it was at once formal but also emotional, a return to an opener voice (Randall, 1979: np).

The pressure of writing on behalf of his community also stifled his ability to express his own thoughts freely, so a crucial part of his decision to leave Northern Ireland was this sense that he needed to reclaim his own narrative of identity and describe himself on his own terms: "I no longer wanted a door into the dark—I want a door into the light….I really wanted to come back to be able to use the first person singular to mean *me* and my lifetime" (Randall, 1979: np). "Exposure", a poem written from his new home in the Wicklow countryside, reflects on the journey the poet has taken, both physically and emotionally, from the landscape of his childhood. "How did I end up like this?", he asks, pondering on the surprise and even hostility expressed by members of his community who felt betrayed by his decision to leave. Aware of the social responsibility invested in an author as the voice of his community, he tries to disentangle the allegiances he has to the different elements of his identity – his poetic imagination, his community, his role as the conveyor of unspoken truths – elements that his experience of the Troubles have proved are inimical to each other: "As I sit weighing and weighing/ My responsible *tristia*. For what? For the ear? For the people?/ For what is said behind backs?" (Heaney, 1998: 143). He rejects attempts to label and thus define his new life: "I am neither internee nor informer", the politically charged terms used here addressing again the strict binary underlying all subject positions in Northern Ireland. Heaney may be a Northern Irish nationalist who has moved across the border during the Troubles, but he is neither a political internee being prevented from returning by the Irish state nor has he turned informer, betraying his community. Instead, he determines to root himself once more in the landscape, retreating from the divisions of the present and allowing the sounds and sensations of the natural world to suffuse his imagination and free his creativity: "Escaped from the massacre,/ Taking protective colouring/ From bole and bark, feeling/. Every wind that blows" (Heaney, 1989: 144). To be a poet, he realises, means being free to fully inhabit the imaginary, resisting attempts to mould one's creativity into a conduit for the expression of social commentary: "The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event" (Heaney, 2002: 183). For Heaney, the role of the poet is to function as a kind of diviner, using his magic to reconnect us with the landscape, where the energies and passions of previous generations lie waiting to inspire and guide us: "The pluck came sharp as a sting./ The rod jerked with precise convulsions,/ Spring water suddenly broadcasting/ Through a green hazel its secret stations" (Heaney, 1998: 13).

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