

## MYTH AND HISTORY IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY

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In an important interview with his friend, the poet and critic Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney was asked whether he felt there was a connection between the emergence of the poetry of his *group* (Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, etc.) and the Northern Irish Troubles. His reply was symptomatically cautious:

I think that this is a much more imponderable kind of subject. There is certainly no direct or obvious connection; but this poetry and the Troubles emerged from an intensity, a root, a common emotional ground. The root of the Troubles may have something in common with the root of the poetry<sup>1</sup>.

Heaney is adamant that he was aware of the problem from the start, but in his early work «one part of my temperament took over: the private, county Derry part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part.»<sup>2</sup>

Though that order of priorities has been partly inverted in his three later collections,<sup>3</sup> the shift has not been, on the whole, towards direct apprehension of the actual —not, that is, towards the articulation of a coherent and embattled political position in the poems themselves— but rather towards the slow, deliberate fleshing out of a mytho-poetic landscape in which the contemporary problem of Ulster, and indeed of Ireland, can be seen in perspective. This has not been to the liking of all the critics, and Heaney has been accused of passivity and even of shirking his responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> The poet, nevertheless, steadfastly, if tactfully, refuses to answer the Irish Question, pointing instead to a historical and cultural heritage that provides the context in which this question might be more properly formulated. He outraged the tender sensibilities of some Northern Catholic intellectuals by commenting favourably on certain rationalisations of the position of the Protestant majority formulated by

the Southern Protestant «Liberal», Conor Cruise O'Brien, and in the discussion with Deane he refused to withdraw his approval, despite his awareness that his poetry partly depends on a gut feeling wholly inimical to O'Brien's humanism. Heaney continues to write an essentially political sort of poetry while conceding to O'Brien that «the link between art and politics constitutes an unhealthy intersection». <sup>5</sup>

Despite his Northern «tightmouthedness», Heaney, so far from eschewing local political and religious issues, considers that they constitute, in his own case, an essential part of those «watermarks and colourings of the self» out of which he believes poetry is born. <sup>6</sup> «I think,» he tells Deane, «that my own poetry is a kind of slow, obstinate papish burn, emanating from the ground I was brought up on.» <sup>7</sup>

It is no accident that the image for his poetry that suggests itself to Heaney here should be a watercourse, and it is similarly unsurprising that the word chosen should be the dialect term *burn* rather than the standard *river* or *stream*. Water, flowing or still, carrying greater or lesser emotional and symbolic charges, appears everywhere in his writings: the rivers of his home area and elsewhere in Ireland, the North and Irish Seas and the Atlantic Ocean, the constant and abundant rains of the Celtic homelands, pools (a habitual phrase in his poetics is «the pool of the ear»), and, above all, the seepage, mud and juices of the great bogs of Ireland and Jutland. Poetry is thus elemental and continuously flowing, but —and this is crucial— it also wells up spontaneously from the springs of the poet's past; it is «bedded in the locale» <sup>8</sup> and is continuous with the experiences and aspirations of the individual and collective consciousness. Poetry and flowing water are preservers and questioners of what the poem 'Gifts of Rain' calls «antediluvian lore». The local term «burn», therefore, serves, in the present instance, to recall Heaney's highly developed sense of place, which he shares with his contemporaries Mahon, Muldoon and Longley, and with his masters, Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, Heaney approvingly endorses Kavanagh's distinction between the words «parochial» (involving an enabling sense of the particular) and «provincial» (which includes a disabling sense of being stuck between nowhere and the metropolis). <sup>10</sup>

'Gifts of Rain' demonstrates these ideas in operation. The river (the Moyola, which flows past Heaney's boyhood home of Mossbawn) is physically present, and the matter-of-fact presentation of such details as the mud and the rotting crops works against any latent tendency to romanticise the well-remembered setting, but the overwhelming impression is one of sensuous intimacy. If the «need» for lore arises from a sense of public duty and an awareness of belonging («the shared calling of blood»),

the occasion of the poem is essentially private, as is suggested strongly in the final line, «Hoarder of common ground», and in the repetition of «I», «my», «me». It is this sense of privacy, together with the acute sensibility of the observation, which save the original metaphor, «a mating call of sound/rises to pleasure me,/Lazarus», from mere cleverness. Heaney's sense of the locale seems actually sensual, and he delights in the regional and specific flavour of «reed music, an old chanter». (A *chanter* is the basic pipe on which students of the bagpipe learn to play.) Still, it should be added that Heaney has something of Joyce's fondness for the enriching pun, so that *chanter* may be read as an elegant archaism (a singer) and the reeds may be musical instruments or river vegetation. Or preferably, both.

We shall have more to say about the waters of various parts of Ireland, but at this point I wish to draw attention to another abundantly used image in this poetry, so pervasive as almost to constitute a structural principle in Heaney's third and fourth collections, especially *North*. This is the notion of digging which, like water, possesses a multiplicity of reference. As a professional activity, it has its realistic dimensions, farming, turfcutting and archaeology; and in their representational, tribal or ritualistic aspects, these forms of digging point to cultural continuity—the preservation of traditional skills in a mechanised world, or the quest for roots and origins that is intellectual and artistic endeavour.

These themes, and the technique whereby they are marshalled, lie dormant in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door Into the Dark*, but they are systematically revealed and exploited in *Wintering Out* and *North*, as Heaney comes to master his craft (and, more essentially, as he would say, his technique):<sup>11</sup> as he slowly and stubbornly pushes his way towards the idea of Northern Ireland as a vision or myth, an intricate and all-encompassing layering of experience articulated through the sustained metaphor of water, the action of the bogs, agriculture, and geological and archaeological probings into the texture of the land itself.

Both the water motif and the sustained imagery of retrieval combine with Heaney's peculiarly lush feeling for language in what is variously viewed as his buoyant verbal fecundity or his weakness for the baroque and the specious or precious.<sup>12</sup> However, it is generally agreed that *Wintering Out* sees a new sense of discipline enter into Heaney's work, though one might feel that it is also a matter, in the case of some English and American commentators, of their ears adapting to what remains an unashamedly *foreign* idiom. As an example of this, I cannot resist quoting one or two remarks dropped by Simon Curtis in a brief article on *North*. His piece takes the form of a glossary: «*pampooties* = cowskin sandals;

*gombeen-men* = usurers; *zoomorphic* = representing animal forms». Curtis adds, apologetically and ingenuously:

My woeful oversimplification does no justice to the rich, high seriousness of the testimony (...) I hope, however, it helps to elucidate (...) his *digging* seems so worthwhile, as it works towards *understanding* and also towards *teaching* – teaching the English, for example.<sup>13</sup>

One recalls Ezra Pound's famous remark that «the English language is now in the keeping of the Irish», but it would appear that the English now need the Irish to teach them Greek as well as their own tongue. For what it is worth, it may be added that all three words are recorded, with the meanings Curtis lists, in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Returning to Heaney's *poetry*, we might consider as an example of the earliest style the poem 'Digging', from *Death of a Naturalist*. The theme of this poem is the speaker's admiration and nostalgia for his labourer forbears — his father digging potatoes and his grandfather cutting turf—but the danger of sentimentality is avoided by the precision and energy of the words:

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.

Even at this early stage, Heaney shows his fondness for bright, sharp outlines and his gift for conjuring up the sensuous immediacy of rural scenes. The first and second lines quoted are particularly relevant as evidence of the unsentimental exactness the poet is striving for. Moreover, the phrase «the curt cuts of an edge» not only evokes the sharpness of the spade and the skill of the turfcutter, but also points forward to the closing lines with their promise of artistic meticulousness to come:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Heaney's frequent use of violently onomatopoeic terms and unusual Saxon or Irish words may at times seem overexuberant or self-indulgent, but such a judgement ignores both the care which such language can

reveal, and Heaney's acute sense of the physical production of speech—which becomes an important motif in *Wintering Out*, described by Edna Longley as «a unique brand of revolutionary action, linguistic decolonisation»<sup>14</sup>— and its relevance to the music of poetry. As one critic puts it:

Heaney is not only concerned with sound but obsessed with pronunciation: in poem after poem, vowels, consonants, the organs of speech themselves provide metaphor.<sup>15</sup>

It requires a very precise, front-of-the-mouth pronunciation to carry off these lines.

A loose kind of unity is discernible in each of Heaney's first two collections. In the case of *DN*, the «private, county Derry part» of the poet is uppermost in a number of poems of immediate experience or boyhood memories in which the initial occasion of the poetry is the land itself, gradually staked out and named. But the title poem is one of a nucleus of pieces which develop the themes of loathing, repulsion, fear of the irrational aspect of nature, coupled with a morbid fascination characteristic of Heaney:

The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked  
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:  
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat  
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.  
I sickened, turned and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

The observer, in this case, flees from the nauseating scene, but in the act of recreating it there is patience, persistence, a concern for minute detail and even a certain relish for the creatures' loathsomeness, which have never deserted Heaney. His willingness to face reality, however unpalatable, commands our respect. Those who have criticised him for his unrelenting negativeness and so-called passivity over the Northern Ireland crisis do less than justice to his intellectual and emotional honesty. There is, however, another note in this poem. Heaney has always greatly admired Wordsworth, from whom he learned that the occasional reward for *wise passiveness* is the *visionary gleam*. There is such a gleam here, a sort of negative epiphany, in this baleful congregation of rutting frogs preparing their dark rites of vengeance. The «great slime kings» are an image of primitive terror and one of the earliest examples in this poetry of a very personal blending of fear, sexuality and ritual violence through the

medium of precise location, solid imagery and sonorous language. The persistence of these traits and the purposefulness with which Heaney pursues such effects through the form may be gauged from a number of the poems of *Field Work* (1979), e.g. 'The Guttural Muse' or 'The Harvest Bow'. The latter poem contains the telling image of the poet running his hands over the corn-dolly and musing, «I tell and finger it like braille, / Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable».

Images of the irrational fear and loathing provoked by contact with the underside of things underlie the second collection, appropriately entitled *Door Into the Dark*. Heaney has commented usefully on the fecundity of the unconscious in this regard:

Circumstances have changed and writing is usually born today out of the dark active centre of the imagination (...) I think this notion of the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts, the hidden core of the self —this notion is the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet.<sup>16</sup>

The darkness may be physical, metaphysical or moral. In arguably the two finest poems in the book, the darkness is, on the one hand, the waters of Lough Neagh in the heart of Ulster (*A Lough Neagh Sequence*), and, on the other, the bog itself, which is to play such a crucial rôle in Heaney's search for his own and his country's roots ('Bogland'). Heaney has said that he wrote 'Bogland' in a conscious attempt to «set up (...) the bog as an answering Irish myth» to the American myths of the west and the frontier.<sup>17</sup>

As a mythic presentation of the actual, 'Bogland' may seem, at first reading, to rely excessively on the dubious legends so apt to be passed off as Irish history on the unwary and the frankly gullible. But Heaney is hard-headed enough to have recalled that the American myth of the west is inextricably associated with the yarn or tall story (and, incidentally, with the bluff humour of the old ironist, Mark Twain). At any rate, it is hard to resist the feeling that, in conceiving his Irish myth, he is daring the reader to distinguish between the facts of folklore and the blarney of the bog-dweller. Such, surely, is the effect of certain details: «To slice a big sun», «An astounding crate full of air», «Missing its last definition/By millions of years», or that butter preserved intact by the action of the bog for over a hundred years.

However, Heaney is too well-documented, and too accomplished, a poet to be disbelieved with impunity, and the myth is duly laid down in the finely observed, masterful peat bog which actively imposes its presence

on the observer: it «encroaches», it «woos» and it «keeps crusting» (deliberately, it seems). Moreover, the geological precision of «tarn» and the apparently baroque introduction of «cyclops» pull the image round to face in the direction Heaney wants: the lake is localised and particularised, and is simultaneously linked to the original, eternal myths of western civilisation. This allows the poet to finish strongly on an appeal to the virtually limitless possibilities of the bog. It is a memory bank and a store of imaged riches. However much «our pioneers keep striking/Inwards and downwards», there will be no end to the wonders to be discovered, and the poet as historian will find in such images a continually renewed and enriched imaginative bounty, and inexhaustible evidence of cultural traditions.

Crucially, «they'll never find coal here», i.e. the bog preserves but does not modify; it is an archetype of the moulding function of the imagination, and shuns the gross materialism of the American prairies which supply a nation's (sliced?) bread. It gives up what it received, though its virtue is softening. The penultimate line («The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage») suggests that the layer upon layer of preserved evidence has no end except in the ocean itself – the primal element, for poets as for anthropologists. That last line is a masterstroke: «The wet centre is bottomless». On one level, it continues to infinity the process of stripping down; on another, it suggests that the dark side or obverse of reality is infinite: one thinks of the procreating dark, of the mythic dimension of the Freudian unconscious, of the faculty of memory itself. Besides, this last phrase contains a deliberate sexual metaphor, this time without the anxiety previously associated with sexual encounter. The suggestion is rather of fertility, of the darkness of the womb. This messing of concepts —memory, imagination, embryonic growth, the silting, accreting process of historical destiny— points forward to the development of later books.

With the discovery of the potential of the bog, Heaney has found a vehicle for the expression of his preoccupations (*Preoccupations* is, in fact, the title of his collected prose) and his next two books proceed to exploit this find with a new sense, not of buoyancy, but of writing from a natural centre that is both local and universal, or, as he puts it in another context, «not just a geographical country but (...) a country of the mind».<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically, perhaps, the increased confidence this vision gives him leads to an increasingly downhearted view of the present state of Ireland and an embittered sense of persistent historical outrage committed against a people. One must take care not to oversimplify, however. If the civilised sneer of Edmund Spenser is rejected in favour of the plodding courage and native resilience of the crafty, adaptable peasants of 'Bog Oak', we are not

allowed to forget that the history of the Gaelic peoples has been, in part, a history of ritual slaughter not obviously different from the sectarian violence of contemporary Northern Ireland. Both 'Bog Oak' and 'The Tollund Man' tackle this theme.

Perhaps the most striking thing about these poems, in contrast with the earlier work, is their quietness, their apparent innocuousness, their simplicity of form. There is a greater compactness, a tighter control, and a tone of increased maturity and responsibility. This observer, we feel sure, will not «turn and run». But the restraint is partly illusory. It derives, in the first place, from a greater breadth of view; the consciousness is less naive, less instinctual, and therefore capable of a greater range of responses, including irony and pity. Heaney's feeling for words is as exact as it ever was, but the cutback on exuberance, on that revelling in texture that is a hallmark of his early work, brings an increased capacity for composition.

Consider, for instance, in 'Bog Oak', the terseness achieved by the use of verbs and quasi-verbs — participles such as *split*, *mizzling*, *softening*, *encroached*; or nouns derived from verbs, such as *blow-down*, *cutters*, etc. This verbal activity is set over against the essentially hypothetical nature of the dominant syntactic links: the absence of a main verb in the opening section, which gives the whole piece the air of a postulation; the use of *I might* and *perhaps*; and the conjuring tricks played in the fifth stanza by the negations which simultaneously give and withhold. If the bog is primeval memory, its spirit is mythical, ruminative, ponderous. But its revelations are sudden, sharp and earthy. Heaney's poetry is characterised from this point on by what we might call urgent speculation, driving contemplation. The push towards understanding is paramount, and if it fails of its object — and the final lines of 'The Tollund Man' bespeak an unequivocal sense of defeat and frustration — then that is surely because Heaney's acceptance of his Ulster inheritance involves an honest, and crippling, sense of incapacity: inability to transcend the force of unjust law, powerlessness to transcend the trap of history and the dead weight of custom.

The overwhelming sense of these poems is of being baulked, cheated of one's birthright, and I confess I am baffled by a response like James Liddy's, who notes only Heaney's «almost total inertia in front of experience», and sums up:

He is emotionally ambiguous, not quite certain how far he should dredge his researched feelings.<sup>19</sup>

The innocent appearance of 'Bog Oak' disguises a refusal to abandon the spectral peasantry to their «hopeless wisdom», and tacitly dismisses the accounts of official historians. Spenser's contemptuous dismissal of the craven bog-dwellers is undercut by the ironic *oak-groves* —too classical and civilised a word altogether for this bleak northern scene. Similarly, the «cutters of mistletoe/in the green clearings» is probably a barb aimed at the more magnanimous but hopelessly uprooted figure of Tacitus, of whom Heaney has this to say:

I think that the kind of republican ethos is a feminine religion in a way (...) It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time, and it is observed with amazement and a kind of civilised tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century A.D. and by leader-writers in the «Daily Telegraph» in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

Heaney ranges over the savage mythos of the Boglands —a wider issue, it should be stressed, than the local Northern Irish conflict— in 'The Tollund Man', thus preparing the way for the definitive mythologising of *North*. This poem is one of a number that deal with the theme of the old ritual killings of victims chosen for sacrifice to the fertility goddess, Nerthus. A certain amount of research is, of course, implied in Heaney's use of this material, and he has referred his readers to Glob's *The Bog People*, for further information. So far, Liddy is justified. But there is no need to dive for one's copy. What the poem has to say is set out clearly, gravely and succinctly, and if some of the facts proceed from scholarship, this means simply that the record is faithful; there is no question here of abuse of allusion, and certainly no emotional dependence on values outside the poem. The poem imaginatively predicates a continuity between the ritual killings of pagan times —and elsewhere, Heaney has insisted on the etymology of *pagan* from *pagus*, meaning a place or region<sup>21</sup>— and the sectarian murders, familiar from newsreels and journalists' reports, of the «labourers» whose *stockinged corpses* recall the Tollund Man's own skin cap.

In 'The Tollund Man', all the elements we have noticed begin to come together:

Some day I will go to Aarhus  
To see his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eyelids,  
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country nearby  
Where they dug him out,  
His last gruel of winter seeds  
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for  
The cap, noose and girdle,  
I will stand a long time.  
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him  
And opened her fen,  
Those dark juices working  
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'  
Honeycombed workings.

Here we have the preserving bog giving up its secrets, the fearful ritual, the imagery of copulation and of the bog as womb, the transmitting of a cultural and mythic identity in the work of the turfcutters, and the suggestion of an inherited belief in ritual slaughter. Significantly, the third part of the poem identifies the scene of the pagan rituals as «the old man-killing parishes»:

Out there in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home.

The term «parishes» ironically underlines the disparity between the religious justification of the deed and its cold-blooded, impious cruelty, and its appropriateness to the grim situation in Northern Ireland is obvious. The closing lines are thus sardonic rather than merely despairing. But the word also picks up on Patrick Kavanagh's notion of the parish as the genuine community —a notion that Thomas Hardy would have approved of. I suspect that Heaney intends it to serve as a reminder of the differences separating the culture of Ireland from the British, or rather the English, tradition, and of the consequent dangers of oversimplification. Finally, his sense of the magic of words and sounds in themselves, and especially of the incantatory origin of poetry at a subliminal level, comes out strongly in the closing stanzas: «Saying the names (...) /Not Knowing the tongue» guarantees the poet's anguished neutrality, the «sad freedom» that is his only consolation. Again, one is reminded of Kavanagh, who held to his faith in the healing power of words, believing too that human utterance at its best spans the gap between the act of perception and the

object perceived. «Naming these things,» runs Kavanagh's famous line, «is the love-act and its pledge.»<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the relationship between poetry and reality is always problematic, and it is particularly delicate when reality is dominated by violence of the modern Northern Irish sort —delicate, I mean, because events come thrusting in, leaving the intellect and the sensibility largely powerless to deal with them, and also because prolonged exposure to such brutality must ultimately have a dulling effect on the consciousness, with a very real danger of emotional numbness. Though Heaney moved with his family to the Republic before *WO* was finished, he carried his obsessions with him. This dilemma clearly has consequences for the kind of poetry which can be written, and Seamus Deane asked him if he thought that

if some political stance is not adopted by you and the Northern poets at large, this refusal might lead to a dangerous strengthening of earlier notions of the autonomous nature of poetry and corroborate the recent English notion of a 'well made Poem'?

Heaney, in his reply, accepts the risks involved in remaining loyal to one's circumstances and one's native perceptions of how things are, rather than to a possibly limiting and finally trivial concept of 'Art':

I think that 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 (...) As I said earlier, the poet incarnates his mythos and must affirm it.<sup>23</sup>

This affirmation of the mythos is clearly consistent with the sense of 'sad freedom' which lies in accepting involvement through poetry while being conscious of the difficulty of maintaining the position, or if you like, of being involved in the right way. This Heaney also describes as the struggle between the contending forces of «the balanced, rational light» (Hercules) and «the pieties of illiterate fidelities» (Antaeus). The first, and much the better, part of *North* opens and closes with poems dealing with these subjects. We shall consider the second of these, 'Hercules and Antaeus'.

In the Greek myth, Antaeus was the giant who challenged all strangers to wrestle with him. His mother was Geo, the Earth, and each time he was thrown, his strength increased through contact with her, so that he was theoretically unbeatable. But the cunning Hercules, realising

the source of his rival's strength, defeated him by raising him off the ground, thus severing the essential link between Antaeus and his origins. Antaeus is literally crushed.

On the basis of what we have been saying so far, there is one possible reading of this poem that cannot be ignored. Expressions such as 'feeding off the territory', 'the mould-hugger', 'the cradling dark,/the river veins', 'the hatching grounds' remind us remorselessly of the mythical presence of the Irish past, the sense of place, the prestige of origins, all of which are positives elsewhere in Heaney's poetry. On this level, the defeat of Antaeus is a tragedy, 'a dream of loss/and origins', and the victorious Hercules appears, initially at least, both haughtily self-righteous ('sky-born and royal') and gratuitously cruel ('pap for the dispossessed').

And yet, Heaney is clearly attracted by this symbol of the reasonable light, opposed to the darkness of ignorance and bigotry, and he has commented that the poem «drifts towards an assent to Hercules, though there was a nostalgia for Antaeus», further complicating the matter by adding, «but I think that is wrong now». <sup>24</sup> Each reader must judge for himself. My own feeling is that the poet's nostalgia outweighs his intellectual assent, though the tensions in the poem are to remain as an uncomfortable underlay throughout the strained bucolics of *Field Work*. Clearly, the poem cannot be read in isolation: the arc of images that Heaney has taught us to respond to cannot spontaneously start operating in a new direction. Moreover, the probability that Britannia lurks behind the figure of Hercules (that *remorseless V* is surely, amongst other things, Churchillian) is fed by the references to the defeat, at the hands of invading and—in the context—imperialist powers, of the other three figures, Balor, Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull. All of this leads to a defining of political positions that militates against the acceptance of the exultant, civilising Hercules. Finally, the mention of *elegists* aligns the poet himself with Antaeus. An earlier poem, 'Act of Union', contains the line, spoken by England to Ireland, «Conquest is a lie», which seems relevant here. The poem is, in any case, more complex in its responses than Heaney's comments allow.

The same complexity is evident in the fine poem, 'Ocean's Love to Ireland', which deals with the same theme as 'Act of Union', viz. England's invasion and conquest of Ireland. One commentator describes this as «a graceful and amusing lyric». The adjectives are oddly chosen for a poem dealing with violence: rape, massacre and defeat. <sup>25</sup> In fact, the rape is twofold, physical and political. Sir Walter Raleigh, as is well known, was an Elizabethan sea-captain and adventurer whose exploits

brought him wealth and renown and the admiration —probably the love— of his queen, whom he called Cynthia at court and in his poetry. The story of his gallantry in laying down his cloak on «the plashy spots», one rainy day, to save the royal feet and slippers, is better publicised, perhaps, than his legendary feats as philanderer and womanizer extraordinary. Heaney got the anecdote of his peremptory lovemaking to the maid from John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, including the punning sixth line ('Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!'), though his identification of Raleigh with Ocean may derive from Spenser, with whose life and writings, as we have seen, Heaney is most familiar. It may be of interest to bear in mind that Spenser lived up the river Blackwater, and on occasion entertained Raleigh there. It is also instructive that Raleigh saw his political incursions in terms of amorous conquest. In *The Discovery of Guiana*, for instance, he remarks that «Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead» —a glimpse into the imperialist mind exploited by William Carlos Williams in «In the American Grain»: «Sing, O Muse, of Raleigh, beloved of majesty, plunging his lust into the body of a new world...».

There are, therefore, literary precedents for the present version of the Raleigh story, but Heaney has his own peculiarly Irish fish to fry, and he immediately turns Raleigh's priapic prow into the rivers of south-west Ireland, where a Catholic rebellion has to be suppressed. In deference to his queen's wishes and in obedience to standing orders, Raleigh participated in the judicial massacre of the six hundred «papists» captured in the rebellion and systematically put to the sword in the precincts of the fort at Smerwick. Heaney allows the exultant cruelty of the English commander's diary entry to stand as his condemnation, and the words *plashy* and *seepings* now take on a more horrific resonance than mud and water warrant. The dense third stanza passes on to a historical consideration of these events, exhibiting fairly close parallelism with the first, but in a quite different key.

Following the destruction of the fleet which Philip II of Spain had sent in support of the rebellion, resistance collapses and Ireland is left with her grief. Images of impotence and barrenness ('The Spanish prince has spilled his gold/And failed her'; 'her poets/Sink like Onan') give way gradually to images of insubstantiality ('She fades from their somnolent clasp/Into ringlet breath and dew') echoed in the very sound of 'Rush-light, mushroom flesh', as the Irish retreat into the woods. The fate of the native Gaelic language and culture is ominously foreshadowed in the 'Iambic drums of English', and the phrase 'ringlet breath and dew' suggests the exhaustion of native resources which, at this crisis, return to a stubbornly atavistic fairy-land of folk legend.

The poetic stance here mingles indignation at the atrocity, pity for the defeated and scorn for the ease with which victory is accomplished. It is therefore a good point at which to end this brief consideration of Heaney's complex mytho-historical poetics. It is the inherent difficulty of his subject, we must say, and not any cloudiness or wilfulness of the poet's, that explains the hesitancy obvious to a reader of his most recent work. Heaney's preoccupations in *North* go beyond the local sectarian questions of Northern Ireland to face the possibility that, as he puts it, «the genuine political confrontation is between Ireland and Britain».<sup>26</sup> Feeling his way gingerly through the perplexities of this position, he writes, in 'Punishment', a poem which seeks to understand intolerance and which, because it takes risks, has been —I think sometimes wilfully— misunderstood.<sup>27</sup> It takes as its subject a young Irish girl brutally tarred and feathered after she has been caught consorting with British soldiers; her fate is compared to that of a young adulteress, found in the bog, hanged for her offence thousands of years ago. To understand is not to condone, whatever Morrison's bad *liberal* conscience makes him want to believe. There is more courage in the speaker of the poem, who admits to cowardice in standing dumb in the presence of torture:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,  
  
who would connive  
in civilised outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

#### Notes

1. Seamus Deane, «Unhappy and at home», *The Crane Bag*, 1: 1, 1977, p. 63.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
3. We refer here to *Door Into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North* (all published by Faber). *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984), neither of which is dealt with in any depth in the present essay, throw interesting sidelights on some of the comments made here, and I hope to consider them in some depth in an essay planned for the near future.
4. See J. Liddy, «Ulster Poets and the Catholic Muse», in *Eire/Ireland*, 13: 4, 1978, p. 136.
5. S. Deane, loc. cit., p. 62.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
8. 'Gifts of Rain', *Wintering Out*, p. 25.
9. See Heaney's essay, «The Sense of Place», in *Preoccupations*, Faber, London, 1980, pp. 131-49.

10. See Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, M. Brian & O'Keeffe, London, 1974. A useful commentary on the conception appears in M. Allen's «Provincialism and Recent Irish Poetry», in D. Dunn (ed.) *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, Carcanet, Manchester, 1975, pp. 23-26.
11. Heaney's (possibly perverse) distinction between these two terms is set out in «Feeling Into Words», *Preoccupations*, p. 47.
12. A wide variety of critics naturally take the former view, e.g. Helen Vendler in «The Music of What Happens», *The New Yorker*, Sep. 28, 1981, pp. 146-57. The latter view is illustrated in a carping article by A. Alvarez: «A Fine Way with the Language», *New York Review of Books*, 6 March 1980, pp. 17-18.
13. Simon Curtis, «Seamus Heaney's North», *Critical Quarterly*, 18: 1, 1976, pp. 82 & 83.
14. Edna Longley, «'North': «Inner Emigré» or «Artful Voyeur»?», In Tony Curtis (ed.) *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales, Bridgend, 1982, p. 69.
15. Patricia Beer, quoted in R. Buttell, *Seamus Heaney*, Bucknell Un. Pr., Ass Un Prs, London, 1975, p. 81.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
17. Heaney, «Feeling Into Words», p. 55.
18. Heaney, «The Sense of Place», p. 132.
19. J. Liddy, *loc. cit.*, pp. 136-7.
20. See T. Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets of Ulster*, Dublin, 1975, p. 176.
21. Heaney, «The Sense of Place».
22. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, M. Brian & O'Keeffe, London, 1972, p. 153.
23. S. Deane, *loc. cit.*, p. 63.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
25. J. Liddy, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
26. S. Deane, *loc. cit.*, p. 62.
27. By, for example, Edna Longley, *loc. cit.*, pp. 78-9, and Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 68.