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### **TERRITORIAL BODIES, EMBODIED TERRITORIES: READING LANDSCAPE, GENDER AND HISTORY IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S FIRST FOUR COLLECTIONS**

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*“The music of what happens”,  
said great Fionn, “that is the  
finest music in the world”.*

—Irish Fairy Tales

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are found both in the text and notes when referring to frequently cited works by Seamus Heaney. Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to first editions published by Faber & Faber (London). Complete information for the titles listed below is provided in the bibliography.

<i>AOL</i>	<i>An Open Letter</i> (1983)
<i>B</i>	<i>Beowulf</i> (1999)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Crediting Poetry</i> (1995)
<i>CT</i>	<i>The Cure at Troy</i> (1990)
<i>DC</i>	<i>District and Circle</i> (2006)
<i>DD</i>	<i>Door into the Dark</i> (1969)
<i>DN</i>	<i>Death of a Naturalist</i> (1966)
<i>EL</i>	<i>Electric Light</i> (2001)
<i>FK</i>	<i>Finders Keepers</i> (2002)
<i>FW</i>	<i>Field Work</i> (1979)
<i>GT</i>	<i>The Government of the Tongue</i> (1988)
<i>HC</i>	<i>Human Chain</i> (2010)
<i>HL</i>	<i>The Haw Lantern</i> (1987)
<i>N</i>	<i>North</i> (1975)
<i>OG</i>	<i>Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996</i> (1998)
<i>PP</i>	<i>Preoccupations</i> (1980)
<i>RP</i>	<i>The Redress of Poetry</i> (1995)
<i>WO</i>	<i>Wintering Out</i> (1972)
<i>SS</i>	<i>Stepping Stones</i> (2008)

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## Introduction

In 1995, Seamus Heaney delivered his Nobel Prize lecture, *Crediting Poetry*, in Stockholm, a moment that further consolidated his position within the canon of English literature. In this account, Heaney traced his evolution from private lyricist to public voice, thereby offering both a comprehensive overview and an intimate account of his poetic journey. Heaney's lecture revealed how his relationship with poetry – rooted in an earthbound rural upbringing and initially oriented toward the contemplative – became increasingly shaped by the pressing obligation to respond to the violence that was consuming Ireland. Heaney expresses gratitude for what poetry embodies and enables: 'I credit poetry, in other words, both for being itself and for being a help, for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference.'<sup>1</sup> It is well established – and Heaney himself acknowledged it – that his poetic evolution was shaped by many inspirational, as well as influential, figures, including Czesław Miłosz, William Wordsworth and W. B. Yeats. Heaney has now joined their ranks and is recognised as a poetic touchstone for generations to come.

In the collection of critical essays *Preoccupations* (1980), Heaney disclosed the importance he afforded the sense of place and his own research of it by writing that 'being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, [is] a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released' (*PP* 47–48). This statement encapsulates his vision of the sense of place rooted in every human being and also addresses the urgency of a revival of the connection with the soil as compellingly contemporary. Through these words, Heaney reveals his deeply personal negotiation with late twentieth-century Irish existence – an intimate yet conflicted engagement that reflects the complexities of Ireland's colonial and postcolonial condition. Contemporary readers might find in Heaney's words an early recognition of what could be described as humanity's gradual disconnection from place – a form of territorial alienation that some would argue has continued to develop since his time. This thesis examines how Heaney translated his and Ireland's sense of place into poetry during a period of socio-political crisis through an interdisciplinary lens merging geographical and gender studies, as well as aesthetic philosophy and poetic theory. Heaney has seldom been examined at the intersection of these categories. Critical studies have tended to privilege a single

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<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 10.

disciplinary perspective – such as autobiographic, mythopoetic, political or intertextual – rather than adopt an interdisciplinary lens capable of integrating different approaches. This single oriented approach to Heaney’s reading risks to anchor his poetry to a unique interpretive frame, isolating aspects of his poetry instead of grasping their deeply integrated nature. The risk in studying Heaney is that the related scholarly literature is already vast and exhaustive; however, this dissertation, which adopts a multiple theoretical approach, illuminates dimensions of his poetry that disciplinary boundaries might otherwise obscure. When Heaney is read at the intersection of these fields, his words resonate differently, especially with contemporary audiences encountering his work from new vantage points.

Through close attention to Heaney’s poetry, this study bridges theory and literary practice, showing how poetry’s ethical and aesthetic dimensions reflect and respond to human crises. The aim is to enable dialogue between apparently distant fields within the space of a single author’s work, allowing an understanding of poetry and poetic function to emerge through the study of selected collections. This approach moves beyond purely literary analysis of Heaney’s poetry to encompass a broader field of disciplinary intersection, revealing how Heaney constructs poetic meaning through the deliberate juxtaposition and negotiation of competing cultural knowledge systems. By analysing the first four collections – considered Heaney’s first poetic period and recognised as a coherent and self-contained creative phase – this study traces the formation of Heaney’s poetic voice before his subsequent maturation and thematic and stylistic shifts of the 1980s and 1990s.

The critical foundation of this work spans four decades of scholarship, from initial studies published in the 1980s and 1990s to works published as recently as 2023, to provide both historical perspectives and contemporary insights on which to build new interpretations of Heaney’s work. Despite varying approaches to analysing Heaney’s life and work, the major critical studies converge on several aspects of Heaney’s significance, whether they focus on tone, style, language or authorial intention. Their authors recognise Heaney’s crucial role in articulating the Irish experience through engagement with ancient traditions in a way that positions him as a cultural mediator between seemingly irreconcilable realities: Catholic and Protestant communities, Irish and British literary traditions, local and universal concerns. Heaney’s critics also agree on his ability to voice fundamental human experiences – loss, displacement, identity

formation and the search for belonging – that transcend national boundaries.

The epistemic polyphony of disciplines chosen engages theories ranging from cultural criticism – including Matthew Arnold’s and John Dewey’s conceptions of culture as an agent of social change – to gender studies, demonstrating how these diverse perspectives converge in illuminating Heaney’s early poetic project. The use of these approaches to read Heaney reveals the central tension in his work between poetic autonomy and social responsibility, the two forces that shape his entire oeuvre. The figures of Arnold and Dewey, for example, serve as theoretical anchors, despite the different socio-historical contexts in which they write: Arnold by establishing the modern conception of culture as a transformative force, envisioning art as a moral and spiritual corrective. In a similar way, Heaney sees poetry as “a redress”, a means to counterweight the pressures of modernity. Both authors serve as cultural mediators, seeing art, and poetry specifically, as a space for spiritual steadiness. Dewey, a paradigm-shifting author in reconceptualising our understanding of experience based learning rooted in everyday encounters with the world, is read at the level of poetic practice. Both Dewey and Heaney, in fact, ground experience and poetry in lived realities, emphasising that perception cannot be separate from life. The framework also incorporates humanistic geography, particularly Yi-Fu Tuan’s work on *topophilia* and Anne Buttimer’s phenomenological theories of place attachment. I employ this geographical approach to examine theories of insularity and their role in place-identity formation, which allows me to position Heaney’s work within the specific context of island consciousness. Finally, work by Stephanie Alexander and Patricia Coughlan facilitates a feminist investigation of the gender dynamics apparent in Heaney’s bog poems, especially those in *North*. To produce a comprehensive overview of the major voices and perspectives that followed Heaney’s evolution as a poet, Chapter I provides a detailed survey of major critical works on his poetry published from the early 1990s to the early 2000s and up to the most recent publication of letters in 2023. Given that the international echoes of Heaney’s work over the last century persist into the present day, it is necessary to first provide an overview of these voices. Specifically, this chapter focuses primarily on three scholars – Michael Parker, Helen Vendler, and Eugene O’Brien– and integrates insights from Roy Foster, Henry Hart, R. R. Russell, and Susanna Lidström. Together, their analyses illuminate both Heaney’s personal evolution and his public emergence as a major voice. This chapter traces Heaney’s poetic journey,

particularly across his first four collections, and examines how these critics read his work – each from a distinct perspective – in the context of his lived experience. These scholars address the central concerns of Heaney’s poetry: his deep connection to place, his consciousness of descending from a rural stock, the twin themes of dispossession and colonisation, and the persistent tension between artistic integrity and political commitment during the Troubles. Michael Parker provides the most comprehensive biographical reading and follows Heaney from his school days through his emergence as an internationally recognised poet. Parker’s meticulous approach reveals the particulars of Heaney’s evolving relationship with language and craft, from juvenile experiments to the groundbreaking achievement of *North* – the collection at the heart of this thesis. Parker demonstrates how Heaney finally found a way to voice Ireland’s tensions through the bog bodies he discovered in P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People* and his subsequent transformation of archaeological findings into powerful metaphors for contemporary violence. This chapter surveys the critical reception of Heaney’s work during the crucial years of his emergence as a major poet.

Chapter II examines the nature of art through the works of Matthew Arnold and John Dewey, two major figures in cultural theory and aesthetic philosophy. In this chapter, Arnold and Dewey facilitate an analysis of Heaney’s conflicted stance on whether poetry should maintain its pristine autonomy or serve the social and political urgencies of its time. In his struggle to balance artistic integrity and social responsibility, Heaney draws heavily on Arnold’s vision of culture as a vital force for individual and societal transformation and, more specifically, as a binding agent that protects against the fragmenting forces of modern society. Despite their chronological and thematic differences, both Arnold and Heaney characterise culture and poetry as transformative social forces. For Heaney especially, this creates a pressing dilemma: How can artistic integrity be balanced with the urgent demand to address the violence engulfing Ireland? Dewey’s theory, which examines how external phenomena transform into aesthetic experience, is more pragmatic, process-oriented and focused on the dynamic relationship between sensory stimuli and their crystallisation into works of art. Heaney’s attentive observation of reality aligns with Dewey’s vision of dialectical engagement between the artist and the world, but they are most deeply connected in their shared belief in art’s capacity to awaken collective consciousness. In this reading, Dewey provides a philosophical framework for understanding how internal experience is channeled and

materialised into an external instrument of social transformation.

Chapter III introduces the methodological and theoretical framework of humanistic geography, an approach that is particularly illuminating when applied to Heaney's work. This chapter examines how humanistic geography, represented by Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttimer and Henry Lefebvre's foundational texts, provides crucial insights into Heaney's poetry. Specifically, it explores the intersection between poetic expression and territorial attachment in an attempt to understand both Heaney's intimate relationship with place – the omphalos of his creative life – and his broader project of deploying landscape as a means of reconstructing national identity. After exploring how humanistic geography revolutionised spatial thinking by moving beyond positivistic approaches, I draw on Buttimer's phenomenological methods and Tuan's psychological insights to explore island identity and situate Heaney's experience within the framework of geography.

Chapter IV addresses the matter of poetry more specifically. First, it analyses Heaney's development from the self-referential poet in search of his own voice in *Death of a Naturalist* to a national bard who adopted bogs as a metaphor for the Irish struggle as exemplified in *North*. Second, the chapter outlines Heaney's attempts to ground his personal experience into tribal history for the purpose of making his words resonate for a wider audience. Here, he draws on ancient fertility rites dedicated to the goddess Nerthus, highlighting parallels between these violent practices and the contemporary atrocities wrought by war. All of this is achieved through the ever-present essence of the territory, which serves as the background of Heaney's experience of place. Poems from Heaney's first three collections – *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark* and *Wintering Out* – capture how Heaney came closer and closer to his maturing language and how his tools progress as he gradually finds both his voice and his direction.

This study highlights the continuing relevance of Heaney's work and its resonance with contemporary concerns. His exploration of dispossession speaks directly to the current moment, especially the growing alienation between people and place caused by global mobility, technological mediation and gentrification, often characterised by the erosion of meaningful connections to landscapes that defines the modern Western experience. Heaney's literary contribution to understanding the human-land relationship is both innovative and multifaceted. His poetry transcends personal introspection and questions of belonging to engage with broader societal issues, while simultaneously

accomplishing something more complex: the transformation of myth, history and lived experience into a new poetic language engaged in the greater project of raising awareness of the Irish situation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Seamus Heaney's poetry is vitally relevant for contemporary readers grappling with urgent matters, giving weight to questions of place-belonging and gender dynamics that remain compelling today. In this contribution to the existing academic discourse on Heaney, I claim that his work serves as more than an object of scholarly analysis; rather, it offers readers a means to examine their own relationships with place and to articulate their experiences of identity and belonging. By offering an overview of theories related to art, place and gender, the reader is presented with a wide-ranging set of arguments that allow them to uncover their own interpretations of key universal themes through the lens of Heaney's poetry.

## I. Evolving Critical Paradigms: Mapping Heaney's Trajectory and Literary Reception from Early Career to Contemporary Reconceptualisation (1993–2003)

*Did it matter, I wondered, whether you were  
Catholic or Protestant when it came to reading James Joyce.*

—Seamus Heaney, 'Further Language', 1997

Tracing Seamus Heaney's evolution from rural bard to international literary figure demands engagement with multiple critical perspectives. Specifically, understanding his poetic development requires a synthesis of interpretive strategies that combines the biographical enquiries, sociohistorical analyses and different theoretical frameworks that illuminate both his artistic achievement and cultural significance. The past three decades have witnessed intensified critical interest in Heaney as a canonical figure in Anglo-Irish literature. His contributions resonate powerfully in the present day, and Heaney has represented a new line of Irish writers who, writing in the second half of the twentieth century, voiced the complexities of Irish identity in ways distinct from their modernist predecessors, such as James Joyce or William Butler Yeats. Scholarly attention towards the Irish poet stems from the international echo of his works and the relevance of the themes he addresses regarding contemporary issues. Heaney's significance extends beyond Irish literature since his poetry addresses universal themes while remaining grounded in specific cultural experience. These themes include problems of postcolonial dispossession, identity struggles, memory, and relationships with the natural environment. What has been called the 'Heaney industry' – namely the literature sprung up around his work – continues to thrive and generate significant scholarly interest.

The common thread in criticism of Heaney concerns his inherent complexity, or, as Henry Hart writes 'the multifaceted argument with himself'.<sup>1</sup> Heaney's entire poetic career reveals uncertainties about the role of politics in art, the evolution of his rustic language, and an intimate struggle with vocation. According to John Wilson Foster, central to Heaney's literary path lies the desire 'to dedicate his central allegiance to Poetry and

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse University Press, 1992), 2.

make that art his candid but chivalrous battlefield'.<sup>2</sup> The role of poetry as a binding force between opposites, be they religious, political, or personal, is a central theme in Heaney's works, alongside a deep sense of place associated with the Irish landscape, the sacred nature of the bogs, and his engagement with ancient mythology.

The task of interpreting Heaney's literary development presents challenges, particularly when situating his work within Northern Ireland's turbulent political context. While the sectarian tensions and antagonisms that shaped his early career have been documented historically, assessing their immediate impact on his poetic evolution requires careful attention to both biographical circumstances and broader cultural dynamics. The complexity deepens when examining how Heaney transmuted the lived experience of political strife into poetic metaphor – a process requiring simultaneous attention to historical specificity and artistic transformation. Notable works whose authors have interpreted Heaney's literary path and public reception include the following selected volumes, which span from 1993 to the most recent publication of private letters in 2023. Chronologically, my review encompasses Michael Parker's *Seamus Heaney: Making of the Poet* (1993), Helen Vendler's *Seamus Heaney* (1998), Eugene O'Brien's *Creating Irelands of the Mind* (2002), Richard R. Russell's *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (2014), Susanna Lidström's *Nature, Environment, and Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes* (2015), Roy Foster's *On Seamus Heaney* (2020), and a brief consideration of the latest publication, *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* (2023) edited by Christopher Reid and published by Faber & Faber on the tenth anniversary of Heaney's death. In this chapter, I concentrate on the sections of the works cited above that correspond to Heaney's initial collections – from *Death of a Naturalist* to *North* – as these are the most pertinent to the current research, while also providing a brief overview of his subsequent anthologies. The following study of these biographical, historical, ecocritical and theoretical interpretations of Heaney's artistic development and cultural significance illuminates both his poetic achievement and his broader cultural impact.

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<sup>2</sup> John Wilson Foster, *The Achievements of Seamus Heaney* (The Lilliput Press, 1995),

## 1. Foundational Interpretations: The Formation of Heaney's Studies in the 1990s

In the preface to *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (1993), Michael Parker sets out to retrace the literary, political, historical, and biographical influences and experiences that shaped Heaney's development as a poet.<sup>3</sup> Parker chronicles Heaney's life from his formative years to his acclaim as a distinguished poet by mapping the poet's literary path through its connection to his private life: his upbringing in Mossbawn, his familial dynamics and his encounters with loss and displacement. Parker analyses the events of Heaney's life from the 1960s onwards, especially the intersection of religion, politics and poetry. His deep familiarity with Heaney's works and biography results in fluid, accessible prose that serves both scholarly and general audiences. At the end of the preface, Parker expresses his hope that his volume will encourage readers to become more acquainted with Heaney's poems and 'to mine their own meanings'.<sup>4</sup> In this spirit, Parker provides both context and critical tools that allow readers to form their own understanding of the poet and pursue whatever aspects most engage them.

*The Making of the Poet* is divided into six chapters dedicated to what the author identifies as the main phases of Heaney's life, from his birth in 1939 to the publication of *Seeing Things* (1991). Parker outlines the poet's development through chronological periods, each of which corresponds to significant changes: his childhood years, his decision to pursue a career in writing, the challenges associated with this choice and the struggle to maintain his poetry independent from social and political demands. At the time of publication, Parker's contribution was regarded as a meticulous investigation on Heaney's life and provided original material that enabled comprehensive analysis: unpublished bibliographical material, photographs, unedited interviews and poems. Parker even obtained information from sources who chose to remain anonymous.<sup>5</sup> The wealth of material allows the reader to gain a clear view of the circumstances that shaped Seamus Heaney as a poet. Parker carefully minded Heaney's historical context for additional insights. By outlining significant figures in Heaney's life (as described in

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, (MacMillan Press Ltd., 1993), x.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. Here, Parker refers to an informant who was a student of Heaney's during the latter's time as Lecturer in English at Queen's University. This student recalled Heaney's comprehensive teaching style when he helped resolve a confusion between Richard II and Richard III by redirecting the discussion toward Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Parker's second chapter),<sup>6</sup> Parker deepens our understanding of the inspirations behind the former's poetry. These detailed biographical descriptions, while seemingly peripheral to the Irish poet's development, provide a valuable context for understanding the socio-historical situation of late twentieth-century Ireland and suggest how external challenges shaped both Heaney's life and his career choices.

Born into a family of farmers, Heaney's life choice to pursue writing weighed heavily on his conscience, particularly in a period when academia was not considered a viable means of livelihood. His father, a protagonist in many of his poems, epitomised solidity and hard work, personifying the long tradition of turf diggers. Parker observes how, even in Heaney's early poems, his father had become 'an elegiac presence, a focus for his own mourning of change'.<sup>7</sup> In Chapter I, Parker traces Heaney's educational journey, from his early attempts at verse to his increasingly sophisticated approach to poetry. During these years, Mossbawn serves as the *omphalos*,<sup>8</sup> the centre of Heaney's world and 'a frame of reference from which he can map the Catholic past and present'.<sup>9</sup> Parker's analysis delves deeply into Heaney's educational journey by chronicling his experiences from his years at the mixed Catholic and Protestant primary school at Anahorish to his time at St. Columb's College, where he studied William Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins, two authors who fundamentally shaped his writings. This close examination uncovers even the most obscure details of the Irish poet's early life, establishing Parker's work as an essential research into Heaney's personal background. Parker focuses intently on Heaney's school years and explores how he navigated the distance from his family home and forged new relationships, such as his friendship with fellow poet Seamus Deane or his affinity for his English teacher Sean O'Kelly. In contrast,

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<sup>6</sup> Among these are Patrick Kavanagh, Ted Hughes, W. B. Yeats, William Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost, Robert Lowell and Czesław Miłosz.

<sup>7</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> In Heaney's own words: 'I would begin with the Greek word, *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and 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' (Seamus Heaney, 'Mossbawn', in *Preoccupations* [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980], 17). In Ancient Greek, the word originally referred to a stone artefact of religious significance. In poetry, however, particularly in Heaney's worldview, it symbolises the source of inspiration – the place where the first stirrings of imagination come to life. An example of this appears in 'Personal Helicon', in which Heaney discovers his poetic voice at the bottoms of wells.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 95.

the author gives only cursory treatment to other significant events, such as the death of his youngest brother Christopher, despite its profound impact on the poet. However, Parker's privileging of educational experience serves a specific analytical purpose by allowing him to explore how both Heaney and Deane came to understand the poet's role through analogy with the priesthood and how Catholic education shaped their conception of the poetic vocation.<sup>10</sup> Parker's portrait of Heaney's childhood underscores the powerful Catholic sensibility instilled by his upbringing, religious perspective which fundamentally influenced the early stages of his education and later poetic work.

Heaney's initial forays into poetry were marked by a profound sense of uncertainty and doubt. As a young poet who encountered the formidable literary canon through an education steeped in the works of Wordsworth, Joyce, and Yeats, Heaney felt the weight of this legacy. The result was that he signed his earliest poetic attempts under the pseudonym 'Incertus', an allusion to his feelings of insecurity. Heaney's early poetry also exhibited what Parker described as an outward mellowness' that contrasted with the violent subject matter that preoccupied many of his Northern Irish contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> This pastoral infusion, with its deep engagement in the landscape and desire to preserve harmony amidst tumult, stemmed in part from Heaney's relative distance from the civil unrest that shaped the work of other regional writers.

In the second chapter, Parker focuses on the years from 1961 to 1966, the period leading up to the publication of Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*. Parker argues that this initial phase of tentativeness and self-doubt in Heaney's poetic development was, in fact, strongly shaped and supported by influential literary figures of the time, such as Patrick Kavanagh and John Hewitt. Even Heaney's engagement with the work of fellow Irishman James Joyce served to fortify his sense of belonging and instil a growing confidence in his own poetic voice. Parker's second chapter carefully explores the inspiring personalities that orbited Heaney during his early poetic life and profoundly influenced his future writing. These figures included Thomas Kinsella, Derek Mahon and John Montague – with whom Heaney shared a common history, turbulent present and profound sense of Irish literary kinship, including a palpable duality between rootedness

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

and exile.<sup>12</sup> Parker characterises these figures as a ‘second anchor’ that helped strengthen Heaney’s poetic abilities and encouraged him to embrace the ambitious path of the writer.<sup>13</sup>

Heaney’s ‘poetic novitiate’,<sup>14</sup> as Parker terms it, was marked by a profound awe towards the sacred implications of his craft and poetry in general. However, this tendency towards the religious started to shift as Heaney became more acquainted with the poetry of Ted Hughes. While both poets shared a common reverence for creation, Parker emphasises how Heaney gradually distinguished himself from these influential figures to develop his distinctive voice. In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney’s religious perspective shifts towards a tendency in respect to what Parker calls a ‘primeval feel’<sup>15</sup> that aligns more closely with Ireland’s pre-Christian traditions than with conventional Christianity.<sup>16</sup> This transformation is particularly evident in Heaney’s portrayals of nature throughout the collection – not merely as an environment but as a living entity that, alongside his family, played an educational role in his early life. ‘The Diviner’, the collection’s fourteenth poem, exemplifies this shift and sees Heaney drawing on pagan beliefs embedded in Irish folk tradition. The figure of the land-diviner represents a sacred intermediary capable of connecting with nature’s spirituality as a source of strength and wisdom that preceded the Christian tradition. In this way, Heaney presents spiritual power as emerging not directly from God but through the expertise of one versed in ancient knowledge.

The 1960s marked Heaney’s introduction to the Belfast Group, established in November 1963 by Philip Hobsbawm, whom Parker describes as a ‘catalyst’ for fostering interaction and critical exchange among young writers.<sup>17</sup> For Heaney, the group presented a crucial opportunity to test his work against that of his peers and to explore the limitations and possibilities of his poetic voice. This exposure to a wider audience – both within the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> A case point is the fourteenth poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, ‘The Diviner’, which provides an example of pagan beliefs embedded into Irish folk tradition – that of the land-diviner, who was considered a sacred figure able to connect with the spirituality of Nature and allowing men to benefit from said spirituality through his intermediation. In this case, strength and resources did not come directly from God, in this case, but from the expertise of a figure using a knowledge of the old waves.

<sup>17</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 51.

intimate circle of fellow writers and through magazine publications – proved significant in helping him gain recognition, encouragement and confidence necessary for his poetic development. The successful reception of three poems – ‘Digging’, ‘Scaffolding’ and ‘Storm on the Island’ – ultimately led to Faber & Faber’s invitation to compile a manuscript of his work.

In the third chapter, ‘Pioneer’, Parker analyses the poems from Heaney’s first two collections: *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969). *Death of a Naturalist* represents Heaney’s first mature work and showcases his early poetic voice through personal experiences, natural imagery, and childhood memories. The collection reveals both Heaney’s keen sensitivity to his surroundings and his emerging mastery of poetic form and language. Parker identifies the opening poem, ‘Digging’, as the manifesto of Heaney’s poetics.<sup>18</sup> The poem is dedicated to his father, whom Parker characterises as ‘the master craftsman’ and ‘the Daedalus of the fields’,<sup>19</sup> and culminates in Heaney’s declaration of vocation: ‘Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests./I’ll dig with it’ (*DN* 2). While ‘Digging’ presents the father as a keeper of mysterious, magical knowledge, this idealisation shifts notably in ‘Follower,’ where the father figure becomes almost a burden: ‘But today/It is my father who keeps stumbling/Behind me, and will not go away’ (*DN* 12).<sup>20</sup> Vendler offers a particularly incisive reading of ‘Digging’ when she notes its unsettling undertones and how it presents Heaney with only two possible tools for shaping his future: the pen and the spade. These implements, she argues, symbolise the dual inheritance of agricultural tradition and Republican militarism but also Heaney’s sense of being at a crossroads between choosing his family’s craft or his calling as a poet.

The opening lines of ‘Digging’, which crystallise Heaney’s complex relationship with tradition and vocation, became emblematic in his early poetics. In these lines, Heaney articulates his deliberate departure from his family’s heritage of turf digging to pursue his calling as a poet. This transition represents not just a change in occupation but a profound negotiation between personal history, cultural identity and artistic mission. Heaney’s careful choice of words makes the image of the pen ‘snug as a gun’ especially striking.

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<sup>18</sup> The term was first used by Andrew Waterman in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elmer Andrews, (The MacMillan Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 28–29.

The word 'snug' suggests Heaney's natural affinity for his chosen tool and implies an organic connection to the writer's craft, yet the comparison to a gun transforms this image into something more potent, even threatening. Through this single metaphor, Heaney establishes the dual nature of his poetic enterprise. The pen represents both comfort and power, both creative and destructive potential, while precise language parallels the precision of a weapon and suggests poetry's capacity to effect change with surgical accuracy. This metaphor ultimately reveals Heaney's early understanding of poetry's transformative power. The physical force of the gun finds its counterpart in the intellectual and cultural influence of the pen, through which the poet shapes consciousness and reality. While Heaney would later develop a more nuanced stance toward political engagement, these opening lines already signal his early recognition that poems must serve a purpose beyond mere aesthetic pleasure.

The pen-as-gun metaphor invites analysis through postcolonial theory, particularly in the image's engagement with Ireland's complex colonial history. Within Irish literature, language has functioned historically as a site of contestation, wherein English represents not merely a medium of communication but an instrument of colonial power, while Irish serves as a vehicle of native resistance. Heaney's decision to write in English thus carries significant political implications and positions him within the discourse of what postcolonial theorists term the 'language of the coloniser'. One reading of the metaphorical fusion of pen and gun in 'Digging' is as Heaney's acknowledgement of this linguistic tension. His deployment of English – the coloniser's tongue – becomes an act both of appropriation and transformation. The 'snug' comfort of the pen suggests not merely acceptance but rather mastery of this inherited language, while its comparison to a gun implies the potential for linguistic subversion. Heaney asserts control over English by transforming it into his own poetic medium while simultaneously adapting it to serve Irish cultural needs. Instead of treating English as a superior literary language, he reshapes its forms and structures to express distinctly Irish experiences, creating a hybrid language that incorporates Ulster dialect, Gaelic influences and Irish cultural references. This duality reflects what Homi Bhabha describes as the ambivalence of colonial discourse,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The ambivalence of colonial discourse in the application of Homi Bhabha's theory to Seamus Heaney's poetry manifests in Heaney's transformation of English literary traditions into Irish cultural perspectives

in which the colonised subject both adopts and adapts the colonial language for purposes of resistance. In the context of twentieth-century Ireland's political tensions, Heaney's metaphor thus resonates with a particular force. The pen-gun image suggests poetry's capacity to not only document but to actively challenge colonial authority – a theme that would become increasingly significant in Heaney's later work as he navigated Northern Ireland's political landscape.

Parker's biographical approach reveals how such thematic concerns grew from formative personal experiences. For example, while Parker's initial treatment of Christopher Heaney's death in Chapter I is cursory, the event's significance emerges more fully in his analysis of 'Mid-Term Break'. The poem captures the profound impact of childhood loss by depicting Heaney's mother's 'angry tearless sighs' and his father 'crying on the porch' (*DN 15*). This representation of familial grief, alongside poems such as 'Blackberry Picking', illuminates the challenges of childhood confrontation with mortality. Parker suggests that Heaney's exploration of such autobiographical material may represent an attempt to address – or at least confront – the guilt associated with his pursuit of a literary career. In 'Mid-Term Break,' the usual warmth of homecoming is replaced by grief's shadow and Heaney's physical absence – he was at boarding school – during his brother's death creates a painful irony. His education, meant to advance him, instead separated him from his family at their most crucial moment, leaving him burdened with guilt. The poem thus connects personal loss with the broader theme of departure from childhood circumstances and renders with intimate restraint both Heaney's own and his family's response to the tragedy. The poem's closing stanzas expose the fundamental injustice of a life cut short in childhood innocence: 'Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops/And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him/For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,//Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,/He lay in the four foot box as in his cot./No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear./A four foot box, a foot for every year.'" (*DN 15*). This tension between past and present, childhood and maturity, finds its clearest expression in the concluding stanza of 'Personal Helicon': 'Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,/To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring/Is beneath all adult dignity.

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through which he creates a hybrid form that subverts colonial authority. Language, in this case, becomes a tool for both expression and resistance.

I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (*DN 44*). Here, Heaney acknowledges the perceived childishness of his poetic fascinations while simultaneously asserting their essential role in his artistic vocation. The image of Narcissus suggests both self-examination and self-knowledge, while 'set[ting] the darkness echoing' implies poetry's power to transform personal experience into universal resonance.

In earlier poems, such as 'Digging' and 'At a Potato Digging', the presence of agricultural workers mediates Heaney's exploration of the earth-as-mother figure. 'Personal Helicon', however, presents a solitary observer confronting both personal and national darkness without intermediaries. This solitude enables a more direct engagement with the echoes emerging from these depths. The poem weaves together an objective observation of Heaney's childhood landscape with deep introspection. Wells, which serve as the poem's central metaphor, represent both the physical features of rural Ireland and portals to consciousness. Through this double significance, Heaney transforms concrete childhood experiences – peering into wells, drawing water, listening to echoes – into metaphors for poetic inspiration and self-discovery. The final stanza marks a crucial transition in Heaney's poetic development. His acknowledgement that 'to pry into roots, to finger slime' is 'beneath all adult dignity' signals not merely a personal maturation but a transformation of poetic purpose. What was once childhood fascination with the natural world must evolve into something more deliberate: the craft of poetry itself. However, rather than abandoning these early experiences, Heaney repurposes them. The childlike wonder at wells and echoes becomes the mature poet's tool for self-examination and artistic expression, 'to see myself, to set the darkness echoing'.

In his second collection, *Door into the Dark*, Heaney deepens his poetic exploration – a descent that prefigures the full catabasis<sup>22</sup> he would later undertake in *Station Island*. This progression marks both a literal and metaphorical deepening of his poetic vision, as Heaney moves beyond the familiar territory of his childhood home to engage with broader horizons. The collection reflects significant personal transitions, and

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<sup>22</sup> In *Station Island*, Heaney refers to the classical motif of catabasis – a descent into the underworld – to structure his spiritual and artistic journey. His encounters with the dead (mainly victims of sectarian violence or acquaintances) which culminate in a transformation that very much resembles Aeneas' or Dante's voyage into the depths. Also, this descent takes on cultural significance through Heaney's connection of cultural ghosts with collective trauma, allowing poetry to become a means of exploring both personal and national consciousness.

his expanding concept of family now encompasses his wife, Mary, and their two children, signifying Heaney's heightened awareness of his roles as husband and father. *Door into the Dark* culminates in 'Bogland', the first of Heaney's influential bog poems. The poem's concluding line, 'the wet centre is bottomless' (*DD* 44), echoes and transforms the well imagery of 'Personal Helicon'. This resonance is significant: where the wells represented personal introspection, the bog becomes a national symbol that encompasses themes of Irish identity, dispossession, and attachment to land. The poem's opening lines read as follows:

[. . .] Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up  
An astounding crate full of air. (*DD* 43)

In addition to anticipating Heaney's later bog poems in *Wintering Out* and *North*, this poem establishes key themes that would become central to his exploration of landscape and memory. The image of the 'crusting' unfenced bog serves as a powerful metaphor for Ireland's layered history, where each stratum preserves a different epoch of national memory. The Great Irish Elk emerges as a particularly resonant symbol in this meditation on time and preservation. Its remains, discovered in the bog's depths, represent both the grandeur of Ireland's ancient past and the bog's remarkable capacity to preserve historical artefacts. The Elk's remains, discovered in the bog's depths, represent both the grandeur of Ireland's ancient past and the bog's remarkable capacity to preserve historical artefacts, yet Heaney's focus on the Elk's skeletal form creates a complex tension: while the bog preserves these remains, what survives is fundamentally fragmentary. This paradox – of preservation and decay, presence and absence – becomes central to Heaney's understanding of how history persists in the landscape. The Elk thus embodies both the endurance of historical memory and its inherent fragility, suggesting that the past, though materially preserved in the bog, remains eerily spectral and resists recovery. Parker opens

the fourth chapter, 'Exposure, 1969–75,' with an etymological analysis of *Wintering Out*'s title. He draws attention to Heaney's 1972 article, 'Mother Ireland', in *The Listener*, in which the poet connects his collection's title to *Richard III*'s opening line, 'Now is the winter of our discontent'.<sup>23</sup> Heaney describes this allusion as 'a gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the moment'.<sup>24</sup> While social and political implications are subtle in *Death of a Naturalist*, *Wintering Out* marks Heaney's more overt engagement with shared Irish history. Parker's analysis reveals how this broader political consciousness manifests through Heaney's distinctive approach to language. The 1972 collection displays Heaney's growing fascination with the evocative power of words and their sonic qualities, which is particularly evident in poems such as 'Anahorish', 'Broagh', and 'Toome'. This linguistic experimentation reflects Heaney's engagement with the ancient Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas* – tales that explore the etymological connection between place names and their physical locations, thereby reinforcing the relationship between geography and identity in Gaelic culture. Heaney's approach to these place-name poems reveals an almost sensual pleasure in language, as he orchestrates the interplay between harsh consonants and flowing vowels. In his essay 'Belfast', Heaney characterises this linguistic dynamic in gendered terms:

I think the process is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotion. [. . .] I suppose the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature. (PP 34)

This metaphorical framing reveals Heaney's complex understanding of his position between two linguistic and cultural traditions. He conceptualises his relationship with language as a negotiation between the 'feminine' aspects of Irish culture – its imagery, emotion, and connection to place – and the 'masculine' qualities he associates with English literary tradition – its formal structures and intellectual frameworks. This gendered dichotomy, while potentially problematic by contemporary standards, illuminates Heaney's perception of his own artistic development as a synthesis of competing cultural and linguistic inheritances.

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<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Mother Ireland", *The Listener*, December 1972, in Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 790.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

In *Preoccupations*, Heaney describes *Door into the Dark* as envisioning ‘poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit from it’ (PP 52). *Wintering Out*, however, pursues a more ambitious agenda. Though initially received as a collection focused primarily on poetic craft – its explorations of language, style, structure and phonetics – the work emerged during a politically charged moment: Heaney’s controversial permanent move to the south of Ireland, an act some interpreted as a form of betrayal. The collection showcases how language, place and identity become inseparable elements in political discourse, and through his manipulation of language, Heaney participates in constructing what Benedict Anderson terms ‘imagined communities’.<sup>25</sup> Anderson’s influential theory posits that nations function as ‘imagined political communities’ whose members, though mostly unknown to each other, share a profound sense of collective identity and communion. Despite actual social inequalities, these communities conceive of themselves through horizontal bonds of comradeship. Heaney’s distinctive contribution to this concept lies in his recognition of language’s role in creating such communal bonds. His poetry evidences how a sense of place derives not only from visual experience but also from linguistic memory. In poems such as ‘Anahorish’ and ‘Broagh’, Heaney explores how the sounds of words – particularly place names and local dialects – can capture and preserve the essence of specific locations. His use of Irish vocabulary and pronunciations does more than simply document local speech patterns; it actively constructs and reinforces a distinct cultural identity through a shared linguistic heritage.

The title Parker chose for the fourth chapter, ‘Exposure’, echoes the final poem of *North*. This choice acknowledges 1969–1975 as the period during which Heaney developed a more explicit stance on Ireland’s political situation. These years saw escalating tensions, further intensified by the Conservative Party’s unexpected victory in the Westminster election – a shift that resulted in a government less sympathetic to Catholic concerns than its Labour predecessors.<sup>26</sup> It was during this time that Heaney stumbled into Peter Glob’s archaeological study on the discoveries of Iron Age bodies in

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<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson provides a detailed analysis of such imagined communities in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

<sup>26</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 92.

Jutland, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* (1969). During this period, Heaney's encounter with Glob's work proved transformative, and the archaeological study of bog bodies provided Heaney with what he termed 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament'. (PP 56) The interred bodies became powerful metaphors for constructing a foundational myth that could unite the Irish people through a shared identity and common ideology.

This engagement with Glob's work marked a significant shift in Heaney's poetic approach. The weight of colonial and political domination becomes increasingly palpable in his poetry, as he abandoned earlier attempts to obscure his discomfort with Northern Ireland's situation. This political awakening parallels a growing linguistic consciousness, as Heaney confronted the paradox of using the coloniser's language to articulate the experience of the colonised. Parker synthesises this concept by writing that

the advent of the Troubles had heightened Heaney's ambivalent feelings towards the rich traditions of English literature, and while he is conscious of its role in 'founding' him as a poet, he is acutely aware that its cultural triumph has been at the expense of other cultures.<sup>27</sup>

Heaney seeks reconciliation through the recovery of Celtic and Catholic traditions (especially in *Wintering Out*) and ancient communal practices, in which he finds a framework for understanding contemporary conflicts. His search for appropriate metaphors to address Ireland's situation finds its most powerful expression in the figure of the Tollund Man, a preserved bog body that became both the face of Ireland's predicament and a lens through which to view sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The ancient practice of ritual sacrifice – bodies interred in bogs as offerings to ensure fertility – provided Heaney with a historical parallel for contemporary political violence. In this metaphorical framework, the Germanic earth goddess Nerthus becomes analogous to Mother Ireland, her ritual sacrifices echoing modern sectarian killings. The sexual implications of these ancient fertility rites – the symbolic marriage between mortal and goddess – add another layer to Heaney's exploration of violence and sacrifice. Parker identifies the writing of 'The Tollund Man' as an epiphanic moment for Heaney, one that

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

granted him the ‘ability to handle the national theme maturely and responsibly’.<sup>28</sup> However, Parker’s analysis of *Wintering Out* is not wholly laudatory, and he argues that one of the collection’s primary weaknesses lies in Heaney’s difficulty in maintaining a focus on contemporary horrors.<sup>29</sup> Heaney’s poetry more directly confronted present-day atrocities in response to the escalating violence in Ireland at the time.

In the pursuit of his poetic vocation he felt compelled to examine other modes of feeling and perception – in addition to Catholic and Christian ones – and to employ a pre-Christian mythic material to enable him to confront and interpret the slaughter of innocence.<sup>30</sup>

These explorations ultimately gave rise to *North*.

A decisive evolution from Heaney’s first three collections,<sup>31</sup> *North* synthesises his engagement with Peter Glob’s study of Jutland’s bog bodies and his response to Northern Ireland’s escalating turmoil. Parker dedicates the majority of his book to this collection, underlining its significance both as a literary achievement and as a crucial moment in Heaney’s development. Parker prefaces his analysis of *North* with a detailed historical account of Northern Ireland from 1971 to 1975, the period coinciding with the collection’s publication. This contextualisation serves a dual purpose that at once illuminates the collection’s immediate themes and provides a framework for understanding both Heaney’s earlier and subsequent work. By situating the poems within their historical moments, Parker reveals how Heaney’s distinctive poetic voice translates political reality into artistic expression. The year 1972 marked a crucial turning point: Heaney’s resignation from Queen’s University and his decision to move south to pursue writing full-time. His relocation to rural County Wicklow proved paradoxical – while offering deeper engagement with Ireland’s land and mythology, it also creates a complicated distance from Northern Ireland’s ongoing turmoil. This tension between engagement and removal found its most poignant expression in ‘Exposure’, in which Heaney describes himself as ‘An inner émigré, grown long-haired/And thoughtful’ (*N* 68). The image of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

‘inner émigré’ precisely captures his position: physically removed yet mentally absorbed in the North’s struggles.

Parker’s assessment of *North* traces Heaney’s deepening engagement with bog imagery, from the initial exploration in *Wintering Out*’s ‘The Tollund Man’ to the depiction of the more complex female figures, the bog queens. This progression reveals how prehistoric rituals and pagan religious figures provided Heaney with an increasingly sophisticated metaphorical framework for addressing contemporary Irish conflicts. As Parker notes, the collection aims to ‘display the poet’s determination to seek out images, rich in energy, which might serve as a “binding force” for his community, and provide him with the solace of a shape’.<sup>32</sup> The collection’s bipartite structure – its division into Parts I and II – reflects this search for order amid chaos, and Parker argues that this formal organisation mirrors Heaney’s broader attempt to impose poetic structure on social turmoil. Part I employs archaeological and mythological metaphors, Part II addresses contemporary violence more directly, which creates a dialogue between past and present, between myth and reality.

*North* manifests Heaney’s sophisticated engagement with ancient linguistic forms, particularly through his use of *kennings* – compound expressions characteristic of Anglo-Saxon and Viking poetry, such as ‘bone-house’ for body. His linguistic palette extends beyond kennings to include Gaelic terms and hybrid Norse-English compounds (exemplified in the name ‘Mossbawn’). This archaeological approach to language reaches its fullest expression in poems such as ‘Funeral Rites’, which draws directly from the Old Norse *Njáls Saga*. These linguistic choices do more than simply ornament the poetry; they reflect the inherent hybridity of Ireland’s linguistic and historical heritage while creating a complex dialogue between modern and ancient worlds. By deploying these compound expressions, which blend Anglo-Saxon and Norse traditions, Heaney creates linguistic parallels to the cultural stratification he uncovers in the bog poems. His use of *kennings* carries particular resonance in the context of contemporary Ireland, where language itself becomes a site of political and social negotiation. Like Wordsworth’s transformation of common language into poetic insight, Heaney’s *kennings* defamiliarise everyday objects

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

and experiences. However, Heaney's project extends beyond simple defamiliarisation. His *kennings* forge active connections between ancient linguistic forms and contemporary experience to create what might be called a verbal archaeology. Through these compressed metaphors, he reveals how past traditions continue to shape present understanding, thereby making the historical dimension of language itself part of his poetic exploration. In *North*, Heaney attempts what Richard R. Russell terms access to 'the spirit region, that world beyond our ken',<sup>33</sup> by reaching into pre-colonial, pre-sectarian, and pre-Christian Ireland for resources to address contemporary conflicts.<sup>34</sup> This poetic archaeology, however, presents a fundamental challenge: How to balance aesthetic concerns – matters of style and emotional resonance – with the urgent political realities of colonisation and sectarian violence? Parker articulates how this tension becomes productive in *North* and argues that Heaney's comparison between ancient ritual and contemporary culture serves to 'explain the persistence in Northern Ireland of this fiercely defensive, and, at times, pitilessly destructive ideology, and that of its twin – Loyalism'.<sup>35</sup> However, Parker's reading goes beyond simple political allegory, and he suggests that Heaney's fascination with 'bogland landscapes' and their preserved treasures represents a broader artistic mission: 'to retrieve some shards of hope and beauty to weight in the scales against "atrocities"'.<sup>36</sup>

The evolution from simple childhood landscape descriptions into deeper explorations of communal identity and resistance in *North* finds its most powerful expression in the bog poems, in which Heaney weaves together archaeological evidence from Glob's research with contemporary accounts of sectarian violence. 'Punishment' exemplifies this technique, drawing parallels between ancient bog bodies and a young Irish girl executed for alleged collaboration with British soldiers. In such poems, the past and present illuminate each other, thereby creating a complex meditation on violence and victimhood. The bog poems also introduce the figure of the 'dark-bowered queen(s)' (*N 24*), which raises crucial questions about gender representation in Heaney's work. His

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Ranking Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame Press, 2014), 2; see also p. 38 and p. 45 for additional elaboration.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

attempt to speak for these female figures invites critical examination: Does this ventriloquism represent the genuine empowerment of silenced voices, or does it paradoxically reinforce patriarchal authority through the male appropriation of female experience?<sup>37</sup>

While *North* generally received positive critical acclaim, it also elicited criticism from significant dissenting voices. In the Winter 1975 edition of *The Honest Ulsterman*, Ciaran Carson delivered a particularly pointed critique, in which he described *North* as an ‘uneven book’ and argued that Heaney had transformed from ‘a writer with the gift of precision’ into ‘the laureate of violence – a myth-maker, an anthropologist of ritual killing’.<sup>38</sup> This criticism specifically targeted Heaney’s use of historical violence as a metaphor for contemporary conflict. Edna Longley’s raised different concerns in her influential essay “‘Inner Émigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’? Seamus Heaney’s *North*”, in which she criticised Heaney’s fusion of the Catholic experience with Ireland’s pagan history.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, Longley questioned the validity of using pre-Christian ritual as a framework for understanding sectarian violence. Michael Parker responds to these criticisms by arguing for a more nuanced reading of Heaney’s position and contends that Heaney’s perspective should not be interpreted as uncritically Catholic but rather as non-revolutionary – a careful negotiation between tradition and contemporary reality. While Parker acknowledges the collection’s critics, his analysis ultimately reinforces *North*’s significance and suggests that the very tensions identified by Carson and Longley contribute to the work’s complexity and power. John McGurk’s review highlights Parker’s central concern in *The Making of the Poet* as one of understanding Heaney’s attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions in his work. McGurk emphasises Parker’s view that Heaney’s poetry strives to unite Northern Ireland’s divided communities,<sup>40</sup> although Sydney Burris’s (1995) review of Parker’s volume offers a more complex assessment. While acknowledging the volume’s importance for understanding Heaney’s literary development, Burris identifies a paradox in Parker’s approach: The book’s strengths

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter V for further discussion.

<sup>38</sup> Ciaran Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?,” *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975), 183.

<sup>39</sup> Edna Longley, “‘Inner Émigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’? Seamus Heaney’s *North*”, in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle, 1986), 31–61.

<sup>40</sup> John McGurk, “Literary Supplement: Seamus Heaney, Man and Poet”, *Contemporary Review* 263, no. 1534 (1993), 277.

ultimately become its limitations. What initially appears as innovative scholarship, Burris argues, often simply synthesises ideas Heaney had already articulated in his own critical essays, thus potentially compromising the work's originality. Despite these reservations, *The Making of the Poet* remains fundamental to understanding Heaney's evolution from local poet to national bard, and Parker's achievement lies especially in his ability to trace how Heaney's personal journey informs his artistic development. The biography reveals what Parker calls Heaney's 'capacity to transmute personal intuitions into universal insights'<sup>41</sup> through poetry that is "both particular and universal, immediate and oblique".<sup>42</sup> This dual focus – on individual experience and collective meaning – makes Parker's study particularly valuable for understanding Heaney's significance.

The second major critic within this framework, Helen Vendler, adopts a different critical approach in her 1998 study, *Seamus Heaney*. Published five years after Parker's text, it opens by emphasising the poet's broad appeal: 'Heaney's poetry has reached a large public in Ireland and abroad, and that public extends to all classes. It is a poetry in which readers can recognise profound family affections, eloquent landscapes, and vigorous social concern'.<sup>43</sup> She traces an 'expressive autobiographical story' that evolves from childhood through displacement to maturity, noting how, as 'each decade of poetry unfolds, it illuminates and corrects the previous ones'.<sup>44</sup> For Vendler, Heaney's innovation lies in his approach to lyric poetry. She argues that 'lyric is not narrative or drama; it is not primarily concerned to related events, or to reify contesting issues'. Instead, lyric's function is 'to present, adequately and truthfully, through the means of temporally prolonged symbolic form, the private mind and heart caught in the changing events of a geographical place and historical epoch'.<sup>45</sup> Like Parker, Vendler traces Heaney's literary path through the chronological sequence of his collections, but while both Vendler and Parker delineate Heaney's development chronologically, their methodologies differ significantly. Where Parker constructs a comprehensive biographical and historical framework, Vendler, as Jonathan Allison notes that Vendler's 'emphasis in the present

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<sup>41</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, (Harvard University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

volume is firmly placed on style, form, and voice, and less on historical and biographical context'.<sup>46</sup> The distinction appears in her chapter titles – 'Anonymities', 'Archaeologies', 'Anthropologies', 'Alterities and Alter Egos', 'Allegories', 'Airiness,' and 'An Afterwards' – which suggest thematic rather than chronological organisation. Vendler's conversational prose style reflects her priority: encouraging readers to experience rather than merely analyse Heaney's poetry. By weaving Heaney's lines throughout her discussion, she creates a dialogue between critic and poet that illuminates the work without overwhelming it with an academic apparatus. This approach, while requiring some familiarity with Heaney's oeuvre, offers readers a more intimate engagement with his first twelve collections. Rather than dissecting poems as academic specimens, Vendler invites readers to appreciate their living presence, prioritising artistic technique over contextual interpretation.

Vendler structures her book through seven chapters, each concluding with a 'Second Thoughts' segment that creates dialogues between different periods of Heaney's career. This innovative structure allows her to trace both continuities and evolving patterns in his work while fulfilling her stated aim: 'to explain, as much to myself as to others, the power of his extraordinary poetry'.<sup>47</sup> In her analysis of Heaney's first three collections, Vendler identifies a distinctive feature: the prevalence of unnamed figures. With this term, Vendler refers to a characteristic of Heaney's early poetry, in which figures were deliberately presented without specific identities. The unnamed potato diggers, Croppies, the Diviner, family members, and animals of rural County Derry become archetypal representations rather than individual figures. This anonymity, which gives the first chapter its title ('Anonymities'), serves a specific poetic purpose: it allows Heaney to achieve both intimacy and universality because these figures are simultaneously deeply personal and broadly representative of Irish cultural experience.

Unlike Parker's historically grounded approach, Vendler focuses on how this technique transforms personal memory into collective experience. Her characterisation of Heaney as an 'anthropologist of his own culture'<sup>48</sup> effectively captures how he

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<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Allison, "Seamus Heaney by Helen Vendler", *South Atlantic Review* 65, no. 4 (2000), 156.

<sup>47</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

meticulously documents and interprets his rural upbringing with both intimate knowledge and analytical distance. She argues that his early poems are not immediate recordings of 1940s rural Derry but rather sophisticated adult reflections that combine intimacy with analytical distance. This dual perspective – simultaneously insider and outsider – allows Heaney to transform individual figures into representatives of collective experience. By deliberately withholding individual identities, Heaney elevates these figures into the broader narrative of Irish cultural memory. The elegiac quality Vendler identifies in these early poems emerges not from simple nostalgia but from this complex positioning. Heaney’s anthropological stance enables him to document his culture’s customs, beliefs, and conflicts while maintaining critical distance. Paradoxically, this technique makes his poetry both more personal and more universal: The unnamed figures become part of Ireland’s collective memory precisely because they transcend individual identity.

Vendler identifies eight pivotal poems in Heaney’s early work that navigate between personal experience and collective representation: ‘Digging’, ‘Death of a Naturalist’, ‘Mid-Term Break’, ‘Personal Helicon’, ‘Relic of Memory’, ‘Anahorish’, ‘Oracle’, and ‘The Other Side.’ In these compositions, she notes that the child-protagonist retains a distinct individuality that offers intimate perspectives drawn from Heaney’s own experiences. These poems stand as exceptions to his broader use of anonymity and evidence his ability to blend memory with universal significance. Beyond these exceptions, Heaney’s use of unnamed figures creates a distinctive portrait of a rural Ireland, populated by archetypal characters set against a sometimes threatening natural world; however, Vendler identifies a significant shift in the anonymities of *Wintering Out*. The relatively benign pastoral world of the first two collections – occasionally disrupted by death or threatening creatures – gives way to the starker realities of rural life. As Vendler observes, Heaney’s focus moves from ‘the abundances and confirming rituals of family life to a dark and cruel underside of the culture he was bred in, and by directing his gaze away from artisanry and agriculture to illegitimacy and intimidated women’.<sup>49</sup> This transformation marks a crucial development in Heaney’s poetic vision, during which his pastoral nostalgia yields to more complex social and cultural critique. These anonymities,

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

for example, are well addressed in poems such as 'Limbo' and 'Bye-Child', in which the oppressive culture of Christian decorum leaves unspoken traumas.

Vendler's analysis of anonymity extends crucially to Heaney's treatment of bog bodies. She argues that 'their anonymity gave him [Heaney] an imaginative scope he would have been unwilling to assume in a literal retelling of local assassinations'.<sup>50</sup> This observation illuminates how archaeological distance enables Heaney to address contemporary violence through historical parallels without the complications of naming specific victims or perpetrators. Like Parker, Vendler sees the bog bodies as powerful metaphors for sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, but she traces a significant development in their treatment. While 'Bogland' (*Door into the Dark*) presents archaeology as a primarily benevolent and intellectually engaging pursuit, the poems in *North* transform this archaeological metaphor into a more explicit exploration of violence. For Vendler, this shift reflects Heaney's growing awareness that unearthing ancient violence is necessary to reveal the deep historical roots of contemporary conflict, thus suggesting a tragic continuity in Ireland's history of violence.

Comparing the two authors, Parker emphasises historical context while Vendler offers more nuanced interpretations of pivotal poems, particularly in her analysis of bog bodies. Her reading of 'Bog Queen' proves especially illuminating, as she identifies an unexpected quality in these preserved corpses: patience rather than vengeance. Despite their violent deaths and centuries of burial, these female figures emerge not as harbingers of revenge but as embodiments of endurance. Vendler describes 'Bog Queen' as 'an assertion of the deep poetic interest Heaney now finds in the processes of unmaking, of the resonance he gives to the frayed, the hacked, the incomplete'.<sup>51</sup> This observation reveals how Heaney transforms destruction into a form of preservation. The Queen's patient waiting suggests not passive decay but active preparation for eventual emergence. Her preservation in the bog becomes a form of suspended animation in which she awaits the right moment for revelation. Both Parker and Vendler recognise the significance of female figures in poems such as 'Bog Queen', 'Strange Fruit', and 'Punishment'. However, Vendler's analysis uniquely emphasises how these poems discover beauty and

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

nobility in the preservation itself. The bog women, rather than serving merely as mere metaphors for political violence, represent the persistent power of cultural memory's persistent power. Parker and Vendler offer fundamentally different readings of Heaney's bog poems, particularly regarding their religious implications. Parker emphasises how Heaney's portrayal of sectarian violence functions as a form of redemptive writing and suggests that the poet's act of witnessing – and even 'savouring' – these atrocities transforms them through artistic representation. This reading finds religious undertones in Heaney's treatment of violence and sacrifice, whereas Vendler resists religious interpretations and focuses instead on Heaney's struggle to connect archaeological discoveries with contemporary events. This distinction becomes particularly clear in their readings of 'Strange Fruit'. Where Parker emphasises the Christological parallels in Heaney's description of the bog girl, finding redemptive meaning in her death and suggesting that readers should sympathize with her despite her 'tribal' transgressions, Vendler maintains a more secular focus on the political and historical implications of these preserved victims.

This difference in approach leads Vendler to emphasise how Heaney manipulates time itself in these poems. Specifically, Vendler argues that in Heaney's bog poems, the line between past and present 'has reached its vanishing point'.<sup>52</sup> Ancient ritual killings and 1970s sectarian violence collapse into a single temporal plane, with Heaney positioned as what Edna Longley terms a 'voyeur',<sup>53</sup> transforming witnessed atrocities into art while maintaining critical distance. Vendler's distinctive contribution to the Heaney literature lies in the cultural significance she ascribes to the bog poems when she argues that Heaney's archaeological excavation of myth transcends sectarian, colonial, or political readings to reveal something more fundamentally cultural. Her insight proves particularly illuminating:

This was a way of saying that other countries have religious differences without religious wars; that other countries endure deep rifts between classes without resorting to murder; that other countries are postcolonial without continuing to avenge grievances dating from the sixteenth century. Can it be, Heaney proposes, that what we are seeing is not Catholics against Protestants, or rich against poor, or

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> See "Inner Émigré or Artful Voyeur?".

loyalist against nationalist, but rather a generalized cultural approval of violence, dating back many centuries?<sup>54</sup>

This interpretation elevates Heaney's engagement with violence from local to universal significance. Rather than seeing sectarian conflict as purely the product of specific historical circumstances, Vendler suggests that Heaney reveals violence as inherent to human culture itself. This view of violence as embedded in power structures and cultural dynamics anticipates Eugene O'Brien's later exploration of the instinctual aspects of human nature in Heaney's work.

In her third chapter, 'Archaeologies', Vendler identifies *Field Work* (1979) as marking a new phase in Heaney's poetic development and unpacks the collection's title on multiple levels. In particular, she points out how 'field work', which suggests the archaeological investigation of an unfamiliar culture,<sup>55</sup> implies firsthand exploration and documentation; however, the title also resonates with Heaney's new physical environment – the fields of County Wicklow. In 1972, Heaney relocated to Glanmore, where he had the chance to live in a rural setting once more. This geographical shift from North to South<sup>56</sup> required Heaney to develop new observational techniques. Just as he had previously documented Derry's landscape, he now needed to account for both the physical features of Glanmore and the emotional implications of displacement, yet Vendler argues that the title's significance extends beyond mere landscape observation. She notes the following:

Work in the field, in this sense, arises from the obligation of survivors to celebrate those who have died. [...] The Heaney style is now called to sketch the living as they were before their annihilation, and to do justice to the moment of extinction.<sup>57</sup>

Her interpretation suggests that the sentence 'field work' also encompasses the poet's obligation to document loss and preserve memory.

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<sup>54</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 51.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>56</sup> Capitalisation maintained to reference not only the geographical direction but also the political division.

<sup>57</sup> Vendler, 60.

Vendler's analysis reveals how *Field Work* structures itself around a central dialectic of presence and absence. This tension manifests through the collection's distinctive organization: elegies for the dead are interwoven with intimate narratives of daily life. While poems about domestic routines and family experiences assert the vitality of present existence, the elegies acknowledge absences created by violence and loss. This juxtaposition, Vendler argues, does more than simply contrast life and death. The interplay between domestic scenes and elegiac moments reflects Heaney's increasingly sophisticated approach to addressing Ireland's socio-political situation. By grounding political violence in the context of everyday life, he creates a more nuanced understanding of how absence and presence constantly interact in both personal and public spheres.

*Field Work* marks a crucial shift in Heaney's elegiac practice: Where his previous four collections featured anonymous figures, the poems in this collection commemorate specific victims of the civil war. Vendler notes that these individuals, 'brought together by obituary necessity, show that Irishness is not a unitary thing'.<sup>58</sup> Through these particularised elegies, Heaney reveals the diversity of Irish identities, even as their deaths share a common cause in the Anglo-Irish conflict. This attention to individual identity, Vendler suggests, anticipates Heaney's growing international perspective in later collections. By acknowledging the varied backgrounds and social positions of the conflict's victims, he begins to move beyond simplified narratives towards a more complex understanding of the Irish experience. The collection's domestic poems provide a counterpoint to these elegies. While the elegies confront the violence of public history, the domestic poems create spaces of relative peace. Yet rather than mere escape, Vendler sees this alternation between the public and private spheres as central to Heaney's developing poetic strategy for addressing political violence. Vendler demonstrates how *Field Work* marks Heaney's shift away from mythic and psychological interpretations of Irish culture. Unlike the regal figures of *North* – the majestic Grauballe Man or Tollund Man – *Field Work*'s protagonists are ordinary individuals confronting unsought deaths. As Vendler notes in her 'Second Thoughts' of the chapter, Heaney

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<sup>58</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 64.

deliberately makes his elegies ‘un-sublime, to station his elegiac subjects at the level of daily life’.<sup>59</sup>

In Chapter Four, ‘Alterities and Alter Egos: From *Death of a Naturalist* to *Station Island*’, Vendler traces thematic continuities across Heaney’s first six collections, from *Death of a Naturalist* to *Station Island*. Her ‘Second Thoughts’ crystallises Heaney’s artistic development during this period:

The continual carnage in Northern Ireland (visible in all the victims and terrorists of *Station Island*), together with his own removal to the Republic, compelled Heaney to gather representative alter egos – mythical, historical, contemporary, even animal – against whom and through whom to define his own being and function.<sup>60</sup>

Vendler’s analysis in this chapter centres on Heaney’s strategic use of alter egos as vehicles for self-exploration. As she notes, ‘Heaney here forsakes group anonymities not for archetypes, as in the case of the bog people, but for avatars’.<sup>61</sup> This shift from archetypal to personal identification marks a crucial development in Heaney’s poetic strategy. Unlike the distant, mythologised bog bodies of *North*, these alter egos facilitate a more intimate form of identification. Where the bog bodies served as historical archetypes that allowed Heaney to explore collective experience, his avatars provide more immediate access to individual lives affected by sectarian violence. These figures – often victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time – represent paths Heaney’s own life might have taken under different circumstances, and his movement from archetype to avatar allows Heaney to engage with political and civil themes through deeply personal identification. By inhabiting these alternative lives, he explored not just his own identity but also the contingent nature of survival in Northern Ireland’s violent landscape. The randomness of who lives and who dies becomes both a personal meditation and a political commentary.

In her final chapter, Vendler examines Heaney’s later collections, focusing particularly on *Seeing Things*. She identifies what she terms the collection’s ‘strange

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

return to the phenomenological world',<sup>62</sup> which marks a significant shift from the spatial emptiness that characterises *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney's return to landscape serves not merely as a means of setting the scene, but as a repository for memories of his younger self. Vendler's analysis is particularly acute in terms of identifying a distinctive stylistic evolution in *Seeing Things*. She characterises this new approach as embracing the 'simplicity of the actual',<sup>63</sup> a significant departure from Heaney's previous collections. This stylistic shift manifests most clearly in Heaney's engagement with hieroglyphs – a mode of representation that moves beyond literal description toward symbolic expression, yet crucially, Vendler argues, this turn towards the symbolic does not abandon empirical reality. Instead, Heaney's project becomes one of restoration: returning objects to their essential nature, whether that essence manifests as an abstract concept or a concrete reality. This balance between symbolic representation and phenomenological observation creates what Vendler sees as a new phase in Heaney's poetic development.

Vendler titles her final chapter 'An Afterwards', a deliberate echo of Heaney's perspective on the 1994 political truce in Northern Ireland. In *The Spirit Level*, she finds Heaney wrestling with the possibilities of peace after decades of conflict. While 'Mycenae Lookout', which Vendler identifies as the collection's 'emotional centrepiece',<sup>64</sup> addresses lingering violence, the surrounding poems explore a Stoic approach to postconflict existence. In her concluding 'Second Thoughts', Vendler moves beyond specific analysis to articulate a broader defence of lyric poetry's role in political contexts:

It should be remembered that the only thing to which the genre of the lyric obliges its poet is to represent his own situation and his responses to it in adequate imaginative language. Since even his most strenuous critics never seem to doubt that Heaney has shown them how he sees his situation and how his feelings respond to it, they – even in arguing against what they take to be his views – are the best witnesses to his imaginative success. Their demand that he see predicaments of politics or gender as they would, or have the same feelings about them as they do is, of course, unanswerable; that is not a demand one can make of art.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

In her final statement, by defending Heaney against political critics while articulating a broader principle about artistic freedom and responsibility, Vendler argues that the lyric poet's obligation is not to represent any particular political position but to render personal experience truthfully through imaginative language.

Vendler's *Seamus Heaney* stands apart from other critical volumes through its distinctive methodology. Rather than emphasising biographical context, she creates what might be called a critical dialogue with the poems themselves that produces an intimately integrated analysis of Heaney's first eight collections. Her close readings reveal interpretive possibilities that might remain hidden in more contextual approaches, and her attention to the poems' internal workings allows Vendler to trace Heaney's artistic development with particular precision. She shows how his poetry evolves from the immediate perceptions of childhood in *Death of a Naturalist* to increasingly complex engagements with spirituality, mortality, and mature reality, yet this evolution, in Vendler's reading, never loses touch with the fundamental challenge of finding appropriate language for experience. What emerges is a portrait of Heaney's poetic growth that emphasises both continuity and transformation. Vendler demonstrates how his early attention to physical detail provides the foundation for later metaphysical explorations, while his growing spiritual awareness remains grounded in concrete experience. Throughout, Vendler shows how Heaney's deepening self-reflection serves his primary task: articulating the events of his time through language that is both precise and transcendent.

## **2. Reading Heaney in the Twenty-First Century: Critical Developments**

The twenty-first century has witnessed a proliferation of critical works on Seamus Heaney that reflect both his expanding oeuvre – by 2001, he had published his tenth collection – and his growing scholarly significance. Eugene O'Brien's *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind* (2002) makes a distinctive contribution to this body of criticism by offering what might be called an insider's perspective on Heaney's work through an Irish

cultural lens.<sup>66</sup> Through six chapters, O'Brien discusses Heaney's literary phases with clarity and an accessible style. His thesis, outlined in the introduction, is plain and concise: to provide an overview of Heaney's evolution as a poet and to underline that reading *North* only according to its nationalistic outlook is an oversimplification of the text and of Heaney's intention.<sup>67</sup> This evolution, which O'Brien traces from *Death of a Naturalist* through *Electric Light* (2001), parallels Ireland's own transformation over forty years. O'Brien's larger purpose emerges clearly: to demonstrate how Heaney's sense of tradition serves not only his immediate historical moment but also future generations as well. He shows how Heaney's perspective evolves from an inward-looking examination of Ireland to an outward-looking engagement with broader horizons that makes his work relevant beyond the specific context of the Troubles.

O'Brien's analysis centres on what he terms Heaney's 'binocularity of vision'<sup>68</sup> – a dual perspective that views land both as a physical repository of artefacts and corpses and as a symbolic representation of Ireland's violent history.<sup>69</sup> This view anticipates Russell's notion of 'mental regionalism' (2014), which describes Heaney's poetic creation of a unified Ireland within his imagination.<sup>70</sup> This binocular vision enables Heaney to comprehend both the immediate gravity of Ireland's situation and the historical depth of its wounds.<sup>71</sup> O'Brien links this understanding to the theme of verticality, which, for him, 'encapsulates the direction of the imagination of the first four books'.<sup>72</sup> Crucially, O'Brien argues that the bottomlessness Heaney discovers in Irish soil suggests that any search for definitive origins – such as plunging into wells or digging into the past – must fail, yet this very boundlessness creates possibility: 'It preserves whatever happens to fall into it, allowing multiple historical narratives to emerge.'<sup>73</sup> This multiplicity evolves through several stages in Heaney's work. First, the bog-trope as a historical metaphor; then, the creation of spectral figures such as Simon Sweeney as 'mirror images or refractions of

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind* (The Liffey Press), 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Russell, *Regions*, 9

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

aspects of his own personality'<sup>74</sup> and finally, the use of personalities as 'sounding boards to enunciate different perspectives'.<sup>75</sup> O'Brien, whose earlier work focused on Northern Irish politics and literature,<sup>76</sup> demonstrates how this poetic evolution parallels political developments. His analysis moves fluidly between close reading and historical context, which allows him to highlight how poems such as 'Bogland' reflect the emergence of the Troubles, while 'The Grauballe Man' and 'Punishment' draw parallels between Iron Age victims and PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) activists. This methodology reveals how Heaney's journey from personal introspection to national engagement culminates in *Electric Light*'s negotiation between artistic desire and social responsibility. O'Brien moves swiftly from his introduction to a focused analysis of Heaney's earliest poems, particularly 'Digging' and 'At a Potato Digging', which catapult readers into the very heart of Heaney's initial themes. Despite their concision, O'Brien's reading of Heaney's work reveals remarkable analytical depth and he identifies key themes in these early works that will resonate throughout Heaney's career: the bonds of male lineage, nostalgia for agrarian tradition, the search for poetic voice and poetry's social utility. The first chapter, 'Northern Exposure: Digging into the Past', examines Heaney's first four collections and begins – conventionally but significantly – with the opening lines of 'Digging', which set the stage for O'Brien's assertion that Heaney's early work already contained the seeds of his mature poetic concerns.

O'Brien emphasises the significance of 'Digging' beyond its position as the collection's opening poem. The poem articulates what will become Heaney's central preoccupation: excavating personal history in its familial and national dimensions, a theme that dominates his work from *Death of a Naturalist* to *North*. In O'Brien's reading, *Death of a Naturalist* marks Heaney's initial movement from an individual to a collective perspective. While 'Personal Helicon' concludes the collection with an introspective focus, 'At a Potato Digging' introduces a nascent national consciousness. O'Brien traces how this early poem anticipates the nationalistic and mythological elements that will later

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>76</sup> O'Brien's alternation between politics and poetics is not surprising in view of his previous publications. 'Poetry, Prose and Politics in Northern Ireland', *Imprimatur* 1, no. 2–3 (1996), 142–50 and 'North: the Politics of Plurality' appeared in *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing* 2, no. 1–2 (Autumn 1998/Spring 1999), 1–19.

flourish in the bog poems of *Wintering Out* and *North*, devoting considerable attention to examining these emerging patterns in the chapter's latter portion of the chapter. In doing so, he demonstrates how the verticality and resurgence inherent in the bog motif become central to Heaney's poetic vision. This analysis reveals the profound connections Heaney draws between Iron Age victims and contemporary Irish persecution, while simultaneously exploring the poet's symbolic descent into both personal and collective unconscious.

Like Vendler, O'Brien examines the inevitable relationship between culture and violence, but he extends this analysis to consider the moral implications of IRA (Irish Republican Army) actions. This exploration reveals Heaney's evolution from his initial desire to separate art and politics to an unavoidable engagement with political realities. O'Brien uses 'Punishment' and its 'little adulteress' – a figure paralleling the Windeby Girl found in a German bog<sup>77</sup> – to examine Heaney's complex response to tribal revenge. As O'Brien notes, 'Heaney [. . .] would express "civilized outrage" at such barbaric treatment of people in the twentieth century', at the same time 'at a traditional and visceral level, he does understand why 'his' community feels the need to act in such a manner.'<sup>78</sup> This 'binocular vision' leads O'Brien to identify a quasi-Machiavellian element in Heaney's thinking: 'Belief that one is acting for the good of one's tribe is a powerful force, as it allows all morality to be bypassed for the good of that tribe.'<sup>79</sup> Heaney's poetry thus confronts not questions of morality or justice but the raw mechanics of tribal revenge against those who transgress communal rules.<sup>80</sup> In 'Exposure', Heaney positions himself as 'neither internee nor informer' (*N* 72), 'as someone who is neither so committed to nationalism [. . .], nor as someone who is removed from his ideology.'<sup>81</sup> However, in the second part of *North*, particularly in 'Whatever you Say Say Nothing,' Heaney addresses the conflict more directly: the line 'Smoke signals are loud-mouthed compared with us' (*N* 54) acknowledges the enforced silence of the time, while the poem's conclusion –

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<sup>77</sup> Windeby I is a bog body dating from the Early Iron Age and discovered in northern Germany in 1952. Prior to 2005, it was assumed that Windeby I was a fourteen-year-old girl whose body suggested live burial, evidenced by birch branches and a stone placed on her chest.

<sup>78</sup> O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney*, 39.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

‘Competence with pain,/Coherent miseries, a bite and sup:/We hug our little destiny again’ (N 55) – reveals a complex acceptance of tribal identity and its attendant suffering. O’Brien shows how these lines reflect both personal resilience and communal endurance, suggesting that the capacity to bear pain has become a collective Irish trait forged through prolonged conflict.

In Chapter Two, O’Brien traces a crucial transition in Heaney’s work: the movement from the collective ‘we’ back to the individual ‘I’. This shift reveals Heaney’s evolving understanding of community, his role as bard, and his sense of place. O’Brien demonstrates how Heaney establishes critical distance from the communal voice that dominated *North*, developing instead the more personal perspective that characterises his subsequent collections – a transition that enables Heaney to reexamine his artistic responsibility to Northern Ireland’s political situation. Through both *Field Work* and *Station Island*, the critic interrogates the relationship between individual artist and tribal community, questioning the nature of poetic obligation to collective experience. O’Brien identifies ‘Exposure’, *North*’s concluding poem, as pivotal to this development. While the collection’s first section presents mythic certainties, ‘Exposure’ deliberately confronts present complexities,<sup>82</sup> thereby opening possibilities for new ways of engaging with contemporary experiences. This shift from communal mythology to individual introspection sets the stage for Heaney’s work throughout the crucial five years between *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984).

In this second chapter, O’Brien also examines Heaney’s shift away from his earlier stance on violence. As he argues:

In the detail of these elegies, there is no trace of any form of ‘understanding’ of the killings, or of their being in any way for ‘the common good’. There is a vastly different perspective involved here, as the mythic notion of Ireland’s past that we saw in the bog poems, has been replaced by a more humane concern with the plight of individuals.<sup>83</sup>

This transformation becomes evident in poems like such as ‘Casualty’, in which Heaney focuses on an individual death – a drunken seaman killed in 1972 during Bloody Sunday

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

– rather than its communal impact. O’Brien sees this shift as fundamental: ‘It is this questioning of the validity of the tribal bond that is the seminal trope of these books. What was voiced as almost a given in *North* has now become something which needs to be interrogated’.<sup>84</sup> This evolution in perspective coincides with significant formal probing, and O’Brien notes how *Field Work* marks a departure from the quatrains of earlier collections towards ‘a more self-conscious sense of the structure of the line and of experimentation’ using a wide range of poetic forms such as ‘lyrics, sonnets of varying degrees of rhythmical exactitude, translations for Dante, less formal reminiscences, formal elegies and a great variation of line length’.<sup>85</sup> For O’Brien, this formal variety reflects more than technical virtuosity. These experiments become a kind of mirror – or to use Heaney’s metaphor, a ‘well’ – in which the poet examines his evolving artistic identity. The diverse forms suggest that Heaney’s negotiation of his position between Irish and English traditions creates a poetry that reflects his cultural in-betweenness while demonstrating the inseparability of artistic form and personal identity.

O’Brien uncovers a fundamental shift in Heaney’s understanding of art’s purpose during this period. Whereas *North* emphasised art’s service to tribal interests, Heaney’s later work prioritised individual artistic growth. Art becomes not a means of tribal salvation but a tool for self-discovery. As O’Brien notes, Heaney reaches the ‘realization that his reaction to his culture and to the historical situation of that culture must be individual: he is not, nor can he be, the saviour of his tribe’.<sup>86</sup> In this view, although art offers either comfort or provocation to readers, it serves primarily as a medium for translating inner experience into external expression.

O’Brien’s analysis also reveals a parallel transformation in Heaney’s treatment of place. The poet moves from the specificity of place to the universality of space, from a detailed exploration of the Irish landscape to a broader conceptual territory. This shift reflects a crucial reorientation: pursuing belonging through individual rather than communal experience. As O’Brien observes:

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

His relationship with place has been transformed, from an artesian probing of the psychic communal memory bank to a more individualistic translating and transforming of that past into a personalized aesthetic wherein the relationship with tradition is more nuanced and the perspective is more transcendental than immanent.<sup>87</sup>

This evolution reaches its fullest expression in *Seeing Things*, where Heaney employs classical references (e.g. *The Divine Comedy* and *The Aeneid*) to achieve a new perspective. The collection coincides with the loss of his father, following his mother's earlier death, which forces Heaney to confront existence without the foundational figures of his life, yet O'Brien shows how these themes of loss and transformation build on earlier work – the introspective elements of *Death of a Naturalist*, the well gazing as metaphor for unconscious exploration – while pushing towards new artistic territory.

In Chapter Three, O'Brien examines how *The Haw Lantern* (1983) and *Seeing Things* (1991) marked a decisive turn in Heaney's poetic development. In particular, he focuses on what he terms 'second thoughts' – Heaney's systematic reconsideration of earlier themes through a more mature lens. As O'Brien explains:

The more mature Heaney, now sees 'signs' and 'visions' with a more jaundiced eye: he has 'second thoughts' about the very nature of the visionary, seeing it as no longer something to be caught and venerated. Instead, he now sees visions as experiences to be survived. Rather than look for huge manifestations and visions, his aesthetic is now more keenly attuned to seeing the visionary in the ordinary, but it is a more personalised vision, with 'I' being used far more often than the vatic or tribal 'we'.<sup>88</sup>

This transformation manifests in Heaney's departure from the concrete materiality that characterises his first four collections. His poetry now reaches towards more abstract themes and creates what O'Brien describes as spaces 'where presence and absence interact in a dialectical fashion'.<sup>89</sup> This shift appears most notably in Heaney's evolving relationship with language. Where earlier works used language primarily to describe rural

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–84.

life and excavate history, in these later collections it becomes a more complex mediating tool that actively shapes reality rather than merely describing it.

O'Brien develops the theme of presence and absence – previously explored by Vendler – by connecting it to broader philosophical currents, particularly Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. This theoretical framework illuminates Heaney's treatment of loss, especially in 'Clearances,' the sequence addressing his mother's death, which marks a significant shift from the materiality that characterised early collections such as *Death of a Naturalist*. Where 'Digging' emphasised masculine strength and paternal inheritance through physical labour, 'Clearances' explored more delicate, feminine, and spiritual dimensions of experience. As Henry Hart observes, 'his natural father and mother, as poems as different as 'Follower' and 'Clearances' attest, are superseded; in their place Heaney erects the memorials that are his poems'.<sup>90</sup> O'Brien reveals how this engagement with maternal loss enabled Heaney to explore more nuanced aspects of his interior life. The shift from masculine to feminine influence manifests particularly in Heaney's treatment of silence. Whereas earlier poems resonated with the sounds of male labour and political tumult, his mother's influence introduces a different kind of presence, one defined by absence, which creates spaces that invite contemplation rather than action.

O'Brien examines how the chestnut tree in 'Clearances' becomes a powerful symbol of transformation from presence to absence:

Deep planted and long gone, my coeval  
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,  
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,  
A soul ramifying and forever  
Silent, beyond silence listened for. (*HL* 34)

This image crystallises the contrast between paternal and maternal influences in Heaney's work. While his father represents life's concrete materiality, his mother embodies a more metaphysical presence. O'Brien shows how this shift from physical to spiritual understanding extends beyond personal relationships to inform Heaney's evolving

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<sup>90</sup> Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, 14.

perspective on Ireland itself. The progression from *North* through *Field Work* to *Seeing Things* reveals a parallel transformation in Heaney's sense of place, and he moves away from what he describes in 'The Sense of Place' as 'the stable element, the land itself' (*PP* 149) toward a more imaginative conception of nationhood. This evolution culminates in his vision of 'Irelands of the mind' – spaces that exist not in physical geography but in the realm of possibility and reconciliation.

O'Brien devotes Chapter Four and Five ('A Different Shore' and 'A Pure Change Happened') to examining both Heaney's prose works – including *Preoccupations*, *The Redress of Poetry*, *The Government of the Tongue* and his Nobel speech *Crediting Poetry* – and his deepening engagement with classical themes following his parents' deaths. The final chapter analyses *Electric Light*, positioned within a radically transformed Ireland. As O'Brien notes, 'electric light allows us to see in the dark, to see where we could not see before, to see things anew'.<sup>91</sup> The metaphor works on multiple levels as both a literal representation of technological progress in rural Ireland and as a symbol of broader cultural illumination. Where Heaney once sought light as abstract redemption, it now manifests as tangible progress. O'Brien defines how this transformation enables 'cross-cultural pollination',<sup>92</sup> particularly following Ireland's integration into the European Union. This new context allowed Heaney to merge tradition with modernity and native with foreign elements to create a more cosmopolitan poetic voice that is evident even in his choice of titles and place names. O'Brien's concluding assessment captures the significance of this evolution:

What is at work here is a parallel process to the development of a new sense of Irishness, an Irishness that is centrifugal as opposed to centripetal in orientation. Here we see an embracing of European and world culture, an unselfconscious placement of Irish experience in the context of such a culture, and a willingness to posit connections between the two. Through electricity, the light of different cultures and languages, the 'stations of the world', came into the home and mind of Seamus Heaney, and this is celebrated in the cosmopolitan, sophisticated and nuanced sense of Irishness, as well as in the complexity of identity that is enunciated throughout his writing.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney*, 185.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–87.

O'Brien's analysis reveals Heaney's evolution toward a more synthetic vision in which the centre and periphery become interdependent rather than oppositional. The poet's journey from tribal spokesman to cosmopolitan voice reflects a deeper transformation: the resolution of his earlier struggle between commitment and abstention. As O'Brien notes, Heaney moves from seeking communal symbols to achieving a relationship with tradition that is 'more nuanced and the perspective is more transcendental than immanent.'<sup>94</sup>

This evolution in Heaney's sense of place takes on new significance in the twenty-first century's environmental context. As ecological have expanded beyond scientific and technological domains to encompass humanistic disciplines, literary scholars have examined how poetry engages with environmental crises. Lidström's *Nature, Environment and Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes* (2015) represents a significant contribution to this emerging field. Lidström examines Heaney and Hughes through contemporary ecocritical theory and with a particular focus on their treatment of landscape, territory, and human–environment relationships. Her analysis, when considered alongside Richard Russell's exploration of place in *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (2014), offers new perspectives on Heaney's environmental imagination. Together, these works illuminate how Heaney's poetry engages with postmodern concepts of deterritorialisation while maintaining a deep connection to specific landscapes. This section layers Lidström's inquiry into the themes of postmodernism and deterritorialisation onto Russell's exploration of Heaney's sense of place and highlights the intersections and dialogues between their analyses. Of particular interest are Chapters Two and Six of Lidström's volume, which address the theme of placeness more directly and are most relevant to the core points being disentangled in this discussion: Heaney's sense of place and his shift from a local based experience of place to a more globalised and cosmopolitan perception of spatiality.

Lidström frames her investigation explicitly with fundamental questions about poetry's role in environmental discourse. She asks explicitly:

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

How do poems in particular reflect and contribute to this major change in our environmental imaginations? How does the context of growing concern for the environment affect the way in which we read poems, especially ones pertaining, more or less directly, to the readership between human and non-human nature?<sup>95</sup>

These questions guide her methodical exploration of how poetry can be used to engage with environmental and climate crises, and her analytical framework draws on and extends previous Heaney scholarship, creating productive dialogue with critics such as Neil Corcoran, Edna Longley, Eugene O'Brien, Michael Parker and Greg Garrard. By synthesising their insights in relation to ecocritical theory, Lidström develops new approaches to reading poetry's environmental dimensions that facilitate expansion beyond theoretical foundation and allow her to move beyond traditional interpretations of nature in poetry toward a more complex understanding of how poetic language engages with environmental consciousness.

Lidström adopts an interwoven approach to examining Hughes and Heaney, alternating between the poets across six chapters. This structure – odd-numbered chapters focus on Hughes, while even-numbered ones examine Heaney – creates subtle dialogue between their works. Although each chapter stands as an independent essay with its own bibliography – a reflection of the distinct theoretical frameworks required for each poet's environmental engagement – the overall design facilitates both focused analysis and comparative insights. This organisational strategy is particularly effective for understanding how two major poets approach environmental themes through different cultural and personal lenses. While readers have the option to engage with individual chapters as standalone works, the book's conclusion synthesises these parallel investigations, demonstrating how diverse poetic responses to the environment ultimately illuminate shared ecological concerns. Lidström's study shows how Heaney exemplifies the way modern poetry can address environmental concerns by questioning traditional perspectives on the human-nature relationship.

In *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (2014), Russell departs from traditional biographical-developmental studies of Heaney's work by offering a focused examination

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<sup>95</sup> Susanna Lidström, *Nature, Environment and Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes* (Routledge, 2015), 1.

of place as a central organising principle in the Heaney's poetics. In doing so, Russell identifies three distinct but interconnected 'regions' in the poet's writings: the immediate geographical and cultural Ireland of his present, the imagined 'spirit region' where reconciliation might be possible, and the transcendent region beyond the immediate experience. Using this framework allows Russell to reexamine the concepts of regionalism, parochialism and provincialism present in Heaney's work. He argues that Heaney's return to the land – his centre – represents not a retreat into provincialism but a strategy for liberating poetry from social constraints and nationalist distortions. Like Parker and O'Brien before him, Russell emphasises Heaney's fundamental drive to communicate personal experiences to a universal audience. This universal aspiration manifests in Heaney's evolution from a regional writer to what John Montague terms a 'global regionalist'.<sup>96</sup> Beginning with precise observations of life at Mossbawn, Heaney's work gradually expands its scope while maintaining its grounding in specific place. Through careful attention to language, he creates poetry that bridges divisions between Ireland's various 'regions' – social, religious and geographical – while speaking to an increasingly international audience.

Lidström's second chapter, 'Human History and Environmental Time: Postmodern Nature in Heaney's Bog Poems', follows an analysis of Hughes's 'Crow' and examines Heaney's bog poems through postmodern ecocritical theory, particularly Serpil Oppermann's synthesis of ecocriticism and postmodernism.<sup>97</sup> Lidström characterises *North* as a 'careful and self-conscious balancing act between artistic obligation and integrity' and argues that the bog poems offered Heaney a way to address the Troubles while maintaining poetic autonomy.<sup>98</sup> Drawing on diverse critics – Dianne Meredith, Edna Longley and Conor Cruise O'Brien – she demonstrates how Heaney's treatment of territory transcends temporal boundaries, connecting ancient and contemporary experiences of place. In the same chapter, Lidström examines how bog

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<sup>96</sup> Russell, *Regions*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Lidström takes into account Oppermann's argument that early ecocriticism was limited by its commitment to literary realism (concentrating on trees, animals, elements as direct representations) and was opposed to postmodern theory, which emphasises how culture and language inevitably shape our interpretation and understanding of reality, including nature. Lidström argues that the best approach would be to combine both approaches by looking at the representations of nature but also how our language and culture shape said representations.

<sup>98</sup> Lidström, *Nature, Environment and Poetry*, 7.

poems represent a postmodern conception of nature in which place and time merge in timeless repositories. As she notes, ‘the bog’s ability to preserve remnants from the past challenges our perception of time and unsettles the linear relationship we conventionally perceive between past, present and future’.<sup>99</sup> Building on her analysis of religious themes in Hughes’s ‘Crow’, Lidström reveals previously unexplored spiritual dimensions in Heaney’s bog poems. These works ‘address the relationship between religious beliefs and the natural environment and trace the roots of a particular contemporary political and cultural conflict surrounding the relationship to an ancient, primeval past’.<sup>100</sup> The bog’s unique preservative properties – its ability to suspend bodies and objects outside of normal temporal decay – creates what Lidström sees as a space where historical chronology becomes fluid. Heaney exploits this temporal fluidity to connect Jutland’s ancient sacrificial practices with contemporary Irish sectarian violence, and Lidström’s analysis of ‘The Tollund Man’ reveals how Heaney uses such connections to construct meaning from violence. Just as the Tollund Man’s death served to ensure land fertility, contemporary Irish deaths became part of a larger narrative of national liberation:

In relation to the attempt to make the violence in the poem’s second part meaningful in some sense, perhaps the idea of a ‘sad freedom’ is an attempt to suggest that to some extent the Tollund man was aware of his own death as meaningful in the sense that it would secure the fertility of his people’s land, that it would make something ‘germinate’. The speaker wishes for a similar kind of meaning to help him make sense of the violent deaths in Ireland.<sup>101</sup>

Lidström connects her analysis to Meredith’s concept of ‘mindscape’ or ‘geographies of the mind’, where landscape functions as a living entity in which the past and present actively interweave. This dynamic relationship emerges through Heaney’s metaphorical strategy of using ancient practices to illuminate contemporary events. The landscape becomes not a static backdrop but an active force that moves non-linearly and creates overlapping temporal and spatial relationships. Meredith’s understanding of place as subjective construction aligns with Oppermann’s postmodern ecocritical theory, which

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55.

resists fixed boundaries between literary and ecological spheres. Both critics emphasise that place creation depends fundamentally on human perception and sensation, suggesting that environments exist not as objective realities but as complex interactions between physical space and human consciousness.

Heaney's metaphoric framework allows him to create resonant connections between the contemporary Irish conflict and ancient Jutland practices in a way that challenges simple temporal distinctions. This interweaving of past and present raises a fundamental question about historical time that different critics approach through complementary perspectives. Vendler sees this temporal complexity through the lens of natural recurrence: Human nature, she argues, manifests consistent patterns across time, making the past never truly past but always potentially present. Her view suggests that historical events do not simply repeat but persist as underlying patterns of human behaviour. Russell developed this idea of time overlapping through his analysis of 'blackness' in 'Strange Fruit'. He observes how the poem's visual structure – appearing as a dark block on the page – mirrors its thematic content: the darkness of violence perpetrated against the 'black' other. As Russell notes, this formal choice is suggestive of 'how violence, once engaged in, spreads like an ink blot across lives and generations'.<sup>102</sup> This visual metaphor reinforces the poem's suggestion that violence, like ink, leaves permanent marks across time.

The themes of sacrifice and violence in Heaney's bog poems emerge from concrete historical evidence documented in Glob's research. Physical details – bound hands, nooses, cut throats – found on bodies like the Windeby Girl and the Grauballe Man testify to specific acts of violence while suggesting broader patterns of social injustice. These preserved victims reveal how religious and social imperatives often disguise systemic violence, and Lidström's analysis resonates with Vendler's earlier insights about the persistence of human cruelty. As Lidström notes, these poems 'seem to say that this is what humans have always been like: cruel and callous, abiding to religions that demand brutal sacrifices in the name of the earth'.<sup>103</sup> This interpretation suggests that religious

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<sup>102</sup> Russell, *Regions*, 170.

<sup>103</sup> Lidström, *Nature, Environment and Poetry*, 58.

justification for violence represents not an aberration but a recurring feature of human culture, where sacrifice serves to normalise brutality through ritual.

In 'A Postmodern Nature', Lidström initially suggests that Heaney has not found a remedy for contemporary crisis, yet her analysis ultimately reveals how his use of bog imagery actually provides one by rekindling a sense of place and communal identity through poetry. The widespread resonance of his work confirms this therapeutic function. Lidström's application of postmodern theory, particularly Oppermann's insights, positions Heaney within contemporary critical discourse while illuminating his distinctive approach to nature. The bog poems exemplify postmodern characteristics through their dissolution of traditional boundaries, the way in which they collapse conventional distinctions between space and time, nature and culture. Oppermann's framework helps reveal how Heaney moves beyond simple binary oppositions to explore the complex interconnections between human and natural worlds. This theoretical perspective gains particular force through Heaney's personal experience – his childhood immersion in mossy land at age eleven becomes emblematic of boundary dissolution. The preserved bodies of the Tollund and Grauballe men further demonstrate this postmodern sensibility. Specifically, their intact preservation challenges linear temporality, which makes the past perpetually present, yet Heaney's work maintains productive tension between local and global perspectives. As Lidström notes, his poetics balances 'advocacy and strengthening of local ties, cultures and belonging' with 'a growing recognition of global connectedness, with regard to environmental and other relationships'.<sup>104</sup> This tension itself becomes part of Heaney's postmodern vision, in which the particular and universal constantly inform each other.

In Chapter Six, 'The Place in Me', Lidström examines how *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern* reflect Heaney's development of an international poetic voice. Through close readings of selected poems, she addresses a central tension in contemporary environmental thought: whether the shift towards global consciousness threatens local distinctiveness or whether cosmopolitan perspective is essential for developing a more expansive sense of place and attachment. Lidström grounds this analysis in ecological

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

theory, particularly the work of James Lovelock and Ludwig von Bertalanffy, to explore the growing recognition of the interdependence between natural elements and human beings. She uses this theoretical framework to demonstrate how Heaney's later poetry extends the concept of belonging beyond immediate locale and suggests that a deeper understanding of interconnectedness actually strengthens rather than diminishes attachment to specific places.

Heaney's sustained engagement with nature and place makes his work particularly valuable to understand the relationship between local belonging and global consciousness. 'The Birthplace' exemplifies his evolution from the childhood landscapes of *Death of a Naturalist* towards a more cosmopolitan perspective on place. In his 1977 lecture 'The Sense of Place', Heaney articulates this duality:

I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and unconscious. (*PP* 131)

Although this lecture predates Heaney's fully developed global perspective, it anticipates his later cosmopolitan voice by recognising how immediate experience and broader understanding may create different but complementary relationships with place. The initial sense of rootedness, explored in his first four collections, emerges from direct engagement with culturally and historically charged locations, often expressed through the linguistic specificity of place names. Lidström examines this relationship between language and place through two poems from *Wintering Out*: 'Anahorish' (named for his primary school) and 'Broagh'. Conversely, Russell's analysis of 'Broagh' reveals how linguistic elements metaphorically establish boundaries of home while acknowledging threats of dispossession. As Russell notes, the poem's attention to dialect and cultural specificities enables a deeper connection to particular places while simultaneously serving as a unifying element among Northern Ireland's inhabitants.<sup>105</sup>

Heaney's poetic journey towards a more introspective, self-aware identity parallels his development of a more complex global consciousness. This dual evolution finds

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<sup>105</sup> Russell, *Regions*, 139.

precise expression in the pivotal lines from ‘The Birthplace’: ‘Everywhere being nowhere,/who can prove/one place more than another?’ (SI 35) These lines suggest that the very impossibility of absolute location becomes a way of being everywhere at once. This transformation in Heaney’s perception of place develops through his experiences of displacement – across Ireland’s borders and through his international travels. Each movement away from home contributes to an increasingly nuanced understanding of the place itself. What began as an intensely local experience centred on Mossbawn’s family farm expands into a more comprehensive global perception without losing its grounding in a specific location. Lidström argues that this evolution involves ‘a focus on the individual as representative of the universal, rather than on the communal, regional, or national’.<sup>106</sup> She suggests that Heaney’s first significant displacement – his journey to Berkeley – initiated this perspective shift, allowing him to view Ireland and Irish identity from an external vantage point. This distance paradoxically enabled a deeper understanding through the very act of displacement. Lidström examines Heaney’s evolving perception of place through two key poems from his fifth collection: ‘Making Strange’ and ‘The Birthplace’. She focuses particularly on how ‘Making Strange’ employs defamiliarisation and deterritorialisation, which marks a significant departure from his earlier, more directly attached representations of place. The poem captures a revealing moment: Heaney driving Jamaican poet Louis Simpson through the Irish countryside. As he describes his homeland, Heaney experiences simultaneous pride and estrangement: ‘I found myself driving the stranger//through my own country,/at dialect, reciting my pride/in all that I knew, that began to make strange / at that same recitation’ (SI 32–33). This moment encapsulates the complexity of translating one’s intimate knowledge of place for an outsider and how the very act of explanation transforms what is being explained. Lidström contrasts this approach with the earlier ‘Broagh’, in which linguistic exclusion defines community boundaries. As she notes, ‘whereas in “Broagh” at the end of the poem outsiders’ inability to correctly pronounce the name of the place was used to identify “us” versus “them”, in “Making Strange” the outsider’s point of view is accommodated and allowed to make the familiar place take on an at least partly new

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<sup>106</sup> Lidström, *Nature, Environment and Poetry*, 129.

meaning through an unfamiliar, cosmopolitan perspective'.<sup>107</sup> Instead of using language to establish boundaries, Heaney now employs it to bridge them, attempting to convey his deep connection to place through words 'loaded with history'.

While 'Making Strange' explores deterritorialisation through the act of translating place for an outsider, 'The Birthplace' represents a more fundamental reevaluation of belonging itself. The poem's assertion that 'Everywhere being nowhere/who can prove/one place more than another?' (*SI* 35) illuminates Heaney's postmodern merging of place and space, in which traditional boundaries become fluid and permeable. This evolution transforms Heaney's sense of place from a purely geographical attachment to a more complex interior belonging. The haunting images of home that dominated his first collection now merge with more sophisticated understandings of place and displacement. Lidström connects this poetic development to broader historical changes, noting how the peace process between Northern Ireland and England enabled new definitions of local and global identity. As Lidström observes:

While the local is a directly experienced relation, the national or global depends on a constructed or imagined sense of identity. While formulated differently in different places, there is a sense in which the local can also be referred to as individual and at the same time universal.<sup>108</sup>

Through poetry, Heaney transcends simple oppositions between local and global, creating a language that makes universal what is deeply personal.

In analysing 'From the Land of the Unspoken', Lidström examines how Heaney reconceptualizes cosmopolitanism as universal belonging based on shared systemic principles. This vision suggests that feeling at home anywhere becomes possible through the recognition of the fundamental interconnections operating across all places. Lidström identifies two distinct but related systems in Heaney's work. The first, explored through natural laws, connects human experience to non-human patterns and rhythms. The second, developed in 'Electric Light', focuses on how technology – particularly radio – creates new networks of understanding through language. The advent of electricity enabled immediate access to diverse cultural perspectives and historical narratives that

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

transformed local experiences through global connections, mostly thanks to the access to the radio. As Lidström notes, ‘by thus translating a global or planetary system into local and immediate experience, Heaney creates a sense of continuity between the local and the global’.<sup>109</sup> This synthesis suggests that modern technology does not necessarily alienate us from place but can actually deepen our sense of belonging by revealing underlying connections.

For Russell, language serves as the crucial bridge between the three regions mentioned above:

Heaney’s call to poetry, then, stems from and is freighted with an ethical sense of his obligation to others to communicate meaning and form community, whether in the actual region of the North of Ireland, an imagined future North, or the spirit region.<sup>110</sup>

Russell’s emphasis on ethical obligation suggests that poetry’s role extends beyond aesthetic concerns to community formation, and he sees Heaney’s embrace of cosmopolitanism as recognition of poetry’s potential for global advocacy against injustice. This perspective aligns with previous discussions of how Heaney’s understanding of systemic oppression enabled him to connect with audiences worldwide which suggests that regional experience can illuminate universal patterns of power and resistance.

This ability to transform local experience into broader insights can be traced back to Heaney’s formative experiences. Russell examines Heaney’s 1970 essay “Further Language” in order to better understand how educational experience shaped Heaney’s perceptions of place and identity. At Queen’s University (Belfast), Heaney encountered diversity that challenged his previous understanding of cultural boundaries. English literature lessons, in particular, helped dissolve the seemingly rigid binaries of Irish/English and Celtic/Saxon identities. As Heaney writes, these oppositions ‘were momentarily collapsed [. . .] and I experienced an elsewhere of potential which felt at the same time like a somewhere being remembered’.<sup>111</sup> This paradoxical sensation – where possibility feels like memory – suggests how education can transform one’s understanding

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>110</sup> Russell, *Regions*, 5–6.

<sup>111</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Further Language”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 30, no.2 (Fall 1997), 10.

of place and identity. The experience points towards what Heaney envisions as an Ireland where politics might ‘promote conditions where the imagined communities towards which people aspire can find their symbolic reflection’.<sup>112</sup>

Lidström concludes her study by returning to her initial question about poetry’s relationship to environmental problems. She argues that ecological poetics transcends a simple thematic treatment of nature:

The concept of an ecological poetics suggests that there is a special relationship between ecology or environmentalism and the formal qualities of poetry; that ecopoetry is not merely ‘about’ nature in a thematic sense, but actually addresses or reflects ecological relationships in a different, intrinsic way.<sup>113</sup>

Through Heaney’s work, Lidström demonstrates how poetry functions as an artistic response to reality and shows how the poet translates universal experience through an individual perspective. While nature remains universal and ultimately untranslatable, poetry creates accessible entry points into its essence. The poem becomes a space where complex environmental relationships can be rendered comprehensible without being oversimplified. Language plays a crucial role in this translation. As Lidström shows,<sup>114</sup> Heaney’s linguistic choices reflect the intricate relationships between human emotion and environmental interaction. The poem creates a unique space in which species interconnectedness can be explored within art’s mediating framework. Rather than advocating escape into nature or maintaining rigid human/nature distinctions, Heaney’s poetry seeks integration and uses artistic space to demonstrate fundamental interconnections.

### **3. Recent Critical Works: From Bibliography to Letters**

Roy Foster’s 2020 contribution to the ‘Writers on Writers’ series, *On Seamus Heaney*, offers a distinctive perspective on the poet through the lens of a distinguished Irish historian. This slim volume combines biographical insight with literary analysis, making

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>113</sup> Lidström, *Nature, Environment and Poetry*, 146.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. Chapter Six.

Heaney's work accessible to new readers while offering fresh perspectives to scholars. Foster approaches Heaney's career with a historian's sensibility and examines how the poet balances artistic integrity with social obligations. His methodology – tracing how each collection speaks to and illuminates others – creates a dynamic understanding of Heaney's development. This historical-biographical approach proves particularly valuable given Heaney's deeply autobiographical tendencies; even in his most abstract poems, traces of personal experience are visible. The volume's underlying premise – that understanding poetry requires biographical context – aligns especially well with Heaney's work, in which personal and poetic voices are frequently merged. Foster's dual focus as a historian and literary critic enables him to demonstrate how Heaney's life experiences inform his artistic choices while showing how his poetry transforms biographical material into universal significance.

*On Seamus Heaney* testifies to Foster's deep engagement with previous Heaney scholarship, and he acknowledges debts to Vendler, Richtarik, Parker, and Corcoran. While Vendler's work offered measured, detailed analysis of specific poetic aspects, Foster provides a concise biographical-critical narrative within a tight 250-page framework. Despite these constraints, he captures every significant event, relationship, and publication, from private correspondence to Heaney's 1995 Nobel speech. Foster's perspective as a historian illuminates how Heaney's personal development intersected with Ireland's political evolution. He emphasises Heaney's charisma, eloquence, and tact as essential elements of his artistic vocation, while demonstrating how these qualities emerged through specific historical circumstances. Despite signing early works as Incertus, Heaney displayed remarkable certainty from the beginning. *Death of a Naturalist* not only achieved commercial success but also established a broad readership beyond Ireland, aided by Heaney's accessible, economical language, and Foster identifies Heaney's Berkeley period as a 'kick-start for the next phase'<sup>115</sup> in his development. Like Parker, Foster sees this California sojourn as providing crucial distance from Ireland that facilitated both detachment and deeper comprehension. This perspective shift culminates in 'The Tollund Man', in which Heaney connects ancient bog bodies with contemporary

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<sup>115</sup> Roy Foster, *On Seamus Heaney* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 28.

violence, marking his transition from early to mature work. The California experience, Foster suggests, heightened Heaney's awareness of the communal and tribal bonds lacking in Irish society. This realisation shaped his subsequent collections, *Wintering Out* and *North*, in which language became a tool for creating a unified Irish historical consciousness.

Foster identifies 1973 as a crucial moment in Heaney's political development, corroborated by a significant letter in which the poet acknowledges his cautious engagement with 'the Irish thing' dating back to the publication of *Death of a Naturalist*. This letter, unpublished when Foster was writing, has since been made accessible by Reid's in *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* (2023), one of the decade's most significant contributions to Heaney scholarship. Reid's collection transforms our understanding of Heaney's development as both a public figure and a private individual. The letters reveal the poet's intimate thoughts on poetic inspiration while documenting his extensive intellectual network. Through correspondence with fellow writers and critics – Michael Longley, John Montague, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Deane, and Brian Friel, among others – readers see Heaney engaging with the key cultural figures of his time,<sup>116</sup> yet this unprecedented access to Heaney's private thoughts and relationships raises important questions about the boundaries between public scholarship and personal privacy. While the letters offer invaluable insights into Heaney's creative process and intellectual development, they also expose intimate aspects of his relationships and inner life that he might have preferred to keep private.

In a crucial moment of reflection, captured in a letter to Brendan Hamill dated 8 January, Heaney first explicitly acknowledges the political dimensions of early poems such as 'Dockery', 'Requiem for the Croppies', 'Bogland', and 'At a Potato Digging', even while noting that he was not yet 'very politically conscious *as a poet* [original emphasis]'. Heaney articulates his implicit political positioning: 'You don't have to make noises against the establishment if your name is Seamus, for example; it's just taken for granted'.<sup>117</sup> He recognised that his early works already contained political implications:

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<sup>116</sup> Additional correspondence includes exchanges with David Hammond, Charles Monteith, John Hewitt, Peter Crawley, Edna Longley, John L. Sweeney, Seán Ó Riada, Harry Chambers, James Simmons, John Oliver and Rosemary Goad.

<sup>117</sup> Christopher Reid, *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* (Faber & Faber Ltd., 2023), 98.

In my first two books I had a few poems which were ‘political’ in the northern context, in that they assumed that Ulster was part of the Irish experience, not part of the British. [. . .] So I would begin by saying that from the beginning I was writing from a perspective that was at odds with the prevailing ‘Ulster is British’ atmosphere.<sup>118</sup>

The letter in question reinforces themes earlier identified by Vendler, and O’Brien regarding tribal violence and inevitable conflict. Heaney acknowledges this tension directly: ‘By upbringing and education, and by experience of life in the north, one is destined to be partisan. Yet an intense fidelity to one’s own tribe can only lead to a continuous cycle of revenge’.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, he insists on poetry’s autonomy when he argues that poetic voice ‘can’t be *summoned* [original emphasis] – a poem is a different utterance from a newspaper leader. [. . .] The important thing is that work adequate to the terrors and wrongs should appear sooner or later’.<sup>120</sup> In his commentary, Foster captures this complex relationship between poetry and politics, noting that for Heaney, ‘when politics did come into a poem, it was not an act of summoning, but the reflection of a cultural accumulation’.<sup>121</sup> The letter thus illuminates how Heaney understood poetry’s relationship to political reality, not as direct engagement but as an inevitable reflection of lived experience.

Foster examines both the critical response to *North* and Heaney’s subsequent evolution. He notes how Ciaran Carson ‘took an oddly reductionist line on *North*, accusing Heaney of a defeatist and even aestheticizing approach to the history of violence’. (56) This critique, Foster suggests that this critique misses the complex ways in which Heaney engaged with violence. *Field Work* marks a significant shift, revealing a more personal and direct voice that demonstrates Heaney’s growing certainty about his poetic mission. This evolution coincides with important prose collections – *Preoccupations* (1980) and *The Government of the Tongue* (1988) – in which Heaney developed critical perspectives on his own work and achieved new analytical distance. Foster identifies how this period balances public and private concerns; for example, while the collection contains elegies for bombing victims, it also includes intensely personal works. ‘The

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–100.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>121</sup> Foster, *On Seamus Heaney*, 41.

Harvest Bow', written just after *North*, offers a tender portrait of Heaney's father, while the 'Glenmore Sonnets' celebrate married love. These poems suggest how personal affection might counter political violence without ignoring it.

Foster's analysis illuminates the multiple dimensions of Heaney's achievement by examining how he navigated roles as both a national figure and global literary presence. Through careful attention to Heaney's historical context, Foster demonstrates how Heaney maintained artistic independence while fulfilling his public responsibilities, particularly during the Northern Irish Troubles. This balance extends to Heaney's treatment of myth and reality, and Foster shows how Heaney's rural upbringing and deep connection to Irish identity provided a foundation for poetry that transforms local experience into universal significance. The poet's evolution from a local voice to an international figure never sacrifices specificity for broad appeal. Foster pays particular attention to Heaney's linguistic development and argues that his consistent ethical and artistic rigour enabled him to address both immediate circumstances and eternal concerns. This ethical dimension becomes especially clear in Heaney's engagement with classical texts, from *Beowulf* to *The Aeneid*, where he employs translation serves as a means of connecting contemporary Irish experience with a broader literary tradition.

Foster concludes by examining Heaney's lasting legacy, crystallised in his final message to his wife: *noli timere* (do not fear). As Foster notes, this phrase transcended its personal context to become 'a manifesto to the nation and the world',<sup>122</sup> suggesting how individual courage might counter historical trauma while remaining true to oneself. Foster's distinctive methodology – rapid movements between topics and swift transitions between biography and analysis – might seem disconcerting at first. However, this approach proves remarkably effective in capturing the dynamic interplay between Heaney's life and work. While the volume's brevity might suggest limitation, Foster's synthesis is remarkably dense, which makes the book an essential companion to Heaney's poetry. What distinguishes Foster's contribution is his ability to show how personal experience shapes artistic development. By examining crucial encounters and experiences that influenced both poet and person, Foster reveals the constant dialogue between

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

individual growth and the broader sociopolitical context. This balance between scholarly analysis and biographical insight illuminates how Heaney's personal qualities – his inspiration, integrity, and courage – facilitated his artistic achievement.

#### **4. Towards a New Hermeneutics: Synthesising Three Decades of Critical Response to Heaney's Oeuvre**

The seven critical works examined here reveal Heaney as a figure who was continuously negotiating between competing forces – personal and political, local and universal, past and present. This fundamental in-betweenness shaped both his development as a poet and his evolution as a public figure. Henry Hart captures this complex dynamic:

Obsessed with such hierarchical oppositions as writing and speech, forgetting and remembering, blindness and insight, profane and sacred love, marginal and central institutions, Heaney typically reveals a dialectical relation where oppressively one-sided relations were or are the rules. His doors into the dark open onto a present inextricably wedded, for better or worse, to the past.<sup>123</sup>

This dialectical tension originates in Heaney's birthplace, positioned between ancient rural traditions and encroaching modernisation. While his early work, in which he sought refuge in Arcadian portrayals of home landscapes, suggests a desire for coherence, his poetic journey ultimately embraced rather than resolved contradictions. The progression from local poet to cosmopolitan voice represents not a simple expansion but a deeper understanding of how specific experience illuminates universal human conditions.

The tension between artistic integrity and public responsibility, central to critical discussions of Heaney, finds its clearest expression in his Nobel Prize speech. His metaphor of 'ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago' (*CP* 10–11) perfectly captures how poetry creates expanding circles of meaning and connection. This image of a rippling influence resonates through the critical works examined, and each scholar acknowledges their role in extending these ripples. By acting as intermediaries, these critics help Heaney's work reach audiences beyond

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<sup>123</sup> Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, 48.

academia while maintaining its intellectual depth. Their approaches mirror Heaney's own belief that poetry can 'walk on air against your better judgement' (*CP* 9), balancing artistic ambition with communicative necessity. The speech's conclusion articulates Heaney's position on poetry's essential function:

The form of the poem [. . .] is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they are an earnest of our veritable human being. (*CP* 53–54)

This understanding of poetry's role – to give form to unexpressed experience, to create order from chaos, to find meaning in difficulty – shapes both Heaney's work and the criticism it generates. Through careful attention to form and expression, poetry becomes a vehicle for exploring and communicating experiences that might otherwise remain inarticulate, enabling readers to discover their own truths within the poet's words. Thus, Parker's invitation for readers to 'mine their own meanings' establishes a critical framework that extends throughout Heaney scholarship, revealing a shared commitment among scholars to foster active, interpretive engagement with his poetry rather than prescriptive readings.

## II. Theorising Artistic Experience: Heaney's Poetics Through Arnold's Cultural Theory and Dewey's Aesthetic Philosophy

*Art is a mode of prediction  
not found in charts and statistics,  
and it insinuates possibilities  
of human relations not to be found  
in rule and precept,  
admonition and administration.*

—John Dewey

### 1. Origins of Modern Cultural Discourse: Matthew Arnold's Theory of Social Art

To understand Seamus Heaney's endeavour to reconcile poetic autonomy and social responsibility, the present analysis draws on two foundational texts: Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which explores the social function of culture, and the more philosophical discourse on art in John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). Arnold's examination of culture's social role and Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience provide crucial theoretical frameworks for understanding how Heaney balanced poetic craft with societal demands throughout his career, especially in the period ranging from 1969 to 1975. While a comprehensive analysis of Arnold's work lies beyond this study's scope, it is worth providing a brief overview of how he frames certain concepts – particularly what he means by culture and the idea of 'perfection' – to establish the fundamental background necessary for understanding Heaney's views on the social role of poetry.

Matthew Arnold's influence on contemporary cultural discourse remains significant, especially in theorising about the relationship between art, society, and personal development. He wrote during a period of intense intellectual restlessness, marked by competing critical voices responding to Victorian industrialisation. Notable among these voices were John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, who, despite sharing Arnold's concerns about industrial society, developed distinctive critical approaches. The period's intellectual debates had a particularly religious charge, with thinkers questioning religion and struggling to reconcile traditional faith with rapid industrial change. Arnold's distinctive contribution to these debates emerges through his vision of culture as a

mediating force, capable of both stabilising society and enabling its transformation, a perspective on culture's dual function that remains relevant in current debates about cultural development and social change. His vision of culture as a mediator between individual growth and social cohesion particularly influenced the British tradition of cultural criticism through figures such as F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot, who explored Arnold's insights about culture's capacity to prevent social fragmentation while adapting them to twentieth-century conditions. Arnold's enduring significance extends beyond this influence on specific critics to his broader role in establishing cultural criticism as a field of study. His work pioneered both systematic cultural analysis and the conception of criticism as a distinct intellectual discipline. What proves relevant to this study is Arnold's argument about the relationship between literary critical practice and culture's social impact.

Arnold's significance as cultural critic clearly emerges in twentieth-century interpretations of his works. Terry Eagleton, in *The Function of Criticism* (1984), emphasises Arnold's role in addressing class conflict and the need to transcend political credibility in favour of intellectual growth, while in *Matthew Arnold* (1949), Lionel Trilling, one of last century's most influential American literary critics, focuses on Arnold's broader historical vision. For Trilling, Arnold's attempt 'to make the past of Europe march with the future'<sup>1</sup> reveals Arnold's fundamental project: mediating the competing demands of tradition and progress, integrity and social needs. This bridging characteristic is conferred to culture, which offers the balancing quality between tradition (namely the Classics)<sup>2</sup> and present concerns. In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold presents his comprehensive theory of culture as remedy for Victorian fragmentation. Trilling's observation that 'the poet's vision gave the prose writer his goal'<sup>3</sup> illuminates

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, (Meridian Books, 1995), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold's notion of 'the Classics' centres on the Greco-Roman tradition, particularly its literary and philosophical heritage. He draws specifically from Greek ideals of harmony, beauty, balance, and reason. These classical principles become foundational to his cultural theory, especially in his development of 'sweetness' (derived from Greek aesthetic beauty) and 'light (emerging from classical intellectual clarity) – concepts that become central to his cultural investigation. This reliance on established tradition and convention is challenged by Dewey, who questions the very basis of canonical authority, asking whether we value masterpieces through genuine personal response or merely accept their status through cultural inheritance. This scepticism toward traditional hierarchies reflects his broader emphasis on direct experience over inherited cultural values.

<sup>3</sup> Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 11.

how Arnold's early poetic practice shaped his later cultural criticism. His experience as a poet provided him with a foundation for understanding how aesthetic sensitivity might inform social transformation, thereby creating a theoretical framework that maintains artistic integrity while addressing practical needs. Writing during a period of rapid industrialisation and widening class divisions, Arnold envisions culture as a unifying force capable of establishing shared values across English society. His evolution from poet to cultural critic reflects this growing concern about social cohesion. While maintaining sensitivity to aesthetic values, Arnold developed a distinctive vision of how cultural engagement might address the fundamental challenges of Victorian society. This dual focus – preserving artistic integrity while pursuing social improvement – discriminates his influence on cultural criticism. As he writes, his aim is to contribute to 'the practical necessities of our times. The great thing [. . .] is to find our *best self*, and to seek to affirm nothing but that'.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding Arnold's relevance as a cultural critic requires considering him within his historical context. *Culture and Anarchy*, which established a foundation for the systematic analysis of culture's social function, responds directly to Victorian society's growing fascination with what Arnold terms 'machinery' – a concept borrowed from Thomas Carlyle to critique not merely industrial development but an emerging mechanistic worldview.<sup>5</sup> The Victorian era, an 'age of compromise', presented unprecedented opportunities and challenges in the form of remarkable technological advancements, the emergence of mass manufacturing and the widespread mechanisation of production. For Arnold, these developments fundamentally challenged traditional societal organisation. Growing wealth disparity and new educational demands created tensions between material progress and cultural values. Arnold saw how preoccupation with mechanical efficiency and industrial advancement threatened to overshadow intellectual and spiritual development, destabilise traditional certainties and divert humanity from the pursuit of spiritual perfection and character formation. In response, he positioned culture as an alternative to both industrial materialism and conventional

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford University Press, 2006), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Time" in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Matthew, Arnold. Culture and Anarchy*, (Oxford World's Classics, 2006), 189.

religion by advocating its essential role in human development. Eagleton clarifies the concept by writing that when religion ceases to represent the foundation of a society, it is English literature (in this case) that becomes instrumental in providing an ideological structure from the Victorian period onwards, specifically ‘culture’, he writes ‘is a the service of religion, which, in turn, is in the service of police.’<sup>6</sup> This dedication to religion was due, in Eagleton’s opinion, thanks to literature’s ability to work primarily on emotional and experiential levels, as religion did.

Arnold’s approach distinguishes itself from purely aesthetic or political critiques of Victorian society by emphasising self-cultivation as essential to social improvement. His vision challenges established Victorian beliefs, by proposing that refined cultural sensibility could effectively counter the superficiality of mass culture. Central to Arnold’s theory is a dual vision of culture: at once a means for individual elevation and, more profoundly, as a tool for developing a pluralistic consciousness transcending narrow self-interest. Arnold envisions art, literature and philosophy, powerful instruments whose engagement with might be beneficial for personal and societal metamorphosis. He centres his focus especially on developing his social class through what he terms ‘Hellenisation’—a process of intellectual and aesthetic refinement designed to enable the bourgeoisie to assume genuine political and economic agency.<sup>7</sup> Arnold conceptualises a critical dialectic between what he calls ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Hebraism’. Whereas the Hellenic ideal, rooted in classical principles, advocates for the balanced development of all human faculties, Hebraism represents the prevalent tendency to subordinate human nature to religious concerns and spiritual pursuits. By promoting Hellenisation, Arnold imagines an intellectual era in which cultural knowledge would harmoniously balances enduring religious and moral imperatives, thereby offering a sophisticated pathway to social progress and individual enlightenment.

Against growing Victorian prioritisation of individualism and self-interest, Arnold proposed culture as a means of fostering both personal and societal harmony. In the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, he presents his most comprehensive definition of culture’s scope and describes it as ‘the great help out of our present difficulties’. Culture,

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, (Yale University Press, 2014), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 28.

he argues, represents ‘the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world’. Through this knowledge, Arnold suggests, we can direct ‘a stream of fresh and free through upon our stock notions and habits’.<sup>8</sup> This vision of culture embodies the pursuit of perfection, driven by a love of balance and a desire for social good. At its purest, culture offers fresh perspectives on contemporary issues while broadening our understanding.<sup>9</sup> This pursuit of perfection through cultural study becomes Arnold’s proposed solution to the challenges of his era. His essays systematically demonstrate how individuals can contribute to broader social evolution through cultural and philosophical development.

In the opening chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold establishes his foundational theory of cultural development through two interconnected qualities that define human perfection: ‘sweetness’ and ‘light’. Rooted in Greek philosophical ideals, these concepts represent complementary dimensions of human potential. ‘Sweetness’ embodies aesthetic beauty and emotional depth, while ‘light’ symbolises intellectual knowledge and rational clarity. Together, these paired qualities support the achievement of inner harmony and balance. Arnold’s vision of perfection differs from mere interpretations of excellence. Rather than valuing mastery in isolated domains, he advocates for a comprehensive and balanced development of human capacities. This perspective requires an integration of emotional, intellectual and aesthetic dimensions that avoids the pitfalls of one-sided advancement. Arnold distinguishes between the ‘ordinary self’, which is concerned with material matters and immediate gratifications, and the ‘best self’, which is capable of deeper spiritual and intellectual insight. For Arnold, culture emerges as the transformative pathway to achieving this ‘best self’. Rather than a mere aesthetic pursuit, culture is a critical mechanism for personal and societal growth. As Arnold writes, culture was becoming ‘the new standard by which we choose our guides and shape our actions’.<sup>10</sup> Unlike religion’s focus on personal salvation through specific doctrinal adherence, culture

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

offers comprehensive moral, aesthetic and intellectual development, which ultimately serves both individual growth and societal improvement.

For Arnold, culture functions as a *super partes* tool enabling individuals ‘to see things as they are, natural and proper in an intelligent being’.<sup>11</sup> This concept of culture as the path to perfection necessarily involves a social dimension: ‘Perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated: [T]he individual is obliged [. . .] to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection’.<sup>12</sup> Arnold’s critique of individualism, outlined in the following chapters of Arnold’s essay, challenges the equation of freedom with ‘doing freely and as [one] likes’.<sup>13</sup> He sees such unguided action as a mark of intellectual deficiency, describing it as ‘action with insufficient light, action pursued because we like to be doing something and doing it as we please, and do not like the trouble of thinking, and the severe constraint of any kind of rule’.<sup>14</sup> True liberty, Arnold argues, must align with social responsibility.

According to Arnold’s intellectual exchange, especially in an era of rapid social transition, is, the means of circulating knowledge, which is required foster harmony rather than discord. Culture serves as regulator,

with its disinterested pursuit of perfection, [. . .] simply trying to see things as they are, in order to seize on the best and make it prevail, is surely well fitted to help us to judge rightly, by all the aids of observing, reading, and thinking.<sup>15</sup>

Arnold develops this vision through an analysis of social classes, which he renames according to their characteristics. These three main classes – aristocrats, the middle class and the working class – are assigned new labels according to their characteristics. Arnold refers to the aristocrats as ‘Barbarians’ and associates them with an emphasis on the assertion of personal liberty and a preoccupation with outward appearance and refinement. For him, aristocrats are those that allowed the spreading of individualism and the interest in exteriority. Arnold terms the middle class ‘Philistines’, characterised as such for their

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

prioritisation of material success over cultural development. This class, which Arnold characterises as focused on machinery, commerce, and economic advancement, remains indifferent to intellectual growth and resistant to cultural refinement. In his view, it is the instinct to pursue material wealth rather than inner depth and to prefer any immediate practical result over the pursuit of deeper cultural values. The ‘Populace’, Arnold’s term for the working class, faces fundamentally different challenges. Unlike the Philistines, who choose to reject cultural development despite having the means to pursue it, the Populace encounters actual economic barriers to accessing culture and knowledge. The socio-economic condition of this social category makes achieving Arnold’s ideal of ‘sweetness and light’ virtually impossible. The working class’s limited access to education also makes them prone to emotional rather than rational responses and therefore susceptible to excess and possibly anarchy. Arnold finds each class fundamentally lacking in qualities essential for true cultural enlightenment: The ‘Barbarians’ (aristocracy) possess refinement but lack ‘light’ – the intelligence and knowledge necessary for deeper intellectual engagement; the ‘Philistines’ (bourgeoisie), despite their means, remain indifferent to cultural development and blind to beauty’s value; and the ‘Populace’ (working class), face external socioeconomic barriers that prevent access to higher intellectual and cultural development.

This diagnosis of social fragmentation is the catalyst for Arnold’s visionary conception of *the State* – a radical reimagining of a genuine nationhood that transcends mere political organisation. Culture thus emerges as the transformative mechanism for bridging these social divides and offers a path to unity through shared cultural values. With this vision, Arnold advocates for the dismantling of rigid hierarchical boundaries to promote a harmonious national consciousness that can overcome the limitations of class stratification. His ideal of a balanced state is not a political construct but a cultural organism for which intellectual and aesthetic cultivation are the fundamental principles of social cohesion.

Cultural development, then, carries attendant social obligations. Arnold identifies two major obstacles to this kind of development: the growing fascination (in both American and European societies) with ‘machinery’ – the systems and values of industrial progress – and the misidentification of freedom with unrestricted individual desire. Arnold argues that when individuals remain confined to class-based interests and ambitions rather

than pursuing broader human development, both personal and social progress stagnate. True advancement requires the transcendence of these class-driven limitations through cultural development, which facilitates both individual growth and collective harmony.

Arnold's understanding of culture's social function thus operates on multiple levels. As a harmonising force, culture mediates between competing social interests while promoting shared values across class divisions. It serves as a tool for social improvement by encouraging intellectual and moral development beyond narrow class interests. Culture also provides an alternative to mechanical progress by offering spiritual and intellectual advancement, rather than purely material, gains. As a unifying framework, culture establishes shared standards and vocabulary for social discourse. Finally, culture functions as an agent of transformation that facilitates individual development in service of collective improvement. In the conclusion to *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold adds a final quality to culture: safety. In doing so, he establishes a crucial relationship between culture, order, and human development and argues that culture serves not only individual and social evolution, but it is also essential to maintaining social order. Specifically, Arnold asserts that 'without order there can be no society; and without society there can be no human perfection'.<sup>16</sup> This relationship creates a fundamental connection between cultural development and state authority. The State, as guarantor of order and enemy of anarchy, must therefore promote culture as a means of enduring social stability. Arnold thus completes his argument with a clear logic: culture guides proper state action; the State, in turn, promotes cultural development; and this cultural development enables both individual perfection and social harmony.

## **2. From Arnold to Heaney: The Transformative Function of Culture in Heaney's Social Vision**

Despite their chronological disparities inherent in the context of their respective writings, both Arnold and Heaney espouse analogue values regarding the essential role of culture in fostering social engagement, promoting responsibility, and facilitating reconciliation.

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold, 149.

While Arnold's work is rooted in the Victorian era and focuses on the anxieties related to tensions between tradition and modernity, Heaney writes from a postcolonial context and concentrates on the complexities and the consequences of a loss of identity for certain segments of the Irish community. Both writers share a fundamental conviction that cultural engagement – manifested in Arnold's broader theory and Heaney's specific focus on poetry – enables deeper ethical reflection while offering potential resolution to questions of identity and social fragmentation. The distinction between Arnold and Heaney lies in their scope: Arnold envisions culture broadly as a path to human perfection and a remedy for materialist thinking, while Heaney examines poetry's specific role in mediating sectarian and political divisions in Northern Ireland. Though both see cultural work as transformative, Heaney grounds this transformation in poetry's capacity to bridge particular historical conflicts between Protestant, Catholic, Northern Irish and Nationalistic identities. This more targeted approach nevertheless engages what Trilling identifies as Arnold's central challenge: balancing artistic integrity with social responsibility. Both writers confront the fundamental tension between maintaining aesthetic autonomy and addressing urgent historical crises. Like Arnold, Heaney grapples with how poetry might engage with political urgency without sacrificing aesthetic autonomy. This parallel is especially apparent in Heaney's navigation of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflicts, where he faced pressure to make poetry serve political ends while striving to preserve artistic independence.

In the historical context of the Troubles, poetry became a 'third space' – a liminal realm that transcends the binary of political and communal divisions. This poetic space offers a unique form of psychological and cultural refuge in which individuals might explore inner conflicts while reconnecting with a lost sense of community. Furthermore, it provides a metaphorical ground able to foster belonging amid the instability and fragmentation wrought by war. Heaney articulates this transformative potential in his Nobel Prize lecture when he argues that poetry creates 'an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago' (*CP* 10). This order, he suggests, supports growth towards 'that which we stored up as we grew' while satisfying 'all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections'. (*CP* 10) Poetry thus creates 'a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre

and its circumference' (CP 10–11). For Heaney, poetry was an entreaty to reliability and to the truthfulness of depicting life's realities.<sup>17</sup> From his first collections, it is apparent that the Irish poet aspired for his work to be composed of tangible images and crude facts. For him, poetry was 'earnest and devoted to things as they are' (CP 13), a sentence that seems to resonate Arnold's belief that culture saw 'things as they are, natural and proper'.<sup>18</sup> In the works of both authors, culture emerges as a reliable foundation in which to place faith amid a world of uncertainty. Arnold and Heaney share a profound concern with cultural autonomy, with both insisting that artistic work must maintain its essential independence from external demands. For Heaney, this theoretical position faced particular challenges in the context of Northern Ireland's political crisis. In a 1988 interview, Heaney articulated this complex dynamic. While rejecting the notion that writing belongs to the community and insisting on poetry's independence, Heaney acknowledged that in Northern Ireland's political context, poetry inevitably engages with collective experience. This creates what Heaney sees as poetry's dual nature: It exists as autonomous artistic creation while simultaneously participating in the life of the tribe. This understanding of poetry's dual nature as both a receptive and creative force aligns with Arnold's vision of culture's transformative potential. While Arnold envisioned culture as a vehicle for transcending material desires and bridging social divisions, Heaney similarly understood poetry as a unifying force that offered an antidote to the pervasive divisions and fragmentation within Ireland. Like Arnold, he saw cultural work as a means of transcending immediate social boundaries, whether of class, identity, religion, or politics, yet Heaney maintained a nuanced stance that rejected simplistic political instrumentalisation of art. This delicate balance is captured in his generative work *The Government of the Tongue* in which he asserts:

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<sup>17</sup> In correspondence with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney articulates a fundamental belief about poetry's capacity: "There's such a thing as truth and it can be told." (Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2009), 467. This assertion reveals his conviction in poetry's ability to articulate genuine insight despite the complexities of representation.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, 34.

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.<sup>19</sup>

In this statements, Heaney insists on poetry's fundamental autonomy, despite his deep engagement with the social and political context of Northern Ireland.

The discussion of art's role in fostering personal and social change necessarily prompts a reflection on the artist's societal function as well. Arnold and Heaney approach the artist's responsibility from distinct yet intersecting perspectives that nevertheless intersect, each of which explores the complex relationship between artistic expression and social context. While Arnold explicitly advocates that the critic to serves as a guide, as a substitute for traditional religious authority, Heaney's stance is more complex. For the latter, culture is often fragmented, a reflection of the social and historical situation afflicting Ireland. His work, in fact, rooted in local traditions and in the physical landscape, both of which play a fundamental role in the shaping of Irish cultural identity. In the early stages of his writing career, Heaney resisted directly addressing or engaging with political matters and emphasised both poetry's autonomy and its need to remain detached from social demands; however, through the use of symbolism and myth, Heaney ultimately found a way to navigate both personal and social issues, functioning as a mediator between inner personal struggles and social necessities. He frequently bridged these themes through his deep connection to place, which allowed him to engage subtly with the political while maintaining the integrity of his poetic expression. Even in his earliest prose writings, he personified himself as the water diviner (or land diviner), blessed with the ability to access that which could not be seen, that which lay beneath the surface. The deep waters to which the land diviner claims access to represented Heaney's poetic inspiration, the voices – unheard by many – that he could hear to and transform into poetry, serving as a bridge 'between the latent resource and the community' (*PP* 47). In *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney remarks that the poet possesses a special ability to uncover unexpected connections between human nature and external reality. This

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<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, (Faber and Faber Limited, 1989), 101.

understanding aligns with his broader vision of the poet as mediator – one who reveals hidden relationships between internal consciousness and the external world.

Both intellectuals view culture as a means of navigating complex and evolving historical circumstances, and both position it as an antidote to the pressures of history. While Arnold often adopts the more didactic tone of a moral guide, Heaney's approach is more introspective and personal, reflecting his own contradictions and vulnerabilities, which resonate with the shared struggles of the Irish community. Despite their distinct historical contexts, the two authors reach similar conclusions about culture's dual nature: Its essential autonomy must be preserved precisely because such autonomy facilitates its broader social impact. While maintaining that cultural work must resist reduction to mere social utility, both writers recognise the ways in which artistic integrity permit culture's transformative potential. Their understanding of this paradox – that social power derives from its ability to maintain aesthetic independence – continues to offer insight into questions of cultural work's relationship to social change. This insight finds significant development in the twentieth century through John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, which extends and transforms this understanding of how art maintains social efficiency precisely by preserving the aesthetic autonomy intrinsic to a work of art.

### **3. Art, Experience and Learning: The Educational Function of Aesthetic Engagement in John Dewey's *Art as Experience***

John Dewey occupies a pivotal position in the development of American pragmatism, reconceptualising the philosophical foundations established by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. While maintaining pragmatism's emphasis on practical consequences, Dewey transforms this methodology through sustained engagement with questions of social experience. In *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), Richard Rorty offers a crucial epistemological insight in Dewey's work: 'that the only intuition we have of the world as determining truth is just the intuition that we must make our new beliefs conform to a vast body of platitudes, unquestioned perceptual reports, and the like'.<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 13–14.

assessment captures Dewey's distinctive contribution to pragmatic philosophy: the rejection of both foundationalist epistemology and purely relativistic approaches to truth. Instead, Dewey develops a sophisticated understanding of how knowledge emerges through active engagement with accumulated human experience. This epistemological position fundamentally shapes Dewey's broader philosophical project. Rather than seeking unchanging truth or accepting complete relativism, he shows how we can achieve reliable knowledge through systematic engagement with experience. This reconceptualisation helps explain his enduring influence on contemporary pragmatism and philosophical naturalism.

In his 1992 essay, 'The Development of American Pragmatism', Dewey traces pragmatism's philosophical lineage from Immanuel Kant to Peirce's work. He demonstrates how Peirce initially conceived pragmatism as a method for establishing conceptual universality within experienced domains and determining meaning through practical consequences to help achieve clarity of thought.<sup>21</sup> Peirce's background in mathematics influenced his initial focus on scientific methodology and operational consequences, which restricted his approach to achieving clarity in scientific thinking. Subsequent pragmatists, particularly William James, expanded their principles to broader philosophical questions about truth and meaning across multiple domains of human experience, instead of circumscribing said experience to scientific enquiry. Dewey writes that James wished 'to establish a criterion which would enable one to determine whether a given philosophical question has an authentic and vital meaning or whether, on the contrary, it is trivial and purely verbal'.<sup>22</sup> Dewey concludes his analysis of pragmatism's origins by drawing a crucial distinction between his predecessors: 'Peirce wrote as a logician and James as a humanist'.<sup>23</sup> This observation illuminates pragmatism's evolution from Peirce's focus on logical methodology through James's exploration of individual psychology to Dewey's own synthesis. While Peirce sought to establish universal methods for clear thinking and James investigated pragmatism's implications for personal experience, Dewey developed a more comprehensive theory about how intelligence

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<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, 'The Development of American Pragmatism', in *Philosophy and Civilization*, (Minton, Balch & Company, 1931), 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

actively shapes future possibilities. His distinctive input positions pragmatism as a philosophy grounded in consequences rather than abstract principles. He characterises pragmatism as ‘an extension of historical empiricism’, but one that differs fundamentally from traditional empiricism by emphasising ‘consequent phenomena’ rather than ‘antecedent phenomena’, focusing on ‘the possibilities of action’ rather than mere precedents.<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on future possibilities rather than past precedents, and on experience’s role in shaping collective life – distinguishes Dewey’s pragmatism from traditional empiricism despite its foundation in earlier pragmatist insights.

Dewey’s intellectual contribution spans multiple philosophical domains, and his influence extends from democratic theory through social philosophy to educational and aesthetic theory. His conception of experience, initially formulated in his educational writings,<sup>25</sup> achieves particular significance in his aesthetic philosophy and provides an essential theoretical foundation for understanding his mature work on art and aesthetic experience – work that proves especially relevant to the present investigation. In his educational philosophy, Dewey develops a sophisticated theory of experiential learning that transcends simple empiricism. Rather than merely advocating ‘learning by doing’, he conceptualises education as dynamic interaction between learner and environment, emphasising the qualitative transformation of experience through reflective engagement. This approach challenges models of abstract curricula in favour of embodied, contextual learning.

Dewey’s position on education – that learning occurs through active engagement with the environment rather than through passive reception – extends naturally to his theory of aesthetic experience. Just as he saw education as emerging from direct interaction with real situations, he understood artistic experience as grounded in active engagement rather than passive contemplation. This parallel between educational and aesthetic theory demonstrates Dewey’s broader philosophical achievement: the development of a comprehensive theory of experience that transcends traditional dichotomies between active and passive, past and present, theory and practice. Through

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Dewey’s major works on educational philosophy are the following: *The School and Society* (1899), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *How We Think* (1910), *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938).

this theoretical framework, Dewey creates new possibilities for understanding how human beings actively construct meaning through engagement with both historical inheritance and the present circumstance. In the Preface to *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey distances his views from previous theories of education by critiquing the tendency to return to past models rather than progress towards new ways of thinking:

[E]very movement in the direction of a new order of ideas and of activities directed by them, calls out, sooner or later, a return to what appear to be simpler and more fundamental ideas and practices of the past – as is exemplified at present in education in the attempt to revive the principles of ancient Greece and of the middle ages.<sup>26</sup>

Dewey's observation about conservative reactions to progress highlights his distinctive break from Arnold's classical orientation. Whereas Arnold develops his cultural theory through engagement with classical tradition, Dewey argues against such retrospective solutions. He sees the impulse to return to historical models – whether Greek or medieval – as potential obstacle to genuine reform and emphasises, instead, the need to address present challenges through forward-looking approaches rather than risking control from past paradigms.

This progressive pedagogical theory provides a crucial context for understanding Dewey's later work. *Art as Experience* (1935) represents the culmination of his philosophical development and an extension of earlier investigations. This mature work synthesises decades of pragmatist thinking while extending its principles to aesthetic experience and examining how art creates possibilities for new forms of individual and social interaction. Like Arnold before him, Dewey emphasises art's social significance and practical function, although their approaches differ significantly. While Arnold develops a theory of culture as a means of social improvement through criticism and education, Dewey grounds his understanding of art in immediate lived experience and its potential for transforming human consciousness. Dewey's educational theory, like Arnold's cultural criticism, recognises education's transformative social potential. However, where Arnold emphasises cultural transmission, Dewey envisions education as an instrument of democratic renewal. His theory posits learning as an inherently social

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<sup>26</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (The Macmillan Company, 1953), vi.

process, one that develops the capacities of cooperative enquiry and rational deliberation essential to democratic life. This understanding reconceptualises education not as individual achievement but as collaborative engagement in shared experience – a view that reimagines the relationship between individual development and social transformation. For Arnold, culture serves as a corrective to social fragmentation through the cultivation of ‘sweetness and light’. Dewey, however, sees art not as a form of elevated cultural achievement but as ordinary experience redefined. Both thinkers recognise art’s transformative potential, but where Arnold emphasises cultural transmission of ‘the best that has been thought and said’, Dewey focuses on how aesthetic experience emerges from and enhances everyday life.

From the opening pages of *Art as Experience*, Dewey emphasises art’s fundamental vitality. Although art objects themselves may be inanimate, they remain inextricably bound to human experience and create living consequences in the lives of those who encounter them. The art object is then studied with an emphasis on its practical function, in terms of its interaction with the environment. In the first chapter of his book, Dewey uses a very evocative metaphor to underline the inextricable bond between art and everyday experiences ‘Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations’.<sup>27</sup> Here, Dewey not only articulates the fundamental aspect of artistic experience – its relationship to the ordinary – but also uses this geographical metaphor to underscore how art represents an intensified form of everyday experience. In the same way that mountains serve as a heightened manifestation of natural capacity, art represents a dramatic manifestation of ordinary experience. With this statement, Dewey also challenges traditional aesthetic experience which tended to separate ‘fine art’ from everyday engagement. By contrast, Dewey believes that art fundamentally originates from everyday events and represents a continuum of it rather than a separation.

Consistent with his broader philosophical approach, Dewey’s aesthetic theory grounds artistic experience in practical reality and social function. While acknowledging art’s essential creative freedom, he argues against separating aesthetic experience from its

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<sup>27</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

social context. Art, in Dewey's view, exists in a continuous cycle of experience: emerging from the artist's lived experience and culminates in the audience's experiential encounter with the finished work. *Art as Experience*, Dewey traces this complete trajectory of aesthetic development: from art's origins in ordinary experience, through its transformation into formal expression, to its ultimate social function. In doing so, Dewey examines how artistic creation moves from initial inspiration from practical necessity through various stages of transformation to become both an aesthetic object and an instrument of social experience.

#### **4. The Perception of Aesthetic Experience. Subject–Object Dialectics in Art's Perception**

Dewey opens *Art as Experience* by establishing a principle reminiscent of Wordsworth's poetic vision articulated in the *Lyrical Ballads*: the fundamental interconnection between art and everyday life.

(The poet) considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become of the nature of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding every where objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.<sup>28</sup>

This passage not only illuminates Dewey and Heaney's profound engagement with quotidian objects as subjects of aesthetic enquiry but articulates the dialectical relationship between external phenomena and subjective experience. The text underscores the intricate, reciprocal interaction between objects and perceivers – the objects and man 'acting and re-acting upon each other' – and emphasises how everyday encounters generate complex emotional and intellectual responses that transcend mere passive observation. Dewey challenges the traditional elevation of art into a sphere of pure

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<sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, (Methuen & Co., 1789), 258.

abstraction and argues that such separation misunderstands art's essential relationship to ordinary experience. His task is 'to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience'.<sup>29</sup> This understanding of art's relationship to ordinary experience illuminates Heaney's early poetic practice. His engagement with the raw materials of rural Irish life – the so-called field work – demonstrates how careful attention to ordinary experience can yield extraordinary insight, as daily observations become vehicles for deeper contemplation.

Beyond their shared fascination with natural landscapes, Wordsworth's philosophical and poetic legacy also reverberates profoundly through Heaney's artistic vision as well. Heaney conceptualises poetry as a practice of heightened attentiveness, a mode of perception that illuminates the overlooked events of quotidian existence. This approach aligns intimately with Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, which posits the experience of art as a dialectical mode of engagement – simultaneously rooted in the mundane and yet capable of transcending its immediate material constraints. Through these lenses, Heaney's poetic project emerges as a complex enterprise that transforms the seemingly banal into a site of philosophical and aesthetic revelation. *Death of a Naturalist* epitomises Heaney's early understanding of how direct experience shapes poetic perception. Through its engagement with the physical and sensory realities of rural Ireland, the collection evidences how immediate experience can illuminate broader historical and cultural understanding. The work resonates with Dewey's pragmatic aesthetic philosophy and echoes Wordsworth's conception of poetry as a form of cultural expression that is accessible to everyone. While Dewey conceptualises art as a transformative social mechanism capable of catalysing collective agency, Heaney perceives poetry as a contemplative medium that offers existential solace and meditative refuge. Both perspectives underscore the profound potential of artistic expression to bridge individual experience with collective consciousness, thereby rendering the local universal and the particular emblematic.

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<sup>29</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

Dewey's lectures on aesthetics demonstrate how artistic creation remains inseparable from lived experience while examining art's potential for social transformation. In the fourth chapter of *Art as Experience*, 'The Act of Expression', Dewey presents a detailed analysis of artistic creation. Of the four principles he derives from Samuel Alexander's work, two are especially relevant to an understanding of poetic creation. Alexander's assertion that '[t]he real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies' is central to understanding how artistic expression emerges from environmental engagement.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, this concept becomes relevant to understand Heaney's engagement with Ireland – its landscape, history, and cultural memory – which he initially experiences mainly through the senses, creating precisely the kind of 'integral experience' Alexander writes about. When Heaney describes his 'primitive delight in finding world become word' (*GT* 8), he captures exactly what Dewey means by the pressure of 'objective things upon the natural impulses and tendencies'.<sup>31</sup> Both thinkers recognise how poetry originates in emotional response to material reality and then transforms that response into new aesthetic experience through poetic creation.

As a form of mediation between immediate experience and artistic expression, poetic creation is a process that occurs in stages. Dewey again draws on Wordsworth's concept of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' to explain how this transformation occurs. Raw emotion must be tempered by reflection, as 'excessive emotion obstructs the necessary elaboration and definition of parts' and 'a person overwhelmed by emotion is thereby incapacitated to expressing it'.<sup>32</sup> Heaney's early work, particularly *Death of a Naturalist*, exemplifies this process of emotional recollection and transformation. Drawing on rural Irish experience, he transforms childhood emotions into mature poetic reflection. The poem 'Personal Helicon' epitomises this method of retrospective interpretation, where memories of boyhood are reexamined through the lens of maturity. The well emerges as the central metaphor for this process of poetic inspiration and symbolises preservation, memory, revelation, and personal metamorphosis. Like the land

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

diviner ‘making contact with what lies hidden’ (*PP* 48), the poet draws from deep sources both ‘hidden and real’. This image connects Dewey’s idea of emotional transformation with Heaney’s conception of poetic practice. Dewey’s study of artistic birth perfectly echoes Heaney’s examples of mixing past experience from childhood with their present-day rekindling: ‘the act is expressive only as there is in it a union of something stored from past experience, [ . . . ] with present conditions’.<sup>33</sup> Dewey argues that individuals internalise the values and meanings of past experiences to varying degrees and at different levels of consciousness. He observes that while some experiences become deeply embedded, others remain superficial and easily displaced.

Heaney’s reflections on his writing process reveal the interplay between material practice and creative inspiration. In conversation with Dennis O’Driscoll, he emphasises the physical dimension of poetic creation: ‘a sheet and a good pen still give me a sensation of being ready and able. [...] When you are bent to a desk with a pen in your hand, you feel a bit of gathered force’.<sup>34</sup> Heaney acknowledged this emphasis on practical routine with his recognition of inspiration’s unpredictable nature and acknowledges that the poet must remain receptive to creative impulses that arrive without warning. He finds particular significance in the traditional poetic invocation of the Muses as external forces, seeing in this practice the recognition of how deeply buried experience shapes both the present self and artistic expression. In *Preoccupations*, he writes that there is a second element to ‘a poet’s music, derived not from the literate parts of his mind but from its illiterate parts’ (*PP* 62). In the same way, Dewey, rather than accepting theories of repression or forgetting, argues that experiences become compartmentalised within consciousness, awaiting reactivation through present circumstances. When current events awaken these dormant experiences, they create an impulse towards artistic expression. This understanding of how past experience becomes integrated and re-emerge through artistic expression resonates with Arnold’s vision of human perfection through the unity of being. Dewey and Arnold converge on a profound discernment of completeness through integration – Dewey via the artistic synthesis of past and present experience, Arnold through the harmonious cultivation of human capacities. Heaney extends this

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 468.

philosophical trajectory by positioning society as a critical intermediary between external reality and inner laws that functions simultaneously as an existential statement and transformative medium.

Having established how emotions are transformed into artistic material, we must consider how this material finds an appropriate poetic form. Heaney explores this crucial aspect of artistic creation in *The Government of the Tongue*. In the homonymous essay, Heaney speaks of many aspects relative to the act of writing: inspiration, translation into words, reception, and audience. As Heaney writes:

Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms; art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it. (*GT* 94)

This conception challenges Platonic notions of art as the mere imitation of a higher reality. Rather than positioning art as a derivative reflection of divine or ideal forms, Heaney reconceptualises creativity as active rehearsal or preparation – a way to discover truth through earthly means. The distinction between ‘tracing’ and ‘improvising’ is particularly significant: Art is not a passive reproduction of a pre-existing ideal pattern but an active dialectic of understanding where the poem, the poet, and the reader are operating participants. Through Osip Mandel’shtam’s reading of Dante, Heaney illuminates this paradigm. The *terza rima*<sup>35</sup> emerges not from external constraint but from internal necessity, embodying poetic form as an organic, almost natural unfolding: ‘The poem is not governed by external conventions and impositions but follows the laws of its own need. Its composition had all the spontaneity of a chain reaction, of an event in nature’ (*GT* 94). Yet this vision of spontaneity is immediately tempered by disciplinary self-awareness – the imperative ‘Govern your tongue’ – thereby suggesting that artistic freedom is dialectically related to formal constraint.

Dewey’s theoretical analysis reveals the intricate contention between internal experience and external materialisation. As an artist translates concept into medium – whether this is a painter placing pigment or a writer composing words – cognitive and

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<sup>35</sup> Terza rima is the rhyme scheme Dante used in the *Divine Comedy*, consisting of three-line stanzas written in hendecasyllables. It is particularly demanding because of the technical skill required to maintain musical flow across its interlocking pattern (ABA-BCB-CDC-DED).

emotional states simultaneously undergo metamorphoses. This process is not a mere representation but a dynamic reconfiguration in which form and feeling reciprocally shape each other. For Dewey, the artistic act transcends instrumental organisation. When one orders a room, the transformation becomes meaningful not through mechanical rearrangement but through the emotional resonance of the act; in other words, where external reordering reflects and facilitates an internal emotional recalibration. The space becomes a material testament to an interior landscape and embodies the aesthetic as a profound act of self-understanding and emotional fulfilment.<sup>36</sup> In a later chapter, 'Substance and Form', Dewey underlines this contention between internal experience and external materialisation by brilliantly synthesising the concept by writing that form is 'a way of envisaging, of feeling, and of presenting experienced matter so that it most readily and effectively becomes material for the construction of adequate experience'.<sup>37</sup> This concept extends beyond individual creation, which suggests that artistic forms serve as a communicative bridge that transform personal experiences into a shared interpretive landscape.

In the creation of an object of art and its subsequent reception, the artist plays a crucial mediating role. The artist's challenge is to find the most appropriate tools for transposing intangible, invisible inner stirrings into objective, perceptible forms with which readers resonate. The mediation transforms the amorphous realm of nascent and still formless feeling into a communicable, structured expression, thereby bridging the gap between internal experience and external representation. Heaney's understanding of the poet's position reflects the complex mediation between private art and public function. Drawing on Elizabeth Bishop, he describes the poet as 'an antenna capturing the voices of the world, [. . .] expressing his own subconscious and the collective subconscious' (*GT* 107). In this metaphor, the poet is simultaneously a cultural possession of the tribe and an independent artistic voice. In a 1996 interview, Heaney further developed this concept, describing the poet's delicate position between what he terms the 'itness' of the poem – its essential artistic integrity – and the multiplicity of lived experience. This vision recalls the Romantic portrayals of the poet as mediator or prophet, while adapting it to

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<sup>36</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–114.

contemporary conditions: The poet functions both as receptor of the world's voices and translator of collective experience into artistic form. Specifically, Heaney writes that '[t]he poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit' (*GT* 93), an understanding of poetic creation that he develops further in his 1978 lecture 'The Makings of a Music', in which he characterises the poet's essential perceptual mode as an 'alertness', a 'harkening' or a 'readiness', suggesting that the poet operates as a 'somnambulist' attuned to poetic 'invitations' (*PP* 63).

Heaney identifies two phases in poetic composition: the external, which engages with the world's sensory reality, and the internal, which operates at a pre-verbal level. This resulting poetic 'music' represents what he terms 'the mind's internal echo' (*PP* 63) – a shadow of an 'unheard melody' that emerges from this dual process of reception and creation. Dewey extends this understanding to a broader theory of human consciousness when he argues that 'the distinguishing contribution of man is consciousness of the relations found in nature'.<sup>38</sup> While Dewey sees this awareness as a universal human capacity, the poet – and the artist generally – possesses a particular sensitivity to these relationships and functions as a specialised 'antenna' for their reception and transformation. Thus, Dewey's aesthetic theory and Heaney's poetic practice converge in their understanding of artistic creation as the transformation of consciousness into expression. While Dewey sees art as a fundamental human necessity, Heaney demonstrates how poetic sensitivity enables deeper perceptions of the relationships between natural, historical, mythical, and human realms. The poet's distinctive gift lies not only in recognising these hidden connections but also in finding artistic forms that makes them manifest to others: 'Expression as personal act and as objective result are organically connected with each other'.<sup>39</sup>

In 'The Government of the Tongue', Heaney also examines the transformation of artistic intuition into poetic expression and its ultimate reception by readers. Poetry, he argues, requires the patience for 'a music to occur, an image to discover itself' (*GT* 92). At its core, poetry emerges from and creates *feeling*, therefore, its power lies in its

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

emotional impact on readers rather than its response to external demands. Heaney grounds his defence of poetry's independence in this understanding and privileges artistic integrity over political utility, but, again, in 'The Government of the Tongue' he explores the fundamental tension between artistic integrity and social responsibility. Specifically, Heaney examines how poetry navigates between creative independence and necessary constraints and between artistic autonomy and social engagement. Through an analysis of various poets – Zbigniew Herbert, Anna Swir, W. B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bishop, and T. S. Eliot – Heaney reveals how different writers maintained allegiance to poetry despite historical pressures. Osip Mandel'shtam's refusal to compromise artistic truth under Stalin's regime, Czesław Miłosz's resistance to totalitarian pressure through poetic excellence, and Zbigniew Herbert's sophisticated strategies for indirect political critique provide models for poetry's capacity to maintain artistic integrity while engaging social reality. Learning from how each poet balanced artistic independence with social responsibility, Heaney synthesised these various approaches in developing his own poetic practice.

### **5. Articulating Resistance: Heaney's Poetic Mediation of Cultural and Political Identities**

Within Ireland's socio-political context, Heaney occupies a clear position as an exemplary for addressing the artistic challenges of filling the role of translator of unheard voices, burdened with the responsibility of mediating between personal sentiment and historical circumstances. Among his contemporaries, especially Patrick Kavanagh and Paul Muldoon, Heaney distinguishes himself through a nuanced hermeneutic approach that renders universal sentiments with remarkable linguistic accessibility. His poetic methodology engages with a complex interpretive framework that strategically includes personal narrative, metaphor and symbolism, linguistic technique, and historical distance. Despite *Death of a Naturalist* being considered one of Heaney's less politically involved collections, it is probably the work most concerned with personal emotions and memories. Heaney describes 'Digging', for example, as 'the first poem where I thought my feelings had got into words, [. . .] where I thought my *feel* had got into words' (*PP* 41). Nevertheless, the poem contains the nascent seeds of his future thematic explorations.

As an Irish Catholic poet, Heaney's engagement with Ireland's political landscape, as a fundamental substrate of his poetic consciousness, transcends mere biographical circumstances. What might be perceived as an automatic response is rather an intentionally crafted expression regarding the Troubles. Early poems, such as 'At a Potato Digging', are not merely pastoral descriptions, but texts that excavate deeper historical and cultural meanings and which seem to anticipate future mythological explorations. 'At a Potato Digging', for example, transforms the act of harvesting into a nuanced reflection on historical memory, colonial dispossession, and collective suffering. The potato – a symbol already deeply embedded into Irish consciousness – serves as a repository of cultural memory that echoes the Great Famine<sup>40</sup> and the ongoing struggles of Irish agrarian life. The 'processional stooping' to gather potatoes for 'the famine god' (*DN* 18) seems to foreshadow the ritualistic gestures to the ancient goddess Nerthus of *North*, while the reference to 'live skulls, blind-eyed' (*DN* 19) creates a direct intertextual bridge to the bog bodies central to Heaney's fourth collection.

The escalating socio-political tensions in Northern Ireland catalysed a turning point in Heaney's poetic discourse, propelling him from a tentative engagement with political themes to a more explicit and deliberate critical stance. In particular, the Belfast riots in the summer of 1969 appear to have been a watershed moment in his decision to take a stance in the political events. In *Preoccupations*, Heaney's essay 'Feeling into words', articulates a pivotal shift from formalist concerns – the 'satisfactory verbal icon' – to a more urgent aesthetic and ethical imperative. He writes:

I mean that I felt the imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. (*PP* 56–57)

The metamorphosis and integration of the innate freedom of poetry with political engagement are not merely rhetorical but deeply structural. The emergence of the bog landscape in Heaney's subsequent collections is more than a metaphorical device: it is a

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<sup>40</sup> The Great Famine refers to the period of mass starvation in Ireland from 1845 to 1852, triggered by potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) that destroyed the primary food source for much of the population, forcing the emigration of millions of Irish people.

profound archaeological site of memory, violence, and cultural negotiation. By grounding his poetic exploration in this liminal topography – at once historical archive and mythic terrain – Heaney develops a sophisticated linguistic strategy for processing collective violence. It is in this same essay that Heaney invokes the mythic ‘numen’ of Ireland and the allegorical representation of the island, Kathleen Ni Houlihan. The allegory, in which Ireland is traditionally depicted as a dispossessed woman violated by male colonial forces, is strategically reimagined to resonate with contemporary political struggles. Heaney not only draws from history and folklore, but also adapts myth in order to interrogate the mechanisms of historical oppression, gender dynamics and the ongoing negotiation of Irish cultural and political sovereignty. The position Heaney decides to take is directly apparent in his collections.

### **III. Topographical Poetics: The Phenomenology of Space and Place and the Location of Identity**

*To be is to be in place.*

—Edward Casey

As evidenced in the previous chapter, Matthew Arnold's social theory and John Dewey's philosophical analysis, both of which concern the development and social importance of artistic experience, illuminate the dual nature of Seamus Heaney's poetry and clarify the processes through which his artistic inspiration found translation into creative expression. Accordingly, this chapter examines the intersection of art and territory by exploring the phenomenology of place and its role in shaping poetic and political identity, with a particular focus on Heaney's insular consciousness and spatial imagination. Through the work of key scholars in theoretical and critical approaches in cultural geography, including Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttner, Edward Casey and Angelo Turco, the chapter highlights how spatial experience becomes constructive of individual and collective self-understanding. These theories are then placed in dialogue with the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, which supports an analysis of the island – Ireland – not merely as a geomorphological entity but as a symbolic and psychological metaphor for alterity, convergence and containment. From this conversation, Ireland emerges as a spatially limited and culturally heterotopic entity suspended between colonial imposition and national reimagining. By connecting the materiality of place to the construction of insular identity, the chapter ultimately establishes a conceptual foundation for interpreting Heaney's poetic as a form of spatial practice in which he continuously negotiates rootedness, resistance and renewal.

#### **1. Cultural Geography and the Spatial Turn: Reframing Space Through Human Experience and Challenging Positivism from the 1970s to the 1990s**

While the metaphorisation of place demands interdisciplinary integration across social psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies, I confine my analysis to the humanistic/cultural geography framework, which is best suited to contextualising Heaney's fusion of culture-bound symbols and their relative metaphorical meanings into a defined conceptual paradigm. This chapter therefore examines key theories and

foundational theoretical texts in humanistic geography to establish the analytical framework that informs Chapter IV's exploration of how Heaney's work translated Irish territory into universal terms during the sociopolitical upheavals of the late twentieth century. In both his poetry and prose works, Heaney demonstrates how place perception and experience are inextricably bound to one's sociocultural contexts, with an emphasis on how landscape itself becomes constitutive of worldview formation.

A thorough analysis of the development of spatial theory is an enormous endeavour and would go beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, to understand the integral position of the environment as a central element in Heaney's poetry, it is critical to examine theoretical developments in humanistic geography and the relative determination of space and place as concepts. While spatial theory has deep roots in classical texts – from Aristotle to Descartes, through Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Kant – the present analysis focuses on Western theoretical developments in spatial studies from the mid-twentieth century onward.

The emergence of an academic discipline that incorporated the study of culture into the field of geography appeared formally in the 1970s and 1980s. At this time, the evolution of cultural geography marked a shift towards incorporating emotional and experiential dimensions into geographical analysis in a way that emphasised the importance of human experience in the relationships between people and geographical environments. The social transformations of the 1960s catalysed academia's receptivity to alternative approaches in environmental and spatial studies, which produced a new generation of geographers who revolutionised the theoretical paradigms governing human–environment relationships in line with the spatial turn. David Harvey stands out among the key theorists who have established space as a fundamental category of social analysis. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), Harvey's analysis of time–space compression made pivotal contributions to the spatial turn. Specifically, he demonstrated how technological advances in transportation and communication had dramatically accelerated the pace of life while reducing spatial barriers and creating unprecedented global interconnectedness. At the same time, Harvey acknowledges the ways in which these modernist tendencies towards acceleration simultaneously produce fragmentation and disorientation, thereby destabilising previously coherent spatial perceptions.

Within the academy, environmental awareness grew alongside rising societal concerns about ecological preservation. Specifically, the positivist spatial science that dominated the 1950s and 1960s, with its emphasis on quantitative and empirical methods, left a significant gap in knowledge about the human dimension of space and place. Many geographers argued that this reductionist approach inadequately captured the complexity of human–environment interactions and called for the redefinition of sociocultural dynamics according to different kinds of spatial theories.<sup>1</sup>

This discontent with the constraints of conventional spatial theory, along with social change, sparked new theoretical approaches, which proved groundbreaking despite the initial prejudice against them. These new methodologies included feminist geography, postcolonial studies (more specifically concerned with social geography) and those based on perspectives informed by civil rights movements, all of which questioned dominant spatial analysis models. By emphasising how rooted communities support social cohesion and human flourishing, these new methodologies have made significant contributions to the field.

This shift towards incorporating studies of space into existing academic disciplines – called the ‘spatial turn’ – sought to enrich spatial theory by incorporating the lived experience of communities and their attachments to place. In this way, geographers turned to humanistic principles as a means of centering human experience within their research and reconciling social sciences and human experience to better understand humanity’s place in the world. While humanistic geography focuses on affective and relational engagement with territory, cultural geography investigates how societies develop environmental knowledge systems. The first approach emphasises individual emotional connection to place; the second examines how communities create worldviews through the interaction between natural features and human practices. Humanistic geography builds on cultural geography by showing how the emotions tied to a place shape art,

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<sup>1</sup> The principal critiques of spatial positivism targeted its abstract and statistical approach to defining human experience, its mechanistic conceptualisation of human behaviour, the problematic detachment between researcher and subject predicated upon extreme objectivity and the methodological constraints inherent in confining the expansive spectrum of human emotions within predetermined taxonomic categories. The new discipline advocated for the retention of scientific frameworks as the foundation upon which to construct the relationship between humans and place, while eschewing the rigid constraints demanded by orthodox scientific methodology.

thought and religion. While humanistic geography focuses on primary spatial relationships, cultural geography analyses how these evolve into broader cultural responses within power structures. These two theoretical perspectives gradually merged and are now often considered the same, with *cultural geography* being the term predominantly used in the United States.

Attention to inequality is key to understanding Heaney's relationship with the land (most evidently in *Death of a Naturalist*) and with place, especially during the Troubles. As Timothy Oakes and Patricia L. Price observe, hegemonic structures of 'discrimination, exploitation, and patriarchy' fundamentally constitute our epistemological frameworks and consequently mediate our environmental engagement.<sup>1</sup> The colonial context is particularly important when attempting to determine how power structures create and maintain marginalised groups – especially considering how culture and politics are intertwined. Cultural geography therefore provides an analytical framework that is both crucial and appropriate for understanding Heaney's spatial consciousness as an Ulster citizen during the Troubles that plagued Northern Ireland in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The 1970s produced foundational works that informed later developments in spatial theory, as intellectuals from different fields generated theories that supported more interpretive and humanistic approaches in geographical studies.<sup>2</sup> Following the critiques of positivist spatial science, the spatial turn spilled over from geography and influenced the adoption of space and spatial studies as a serious concept and subfield, respectively, in various disciplines. Rather than discarding quantitative methods altogether, humanistic geography integrates additional scientific methods, such as textual and visual analysis, qualitative interviewing and participant observation, to explore and articulate human experience. As David Ley writes, '[t]his literature, though experimental, is significant in that it has attempted to provide a credible philosophical underpinning to humanistic work

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Oakes and Patricia L. Price, *The Cultural Geography Reader* (London and New York, 2008), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Among the most notable scholars are Henry Lefebvre, Gilles Deleuze, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault. Lefebvre's *La production de l'espace* (1975) introduced the revolutionary concept that space is produced rather than pre-given. Foucault developed spatial theory in a different direction through his concept of 'heterotopia' in his 1967 lecture, 'Of Other Spaces' (*Diacritics* 16, no. 1 [Spring 1986], 22–27) and his analysis of power relations in *The History of Sexuality* (1984).

which would match the positivist foundation of spatial analysis'.<sup>3</sup> Buttimer explains the rejection of Newtonian theories in the Romantic period: '[s]candalous, it seemed, to impose a "scientific" grid on Nature – to reduce beauty, melody, and fragrance to the sterile metric of mathematics and physics'.<sup>4</sup> This approach bridges empirical rigour and subjective insight by using scientific paradigms as a critical lens through which to understand more dynamic and experience-based interactions with space.<sup>5</sup>

Henri Lefebvre reconceptualised the understanding of space by transcending its geometrical aspects. In *La Production de l'Espace*, he proposes a complex trichotomy that encompasses three ways in which space is created: the social space of lived practices, the physical space of sensory phenomena and the mental space of symbols and utopias. This logico-epistemological framework comprises three interconnected spatial modalities: perceived space (physical space as experienced directly), conceived space (representations of space as imagined by experts and scientists) and lived space (representational space as experienced by the inhabitants of that space). Lefebvre conceptualises space as an irreducibly social product and rejects notions of space as a neutral or naturally determined phenomenon. He argues that space is produced actively through social relations and cannot be understood as a creation of nature that lacks the cognitive capacity for such generative processes: '[A] flower does not know that it is a flower any more than death knows upon whom it is visited'.<sup>6</sup>

Lefebvre's distinction between human and nonhuman intentionality finds further elaboration in Tuan's exploration of humanistic geography. Specifically, Tuan emphasises the uniqueness of our species in terms of the human capacity 'to reflect upon [our] acts

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<sup>3</sup> David Ley, 'Cultural/Humanistic Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 5, no. 2 (1981), 51.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Buttimer and David Seamon, *The Human Experience of Space and Place* (St. Martin's Press, 1980), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan lists the material usually overlooked by the scientist, of which the human geographer is, instead, interested into 'the nature and range of human experience and thought, the quality and intensity of an emotion, the ambivalence and ambiguity of values and attitudes, the nature and power of the symbol, and the character of human events, intentions and aspirations'. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66, no. 2 (January 1976), 274.

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 70. Lefebvre's discourse resonates with Dewey's conception of artistic intentionality by examining the unconscious process of urban formation. Like the rose's unselfconscious growth, city creation emerges without the deliberate intentionality typically associated with an 'art object', thereby suggesting a deeper, more organic mode of collective spatial production. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 74.

and to evaluate them critically'.<sup>7</sup> The concept has evolved as scholars have attempted to categorise human actions to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be human in relation to the environment and communities. Humanistic geography aims to create a more inclusive, nuanced view of the human spatial experience by prioritising subjective interpretation and critical reflection over purely objective measurement. By focusing on human agency and consciousness, this approach acknowledges the complex interpretative dimensions of how humans interact with and understand their spatial environments, thereby distinguishing human engagement from that of other species. As Tuan notes, humanistic geographers 'specifically tr[y] to understand how geographical activities and phenomena reveal the quality of human awareness'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, scholars examine these anthropic qualities in relation to place-making, space creation and the construction of communal belonging to specific territories. In doing so, they reveal how human nature both shapes and is shaped by geographical context and territorial configurations.

The groundbreaking works of Tuan and Buttimer are among the first empirical examples of humanistic geography and serve as foundational texts in the field.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, their research represented an initiation to new ways of experiencing place and proposed alternative paradigms that transcended conventional philosophical conceptualisations of geographical thought towards a phenomenological experience of place. Buttimer and Seamon's 1980 edited collection, *The Human Experience of Space and Place*, marked a pivotal turn in environmental understanding and challenged the prevailing debates on social space. Although focused primarily on urban environments, the contributions emphasised the importance of urban planning outcomes and represented attempts to approach geographical research through novel and unexplored methodologies,

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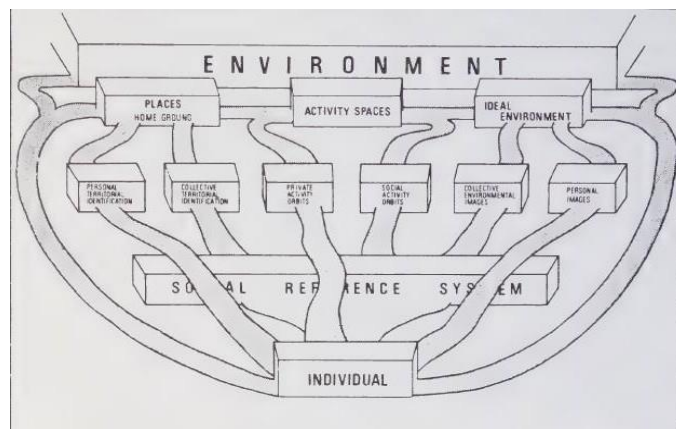
<sup>7</sup> Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography', 267. Tuan elucidates the etymology of 'humanistic geography' and notes that the term, which dates back to the Renaissance, denotes an inclusive methodology for conceptualising science and subsequently applying such frameworks to geographical inquiry. This approach builds upon established scientific paradigms rather than repudiating antecedent doctrines, thus representing an integrative evolution within geographical discourse. For Tuan, what unites the modern scientist and the Renaissance scholar is their shared commitment to 'enlarge the conception of the human individual'. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography', 266.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The research Buttimer conducted at Clark University in the 1970s was particularly significant and created a distinct 'school' of humanistic geographers.

thereby offering students and researchers new perspectives that challenged conventional approaches to geography and other social sciences. The collection expanded possible avenues of enquiry by providing readers with the opportunity to engage with a wide range of innovative viewpoints and creating a space within which to examine emerging ideas critically with the goal of exploring environmental behaviour and experience while treading previously unexplored intellectual territory. In her contribution to the volume, 'Home, Reach, and a Sense of Place', Buttimer personally acknowledges certain interpretive elements that do not stem from purely objective analysis. This self-critical approach is precisely the strength of humanistic geography, the intellectual openness of which allows and ultimately welcomes the potential errors that facilitate scholarly growth and deeper understanding.

Buttimer's phenomenological approach prioritises direct experience as the primary source for understanding human-space relationships. This firsthand interpretive framework conceptualises space and territory as dynamic entities that interact actively with humans. Building upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories regarding the lived body as the essential medium for experiencing and understanding space, Buttimer applies phenomenology to geography by integrating a more humanistic perspective with scientific methodological rigour. One of her most distinctive contributions lies in her development of cartographic methods that depart from conventional spatial organisation and instead map the collective meanings that communities attribute to places. This approach, which echoes Tuan's ideas about schemata and mental maps, privileges lived experience and social meaning over purely structural considerations. Buttimer's work also augments the study of urban growth and spatial organisation by integrating emotional and meaning-based thoughts into city planning and construction. Critically, Buttimer highlights the absence of a sociological dimension in spatial restructuring and advocates a holistic approach that integrates human experience and subjective perceptions into contemporary understandings of place. The map below represents one way in which places may be reframed to highlight meaning rather than organisationally oriented goals.



*Figure 1. An operational model of social space. Reproduced from Anne Buttimer and David Seamon, The Human Experience of Space and Place (St. Martin's Press, 1980), 45.*

The figure above summarises Buttimer's conceptual and technical points. For her, spatial experience transcends mere metrical coordination systems and thus requires the integration of individual and collective referential frameworks. She concludes that 'the success of a residential development is contingent on the existential meaning it acquires for its residents'<sup>10</sup> and stresses that the urbanistic imperative of the 1970s constituted the reconfiguration of metropolitan spaces in accordance with quotidian behavioural patterns in urban social worlds.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Buttimer reaffirms the importance of human experience in providing meaning to specific places.

Furthermore, Buttimer provides a refined analysis of spatial conceptualisation throughout the twentieth century. World War I prompted a more rational approach to spatial organisation that was enabled by technological advancements and aligned with Newtonian spatial theories. Following World War II, spatial understanding underwent a radical reconfiguration that necessitated the reimagining of boundaries and territorial frameworks. This period marked a shift towards a more people-oriented conceptualisation of territory. Ideologies of community and territorial bonding, previously marginalised, reemerged. Buttimer defines one's 'sense of place' as 'a function of how well it provides a center for one's life interests',<sup>12</sup> thereby reinforcing the interpersonal bond to territory.

<sup>10</sup> Buttimer and Seamon, *Human Experience*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

In the book's conclusion, David Seamon summarises the work's main ideas and offers personal reflections, quoting Buttimer's belief that people in situ represent the essential core of a place in an increasingly technological and globalised world. This perspective creates the urgent necessity for a return to place – a dynamic 'giving and receiving' capable of facilitating more meaningful relationships with spatial environments and supporting more authentic lifestyles.<sup>13</sup> However, this vision does not advocate an uncritical or nostalgic return to place-bound communities. Buttimer carefully emphasises the importance of values cultivated in stable, locally rooted communities while simultaneously arguing for their integration into evolving economic and technological landscapes:

Certain values almost inevitably fostered in stable, place-bound communities are indispensable ingredients for a decent human existence. [. . .] Since we cannot return to the green valleys we remember and do not really wish to do so, let us instead re-create the lost values by giving them visibility and inspiring people to cultivate them [. . .] in the world as it is now. Once we become aware of the ailment, we may find opportunities to heal.<sup>14</sup>

Tuan's approach is more psychological and therefore more readily juxtaposed with Dewey's thoughts on artistic experience. For him, the concept of placeness is derived directly from the experience of a place, which means living in the place sensorially while also creating a past in it: 'To know a place is also to know the past: one's own past preserved in schoolhouse, corner drugstore, swimming pool, and first home'.<sup>15</sup> Tuan's major theoretical contributions to spatial theory are constituted in *Topophilia* (1974) and *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977). In the first, Tuan establishes his comparative approach to spatial consciousness and examines how different cultures, both ancient and modern, organise and understand place. Through an analysis of cosmological systems and spatial practices across Indonesian, Indian and Sioux societies, he uncovers common psychological patterns in spatial understanding. Tuan offers an exploration of human relationships with place across global cultures and meticulously analyses the complex interplay between biological and cultural responses. Importantly, Tuan

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Place: An Experiential Perspective', *The Geographical Review* 65, no. 2 (Apr. 1975), 164.

recognises individual variations in perception and demonstrates how cultural factors create shared structures in spatial experiences. Tuan also scrutinises the correlation between physiological morphology and dispositional proclivities in spatial cognition to explore how biology influences our experience of the world.

In *Space and Place*, Tuan builds on the desire that inspired *Topophilia*: to understand how diverse human attitudes are reflected in relationships with physical environments. Specifically, Tuan introduces a more nuanced distinction between the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘place’ while centring the work on the basis of human experience and how people attach meaning to these concepts.<sup>16</sup> Beginning with how the body shapes spatial perception, he explores experiences of spaciousness and crowding, arguing that in the Western world, space is typically associated with freedom, yet its limitlessness and the ways in which it exposes us evoke vulnerability. Conversely, Tuan conceptualised place as enclosed and humanised spaces rich with established values and meanings. This work legitimised phenomenological approaches to humanistic geography that were previously dismissed by more deterministic methodologies. The extent to which Tuan’s work added depth to the conclusions achievable via more quantitative geographical methods is attributable to his integration of insights from psychology, anthropology, philosophy, literature and the social sciences.

Finally, in *Humanistic Geography: An Individual’s Search for Meaning* (2012), Tuan attempts to reconcile the relevance of religion in space studies. Building on his personal and biographical experience, the geographer criticises modern detachment from place and the fragmentation provoked by modernity. Referring to the concepts of good and evil, Tuan explores the ways in which positive or negative behaviour can shape place-making and stresses the importance of a geography of religion, aligning with the ongoing trend of centring religion in studies of place. Tuan’s objective is provocative in that it reveals how works of humanistic geography may well ground themselves on theological studies.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Justin K. H. Tse, Review of *Humanist Geography: An Individual’s Search for Meaning*, by Yi-Fu Tuan, *The Canadian Geographer* 58, no. 3 (2014), e55–56.

Despite its widespread success and growing interest, the field of humanistic geography has received criticism, particularly regarding its alleged lack of empiricism and substantive applications. Tuan's conceptualisation has been reproached for being limited in scope; however, Tuan has responded to these critiques by arguing that the field's fundamental approach encompasses the entire spectrum of human awareness, an approach that is inherently expansive rather than restrictive.<sup>18</sup> Buttimer received similar criticism from Ted Relph regarding her attempt to integrate the social sciences and phenomenology. Relph specifically challenged her treatment of phenomenology as an additional tool for understanding scientific phenomena rather than as a distinct discipline. According to Relph, both Tuan and Buttimer employ phenomenology as a justification for subjectivity instead of engaging with it as the sophisticated approach it is – one that demands more careful consideration in its application.

Again, Nigel Thrift advocated a rebalancing between social structure and human agency, which appears to have recently been polarised.<sup>19</sup> Rather than maintaining this division, he proposes accounting for broader structural forces that encompass the spectrum of human action. His structuration theory envisions a framework in which the duality of structure and agency simultaneously constrains and enables individual action. In recent years, criticism has emerged regarding the insufficient integration of cultural studies and policy-relevant arguments. In this context, social studies are perceived as deficient in genuine scientific rigour. Notably, Susan J. Smith and Kay Anderson contend that 'emotions are an intensely political issue, and a highly gendered one too'.<sup>20</sup> The authors further critique social science's preoccupation with seemingly heightened emotions, which creates a distorted perspective in which other domains, such as economics or politics, appear devoid of an emotional dimension. The imperative is to expand geography's scope beyond the study of emotionally charged environments, acknowledging how emotions function as epistemological instruments that permeate and remain integral to all facets of existence. In general, humanistic geography confronts the

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<sup>18</sup> Ted Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan and Anne Buttimer, 'Humanism, Phenomenology, and Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67, no. 1 (March 1997), 179.

<sup>19</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (Sage Publications, 1996), 63.

<sup>20</sup> Key Anderson and Susan J. Smith, 'Editorial: Emotional Geographies', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 1, no. 26 (2001), 7.

challenge of excessive generalisation regarding emotions, which, as inherently human characteristics, constantly evolve and resist confinement within fixed analytical structures. Despite criticism and scepticism, humanistic geography continues to develop as a discipline. Contemporary humanistic geography approaches are now advanced by scholars such as Casey (who takes a more philosophical approach), David Seamon (who employs phenomenological and psychological perspectives) and Tim Cresswell (via social and political lenses). The collective aim of human geographers is to redefine the importance of place and restore its value in a rapidly globalising world. They uniformly reject positivistic approaches that attempt to reduce complex spatial experiences to statistical analyses or universal truths, instead emphasising the fundamental ways in which place shapes identity and how identity transforms place.

## **2. Theorising Space and Place: A Historical and Philosophical Framework**

What is the primordial relationship between temporal and spatial experiences? Can we determine whether temporal or spatial consciousness has ontological priority? Casey examines diverse cosmological traditions to demonstrate a place's primordial significance. The biblical creation narrative exemplifies this priority: 'In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the Deep'.<sup>21</sup> This primordial creative genesis establishes spatial situatedness as the necessary precondition for ontological existence. Just as the Deep provides a place for God to enact creation, emplacement provides the fundamental framework within which human consciousness comprehends experiential reality. Our perception is grounded in space, shaping how we think and feel in diverse conceptual domains – from geographic terrains to mental landscapes, urban spaces to celestial expanses. This spatial condition suggests that human existence is unthinkable outside the context of a place. There is no self or existence without the essential idea of place and spatiality.

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<sup>21</sup> *Genesis* 1:1–2.

As evidenced above, studying how space becomes place is the work of the humanistic geographer. For Tuan, the meanings of space and place often converge in lived experience, with space remaining the more abstract of the two concepts. Before delineating their distinctions, it is crucial to acknowledge that the sense of place represents a personal, profoundly subconscious perception and predominantly private phenomenological experience that defies comprehensive articulation. Despite Tuan's scholarly attempts to systematise various experiences of place, he ultimately grounds his analysis on the fundamental understanding that each place experience is inherently personal and irreproducible. Building on Lefebvre's argument that placeness emerges through human interaction, Tuan conceptualises place as 'an organized world of meaning' that develops circularly.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the linear progression of time, place represents a concentrated spot of significance within temporal movement. Turco further elaborates on this concept and defines space as a basic terrestrial surface with physical attributes that transform into territory through explicit human action.<sup>23</sup> This progression – from abstract space to meaningful territory to, ultimately, place – illustrates a fundamental process of human spatial engagement. Each stage reflects increasing layers of human interpretation and interaction where geographical surfaces become progressively infused with meaning, emotion and cultural significance through human experience and intervention.

Time emerges as a trigger for the transformation of abstract space into place. The process of place-making occurs through the gradual establishment of human relationships within a locale, which generates emotional resonance and personal significance. Sensory memories also play a crucial role in this phenomenological experience of place. Tuan identifies six perceptive traits: sight, touch, hearing, smell, multisensory perception and movement perception. Sensory experiences, such as smell and sight, in particular, have been shown to trigger powerful emotional memories capable of transporting individuals across time almost instantaneously. A specific scent, for instance, can evoke childhood memories associated with a particular place, thereby transforming an ordinary space into a deeply personal landscape of memory and meaning.

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<sup>22</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 179.

<sup>23</sup> Turco (1988).

Beyond sensory engagement, creating a place from space involves complex cognitive processes of meaning-making, and one fundamental mechanism through which humans accomplish this transformation is symbolisation. According to Tuan, symbolic creation serves as a critical pathway for understanding human spatial experience, and his work reveals how abstract spaces are imbued with personal and cultural significance through symbolic representation. While acknowledging intimate individual place relationships, Tuan also emphasises how shared symbols give places cultural meaning. These shared symbols are not merely individual attributions but require broader cultural consensus. This process pertains to the mental world humans create to generate a connection with the environment and are mostly mental processes. From these, legends, myths, taxonomies or linguistic acts upon space are created.

The idea of symbology as specific to the human species is also present in Turco's treatment of denomination – the act of naming places – as a linguistic act that occurs in the territorialisation process.<sup>24</sup> As Turco explains, '[t]he character "humanity" finds, thus, his most appropriate site in man's capacity of generalization, of thinking concepts, of elaborating symbols and manipulating reality through symbols'.<sup>25</sup> Of the various processes that constitute territorialisation, denomination is linked especially to semantic experience and interpretive consequences. Territorialisation is first and foremost a human process through which human emotions are attached to a physical space – the territory. Denomination is the primary method through which humans transform space into place through the attribution of meaning in a way that creates connections between location and memory, particularly collective memory, and establishes places as centres of shared remembrance. Setting aside questions of power relations, denomination is a method of organising world experience, one that both enriches and systemises – or complicates – understanding. Turco sees this naming process as the first stage of territorialisation, which is then followed by reification (the construction of things) and structuring (the

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<sup>24</sup> Turco employs the term 'territorialisation' to describe how humans engage with specific territories through social, cultural, economic and political actions. This process of creating relationships with the land is dynamic and evolutionary, continuously shaped by changing historical circumstances.

<sup>25</sup> Original text: 'Il carattere di "umanità" trova dunque la sua sede più appropriata nella capacità dell'uomo di generalizzare, di pensare per concetti, di elaborare simboli e di manipolare la realtà mediante simboli.' Angelo Turco, *Verso una Teoria Geografica* (Edizioni Unicopli, 1988), 29.

organisation of the exercise of a certain function over a territory) as territorial control becomes more complicated.

Humanity's primordial endeavour is to cognitively apprehend and territorially appropriate the environment; thus, territorialisation constitutes a fundamental dimension of spatial relationships, notwithstanding its implications for power hierarchies and proprietary claims. As part of the territorialisation process, denomination also involves cognitive and communicative functions. The first function is associated with the use of naming conventions to organise information by connecting signifiers to signifieds, which create the 'designators' that become toponyms. The second function creates shared reference points recognised by community members, which establishes the common ground that underlies collective understanding and experience. As a result of both functions, the denomination process qualifies not only the place named but also the social corpus involved in the naming process.

Naming places creates psychological closeness similar to the function of naming loved ones and familiar items. Designating places in this way reduces environmental complexity by transforming unnamed spatial vastness into recognisable, discrete locations. Through naming, we convert overwhelming spatial generality into manageable and comprehensible particularity – we compact the information. Paradoxically, this simplification also enriches reality by layering previously absent meaning onto physical space, which creates more complex layers of significance. The act of naming reflects both power relations and the means of understanding. Beyond mere domination of the surrounding environment, humankind's act of denomination establishes meaningful connections with the environment that reinforce collective consensus and create social cohesion through shared reference points. This naming process draws from what Turco terms the 'metaphysical reservoir', the mythical universe that provides the value systems that anchor communities to a place.<sup>26</sup>

On a more philosophical level, Casey's *Getting Back into Place* shows how spatial consciousness emerged relatively late as a focus of academic enquiry. Building on Buttimer's work, Casey grounds his spatial theory on the necessity of returning to place.

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<sup>26</sup> Original text: '*serbatorio metafisico*'. Turco, 90.

His work reclaims place's fundamental importance and demonstrates its role in stabilising human experience and enabling identity formation: 'I shall accord to place a position of renewed respect by specifying its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are*'.<sup>27</sup> For Casey, place transcends simple geography and functions as an active site of human self-determination where emotions find expression, memories take root and individual development unfolds. Place is also central due to its capacity to provide stability and establish a fixed existential centre for human experience. From this perspective, human beings are inevitably and constantly located in space, and this emplacement enables specific sites to become integral parts of identity formation and personal development. Place, space and time constitute inextricable dimensions of phenomenological experience and allow us to become aware of our own presence in the world. Perception, for Casey, is central to place sensing through the syllogism that we can only know a place by being in that place and that being in a certain place implies that we occupy a position from which we can perceive it.<sup>28</sup>

Time has historically dominated philosophical understanding as the primary ordering principle of experience. As Casey observes, '[f]or an entire epoch, place has been regarded as an impoverished second cousin to Time and Space, those two colossal cosmic partners that tower over modernity'.<sup>29</sup> While place has historically been subordinated to the categories of space and time – particularly throughout the modern period, from Galileo Galilei to Martin Heidegger – it emerged as a focus of academic discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, when spatial theorists began to reposition place as a classification paradigm. Previously, space was perceived as homogeneous and infinitely extended, with place characterised as merely a subcategory of space – a measurable fragment within space's infinite expanse. Building upon the phenomenological foundations established by philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and incorporating critical insights from Michel Foucault and Heidegger, these new theoretical approaches synthesised phenomenology, cultural geography and environmental psychology, ultimately elevating place as a distinct field of academic enquiry. 'Topophilia', a term first

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Indiana University Press, 1993), xv.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (School of American Research Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, xiv.

introduced by Gaston Bachelard in *La Poétique de l'Espace* (1958), initially referred to research aimed at determining the values of the spaces to which we are emotionally attached.<sup>30</sup> As discussed above, this concept was later adopted and popularised by Tuan. In the early 1970s, Tuan developed influential theoretical frameworks concerning place experience and environmental consciousness. The contribution most relevant to the present study is Tuan's analytical framework for distinguishing between 'space' and 'place'. For Tuan, these concepts are based in human ethology, particularly the sensations of belonging, displacement and disorientation that emerge primarily from our primordial existence – our embodied experience as living beings – rather than from cultural conditioning alone. In this view, the concept of place is intimately connected to biological experiences. In terms of differentiating the concepts of space and place, Tuan frames the former as something 'abstract' and suggests that '[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'.<sup>31</sup> In other words, 'abstract space, lacking significance other than strangeness, becomes concrete place, filled with meaning'.<sup>32</sup> Space and place exist in symbolic relationships. The security and stability of a place enable us to experience the openness and freedom of space, while the inherent freedom of space creates the need to feel enclosed and safe within a place. This dialectical interaction is central to the complex, interdependent nature of spatial experience.

In 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', Casey addresses a range of themes to formulate a comprehensive definition of place. In questioning the conventional prioritisation of space over place, Casey emphasises embodied perception and introduces the concept of 'implacement' – the inevitable situatedness of human experience. Drawing upon phenomenological approaches, especially Merleau-Ponty, Casey offers a critical philosophical examination of a fundamental question: Does human experience originate in an abstract, neutral space later modified by personal perceptions, or are we inherently emplaced within environments

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<sup>30</sup> 'Heureux dans un petit espace, il réalise une expérience de topophilie' (Happy in a small space, he experiences topophilia). Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2020), 141.

<sup>31</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

already imbued with character and meaning? His response is that the body plays a crucial role in place perception as the essential mediator through which place is experienced and comprehended. The body is so deeply significant in its relationship to place that Casey frames built places as extensions of our bodies that require a residing location, namely, a dwelling.<sup>33</sup> Place is not merely an abstract spatial configuration, then, but a meaningful environment imbued with significance through our sensory engagement and bodily experience.

Casey deepens his conceptualisation of place by articulating several defining characteristics that transform mere space into a domain of significance. First, given that lived bodies are intrinsically connected to places, these places have the capacity to gather, a function that extends beyond the mere collection of physical elements to encompass history, experiences and memories. At a more immediate level, places possess the capacity to bring bodies together within a shared geographical context. Casey is careful to distinguish this gathering capability from simple accumulation; rather, places contain and hold together elements that might otherwise remain disparate or even conflictual. This containment function represents two additional significant properties of place: the capacity to hold and preserve, particularly with respect to noncorporeal entities, such as beliefs, religious practices, and senses of belonging. Casey contends that this gathering function enables the phenomenon of return and recognition. The familiar quality we experience upon revisiting places stems precisely from their capacity to maintain and preserve various elements of meaning with which we reengage, thereby renewing and extending our original experiences: 'Place is the generatrix for the collection, as well as the recollection, of all that occurs in the lives of sentient beings' (26). This concept serves as a theoretical bridge that allows him to transcend conventional understandings that situate place within established frameworks of space and time, instead describing place as possessing fluid and variable characteristics that shift according to individual experiences. Thus, place 'is more an event than a thing to be assimilated to known categories. As an event, it is unique, idioloal' (26). This characteristic allows place to simultaneously contain multiplicity while facilitating individualisation. Through this dual capacity, place

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<sup>33</sup> Casey, *Op. cit.*, 121.

functions as both the foundation for community formation and the context within which individual personalities develop and take shape.

### **3 Writing Insular Identity: Theoretical Approaches to Island Spaces**

Place formation finds particular development in the study of islanders' building of identity and sense of community. Drawing from the previous analysis of placeness, emplacement, and experience of spaces, the following section explores Michel Foucault's philosophical concept of 'heterotopia', to analyse how identity formation is constructed through the distinctive territorial configuration of islands.

#### **3.1 Foucault's Heterotopias: An Analysis**

Islands have generated significant academic fascination due to their isolation and malleable qualities as well as their capacity to function as locations of unfamiliar terrain, exotic environments and fantastic settings. While frequently conceptualised as blank canvases onto which external histories are imposed, islands fundamentally represent spaces where encounters with 'otherness' occur. That islands facilitate engagement with difference makes them particularly significant sites for examining cultural, political and social relationships. Understanding islands as heterotopic spaces first requires familiarity with the Foucauldian concept of heterotopias. From this conceptual foundation, it is possible to proceed with an analysis of the particular heterotopic qualities of insular spaces, such as colonial Ireland.

Introduced in his preface to *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966) and later developed in two lectures – 'Le Corps Utopique' and 'Les Hétérotopes' – Foucault's analysis of heterotopias examines spaces that function as 'counter-sites' or 'effectively enacted utopias'. Anthony Vidler coined the term 'heterotopology' as designation for this analytical approach.<sup>34</sup> Foucault describes heterotopias as

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Vidler, Michael Foucault and Pamela Johnston, 'Heterotopias', *AA Files* 2014, no. 69 (2014), 21.

real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.<sup>35</sup>

Whether physical (the body, a place, the mirror) or mental (a dream, a secret, a meditation), heterotopias exist alongside ordinary places and are geographically accessible. According to Foucault, all cultures generate heterotopias, although Galileo's conceptualisation of infinite space is a crucial turning point: '[A] thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down'.<sup>36</sup> This transformation marked a fundamental shift from mediaeval conceptualisations of space – stable binaries (e.g. sacred/profane, protected/exposed, urban/rural) between which objects occupied fixed positions – towards a more complex theory of emplacement. Modern spatial experience, defined by multiplicity and juxtaposition, better reflects contemporary heterogeneity through sites where different realities coexist. Jorge Luis Borges's concept of the 'heteroclit' extends this understanding by identifying objects, beings or events that exist so far outside established categories that they create fundamental taxonomic crisis – entities whose very existence challenges conventional systems of order and classification.

In his theory of heterotopia, Foucault articulates six kinds of 'other spaces' or 'placeless places': crisis heterotopias, deviation heterotopias, time heterotopias, juxtaposition heterotopias, ritual or purification heterotopias and relative function heterotopias. The first two types hint at the cultural universalism of heterotopias in that they demonstrate how heterotopias are innate to human nature and human relational approaches as far back as primitive man. Crisis heterotopias were predominant in ancient societies and comprised privileged or forbidden spaces reserved for individuals who existed in conflict with social norms, such as adolescents, menstruating women or elderly people. These places accommodated individuals who occupied a position outside of

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<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* (Spring 1986), 24.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 23.

normal social functioning and, over time, evolved into deviation heterotopias, places designated for individuals whose behaviour consistently transgressed social expectations. Exemplars of deviation heterotopias are those institutions within which norms are momentarily exorcised, such as asylums, prisons, rest homes and retirement facilities, because they function as repositories for those deemed incapable of operating within normative boundaries.

Deviation heterotopias are particularly emblematic of the historical mutability of these sites and how societies transform places over time according to changing cultural needs. A place that fulfilled specific functions at a particular historical moment may evolve to serve different purposes over time. Foucault illustrates this through the cemetery's transformation from a sacred central location to a sequestered site in urban peripheries. Cemeteries exemplify heterotopic complexity in multiple dimensions: spatially, they create differential accessibility between living and dead; temporally, they function simultaneously as spaces of preservation of the past and sites of present engagement. The cemetery's temporality also encompasses several intersecting binaries between dead and living, memory and presence, history and contemporary experience, all of which operate according to principles that are distinct from ordinary social spaces. This liminal quality makes cemeteries particularly rich heterotopic sites that create a threshold between life and death while simultaneously including and excluding the dead from society.

The third type, juxtaposition heterotopias, highlights the ability of these places to unite multiple incompatible spaces within single physical locations. Examples of such places included cinemas, theatres and gardens. Regarding the first two, theatres and cinemas contain different realities or representations within unified spaces, while at the same time allowing spectators to transcend their immediate surroundings through controlled access to other worlds. Concerning the garden,<sup>37</sup> such places are defined by

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<sup>37</sup> The garden presents as paradigmatic of spatial complexity, simultaneously embodying utopian and heterotopian characteristics. Spatially delimited by physical boundaries – fences, walls, or enclosures – the garden represents a carefully circumscribed microcosm where human intervention transcends mere architectural design. Within this bounded space, metaphysical and symbolic experiences unfold, enabling transformations, transgressions, and encounters that challenge normative social constraints. As space of both psychological and symbolic representation, the garden operates as a reflective space where the unconscious of repressed or hidden selves can emerge, develop, and be explored.

regulated boundaries between the inside and outside using walls, fences or restrictive entry policies (e.g. private or botanical gardens). Controlled access establishes a precise demarcation between ordinary space and the garden's special domain. Additionally, gardens often host events at specific times, further regulating their accessibility. Through such mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, gardens create microcosmos that juxtapose multiple realities within defined boundaries.

The fourth type, time heterotopias or 'heterochronies', are spaces that manifest temporal relationships distinct from linear chronology. The two primary subtypes are accumulative spaces, in which time is simultaneously suspended and expanded (e.g. museums and libraries), and ephemeral spaces, where time intensifies within strictly bounded temporal parameters (e.g. festivals), although such spaces may also disrupt linear chronology through condensation, suspension or fragmentation. Museums exemplify this principle by housing objects from various historical periods, creating nonlinear temporal experiences as visitors move between artefacts. Similarly, libraries preserve past, present and future intellectual development within a single accessible space. Other heterotopias, such as gardens, operate through decelerated temporality and follow seasonal rhythms distinct from standard chronological progression.

The fifth type, ritual or purification heterotopias, requires ceremonial thresholds. These spaces are accessible only through specific purification ceremonies or formal permissions that mark transitions between ordinary and heterotopic domains. Finally, the sixth type, relative function heterotopias, fulfils specific relational functions at particular historical moments and is further divided into two subtypes, each related to a unique function: compensation and illusion. Colonies exemplify compensation heterotopias due to their function as perfectly ordered spaces intended to compensate for the disorder of the motherland. These spaces function as 'other' to their originating societies, often attempting to realise idealised visions unachievable in the homeland.

### **3.1.1 Contested Spaces: the Island through Foucault's Heterotopias**

Having established Foucault's heterotopic framework, we can now analyse islands through these principles, examining how insular spaces manifest heterotopic characteristics through their distinctive spatial and temporal properties. Nissology – the

study of islands – is replete with various perspectives on these land masses, with researchers describing them as sites of belonging, displacement and even potential entrapment.<sup>38</sup> Beneath these symbolic representations is a deeper psychological dimension, and island topography has been shown to influence psychological development and human identity as well as collective community formation. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard introduced *topoanalysis* as a method for exploring self-identity in relation to place and suggested a profound connection between personality development and the places in which one lives during one's formative years, especially during childhood. Due to its unique geographical configuration, the island produces a distinctive human experience. Contained, smaller and circumscribed, the island is both a surface that reflects personal unease and a malleable space to be shaped according to individual imagination and desire.

Although islands are unique in many ways, they also share common features beyond being surrounded by water. According to Peter Gill, 'islandness' creates cognitive schemas in the creation of the social identity of islanders.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, the repetition of patterns in island cultures may hint at underlying psychological and sociological mechanisms that extend beyond specific cultural schemas. Such universal tendencies suggest that geographical and environmental characteristics shape social and individual responses to perceptions of insular spaces. According to Gill's perception of island identity formation, islanders' self-conceptions are constructed dialectically through both internal community processes and external perceptions. The geographical configuration of islands generates a normative expectation of social cohesion, a presumption internalised by both outsiders and islanders, which manifests as an unwritten social contract in which community members actively suppress individual differences to perform a unity that aligns with the

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<sup>38</sup> Baldacchino provides a fitting definition of island studies when he characterises its core objective as the exploration and definition of 'islandness' in terms of its profound implications for both ecological systems and human/species behavioural patterns. However, he deliberately resists framing island studies as a traditional academic discipline, precisely due to its inherent variability. This fluidity represents both the field's most significant strength and potential methodological challenges, which suggests a dynamic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding island environments. Godfrey Baldacchino, 'Island, Island Studies, Island Studies Journal', *Island Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006): 9.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Gill. 'Island Psyche: Fieldnotes from an Irish Island', *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 15, no. 2–3 (1994), 277.

perceived geographical coherence of their insular space. Islanders tend to discourage or frown upon discrepancies and disharmony, thereby reinforcing a collective identity shaped by internal dynamics and external expectations.<sup>40</sup>

Some islands have converted geographical constraints into strategic advantages by using their separation from mainland territories to develop distinct political, economic and cultural systems. This is particularly apparent in the United Kingdom, where this phenomenon has created complex hierarchies among the islands, with one functioning as an imperial centre and others becoming colonial peripheries. This duality, in which islands simultaneously occupy positions of dominance and subjugation within global power structures, functions as another layer of their heterotopic character, since islands inherently manifest heterotopic qualities through their fundamental separation from mainland continuity. Their physical isolation immediately positions them as spaces outside everyday spatial ordering due to their distinctive environments, which function differently from continental territories. This inherent ‘otherness’ establishes islands as prime candidates for heterotopic analysis. Nowadays, the finite demographic capacity of islands necessarily positions migration as a fundamental characteristic of insularity. In this context, islands are critical intersectional zones that function as crossroads of multiethnicity while also embodying profound local identities, thereby creating a nuanced dialectic between openness and closure, diversity and territorial specificity. Beyond the felt belonging of their islanders, islands frequently generate interpretive dichotomies from both their inhabitants and outsiders. For some, islands represent paradises and prisons alike,<sup>41</sup> while for others, they represent sites of resilience and vulnerability, underdeveloped territories and repositories of tradition. Gilles Deleuze, in his introduction to *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (1953),<sup>42</sup> described ‘[d]reaming of islands’ as ‘dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew’.<sup>43</sup> In this way, he conceptualises the island as a site for potential re-creation and transformation, a framework that positions colonial islands as heterotopic spaces where

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<sup>40</sup> Gill, ‘Island Psyche’, 283.

<sup>41</sup> Pete Hay reframes the notion of islanders as being imprisoned by the sea’s natural constraints and proposes a more nuanced understanding of containment – a sense of spatial definition experienced as a norm of belonging rather than restriction. ‘What the Sea Portends: A Reconsideration of Contested Island Tropes’, *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 2 (2013), 216.

<sup>42</sup> The text is an unpublished work by Gilles Deleuze, written during his youth and published posthumously by one of his pupils, David Lapoujade, in 2002.

utopian impulses may be enacted. This capacity to suspend conventional ordering or recreate realities in insular territories is especially apparent in several literary masterpieces, including William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In Golding, the reader sees how islands create social and geographical spaces where ordinary behavioural constraints dissolve. The isolated environment facilitates the suspension of civilisation's rules, which allows primal instincts – intensified by wild surroundings and immediate natural imperatives – to emerge. Conversely, Rhys explores how the insular experience creates fundamental difficulties in adapting to mainland social conventions. The protagonist's Caribbean provenance is incompatible with English social structures, thus demonstrating how island existence produces distinctive modes of being that resist continental assimilation. Finally, Swift highlights islands' heterotopic potential through a journey across multiple insular spaces. Each island – from Lilliput to Laputa – functions as a distinct heterotopia with its own physical scale, social organisation and cultural logic, through which Swift's archipelagic narrative displays the heterotopic nature of islands capable of accommodating radical alterations in both physical proportions and social conventions while maintaining geographical plausibility. The diverse distribution of islands – scattered across oceans and seas in various climatic and geological formations – along with their distinctive cultural, social, economic and political systems aligns perfectly with Foucault's assertion that heterotopias exist across all cultures and historical periods.

Applying each of Foucault's heterotopias to island environments reveals how thoroughly insular spaces embody 'otherness' and peculiarity. Based on the ecological particularities of insular sites, Guoqing Ma defines the heterotopic nature of islands and delineates four cultural characteristics attributable to their unique natural environments. First, the geomorphologic configuration of islands inherently isolates them from continental cultural paradigms. Second, the marine-centric ecological context of marine

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<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Deserted Islands and Other Texts* (Semiotext[e], 2002), 10.

islands produces distinctive cultural orientations fundamentally shaped by maritime interactions. Third, islands maintain profound historical continuities that preserve cultural significance across temporal dimensions. Finally, islands embody transformative mobility and often function as transitional zones that are crucial for mediating complex land–sea cultural exchanges.<sup>44</sup> As Foucauldian ‘counter-sites’ that challenge ordinary normative spaces, islands acquire even greater theoretical complexity. Islands are more than geographical entities and function as sophisticated cultural laboratories that simultaneously resist and redefine conventional spatial and cultural boundaries. Similarly, Baldacchino provocatively defines islands as ‘sites of innovative conceptualization, whether of nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real’,<sup>45</sup> while also addressing their historical vulnerability. Specifically, he characterises them as ‘fair game for mainland subjugation and organization’<sup>46</sup> in a way that underscores the dual role of islands as potential sites of creativity and external projection.

The penitentiary institution of Alcatraz (San Francisco, California) is a paradigmatic example of Foucault’s second and third heterotopic types: deviation and juxtaposition. The island’s spatial configuration materialises a literal and metaphorical boundary – a confined space that represents physical seclusion and social marginalisation. Its insularity amplifies the punitive function, transforming geographical isolation into a comprehensive system of social exclusion. Alcatraz functions not simply as a prison but as a profound spatial manifestation of societal normative mechanisms, where geographical boundaries become isomorphic with social boundaries. This heterotopic space shows how physical geography can be weaponised into a social instrument, a place that is both real and ‘other’. Considering Alcatraz’s evolutionary trajectory, it also represents a complex heterochrony. The island has evolved over multiple distinct phases – first a Civil War fortress to a maximum-security federal prison, then a bird sanctuary and now a National Historic Landmark with hundreds of daily visitors. Each phase represents a distinct temporal and

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<sup>44</sup> Guoqing Ma, ‘Islands and the World from an Anthropological Perspective’, *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology* 4 (2020): 2.

<sup>45</sup> Baldacchino, ‘Island, Island Studies’, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Studying Islands: On Whose Terms? Some Epistemological and Methodological Challenges to the Pursuit of Island Studies’, *Island Studies Journal* 3, no.1 (2008): 38.

functional reconfiguration that illustrates how geographical spaces can accumulate and reflect multiple historical and social narratives.

Foucault's fourth type, heterochronies, manifests in islands as three temporal dynamics. First, islands often experience time at distinctive rhythms, determined by their unique geographical positioning. Physical separation from the temporal rules of the mainland may create alternative time patterns deeply connected to natural cycles such as seasons, migration or climate. The geographical distance from urban centres generates a markedly different temporal experience characterised by a more relaxed, community-focused atmosphere, a distinction amplified by the island's natural environment, where the landscape creates a contemplative, slow-paced experience of time. The island's spatial configuration thus becomes a mechanism for experiencing temporality outside conventional urban rhythms and natural cycles. Second, islands frequently undergo functional transformations as historical circumstances change. Third, most islands contain layered historical strata that allow multiple cultural and temporal realities to coexist simultaneously within a limited territory. The archaeological sites of mediaeval remains in certain Italian cities, for example, illustrate how it is possible for daily life to occur in the context of compressed historical accumulation in a singular environment.

Foucault's fifth principle, presupposing systems of opening and closing, aligns perfectly with the geographical conformation of islands, which inevitably require specific modes of access. In this way, islands are both accessible and isolated. Water boundaries create natural perimeters that alter modes of spatial entry and movement, transforming traditional concepts of territorial displacement. The Venetian municipal islands, for example, are accessible solely via ferryboats, which creates a unique spatial experience in which movement itself is a component of territorial engagement. In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the island epitomises Foucault's principle of opening and closing through both physical and psychological dimensions: physically, the island initially appears as a site of free access, yet it quickly transforms into an inescapable prison from which departure is nearly impossible; psychologically, the island functions as a complex spatial metaphor. Concerning the latter, the island offers Robinson a blank canvas on which to reconstruct his understanding of social order and project the ideological structures of England. At the same time, the island functions as a site of profound isolation. Crusoe's solitude represents a simultaneous state of liberation and constraint – a

paradoxical experience that suspends his social relations until Friday's arrival, which constitutes a critical moment of potential reconnection to another human being. The island thus emerges as a heterotopic space in which geographical boundaries and psychological states continuously negotiate its meaning.

Finally, compensation heterotopias are places that maintain specific relationships with other spaces, often functioning as compensatory sites. As 'perfect' spaces designed to improve upon the metropole's perceived imperfections, colonial islands exemplify this function. In addition to their primarily compensatory function, these colonies also manifest multiple heterotopic qualities, one of which is that of experimental grounds where colonisers attempt to create idealised versions of their homeland societies – spaces paradoxically both attached and detached from their origins.

### **3.1.2 Inverted Heterotopias: Ireland's Spatial Liminality**

As previously established, colonial processes inherently generate heterotopic spaces that serve as sites of compensation while establishing the metropole as a normative centre. Ireland's status as a heterotopia was initially derived from its geographical insularity and cultural peculiarity. Initially, the island was inhabited by the Celts, who introduced their culture, language and beliefs. From the fifth century AD, missionaries from neighbouring England brought Christianity to the island, later complemented by the emergence of Gaelic culture. Despite its insular position, Ireland was subject to continuous external influences that shaped its cultural and social configuration from the mediaeval period to the present day. Significant migration from Britain to Ireland in the twelfth century began to alter Ireland's structure, initiating its conceptualisation as a settlement. The decisive transformation occurred following the Act of Union (Ireland) 1800,<sup>47</sup> when Ireland acquired an additional heterotopic dimension through its integration into the United Kingdom.

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<sup>47</sup> The legislative union between England and Ireland was formalised on 1 January 1801. This constitutional transformation was symbolically represented through the creation of a new flag, signifying Ireland's formal incorporation into Great Britain.

When the Crown dissolved Dublin's parliament and transferred power and representation to Westminster, it added another heterotopic quality to Ireland and established it as a distinct nation differentiated primarily by its religious character. Ireland's steadfast adherence to Catholicism distinguished it from the rest of the United Kingdom and precipitated internal civil conflict, with promises of Catholic emancipation repeatedly offered as an inducement for supporting the union between the two countries. Ireland's identity became increasingly ambiguous amid the sociopolitical upheaval resulting from England's colonisation and internal religious conflict, with the Irish people increasingly identifying with the Catholic Irish.<sup>48</sup> During the eighteenth century, defining Ireland's status – whether as kingdom, colony or 'fairly typical ancien régime society'<sup>49</sup> (apart from the political definition of the island) – grew increasingly problematic. Beyond its political classification, the Act of Union inevitably altered Ireland's demographic composition. Protestants attained majority status, while the remaining Catholic population faced pressure to assimilate into this new majority.

Dispossession and repossession characterised Ireland's political and economic territory as well as its social and religious belief system. The juxtaposition of multiple places inherently incompatible with one another (Foucault's fourth principle) aptly describes the Irish situation. As land transforms into soil through ideologically constructed notions, Ireland itself becomes a metaconcept that describes the coexistence of multiple layers of history and beliefs. Ireland's constitutional integration with Britain through the 1800 Act of Union provoked cultural assimilation, which further intensified the heterotopic nature of the island. Seamus Deane refers to this phenomenon when he states that '[b]ecause it could not be represented in the traditional forms, Ireland was taken to be beyond representation and beyond civilization', becoming a space requiring regulation and control.<sup>50</sup> This positioning created Ireland's paradoxical status as both "home" and "other," domestic and foreign,<sup>51</sup> [. . .] to make what was strange – a recalcitrant Ireland – familiar, a part of the United Kingdom.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Seamus Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', *boundary2*, no. 21 (1994), 122.

<sup>49</sup> John Gibney, *A Short History of Ireland: 1500–2000* (Yale University Press, 2018), 124.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

This transformation aligns with Foucault's second heterotopic principle: societies remaking spaces according to evolving requirements. Perceived as anachronistic – bound to folklore and premodern traditions – Ireland became a heterotopic space subject to Britain's modernising imperatives and underwent a real process of modernisation and adaptation to the rules of the British Empire. This temporal displacement reinforces Ireland's heterotopic status through its distinctive relationship with time throughout which, at various points, England has taken on the role of initiator for the unruly and old-fashioned Ireland.

This escalating 'trouble' and discontent fostered aspirations for a renewed and independent nation that could liberate itself from Protestant influence, a dynamic that positions Ireland squarely within Foucault's heterotopic framework. Ireland's status as an 'imagined community', following Anderson's concept, further reinforces its heterotopic character. The collective self-perception of belonging to a community strengthens Ireland's heterotopic quality precisely due to the distinctive sense of communion among community members who might never actually meet, a phenomenon that recalls Homi Bhabha's 'third space' – a postcolonial term that describes ambiguous and hybrid zones where cultures intersect and transform. According to this definition, Ireland acquires the status of heterotopic third space, which resonates with Foucault's third type of heterotopia: spaces that juxtapose multiple incompatible sites within a single location. As a third space, Ireland contains seemingly incompatible elements – tradition and modernity, Irish and English culture, ancient practices and colonial innovations – within a unified but contested territory.

The second type of heterotopia also manifests in Ireland through its reappropriation of Celtic traditions as expressions of modernity. This retrospective orientation functions as a means of achieving emancipation from England through the promotion of a cultural heritage that predates the colonial relationship by centuries. As a result, the colonial system underwent an inversion and adopted a nationalist framework that preserved its fundamental structures while operating within a newly constituted cultural frame.<sup>53</sup> As a space, Ireland has been imbued with different meanings as history has unfolded. Beliefs

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

and people merged and changed according to the requirements of history. Deane articulates precisely how Ireland's question of ownership and belonging culminated in nationalism, with place and sense of place converging to create a new dimension in Irish history:

In Ireland, one of the central acts of such reordering was devoted to the vexed question of land, its ownership, its status, its physical, and even its metaphysical properties. Such a reordering necessarily involved the production of a new history of the land of Ireland, a narrative that had the dual function of legitimizing in retrospect what had always been true.<sup>54</sup>

This system of belief has afforded Ireland a sense of stability and continuity amid the fluctuating processes of territorialisation and reterritorialisation. Land, in this case, is the site where narratives about Ireland are established through appeals to the authenticity of the past. This nationalist effort aims to reclaim both Ireland's physical territory and its cultural identity, creating a connection between precolonial Ireland and contemporary and destabilising social and political events.

By drawing on humanistic geography and heterotopic theory, this chapter has evidenced how geographical space, especially insular formations and specifically Ireland, can serve as a crucible for both personal and cultural identity. Ireland, long suspended between colonial projection and national recovery, is a paradigmatic heterotopic space that is at once peripheral and central, domesticated and estranged, remembered and remade. Within this context, Heaney's poetics must be read not only as an aesthetic meditation on landscape but also as a sustained phenomenological enquiry into how place becomes charged with memory, resistance and self-fashioning.

By invoking and reworking symbolic structures embedded in Irish territory – its bogs, fields, borders and boundaries – Heaney engages in Casey's implacement, that process by which bodies, histories and cultural meanings are carved into the land itself. Heaney's work dramatises the tensions between rootedness and dislocation, between the sediment of tradition and the pressures of political modernity. As such, his poetics of place are never static. Rather, while, yes, his work is topographical, it is also topological and thus constitutes a dynamic reshaping of self and nation through spatial consciousness.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Building on the foundations laid here, the following chapter traces these spatial configurations through Heaney's verse more directly and maps out the textual interplay between land, loss and lyric as strategies of cultural and personal survival.

#### IV. Writing Places: The Spatial and Elemental Poetics of Heaney's Writing Sites in *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North*

*I composed habits for those acres  
so that my look would be  
neither gluttonous nor starved.  
I was ready to go anywhere.*

—Seamus Heaney (WO 11)

Heaney's poetry emerges from the necessity of integrating the rural Irish reality into which he was born with the historical developments of the late twentieth century. His poetic work constitutes an attempt to comprehend his own existence and that of his fellow Irish citizens during a period characterised by political upheaval and social transformation. Despite being torn between engaging in the poetic translation of political and historical turbulence and leaving poetry to its pure essence untouched by social constraints, Heaney ultimately grounds features of his poetry into the memory of his personal life and interweaves individual experience with the collective narrative of his country. The foundation of his writing career lies in his strong bond created with the land. Place functions as the immutable centre of the world ('this centre holds'<sup>1</sup>) and of Heaney's creative inspiration, the *omphalos* that maintains stability despite the flux of surrounding circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Heaney's allegorical treatment of his sense of place, which matures into the so-called bog poems, is an attempt to ground personal experience and tribal history into the instability of contemporaneity by drawing from the myth and Irish lore that shape his individual and communal senses of identity.

Heaney's description of a poem as a 'housing' or 'snapshot' of consciousness emphasises how he deeply values territory and his native environment. When Heaney writes poetry, he creates a protected 'place' in which he blends his personal views of

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<sup>1</sup> In 'Clearances' (*The Haw Lantern*), Heaney appropriates and reconfigures William Butler Yeats' apocalyptic phrase from 'The Second Coming' and transforms 'the centre cannot hold' from a vision of disintegration into one of stability and continuity: 'this centre holds'. Through this rhetorical inversion, Heaney articulates how the emptiness left by his mother's death functions paradoxically as both void and enduring presence. This understanding of stability extends beyond personal loss to encompass Heaney's writing locales, his *omphalos*, and the Irish territory more broadly.

<sup>2</sup> See also chapter I, page 9.

territory with the ways in which Irish communities envision their shared identity. The poem thus functions intimately and collectively – as a structure for dwelling and sheltering that remains impervious to assault. This poetic space functions as a third realm in which Heaney engages simultaneously with his personal perspective, his sense of belonging to a community, and his connection to the past. Heaney’s view of poetry as an extension of himself allows him to create verses intrinsically connected to Ireland’s physical landscape and sociopolitical reality. Despite the inward orientation of his early work, Heaney consistently produced poetry that remained accessible to others and in which readers could recognise aspects of their own experiences. In an interview with Tiago Moura, Heaney articulated the significance of poetry’s communal function, while also acknowledging that poetry originates from individual and intimate impulses, while also highlighting its capacity to fulfil public purposes. Heaney draws attention to the crucial distinction between the homophonic words ‘heard’ and ‘herd’ – terms that carry fundamentally different meanings despite their acoustic similarity. He notes the importance of attending to the collective sentiments of the ‘herd’ or community during periods of crisis, observation that reveals Heaney’s enduring negotiation between poetry’s inherent freedom and independence and the pressure to adopt a collective voice that transforms his work into politically engaged expressions. Within this tension, Heaney searched for ‘the images and symbols adequate to our predicament’ (*PP* 56), beginning with the common elements of Mossbawn’s rural environment (e. g. the pump, animals, etc.) and proceeding to the language of his inhabited places, and extending to the bogs and natural features of the Irish landscape. This search among the known landscape became his method of interpreting and comprehending reality: establishing a relationship with the past through the enduring stability of the Irish landscape.

The present chapter explores how Heaney incorporates territory into the very fabric of his craft and constructs his sense of place through his lived experience of inhabited locales. In doing so, the analysis reveals a developing and maturing mastery in the observation of his surroundings and a discovery of space in its many forms from which his conception of place emerges. Heaney recollects his nascent engagement with territory through his familial attachments and the sensory qualities of his rural childhood environs is well visible in *Death of a Naturalist*. Throughout the collection, the poet emphasises the significance of familial labour as the mechanism by which his craft becomes rooted in

the very essence of landscape, a connection substantiated through his genealogical heritage. In *Door into the Dark*, he advances his exploration of placeness from a demonstration of how the land transforms from a mere geographical setting to a matrix of identity formation into a more profound dimension that emphasises rural labour, memory, heritage and locale. This collection broadens the concept of territorial bonding by incorporating elements of liminality and myth, which suggests— as intimated by the title itself – a descent into the obscured mysteries of the landscape. *Wintering Out* exhibits even more thematic evolution and linguistic experimentation, through which Heaney addresses spatiality, archaeological depth and political engagement. Despite shifts in the specific preoccupations of this volume, which signal a transition in Heaney’s poetics, they maintain continuity through the persistent intensification of concerns regarding the cultural dichotomy between place, memory, tradition and Irish and British soldiers, while simultaneously advancing towards a more nuanced engagement with historical and cultural elements.

### **1. Inscribing Place: The Genesis and Development of Territorial Consciousness in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark***

I grew up in the twentieth century, but it was a twentieth century that had roots really in the Medieval, in a countryside where we still ploughed with the horses, lit the fire in the morning, carried water from wells and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Heaney was born in rural County Derry,<sup>4</sup> where the landscape featured bogs, thatched houses and agricultural fields. This environment fostered communal living and mutual support among its residents and Heaney’s family farm embodied all these distinctive regional characteristics.<sup>5</sup> The farm is depicted as a whitewashed cottage,

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Making Sense of a Life’, interview with Tiago Moura, posted 13 April 2010 by The NewsHouse, YouTube, 3 min., 35 sec., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi_k).

<sup>4</sup> County Derry is one of the six counties of Northern Ireland and one of the nine counties of Ulster.

<sup>5</sup> Heaney provided a most detailed visual description of his birth place in a written interview with Dennis O’Driscoll: ‘We’re talking about a one-storey, longish, lowish, thatched and whitewashed house, about thirty yards from the main road. Parallel to the road. [. . .] Beyond the alders was what we called “the front garden” – a mini-field of sorts – and between the front garden and the house was a boxwood hedge. The lane, or loaning, went straight in from the road and formed one end of that front garden. [. . .] Then, if you stood facing the front door, you had on your right the front window of the “kitchen” or living room; farther along

distinct yet intimate: ‘your own fields were around you, neighbours that you knew were beside you’.<sup>6</sup> As Heaney articulates in various essays and interviews, the era of his birth and upbringing represented an almost primeval, mythic period, where time appeared suspended and events occurring in the external world were subdued by the near-mediaeval rhythm of rural existence. Even the ‘great historical action’ he describes in ‘Mossbawn’ – American bombings and troops patrolling in the vicinity<sup>7</sup> (*PP* 17) – was unable to disturb the rhythms of country life.



*Figure 2. Seamus Heaney's family cottage in Mossbawn, Castledawson. Photograph by RTE Archives, accessed April 2025 at <https://www.rte.ie/archives/>.*

Heaney refers to his place of childhood as ‘[a]historical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern’ (*CP* 4) and to the wartime period as ‘pre-reflexive’, ‘pre-literate’, and ‘pre-historical’ (*CP* 7). He consistently cherishes and remembers this

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on your right was the front window of the “upper bedroom”. On your left, you had the front window of the “lower bedroom” and, beyond that, the stable door – since the stable was “under the roof” with the dwelling house’. Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stone: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (Faber & Faber, 2008), 3.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Seamus Heaney on Poetry – The New Yorker Festival’ – interview by Paul Muldoon, posted 22 July 2014, by The New Yorker, YouTube, 13 min., 50 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HWurkQ1ao4>.

<sup>7</sup> Heaney refers to the period around the 1940s, when U.S. Army was staged in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England (Rick Atkinson, *The Liberation Trilogy* [Henry Holt and Company, Vol. 1, 56]) as part of a broader division to support the Allied war effort. Northern Ireland represented a strategic logistic point for the operations in Europe.

place as sacred – an environment where he developed both his appreciation for nature and his compassion for people. Heaney’s childhood was filled with the sounds of nature and by activities involving natural elements: willow and birch trees, badger’s holes, and rabbits running around. News from beyond rural Mossbawn reached him only through radio transmissions – ethereal spoken words unable to disturb the solidity of rural life. Yet, while the news broadcasted the events of war and the familiar names of neighbors were often listed among the fallen, there was something ‘torpid’ in the understanding of what was really happening: ‘[I]f there was something culpable about such political ignorance in that time and place, there was something positive about the security I inhabited as a result of it’ (*CP* 7). Through this sentence, Heaney encapsulates his paradoxical position during the Troubles – simultaneously sheltered and exposed, dwelling in rural seclusion yet acutely aware of the violence permeating Northern Ireland.

Scholarly examinations of Heaney’s formative environment and worldview rank among the most frequently cited areas of critical enquiry and provide an essential context for comprehending the fundamental impulses and aspirations that prompted his distinctive conceptualisation and representation of territory. Nature and landscape are the quintessential backdrop against which Heaney constructed his entire oeuvre, serving not merely as setting but as the generative matrix for his poetic vision.

In an interview for *The New Yorker* made by Paul Muldoon, Heaney referred back to his childhood in the following terms:

When I think of my childhood. . . How do you think of your childhood? It’s an inwardness. And how do you imagine it? My whole childhood, in one way, could be summed up. . . Little fellow in the middle of the fields, listening to a lark. It’s very poetic, but it actually is, in a way, the wholeness of that and the littleness of that; the solitude and the homeness at the same time in the whole picture.<sup>8</sup>

Images of nature and domestic scenes converge in Heaney’s recollections of his childhood years. The bucolic setting he describes represents more than a tranquil, timeless space. While this rural environment embodies wholeness, Heaney simultaneously acknowledges its inherent duality. When he describes this life as ‘in suspension between the archaic and

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Seamus Heaney on Poetry’, 20:00.

the modern', he articulates one of Ireland's fundamental divisions – a split later mirrored in the political separation between Northern Ireland and the Republic, the religious divide between Protestant and Catholics, and his personal tension between poetic craft and cultural tradition.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, Heaney experiences this division as both threatening and reassuring and believes that external dangers could barely penetrate the stability of his unmovable centre.<sup>10</sup> Within this environment, where he connected deeply with traditional sensory experience and natural rhythms, Heaney developed the ability to perceive what others often overlooked. Through this heightened awareness, he explored what it meant to observe the world with more attentive eyes and, echoing William Wordsworth, to transform quotidian rural experiences into poetic insights. In his later work, Heaney attributed this centripetal force not only to nature but also to poetry itself, which he described as enabling 'a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference' (CP 10).

In this context, where poetry is the junction between the inner world and the community, Heaney crafts a language that translates his perceptions and surrounding events. *Death of a Naturalist* represents an initial attempt to unite his early attempts at crafting and his worldview, a process wherein he meticulously examined his evolution from the introspective, self-referential 'I' toward more nuanced engagements with a collective 'we'. His exploration of these initial perceptions of the world was invariably suffused with the tactile presence of the landscape, and he positioned nature as both an intimate companion and an omnipresent backdrop against which his consciousness unfolds. The inextricable interconnection between nature and craft is the result of how territory shaped Heaney's poetic vision and worldview. Against this background, Heaney excavated the fundamental elements that will become the enduring leitmotifs of his literary oeuvre and established the conceptual infrastructure that sustained his poetic

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<sup>9</sup> The division afflicting the country was well felt by its inhabitants, so much so that Heaney too created, sometimes unconsciously, images of duality. In *North*, for example, he writes of 'the scone rising/to the tick of two clocks' (N x). The kitchen, another central part of the house, where his mother and his aunt Mary often worked. Amid this almost sacred context, memory and present mix, and the two clocks representing the past and the present.

<sup>10</sup> '[N]one of the news of these world spasms entered me as terror. If there was something ominous in the newscaster's tones, there was something torpid about our understanding of what was at stake; and if there was something culpable about such political ignorance in that time and place, there was something positive about the security I inhabited as a result of it'. (CP 6-7)

explorations throughout his career. Among the principal themes explored in *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney negotiates the terrain between universal truths and deeply personal revelations. As he did so, he constructed a reflective surface in which readers might discern aspects of their own experiences as they continue to do today.

Through his poetry, Heaney reveals the progressive passage from the experiences of a young boy encountering the world to the responsibilities of adult life. *Death of a Naturalist* – and the four initial collections that preceded *North* – function as a lyrical narrative of becoming, wherein Heaney chronicles his evolution from naïve youth to self-aware adult. The final lines of ‘Personal Helicon’ – and of *Death of a Naturalist* – exemplify this pivotal shift. The childhood world populated by rats and frogs and characterised by slow-paced rhythms and naïve observations, is gradually superseded by the imperative to establish adult dignity: ‘Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,/To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring/Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing’ (*DN* 44). The rural life characterised by death, recollections, family dynamics and animal encounters carries with it the profound significance of genealogical heritage, which ultimately lies cherished in the memory of the land itself. The opening poem of the collection, ‘Digging’, is widely regarded as Heaney’s poetic manifesto precisely due to its deliberate focus on memory, historical consciousness, craftsmanship, and social engagement – thematic preoccupations that came to define most of his subsequent literary productions.

In Chapter I, the pen held ‘snug as a gun’ between the finger and the thumb was interpreted as linguistic tension between being Irish and writing in English. However, another dimension to the dichotomy and felt division of Irish identity embedded within the image of the two fingers holding the pen, and these lines subtly – perhaps unconsciously – evoke the two societies of Northern Ireland and the Republic, with the poet growing in-between, are subtly – perhaps unconsciously – evoked in these lines. The poem is emblematic of Heaney’s articulated intention to diverge from ancestral vocational patterns. His declaration of professional autonomy remains suffused with ambivalence and an underlying sense of historical guilt: Heaney recognises that his pursuit of literary endeavours represents not merely a personal choice but access to opportunities systematically denied to his forebears through the structural limitations imposed by colonial rule. ‘Digging’ illuminates the inextricable interconnections between historical

consciousness, familial legacy, sociopolitical conflict, personal vocation, and the territorial dimensions of Irish identity and establishes these as fundamental, interwoven elements of Heaney's poetic vision. 'Digging' thus inaugurates a collection filled with the tactile essence of the land and the layered recollections of childhood and maturity, all experienced within the liminal space that characterised Irish existence – a territorial ambiguity to which Ireland itself remained both constant witness as well as unwavering certainty.

Other poems that examine the enmeshment of ancestry and the imperative to reconcile tradition and vocation include 'Follower' and 'Ancestral Photograph'. The former shows how labour is embedded within the very fabric of the landscape. Heaney's father and grandfather are present as familial touchstones precisely through their land-related occupations, and Heaney's description of their expert manipulation of implements that shape the soil establishes them as masters of their craft. Through this process, genealogy and familial identity are bound inextricably to territorial connection. Heaney's vocational struggle thus reveals itself as more complex than initially apparent. Specifically, serving the bonds of familial occupational tradition required Heaney to reconfigure his relationship with the land. Consequently, his is developed, in part, as an alternative means of territorial embeddedness that is achieved, ultimately, through language rather than agricultural work.

'Follower' marks a progression in Heaney's negotiation with perceived ancestral inadequacy. Just as 'An Advancement in Learning' chronicles his triumph over primal fear, this poem documents how the poet transcended his sense of deficiency vis-à-vis his forebears. This evolution represents a crucial developmental threshold at which Heaney reconciles his inner struggle between vocation and with hereditary respect. The initial section of 'Follower' elaborates upon the manual proficiency of Heaney's father and focuses specifically on the physical postures adopted during agricultural labour – corporeal knowledge that rendered him an expert in his vocation. The child's aspiration to emulate his progenitor's path ('I wanted to grow up and plough,/To close one eye, stiffen my arm'; (DN 12) is ruptured in the concluding stanza, wherein the poet acknowledges that within his chosen craft – poetry – the paternal figure is the follower rather than the followed. This inversion suggests that Heaney succeeded to some extent in

mastering his father's capacity to shape the landscape, albeit through linguistic rather than physical intervention.

In both 'Digging' and 'Follower', Heaney articulates his sense of place via familial genealogical heritage and offers territorial relationships through the traditional labour his ancestors kept alive. The rigours of rural existence receive detailed exposition in a poem that Heaney wrote from his mother's perspective. The dramatic monologue speaks to the exacting nature of daily toil from the maternal point of view, and the repeated refrain 'I'm tired' functions as rhetorical embodiment of the arduous nature of manual labour compounded by the additional burden of pregnancy. Her lamentations initially concern the agricultural labour – 'I'm tired of the feeding of stock – before shifting to her gestational burden – 'I'm tired of walking about with this plunge/Inside me' (*DD* 19). This dual exhaustion encapsulates the fatigue inherent in the experiences of rural women, who must simultaneously satisfy two distinct natural imperatives: agricultural labour and biological reproduction. Heaney uses these images to highlight the difficulties inherent to rural life. Reproduction is also a central theme in 'Elegy for a Still-born Child', where Heaney frames the harshness of a failed pregnancy as part of natural cycles.

Despite drawing from personal experiences, Heaney achieved a kind of anonymity in his early poems.<sup>11</sup> His writing on childhood discoveries and events, he reflects experiences common to many of his Northern Ireland contemporaries. By presenting these personal experiences – often universally relatable to childhood moments – in an anonymous tone, Heaney transforms his individual perspective with universal resonance. The more Heaney digs into his land's history, connects it with present events, and grows both as a poet and an individual, the more precisely he describes that which was previously anonymous. The following three collections, in fact, contain specific references to individuals who inhabited Heaney's reality.

Heaney matured amid the soundscape of rural Ireland, attuned to the rhythms of pumps, clocks, animal sounds and natural cycles.<sup>12</sup> The pump – which he termed *omphalos*, the literal and metaphorical centre of his world – became the centrepiece of Heaney's world, both internal and external. People regularly visited Heaney's farm to

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter I for a more detailed explanation of what Vendler means by 'anonymity'.

<sup>12</sup> Heaney specifically recalls hearing hens, cackles, clucks, turkeys, geese, calves, cows, pigs and horses.

collect water from what he vividly describes as a ‘slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green as set on a concrete plinth’, a pump that ‘marked the centre of another world’. (*PP* 17) Through this vivid description, Heaney transforms this seemingly ordinary, everyday object into a symbol of life-giving power, communal interconnection, and repository of memory. In ‘Personal Helicon’, Heaney extends this eloquent articulation to his childhood encounters with various wells and provides richly textured sensory images that capture the phenomenological dimensions of his experience. In this poem, the well clearly acquires multiple symbolic dimensions: as a site of childhood play, as a repository of memory, an instrument of self-discovery, and a metaphor for poetic vocation. A parallel use of instruments (as the pump in this case) as means of poetic investigation occurs in ‘The Forge’, where Heaney transmutes the object into a tool of poetic craft that offers access to the obscured realm – the mysteries and cultural secrets embedded within the landscape. Here, Heaney synthesises his fascination with manual craftsmanship and the latent sources of power made accessible through material manipulation through metaphoric engagement with the word ‘craft’ and the significance of the ‘forge’. Interpreted literally, Heaney alludes to manual labour conducted with hoops, hammers and anvils in service of creating implements. In the figurative sense, Heaney refers to the craft of poetry, which likewise requires instruments – such as paper, pens, ink – to create poems. The poem’s central portion offers a significant evocation of the concept of centeredness:

The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,  
 Horned unicorn, at one end square,  
 Set there immovable: an altar  
 Where he expends himself in shape and music. (*DD* 9)

The centre recurs alongside music, which constitutes Heaney’s method of discussing poetry. In ‘The Makings of Music’, he asserts that each poet possesses his distinctive music and investigates on how each –Yeats and Wordsworth in the essay’s case– happened succeeded in discovering theirs. The unconscious effort Heaney appears to invest in the act of crafting recalls the unconscious and almost mechanical process of forging implements. The anvil – immovable as the *omphalos* – stands at the centre of a site where a sacred event is about to take place: ‘an altar/Where he expends himself in shape and

music'. Heaney's profound fascination with these structures and implements emerges immediately in the opening lines of 'Personal Helicon', where he asserts that 'they could not keep me from wells/And old pumps' (*DN* 44). His meticulous description of the wells' acoustic properties and physical attributes showcase how thoroughly Heaney was immersed in the rural landscape, such that he retained precise sensory details decades after the original experience. His attention to the minutiae of place reveals not just mere nostalgic recollection but a phenomenological engagement with the landscape, which became fundamental to his poetic methodology. The recurrent invocation of traditional artisanal implements, exemplified in 'The Forge', underscores the significance Heaney attributes to the nexus between place and its associated traditions.

Another element that establishes the sense of place in Heaney's poetry is his reliance on natural elements to comprehend reality. Heaney's attention to nature is clear in his interest in natural elements, particularly water, earth and wind, and this accounts for his poetry's frequent designation as 'elemental'. Of these elements, water and earth occupy the most prominent positions in his poetic imagination. Water, in particular, is embodied in recurring images of pump and wells. The metaphorical conflation of water with memory creates a potent symbol through which Heaney accesses and articulates the layered complexities of the individual and collective past. In his exploration of how Heaney employs water in his poetry, Nicholas Allen highlights the unique bond that island dwellers develop with this fundamental element. According to Allen, islands are tangible bridges to the mysterious for those who live on them, especially because these defined, enclosed landmasses are subject to constant change in the face of currents, both historical and oceanic: 'In this formula, water is a metaphor for changing states and liquidity a mode of transition, the many varieties of rain one sign of the writer's flexibility in writing about place'.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, water emerges as an apt element to characterise the various historical and political events surrounding Ireland, shaping the national narrative with the uncontrolled unpredictability characteristic of meteorological phenomena. In 'Crediting Poetry', Heaney links the susceptibility of water changes in the buckets to the impressionability nature of the Irish people who lived in the countryside at that time (*CP*

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<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Allen, 'Seamus Heaney and Water', *Irish Review* 49–50 (2014–2015), 174.

4). Water is thus positioned as the fluid element that best describes the living attitudes of the Northern Irish people.

Out of the association between the flowing properties of both water and poetry, Heaney creates a compelling parallel between poet and the diviner. The last poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, 'The Diviner', explores this parallel relationship between the water diviner and the poet. Here, Heaney highlights the poet's acute, almost solemn awareness of the distinctive gift that distinguishes him from ordinary individuals, which calls back to the Romantic poet's status as an intermediary figure between prophet and commoner. Just as the diviner can command the element of water at will, Heaney crafts language and plumbs its depths. This self-consciousness is illustrated powerfully in the poem's concluding lines, where Heaney describes the curiosity of onlookers attempting to use the diviner's instrument, the hazel rod: 'he handed them the rod without a word/It lay dead in their grasp till, nonchalantly/He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred' (DN 23). These final lines reveal Heaney's nascent confidence in his poetic vocation and his recognition that poetry constitutes a singular gift bestowed on select individuals rather than a universally accessible capacity. Furthermore, the diviner appears to derive his powers directly from the land, which he both regulates and manipulates through an almost symbiotic relationship. This dynamic is a powerful echo of Heaney's profound connection to the land as both a wellspring of inspiration and as a force whose energies he channels and transforms through his poetic language. The poet, like the diviner, is an intermediary figure who accesses hidden currents – whether literal or metaphorical – and renders them perceptible to others through their specialised craft and innate sensibility. The professionalism Heaney foregrounds in the depiction of the diviner's craft serves as a metaphoric reflection of his own artistic methodology. The diviner's precise, measured gestures and the accuracy of his outcomes, parallel Heaney's meticulous approach to language and his exactitude in selecting the appropriate lexical register for his poetry.

In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney alternates between the themes of territorial engagement and interpersonal connection. This pattern is most apparent in 'Gravities', 'Lovers on Aran', and 'Valediction', 'Honeymoon Flight', 'Poem', 'Scaffolding' and 'The Peninsula', wherein Heaney associates terrestrial characteristics with aspects of love, particularly elemental forces. Rather than diverging from Heaney's fundamental project of establishing a sense of place, these love poems serve as metaphorical substantiations of

the intrinsic relationship between territory and care. Through this juxtaposition, Heaney demonstrates how affective bonds and geographical attachments share conceptual terrain. In the first three love poems, the element of water functions as a medium for emotional expression. The sea and surrounding landscape serve as metaphorical vehicles that articulate the complexities of love. In 'Gravities', love imagery converges with representations of the sea and origins to generate a constellation of visual metaphors that illuminate the various forms of 'gravities' one encounters throughout one's existence. Heaney uses wind to symbolise the dynamic forces that simultaneously attract and repel lovers, first through the metaphor of kites moving with apparent freedom yet remain 'reined by strings' (*DN* 30) and, subsequently through the extended metaphor with pigeons: 'The pigeon that deserts you suddenly/Is heading home, instinctively faithful' (*DN* 30). Here, avian creatures are emblematic of the instinctual pull towards home and align metaphorically with the reciprocal gravitational attraction between lovers. The poet conceptualises separation from his beloved as a form of exile and draws from an implicit parallel to Joyce's nostalgic yearning for Dublin while in Paris – a comparison that underscores how emotional gravity exerts its inexorable force to draw the spirit back toward its emotional centre.

Liberty and constraint, images of love and sea metaphors also appear in 'Valediction'. Here, Heaney again uses maritime language – 'anchored', 'unmoored', 'strand', 'command', and 'mutiny' – to imbue the distance from the lover with a pregnant feeling of uneasiness and disorientation explicated through phrases such as 'I am at sea', or 'absence/Rocked love's balance, unmoored/The days' (*DN* 33). This longing for the distant land, which Heaney conceptualises as a lover to whom one returns, is further affirmed in the essay 'The God in the Tree', where he declares that 'This love of place and lamentation against exile from a cherished territory is another typical strain in the Celtic sensibility' (*PP* 184). Heaney's deployment of maritime metaphors is thus intrinsically connected to cultural traditions deeply embedded within the Irish Sea itself. Like Yeats before him, Heaney endeavours to restore the old legends that would connect people to their homelands. For Heaney and his young companions, the first approach to the land occurs via old stories and folklore tales embedded in the territory and intersecting with the tribe.

In 'Honeymoon Flight', Heaney employs the element of air as governing metaphor through which he portrays the trajectory of love as an aerial journey above both earth and water. This poem is distinctive in that Heaney incorporates all four elemental forces to create a comprehensive natural framework through he articulates the intricacy of a romantic experience:

And launched right off the earth by force of fire,  
We hang, miraculous, above the water,  
Dependent on the invisible air  
To keep us airborne and to bring us further. (*DN 36*)

'Scaffolding,' in turn, employs the solidity and stability of earth through terrestrial metaphors of the house's foundation, and, as in 'The Forge', manual labour is vital to the house's construction. Heaney refers to his marriage to Mary and his reassurances that the foundations they have established upon the earth are sufficiently robust to withstand any forthcoming difficulty. Specifically, Heaney emphasises how the initial construction work of construction – 'Make sure that the planks won't slip at busy points/Secure the ladders, tighten bolted joints' – that is essential during the preliminary stages of a relationship creates a strong foundation. The assurance of having built a sturdy wall enables a relationship to overcome any temporary rupture:

So if, my dear, there sometime seem to be  
Old bridges breaking between you and me,  
  
Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall,  
Confident that we have built our wall. (*DN 37*)

While other poems in the collection focus primarily on the masculine aspect of earth work and ancestral figures characterised by pronounced masculinity, the love poems emphasise water – an element predominantly associated with feminine creative force in Heaney's poetic corpus. In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney establishes a deliberate elemental taxonomy wherein water and wind are principally connected to sentiment and the feminine sphere, while earth remains firmly situated within the masculine domain. This vision is confirmed by Heaney's interest in Hughes poetry who, in his early poems, aspired

to command all the elements, ‘to bring them within the jurisdiction of his authoritarian voice’ (*PP* 154). Only ‘Poem’ and ‘Scaffolding’ employ images of grounding and stability through representations of security likened to home, stone, walls and garden – of ‘bastions of clay and mush’ – to emphasise the reassurance and constancy provided by having established solid foundations for love. The metaphor connecting these two works centres on the wall, which signifies the protective security of a domestic enclosure.

Water is also a fatal element and a domain of frightening things. In *Death of a Naturalist*, water pumped from wells is also used as an instrument of death. In ‘The Early Purges’, Heaney describes harsh scenes from his childhood, including the common practice of drowning kittens, rats, rabbits, crows, and hens – anything that Dan Taggart (a farm worker who epitomises the harshness and pragmatism of rural life) could snatch. Michael Parker suggests a potential political dimension to the poem, specifically that the use of the word ‘purges’ in the title may evoke associations with Stalinist repressions in the URSS in the 1930s, while also highlighting Heaney’s apparent emotional detachment towards the animals’ fate. Heaney’s narrative voice manifests as dispassionate, clinical, and objective – and although readers might naturally sympathize with Dan Taggart’s victims,<sup>14</sup> Heaney remains ‘dumb,’ as if desensitised to the disturbing imagery of kittens blobbing in the bucket’s water like ‘wet gloves,’ ‘glossy and dead’ (*DN* 11). The normalisation of quotidian violence as part of rural life speaks to the pervasive nature of death in agricultural settings and Heaney’s juvenile endeavour to assume adult behaviours by witnessing the scene unflinchingly – a strategic posture that signals his attempted fraternisation with mortality as a natural phenomenon rather than an aberration requiring emotional response. The only genuine sympathy Heaney appears to extend towards the victims’ fate is distilled in the fourth stanza: ‘Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung/Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains/Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung’, before promptly returning to his aspiration for maturity with the deliberately concise admission, ‘Until I forgot them’ (*DN* 11). Dillon Johnston comments that many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist* reveal ‘the sensitive rural youth building in language and verse-structures a stay against farmyard barbarity and the violence of

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 67.

nature'.<sup>15</sup> In 'The Early Purges' specifically, Heaney deploys language as defensive mechanism against witnessed atrocities, processing barbaric acts through a refined linguistic medium. Johnston discerns the political undercurrents embedded within the poem and contends that Taggart embodies the 'terseness' characteristic of Northern farming communities, which sites in opposition to the indignant sentimentality of animal-rights advocates who condemn such practices. Johnston's analysis extends to the poem's structure – never incidental in Heaney's work, and he posits that the predominantly end-stopped tercets mirror Taggart's structured, uncomplicated cognitive patterns and facilitates detachment from perspectives that transcend farming's inherent regulatory framework.<sup>16</sup> Heaney's stance is thus twofold, and he ends the poem in an almost journalistic and detached tone:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town  
Where they consider death unnatural  
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down. (DN 11)

The events portrayed in the poem illustrate the extent to which rural existence was punctuated by harshness and trepidation and where mortality was not abhorrent but a pragmatic methodology for controlling animal populations. While some of Heaney's poetry celebrates natural beauty or the comical aspects of animal appearance, such as in 'Cow in Calf' and 'Turkeys Observed',<sup>17</sup> respectively, the most striking compositions are those depict scenes of the perilous and foreboding aspects of nature in the rural context. Among the most formidable creatures that inhabited Heaney's childhood landscape, rats are present as a potent symbols that reflect the anxieties and challenges of his poetic vocation. Within this interpretive framework, the early poems that feature menacing animals are instructive in terms of Heaney's initial tendency to evade responsibilities and difficulties, which he ultimately embraces in the final lines of 'Personal Helicon', while 'An Advancement of Learning' signals a significant positive evolution in his relationship

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<sup>15</sup> Dillon Johnston, 'Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> As Heaney writes, 'He is just another poor forked thing./A skin bag plumped with inky putty./[. . .] He lorded in on the claw-flecked mud/With a grey flick of his Confucian eye'. (DN 24)

to fear. In this poem, Heaney describes a similar panorama of alertness regarding the rural landscape of his birthplace and chronicles a significant progression in his capacity to manage and transcend fear.

Symbolic of Ireland's marshy and boggy soils, rats and frogs are among the most dreaded animals.<sup>18</sup> In the poem, Heaney emphasises their sliminess in the poem and his almost primordial fear of ever sighting these creatures: 'Something slobbered curtly, close,/Smudging the silence: a rat/Slimed out of the water and/My throat sickened' (*DN* 6). The frequent use of the voiceless alveolar fricative 's' underscores the feelings of disgust he experienced at the mere sight of the animal: 'something', 'slobbered', 'smudging', 'silence', 'slimed' and 'sickened'. Heaney's phobia forces Heaney to retreat along another path, but, unfortunately, another rat appears, creating a dead end: 'I turned down the path in cold sweat/But God, another was nimbling/Up the far bank, tracing its wet/Arcs on the stones' (*DN* 6). The poem illustrates Heaney's facing of an atavistic fear. Slimy, soil-dwelling creatures typically function as death archetypes, and the young Heaney confronts these living emblems of mortality, ultimately surmounting his trepidation.

Part of *Death of a Naturalist* is dedicated to Heaney's reconstruction of the primordial dread experienced by a child confronting wild creatures – a formative encounter with fear that serves as a critical foundation for his later poetic explorations of human violence and allows him to disclose a more nuanced comprehension of life's struggles. This early apprehension, which initially appears as typical childhood trepidation, becomes profoundly significant when viewed in the context of his subsequent works depicting warfare and civil strife. The embryonic elements of conflict are already discernible even in the collection's early poems, where seemingly innocuous natural elements, such as frogs, are transformed into potent military metaphors reminiscent of grenades. In 'Death of a Naturalist', specifically, frogspawn grown into threats 'sat/Poised as mud-grenades [. . .] gathered there for vengeance' (*DN* 4). The poem begins with a thorough description of the natural development of frogspawn into tadpoles, presented simultaneously as a biological process as an educational experience supervised by Miss

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<sup>18</sup> Their reproductive periods link rats and frogs to water. During these times, they are particularly active in humid areas and tend to hide into cavities or under dead leaves.

Walls, the schoolteacher. The tone of the poem abruptly shifts in tone during the second stanza, when the tadpoles transform from innocuous beings into emblems of war.

Then one hot day when fields were rank  
With cow dung in the grass, the angry frogs  
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges  
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard  
Before. 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. (*DN* 3–4)

Through a sophisticated act of transmutation, Heaney aligns natural phenomena with the sectarian violence plaguing Northern Ireland, thereby suggesting the extent to which conflict has been woven inextricably into the very fabric of Irish existence and in its territory. This rhetorical strategy illuminates Heaney's perception of strife not as an aberration but as an integral component of the national and historical consciousness as well as the fauna inhabiting its territory.

'The Barn' and 'Turkeys Observed' contain additional manifestations of the latent violence and implicit threats that permeate rural existence. In 'The Barn', Heaney recounts the experience of profound trepidation associated with winged creatures, specifically bats and birds. Following a meticulous description of the great agricultural structure that is comparable to the descriptive technique employed in 'Death of a Naturalist', Heaney abruptly transitions to an evocative portrayal of the menacing fauna inhabiting the barn: 'And into the nights when bats were on the wing/Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared/From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking' (*DN* 5). The passage culminates in the articulation of vulnerability and the child's fear of becoming prey: 'I was chaff/To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits./I lay face-down to shun the fear above' (*DN* 5). The world Heaney depicts is remarkably consistent. Rural life

operates according to an immutable order that perpetuates itself within the tranquil framework of natural principles. Heaney's objective, as he affirms in *Crediting Poetry*, is to convey this reliability through the veracity of his poetic language.

Both safety and threat are present in a territory governed by established patterns and structures to which Heaney becomes habituated, and upon which he constructs his distinctive sense of place. By alternating bucolic compositions – such as 'Churning Day' or 'Blackberry Picking' – and the threats of rural life, Heaney also inserts the already nascent seeds of what will later become his stance on the historical events plaguing Ireland. 'Requiem for the Croppies' and 'At a Potato Digging' are two such poems that combine historical tribulation and an inevitable bonding with the land. The latter, in particular, juxtaposes potato farming and the memory of the Irish Potato Famine of 1845–1849. In contrast to the almost idyllic images of men ploughing the countryside in the nearly elegiac tone of 'Digging', Heaney speaks to how trauma and violence remain embedded in the land and the inexorable repetition of history despite the passage of time. In four sections, the poem moves from past to present, alternating descriptions of the diggers' mechanical labour with images of death and starvation. The potato serves as an emblem that eventually, between Sections II and III, merges with the figures of the diggers.

[. . .]

The rough bark of humus erupts  
knots of potatoes (a clean birth)  
whose solid feel, whose wet insides  
promise taste of ground and root.  
To be piled in pits; live skills, blind eyed.

III

Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on  
wild higgledy skeletons,  
scoured the land in 'forty-five,  
wolfed the blighted root and died. (*DN* 19)

Heaney's apparent anger and desperation seem to intensify as the poem goes on. In the fourth stanza of Section III, he writes:

A people hungering from birth,  
Grubbing, like plants, in the earth,  
Were grafted with a great sorrow.  
Hope rotted like a marrow. (DN 19–20)

Both Helen Vendler and Neil Corcoran recognise a quasiliturgical element in the poem. For Corcoran especially, ‘Potato digging becomes a ritual of appeasement to the Earth as “the Black/Mother”, the beneficial provider of food’.<sup>19</sup> The Black Mother is symbolic of Heaney’s nascent conception of the land, which he will eventually mythologise through the Germanic goddess Nerthus.

‘Requiem for the Croppies’ reads as a genuine resistance poem, wherein Heaney finally employs the collective we rather than the self-referential ‘I’ to include himself as part of the resistance. Commemorating the martyrdom of the rebels who fought at the Battle of Vinegar Hill and were defeated by the British army, the poem serves as tribute and commemoration, a ‘requiem’ for figures who became, as Vendler observes, anonymous.<sup>20</sup> The poem’s most potent image is that of the scattered barley the rebels used to carry in their pockets, which were planted in the land upon the rebel’s death and shot up in August:

Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.  
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.  
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.  
They buried us without shroud or coffin  
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave. (DD 14)

Here, the grave – Mother Earth – cherishes the corpses of civilians, as she will in *Wintering Out* and *North*. In addition to being a cherisher of bodies, she is a hoarder receiving her Irish children into her bosom.

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<sup>19</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney. A Critical Study* (Faber & Faber Limited, 1998), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Vendler, 21.

## 2. Towards *North: Wintering Out* and the Emergence of Archaeological Poetics

Heaney's third poetic collection, *Wintering Out*, represents a progression of themes previously explored in his initial two volumes: political engagement, archaeological depth and linguistic excavation. The collection thus marks an initial movement towards recognising poetry's collective function and art's social responsibilities, as outlined through Arnold's and Dewey's theories in Chapter II. Heaney accomplishes this reconciliation by crafting metaphors that deftly merge his poetic vocation with both poetry's accessibility and the societal imperative to adopt a position on the Irish political situation. The mythological elements he employs and his archaeological descents are traceable to his encounter with Peter Glob's seminal text, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, which constitutes a decisive turning point. From here onward, Heaney worked towards establishing a fitting founding myth that could synthesise craft, territorial consciousness, and sociopolitical engagement. Furthermore, as Parker observes, Heaney expands his conception of 'home' beyond the perimeter of Mossbawn and the figures from his initial collections: 'It is now a place and a people stretching back into time, into various periods of Irish history'.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1 Linguistic Cartography: the *Dinnseanchas* of Irish Tradition

Throughout Northern Ireland, place names preserve traces of pre-Norman and pre-Tudor settlements, which anchor contemporary notions of homeland in Celtic and Gaelic spatial traditions. Ireland's political divisions were present from the beginning of Heaney's life in the very name of the family farm, Mossbawn. 'Bawn'<sup>22</sup> refers to the plantation of Ulster, which began in the early seventeenth century. Different pronunciations of 'bawn' imply the first division implicit in the word's etymology, but Heaney clearly states that the division was soaked in the language of the land, "redolent of the histories of its owners.

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<sup>21</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> Reference to Heaney's use. The word 'bawn' actually means 'walled enclosure' from the Irish Gaelic *bábhún*.

Broagh, The Long Rings, Bell's Hill; Brian's Field, the Round Meadow the Demesne; each name was a kind of love made to each acre' (*PP* 20).

In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney acknowledged the directional shift in his phonetic linguistic exploration as 'a kind of melt-down of memory-stuff and Ulster myth of belonging' (*SS* 125). In keeping with his typical methodological approach of deriving inspiration from established literary and intellectual traditions, Heaney's discourse on language commences with an analysis of earlier writers. In 'The Fire i' the Flint,' for example, Heaney demonstrates how linguistic considerations manifest in Gerard Manley Hopkins' recognition of 'the masculine powers' (*PP* 86) in poetry and describes the regulatory principles by which language must abide to forestall excessive disorder. Heaney's distinct perspective on linguistic gender is articulated in 'Belfast':

[T]he process (of poetic craft) is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine cluster of image and emotion. I suppose the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature. (*PP* 34)

*Wintering Out* represents Heaney's first conscious attempt at versing while using language as a tool for archaeological excavation into the memory of Ireland, in its political dimension and as a way to experiment with the fragmentation of the land through the fractured syntax of language itself. Neil Corcoran synthesises the concept of 'tongue' in a brilliant manner:

Heaney's preoccupation with the tongue, in this book which subtly registers the contours of a divided culture, derives from the fact that the tongue, or language, he speaks, and uses as a poet – English – is not native or original to the land he comes from – Ireland – or straightforwardly identifiable with the feeling or aspiration of the community from which he derives. English is, at least in the traditional nationalist reading of the case, the imposition of the colonial oppressor, dispossessing the native Irish of their own first 'tongue'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Corcoran, *A Critical Study*, 37–38.

In reviving the ancient literary tradition of *dinnseanchas*, Heaney attempts to restore eroded nationalist connections forged through language while addressing and mitigating, however tentatively, the linguistic dispossession of the Irish people. These compositions are not merely a synthesis of linguistic experimentation with cultural foundations, but also a means of reconnecting Irish history through the reappropriation of language following years of British dispossession. Among the poems born out of this tradition are ‘Anahorish’, ‘Toome’, ‘Broagh’, and ‘A New Song’, all of which assess the relationship between subject and place. These poems exemplify one strategy through which Heaney constructs a sense of place founded upon linguistic articulation and territorial relationships. In precise alignment with Turco’s theoretical framework, the act of denomination represents the secondary phase in establishing a relationship with the soil, following direct physical engagement but preceding more complex cultural elaborations. Additionally, the linguistic significance of the association between locale and toponym lies in the collective cohesion it engenders. Turco posits that language disengages individuals from their immediate lived experiences, enabling them to operate according to others’ experiential frameworks. Thus, *dinnseanchas* functions as a linguistic instrument that unifies the community through the fundamental act of place-naming.

The communal cohesion created by employing regionalised lexicons, distinct from usage elsewhere in the country, demonstrates Heaney’s transition from the more self-referential compositions of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* towards a more society-facing turn in his poetic craft. In ‘Anahorish’<sup>24</sup>, the third poem of *Wintering Out*, Heaney unites both language and the sense of place inherent in the place name, which comes from the Gaelic *Anach fhior uisce*, meaning ‘the place of clear water’.

*Anahorish*

My ‘place of clear water’,  
the first hill in the world  
where springs washed into  
the shiny grass.

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<sup>24</sup> Located in Northern Ireland, Anahorish was where Heaney attended primary school among a rare mix of Catholic and Protestant students.

and darkened cobbles  
in the bed of the lane.  
Anahorish, soft gradient  
of consonant, vowel-meadow,

after-image of lamps  
swung through the yards  
on winter evenings.  
With pails and barrows

those mound-dwellers go waist-deep in mist  
to break the light ice  
at wells and dunghills. (WO 6)

The poem is significant as it addresses the concept of the centrality of place, the *omphalos* subsequently invoked in *North* ('Mossbawn: Sunlight'), while reinstating water's essential role as the fundamental spring that allows the centre to fulfil its function. The allusion to 'the first hill in the world' echoes the metaphorical Mount Helicon from 'Personal Helicon' and represents a primordial source of poetic inspiration, an Edenic landscape wherein Heaney experiences both security and creative stimulus. In this instance, Heaney conceives Anahorish not merely as a primary elevation, but as 'the first hill in the world', thereby imbuing it with mythological significance within his personal cosmology and archetypal status. The poem occupies a pivotal position for two principal reasons. First, it reaffirms the centrality of the home-place in Heaney's conceptual framework and positions it as a place of purity associated with his childhood. Second, it properly introduces Heaney's linguistic engagement. Mouthing 'Anahorish' seems to purify everything back to the moment of creation, and the harmonious use of *enjambement* which creates delight and fluidity. Lloyd writes that this Edenic and absolute origin would seem 'to repeat and symbolize, knowledge cleansed and redeemed to graceful polish'.<sup>25</sup> The pronounced emphasis accorded to phonetics and its pleasurable effect on the vocal apparatus facilitates a regression to orality and the primordial nature of infantile world-

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<sup>25</sup> David Lloyd, "'Pap for the Dispossessed": Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity', *boundary2* 13, no. 2-3 (Winter/Spring, 1985), 319-342.

knowledge. The word's meaning also alludes to water as a life-giver and an essential element in life's survival and flourishing.

The naming of place thus constitutes a genuine recovery of unconscious elements – an initial stage in territorial cognition analogous to the infant's oral exploration of its environment. In the 'soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow', language assumes physical and neurological significance, and the toponym evokes a memorialised experience – 'after-image of lamps/swung through the yards/of winter evening' (*WO* 6). According to Turco's theory of denomination, which posits a profound connection binding inhabitants to their locales, Anahorish functions as mnemonic repository of embodied experience with the almost magical power of evoking the past. Through this process, he 'rediscovers a sense of harmony, and finds himself by means of myth'.<sup>26</sup>

The deployment of Gaelic lexical items in *Wintering Out* thus constitutes a relatively explicit declaration of Heaney's intent to reconnect with a primordial and collective sense of unity facilitated through a shared linguistic heritage. The articulation of toponyms, such as Toome or Broagh, evokes both childhood memories and more ancient tribal meanings. As in 'Anahorish', the voicing of said names also produces a pleasurable effect:

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

The tongue's movement suggests an exploration that extends beyond the physical confines of oral cavities to temporal depths spanning centuries. In this formulation, language functions as a repository of historical memory:

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

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<sup>26</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 98.

loam, flints, musket-balls,  
fragmented ware,  
torcs and fish-bones. (WO 16)

Heaney's approach to language transcends mere acoustic pleasure and encompasses all sensory modalities. The act of writing and constructing an appropriate linguistic structure even constitutes an erotic engagement in which words generate specific articulations within the oral cavity, and beneath 'the slab of the tongue' are treasured the physical constituents of terrain: 'loam,' 'flints,' 'musket-balls,' 'fragmented ware,' 'torcs,' and 'fish-bones'. In 'Toome', Heaney delicately guides the reader into the very substance of the landscape through a synthesis of language, corporeality, and memorial consciousness. According to Corcoran, the poem 'establishes a condition of primeval intimacy between poet and terrain, a sense that the existence of this "I" is coterminous with its knowledge of this place.'<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Heaney describes how the landscape intertwines with the word itself in 'Broagh'.

The garden mould  
bruised easily  
gathering in your heelmark  
was the black O

in Broagh,  
its low tattoo  
among the windy boortrees  
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost  
suddenly, like that last  
*gh* the strangers  
found difficult to manage. (WO 17)

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<sup>27</sup> Corcoran, *A Critical Study*, 46.

The pronunciation and phonetic demands of the word ‘broagh’ functions as a distinct marker of cultural and political identity in Northern Ireland. The terminal ‘gh’ sound, specific to the Ulster region, presents what Heaney identifies as a significant articulatory challenge for non-native speakers. This phonological particularity establishes a linguistic boundary that differentiates Ulster speech from other Irish regional varieties, effectively delineating insiders from outsiders through prosodic competence. Such linguistic demarcations reveal what might be understood as Heaney’s central concern: the dual capacity of language to operate simultaneously as both an instrument of division and a medium through which communities maintain their connection to place.<sup>28</sup>

The last poem in *Wintering Out* to be recognised as part of the recovery of the *dinnseanchas* tradition is ‘A New Song’. Rather than deploying specific toponyms or lexical items that might evoke place memory, Heaney focuses on the capacity of language – particularly poetic language – to transform landscape from geographical fact into spiritual resonance. The final two stanzas articulate Heaney’s call for poets to assert their distinctive voices:

But now our river tongues must rise  
From licking deep in native haunt  
To flood, with vovelling embrace,  
Demesnes staked out in consonants.

And Castledawson we’ll enlist  
And Upperlands, each planted bawn –  
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass –  
A vocable, as rath and bullaun. (*WO* 23)

Concerning the linguistic poems in *Wintering Out*, Parker observes that, on one level, ‘these poems mourn the “Vanished music” (“A New Song”) of Gaelic, on another they

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<sup>28</sup> The linguistic territoriality resurfaces in Heaney’s later collection *North*, specifically in ‘The Ministry of Fear’, in which he recounts a formative incident: During a car journey with his father, a police checkpoint required them to prove their local identity by testing their pronunciation: ‘The car like black cattle, snuffling and pointing/The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:’/“What’s your name, driver?”/“Seamus. . .”/“Seamus?” (*N* 59).

deny silence and loss'.<sup>29</sup> In this reading, language intersects with poetic vocation and with Heaney's consciousness of his capacity and responsibility – and that of other Irish poets – to restore significance to place-based identity.

## 2.2 Sacred Ground. Introducing the Bog Poems: 'The Tollund Man' and 'Nerthus'

The concluding poem of *Door into the Dark*, 'Bogland', reveals Heaney's deliberate intention to excavate territorial memory as an archaeologist of history and culture. In commentary on this poem, Heaney stated the following:

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 my childhood. [. . .] I began to get an idea of bog as a memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. [. . .] moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own property, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland (*FIW* 13–14).

The poem's conclusion – 'The wet centre is bottomless' (*DD* 44) – which simultaneously closes the entire collection, opens onto the bottomless wet centre that Heaney has endeavoured to penetrate in his preceding poetical explorations. The phrase signifies the inexhaustible capacity of bogs to preserve objects, corpses, history, and memory. Heaney excavates Irish traditional examples like the Great Irish Elk, as the bog simultaneously encompasses geological and human temporal scales in which the stratified depths of Irish soil appear thoroughly colonised ('Every layer they strip/Seems camped on before'). Nevertheless, Heaney presents the land as 'bottomless', an inexhaustible wellspring of hope, mystery and inspiration.

The centre of Ireland and of the national (and Heaney's) unconscious is attained through the bog metaphor, wherein past and present coexist and where Heaney can excavate forgotten memories while creating new ones that build upon ancient foundations. This 'probing of the unconscious' through the digging process acquires particular

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<sup>29</sup> Parker, 97.

significance in the bog poems.<sup>30</sup> Glob exerts a particular influence upon Heaney's poetics due to the contemporary context of the Troubles.

It [Glob's book] was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bog of Jutland, naked, strangles or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. The author, P. V. Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these, and in particular the Tollund Man, [. . .] were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern. And the unforgettable photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles. (*PP* 57)

According to Parker, Glob 'provided an historical perspective' that allowed Heaney to "cope with' and confront the contemporary "Troubles", and create a sense of continuity, kinship, affirmation at a time of social and political disintegration."<sup>31</sup> The resulting bog poems, however, also illuminate aspects of Heaney's artistic practice, as each composition devotes specific attention to his personal observations and emotional responses when confronted with the material reality of the preserved remains. The bog poems thus furnish Heaney with the appropriate metaphor to reconcile his personal responsibility to art with his obligation to the community, interpreting Ireland's contemporary circumstances through juxtaposition with ritual killings of the Iron Age period. In this manner, Heaney successfully channels his devotion and fascination with the Irish landscape alongside social imperatives to render his poetry meaningful during a period of crisis. The sense of place emerges through establishing parallels between these unearthed remains and the victims of sectarian antagonism in which Heaney presents the land as an unwavering centre – a secure foundation to which one may return for sanctuary, repose, and safety.

Through the parallel between ancient sacrificial rituals and contemporary sectarian violence, Heaney compresses historical distance to show similarities between past and present brutalities. Helen Vendler affirms that at some point in Heaney's poetry,

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<sup>30</sup> O'Brien, *Creating Irelands of the Mind*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Parker, 91.

archaeology ceases to be interesting and beneficent, and instead is interrogated “for an explanation of violence.”<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, this mythic dimension unifies disparate communities by demonstrating their shared foundations in common traditions. This temporal collapse functions rhetorically to illuminate continuities in human behaviour – and Irish identity – while promoting recognition of cultural commonality that transcends sectarian divisions. In Glob’s book, Heaney finds the symbols required to face the brutalities of the civil war: bog bodies.

The first of Heaney’s poems to explicitly address bog themes is ‘Bogland’ from *Door into the Dark*. In *Wintering Out*, he further develops the themes of myth and historical excavation in two poems that effectively inaugurated the so-called bog poems: ‘The Tollund Man’ and ‘Nerthus’. The former represents a fictional pilgrimage to Aarhus, where the body of the Tollund Man, a two-thousand-year-old Iron Age man found in Bjaeldskov Dal (Denmark), now rests. Heaney employs the first-person voice (‘Some day I will go to Aarhus’) to intensify the encounter’s immediacy while applying what Vendler terms a ‘binocular view’ to juxtapose the ancient, preserved corpse and the ritual practices in which it participated against contemporary sectarian violence in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> Glob describes the encounter with the preserved corpse that reverberate throughout Heaney’s poetry:

Standing in front of the glass case in which it is displayed, he finds himself face to face with an Iron Age man. Dark in hue, the head is still full of life and more beautiful than the best portraits by the world’s greatest artists, since it is the man himself we see.<sup>34</sup>

‘The Tollund Man’ comprises three distinct sections. In the initial segment, Heaney establishes an intimate, personal connection with the preserved remains, contemplating and admiring their remarkable endurance and preserved stillness. Heaney imagines himself standing in front of the glass display and, echoing Glob’s description, writes the following:

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<sup>32</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, (Faber Finds, 1965), 36.

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus  
To see his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eye-lids,  
His pointed skin cap. (1–4)

The opening phrase ‘some day’ signifies Heaney’s dreamlike aspiration to visit a repository of archaeological significance which Heaney had previously encountered only through Glob’s textual account, which records that the unearthing of the bog body in 1950.<sup>35</sup> Heaney’s description of the Tollund Man’s appearance echoes Glob’s delicate and near-compassionate regard for the preserved relic, deceased for millennia, expressed through the aestheticization of human remains. Glob observes that the cadaver appeared almost to reanimate upon excavation and bore a gentle countenance, ‘as though the dead man’s soul had for a moment returned from another world, through the gate in the western sky’.<sup>36</sup> This perceptible gentleness – an adjective that Parker admits being frequently associated with description of Christ<sup>37</sup> – is related to peat’s preservative properties (bog water saturated with solid acids)<sup>38</sup> which shield certain substances from decomposition. Like Glob, Heaney highlights the corpse’s quasivitality by referring to ‘the last gruel of winter seeds/cacked in his stomach’, the preserved remnants of his final repast, which suggests that the Tollund Man had likely lived for between twenty and twenty-four hours after consuming them.

Naked except for  
The cap, noose and gridle,  
I will stand a long time.  
Bridegroom to the goddess (9–12)

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<sup>35</sup> The Tollund Man is significant not only because it is the best preserved bog body but also because it was one of the first to be found in Jutland. The others, which were unearthed later, included the Grauballe Man, the girl from Foum, the Rendswühren man, Windeby I (the Windeby girl), the Borremose Man (the Borren Fen Man) and more.

<sup>36</sup> Glob, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Parker, 106.

<sup>38</sup> Water reasserts its significant role of the preservative that facilitates postmortem survival. The distinctive solution of bog water permits interred remains to ‘survive’, essentially unaltered save for their contracted dimension and characteristic peat-brown coloration, for millennia.

Lines nine to twelve allude specifically to sacrificial rituals conducted for the goddess (i. e. Nerthus) and describe them in an almost liturgical and dispassionate sequence of actions performed to achieve the intended purpose.<sup>39</sup> Behind the Tollund Man's head a rope was discovered, 'knotted at one end to form an eyelet through which the other end was drawn, forming a noose which could be tightened from the back'.<sup>40</sup> Heaney provides only a cursory description of the artefacts that accompanied the corpse, despite their ceremonial significance suggested by their very presence. In the subsequent stanza, the poet alludes to the ritual practice and the functional purpose of these implements.

She tightened her torc on him  
And opened her fen,  
Those dark juices working  
Him to a saint's kept body. (13–16)

Heaney's use of 'she' calls up the fertility goddess Nerthus and the ritual practices associated with vernal ceremonies conducted in her honour. Lines 13 and 14 evoke a sadistic practice that suffuses violence with sexual elements.<sup>41</sup> The ritual incorporated the tightening of a cord around the victim's neck – a noose for the hanging but also guiding the sacrificial subject – is a symbol of the victim's belonging to the goddess. This process is then followed by a kind of sexual congress wherein the goddess Mother Earth tightens the torc while also opening and exposing 'her fen' (i.e. her crevice, her genitalia) to permit the male victim to couple with her and promote territorial fecundity through their union. Despite the reference to implements that evoke sadistic and submissive practices, there is generosity in Nerthus' actions, which can be interpreted as a caring embrace that delicately conducts the victim across the threshold of death and confers upon him immortality.<sup>42</sup> This markedly sensual description of the body, initially 'naked' and subsequently in congress with the goddess, provides insight into the sexual and subconsciously intertwined

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<sup>39</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Nerthus, see Chapter II (Section 2.2.1).

<sup>40</sup> Glob, 32.

<sup>41</sup> See chapter V for a more detailed discussion of the sexual implications of the bog poems.

<sup>42</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 107.

relationship between Heaney and the corpses he depicts – one of the principal methods through which he negotiates discourse on bog bodies and his personal relationship with place and the land. In *North*, this approach receives further elaboration.

For Heaney, the immersion of the sacrificial victim into the ‘dark juices’ of the motherland parallels his own sense of betrothal to the landscape, which he mentions when discussing the prohibited shores of Lough Beg in ‘Mossbawn’:

It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-think mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated. (*PP* 19)

This rite of passage, which commenced long before Heaney’s poetic vocation and marked him permanently through the sensory imprinting of both olfaction (‘smelling of the ground’) and tactility (‘coming out smeared and weedy and darkened’), exemplifies his profound and atavistic connection with the Irish terrain. Heaney becomes “initiated” into the landscape’s mysteries and its fathomless depths. This experiential foundation enables him to conceive the bog as a repository of memory, tradition, culture, artistic inspiration, and sanctuary. ‘The dark juices’, which hint at preparatory female arousal prior to intercourse, refer to the preservative properties of the Irish peat, wherein the goddess claims bodies whilst simultaneously conferring eternal preservation akin to that of ‘a saint’s kept body’. This creates a diametrical dichotomy between eroticism and sanctity that positions the bog as both carnal and sacred repository while simultaneously elevating the body preserved in it to saintly status – a thought that risks blasphemy, as Heaney states. The rite creates a stain that cannot be erased, and while the juices provide immortality to the sacrificial Iron Age victims, they also provide Heaney with eternal poetic inspiration. The second section of ‘The Tollund Man’ returns to the present moment and offers a parallel between ancient killings and sectarian violence in Ireland.

II

I could risk blasphemy,  
Consecrate the cauldron bog  
Our holy ground and pray

Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed

Flesh of labourers,

Stockinged corpses

Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth

Flecking the sleepers

Of four young brothers, traile

For miles along the lines. (*WO 37*)

Here, Heaney connects past with present, risking blasphemy and yearning for enchantment – a potion within the magical cauldron that is the bog. He appears to compare the renewal encouraged by ancient rites facilitated to that of a resurrection. On this occasion, Heaney entreats for a germination of their remnants ('the scattered, ambushed/Flesh of labourers') belonging to four brothers, workers killed in the sectarian conflict.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, Heaney contrasts the methodical, ritualised and systematic execution of ancient practices contrasts with the chaotic and brutal killings of the four Catholic brothers 'trailed/For miles along the lines', which only 'tell-tale skin' and teeth left behind to acknowledge their existence. Compared to the purposeful ritual killings conducted to ensure fertility and prosperity, modern conflicts represent the deliberate and conscious desire to sever the lifeline of an entire generation, the opposite of killing to promote continuity. While the former exemplifies sacrifice for the communal benefit and follows a structured ritual, the latter lacks purpose; the victims are 'ambushed' and tortured. In the end, however, neither scenario contains the potential for rebirth. Neither the Iron Age rituals nor contemporary Irish killings offer hope, and Heaney is capable only of mourning and expressing compassion for the victims. The landscape becomes a repository of their memory, the sole sacred space capable of conferring dignity upon these losses.

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<sup>43</sup> Heaney refers to an incident in 1920, when four brothers were killed by Protestant paramilitaries, wiping out an entire generation for no reason other than pure violence.

The poem's third section constitutes a final contemplative reflection upon the current situation and the apparent cyclical nature of history's violence.

### III

Something of his sad freedom  
As he rode the tumbrel  
Should come to me, driving,  
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,  
Watching the pointing hands  
Of country people,  
Not knowing their tongue.

Out there in Jutland  
In the old men-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home. (WO 37)

The poem's final section deliberately blurs subjective boundaries, creating productive uncertainty about whether the speaker is Heaney or the Tollund Man, and the questions multiply: Who inhabits Jutland? Whose consciousness registers the pervasive sense of loss and melancholy? This ambiguity likely resolves into Heaney's projected anticipation of his future encounter with the preserved corpse. It is significant that the Tollund Man initially appears in repose in the poem's opening lines but now manifests unrest – a transformation that mirrors Ireland's inability to achieve genuine peace amid perpetual conflict. The concluding melancholy seems to assert the inexorability of death and violence as inherent elements of human nature. This sense of place founded upon tribal identity proves incapable of delivering the anticipated renewal and instead ensures the perpetual continuation of brutality: Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard, Ulster, Ireland, and so forth. Heaney brilliantly concludes the poem with words that originate paradoxically from the brutality of the preceding lines. 'Home', which ought to be a locus of security, protection, freedom, and happiness, here is synonymous with murder and unrest. Eugene O'Brien contends that the pervading sense of loss and sadness stems from the recognition that the existence of a home or territory requires either internal communal sacrifice or the

scapegoating of external others.<sup>44</sup> Simultaneously, Heaney frames the sacrifices as meaningful and suggests that the blood shed for the Irish cause might eventually lead to the renewal of both the territory and its foundational ideals. Thus, ‘The Tollund Man’ represents a pivotal composition in Heaney’s transition from personal and self-referential poetic practice towards communal engagement in which the bog poems function as the established methodology for addressing the contemporary national crisis.

Particular attention is needed in relation to the fertility goddess Nerthus. Marco Battaglia provides a thorough investigation on the studies orbiting this figure. Battaglia notes that initial attestations of this deity derive from Tacitus’ *Germania* (98 AC),<sup>45</sup> in which the historian describes a goddess venerated by a confederation of smaller Germanic tribes: the Redigni, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suardones, and Nuithones. Based on images preserved on pottery, Nerthus had apparently been worshipped as far back as the Neolithic period. In addition to meticulous details regarding Nerthus’ advent and associated rituals, Tacitus writes that upon her satisfaction, ‘[s]laves perform the rite, who

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<sup>44</sup> O’Brien, *Creating Irelands of the Mind*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Latin: Contra Langobardos paucitas nobilitat: plurimis ac valentissimis nationibus cincti non per obsequium, sed proeliis ac periclitando tuti sunt. Reudigni deinde et Aviones et Anglii et Varini et Eudoses et Suardones et Nuithones fluminibus aut silvis muniuntur. Nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, inveni populis arbitrantur. Est in insula Oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contactum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. Is adesse penetrali deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. Laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. Non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam templo reddat. Mox vehiculum et vestes et, si credere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur. Servi ministrant, quos statim idem lacus haurit. Arcanus hinc terror sanctaque ignorantia, quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident.

English translation: The Langobardi, by contrast, are distinguished by the fewness of their numbers. Ringed round as they are by many mighty peoples, they find safety not in obsequiousness but in battle and its perils. After them come the Reudingi, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suarini and Nuitones, behind their ramparts of rivers and woods. There is nothing noteworthy about these peoples individually, but they are distinguished by a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she interests herself in human affairs and rides among their peoples. In an island of the Ocean stands a sacred grove, and in the grove a consecrated cart, draped with cloth, which none but the priest may touch. The priest perceives the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies and attends her, in deepest reverence, as her cart is drawn by heifers. Then follow days of rejoicing and merry-making in every place that she designs to visit and be entertained. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every object of iron is locked away; then, and only then, are peace and quiet known and loved, until the priest again restores the goddess to her temple, when she has had her fill of human company. After that the cart, the cloth and, if you care to believe it, the goddess herself are washed in clean in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake. Thus, mystery begets terror and pious reluctance to ask what the sight can be that only those doomed to die may see. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania*, trans. R., B. Townshend (Methuen & Co., 1894), 90.

are instantly swallowed up by its waters. Hence arises a mysterious terror and a sacred ignorance concerning the nature of that which is seen only by men doomed to die'.<sup>46</sup> Nerthus was apparently worshipped since the Neolithic period as depictions on pottery demonstrate.

The simultaneously feared yet fecund darkness that Heaney explores from his earliest collections is complemented perfectly here: Just as servants and sacrificial victims were drowned to meet the goddess' demand for offerings and ensure a fertile spring, Irish civilians were reclaimed by Mother Earth in anticipation of a more propitious future.<sup>47</sup> Heaney's 'Nerthus' is concise and concentrated: two stanzas of two lines each, which employ a free verse rhyming scheme. The brevity affords significance to each individual word.

For beauty, say an ash-fork staked in peat,  
Its long grains gathering to the gouged split;

A seasoned, unsleeved taker of the weather,  
Where kesh and loaning finger out to heather. (WO 38)



*Figure 3. The Goddess of Nerthus at Foerlev Nymolle. Reproduced from Peter Glob, The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved (Faber &Faber, 1969), 181.*

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> This topic is discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

This poem names the Germanic fertility goddess for the first time. In his formal declaration of Nerthus – represented here in her fetish form – Heaney creates a parallel to the contemporary Mother Ireland. Drawing upon Iron Age practices of fashioning deities from commonplace and humble materials, Heaney devotes an entire poem to a staff over a bog and employed as divinity, perhaps based on recovering Glob's documentation of the implement discovered at Foerlev Nymølle by Harald Andersen in 1961. This realisation of Wordsworth's precepts – transforming the quotidian into the wondrous – is executed literally in Heaney's description of ash wood embedded in bog soil and elevated to sacred status through poetic attention to particulars.

Heaney notes the staff's endurance and resistance to elemental forces when he describes it as '[a] seasoned, unsleeved taker of the weather' inextricable from Ireland's characteristic landscape. 'Kesh' and 'loaning' are traditional Irish terms that refer to pathways leading to the moorland 'heather'. The staff harmonises perfectly with this pastoral setting in a way that suggests the indissoluble bond between divinity and territory. Furthermore, Heaney symbolises the sexual organ as the 'gouged split' from which the two longer branches protrude and become legs. Upon closer examination and with imaginative interpretation, the nine-foot-long cloven oak branch resembles a woman's silhouette with elongated limbs, rounded hips, and a pronounced incision around the ['legs'], all of which are suggestive of female sexuality and fertility.

In this way, the existence of multiple spatial registers within the bog lends it a heterotopic character. Throughout Heaney's poetry, the bog undergoes functional transformations across historical periods. Initially serving as a burial ground for Iron Age ritual sacrifices, it subsequently becomes a repository of cultural memory and a symbolic matrix represented as Mother Earth's receptive cavity for her dead children – the Irish civilian casualties. In its ability to collapse temporal boundaries between the Iron Age and the present day, the bog also exhibits heterochronic properties. It also operates through the systems of aperture and closure, manifested when Mother Earth opens up to receive her dead or when Nerthus accompanies sacrificial victims to their death, configuring this opening in a form of sacred coitus. Finally, the bog functions as an illusory space onto which Heaney projects both collective emotions and aspirations – a site of radical alterity that generates simultaneous attraction and repulsion. In his engagement with space and place, Heaney's testifies to Ireland's embeddedness in cultural heritage, mythological and

collective memory such that every fragment of terrain functions as a repository of concealed and precious elements capable of revealing fresh insights into Irish cultural identity.

### **3. Gender and Representation in *North*. Subverting the Traditional Metaphor of the Land as Mother**

And these and more or less costive attitudes<sup>48</sup> were fortified by a refusal to grant the poet any more license than any other citizen; and they were further induced by having to conduct oneself as a poet in a situation of ongoing political violence and public expectation. A public expectation, it has to be said, not for poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups (*CP* 14).

Heaney's socially engaged poetics carry an air of inevitability, as though his historical circumstances precluded any retreat into aesthetic autonomy, which compelled him to transform what might have remained self-referential verse into a communal instrument for addressing the period's political trauma. Chapter II examined the social function of culture and art through the theoretical frameworks of Matthew Arnold and John Dewey, whose perspectives now prove particularly illuminating in addressing Heaney's most politically engaged collection, *North*. In his written conversation with Dennis O'Driscoll, the poet remarks on the inner struggle of reconciling Anna Swir's assertion regarding a poem's 'biological right to life' with the actual events unfolding in Northern Ireland.<sup>49</sup>

In navigating the tension between poetic autonomy and social responsibility, Heaney employed ancient myths as a framework for interpreting contemporary events. Ireland's insular geography has cultivated a rich mythological and folkloric tradition that reinforces cultural belonging. Heaney mobilises this distinctive heritage through a dual strategy of invoking folklore to maintain continuity with indigenous tradition while drawing on classical antiquity to establish historical parallels that illuminate cyclical

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<sup>48</sup> Heaney attributes his aesthetic commitment to unadorned veracity to the formative influence of his native environment and cites the 'vigilance and realism' that characterised his birthplace. As he observes, no place was 'more qualified to censure any flourish of rhetoric or extravagance or aspiration'. (*CP* 13)

<sup>49</sup> O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 159.

patterns of violence through folkloric figures such as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, or, even, the Virgin Mary. Simultaneously, Heaney both embraces and subverts the *dinnseanchas* tradition by reconfiguring the conventional trope of Mother Ireland as dispossessed and subdued to address the specific historical circumstances of Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the footsteps of James Joyce and Patrick Pearse, Heaney accomplishes this subversion by transforming Mother Ireland into a figure of vengeance. While Heaney's poetic practice has so far navigated the tension between introspection and social obligation, *North* manifests the poet's ability to engage with collective trauma beyond his personal anxiety. His relocation from Londonderry to Belfast – where he lived until 1972 – placed him at the epicentre of conflict in Northern Ireland, and provided unmediated exposure to sectarian violence. Although he experienced this geographical displacement as a form of betrayal – identifying himself as an 'inner émigré' in 'Exposure' – he maintained fidelity to what he termed 'the living speech of the landscape I was born into' (*PR* 37). This rootedness persisted throughout his career, and despite extensive travels, Heaney consistently positioned Ireland as both the wellspring and governing consciousness of his poetic imagination.

In *Preoccupations*, Heaney characterises the creative process as 'a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotions' (*PR* 34), thus revealing his conception of poetic creation as a gendered dialogue between the masculine self and the maternal essence embodied in the land. This formulation illuminates his account of his childhood 'betrothal' to the land at age eleven, after which he experienced a profound responsiveness to what he perceived as the earth's inherent powers – to what is 'hidden and real' (*PR* 47). Throughout his early collections, Heaney configures the land as a realm of darkness. In *Door into the Dark*, he explicitly initiates an exploration of this terrestrial obscurity by crossing the threshold into subterranean mysteries that will deepen and expand in *Wintering Out*. The act of digging, introduced in *Death of a Naturalist*,<sup>50</sup> initially functioned as a metaphor for both poetic craft and the human–land intimacy and was developed through the mystical terrain of 'The

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<sup>50</sup> The first collection emphasises male figures as archetypal makers with whom Heaney identifies in constructing his rural origins. Female figures remain marginalized as mothers and housekeepers, voiceless within masculine domains and excluded from the poet's self-fashioning. This marks a dramatic transformation from the initial portraits of womanhood in *North*'s fierce and violent feminine figures.

Diviner’ and the occult depths of the wells of ‘Personal Helicon’. The metaphor subsequently evolved to signify an excavation of darkness from which renewed hope for a fractured Ireland might emerge. In *North*, the female figure of Mother Ireland embraces ‘the memory incubating the spilled blood’ (N 11), functioning both as an emblem of sectarian violence and as a salvific presence offering solace to the afflicted. The shared cultural heritage that Ireland preserves in its soil informs collective identification through communal trauma. In *North*, Heaney expands the significance of the *omphalos* – the ‘unmovable stone’ – beyond its initial local reference point and extends its symbolic reach from Mossbawn to encompass the entirety of Ireland and centuries of historical accumulation. This stone now functions as a binding force across generations and, like the bottomless depths of Irish soil, as a repository of collective memory. In the Irish landscape and its embedded historical narrative, Heaney discovers the ideal context for integrating both personal and collective experience.

The present chapter traces Heaney’s poetic engagement with political concerns. Furthermore, it examines how Heaney expands both the bog trope and the gendered figure of Mother Ireland within the specific context of ‘the Troubles’, deploying femininity simultaneously as an epistemological framework for comprehending the world and as vessel through which to confront Ireland’s unbearable violence. Heaney’s characterisation of Ireland, inflected by late twentieth-century political realities, foregrounds the intimate connection between nationalist discourse and feminine paradigm. This analysis draws particularly on the feminist critiques of Patricia Coughlan’s ‘“Bog Queens”: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney’ and Stephanie Alexander’s ‘Femme Fatale: The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney’s *North*’. These two critical essays illuminate the centrality of feminine figures in Heaney’s poetry while demonstrating how female readers necessarily reframe texts authored by male writers.

#### **4. The Treatment of Femininity in Seamus Heaney’s *North***

The representation of femininity which occurs most insistently in this material takes the form of dualistically opposed aspects: beloved or spouse figures versus mother figures, which are in turn benign

and fertile or awe-inspiring and terrible. [. . .] In Heaney, for example, the nature-goddess is simultaneously spouse, death-bringer and nurturer.<sup>51</sup>

*North* achieves a thematic range unprecedented in Heaney's oeuvre to that point, thus marking what is perceived as a watershed moment in his artistic development due to the shift in the thematic range and innovative treatment of Irish material. As the culmination of his earlier work, the collection represents a bold synthesis of the political conflict, gender dynamics, and environmental concerns that had been developed throughout his previous volumes. The collection's bog poems, in particular, function as what Eugene O'Brien terms a 'two-pronged metaphor', wherein the physical landscape simultaneously embodies both material reality and the 'psychic racial memory of the nationalist consciousness'.<sup>52</sup> Both Stephanie Alexander and Patricia Coughlan read *North* as an example of resistance writing shaped by the intersection of gender and environment, wherein femininity in its various interpretations – from bog queens to sovereignty goddesses to maternal figures – emerges as the collection's dominant and most problematic presence. This gendered landscape becomes the primary vehicle through which Heaney explores complex questions of Irish nationality, colonial power relations, and cultural identity. Heaney's own assertion that 'the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way,'<sup>53</sup> that connects contemporary Irish republicanism to ancient Celtic fertility goddesses and maternal figures like Cathleen Ní Houlihan – provides the theoretical foundation for this gendered reading of political resistance. This statement suggests that Irish nationalism operates through feminine mythologies that both empower and constrain women's actual agency, thereby creating the fundamental tension that both Coughlan and Alexander identify as central to the collection's political and aesthetic project.

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<sup>51</sup> Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in Seamus Heaney's *North*", ed. by Michael Allen (St. Martin's Press, 1997), 186.

<sup>52</sup> O'Brien, *Making of the Poet*, 72.

<sup>53</sup> Heaney, quoted in Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney. Poetry of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse University Press, 1992), 88. In this interview with the *Listener*, Heaney elaborates on the connection between ancient Celtic fertility religions and contemporary Irish republicanism, noting the recurring presence of feminine goddess figures who 'appeared in various guises' including 'Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays' and 'Mother Ireland'.

Both critics centre their analyses on the female figures that populate Heaney's bog poems and his complex – often troubling – engagement with these bodies, whether as archaeological specimens, political symbols, or erotic objects, 'possessors of a form of knowledge hidden from the masculine speaker',<sup>54</sup> as the 'unspeakable Other we must push out, must abjure'.<sup>55</sup> Both critics recognise Heaney's recuperation of folkloric traditions that figure Ireland as dispossessed and colonised woman, yet identify his innovation in reconfiguring this violated figure as potentially dangerous – a mother who births the 'parasitical' offspring that Ulster becomes in 'Act of Union'. The critics' feminist interventions employ sophisticated psychoanalytic frameworks that illuminate the deeper psychological and cultural dynamics at work in Heaney's representations. Alexander draws primarily on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, according to which societies expel or marginalize that which threatens social boundaries, especially the maternal feminine, which represents both creative power and the dissolution of individual identity. From this position, Alexander reads Heaney's bog queens as 'abject feminine' figures who simultaneously offer the potential for radical anti-colonial resistance while being contained within patriarchal structures of meaning and control.

Coughlan, writing nearly two decades before Alexander, employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts, particularly his understanding of the Symbolic Order – the realm of language, law, and social structure that is fundamentally patriarchal – and the mirror stage, which describes how individual identity is formed through a process of differentiation from others. Coughlan argues that Heaney's masculine poetic personae remain 'stuck in the self/not-self dualism of the mirror stage,'<sup>56</sup> unable to acknowledge genuine feminine subjectivity and instead requiring women to function as objects against which male identity is defined. The two critics thus employ psychoanalytic frameworks alongside feminist critical methodologies to advance what Coughlan terms necessary 'feminine interventions' in literary scholarship – the ongoing work of demystifying how male-authored texts construct and constrain feminine identity. This transformation occurs

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<sup>54</sup> Coughlan, 188.

<sup>55</sup> Stephanie Alexander, "Femme Fatale: The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney's *North*," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 39, 2 (2016), 219.

<sup>56</sup> Coughlan, 200.

through Heaney's sustained attention to landscape and its intersection with his poetic vision.

The following discussion employs Alexander and Coughlan's critical perspectives to illuminate Heaney's engagement with Ireland's political crisis through feminised metaphors that connect ancient practices, historical events, and contemporary struggles. A comparative analysis examines several key themes: the critique of gender binaries and female objectification; the male poet's position as an excavator-voyeur attempting feminine ventriloquism, the eroticisation of bog bodies, Ireland's figuration as woman violated by a masculine coloniser; and the abjection inherent in constructions of femininity and maternity.

Stephanie Alexander's essay examines how gender and the environment function as interconnected forces in Heaney's construction of the resistance writing that defines *North*. Central to her argument is the recognition that Heaney presents the Irish landscape as fundamentally vulnerable – 'endangered, always encroached upon'<sup>57</sup> – and, I would add, inevitably damaged by the historical forces of colonisation and contemporary political violence. This damaged landscape is the foundation for what Alexander identifies as Heaney's unique form of postcolonial resistance, one that operates through the imagery of the dangerous feminine rather than through conventional political discourse. Yet the question remains: Does Heaney's reconfiguration of traditional subjugation–dominion metaphors constitute genuine subversion, or a mere rearrangement of female and male roles that ultimately reinforces patriarchal power dynamics?

Alexander reveals how Heaney's land is consistently described through pastoral terms that mask deeper complexities and contradictions. As she writes:

The idea of using the pastoral as a platform from which to write into existence an idealized, imagined nation does, of course, open itself to the charge of romanticization—either of the romanticized idea of a return to 'pure' pre-colonial past, or the fetishizing the land itself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Stephanie Alexander, 'They "smelt of rot": Abjection and Infection in Seamus Heaney's Early Work', *Estudios Irlanseses* 18 (2023), 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

This observation illuminates a crucial tension in Heaney's work: his simultaneous reliance on and critique of pastoral conventions. Heaney indulges in both forms of the romanticisation Alexander identifies, from the deceptively bucolic and rural settings of *Death of a Naturalist*, where agricultural labour appears timeless and unproblematic, to the explicit fetishisation of landscape in the bog poems, where Irish soil is eroticised through metaphors of penetration and excavation. Through this strategic idealisation of place, Heaney establishes the conceptual foundation for his broader political project and creates what appears to be an authentic connection to pre-colonial Irish identity<sup>59</sup> that subsequently evolves into the more complex bog body metaphor that dominates *North*. This evolution from pastoral idealisation to bog body excavation connects directly to what Alexander terms the 'abject feminine landscape' of Heaney's bog poems. According to Kristeva, the abject exists in a disturbing liminal status between subject and object – it is neither fully 'self' nor fully 'other' but rather occupies a threatening liminal space that both fascinates and horrifies. This spatial dynamic of blurred boundaries creates what might be understood as a form of heterotopia, where the normal rules of identity and power are suspended or inverted.

The voyeuristic and sexualised treatment of feminised bodies emerges from Heaney's foundational metaphor. Just as Nerthus' fertility rites required sacrificial victims, so Ireland demands dead civilians as seeds for future generations. According to Alexander, 'Heaney's representation of the bogs as a physical manifestation of a greedy, devouring monster-mother version of Ireland is not out of line with the Irish republican sentiments of the day',<sup>60</sup> which demonstrates the aptness of Heaney's metaphor for addressing contemporary crises in the form of poetry.

Alexander further identifies Heaney's metaphorical construction of Ireland as both a colonised space and a subjugated woman, juxtaposed against England's self-proclaimed status as an 'imperial male' (*N* 43) possessor. While this gendered colonial allegory initially appears to reproduce conventional representational patterns, Heaney complicates the metaphor by introducing the 'parasitical' offspring of the Anglo-Irish union, thus transforming Ireland into both violated body and 'space of potentially dangerous

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<sup>59</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander, 'Femme Fatale', 225.

regeneration'.<sup>61</sup> This constitutes what Alexander terms 'radical abject pastoralism',<sup>62</sup> wherein Ireland transcend feminisation and becomes a femme fatale bearing fatal progeny. Heaney's Ireland embodies a dual nature: she manifests as a Nerthus-like goddess of regeneration who offers hope for political and territorial renewal but, simultaneously, fails to engender viable futures by continuously reclaiming and birthing dead or maimed children. Her procreative capacity yields only damaged offspring – the product of Anglo-Irish union – and the bog dead, who merely simulate human form while remaining irrevocably distanced from contemporary crisis. Heaney's metaphor thus proves inherently unstable in how it oscillates between the promise of revolution – embodied in the violated girl protest in 'Ocean's Love to Ireland', for example – and the inevitable failure of such a revolution. Alexander concludes her essay by acknowledging the irreducible dichotomy in Heaney's discourse and its engagement with Northern Ireland's political crisis. She recognises that abjection is inevitable when confronting the bog's multiple significations: Ireland's violated, generative orifice, site of resistance and potential rebellion, the maternal space of longed-for-return, and repository of collective memory. Alexander ultimately characterises Heaney's positions as a 'a tightrope act, teetering between a truly radical embrace of the powers of the feminine and a conservative repudiation of the same'.<sup>63</sup>

By contrast, Coughlan's analysis examines the representation of women in male-authored texts – particularly those of Heaney and Montague's – through 'gynocriticism'<sup>64</sup>: a critical practice that foregrounds the revaluation of women's writing as an interpretive lens for reading masculine representation of women. In the essay, Coughlan illuminates Heaney's deployment of feminine figures through their dual function as both death-bringers and violated spouses, a duality that synthesises the *aisling* tradition, Celtic mythology, and contemporary colonial figurations of the land that portray Ireland as a Janus-like entity – simultaneously provider and destroyer – all shrouded in the silence that defines these figures. This dual function remains apparent in how the poems in *North* can be classified according to Heaney's dual construction of femininity, which alternates

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>64</sup> Coughlan, 201.

between texts that depict masculine violence against feminine figures and those in which female entities, especially bog queens, assume agency by confronting patriarchal power. Coughlan's analysis of Heaney's feminine figures begins with his earliest collections, and she observes how *Death of a Naturalist* presents mothers, aunts, and other women in idealised domestic roles as nurturers and caregivers. While Coughlan reads this proximity to materiality and quotidian life as reflective of women's position in rural society, she identifies a paradox: These figures simultaneously embody a power that transcends the material realm and possess forms of knowledge inaccessible to masculine comprehension. The 'darkness echoing' in 'Personal Helicon', the bottomlessness of 'Bogland', and *North*'s multiple representations of feminine power reveal how Heaney's positions himself as an observer who draws poetic inspiration from female figures. Throughout these early collections, tender feminine presences serve as counterpoints to the poet's construction of masculine identity, which is evident in the military imagery of 'Death of a Naturalist', the patrilineal labour tradition in 'Digging', and, by contrast, the delicate emotional negotiation depicted in, for example, 'Poem'. Coughlan writes that 'the memory of an essentially unchanging rural world is rehearsed [. . .]; and as a central part of that dispensation, male and female subject-positions are also construed as immemorially fixed'.<sup>65</sup> This dynamic shifts dramatically in *North*, where Heaney constructs a feminine figure that fuses the European northern cult of Nerthus and other previous allegorisations of Ireland (e. g. common representations in the *aisling* tradition), thereby creating a lens through which to view Ulster's sectarian violence against Catholics. Through her ritualised sacrifices, Nerthus is equated with contemporary Ireland – a mother who draws her children (the Irish dead) to her bosom and seeks to restore equilibrium and facilitate the emergence of a pacified land. Coughlan emphasises the persistent anonymity surrounding these feminine figures, who, especially in the case of the bog bodies, represent centuries-old corpses that cannot speak. These female figures thus embody the silence characteristic of their societal role, while the poet assumes the traditional position of bard and spokesperson for society, both ancient and contemporary. Here, Heaney demonstrates Coughlan's second principle, according to which female

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 191.

entities remain passive under the male gaze, where ‘all usual amorous activities’ are viewed from ‘the explorer’s, ‘estimator’s’, evaluator’s position’<sup>66</sup> – a perspective that is invariably male. As Alexander notes, the audience also assumes a role in the viewing, as it is ‘forced to wonder if they have any right to watch’.<sup>67</sup>

In his historical grounding of the bog bodies, Parker describes how in the spring of 1781, the skeleton of a very small woman was discovered on Drumkeragh Mountain in County Down, which, at the time, belonged to Lord and Lady Moira. The garments and jewels found on the body indicated that the person had held a high rank in society.<sup>68</sup> ‘Bog Queen’ illustrate the transformation of the female figure from the fragile woman of the *aisling* tradition into what Heaney renders as an ‘insatiable bride./Sword-swallower,/casket, midden,/floe of history’ (N 24). Heaney reproduces Glob’s archaeological descriptions of the bog bodies with near-forensic precision, including the preservation process itself – a detail that emphasises the bog’s capacity for suspended animation:

through my fabrics and skins  
the seeps of winter  
digested me,  
the illiterate roots

pondered and died  
in the cavings  
of stomach and socket. (N 25)

The poem’s recurring opening phrase, ‘I lay waiting’, evokes both the temporal duration before disinterment and, crucially, the body’s fundamental passivity – its dependence on external agency for excavation, unable to effect its own resurrection. In this case, the spade of a turfcutter is the means through which the body comes to light at first, then covered again to be finally exposed,

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<sup>66</sup> Coughlan, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander, ‘Femme Fatale’, 226.

<sup>68</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 135.

[. . .] and I rose from the dark,  
hacked-bone, skull-ware  
frayed stitches, tufts,  
small gleams on the bank. (N 27)

The queen's severed hair transforms into 'a slimy birth-cord/of bog', an evocation of the viscous umbilical connection between the body and the earth. This image reinforces Heaney's vision of the land as an ambivalent mother – one who alternately delivers her children into the world or holds them captive within her womb for centuries. Her emergence marks a crucial inversion in Heaney's poetics. Where his earlier work traced a downward movement into darkness and private reflection, here the bog body rises into light and transforms an intimate excavation into public testimony. The queen surfaces bearing the physical traces of her violent ascent, her nails stained with bruised berries, as if she had crawled her way out of the earth's maternal depths. Her emergence unleashes centuries of accumulated rage as bog releases long-preserved violence and dispossession, yet the poem refuses resolution for the repressed rage. Is this resurrection a moment of triumph or violation? Does her rising signal a revolutionary awakening or merely a disturbance of ancient peace? Just as he leaves the queen suspended between liberation and desecration, Heaney leaves these questions deliberately unanswered. As Coughlan remarks, the queens of this bog-world 'are the epitome of a general silence, at the opposite pole from the describing, celebrating, expressing poet. Whether active or passive, these figures are spoken for, and this division is a highly problematic one'.<sup>69</sup>

#### **4.1 The Eroticisation of the Feminine: a Voyeuristic Excavation**

As Heaney's poetic career progressed and the understanding of Irish-English relations evolved (the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process in Northern Ireland), his approach to representing colonial dynamics underwent significant revision. Although years later, in 2008, Heaney acknowledged that he would no longer employ 'head-on' the paradigm of England as an aggressive usurper and Ireland as passive victim of sexual

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<sup>69</sup> Coughlan, 192.

violence,<sup>70</sup> he nevertheless continued to explore this dynamic in ‘Ocean’s Love to Ireland’ and ‘Act of Union’.

While acknowledging that Ireland initially appears reconceived as a site of anti-colonial resistance, Alexander argues that Heaney, a male poet writing on behalf of feminine entities, ultimately retreats into patriarchal paradigms that inhibit, rather than empower, the feminine. Alexander ultimately concludes that Heaney cannot achieve authentic feminine resistance writing constrained as he is by his position as a masculine poet who maintains patriarchal roles whether as excavator, archaeologist, or the more fetishised position of voyeur. Regarding this last status, in analyzing the paradoxical relationship between these feminised sacred spaces and Heaney’s position as male poet-excavator of these archaeological remains, Alexander identifies a fundamental tension between Heaney’s desire to empathise with the feminised bog bodies and his inescapable position as a male observer unable to fully inhabit a feminine perspective. The observer’s fetishistic gaze and the grotesque nature of the observed corpses generate ambivalence for readers witnessing the abjection of exhumed corpses – framed as emerging from Mother Earth’s simultaneously devouring and generative womb – through an inescapably masculine perspective. This dichotomy manifests most acutely in Heaney’s ventriloquism of these figures. As Alexander writes, Heaney ‘meticulously, almost neurotically, details each corpse’s physicality’.<sup>71</sup> ‘The Grauballe Man’ is the first example Alexander identifies in which Heaney describes the bog and bog body as inextricable: the ‘grain of his wrists’ are as ‘bog oak’, the ‘ball of his heel/like a basalt egg’, ‘his hips’ are like ‘the ridge/and purse of a mussel’ and his ‘spine’ is like ‘an eel arrested/under a glisten of mud’ (*N* 28–29). More importantly, however, for Heaney, these corpses maintain a life-like essence: ‘Who will say “corpse”/to his vivid cast?/Who will say “body”/to his opaque repose?’ (*N* 29). Similarly, the woman in ‘Punishment’ – drawn from an historical chronicle – endures a double exposure: first, through her original public execution for adultery, and then through Heaney’s anatomising description. The reader thus confronts her complete nakedness as she is displayed for scrutiny as both transgressor and corpse:

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<sup>70</sup> O’Driscoll, 170.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander, ‘Femme Fatale’, 222.

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

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

[. . .]  
her shaved head  
like a stubble of black corn,  
her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
her noose a ring

to store  
the memories of love. (N 30)

Heaney infuses the representation with a disturbing eroticism, a sadomasochist arousal in which the revolutionary corpses of the bog people become strangely alluring. The poet's fascination manifests in what Joseph Armengol described as 'necrophiliac fascination'<sup>72</sup> as the former describes wind that 'blows her nipples/of amber beads' and projects himself into the scene, imagining 'the nape of her neck, the wind/on her naked front', transfixed by her preserved beauty. Here, Heaney juxtaposes Glob's account of the Windeby girl with the tarring and feathering of Irish women accused of consorting with British soldiers during the Troubles:

The young girl lay naked in the hole in the peat, a bandage over the eyes and a collar round the neck. The band across the eyes was drawn tight and had cut into the neck and the base of the nose. We may feel sure that it had been used to close her eyes to this world. There was no mark of strangulation on the

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph M. Armengol, 'Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union"', *Atlantis* 1 (2001),

neck, so that it had not been used for that purpose. [. . .] We must suppose that she was led naked out on to the bog with bandaged eyes and the collar round her neck, and drowned in the little peat pit, which must have held twenty inches of water or more. To keep the young body under, some birch branches and a big stone were laid upon her.<sup>73</sup>

According to Glob, the Windeby girl was likely executed for sexual transgression: Germanic tribes would expel adulterous women from their communities and then inter them in peat bogs blindfolded, naked and shorn.<sup>74</sup> This temporal collapse affirms violence as endemic to human society and creates a historical continuum in which women repeatedly serve as scapegoats. As Vendler argues, Glob's bog bodies serve as an 'emblem of cultural predisposition to tribal sacrifice'<sup>75</sup> and a 'generalized cultural approval of violence, dating back many centuries'.<sup>76</sup> In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney himself comes to terms with the difficulty of writing such a poem and admits that it involved understanding of how to remain faithful to his ear (his poetic instinct and sensibility) and the source material he was working with. 'How to take a stand between the tar-black face of the peat-bog girl and the tarred and feathered women in the news reports'.<sup>77</sup>

Following his initial description linking the bog body to Glob's Windeby girl – the noose, the blindfold, and the shorn head – Heaney shifts to personal reflection, revealing his stance on both this specific execution and the broader historical-political dichotomy.

Little adulteress,  
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,  
undernourished, and your  
tar-black face was beautiful.

My poor scapegoat,  
I almost love you,  
but would have cast, I know,

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<sup>73</sup> Glob, *The Bog People*, 114.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>75</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 39.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 159.

the stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,

who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intima revenge. (*N* 30–31)

Unlike the other poems in which he captures the observations of the bog bodies, Heaney acknowledges his own complicity here by admitting that he too would have cast 'stones of silence',<sup>78</sup> thereby permitting the woman's murder to preserve tribal cohesion and communal idealism. It was a matter of 'self-examination, as much to do with shaping the thing as telling about me'.<sup>79</sup> However, by invoking biblical judgement, Heaney abandons his stance as a detached observer and implicates both himself and all who remain silent before atrocity. Heaney's lexicon of condemnation – 'betraying', 'revenge', and 'exact' – nevertheless acknowledges how this constitutes tribal law, which signals his comprehension of those who eliminate perceived traitors to preserve communal cohesion. In this poem, Heaney thus occupies a liminal position in which he simultaneously pities the victim while aligning himself with the executioners, a stance that ultimately endorses tribal law that condemns betrayal during times of political upheaval when boundaries must be enforced to preserve communal identity. Parker stresses this tension when he explains

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<sup>78</sup> The stones allude to Christ's injunction against judgement: 'Let him throw the first stone who is without sin' (John, 8:3–11). Heaney acknowledges violating this commandment, thereby revealing his moral fallibility.

<sup>79</sup> O'Driscoll, 159.

that he feels the distress provoked by the victims, but that he nevertheless ‘recognizes the legitimacy of the community’s feelings of betrayal’.<sup>80</sup>

*North* is saturated with erotic language: ‘I estimate/for pleasure/her knuckles’ paving’ (N 22); ‘the dark bowered queen,/whom I unpin,/is waiting’ (N 24); ‘I unwrap skins and see’ (N 24); ‘I reach past/the riverbed’s washed/dream of gold to the bullion/of her Venus bone’ (N 24); ‘the seeps of winter/digested me,/ [. . .] the vital hoard reducing/in the crock of the pelvis’ (N 25); ‘As I raised it/the soft lips of the growth / muttered and split’ (N 35). This represents a striking evolution from the domestic maternal figures of *Death of a Naturalist*: a progression from a childlike perception of femininity to an adolescent eroticization of the female body that defines his first four collections – taken together – as a poetic bildungsroman of sorts.

Another poem in which Coughlan identifies erotically enabling language is ‘Bone Dreams’, in which Heaney openly positions the female body as landscape in a ‘political conceit’.<sup>81</sup>

I hold my lady’s head  
like a crystal

and ossify myself  
by gazing: I am screens  
on her escarpments,  
a chalk giant

carved upon her downs.  
soon my hands, on the sunken  
fosse of her spine  
move toward the passes.

V  
and we end up  
cradling each other  
between the lips

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<sup>80</sup> Parker, 137.

<sup>81</sup> Coughlan, 193.

of an earthwork. (N21)

In this dynamic, where Heaney merges with the masculine force penetrating the land-as-mother, an unresolved Oedipal complex emerges. The poet occupies dual positions as both lover and child, ultimately ‘cradling’ with Mother Ireland in terrestrial union. His representations of maternal figures reveal a persistent conflation of filial and erotic relations, projected onto both bog bodies and landscapes. In this psychoanalytic reading, England functions as the paternal rival that must be eliminated, and Heaney implies this dynamic in ‘Act of Union’ when he writes that England fearing the ‘parasitical’ offspring whose implicit desire is patricidal usurpation. This implicit desire to return to the maternal womb – the primordial *omphalos* of origin – pervades both Heaney’s worldview and his treatment of the bog bodies. One of Coughlan’s further critical insights concerns the unidirectional nature of Heaney’s sexualised gaze: Not only is the gaze exclusively masculine, but so too is all the pleasure, as the women’s enforced silence precludes any reciprocal response. Male love monopolises ‘all amorous activities in which, however, the explorer’s, estimator’s, evaluator’s position is the man’s’.<sup>82</sup>

Both Coughlan and Alexander expose how Heaney instrumentalises of female bodies in three ways: as sites of sexual violence, as allegorical vehicles for masculine ideology, and as maternal symbols of national sanctuary. Together, they reveal how Heaney reinforces patriarchal conventions by rendering Ireland as a dispossessed figure dwelling ‘in oracular silence’,<sup>83</sup> denied autonomous speech and relegated to masculine ventriloquism. Central to both critiques is Heaney’s problematic positioning. As a male poet, he simultaneously performs the roles of voyeur, excavator, and narrator while claiming to inhabit a feminine consciousness. His positional multiplicity of roles manifests most disturbingly in poems such as ‘Punishment’, in which his ‘artful voyeur’ anatomises the exposed female body with archaeological precision and erotic fascination. Alexander identifies the following as a fundamental contradiction: Heaney’s attempt to deploy the abject feminine pastoral as anti-colonial resistance inevitably fails because it undermined by the very patriarchal authority through which he speaks. Coughlan and

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<sup>82</sup> Coughlan, 194.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Alexander also emphasise how Heaney's Ireland transforms into a devouring mother-goddess who, like Nerthus demanding seasonal sacrifice, consumes her own children to purchase peace. This mythic framework, however, obscures rather than illuminates political realities. As Alexander demonstrates through her concept of the abject pastoral landscape, Heaney's conflation of ancient archetypes with contemporary violence ultimately mystifies the very resistance it purports to represent, collapsing specificity into timeless ritual. Both visions are synthesised by Coughlan's following statement:

I think the real focus is on the speaker's private myth of identity formation, on wresting a self from 'feminine' unbounded indeterminacy of the bog. [...] the bog-goddess is imagined as both mother and spouse, and as destroyer and provider, but it is still persistently (and in both senses) the ground on which the speaker's self and his very identity is predicated. The feminine is thus once again an Other but not really envisaged as an alternative subject of self: a relation of complementarity, certainly, but not of equality, and one which enshrines difference in the oppressive sense of that word.<sup>84</sup>

Heaney realises the contradiction embedded into the land, which is 'destroyer and provider', as Coughlan writes, and he builds his imagined Ireland on the dichotomy inherent in Irish history. This mythologising gesture, however, demonstrates how even resistance poetry can involuntarily reproduce power structure it seeks to challenge, transforming historical trauma into aesthetic opportunity and inscribing the very subjects it seeks to save from oblivion into a symbolic economy that continues to deny their subjectivity.

### **5. Insular Violations: Spatial and Sexual Colonisation in Heaney's 'Ocean's Love to Ireland' and 'Act of Union'**

The previous analysis of the treatment of femininity in *North* has thus far traced Ireland's dual characterisation as both devouring goddess and violated victim, exemplified in poems like 'Punishment'. The synthesis of these seemingly opposing representations generates a distinctly contemporary construction of Mother Ireland that is fully realised

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

in two key poems in which English civility is debunked<sup>85</sup>: ‘Ocean’s Love to Ireland’ and ‘Act of Union’ (bridged by the brief composition ‘Aisling’). These poems simultaneously embody Heaney’s appropriation and deconstruction of the *aisling* tradition, which marks a deliberate departure from his earlier bog poetry while obliquely addressing Ulster’s political crisis through the allegory of Ireland as a dispossessed woman violated by her masculine oppressor, England. In these two poems, Heaney deploys gendered metaphors wherein England assumes the roles of male usurper, coloniser, husband, and rapist, while Ireland is correspondingly figured as a female subject, colonised territory, wife and victim of sexual violence. In this respect, Heaney perpetuates nineteenth-century gendered representations of Anglo–Irish relations, which, according to Mary Jean Corbett, ‘span from marriage and family, sometimes the two are called sister kingdoms; often they are imagined as husband and wife, happily or unhappily joined; occasionally, too, as mother and child, as father and daughter, or as brothers’.<sup>86</sup> However, within this varied familial imagery, Ireland invariably occupies a subordinate position.

In ‘Ocean’s Love to Ireland’ and ‘Act of Union’, Heaney explicitly allegorises colonial invasion through the intersection of gendered violence and sexual-political dynamics. In doing so, he portrays Ireland as a violated woman and England as a masculine usurper throughout history, from Britain’s initial colonisation to the 1800 Act of Union. In these compositions, Heaney’s poetry becomes a transformative medium wherein the colonially subjugated discover their own experiences refracted through verse. Karen Moloney identifies these poems as Heaney’s strategic appropriation of the *Feis* of Tara tradition,<sup>87</sup> that is the ancient marriage of sovereignty, which he radically subverts by

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<sup>85</sup> Parker, *Making of the Poet*, 142.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union and Irish and English Writing: 1790–1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold* (Cambridge, 2004), 3.

<sup>87</sup> The Irish and Celtic motif of the “marriage of sovereignty” intimately linked to the *Feis* of Tara, the ceremonial gathering for royal inaugurations. Within this tradition sovereignty manifested as a goddess who would reveal herself to the rightful king before transforming into a beautiful woman, symbolizing both the land’s fertility and his legitimate rule. The Hill of Tara functioned as the sacred site for these narratives, where the landscape itself – particularly the Lia Fáil (Stone of Destiny) which would cry out for the true king – embodied this mystical union between ruler and realm. The *Feis* of Tara operated simultaneously as an historical assembly and mythological theatre for this sacred marriage.

infusing the mythic framework with contemporary political urgency.<sup>88</sup> In Heaney's reconfiguration of this sovereignty myth, Ireland itself becomes the contested sacred terrain upon which England enforces its union, ultimately engendering Ulster as the traumatic offspring of this forced coupling.

'Ocean's Love to Ireland' offers a poetic account of the invasion and occupation of Ireland during the second phase of the Desmond Rebellion<sup>89</sup> (1579 – 1585), a crucial period when England's colonial ambitions intensified in Munster. The poem appropriates a scene from John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* (1669-1698), wherein Sir Walter Raleigh – Elizabeth I's favourite corsair and active participant in the Irish campaigns – sexually assaults one of Elizabeth's maids of honour and robs her of her virginity. Heaney transposes this historical anecdote onto the colonial relationship itself and stages an allegorical encounter between Ireland-as-woman and Raleigh-as-England. The poem functions as a sinister counterpoint to Raleigh's 'Ocean's Love to Cynthia', the elaborate paean he composed for Elizabeth I. Where Raleigh's original deploys Petrarchan conventions to express devotion to his sovereign (Cynthia being Elizabeth's poetic persona), Heaney's version strips away the courtly veneer to expose an underlying colonial rapacity. Through this allegorical framework, Heaney reveals the violent disjunction between Raleigh's refined courtship of Elizabeth I and his brutal subjugation of Ireland. The result is a demonstration of how imperial conquest appropriates the language of love while enacting domination. The conventions of courtly romance, which emphasise service, devotion and the elevation of the beloved, are grotesquely inverted as Ireland becomes the unwilling object of colonial possession.

I  
Speaking broad Devonshire,  
Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree  
As Ireland is backed to England

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<sup>88</sup> Karen Marguerite Moloney, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope* (Columbia and London, 2007), 167.

<sup>89</sup> The Rebellion was the result of a phase of Ulster's colonisation during which the region was 'farmed out to private interests' as Elizabeth tried to prevent expensive ventures to the island (Gibney, *A Short History of Ireland*, 35).

And drives inland  
Till all her strands are breathless:  
'Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!'

He is water, he is ocean, lifting  
Her farthingale like a scarf of weed lifting  
In the front of a wave.

II  
Yet his superb crest inclines to Cynthia  
Even while it runs its bent  
In the rivers of Lee and Blackwater.

Those are the plashy spots where he would lay  
His cape before her. In London, his name  
Will rise on water, and on these dark seepings:  
[. . .] (N 40)

This first part of the poem establishes both tone and setting through a depiction of oceanic rape in which the young woman resists her violation with pleading and screaming. Raleigh becomes the ocean, which aggressively 'drives inland', penetrating the maid 'Till all her strands are breathless'. According to O'Brien, the allusion to Raleigh's 'Ocean's Love to Cynthia' is reinforced by the detail that even while violating Ireland, 'his head inclines to Cynthia' so as to maintain his devotion to Elizabeth I while continuing his sexual assault 'in the rivers of Lee and Blackwater'. O'Brien argues that Heaney's description of sexual violence epitomises 'the colonial Elizabethan notions of colonised Ireland as land in need of tilling by a competent individual'.<sup>90</sup> However, as O'Brien notes, the poem provides minimal textual evidence that the violated woman represents Ireland itself. Only the geographical analogy – 'Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree/As Ireland is backed to England' – and the title itself indicate this allegorical dimension. In the poem, language

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<sup>90</sup> O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing*, 87.

thus provides the allegorical framework for military conquest: As the woman loses her virginity – her most valued possession – so Ireland forfeits freedom.

Given the unclear nationality of the maid, the poem raises questions about language. If not conveyed satisfactorily in the stanzas quoted above, Heaney eventually provides more indications of her identity:

III

The ruined maid complains in Irish,  
Ocean has scattered her dream of fleets,  
The Spanish prince has spilled his gold

And failed her. [. . .] Iambic drums  
Of English beat the woods where her poets  
Sink like Onan. Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,

She fades from their somnolent clasp  
Into ringlet-breath and dew,  
The ground possessed and repossessed. (N 41)

While passive female figures in traditional narratives might accept their violation in silence, Heaney's Ireland 'complains in Irish'. Language again supersedes action as the primary mode of resistance. Despite the Spanish Armada's failed intervention, the violated figure refuses to comply with colonial authority and wields her sole remaining weapon: linguistic defiance. O'Brien characterises this linguistic juxtaposition between British dialects (Devonshire) as Heaney's 'troping of plurality of meaning and of the complexity of thought in his poetry'.<sup>91</sup> This inclusiveness generates interpretive uncertainty regarding the poem's ultimate purpose, yet for readers who interpret Ireland as 'possessed and repossessed' (declared in the final line), Heaney clearly presents a protesting figure who diverges from the silent, submissive women of the Irish literary tradition. In the closing lines, Ireland retreats to a terrestrial sanctuary, withdrawing from 'Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,/[. . .] Into ringlet-breath and dew'. The temporal progression from night to dawn

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

across the final stanzas signals Ireland's passage from colonial darkness toward revolutionary light. With sunrise, she returns to Nature, a source of regenerative power, and bides her time until the moment to rise up arrives, thus metamorphosing from silent prey into fierce protagonist.

The brief intervening poem, 'Aisling', provides an interlude between the two political works, simultaneously invoking the tradition, with which Heaney engages while highlighting Ireland's transformed characterisation. In addition to the Irish tradition, the poem also draws from Greek mythology in a continuation of *North's* syncretic approach through figures such as Antaeus and Hercules.

He courted he  
With a decadent sweet art  
Like the wind's vowel  
Blowing through the hazels:

'Are you Diana. . .?'  
And was he Actaeon,  
His high lament  
The stag's exhausted belling? (*N* 42)

The composition represents a brief but violent reexamination of the event of Diana killing Actaeon, a clear subversion of the *aisling* tradition invoked in the poem's title. At first, the poem describes a chivalric encounter in which Actaeon flatters Diana by appreciating her archery skills; however, the second stanza dampens any hope of a peaceful encounter between the two, as Diana refuses to let him complete his entreaty and hastens instead to punish his perceived insolence. In this poem, the central feminine figure here abandons the delicate *spéirbhean* (sky-woman) figure of folklore and manifests instead as Diana, fierce goddess of wild nature and protector of chastity. Heaney invokes the classical myth in which Diana shows no mercy towards the intruder who violates her sacred privacy and destroys him for his transgression. Likewise, by corrupting traditional forms to address contemporary brutalities, Heaney extends no mercy to those who have violated Ireland and profaned her sacred inviolability. Death emerges as a singular, inevitable consequence for all who transgress the island's sanctity. The poem thus functions as an interlude wherein Heaney explicitly signals – through the composition's title – his radical

reconfiguration of Ireland, in which he replaces emblems of hope with a violent figure who refuses further subjugation.

The trilogy culminates with the allegorical composition of 'Act of Union', which addresses the eponymous 1801 settlement that formalised England's colonial dominion and Ireland's subsequent incorporation into the United Kingdom.

I

To-night, a first movement, a pulse,  
As if the rain in bogland gathered head  
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,  
A gash breaking open the ferny bed.  
Your back is a firm line of eastern coast  
And arms and legs are thrown  
Beyond your gradual hills. I caress  
The heaving province where our past has grown.  
I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder  
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.  
Conquest is a lie. I grow older  
Conceding your half-independent shore  
Within whose borders now my legacy  
Culminates inexorably.

II

And I am still imperially  
Male, leaving you with pain,  
The rending process in the colony,  
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.  
The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column  
Whose stance is growing unilateral.  
His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum  
Mustering force. His parasitical  
And ignorant little fists already  
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked  
At me across the water. No treaty  
I foresee will salve completely your tracked  
And stretchmarked body, the big pain  
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again. (N 43-44)

The poem, which takes the paradoxical form of a sonnet, presents itself as an address to a pregnant spouse. While sonnets traditionally convey love and romance, Heaney supplants affection with violence. In the first section of the poem's bipartite structure, Heaney depicts the sexual encounter between England and Ireland as the sexual encounter between husband (England) and wife (Ireland) on their wedding night – the political union formalised by the Act. Heaney renders this colonial penetration with deliberate erotic precision. Unlike the violent assault of 'Ocean's Love to Ireland', 'Act of Union' adopts a tone of tender inevitability: 'I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder/That you would neither cajole nor ignore,' and later 'I am still imperially/Male, leaving you with the pain' (N 43). In contrast to the swift colonial assault depicted in 'Ocean's Love to Ireland', in which the coloniser commits a violation immediately upon arrival, Heaney presents a different metaphor: the prolonged subjugation of forced marriage, wherein sexual relations become routine and compulsory.

The union produces an 'obstinate fifth column', the 'parasitical child' that Michael Parker reads as a potential parallel with Protestant paramilitaries, thereby portraying the IRA as the offspring of said rape.<sup>92</sup> The child's 'ignorant little fists' evoke the IRA's harassment of England – troublesome yet ultimately ineffectual.

The poem's conclusion offers no redemption for Ireland, and England warns that no treaty will liberate her from his perpetual dominion. She remains subjugated, without hope of escape and bears permanent physical evidence of her colonial violation in her stretchmarks. Through the phrase 'opened ground',<sup>93</sup> Heaney refers to the irreversible damage England has inflicted upon both Ireland's physical landscape and political sovereignty. The rhyme of 'pain' with 'again' (lines 27–28) reinforces England's perpetual dominion: this is not singular violation but an endlessly renewed cycle of violence. No treaty will liberate the island from England's grasp because the coloniser

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<sup>92</sup> Parker, *The Making of the Poet*, 144.

<sup>93</sup> *Opened Ground* also serves as the title of Heaney's volume of selected poems (Faber & Faber, 1998), which gathers work from *Death of a Naturalist* to *The Spirit Level* and is supplemented by essays and previously uncollected poems. The title signals both the excavation of essential work and the persistent centrality of Ireland throughout his poetic evolution.

stands ready to reassert its dominance whenever challenged. The violated body remains forever 'raw, like opened ground' (*N* 44).

## Conclusion

In his Nobel Prize lecture in 1995, Heaney spoke of poetry's capacity to create "a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference". This image of concentric expansion captures Heaney's engagement with how the intimate reality of Mossbawn enabled his later universal insights into human experience. The present study has demonstrated that Heaney's initial phase establishes place not as limitation but as stepping stone, as methodological principle through which knowledge and poetry achieve cosmopolitan significance.

The interdisciplinary framework comprehending aesthetic philosophy, cultural geography, gender studies and heterotopia theory, shows how territorial consciousness applies and functions in Heaney's work. The ever-present centrality of Mossbawn as *omphalos* works not only as a childhood rekindling, but as an epistemological principle, where knowledge begins in situatedness and the sense of place emerges somewhere rather than nowhere. It is a somewhere that promotes vision rather than constrains it. This vision of the world was translated by Heaney into the idea that only through transformation into lived place can abstract place acquire meaning. This conception of local as containment for the universal is what distinguishes Heaney's poetry from mere regional writing. The development from *Death of a Naturalist* to *North* demonstrates the progressive deepening of the particular of rurality into the more universal themes pertaining to the human condition, with *North* synthesising the more intimate exploration of *Death of a Naturalist* into a comprehensive vision wherein ancient bog bodies become lenses for the translation of contemporary condition of individual experience and collective trauma.

The interdisciplinary methodology used in this study has allowed to trace Heaney's progression as poet across multiple registers rather than through a single-discipline approach. Only through the dialogue between diverse perspectives does adequate understanding emerge. This research demonstrates that Heaney's early poetry already establishes a methodology that remains relevant for contemporary writers and readers confronting with personal approaches to themes of place, history, gender and political struggles. His example shows how local details enable a universal vision; that attention to craft serves political commitment; that acknowledging complexity proves more valuable than claiming certainty. These principles rise above the specific situation

of Northern Ireland to address enduring questions about art's stance to power, individual voice to collective trauma, aesthetic autonomy to social responsibility.

Heaney's insistence on the ethical and psychological importance of place-belonging – his recognition that “being in touch with what is there, hidden and real” constitutes an essential human need – challenges the detachment to place and the progressive loss of rootedness that characterises contemporary existence. His understanding that local knowledge need not be provincial, that particular places can serve as window onto universal patterns and that environmental consciousness can go beyond mere activism to embrace larger ethical issues.

What emerges from Heaney's first poetic phase is that he does not resolve the tension between poetic independence or social responsibility, but rather he inhabits space between these apparently competing paradigms, with poetry as the point of convergence. This said, the preceding chapters have demonstrated that in-depth understanding of Heaney's poetry requires methodological precision in order to match the poet's complexity. Single-discipline approaches inevitably privilege certain dimensions while obscuring others. The interdisciplinary framework proposed here enables more adequate comprehension because it resists reduction to Heaney's multifaceted achievement to single interpretive key. Yet this expanded methodology cannot claim full completeness, as other approaches, such as postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, psychoanalysis or comparative literature, might illuminate additional dimensions of Heaney's work. The goal is not to achieve a complete interpretation, which would be impossible, but to show the intellectual flexibility required in approaching an author, the willingness to propose a transcultural and transdisciplinary vision and the commitment to following the work wherever it leads rather than focusing on predetermined categories. Heaney's work demands and rewards such intellectual generosity.

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