

BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY

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“How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?” Seamus Heaney, the 1995 Nobel Laureate from Northern Ireland, asks these questions in his aptly entitled book of essays, *Preoccupations* (1980, 13).¹ Thus, he articulates a number of fundamental ethical dilemmas and aesthetic demands upon Northern Irish writers trying to locate their own tradition and immediate crisis in the maze of interactions between writing and the world, and the many borders and boundaries within these two spheres. At the time, Northern Ireland constituted a fierce battleground of state suppression, paramilitary violence and sectarian xenophobia. In *Lost Lives* McKittrick et al (2008) account for more than 3700 people who lost their lives during the Troubles from the recrudescence of mass violence in 1968 to the Easter Agreement in 1998, on average one person every third day, and the number of injured persons goes beyond recordability. Approximately 30,000 troops were stationed in Northern Ireland for many years, a considerable army among a population of 1.5 million people. If these Troubles had taken place in England, the proportional fatality number and statistics would have to be given in ten-thousands, perhaps even hundred-thousands. People were murdered on the streets every day, especially if they breached the labyrinthine borders of sectarian neighbourhoods or entered the interfaces at night. In addition to the convoluted killing fields, distinctive demarcations of political enmity, religious division and national separation entrenched the conflict. In an over-simplified definition of the situation one could say that the war-like conflict in Northern Ireland was an extremely lethal combat deeply rooted in history with demarcated territorial zones and complex ideological dimensions. The standard matrix of ideological opposition – REPUBLICAN-NATIONALIST-CATHOLIC-IRISH VS UNIONIST-LOYALIST-PROTESTANT-BRITISH – largely excluded social concerns, multicultural exchange, gender issues, polysexuality and aesthetic preoccupations.² The borders were and still are plural and

¹ For aesthetic and moral self-recriminations in Heaney’s poetry, see the “Station Island” sequence in his eponymous volume of poetry (1984, 61-97).

² Naturally, this crisis has resulted in a large body of literature written from a plethora of genres and research disciplines, all offering insights into what seemed for decades to be an entirely insoluble situation. Dillon’s many books, such as *25 Years of Terror* (1996), *The Dirty War* (1999), *God and the Gun* (1998), *The Shankill Butchers* (1990) and *Stone Cold* (1993), present graphically the dangers and horrors of the Troubles. As even most revisionist historians accept, for example Martin and Moody’s *The Course of Irish History* (2001) and Foster’s *Modern Ireland 1600 – 1972* (1989), the outburst of violence and conflict during the latter three decades of the previous century has deep historical roots. Elliot examines the role of religion in the conflict in two of her major works: *When God Took Sides* (2009) and *The Catholics of Ulster* (2001). Bew researches the cognitive principles of the conflict in *Ideology and the Irish Question* (1998), as does Richard English in *Irish Freedom* (2007) and *Unionism in Modern Ireland* (1996). In his post-Foucauldian analysis, *Formations of Violence* (1991), Feldman discusses the maze of geographical, historical, cultural and cognitive demarcations of the conflict.

complex to poets in Northern Ireland, as Heaney's self-probing questions demonstrate. Where do they draw the line between life and literature? Why and how? And in their literature, how do they relate to the overriding binary borders of their territory and mental activity? "Two buckets were easier carried than one. / I grew up in between", the negotiator states in Heaney's "Terminus" (1987, 5). This essay argues that Heaney's poetics seeks a conciliatory middle ground between aesthetic autonomy and social commitment, and between the binary structures of fierce hostility in the society from which his poetry stems.

Heaney is the chosen poet for this essay on borders and poetics in Northern Ireland due to the time span, the status and the variety of his poetry. Heaney's publications, from *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966 to *Human Chain* in 2010 cover the whole time span of the Troubles. He was early in his career termed the most important Irish poet since Yeats. Already in 1982 Morrison and Blake exalted Heaney as "the most important new poet of the last fifteen years" in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, an anthology that also included five other poets from Northern Ireland. In 1995 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past" (Nobel Prize Committee, 1995). The Nobel accolade acknowledges the literary achievement and the profound human preoccupations of Heaney's poetry, his middle position between literary introspection and social engagement. One of the most consistent factors in the variety of his verse has been his middle position in the responsibilities of his own art and the incessant negotiations of the borders between verse and violence, poetry and politics, lyrics and liability, as well as the sensitive treatment in his poetry of the many barriers in the society from which his poetry also crystalises.³

The overwhelming menace of geographical separation, violence and the militant structures of division impinged as much upon Heaney's creative imagination as any others' in Northern Ireland at the time. Born into a Catholic family in 1939, Heaney studied, worked and lived in Belfast from 1957 until 1972 – the most violent year of the conflict with the highest death toll, 496 (McKittrick et al., 2008, 1552) – when he moved to Dublin where he still resides.⁴ He lived in the middle of the Troubles during the most violent years, and in close proximity to them all of his life, and to draw the line between his living and his writing became a continuous challenge. One of the most durable positions in Heaney's writing is his sensitive negotiations between the realms; both the distinction between literature and life, but also between the binary oppositions of Belfast and Northern Ireland in his poetry. Heaney's

³For a more comprehensive analysis of artistic responses to the Troubles, see Moi, "In a ghostly pool of blood/a crumpled phantom hugged the mud": Spectropoetic Presentations of Bloody Sunday and the Crisis of Northern Ireland" (2011, 61-82).

⁴Heaney died on Friday 30 August 2013. His tragic death occurred when this essay was in the final stages of proof-reading. The sorrows have been expressed with refinement worldwide by poets, politicians and people in general. Michael D. Higgins, poet and Irish President, praised Heaney's "contribution to the republic of letters, conscience and humanity". The Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, expressed the sense of extensive bereavement by saying that his death had brought "great sorrow to Ireland, to language and to literature". I have chosen, apart from this footnote, to keep the time and tone of the original version. For the condolences above and many others, see The New York Times and BBC's webpages of Friday 30 August 2013.

writing seeks a middle position between the borders in Northern Ireland and in the polemics of literary criticism.

That Heaney is the towering figure of poetry in Ireland does not mean that he is the only voice, far from it. Many artists and writers opposed the dominant schisms of their society and focused on their own creativity. In their artistic preoccupation most of them attended to the same questions of aesthetic autonomy and social commitment as Heaney did. On the one hand, some of them, for example James Simmons and Padraic Fiacc, tended to be too vociferous of their own alliances in their poetry to develop a readership beyond their own region or to endure the test of time. On the other hand, an overwhelming amount of poets from Belfast and Northern Ireland have made an impact on the arena of contemporary poetry, developed a worldwide readership and increased their significance in the course of time. In simplistic terms, Michael Longley has been regarded as the unionist custodian of Protestant values, Derek Mahon as the disaffected loyalist who defected, Ciaran Carson as the critical Catholic, and Paul Muldoon as the distant master of evasion. Female poets, for example Eavan Boland and Maeve McGuckian, have answered the same and other questions in other ways. Writers of younger generations – Sinéad Morrissey, Leontia Flynn, Alan Gillis, Ben Maier – trace and reorient in their new poetry the subject matters and styles of their seniors. On this arena of artistic multi-discursivity Heaney has acted as a diplomat and ambassador. All of Heaney's poetry volumes include dedications to his fellow contemporary (and historical) writers and to artists of several disciplines, in parallel with elegies to victims of the Troubles. He has written reviews and essays on most of his fellow poets. Heaney and Michael Longley toured Northern Ireland together with Room to Roam in 1968 and they celebrated their 70th birthdays together in the Belfast Waterfront Hall on Saturday 17 October 2009. He has encouraged and promoted several poets of the younger generation. His long-life friendships, in life and literature, are many. The Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University Belfast was officially opened in 2004 to honour his spirits and significance, and to encourage new generations of writers in Belfast, Northern Ireland and the rest of the world. The intertextuality in Heaney's verses throughout the years and his renowned solidarity of spirit with fellow poets reveal that Heaney advocates peaceful and communal relations within an artistic arena that has intermittently been characterised by acerb reviewing of each other and a Bloomian anxiety of influence. No writer in Northern Ireland could escape the network of territorial borders, ideological demarcations and artistic rivalry within which their poetry was created. Heaney exerted himself to include them all in "the place of writing".⁵

The negotiations of borders between the place of writing and the poet's relations to "his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world" constitutes an imperative in Heaney's poetics. His collections of critical prose – *Preoccupations* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Place of Writing* (1989), *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and his Nobel speech *Crediting Poetry* (1996) – all bear

⁵ Heaney has reviewed extensively and written large numbers of critical essays. Some of these articles are collected in his volumes of critical prose. He discusses his contemporary Northern Irish colleagues most directly in *The Place of Writing*. See also *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue* and *The Redress of Poetry*.

witness to the profundity and longevity of these artistic issues, in titles and contents. His perpetual meditations on these inextricable intimacies save his poetry from the adamant positions of art for art's sake – spearheaded by Oscar Wilde and so dominant in Ireland at the end of the 19th century – and the dissolution of poetry into propaganda, which has placed so many Irish and Northern Irish writers in oblivion. Still, as a poet Heaney naturally but self-critically gives priority to art and imagination over harsh reality, historical analysis, religious speculation, social issues and politicized discourses. “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”, he states in *The Government of the Tongue* (1988, 101), his collection of essays on the demands, duties and delectations of poetry. Almost a decade later this conviction is rephrased in *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), another instalment in his prolonged *apologia* for poetry: “It is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers should be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place” (159). Heaney’s insistence on the aesthetic autonomy of poetry and the written arts nevertheless relates to the problematic questions of the crisis in Northern Ireland. “The end of art is peace”, he argues in *Preoccupations* (1980, 112), echoing Coventry Patmore and William Butler Yeats, against the daily atrocities of his own place and time. “History is as instructive as an abattoir” he comments upon the importance of history in *Crediting Poetry* (1995, 18), and suggests that poetry “involves raising the historical record to a different power” in *The Place of Writing* (1989, 36). “Poetry brings human existence into a fuller life” he claims (*The Redress of Poetry*, 1995, xvii) in tandem with religious belief. Still, he is not naïve about the impact of poetry: “No lyric has ever stopped a tank” (1988, 107), he admits and elaborates: “It [poetry] offers a response to a reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit, and yet I can see how such a function would be deemed insufficient by a political activist” (1995, 2). Aesthetic autonomy always takes precedence over social commitment in Heaney’s essays of heuristic speculation upon the nature and functions of written arts. Still, as the many quotes above indicate, this is an aesthetic awareness that always observes the many historical, political, social and human concerns with which the poetry interacts.

Heaney’s priority to artistic imperatives is not a cancellation of social concerns – on the contrary, they appear to be part of his poetics. From his early poetic attention to his own place in Northern Ireland – after the explosion of the Troubles most noticeable in *Wintering Out* (1973), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987) and *The Spirit Level* (1996) – to his involvement with the pressing issues of the contemporary world in his recent collections *District and Circle* (2006) and *Human Chain* (2010), his social engagement and involvement with the human condition predicate and sustain his formal exactitude. These discussions of an artist’s responsibility to aesthetic autonomy or social commitment loom large in the critical discourses of literature, for example in Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel*, Sartre’s *What is Literature?* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. Heaney’s creative and critical idiom, however much his poetry and essays exalt aesthetic autonomy, tends to avoid these polemical positions. The roles and functions of poetry in the wars, upon which Heaney meditates in his essays and poetry, is a

perennial question that has, before Heaney, in various ways haunted different writers at different times at least since Shakespeare's sonnet 65: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" via Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and the poets of WW1 to Czeslaw Milosz's "Dedication" from 1945: "What is poetry that does not save / Nations or people?" In this respect Heaney continues a long tradition of aesthetics where the questions of composition and form arise in a combination of canonical awareness and contemporary chaos.⁶

Heaney reveals how his poetic aesthetics combines with his sensitivity to violence, history, religion and ideas of belonging throughout his career. A few examples from his poetry illustrate this prolonged preoccupation. In his very first poem, "Digging" in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) in many ways an *ars poetica* in itself, the persona in this neo-romantic poem digs into the organicist tradition of poetry, into the history of Ireland and into the roots of his farming family. The divine dimension presides over the cultivation of arts, land, history and family. The persona exclaims:

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog. (1)

Still, the most striking aspect of the poem is the explosive metaphor of the surprising first two verses: "Between my finger and thumb / the squat pen rests snug as a gun" (1). The image is obviously a literary one: it pays homage to the power of poetry and plays on the adage of the pen being mightier than the sword. Nevertheless, the image also catches the raw nerve of enmity in Belfast at the time and signals the onslaught of violence that precipitated upon Northern Ireland after the book's publication. This ambivalent focus on violence runs throughout the collection. In an ekphrastic poem the art of painter Colin Middleton is charged with "a bright grenade" and a "safety catch" (41). In other poems farmyard implements are described as "armoury" (5), kitchen crocks turn into "pottery bombs" (9), frogs into "mud grenades" (4) and trout into "torpedoes" (26). Water falls "like villains dropped screaming to justice" (27). This extensive use of menacing and militant metaphors could be seen as a radical invigoration of the force of poetry, not least in its correspondence with Ted Hughes' forceful poetry at the time. But these metaphors certainly also intimate the explosion of violence and weapons that precipitated upon the poet's community two years later. In this respect the metaphors of guns and arms add power to Heaney's conviction of poetry as an imaginative field separate from religious dogma, historical research and philosophical discourses, but, apprehensively, the metaphors also anticipate the

⁶ For incisive and illuminating interpretations of some of the major poets of WW1 and the conflict in Northern Ireland, see Edna Longley: *Poetry in the Wars* (1986); Fran Brearton: *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (2000). For a discussion of the many pressures upon Heaney's *Electric Light*, see Ruben Moi, "The Cure by Poetry that cannot be coerced" (2007, 172-189.) See also Matthew Hollis and Paul Keegan (eds.), *101 Poems Against War* (2003) and Edward Hudson, *Poetry of the Second World War* (1990).

imperative of violence that came to dominate society and most discourses from 1968 onwards. Still, the poem ends: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.” In this poetic manifesto, Heaney declares the position of the writer. His declaration of artistic independence is not the well-established *non serviam*. Heaney does not act as poetic arch-rebel in opposition to the poetic canon, religion, history and family tradition, but much more as a moderator of these values. However, the frightening aspect appears to be the anticipation of the violence that is about to explode in his “home” place, both in the vocabulary and in the persona’s choice of commitment. Ultimately, “Digging” illustrates how Heaney forges new poetic idioms in close contact with the discourses from which his poetry attempts to distance itself. The result is a poem that cannot be assorted to one side or the other of the historical, social and cognitive divisions of Northern Ireland.

This digging into literary legacies, land, history and religion reaches a climax with Heaney’s so-called “bog poems”. Many of these poems appear in *North* (1975), Heaney’s most controversial volume of poetry, which was published at the height of the conflict, and which is divided into one historical and one contemporary section. The bog poems take their central metaphor from the victims of ritual killings from pre-Christian sacrificial rites that were exhumed with intact bodies after WW2, especially in Denmark. In these bodies Heaney found a very imaginative and powerful metaphor adequate to the predicament of his own art and his own place. The many analogies between the religious barbarism of primeval Jutland and the atrocities in Northern Ireland unfold in poems such as “Come to the Bower” (24), “Bog Queen” (25), “The Graubelle Man” (28), “Punishment” (30), “Strange Fruit” (32) and “Kinship” (33).⁷ In these poems poetic creativity and metaphoric originality fit the harrowing questions of life and death, of the divine and the secular, of identity and belonging, of selection of sacrifice, of justice and execution – questions that struck artistic sensibility and raw nerves during the intensive state surveillance, bombing campaigns and tit-for-tat killings in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. Written and published during the most intensive years of the conflict, when the death toll reached its climax from 1972-1975, *North* is probably Heaney’s most controversial volume and spurred congeries of critical controversy which place Heaney’s poetic achievement in a larger perspective. Fellow poet Ciaran Carson upbraids Heaney for romanticizing violence and for becoming “the laureate of violence, a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for ‘the situation,’ in the last resort a mystifier” (1975, 184). Jonathan Hufstader (1999, 21-86) basically seconds that opinion in his analysis of Heaney as a Girardian structuralist. Connor Cruise O’Brien (1975, 5) places Heaney one-sidedly as the advocate of “the Catholics of Northern Ireland”, a statement which corroborates Reverend Ian Paisley’s greeting to Heaney on his move to “his spiritual home in the popish republic” in *The Protestant Telegraph* (1972) a couple of years before: “Farewell to the Papist poet”. Edna Longley follows suit and criticizes Heaney for being too political in her chapter on *North* in *Poetry in the Wars* (1986, 140-169). David Lloyd, in “Pap for the Dispossessed” (1993, 13-41), disagrees entirely and criticizes Heaney for not being political enough. From a feminist point of view

⁷ For other bog poems, see for example “The Tollund Man” and “Nerthus” (*Wintering Out*, 1972, 36 and 38) and “Tollund” (*The Spirit Level*, 1996, 69).

Patricia Coughlan (1991, 88-111) and Elisabeth Butler Cullingford (1990, 1-21) arrest Heaney for reductive representations of women. In the field of aesthetic categorisation, Stephen Matthews (1997) considers Heaney a modernist; whereas Thomas Docherty (1988, 112-116; 1997, 206-222) considers him a postmodernist. In a wider perspective, despite the overwhelming disputes listed above, many critics, particularly outside of Northern Ireland, regarded the metaphor of the bog people as universal images of violence and death that could pertain to both sides of the conflict, and the volume was received with extensive appraisal and enthusiasm. The justification of the Nobel committee, “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”, appears very relevant as a description of this particular volume. In Northern Ireland such ideas of inter-communal representation and universalism caused ferocious critical disagreement. In divided societies the middle position appears as disputed as the extreme ones, perhaps even more so, as a middle position faces two fronts. The critical debate surrounding Heaney’s *North* lays bare the many borders and boundaries surrounding Heaney’s own questions about a poet’s responsibilities to his art and the world in which he writes and lives. The spectrum of criticism also indicates that a middle position is close to an impossibility in volatile societies, and that the imagination is not a neutral and innocent realm.

“Two buckets were easier carried than one. / I grew up in between,” The maxim in “Terminus” insists on the sense and significance of the middleman and mediations. The lines also appear as a natural consequence of all the critical controversy surrounding his poetry in the 1970s: the image of the mediator in mid-stream appears as a self-conscious confirmation of the middle position in the aftermath of the bog poems controversies. The poem’s persona placed on horseback in midstream “still parleying, in earshot of his peers” is also an obvious image of the poet and his position as the middling man between literature and life, between the dual demands of aesthetic preservation and humanist engagement, and the verses articulate proverbially the position of poetry for which Heaney argues so convincingly in his critical prose. The metaphors of the middle position between two buckets or the negotiator mid-stream between two embankments emphasise mediation, negotiation and conciliation. However, for all its visionary bridging of fronts and borders, the middle position of these metaphors nevertheless cements the underlying binarism of conflict.

Another such middle position appears in *The Spirit Level* (1996). This title presents another image of balancing extremes, and the sentry in “Mycenae Lookout”, much more of a real gate-keeper than Kafka’s you might say, states: “I balanced between destiny and dread / And saw it coming, clouds bloodshot with the red / Of victory fires” (30). Again, Heaney centres on the middle position, but in this poem the main concern of the gatekeeper is his own brothers-in-arms returning from the battle. The middle position has been moved from the borderlands of binary hostility to those of internal complexity, and the mediator now has to negotiate concerns of his own community: “No such thing / as innocent / bystanding” (30), states another stanza in the poem. This shift in focus from external enmity to internecine struggle and the realization of the impossibility of innocence appear prophetic of the peace process and its aftermath in Northern Ireland. “Mycenae Lookout” suggests a poetic

parable for the innermost infernal circles of a Northern Ireland in the transition from conflict to conciliation. As such, this visionary poetic cycle also contains the hope for a prosperous peace process across the divide as much as confrontations of change within the separate communities.

Heaney's inquisition into his own responsibilities has always crossed the boundaries of stereotypical divisions in Northern Ireland and of the theoretical positions of aesthetic autonomy and social commitment. He remains an ambassador of artistic solidarity, and a towering figure for younger poets today. The award of the Nobel Prize in literature to Heaney three years before the politicians John Hume and David Trimble were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, acknowledges Heaney's poetic achievement and indicates a political acceptance of his imaginative contribution to conciliation and peace across the many borders and boundaries of Northern Ireland. Despite the many critical controversies surrounding his oeuvre, there is still a sense that his poetic quest for mediation and a middle position contributed to renewing poetry and to solving the conflict of his own time and place. In a society where geographical separation, entrenched fronts, state suppression and the paramilitary are frequently given further ammunition by religion, ideology, historiography and political rhetoric, the insistence on poetry as an imaginative province of peace proves salutary. If conciliation, co-existence and a peaceful future across the borders cannot even be envisioned in the imaginative realm, it is hard to see where and whenever it would take place at all.

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Summary

This essay discusses the borders and boundaries between the poetry of Seamus Heaney, the 1995 Nobel Laureate from Northern Ireland, and the Troubles of the border-riven society from which it stems.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, poetry, Northern Ireland, Nobel Prize, the Troubles, borders, boundaries, aesthetics, commitment, conciliation, peace