

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost:

Seamus Heaney and Northern Irish Politics

by

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## Abstract

This thesis will examine the portion of Seamus Heaney's poetry that addresses Northern Irish politics, specifically the modern conflict known as the Troubles. I will argue that the distinguishing feature of Heaney's political stance is a distinct humanism, meaning that Heaney values human interests, values, and dignity over political ideologies, religious dogmas, or social conventions. Heaney addresses the political realm with reluctance. He is a naturally personal poet who enters the public spotlight out of compassion for the human suffering caused by the Troubles. Even when confronting political issues, Heaney engages in self-examination, exploring his development as a poet and questioning his role in a conflict-torn society like Northern Ireland. He feels a strong sense of guilt for being a survivor where many, including family members and friends, have died. Ultimately, Heaney's political poetry becomes a forum for him to address that guilt, find absolution, and recommit to writing with a personal vision rather than a public focus.

In my introduction, I provide the historical information needed to understand modern Northern Ireland and the Troubles. I cover the period from the sixteenth century up until 1975, the year of publication of Heaney's volume *North*.

My first chapter examines Part I of *North*, in which Heaney explores his country's history in an oblique, allusive manner. He creates a series of spiritual "fathers" which provide a lineage of sorts for modern-day Northern Ireland. Using mythological characters and real-life sacrifices, Heaney finds parallels for modern political victims. He treats these characters with compassion, choosing not to elevate them to mythic status.

My second chapter deals with Part II of *North*, in which Heaney explores his personal development in the context of the Troubles. He imagines himself as a "son" of Northern Ireland, a product of his country's traumas and struggles. Heaney reveals both his humanistic political views and the internal conflict created by the Troubles. He wants to be a man of political action and influence, but as a son of Northern Ireland, his reticence is too strong. He can only speak out through poetry, which he views as an ineffective agent of change.

My final chapter moves beyond *North* to selected poems from *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984). I deal with the poems in which Heaney confronts the voices of the recent dead, including several political victims. These "holy ghosts" serve Heaney as a self-examination tool, allowing him to confront his feelings of guilt and seek absolution. As a result of questions and advice from the dead, Heaney charts a new course for his poetry. In the poem "Station Island," Heaney commits to writing poetry based on a personal, private vision rather than public expectation.

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Short Titles

*N*: Heaney, Seamus. *North*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1975.

*OG*: Heaney, Seamus. *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998.

## Introduction: The Historical Backdrop

I am of Northern Ireland, born  
 Behind a matted window, when  
 The crossfire between love and hate  
 Jerked a corpse across our wooden gate.  
 Where introverted streets reflect  
 Pains from a shattered past: where all  
 My constitutionals end with  
 The dead man on the gate and in the myth.

- Roy McFadden, "I Won't Dance"

An essentially personal poet, Seamus Heaney found himself thrust into the political spotlight with the publication of his 1975 volume, *North*. While his previous volumes mined his rural upbringing for inspiration, *North* found him tackling the political situation in his native Northern Ireland head-on. As a part of the Catholic minority, Heaney was well aware of his country's history of prejudice, discrimination, and political struggle. And yet, prior to 1975, he seemed content to write poetry in a primarily pastoral mode, touching only tangentially on political issues. His early poems recreated the rich landscape of his childhood while downplaying the conflict that was escalating around him. As that conflict -- euphemistically known as "the Troubles" -- grew to epic proportions, Heaney could not avoid confronting the issue within the framework of his poetry. The title of 1972's *Wintering Out* comes from Ulster slang for surviving a crisis, and the dedicatory poem in that volume describes Heaney's encounter with Long Kesh, an internment camp for political detainees. Although the rest of the volume steers clear of political matters, the stage was set for a definitive statement from Heaney on the political situation in Northern Ireland.

That statement came in the form of *North*, Heaney's most overtly political volume. While autobiographical at times, the volume situates Heaney's development in the context of political, religious, and cultural conflict. Heaney employs differing strategies in each of the book's two parts. In the first part, Heaney examines the Troubles in an oblique

manner, drawing parallels between ancient atrocities, mythical struggles, and modern strife. He presents the Troubles as a continuation of the legacy of North European violence, and the victims as the spiritual descendants of ancient sacrifices to the gods. In this sense, he establishes a series of figurative “fathers” for the Northern Ireland of his time: “emblems of adversity,” in his own words, which represent his country’s long history of discord. In Part II of *North*, Heaney moves from an oblique, symbolic method to a direct, journalistic style in order to explore the Troubles and their effect on his own development as a poet and a citizen. Accordingly, he becomes Northern Ireland’s “son,” a product of the ancient traumas and struggles outlined in Part I and a representative of the Catholic minority. Throughout Part II, Heaney explores his sense of guilt at having chosen a passive, reflective life rather than an actively political one.

This guilt is a recurring theme in Heaney’s poetry, and in the volumes *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984), Heaney’s guilt is displayed through his treatment of the dead. In the elegies of *Field Work* and the extended title sequence of *Station Island*, Heaney confronts the victims of political violence in an attempt to find absolution and forgiveness. These “holy ghosts,” while at first exacerbating Heaney’s penitent mindframe, eventually forgive his political inaction, allowing him to focus on the personal side of his poetry. Heaney’s poetic journey through the political is remarkable for the way in which he avoids getting bogged down in the muck and mire of Northern Irish politics. Although clearly biased towards the Catholic and Nationalist camps, Heaney steers clear of partisanship in his poetry, offering an even-handed account of the situation. The signature quality of his poetry is a distinct humanism; the suffering of individuals outweighs dogmas, rhetoric, and ideologies. In dealing with the political, Heaney remains tuned to the human condition and the distress caused by the Troubles. In order to understand the significance of Heaney’s unique treatment of Northern Irish politics, one must first learn about the history of his country and the issues that have long divided its population.



## Historical Background

The term “Ulster” refers to the nine counties that make up the Northern province of Ireland. When the British government partitioned Ireland in 1921, the resulting state, called Northern Ireland, encompassed only six of those counties. The remaining three were excluded because Catholics comprised a majority of their population. The history of Ulster prior to the partition is important in understanding the history of modern Northern Ireland. Ulster was first brought under English control by the conquests of Elizabeth. This was followed by Jacobean plantation, a colonizing enterprise similar in size and character to the English migrations to the New World. Local Gaelic warlords were displaced by mostly Scottish settlers. This represented an overthrow of the old order of Celtic aristocracy, to be replaced by a new Protestant power structure. However, the Gaelic Irish by no means disappeared. In 1641, they rose up in rebellion. The following decade saw great political turmoil in Ulster. It took the arrival of Oliver Cromwell to bring the province back under British subjugation. Cromwell led a brutal campaign, confiscating almost all Catholic-owned land and wiping out the Gaelic aristocracy. The Restoration of Charles II did nothing to reverse Cromwell’s settlement.

From its inception as a British territory, religion was the symbol of ethnic division in Ulster. The accession of a Catholic king, James II, in 1685 was cause for alarm for the Protestant settlement in Ireland. However, their hopes were raised by the news that the Dutch king William of Orange would be invading England. William was worried that James II and Louis XIV of France were planning to invade Holland, so in defense of his country and with the support of English nobility, he arrived in England in November of 1688. James fled to France just before Christmas and the following February, William and his wife Mary, James’s eldest daughter, were declared joint sovereigns of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Then, in March, James arrived in Ireland with a formidable French army. The ramifications of this conflict were widespread; indeed, the fate of much of Europe seemed to turn on events in Ireland.

The decisive event of the Williamite war was the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Armed with superior firepower and outnumbering the Jacobites by 10,000, William's forces registered a decisive victory. James fled to France with hopes of recovering his throne dashed. The following year, the Treaty of Limerick was signed after a Williamite victory at Aughrim. William's triumph ensured Protestant domination in Ulster and throughout the rest of Ireland. In 1695, the Irish parliament began the Penal Code -- in violation of the Treaty of Limerick -- by preventing Catholics from bearing arms or educating their children. They continued to add laws, unchallenged by Queen Anne's government; the final penal law did not enter the statute book until 1728. The Penal Laws aimed to deny political and economic power to Catholic men of property. Catholics could not buy land, vote, hold public office, or enter the army. By 1776, Catholics owned an estimated 5 percent of the land of Ireland, even though they formed three quarters of the population.

In 1800, the Union Bill passed the Irish Parliament, uniting the Westminster and Dublin parliaments and creating the United Kingdom. Prime Minister William Pitt promised to pursue Catholic emancipation following the Union. For this reason, the bill was popular with Catholic men of property and opposed by many Protestants. And yet King George III opposed emancipation, so it never came to fruition. The Irish Catholic middle class turned against the Union while Protestants in every part of Ulster were won over by it. The advent of the Union upset the relative calm of the previous century. 1813 saw the arrival of the Ribbonmen, a revolutionary Catholic group bent on the destruction of the Protestant elite. On the other side were the Orangemen, named after William of Orange, whose victories they would commemorate with marches and celebrations. Clashes between the two sides, which had occurred throughout Ulster's history, once again became commonplace.

In the middle of the 19th century, the whole of Ireland went through a disastrous famine. Between 1841 and 1851, the number of Ulster's inhabitants fell by 15.7 percent.

That decline continued throughout the century. In 1841, the population of Ireland was an estimated 8 million. At the turn of the 20th century, it was 3 million. In Ulster, the population shifted from the countryside to the cities. Following the famine, the city of Belfast went through an economic boom. The success of Belfast's linen mills and factories, engineering works, and shipbuilding yards brought large numbers of people in from the countryside; by 1891, Belfast was the biggest city in Ireland. The influx of population was volatile and unstable. Traditional fears and rivalries brought from the countryside thrived in the streets of working-class Belfast, particularly along the boundaries of Protestant and Catholic areas. The Belfast riots of 1864, 1872, and 1886 resulted in more deaths than all the nationalist uprisings of the nineteenth century put together.

Throughout Ireland, the Catholic middle class was seeking greater political advantage. They wanted Home Rule, where the political power would be moved from Westminster to Dublin. In 1886 and 1892, Home Rule bills were considered by Parliament, but rejected. At the same time, the whole of Ireland was going through a Gaelic revival. The Gaelic Athletic Association, founded in 1884, promoted the native games of Gaelic football and hurling. The Gaelic League, dedicated to reviving the Irish language, was founded in 1893. Concurrent with the Gaelic revival was a rise of nationalist sentiment. By 1910, the Irish Parliamentary Party held the balance of power at Westminster, and the third Home Rule bill made its journey through Parliament to the chagrin of Ulster Unionists. The Ulster Unionist Council recruited men into the Ulster Volunteer Force to stop Home Rule by any means necessary. Likewise, the Nationalists had the Irish Republican Brotherhood, also known as the Fenians, who were dedicated to an independent Ireland. The Home Rule issue pushed Ireland to the brink of a civil war. At the height of the conflict, World War I broke out. Home Rule would not be implemented until the end of the war and would have a special provision for Ulster.

On Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916, a group led by Patrick Pearse and James Connolly started an armed insurrection in Dublin. The Easter Rising was meant to be nationwide, but poor communication limited its scope. Just 5 days after the rebellion began, Pearse and Connolly surrendered. Military tribunals in Dublin condemned sixteen insurgent leaders to execution by firing squad. Instead of breaking their spirits, the executions just strengthened the resolve of the nationalist community. April 1917 saw the formation of a broad new coalition of nationalists called Sinn Fein ("Ourselves alone"). Over the next year, Sinn Fein won five out of eight by-elections, but its MP's did not take their seats at Westminster. In January of 1919, the Dail Eireann, an assembly of Ireland's elected representatives, met in Dublin's Mansion House. They proclaimed Ireland's independence. The Irish Republican Army, formerly called the Irish Volunteers, began their campaign of guerilla warfare, which spread northwards to Ulster in 1920. Protestant resistance was bolstered by the Black and Tans, a notoriously brutal English force. The Anglo-Irish war triggered a sectarian conflict in Ulster that was more lethal than all the previous century's riots put together.

The British government's solution came in the form of the Government of Ireland Act. First introduced in 1920, the act proposed two Irish parliaments, one for the six north-eastern counties to be called Northern Ireland, and one for the other twenty-six counties to be known as Southern Ireland. Sinn Fein rejected this act out of hand and struggled to make the Dail the parliament of a thirty-two county Irish republic. Still, the act received royal assent and came into force in May of 1921. It was to become, in effect, the constitution of Northern Ireland for the next fifty years. Thanks to the exclusion of counties Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan, Northern Ireland had an in-built Protestant, and therefore Unionist, majority. The new country was sixty-five percent Protestant and thirty-five percent Catholic. For Northern Ireland's first election in 1921, 40 Unionists, 6 Sinn Feiners, and 6 Nationalists were elected. Only the Unionists took their seats in the new parliament; the Sinn Feiners and Nationalists refused to acknowledge the validity of

the partition, effectively turning Northern Ireland into a one-party state, which it would remain for almost fifty years.

In the early years of the new country, Protestant-Catholic relations were exceedingly strained, resulting in considerable violence and deaths. The Unionists deployed a populist Protestant militia called the Special Constabulary to maintain law and order. The IRA remained active, resulting in many clashes between the two. Politically, the Unionists were strengthening their hold on the country. They took advantage of the Nationalists' inaction and maximized their control of the state's vital democratic institutions. They initiated reforms of both local government boundaries and voting methods in order to take control of many of the previously Catholic dominated councils. The Nationalists, although they began taking their Parliamentary seats in the second election, were hurt by a lack of cohesion and organization and divisions over the Civil War in the South. They also deferred to Dublin for leadership, a weakness that left them vulnerable. The Unionists were able to gain a stranglehold on Northern Irish politics.

After the second World War, the situation in Northern Ireland was relatively peaceful until the sixties. In 1947, the Northern Ireland Education Act was passed, giving children greater educational opportunities. One of the beneficiaries of this act was Seamus Heaney. Born April 13th, 1939 in Mossbawn, County Derry, Heaney was the son of Patrick Heaney, a farmer, and Margaret Heaney. The locations of his childhood would prove to be extremely important to his later development as a poet. From 1945-51, Heaney attended the local primary school at Anahorish, which educated both Catholic and Protestant children. This experience made him conscious of religious differences at an early age. Heaney received a scholarship to St. Columb's College in Derry. Leaving home, he began his secondary education in September, 1951. In the poem "Ministry of Fear," Heaney addresses the subtle conditioning designed to make Catholics feel inferior that took place at St. Columb's. Nevertheless, Heaney achieved distinction and academic success there. Thanks to the 1947 Education Act, which provided him with the

scholarship to St. Columb's, he received a State bursary to study at Queen's University, Belfast, where he began his four year course in October, 1957. In 1961, he received a First Class Honours degree in English Language and Literature.

The following decade witnessed both Heaney's development as a poet and the rebirth of sectarian conflict. In 1963, Terence O'Neill was appointed prime minister. O'Neill promised to respond to Catholic grievances, of which there were many. The inequality and discrimination extended to every aspect of life. To begin with, Catholics had a far larger unemployment rate than Protestants. They were over-represented in manual posts and under-represented in senior posts. By 1966, only 4 percent of those earning 2,000 pounds or more were Catholics. Second, the housing standards in Northern Ireland were among the worst in the United Kingdom. For working class Catholics, the situation was made worse because many local housing authorities were dominated by Unionists and favored their fellow Protestants for allocation of new homes. For example, in County Fermanagh, of 1,589 postwar houses built, 1,021 went to Protestants, 568 to Catholics. Third, the Northern Ireland police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, had wide powers of arrest thanks to the Special Powers Act, draconian legislation enacted in the early years of Northern Ireland. The RUC and the B-Specials, a part time constabulary set up during the 1920's, were dominated almost exclusively by Protestants. Finally, regional policy was manipulated by the Unionists in order to keep Catholics out of power. Gerrymandering was a popular tactic by which the Unionists would manipulate regional boundaries in order to give them an advantage in voting. In Derry, Northern Ireland's second largest city, Unionists held twelve of the twenty council seats in spite of the city's large Catholic majority. The Cameron report of 1969 found evidence to support Catholic claims of discrimination in these four areas.

In 1966, the same year that Heaney published his first volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, a small group of republicans and political activists met to discuss Northern Ireland's future. Out of this meeting, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was

born. This group's demands were as follows: 1) One man, one vote for local elections 2) A points system to ensure fairness in public housing 3) An end to gerrymandering 4) The disbandment of the B-specials 5) The abolition of the Special Powers Act 6) A new complaints mechanism for local government. NICRA's tactics of marches and sit-downs were based on the black civil rights movement in the United States. On October 5th, 1968, the group planned a march on Derry. The authorities banned the march, but four hundred protestors showed up anyway. British and Irish television cameras were on hand to see the Royal Ulster Constabulary first block their way, then set on the marchers with batons and water cannons. The RUC pursued the demonstrators into the Catholic west side of the city, where the patrols were met with stones and gasoline bombs. The sporadic attacks lasted into the early hours of the morning.

The television coverage of the event awakened British viewers to the problems in Northern Ireland, of which the vast majority had been unaware. As a result of the march, several of NICRA's demands were met, including the points system for housing, the abolition of the company vote, and local governmental reforms. Inspired by the success of NICRA, a group called People's Democracy announced that it would hold a long march from Belfast to Derry, beginning on January 1, 1969. It was modeled on Martin Luther King's march in 1966 from Selma to Montgomery. On the fourth day of the trek, at Burntollet Bridge outside Derry, the marchers were attacked by a mob of several hundred loyalists. The marchers' RUC escort did little to protect them. Riots erupted in the Bogside area of Derry between Catholics and the RUC. With the political situation destabilizing, O'Neill called for a general election in February. He failed to receive the vote of confidence he needed -- the Protestant reactionary Ian Paisley came within fifteen hundred votes of taking his seat. Feeling threatened by the successes of the civil rights movement, a significant number of Ulster's Protestants were taking the road of extremism. In April of 1969, O'Neill resigned, to be succeeded by James Chichester-Clark.

Summer, when thousands of Orange parades take place, is traditionally the most dangerous time in Ulster. The apocalyptic summer of 1969 would prove to be no different. Loyalist paramilitaries like the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ian Paisley's Ulster Protestant Volunteers picked up their campaigns, targeting Catholic citizens and neighborhoods. Likewise, the IRA increased their numbers in Belfast and went on the offensive. Both sides were responsible for atrocities. On August 12th, a Protestant group called the Apprentice Boys held their annual march through Derry. As they went by the Bogside, the Catholics met the marchers with a torrent of stones, bottles, and nails. The RUC moved against the Catholic rioters, but they were prepared, with thousands of gasoline bombs. The riot was the worst of the Troubles so far, lasting two days. In Belfast, as news spread about the riots in Derry, local IRA men led attacks on RUC stations along the Falls Road. Loyalist mobs from the Shankill responded by torching Catholic homes along the streets linking the two thoroughfares, only a few hundred yards apart. The two sides traded gunfire, killing several innocents including a nine year-old boy. The Northern Ireland authorities, unable to contain the violence, requested the intervention of British troops, who took up positions in Derry on August 14th and then in Belfast on the next day. Catholics welcomed them with open arms, hailing their presence as a defeat for Unionism and grateful for the protection they offered against loyalist mobs.

Soon after the arrival of British troops, the IRA split into two groups, the Provisionals and the Officials. The Provisionals saw the torching of the houses on the Falls as evidence that the IRA was not living up to its promise as a defense force. The Provisional IRA had a decidedly Catholic mindframe; they combined the dogmatism of the pulpit with the militancy of the Belfast ghetto, which made for a dangerous mixture. The relationship between Catholics and the British army deteriorated in 1970, and the Catholics looked to the Provisionals for protection. The army began to seem like just another instrument of Unionist rule, no better than the RUC. In July, the army raided the Falls district for weapons. The Official IRA, wanting to show that they could defend their



area as well as the Provisionals, took on the army, wounding eighteen soldiers. The army killed four civilians during the operation. General Freeland imposed a curfew that was not lifted until July 5th. He claimed that the operation was a military success, but politically, it was a disaster. The Catholic population no longer regarded British troops as their protectors. Enrollment in the PIRA increased following the Falls curfew.

With IRA action increasing, Unionists began to demand internment without trial for suspected revolutionaries. On August 9th, 1971, thousands of troops stormed into Catholic ghettos in Belfast and Derry with a list of 452 suspects. 342 people were taken, of which only 56 were Provisionals. Internment was aimed solely at the Catholic community; not one loyalist was interned. Twelve internees were chosen for interrogation by sensory deprivation techniques: they were spread-eagled against a wall for up to sixteen hours at a time and denied sleep while the sound of a jet engine drowned out everything else. The effect was to induce a kind of madness. The techniques used were illegal and constituted a gross violation of human rights. Unfortunately, the interrogations began a pattern that led to further violations. Internment was both a military and political failure for the British. Almost the entire Provisional Army Council held a press conference a few days after the introduction of internment to flaunt their freedom. In the weeks following internment, the number of British army casualties rose dramatically.

As 1971 drew to a close, the bombings and murders continued to increase. But the most atrocious act of the Troubles did not occur until the beginning of 1972. On Sunday, January 30th, NICRA led a march against internment in the Bogside in Derry. The RUC should have had authority to control the situation, but the army was called in to oversee the operation. The decision came from a high political level, but the responsibility for the decision has never been determined. As the crowds listened to the speakers at "Free Derry Corner," the first army units arrived. The troops crossed the first barricade and opened fire, wounding two civilians. The troops' deployment was rapid and disciplined. Eyewitness reports tell of a man being shot while going to the aid of a

wounded man and of two men gunned down at point-blank range even though their hands were on their heads in a gesture of surrender. When the firing finally stopped, thirteen lay dead, and another would die months later from his wounds. At first, the British army claimed that eight of the thirteen dead were wanted, known terrorists who had been found with weapons. Within two days, these claims were exposed as false. None of the dead was on any wanted list, nor had any been found with weapons. The British army claimed to have been fired on first, but there is no evidence to support this. Civilian eyewitnesses tell a simple version of the story: British soldiers murdered civilians in cold blood, without provocation.

Questions regarding "Bloody Sunday" would persist even twenty-five years later, but the impact of the event was immediately felt in Northern Ireland. In March, the British government suspended Stormont, the Belfast parliament, and took over full security powers for the province. Direct rule was back in place. The one-party government of Northern Ireland had lasted fifty years, but now it was gone, never to return. Violence rose sharply following the suspension of Stormont. The Provisional IRA took credit for bringing down the Unionist government and was encouraged to launch an all-out offensive. The loyalist paramilitaries felt betrayed and sure that they were witnessing the end of Ulster as they knew it. They responded with the most vicious sectarian campaign that Northern Ireland had ever experienced. Over the next few years, against the backdrop of seemingly endless sectarian violence, British authorities tried to find a solution to the Northern Ireland problem. In 1973, they instituted a power-sharing executive that included a council of Ireland, which would give the Republic a hand in governing the North. The Nationalist SDLP won 22.1 percent of the vote, making them the biggest anti-Unionist parliamentary party in the history of the state. Protestant opposition to the power-sharing experiment was extreme. In May of 1974, the Ulster Workers Council initiated a massive strike in protest. They were assisted by the loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Defense Association. The two groups effectively shut down

the entire province, choking off fuel, food, and electricity supplies. At the same time, the UVF exploded three car bombs in Dublin and one in Monaghan. In the face of this enormous pressure, the power-sharing executive collapsed, and Northern Ireland found itself back at square one. Britain's attempt at restructuring the 1921 settlement had failed miserably.

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It is in this context of violence and political stagnation that Heaney produced *North*. Prior to 1975, his poetry was primarily concerned with personal development. Now Heaney felt that the time had come for his poetry to address the situation in his native country. Considering the brutalities that Catholics had faced at the hands of loyalists, it would not have been shocking for Heaney's political poetry to resemble propaganda. But Heaney, always a healer, remained resolute in his determination to offer an honest, even portrayal. While he hints at some of the injustices faced by Catholics, he avoids a Yeatsian glorification of the Republican camp, holding them responsible for their own atrocities. Heaney experienced some of the worst internecine violence of the twentieth century and came out of it a devout humanist, committed to expressing the sanctity of human life. His 1995 Nobel Prize was indeed well deserved.

## Chapter I: The Father

In Part I of *North*, Heaney deals with history, myth, and the inextricable connection between past and present by exploring a series of spiritual “fathers” for both Northern Ireland and his own poetic persona. He draws on thousands of years of European history in order to find “emblems of adversity,” characters that reflect his country’s troubled past. Heaney uses mythological characters and real-life Iron Age sacrifices to allude to the modern Northern Irish state and its political victims. Although this method would suggest a Yeatsian mythologization of the Nationalist political struggle, Heaney’s poems are constantly engaging in a discourse of demythification. Heaney dispels the notion that the Troubles are a romantic, noble struggle by exposing the human suffering at its core. For Heaney, the human cost outweighs the political ideal. Too many of his country’s fathers died before their time.

I will focus on two loose groups of poems from Part I, the colonization poems and the bog poems. The former includes “Antaeus,” “Hercules and Antaeus,” and “Act of Union.” These poems explore Ireland’s development in the wake of British conquest and domination. The ancient Greek myth of Hercules and Antaeus provides Heaney with a model of the British colonization of Ireland -- an act whose reverberations would result in, among other things, the creation of Northern Ireland. Moreover, Heaney uses these mythic characters in order to explore the human effects of colonization. Hercules, the greatest of the Greek heroes, was famous for his Twelve Labors. During the last of these, the Apples of the Hesperides, Hercules engaged in the auxiliary task of defeating the giant Antaeus. Antaeus was the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and of Ge, the Earth. According to the tradition, Antaeus forced all comers to wrestle with him, killed them, and then placed their skulls on the roof of the temple of Poseidon. When thrown, Antaeus was made stronger by contact with his mother, the Earth. Heaney stresses this aspect of the tradition in the poem “Antaeus,” which opens Part I of *North*: “In fights I arrange a fall on

the ring / To rub myself with sand / That is operative / As an elixir" (N, 12). Later in the poem, Antaeus predicts his own downfall:

Among sky-born and royal:  
 He may well throw me and renew my birth  
 But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,  
 My elevation, my fall. (N, 12).

Hercules eventually defeats Antaeus by holding him aloft until he dies. This close association between Antaeus and the ground aligns him with the colonized. Like Antaeus, the colonized, particularly the Irish, draw comfort and strength from their native land. The colonizer takes over the land and, in effect, "raises" the colonized out of contact with their culture and traditions. Thus, like Antaeus, the colonized become dispossessed of their native soil.

"Hercules and Antaeus," the last poem of Part I, establishes in greater detail the myth as an allegory for England and Ireland. The poem opens:

Sky-born and royal,  
 snake-choker, dung-heaver,  
 his mind big with golden apples,  
 his future hung with trophies,

Hercules has the measure  
 of resistance and black powers  
 feeding off the territory. (N, 52)

With allusions to divine right and royalty, the description of Hercules suggests an English king. Hercules is immediately associated with both the colonizer in general, and England in particular. In their article "Coloniser and Colonised: The Myth of Hercules and Antaeus in Seamus Heaney's *North*," Brian Arkins and Patrick Sheeran delineate this association in great detail:

For just as Hercules is the greatest of the Greek heroes, who as a mere baby killed the snakes that Hera, jealous of his mother Alcmena, sent against him, the man who embarked on his Twelve Labours, including cleansing the Augean Stables of dung and regaining the Apples of the Hesperides, the man who then went on to a huge number of other exploits, including an expedition against Troy and ridding Asia Minor of bandits; so England in its infancy conquered Ireland and then proceeded to amass by conquest one of the greatest Empires the world has ever known.<sup>1</sup>

Hercules is the rational conqueror who defeats the primitive, instinctual natives. He is said to have the “measure” of the opposing forces. The poet later comments on his “intelligence,” and Hercules celebrates by lifting his arms “in a remorseless V” (*N*, 52-53). Hercules’s rational nature is contrasted with Antaeus’s instinctive behavior, emphasizing the perceived dichotomy between colonizer and colonized.

As the defeated defender, Antaeus is a pertinent symbol for colonized Ireland. Arkins and Sheeran argue that “The crucial point about Antaeus is his total and utter commitment to his mother, the Earth, which mirrors a similar commitment by Irish nationalists to the land of Ireland” (131). The Irish landscape has always been closely intertwined with the Irish character. Antaeus and Ireland both gain identity and strength from the earth. Antaeus also symbolizes the primitive to an extent. In an interview, Heaney explains his poem to Seamus Deane: “Hercules represents the balanced rational light, while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity.”<sup>2</sup> Heaney’s language here implies that the land has a religious quality for Antaeus. The battle with the would-be

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Arkins and Patrick F. Sheeran, “Coloniser and Colonised: The Myth of Hercules and Antaeus in Seamus Heaney’s *North*,” *Classical and Modern Literature: A Quarterly* 10 (Winter 1990): 130-1. Hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Interview with Seamus Heaney,” With Seamus Deane, *Crane Bag* 1 (1977): 63.

colonizer is a holy war of sorts and Antaeus, like Ireland, is aligned with the losing forces of history:

the challenger's intelligence

is a spur of light,

a blue prong graiping him

out of his element

into a dream of loss

and origins - the cradling dark,

the river-veins, the secret gullies

of his strength,

the hatching grounds

of cave and souterrain,

he has bequeathed it all

to elegists. Balor will die

and Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull. (*N*, 52-53)

Balor was a mythical Irish king who was killed by Lugh, the sun God. Byrthnoth was the earl of Essex, defeated and killed by the Danes in 991, an event described in the Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Battle of Maldon." Sitting Bull was the Sioux chief who defeated General Custer at Little Bighorn, but was later hunted down and murdered. Arkins and Sheeran make the connection: "All were leaders of traditional, tribal groups overwhelmed by more technologically advanced societies" (129). When the colonized have been defeated, the magic powers of their land -- "the secret gullies / of his strength" -- are gone. They are left with "a dream of loss / and origins," keeping alive a mythologized past in the hopes of a liberated future.

In addition to the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, Michael Molino, in his book *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, identifies another way of reading “Hercules and Antaeus”:

The struggle between Hercules and Antaeus, however, also represents competing forces or discourses particularly Irish - a struggle not with the British, but within the Irish themselves. Antaeus, rooted as he is in the earth, is representative of the Irish tradition and the myth of origin; he is a voice of monumentality who imagines to speak as a unity. Hercules, on the other hand, is the force or discourse of demythification, the constant struggle of an Irish writer to circumvent monumentality.<sup>3</sup>

Heaney’s poetry constantly returns to this conflict between the discourse of myth and the discourse of demythification. Extending on Molino’s definition, the discourse of myth can be seen as emphasizing the collective consciousness of a group, while the discourse of demythification emphasizes the individual. Furthermore, myth represents timelessness and immortality. Demythification places the emphasis on mortal qualities. Thus, through an emphasis of individuals over ideologies and a finely tuned understanding of the human condition, Heaney’s poetry engages in a discourse of demythification. The struggle between competing discourses manifests itself in both Heaney’s use of myth and his compassionate treatment of human suffering.

In spite of its mythical subject matter, “Hercules and Antaeus” is guided by Heaney’s tendency towards demythification, and the poem ultimately serves to humanize the process of colonization. Antaeus, the figure of the colonized, is described using a wealth of imagery suggesting an infant. When he is separated from the earth, he is said to be “weaned at last.” As a result of this figurative weaning, he loses “the cradling dark, /

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 95. Hereafter cited in the text.



the river-veins, the secret gullies / of his strength" (*N*, 52). Antaeus, as an infant, is "cradled" by the dark. Like an infant, his strength disappears when contact is broken with his mother, the earth. Heaney leaves the reader with this final image:

Hercules lifts his arms  
in a remorseless V,  
his triumph unassailed  
by the powers he has shaken

and lifts and banks Antaeus  
high as a profiled ridge,  
a sleeping giant,  
pap for the dispossessed. (*N*, 53)

First, Antaeus is compared with a ridge, once again emphasizing his devotion to the earth. Next, he is a sleeping giant - a mythic figure reduced to a human level by the condition of sleep. Finally, there is the all-important image of "pap for the dispossessed." Pap is both soft food for infants and ideas without any real substance or value. So, on the one hand, Heaney is reinforcing the mortal, even infantile, qualities of the colonized. The "dispossessed" need their myths of origins as much as infants need food. On the other hand, pap signifies a dismissal of such myths by Heaney. The "dream of loss and origins," which the natives are left with after being dispossessed of their land, is pap, garbage, bunk. And yet, such myths persist because they are all the natives have; they represent the hope that one day, the "sleeping giant" will awake.

"Hercules and Antaeus" presents a paradigm through which other poems in Part I can be understood. "Act of Union" is another poem in which the process of colonization is presented from a demythified perspective. In this poem, colonization occurs not as a wrestling match, but rather as a sexual encounter. "Act of Union" consists of two sonnets, each written from the perspective of a personified England speaking to Ireland:

“I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder / That you would neither cajole nor ignore. / Conquest is a lie” (*N*, 49). Significantly, the voice of England does all of the talking in the poem. Just as the colonizers silence the voices of the colonized, so too is Ireland silenced within the framework of this poem. That makes Heaney’s choice of the sonnet form notable. Although the English learned the sonnet form from the Italians, they created their own version. The Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave and a sestet. The English (or Shakespearean) sonnet consists of three quatrains and a couplet. Both sonnets in “Act of Union” are written in the English style, giving full volume to the voice of the colonizer.

Heaney’s language suggests that the colonization of Ireland is akin to rape:

And I am still imperially

Male, leaving you with the pain,

The rending process in the colony,

The battering ram, the boom burst from within. (*N*, 49)

The battering ram implies rape in two ways. First, it is an obviously phallic image. Second, it suggests something taken by force in the face of great resistance. England, as the imperial male, does his business and leaves the female Ireland responsible for tending to the damage. But England does not get away scot-free:

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. (*N*, 49-50)

England’s rape results in an unholy offspring: the numerous Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups. This bastard child represents a threat to both its mother, Ireland, and its father, England. Indeed, even though Northern Ireland absorbed the brunt of the

violence from the Troubles, the IRA did carry on a campaign on English soil beginning in 1973. The complications created by England's colonization of Ireland will not be easily solved:

No treaty

I foresee will salve completely your tracked

And stretchmarked body, the big pain

That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again. (N, 50)

This final image recalls Antaeus in its conflation of the colonized native and the earth. In this case, the land itself is the victim of England's imperial ambitions. The "opened ground," a recurring image in Heaney's poetry, is symbolic of the trauma of Ireland's land and people at the hands of England, the colonial father figure represented by Hercules.

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Heaney's historical reach in Part I of *North* extends much further back than England's colonization of Ireland. In his so-called "bog poems," Heaney examines victims of ritual violence from the Iron Age. His source for these poems was P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, which documents bodies that had been buried centuries before and were found almost perfectly preserved in bogs. Glob postulates that certain of these bodies were murdered and buried in the bog as a sacrifice to a mythological fertility goddess. Heaney draws parallels between these sacrifices and victims of sectarian violence. In the bog poems and a handful of others in Part I, Heaney situates modern Northern Ireland within a historical continuum of violence. The many casualties from the Troubles represent an age-old tradition of innocents sacrificed to a sacred, mythic entity: for Glob's victims, it was the goddess Nerthus; for the IRA, it is Mother Ireland. As he did with Hercules and Antaeus, Heaney deflates the myths behind these sacrifices in order to expose the waste of human life at their core. He focuses his attention on the victims of violence, giving them the compassionate treatment they deserve. In spite of his mythical subject matter, Heaney is constantly engaging in a discourse of demythification.

The title poem of *North* acts as a ritual of entrance to the past and a connection to thousands of years of poetic tradition. The poet is confronted by ancient voices -- not Irish, but Viking:

those fabulous raiders,  
those lying in Orkney and Dublin  
measured against  
their long swords rusting,

those in the solid  
belly of stone ships,  
those hacked and glinting  
in the gravel of thawed streams

were ocean-deafened voices  
warning me, lifted again  
in violence and epiphany. (*N*, 19)

The poet, situated at the north edge of Ireland, looks even further north in contemplation. He hears the voices of the Vikings - "those fabulous raiders." His mention of Orkney, a group of islands in Scotland, and Dublin links the Vikings historically and culturally to Irish society, lending the voices a poetic weight. By connecting the Irish with the Vikings, Heaney finds an identity for his people which predates England's conquest of Ireland. The Viking society is another spiritual father for Ireland; both cultures are marked by an uneasy tension between violence and epiphany.

Although technically not a bog poem, "North" connects Heaney with the linguistic and cultural tradition which he needs for the bog poems. The multiple voices of the Vikings are compressed into one: "The longship's swimming tongue" offers the following advice:

It said, 'Lie down  
in the word-hoard, burrow  
the coil and gleam  
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.  
Expect aurora borealis  
in the long foray  
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear  
as the bleb of the icicle,  
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure  
your hands have known.' (N, 20)

The mention of the "word-hoard" recalls *Beowulf* and places Heaney within the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. Moreover, Heaney alludes to the Irish Bardic tradition with the line "Compose in darkness." The Bardic schools existed from prehistoric times to about the middle of the seventeenth century. Students were taught to compose poems lying down in the dark, often with a heavy stone on their chests, before committing them to writing. Heaney's subtle reference to this practice establishes him as the inheritor of a centuries-old tradition. His Viking mentor advises him to trust what his "hands have known." In writing about bogs, the landscape of his native land, Heaney is following his advice while at the same time going beyond the scope of what he knows from direct experience. Mary Brown, in her article "Seamus Heaney and *North*," says:

By going down into the bog and backwards in time Heaney has found an identity for Ireland, one which includes North and South, past and present. It relates Ireland not to England but to the North European peoples as a whole, and it

enables Heaney to propose a continuity between the man-killing rituals of the past and those of the present.<sup>4</sup>

“North” plugs both Heaney and his native country into ancient literary and historical traditions.

“The Grauballe Man” continues the work of “North” by digging into the bog and the past to find an emblematic victim. The title subject is an Iron Age sacrifice whose body was found in Denmark in 1952.<sup>5</sup> In the Grauballe Man, Heaney finds an ancient counterpart to modern political victims who were sacrificed in the name of a mythic ideal. As usual, his focus is on the human cost involved. The poem opens with a description of the body:

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

the black river of himself. (N, 35)

The body (an artifact by now) is imbued with human qualities. He is lying on a pillow and weeping. Like Antaeus, his body is associated with the land: his pillow is the turf, and he himself is a “black river.” The Grauballe Man, a potentially mythic figure, is given the same humanizing treatment as Antaeus. He is compared to both a fetus and a forceps baby, establishing his vulnerability and mortality.

The ending of the poem links the Grauballe Man to modern victims of violence. Heaney shifts from description to commentary:

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<sup>4</sup> Mary P. Brown, “Seamus Heaney and *North*,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 70 (1981): 293.

<sup>5</sup> P.V. Glob, *The Bog People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 37-62. Hereafter cited in the text.

I first saw his twisted face

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

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

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

on his shield,  
with the actual weight  
of each hooded victim,  
slashed and dumped. (*N*, 36)

In this remarkable passage, Heaney relates the Grauballe Man to the modern Northern Irish political victim. Heaney uses a work of art to make the connection: the Dying Gaul is a sculpture which depicts a mortally wounded Celtic warrior, one of a group of Gauls who invaded Asia Minor in 239 BC. According to Henry Hart, in his article "History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*," "The naked Gaul is an emblem of the colonized provincial dying as he seeks revenge on an indomitable imperialist. For Heaney

he is a timeless victim, whose contemporary incarnation is the Catholic victim in Northern Ireland.”<sup>6</sup> Heaney refers to such Catholic victims indirectly in the poem’s final two lines. Hart points out that the U.D.A. (Ulster Defense Association, a loyalist paramilitary group) hooded Catholics to interrogate them before killing them, often by slashing their throats (407). Heaney thus uses “The Grauballe Man” to connect ancient ritual violence with modern sectarian killings.

More importantly, “The Grauballe Man” avoids mythologizing the victims of such killings, and by extension, it avoids glorifying violence. The Grauballe Man, as a forefather of modern political victims, is too human to be a mythic figure. Compared to both a fetus and a forceps baby, he is even more vulnerable than the infantile Antaeus. The line about being “perfected” in the poet’s memory suggests a mythological ideal, but then we find out that the Grauballe Man is “hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity.” Molino has this to say about the “scales”:

Rather than perceiving Yeats’s “terrible beauty,” which fuses myth and violence, the speaker in “The Grauballe Man” acknowledges the beauty of the artifact and its mythic resonances, but he also recognizes the “atrocity” of the violent act. The first he may apprehend, but the latter he will never condone. (94)

Molino refers to Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” which commemorates the Easter uprising and the sixteen prisoners executed by the British. He offers the poem as an example of a poet’s ability to mythologize violence and the victims of violence:

I write it out in a verse --  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Hart, “History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney’s *North*,” *Contemporary Literature* 30 (Fall 1989): 407. Hereafter cited in the text.



Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly.  
 A terrible beauty is born.<sup>7</sup>

Yeats's poem elevates the victims beyond the status of mortals. They become absorbed into the turbulent mythology of Mother Ireland -- more "pap for the dispossessed."

Heaney, on the other hand, contrasts the human qualities of his victims with the inhumanity of violence. Yeats's "terrible beauty" uses violence to create a myth; Heaney takes pains to separate the two elements. He appreciates the Grauballe Man as an artifact and a human, but the "atrocious" which he represents contains no element of beauty.

The contrast between Yeats and Heaney raises the question, what is the poet's role in a culture dominated by violence? Self-interrogation is a recurring feature of Heaney's poetry, and in the poems of Part I he begins to explore this question. In "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," he portrays himself in a self-effacing manner, drawing on history and literature:

I am Hamlet the Dane,  
 skull-handler, parablist,  
 smeller of rot

in the state, infused  
 with its poisons,  
 pinioned by ghosts  
 and affections,

murders and pieties,

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<sup>7</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume I* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 184. Hereafter cited in the text.

coming to consciousness  
 by jumping in graves,  
 dithering, blathering. (*N*, 23)

Heaney perceives himself as a literary and cultural descendant of Hamlet. He smells the rot in the state of Ireland and deals with it by "jumping in graves," examining dead bodies like Hamlet with the skull of Yorick. His bog poems serve as parables through which he and his readers might "come to consciousness." And yet, in the end, Heaney dismisses all of that as "dithering, blathering." Hamlet is an appropriate character with which to compare Heaney. Both share an obsession with mortality. Both are by nature introspective. Both are driven by a deep sense of responsibility -- Hamlet to his father, Heaney to his fatherland. And yet neither man finds it easy to take action.

Heaney reproaches himself for this inaction in "Punishment," which once again draws from Glob's book. The subject of this poem is the "Windeby Girl," who was found in a bog in Germany with her head shaved. Glob identifies the shaved head as a special punishment for female adulterers (153). "Punishment" begins with a description of the girl, but ends up focusing on the poet:

My poor scapegoat,  
  
 I almost love you  
 but would have cast, I know,  
 the stones of silence.  
 I am the artful voyeur  
  
 of your brain's exposed  
 and darkened combs,  
 your muscles' webbing  
 and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,

who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

For all of his compassion and humanism, Heaney is still a product of Northern Ireland. Raised in a culture of violence and secrecy, he understands the nature of “tribal” sacrifice but does nothing about it. Heaney is an “artful voyeur,” turning someone else’s pain into poetry. His critical self-portrayal highlights an important theme in *North*: Heaney’s guilt at choosing the life of a poet. His inability to speak out for the Windeby Girl mirrors his political inaction. In Part II of *North*, Heaney’s guilt takes center stage as he tracks his development as a poet in the midst of the Troubles. As the past shifts to the present, the focus moves from Heaney’s cultural tradition to Heaney himself -- from the father to the son.

## Chapter II: The Son

In Part II of *North*, Heaney continues the story begun in Part I. While Part I looked to various father figures in order to provide a lineage for Northern Ireland, Part II explores Heaney's personal history in the context of the Troubles. Consequently, Heaney becomes a "son" of his turbulent native country and its dubious historical legacy. The central conflict of Part II is Heaney's internal struggle between his instinctive reticence and his desire to effect political and social change. The atmosphere of violence and sectarianism in Northern Ireland encourages silence in its natives, and Heaney seeks to break that silence through poetry. At the same time, he acknowledges the inefficacy of poetry to effect real change and questions his role as a poet in the midst of violence. The poems of Part II address the Troubles directly and offer an even-handed portrayal of modern Northern Ireland. Heaney implicates both Protestant and Catholic in creating an atmosphere of silence and suspicion that has allowed sectarianism to thrive. Heaney's personal look at the Troubles reveals a resolutely humanist perspective on the politics of Northern Ireland.

At this point, a deeper examination of the word "humanism" will be beneficial. In its most basic sense, humanism refers to a system of thought in which human interests, values, and dignity are taken to be of primary importance. Also, there is the concept of Renaissance Humanism. The main features of this movement were a renewed interest in the classics, the study of the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, and an emphasis on the worth of human life. Heaney's *oeuvre* is thick with classical allusions, and his arc from pastoral to epic mirrors the careers of poets like Spenser and Milton, who in turn modeled their careers after Virgil. Heaney's humanism also extends to the political realm. In his book *Heresy: The Battle of Ideas in Modern Ireland*, Desmond Fennell outlines a political definition of humanism: "A humanism involves five things: a conception of the proper or realised condition of man in nations; the perception that he is not realised, in all nations or in one's own; concern about this; a theory of why it is so and how it can be remedied; and

action directed towards remedying it.”<sup>8</sup> As a poet, Heaney satisfies the first four elements of Fennell’s definition. And yet, Heaney is all too aware that poetry does not constitute “action directed towards remedying” the Troubles. Heaney’s poetry is guided by a political humanism in spite of his guilt at not being a man of political action.

Heaney begins to explore the roots of his reticence in the poem “Freedman.” Thick with classical allusions, the poem reaches back into history in order to understand the factors that contribute to the repression of the colonized. “Freedman” opens with an epigraph from R.H. Barrow’s *The Romans*: “*Indeed, slavery comes closest to its justification in the early Roman Empire: for a man from a ‘backward’ race might be brought within the pale of civilization, educated and trained in a craft or a profession, and turned into a useful member of society*” (N, 61). One can infer from this passage that the poet will compare ancient Roman and modern English conquests, using the Roman slave as a model for citizens of Northern Ireland. Indeed, the first two lines bear this inference out: “Subjugated yearly under arches, / Manumitted by parchments and degrees” (N, 61). “Subjugate” comes from the Latin term *subjugare*, literally meaning to bring under the yoke. In this case, the poet is implying that he and his fellow citizens are subjugated by the British school system. “Manumit” is another Latinate word meaning to release from slavery. The poet is freed by the degrees which he receives from school. As in ancient Rome, the colonizer grants freedom as a prize. Once the British educate and enlighten the “backward” Northern Irishman, he is free to become a “useful member of society.” Yet Heaney’s language serves as a reminder that England was once in the position of the colonized. His frequent use of Latinate words implies that the English language developed as a result of Rome’s conquest of England. Ultimately, both Heaney and the British write in the language of the colonizer.

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<sup>8</sup> Desmond Fennell, *Heresy: The Battle of Ideas in Modern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press Ltd., 1993), 38-9.

“Freedman” begins as a critique of the British colonial school system, but changes gears quickly. Heaney also implicates the Catholic Church in contributing to the atmosphere of political and spiritual repressiveness in Northern Ireland:

My murex was the purple dye of lents  
On calendars all fast and abstinence

*‘Memento homo quia pulvis es.’*

I would kneel to be impressed by ashes,  
A silk friction, a light stipple of dust--

I was under that thumb too like all my caste. (N, 61)

The mention of murex, a shellfish which yielded the royal purple dye of the ancients, continues the classical theme of the poem. The purple dye reminds the poet of Lent, which imposes the restrictions of “fast and abstinence” -- inconveniences in the eyes of the student. The Latin of the Mass -- “Remember, Man, you are dust” -- reinforces the meaning and origin of the word subjugate that opens the poem. The ritual of Ash Wednesday reminds Northern Irish Catholics of their lowly status in the scheme of things. Heaney’s “caste” -- a term which emphasizes the stratification of Northern Irish society, the link between religion and class, and the powerlessness of the Catholics -- is held down by the very entity with which they identify. The same priest’s thumb that puts the ash on their foreheads also subjugates them in society.

As a “slave” subjugated by school and religion, Heaney seeks some way of making an impression on the figures of power: “I sought the mark in vain on the groomed optimi” (N, 61). *Optimi* has two definitions. In modern times, the word means “one who has been placed in the second or third division in the Mathematical Tripos at Cambridge” (Molino 131). In ancient times, the optimi were the senatorial class in Ancient Rome. Heaney

wants influence both educationally and politically. Poetry provides a potential source for this influence:

Then poetry arrived in that city-  
 I would abjure all cant and self-pity-  
 And poetry wiped my brow and sped me.  
 Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me. (N, 61)

“Abjure” and “cant” are both derived from Latin. “Abjure” means to renounce under oath. “Cant” refers to insincere or sanctimonious statements. It comes from the Latin word *cantus*, meaning song. In this poem, Heaney may be alluding to *cantus firmus*, the traditional vocal music of the Christian church. He rejects the music of the church (and the platitudes of those in power) in favor of the music of poetry. Unlike school and church, which attempt to silence Heaney’s caste, poetry gives Heaney a voice and makes him, in effect, a freedman. The final line explores the reaction of the dominant culture once the repressed begin to speak out. Molino, who focuses on the colonial interpretation of the poem, has this to say regarding the last line: “Once the freedman begins to speak, he is accused, in turn, of biting the hand that fed him, the typical backlash of colonial paternalism against those who do not acquiesce” (132). Michael Parker, in his book *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, emphasizes the role of the church in “Freedman.” He detects something different in the last line: “Ironically, the final line....betrays something suspiciously like guilt. The print of the ash is indelible.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, both interpretations are tenable within the framework of the poem. Both colonizer and church subjugate Catholics, and Heaney speaks out against both even though they provide him with the ability to speak in the first place. That Heaney is not

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 146. Hereafter cited in the text.

afraid to implicate his own side demonstrates the fairness of his portrayal of the Northern Irish dilemma and is an important characteristic of his humanism.

"The Ministry of Fear," the first poem in the autobiographical sequence entitled "Singing School" that concludes *North*, expands on the "arrival" of poetry in Heaney's life and its role in defying the repressive conditions in Northern Ireland. The poem describes Heaney's secondary school experience as a boarder at St. Columb's College and his first attempts at poetry along with his friend Seamus Deane, to whom the poem is dedicated. Heaney praises Deane's work: "Those poems in longhand, ripped from the wire spine / Of your exercise book, bewildered me- / Vowels and ideas bandied free" (N, 63). In contrast to the repressive nature of Northern Irish society, poetry provides a forum in which ideas can "bandy free." Poetry also provides a sense of identity for the disenfranchised. In describing his own early attempts at poetry, Heaney says "I tried to write about the sycamores / And innovated a South Derry rhyme / With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*" (N, 63-4). Heaney's excitement at "innovating" a native rhyme shows the need for the subjugated to establish their own identity. Language and land are closely connected in this passage, and poetry becomes the forum through which Heaney finds his own unique place in society. Although his rhyme seems fairly simple, it allows Heaney to stake a claim to his own poetic tradition.

Heaney contrasts the freedom allowed by poetry with the repressive conditions enforced by school and state. Such repression can take subtle forms. For example, Heaney quotes a nameless, faceless teacher: "'Catholics, in general, don't speak / As well as students from the Protestant schools'" (N, 64). As a Northern Irish Catholic, Heaney must have been subjected to this type of ethnic conditioning often. It is no wonder that he describes it as "Inferiority / Complexes, stuff that dreams were made on" (N, 64). Catholics are conditioned to see themselves as inferior to Protestants. In this case, the conditioning is psychological, but it can be physical as well. Heaney describes his school's form of punishment:



On my first day, the leather strap  
 Went epileptic in the Big Study,  
 Its echoes plashing over our bowed heads,  
 But I still wrote home that a boarder's life  
 Was not so bad, shying as usual. (*N*, 64)

As a student, Heaney has already been trained in the ways of silence. He says nothing of the physical abuse that happens in the "Big Study." The "bowed heads" of the students indicate that they are still subjugated, not yet freedmen. The school reinforces notions of Catholic inferiority through direct and indirect conditioning.

The state, particularly the police force, also encourages such conditioning. Heaney describes an incident in which he and a female companion were stopped by an R.U.C. (Royal Ulster Constabulary) patrol:

Policemen  
 Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round  
 The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing  
 The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:  
 'What's your name, driver?'

'Seamus...'

*Seamus?* (*N*, 64)

This episode illustrates the danger of speech in a repressive society like that of Northern Ireland. Heaney's name immediately brands him as a Catholic (Seamus is the Irish version of James). The policeman's response shows his disbelief and possibly delight at having stopped a Catholic. In a country that has long been accused of police discrimination, even one's name can cause trouble. Thus, Heaney's poetry represents a defiance of his country's legacy of silence. By inventing his own native rhyme, Heaney reclaims his right to speak out. He ends the poem saying, "Ulster was British, but with no rights on / The English lyric: all around us, though / We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear" (*N*, 65). As

he did in "Freedman," Heaney wrests control of the English language from the British. His "South Derry rhyme" has as much claim to the genre of "English lyric" as does any poem from a British poet. The "ministry of fear" (a term which once again implicates the church) conspires to maintain Catholic repression, but Heaney's possession of poetry as his own represents the first step in defying the subjugation of social institutions.

In "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," Heaney acknowledges both his desire to find some order through poetry, and the inefficacy of poetry to effect real change. The poem is conversational in tone and remains autobiographical while simultaneously taking a broader view of the Troubles. Heaney accuses both Catholic and Protestant of creating an atmosphere of silence and suspicion that has allowed violence to flourish. The poem opens with Heaney describing an encounter with an English journalist looking for "views / On the Irish thing" (*N*, 57). The omnipresent journalists prompt him to remark that "The times are out of joint" (*N*, 57). As he did in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," Heaney once again identifies himself with Hamlet. This quote comes from the scene in which Hamlet first understands that he is bound to avenge his father's murder and set things right. Like Hamlet, Heaney is more prone to deliberation than to direct action. Heaney says, "I sit here with a pestering / Drouth for words at once both gaff and bait / To lure the tribal shoals to epigram / And order" (*N*, 59). Heaney's language suggests the impossibility of what he proposes. He has a "drouth" (Ulster dialect for "thirst") for words that will act as gaff (hook) and bait for the warring sides. And yet, it is absurd to think that a complex issue such as the Troubles could be solved with a witty epigram. The "tribal shoals" will not be lured simply by words. The very description of each side as a shoal suggests the Northern Irish citizen's instinctive desire to stick to his own tribe and perhaps also alludes to the shallow nature of the conflict.

Heaney expresses a desire to find order through poetry, but then he immediately acknowledges the futility of such a task:

Christ, it's near time that some small leak was sprung

In the great dykes the Dutchman made  
 To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.  
 Yet for all this art and sedentary trade  
 I am incapable. The famous

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place  
 And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing  
 Where to be saved you only must save face  
 And whatever you say, you say nothing. (*N*, 59)

Heaney finds a historical perspective for the instinctive Northern Irish reticence: the first three lines refer to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, in which the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic King James (Seamus). The Williamite settlement which followed the battle resulted in the displacement of James's Catholic supporters. Heaney sees that as a seminal act in the history of Catholic repression in Northern Ireland, and one whose effects must be undone in order for real change to occur. And yet, Heaney is not the man for the job. "I am incapable" is an admission of defeat. Heaney's chosen occupation is too "sedentary" to effect any change. Without action, all he has left is words. And in the "wee six" counties of Northern Ireland, words serve to obscure rather than clarify. Paradoxically, the Northern Irish have been conditioned to "say nothing" even when they speak. As Heaney derisively comments, "Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us" (*N*, 59).

Heaney's scorn is not reserved solely for Protestants; he holds Catholics (himself included) equally at fault for creating a repressive atmosphere in Northern Ireland. Heaney's ability to see all sides of the issue is a distinguishing characteristic of his humanism and helps him avoid the dangers of sectarian politics. He offers a succinct view of his own tribe: "We're on the make / As ever" (*N*, 58). Far from being innocents preyed

on by the evil majority, Catholics are also involved in the conspiracy. As a result, the Catholic protests lose some of their immediacy: "The liberal papist note sounds hollow / When amplified and mixed in with the bangs / That shake all hearts and windows day and night" (*N*, 58). For Heaney, human suffering outweighs dogmas and politics. The violence that has become a daily reality drowns out the protests of "liberal papists." The fact that the "papists" are responsible for some of that violence makes their protests hollow. Heaney provides an image that leaves no doubt that the Catholic side is partially responsible for the Troubles:

O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,  
 Of open minds as open as a trap,  
  
 Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,  
 Where half of us, as in a wooden horse  
 Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,  
 Besieged within the siege, whispering morse. (*N*, 58-9)

Like the Greeks in the Battle of Troy, the Catholics are participants in the violence that plagues Northern Ireland. The image of the Trojan Horse implies that Catholics hide behind a veil of silence while preparing to strike at the Protestant power structure. Parker points out why many Protestants might feel uneasy at such an image: "When the siege of Troy was lifted, the Trojans were not given the option of peaceful integration within Achaen society; they were enslaved or massacred" (145). Heaney insinuates that a Catholic power structure would be no more humane than the current Protestant one. The "famous Northern reticence" prevents open communication between the two groups, an idea manifested in the oxymoronic image of "whispering morse" (i.e. morse code). Both religious groups are at least partially culpable for the problems in Northern Ireland.

As a result of Heaney's suspicion towards political and societal institutions, he centers most of the poems of Part II around himself. He chooses not to define himself in

terms of social groups, but rather as an individual struggling to make sense of the violence that has permeated his native country. “Exposure,” the final poem in *North*, deals with Heaney’s move from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland and the accompanying feelings of loss. The opening establishes the somber mood that pervades the poem:

It is December in Wicklow:  
Alders dripping, birches  
Inheriting the last light,  
The ash tree cold to look at.

A comet that was lost  
Should be visible at sunset. (*N*, 72)

The first stanza suggests a vague sense of loss. The year is coming to an end, the light is fading, and even the ash tree is cold. The mention of Wicklow, Heaney’s new home located just south of Dublin, implies the loss of Heaney’s homeland. At this point, it is not clear exactly what Heaney feels he has lost. Whatever it is, it seems to be encapsulated in the image of the comet, which suggests celestial light and heat. The comet seems to represent the antithesis of the scene set in the first stanza, and yet the “should” in the sixth line implies that Heaney has not seen the comet in a long time.

As the poem progresses, it becomes gradually clearer what Heaney feels he has lost by leaving his native country:

If I could come on meteorite!  
Instead I walk through damp leaves,  
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

Imagining a hero  
On some muddy compound,  
His gift like a slingstone

Whirled for the desperate. (N, 72)

The “meteorite” Heaney pictures continues with the celestial imagery that begins the poem. Heaney’s wish for a supernatural entrance contrasts with the dead leaves on which he walks. He imagines a great hero, a man of action who will use his “gift” for the “desperate.” This hero recalls the Hercules of Part I, although Heaney’s hero fights for the dispossessed instead of against them. The “desperate” are those who have become marginalized in Northern Ireland. The “gift” perhaps refers to Heaney’s poetic gift, which he would like to use as a “slingstone” to knock off the Goliath-like oppressor. Instead, Heaney becomes bogged down in deliberation: “I sit weighing and weighing / My responsible *tristia*” (N, 73). Instead of acting, Heaney contemplates his feelings of responsibility and guilt. He alludes to *Tristia*, a book of elegiac complaints by the Roman poet, Ovid, written following his banishment to the shores of the Black Sea. Heaney indirectly compares his move to the Republic with being exiled. His excessive contemplation has left him with feelings of self-pity and guilt, feelings that are reflected in Ovid’s *Tristia*.

“Exposure” ends with Heaney coming to grips with his feelings of loss and betrayal:

I am neither internee nor informer;  
An inner emigre, grown long-haired  
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,  
Taking protective colouring  
From bole and bark, feeling  
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks

For their meagre heat, have missed  
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
The comet's pulsing rose. (*N*, 73)

Heaney rejects the roles of internee (some political activists were interned without trial) and informer. While he does not actively fight for his own side, he does not inform on them either. This neutral position makes him an "inner emigre." This image suggests that he flees the war by turning inward to his own private world of poetry. Continuing with the idea of fleeing, Heaney describes himself as a "wood-kerne," which, in the sixteenth century, was an Irish soldier driven to the hills by the English army. By fleeing the North, Heaney has "escaped from the massacre," but he has not escaped from his own feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Heaney is still exposed to "every wind that blows." He must face the reproaches of literary critics, political activists, Northern Irish citizens, and himself. In continuing his career in poetry, Heaney has lost the chance to be a hero. Poetry creates only a "meagre heat" compared to the perfection of "the comet's pulsing rose." As a man of action, Heaney might have experienced the "once-in-a-lifetime portent" and become the hero that he imagines. And yet Heaney, as a son of Northern Ireland, is too conditioned in the ways of passivity and silence to be a man of action. Even as Heaney seeks to distance himself from his native country, the legacy of the father prevents the son from finding the epiphany of which he dreams.

### Chapter III: The Holy Ghost

Having explored the ancient past and its effects on the present in *North*, Heaney turns his attention to the voices of the recent dead in the subsequent volumes *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984). Both volumes are less overtly political than *North*, but each is integral in understanding Heaney's attitude toward Northern Irish politics. In *Field Work*, Heaney elegizes several dead friends and acquaintances, including two victims of sectarian violence. In these two poems, "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "Casualty," Heaney uses differing approaches. The former mythologizes Heaney's cousin, Colum McCartney, and turns him into a symbol for the Republican community, whereas the latter emphasizes Louis O'Neill's individuality in the face of Republican pressure. In the poem "Station Island," Heaney's Dantesque journey through Purgatory, the poet is confronted by ghostly voices from the past, including McCartney's. These voices reflect Heaney's penitence for his lack of involvement while at the same time pointing the way for Heaney's future. Ultimately, the voice of James Joyce helps Heaney chart his future course -- one that is fiercely committed to the integrity of his poetic vision. Joyce helps Heaney to solve his political dilemma by emphasizing the importance of writing with an individual vision.

"The Strand at Lough Beg" is an elegy written for Heaney's second cousin, Colum McCartney, who was killed in an incident of random sectarian violence. In the poem, Heaney offers an uncharacteristically romanticized and mythologized view of the dead man. The opening describes McCartney's ascent into darkness in a mythic territory:

Leaving the white glow of filling stations  
 And a few lonely streetlamps among fields  
 You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton  
 Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars--  
 Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim's track  
 Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,  
 Goat-beards and dogs' eyes in a demon pack



Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing. (*OG*, 145)

Heaney draws a connection between McCartney and the ancient Irish king Sweeney. Sweeney, who (according to the legend) went mad at the Battle of Moira in 637 and was transformed into a bird by St. Ronan, is the hero of the medieval poem *Buile Suibhne* ("The Madness of Sweeney"). Heaney translated this poem and published it in 1983 as *Sweeney Astray*. For Heaney, Sweeney was an alter-ego through which he could explore his own sense of displacement. In comparing McCartney to Sweeney, Heaney accentuates the foreignness of McCartney's surroundings while beginning the process of mythification. Like Sweeney's transformation into a bird, Heaney will transform McCartney into a political symbol at the poem's end.

While the details of McCartney's death are unknown, Heaney offers a theory: "What blazed ahead of you? A faked roadblock? / The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling / Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?" The danger and isolation of the first stanza contrast with the security and community of the second stanza. Heaney describes the territory he and McCartney shared in two lilting lines: "The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg, / Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew." The musical quality of these lines contrasts with the broken, choppy description of McCartney's killers. But even in their home territory, violence is an intruder. Heaney describes an incident from McCartney's youth in which he is frightened by guns fired behind his house. He finds "spent cartridges, / Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected." The harsh, choppy description of the cartridges interrupts the beauty of the poem just as the cartridges intrude on the beauty of nature. Moreover, Heaney and McCartney come from a line that is ill equipped to deal with violence: "You and yours and yours and mine fought shy, / Spoke an old language of conspirators / And could not crack the whip or seize the day." Heaney finds the roots of the "famous Northern reticence" in his own ancestral past. With these lines, Heaney establishes both a sense of community and a continuity between past and present. Each of these elements is important in creating a myth.

The third stanza switches from past to present tense, emphasizing its timeless quality. Heaney and McCartney tend to their cattle “in an early mist.” Then comes the literal and figurative turn:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
 Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
 With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
 Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
 And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
 To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
 Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
 I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
 With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
 Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (*OG*, 146)

In these last lines, a transformation occurs. Heaney’s ritualistic actions elevate McCartney from victim to martyr. His use of the direct address “cousin” stresses the sense of community in the poem and paints McCartney as a representative of his people. The key to this passage is the “rushes that shoot green again.” In his article “‘Daring to make free’: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics,” Tim Hancock remarks that “the repetition of the word ‘green’, combined with insistently green imagery, suggests that his cousin’s death may be associated with a renascence of Nationalist, if not Republican sympathies.”<sup>10</sup> Heaney uses his cousin’s death for political purposes, transforming an innocent victim into a mythic, almost supernatural symbol. Perhaps Heaney’s poem can be best understood through a comparison with Yeats’ “Easter 1916,” which ends very similarly:

I write it out in a verse --

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Hancock, “‘Daring to make free’: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics, 1968-1979,” *English: The Journal of the English Association* 47 (1998): 119.

MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly.  
 A terrible beauty is born. (184)

Yeats elevates these four men, executed by the British, to a mythic status. As with McCartney, the transformation is associated with the color green. The result is the birth of a “terrible beauty” -- terrible because of the human cost, but beautiful because of the promise of liberation. Similarly, Heaney’s description of McCartney contains terrible elements -- the “blood and roadside muck” -- but also a transcendent beauty represented by the eternally green rushes. In their respective poems, both Heaney and Yeats go beyond their position as poets to become mythmakers.

In “Station Island,” Heaney is confronted by the ghost of McCartney, who takes exception to the way he is portrayed in “The Strand at Lough Beg.” He says to Heaney:

‘You confused evasion and artistic tact.  
 The Protestant who shot me through the head  
 I accuse directly, but indirectly, you  
 who now atone perhaps upon this bed  
 for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew  
 the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*  
 and saccharined my death with morning dew.’ (OG, 239)

McCartney is the speaker of these words, but of course it is Heaney writing them, and this passage represents his most extreme example of self-condemnation. The ghostly voice of McCartney even accuses Heaney of playing an indirect role in his death. This passage suggests an element that is missing from “The Strand at Lough Beg”: in elevating himself to the position of mythmaker, Heaney abandons his characteristic self-examination. He

allows himself to “whitewash ugliness” in his attempt to create a mythic martyr. In mythologizing his cousin’s death, Heaney has created a ghost that comes back to haunt him.

While he recants the transcendental gestures of “The Strand at Lough Beg” in *Station Island*, he seems to revise the poem even within its same volume. “Casualty,” another elegy from *Field Work*, is also written in memory of a victim of sectarian violence -- Louis O’Neill, a fisherman friend of Heaney’s. It differs from “The Strand at Lough Beg” in several major ways: it emphasizes the individual over the community, it gives a voice to the victim, and it interrogates the position of the poet. O’Neill was killed by a bomb when he was out drinking after curfew. Heaney offers the details of his death in plain, curt phrases:

He was blown to bits  
Out drinking in a curfew  
Others obeyed, three nights  
After they shot dead  
The thirteen men in Derry.  
PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,  
BOGSIDE NIL. (OG, 148)

The details Heaney offers mark O’Neill’s death as a consequence of “Bloody Sunday,” January 30th, 1972, in which thirteen civil rights marchers were shot dead in Derry by British troops. Bloody Sunday marked a turning point in the history of the Troubles. Three days later, the Provisional IRA burnt down the British embassy in Belfast, and later that year, direct rule of Northern Ireland from London was established. In describing O’Neill’s death, Heaney seems to be setting the stage for a political statement.

Ultimately, though, Heaney’s elegy reflects the individualistic tendencies of its subject. The first line of the poem establishes O’Neill’s introverted nature: “He would drink by himself” (OG, 147). Like O’Neill, the poet of “Casualty” is suspicious of social

conventions. Unlike “The Strand at Lough Beg,” in which Heaney creates a sense of community, he seems to question traditional social rites, as in his description of the funeral for the victims of Bloody Sunday:

The common funeral  
Unrolled its swaddling band,  
Lapping, tightening  
Till we were braced and bound  
Like brothers in a ring. (*OG*, 148)

The image of the “swaddling band” imparts infantile qualities to the mourners, similar to the “pap for the dispossessed” from “Hercules and Antaeus.” Moreover, the words “tightening,” “braced,” and “bound” seem to stress the restrictive qualities of the community, while the “ring” implies that the community is a boxing ring of sorts. Perhaps as a tribute to O’Neill’s solitary nature, Heaney misses his funeral. He doesn’t want to deal with “sideways talkers / Shoaling out of his lane” (*OG*, 149). The participants in this funeral move with the instinctual, unthinking solidarity of a shoal of fish. In “Casualty,” Heaney offers unflattering portraits of a unified Nationalist community.

The political implications of the poem are further obscured by the fact that O’Neill was killed by an IRA bomb: “He would not be held / At home by his own crowd” (*OG*, 148). The curfew was imposed by the IRA in mourning of the thirteen killed on Bloody Sunday. In violating the curfew, O’Neill left himself vulnerable to the vengeance of his own side. Heaney questions how much blame can be assigned to O’Neill:

How culpable was he  
That last night when he broke  
Our tribe’s complicity?  
‘Now you’re supposed to be  
An educated man,’  
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me

The right answer to that one.’ (*OG*, 149)

Colum McCartney’s voice is silenced in “The Strand at Lough Beg,” which is why it resurfaces in “Station Island.” Heaney does not make the same mistake in “Casualty”; the voice of O’Neill returns to question Heaney about the justification of his murder. In this context, “complicity” is a loaded word. Heaney accuses his own tribe (Catholic, Nationalist, Republican) of being an accomplice to the widespread violence in Northern Ireland. As to the question of O’Neill’s culpability in his own death, Heaney’s sympathies seem to be with O’Neill.

The ending of the poem encourages a depoliticized reading of “Casualty.” The description of O’Neill’s funeral segues into a recounting of a fishing trip, in which Heaney “tasted freedom with him” (*OG*, 150). As the two men seem to be working toward some epiphany out there on the water, Heaney ends the poem with an apostrophe:

“Dawn-sniffing revenant, / Plodder through midnight rain, / Question me again” (*OG*, 150). While the idea of a “revenant” might seem to carry some of the supernatural connotations of the “rushes that shoot green again,” in this case the ghost is returning not for political purposes, but rather to question the poet. While Heaney consciously elevates his own position in “The Strand at Lough Beg,” the ending of “Casualty” keeps his feet firmly on the ground. The ghost of O’Neill becomes a tool whereby Heaney can engage in self-examination. The Heaney of “Casualty” is not a Yeatsian mythmaker, but the intensely self-critical “inner emigre” of “Exposure.” Kevin McGuirk, in his essay “Questions, Apostrophes, and the Politics of Seamus Heaney’s ‘Field Work’”, sees this ending as an outright rejection of the political context of the poem:

In calling up this “revenant” and invoking the old relationship, the poet seeks to erase time and consequences, politics and history. At the same time that he excludes his audience, he excludes from consideration the political content of the

question, and, indeed, the political context and nature of the event that is the occasion of the poem.<sup>11</sup>

The ending of "Casualty" narrows its scope to two individuals and their relationship. Social and political groups are ultimately excluded from the focus of the poem. In "The Strand at Lough Beg," Heaney takes advantage of McCartney's death in order to make a political statement. In "Casualty," Heaney depoliticizes an event laden with political possibilities in order to return to two major themes in his works: self-examination and the importance of an individual vision.

These two themes provide a nice segue into "Station Island," the long centerpiece of the volume that bears the same name. "Station Island" is Heaney's twelve-part dream-vision of a pilgrimage to an island in Lough Derg in County Donegal, also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory. The island has been in use as a holy shrine for more than fifteen hundred years. A strong tradition within the Irish Church holds that St. Patrick himself established the forms of penance required of pilgrims to the island. Today the island attracts about thirty thousand pilgrims annually, most of them Irish. Heaney made the pilgrimage four times in his youth. The poem "Station Island" mirrors the experience of the pilgrimage, with each separate part acting as a "station" of penance and reflection. The influence of Dante weighs heavily on the poem, as Heaney confronts ghostly voices from the past in his trip through Purgatory. Several parts are written in *terza rima*, reflecting the Dantean style. Instead of using elegy to deal with the dead, Heaney employs direct speech, giving voice to his ghosts. The interplay of voices provides the poem with a unique artfulness, and is the key to understanding Heaney's message.

The first voice to confront Heaney is that of his old neighbor Simon Sweeney, "an old Sabbath-breaker / who has been dead for years'" (*OG*, 224). In Simon Sweeney there

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin McGuirk, "Questions, Apostrophes, and the Politics of Seamus Heaney's 'Field Work'," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 25 (July 1994): 78.

is an echo of his namesake, King Sweeney, and the pre-Christian Ireland that he represents. Heaney's growing distrust of Catholicism is a major theme in the poem, and this first ghost seems to embody that same distrust and the subsequent feelings of fear and betrayal brought on by Heaney's strict Catholic upbringing. Sweeney derisively remembers Heaney's "First Communion face," along with the fear he inspired in the young Heaney. Sweeney's final command to "'Stay clear of all processions!'" prefigures James Joyce's words in section XII, and is reminiscent of Heaney's critical attitude towards funerals in "Casualty."

In section II, Heaney confronts a ghost who represents not only his religious crisis, but his political and literary struggles as well. Heaney comes "face to face with an aggravated man / raving on about nights spent listening for / gun butts to come cracking on the door" (*OG*, 226). The aggravated man is William Carleton, a 19th century writer who Yeats called "the founder of modern Irish literature." Carleton was raised Catholic and began as a candidate for priesthood, but later converted to Protestantism. His first published work was "The Lough Derg Pilgrim," a satirical account of his own pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory that first appeared in an anti-Catholic journal. Heaney references that work in addressing Carleton: "'Your *Lough Derg Pilgrim* / haunts me every time I cross this mountain" (*OG*, 226-7). But the gruff Carleton is far from flattered, and he criticizes Heaney for being too worshipful of tradition:

'It is a road you travel on your own.

I who learned to read in the reek of flax  
and smelled hanged bodies rotting on their gibbets  
and saw looped slime gleaming from the sacks-

hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots  
made me into the old fork-tongued turncoat



who mucked the byre of their politics.

If times were hard, I could be hard too.

I made the traitor in me sink the knife.

And maybe there's a lesson there for you. (*OG*, 227)

Carleton recognizes the hypocrisy present on both sides, Ribbonmen (who would now be IRA) and Orange. Their politics are little more than a pile of dung to him. Thus, he has no problem with the role of "fork-tongued turncoat." Carleton's advice seems to apply to both the political and religious realms; he wants Heaney to deny all affiliations with sectarian social institutions and "sink the knife" into his own side. This individualistic advice echoes Sweeney's words in section I, but Heaney is still unsure: "'The angry role was never my vocation'" (*OG*, 227).

If the angry role was Heaney's vocation, his anger would be more than justified, as sections VII, VIII, and IX show. In these sections, Heaney is confronted by three men who died young as a result of sectarian violence. Section VII recounts the story of William Strathearn, a companion from Heaney's youth, who was murdered by two off-duty policemen. Heaney sees this ghost not as he remembers him, but as he would look after the shooting: "His brow / was blown open above the eye and blood / had dried on his neck and cheek" (*OG*, 235). Strathearn recalls his own death in horrifying detail: how the two men came to his shop after hours pretending they needed medicine for a sick baby, only to force their way in and murder him. For Heaney, Strathearn has gained a martyr's sanctity in death, and his reappearance stirs up all the old guilty feelings:

Through life and death he had hardly aged.

There always was an athlete's cleanliness

shining off him, and except for the ravaged

forehead and the blood, he was still that same

rangy midfielder in a blue jersey  
and starched pants, the one stylist on the team,

the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim.

'Forgive the way I have lived indifferent-  
forgive my timid circumspect involvement,'

I surprised myself by saying. (*OG*, 237)

As in "Exposure," Heaney feels the oppressive guilt of the survivor that has escaped the massacre. His poetry amounts to little more than "timid circumspect involvement" in Northern Ireland's political struggle, whereas Strathearn paid for his beliefs with his life. In Heaney's vision, Strathearn retains the perfection of youth when the two played on the same soccer team. Even in death, he lives on as a symbol of innocence unjustly murdered. The ghostly voice of Strathearn leaves Heaney looking for forgiveness and absolution.

Heaney certainly does not find forgiveness in section VIII, which features the return of Colum McCartney. We have already seen McCartney viciously attack Heaney for attempting to sweeten his death in "The Strand at Lough Beg." Heaney vainly attempts to defend himself, but McCartney is not appeased. In section IX, Heaney hears the voice of Francis Hughes, an IRA hunger striker who died in 1981: "'My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach / Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked'" (*OG*, 239). This description is reminiscent of Heaney's bog poems, and like those ancient victims, Hughes reminds Heaney of his own guilt. Section IX represents Heaney's low point in the poem, as the collective weight of the dead men weigh heavily on his conscience:

'I hate how quick I was to know my place.  
I hate where I was born, hate everything  
That made me biddable and unforthcoming,'  
I mouthed at my half-composed face

In the shaving mirror, like somebody  
 Drunk in the bathroom during a party,  
 Lulled and repelled by his own reflection. (*OG*, 241)

This last line is an excellent description of Heaney's attitude throughout the poem. He is constantly lulled to self-reflection, but repelled by what he finds. In this case, the contemplation of men whose lives had political significance fills Heaney with self-hate. He can only recognize his own submissiveness and inaction in the face of their accomplishments. He is once again worried that he has missed the "comet's pulsing rose" of political heroism by choosing the life of a poet.

Ultimately, Heaney finds redemption in the words of James Joyce in section XII. Joyce ridicules Heaney's self-doubt and repentance, arguing that an independent artistic vision is its own reward, and need not be governed by any religious or political ideologies. Heaney describes Joyce's voice as "like a prosecutor's or a singer's, / cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite / as a steel nib's downstroke" (*OG*, 244-5). After striking a litter basket with his stick, Joyce speaks:

'Your obligation  
 is not discharged by any common rite.  
 What you do you must do on your own.

The main thing is to write  
 for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
 that imagines its haven like your hands at night

dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.  
 You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.  
 Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,

so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.

Let go, let fly, forget.

You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.' (*OG*, 245)

Joyce turns Heaney's instinctive attitudes around. Heaney's guilt arises from a perceived obligation to his community, an obligation that he forsakes through his personal poetry. Joyce claims that Heaney's poetry is his obligation, and that the "common rite" of community does not excuse him from creating an individual poetic vision. Joyce stresses the importance of acting alone and not writing for an audience. He would probably share Colum McCartney's negative view of "The Strand at Lough Beg," a poem directed towards the Nationalist community. Joyce reduces one of the major conflicts in Heaney's body of work to one sarcastic phrase: "the sackcloth and the ashes." For Joyce, Heaney's guilt and repentance is an impediment to his artistic vision.

Heaney's Joyce does not stop there. He tears apart another of Heaney's grand themes: "'The English language / belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires" (*OG*, 245). In "The Ministry of Fear" and other poems, Heaney stakes a claim to the English language. Now Joyce is telling him that this has been done before, by an earlier generation of Irish writers that includes Joyce. The issue is a dead fire now, useless as a source of creative inspiration. Joyce leaves Heaney with these words:

When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element

with signatures on your own frequency,

echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.' (*OG*, 245-6)

These final metaphors are reminiscent of the fisherman Louis O'Neill and his iconoclastic individualism. Like O'Neill, Heaney needs to find his own path outside of the wide circle

of sectarianism. Joyce implores Heaney to commit himself to an individual vision that is free of religious and political bias.

Joyce's words bring some closure to the issue of Heaney's relationship with Northern Irish politics. Richard Kearney's essay "Myth and Motherland" sheds light on the significance of using Joyce as a model:

In our literature we also discern two opposing tendencies. One led by Yeats sponsored mythology. The other, including Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Joyce, resolved to demythologise the pretensions of the Revival in the name of a thoroughgoing modernism; it endeavoured to liberate literature from parochial preoccupations with identity into the universal concern of language as an endlessly self-creative process. As Beckett put it, language ceased to be *about* something and became *that something itself*.<sup>12</sup>

In giving Joyce the last word in "Station Island," Heaney projects a course for the future of his poetry. No longer will his poems be so self-consciously solemn; they will simply be poems. As Archibald MacLeish put it in "Ars Poetica," "A poem should not mean / But be."<sup>13</sup> The words of Joyce remind Heaney that an artistic life can be just as noble as a political life, and it won't involve sacrifices made for the greater good; as a poet, Heaney is free to follow his own vision. Language is the endlessly self-creative process which Heaney has chosen to pursue, and the ghost of Joyce frees him from the guilt that has plagued his poetry. We can see the effects of this liberation in the poem "The Flight Path" from 1996's *The Spirit Level*. In this poem, an irate IRA man accosts Heaney, asking him "When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us?" Heaney's response? "If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself" (OG, 385).

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Kearney, *Ireland's Field Day* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> Archibald MacLeish, *New and Collected Poems 1912-1976* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 107.

## Conclusion: The Ambassador of Conscience

Seamus Heaney, although reluctant to make his poetry political, is compelled by two separate senses of duty to confront the Troubles. As a native of Northern Ireland, he feels responsible to report on his country fairly. But more significant are his duties as a humanist. Heaney cannot sit idly by with a clean conscience while atrocities are taking place. Try as he might to be a personal poet, he is forced into confronting the Troubles by his strong conscience. He addresses this sense of duty in the poem "From the Republic of Conscience" from 1987's *The Haw Lantern*. After a trip to the allegorical Republic, Heaney returns with a new allegiance:

The old man rose and gazed into my face  
and said that was official recognition  
that I was now a dual citizen.

He therefore desired me when I got home  
to consider myself a representative  
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere  
but operated independently  
and no ambassador would ever be relieved. (*OG*, 277)

Heaney is an ambassador of conscience, operating an independent embassy through his poetry and speaking the language of humanism. He transcends political, religious, and social boundaries with his compassion and intense self-examination. The final line of the poem reveals Heaney's level of commitment to his conscience. He will never be relieved of his post. Even as his poetry shifts in focus from public to private, Heaney's humanism remains constant. He still approaches each poem with integrity and a finely tuned sense of the human condition.

Throughout Heaney's political poetry, there is a sense of uneasiness, of Heaney's belief that he is the wrong man for the job at hand. Yeats, on the other hand, addresses the political as a self-appointed mythmaker. One can hear his confidence in "Easter 1916" when he says "I write it out in a verse," or his restrained excitement when he announces that "A terrible beauty is born" (184). Yeats consciously elevates political victims to a mythic status; Heaney emphasizes their humanity and mortality. Yeats aggressively supports the Nationalist cause; Heaney's allegiance lies with the victims, regardless of political ideologies. Yeats is comfortable within the political realm; Heaney is a fish out of water. Ultimately, Heaney's political poetry is a lens through which he examines his feelings of guilt and self-doubt. This self-examination provides Heaney with the justification to write with a personal vision rather than a public focus. But even as a poet of the private life, Heaney holds on to his integrity and humanism. He is still an ambassador of conscience, but he is not accountable to public expectation or opinion. He operates his embassy independently.

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