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Seamus Heaney and the experience of place: from
theory to poetics

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney wrote from a profound sense of place and his poetic production embodies, perhaps more than anything else, the struggle to attain an understanding of a wide range of issues through the exploration of the meaning of locality in the context of Irish history and culture. This paper seeks to provide an assessment of Seamus Heaney's conceptions of place as reflected in both theoretical principles formulated in his essays (particularly in "The Sense of Place") and a number of his poems. Accordingly, we shall follow a two-part structure where major sections will be devoted to either aspect.

[Key words: Seamus Heaney, sense of place, Ireland, poetry]

Seamus Heaney escribió desde un profundo sentido de lugar y su producción poética personifica, quizás más que cualquier otra cosa, la lucha por alcanzar la comprensión de una amplia gama de temas a través de la exploración del significado de la localidad en el contexto de la historia y la cultura irlandesas. Este documento pretende proporcionar una valoración de las concepciones de Seamus Heaney sobre el lugar tal y como se refleja en los dos principios teóricos formulados en sus ensayos (sobre todo en "The Sense of Place") y en varios de sus poemas. En consecuencia, hemos de seguir una estructura de dos partes donde las principales secciones se dedicarán respectivamente a ambos aspectos.

[Palabras clave: Seamus Heaney, sentido del lugar, Irlanda, poesía]

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Introduction

Every individual is the result of a singularity that characterizes and differentiates him from the rest. This we call identity. Identity is what constitutes us, but it can also be seen in terms of a process — the lifelong process whereby a person gradually educates and discovers him/herself. One of the elements that intervenes in this construction of identity (either as part of the inalienable condition of the individual or within the framework of the human collectivity) is place.

Beyond a conception of place as a purely geographical territory which arouses subjective reactions in us, place conditions us as individuals in deeper ways: a phenomenon which literature is particularly sensitive to. Landscapes naturally mirror human activity and are shaped by it (the relatively recent boom of the discipline known as landscape architecture testifies to the topicality of these concerns), but at the same time, they trigger off in each one of us endless and widely different associations.

Ireland has often been seen as an enigmatic country shrouded in ancient lore and tradition. Its rich past is a product of a turbulent history in which the land has been defined as a crucial element in understanding and constituting national identity. Thus, Irish landscapes have been silent witnesses to Ireland's historical transformation as well as an enduring and critical component of *Irishness* —one that has not perhaps received as much attention as written historical sources in the domain of cultural knowledge, which, to my understanding, is the sphere where collective identity is truly conformed.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was fully aware of this. His deep involvement with issues of Irish communal culture and heritage fuelled a quest for the poetic reconstruction of Irish identity where space and time —place and history— proved major leitmotifs in his literary and intellectual output.

In the present paper my intention is to review the role played by the conception and the experience of place in Seamus Heaney's thinking, and moreover to highlight the links that bind such body of ideas to his poetic practice.

1. Making Sense of Place: A Writer's Endeavour

1.1. A Shared Quest

In this section I will be referring to literary implications of the sense of place from two complementary perspectives: one general, inasmuch as place is a nearly universal concern that can be traced, both in more or less theoretical statements and also in literary works by many writers; the other one more specifically in connection with Heaney's unique arguments in the context of Irish culture, identity and literary history.

Indeed what Heaney calls 'the sense of place' is not something that exclusively pertains to the literary and poetic traditions of Ireland, both new and old. While it is true that there is a certain singularity about the Irish case and about Heaney's particular interpretation of the issue of place, there have been many writers for whom the sense of place has been critical to their literary conceptions and to their own writing. In her dissertation "Place, Race, and Modernism in the Works of E.M. Forster and Eudora Welty", Marny H. Borchardt provides accurate insights into the conception of place in two novelists whose fictional work "emanated from their profound understanding of their respective cultures and the indelible stamp their cultural heritage left on them as individuals." (Borchardt 2013: 6)

E.M. Forster (1879-1970), like Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), delve into their characters' "relationships to places to explore and explain what he perceived to be the psychologically "dislocated" condition of modern men and women." (Siebenschuh 1999: 775). The narratives of Eudora Welty (1909-2001), which share some characteristics with the Southern Gothic literary movement, are another case in point. It is hard to intimately relate

to a Southern Gothic novel if we, as readers, do not become deeply imbued in the atmosphere of a Southern town. Place is vitally important in Welty's prolific oeuvre, where it becomes a cornerstone of her narrative constructions and her method of characterization, just as Heaney's poems, one may argue, often hinge on the several dimensions of place. However, where Welty's exploration of place is perhaps more of a technical contrivance in the service of the effectiveness and authenticity of her stories, as in her essay "Place in Fiction", Heaney's approach to the same issue exhibits a wealth of aesthetic, historical, political and even archaeological reflections: a more holistic assessment of Irish topography.

But perhaps it is to poetry that we must turn to in search for ways of perceiving landscape and place more congenial to Heaney (and more influential on him). Mention must be made of William Wordsworth (1770-1850), a poet whose work Heaney edited and discussed¹ and whose treatment of rural landscapes as a poetic subject can be acknowledged as a relevant input in the Nobel laureate's poetics (Stefanovic, 2001). Despite obvious differences in attitudes, landscape depiction and imagery, the English poet's recollections of his experiences in the countryside as well as his "Poems on the Naming of Places" must have captured Heaney's poetic imagination in an inspirational way. It is significant that despite the differences in attitude and imagery between Wordsworth and the Irish poet, Heaney sees in him points of connection with his own experience in regard to the treatment of the place.

More directly related to Seamus Heaney's background and range of influences, the centrality of place to the poetic and dramatic production of William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) cannot be questioned. Consecrated as the leading exponent of the Celtic Revival that took place in the nineteenth century, Yeats became a powerful restorer of the sense of place

¹ Apart from the essay included in *Preoccupations* (131 – 149), see in this regard *Wordsworth: Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney (Poet to Poet)* London: Faber & Faber, 2005. Also Heaney's "Introduction" to *The Essential Wordsworth*. Hopewell: Echo Press, 1989.

as a major source of inspiration underscored by Irish history and folk traditions. His relation with the issue of place involved an intense and extremely conscious experience in which the legendary blended with imaginative depictions of rural settings in the West of Ireland. This was critical to his endeavour of reviving Irish tradition through the medium of a new, highly refined poetic voice. Place, myth and national identity merged in Yeats' poems and plays in ways that are closely connected, yet different, to Heaney's reassessment of landscape.

Place is also a key concern in the poetry and fiction of Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967). Both poets are comparable in their sensitive descriptions of rural life and in their feeling for the local and the earthy. Interestingly, Kavanagh seems to distance himself from the kind of esoteric associations that we can find in the poetry of Yeats. His influence on Heaney has more to do with the ordinary and the local, while his relationship with place is more responsive to the unconscious perception of natural landscape rather than to mythological images. As Patrick Rafferty emphasizes in his essay "The Sense of Place in Seamus Heaney's Poetry", Kavanagh is closer to Heaney in the illiterate and unconscious ways of perceiving the landscape. In Kavanagh's sometimes Edenic view of his rural origins, "the restored sense of place is what will urge "you and me" to go outside, not to look upwards, but to see the ordinary things with fresh eyes". (Rumens 2013)

Another key figure in the understanding of Ireland's poetic and mythical territory, this time a contemporary of Heaney himself, is the New York-born Irish poet John Montague (1929). Heaney is indebted to Montague's proposition that "the whole of the Irish landscape is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read" (Heaney 1980: 132), a claim that is central to the former's exploration of the idea of place as we shall see when we turn to his most important critical statement in this regard, the essay called "The Sense of Place". Although the two poets differ in style and in the conceptual framework that pervades their respective work, both share their core concern with landscape as so much more than scenery worth describing in poetic terms and as a powerful vehicle for experience, evocation and learning.

The ‘topographical’ poetry that they have produced underscores their strong involvement in Northern Ireland’s place-related tradition and history. Montague’s "Hymn to the New Omagh Road" or any of the poems by Heaney that we shall consider in the second part of this paper are impregnated by this feeling of reconciliation with the poets’ roots and by their shared knowledge that the fertile pairing of the tribal past and the local present can make for a superior experience of territory: one that is particularly relevant in the case of poetry.

1.2. Heaney’s conception of place

In an article on the poetry of Seamus Heaney, John Wilson Foster stated long ago that “digging in one form or another remains the archetypal act in Heaney’s poetry” (Foster 1974: 38). Similarly, although in somewhat more involved terms, Eugene O’ Brian’s profile sets out to prove “how Heaney progressed from a personal vision of digging into his familial past to a more Jungian view of digging into the historical consciousness of his psyche” (O’Brien 2002: 2). Indeed the Derry-born poet’s impressive achievement is largely the result of his conscientious and perceptive digging and turning his native soil in search for the deepest roots of his homeland: those that could account for its literary and political (often violent) past while enlightening the present and even the future of the Irish nation.

In this context, the centrality of place in Heaney’s work —and along with it the many dualisms that place encompasses (beginning by the religious and power-related tensions that have shaped its history up until the present time)—, can hardly be exaggerated. It is only natural that the poet’s intellectual curiosity should have tried to give shape to some theoretical account of the meaning of place in the framework of his exploration of Irish literary identity. This he did in “A Sense of Place”: a lecture given in Belfast’s Ulster Museum in January 1977 and later included in a collection of essays called *Preoccupations*

(1980). There he perceptively deals with deeply entrenched, yet sometimes hidden connections between individuals and places: connections that are physical and sensory, but also cultural and even spiritual.

More particularly, Heaney posits the existence of two ways in which we can know and appreciate a place. On the one hand, there is the unconscious and illiterate perception, a mundane but also very real and experiential way of relating to landscape. And on the other, there are conscious and literate ways of tuning up to places where knowledge (of myth and legend, archaeology and history) and reflection play an indispensable role. And, to paraphrase Heaney, even though these two views can ultimately (and hopefully) complement each other, they often present themselves as opposites. While Heaney's opening remarks have been frequently quoted, and at the risk of being repetitive, we cannot resist the temptation to reproduce them once again:

I think there are two ways in which a place is known and cherished, two ways which always may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. (Heaney 1980: 131)

In order to penetrate into what he calls the sense of place, Heaney imaginatively travels to a series of spots in Ireland that illustrate the critical influence of locale in Irish poetry of "these last hundred years". In the course of this compressed literary journey, he digs up a wealth of aesthetic but also cultural associations that an individual can derive from Irish landscape. Beyond the geographical traits of particular locations, what Heaney intends to highlight are such linkages as bind the literary mind to place —the latter encompassing the dichotomy of "the geographical country" (landscape) and "the country of the mind" (mindscape). While the former elicits the pleasurable appreciation of scenery, the latter is nourished by the inherited culture (sometimes so ancient as to be unavailable to many people). The poet espouses the union or 'marriage' of both modes of relation to place in the cultivated literary sensibility. In the words of Esther Aliaga: "No se trata solamente del

mundo que vivimos físicamente, si no del que experimentamos mentalmente. Se establece así una conexión entre identidad personal y marco geográfico." (Aliaga 2009: 53)

It is in this context that John Montague's manuscript metaphor, which Heaney alludes to in his essay, acquires full significance with its implicit regret over the loss of our ability to decrypt Irish landscapes: the meanings that stem from traditional lore and the autochthonous culture lie deeply buried under the purely topographical and aesthetic traits. The real and the imaginary, to paraphrase the title of an interesting collection of essays on Irish literature published by the University of Valladolid (Carrera, 2008), are frequently disconnected and many places "cannot be imaginatively and fully comprehended unless the geographical —often stunningly beautiful— landscape is not linked to the deep, age-old traditional narratives that accrue to it and lie under the names of places." (Herrero Quirós 2008: 188). The above-mentioned disconnection is clearer in some cases than in others. Lack of familiarity with Gaelic legend, for example, may render the meaning of certain landmarks imperceptible² while the modernity and canonical status of Yeats will make the literary associations of places that are prominent in his poems much more available to present-day visitors.

Ultimately, however, Heaney promotes the fertile encounter of heritage (legend, myth and history) and contemporary experience. In fact, in his own poetic search, and as one of his many obituaries pointed out³, "he found the human at the intersection of present and past" and thus was able to bring in a breath of fresh air in contemporary Irish poetry. His interest in retrieving the past as encapsulated in place —one that was closely related to his particular circumstance as the inhabitant of a country marked by a geopolitical division—is

² The native literary tradition represented by the so-called *disseanchas*, which Heaney deals with in "The Sense of Place", is a case in point. They are "a form of mythological etymology" that is inaccessible to many Irish people today. In general terms the anglicisation of many place names in Ireland and the lack of written documents reflecting the original Gaelic names is certainly another obstacle.

³ Alexandra Petri, "Farewell, Seamus Heaney", The Washington Post, August 30, 2013 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/wp/2013/08/30/farewell-seamus-heaney/>)

no nostalgic undertaking. His was a poetic search that led him to a profound understanding of his own territory in a process that has been characterized in terms of “excavation” of his Irish roots (<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1990/9/28/seamus-heaneys-poetry-excavating-his-irish/>) and which paradoxically made him into a truly universal poet.

Heaney’s understanding of place is inextricably wound up with notions of language and political (often troublesome) history. Language is indeed central to identity bonds anchored in place, as we are reminded of by Heneayian scholar Eugene O’Brien: “At the level of epistemology, identity is precisely the bond between a people and a place, a bond whose constituents are historical, cultural, religious and social, and which is created and cemented mainly by language.” (O’Brien 2002: 4)

In Heaney’s poetry references to the English culture that was violently superimposed on the Irish soil are often expressed with masculine language, while he associates the Gaelic tradition to the female gender (Parker 1993: 21, 56, 73). His composition "In the Chestnut Tree", for example, presents nature in close connection to primeval Ireland, the latter framed in feminine terms. "Kinship", which belongs to the first part of his collection of poetry called *North*, also refers to the earth as a mystical, feminine entity with regard to the formation of bogs: a distinct trait of Irish landscape. The essay on Kavanagh that opens his collection of essays *The Government of the Tongue* shows his concern with “a political situation where land, place, street name and townland acted as a symbolic register which “placed” individuals in terms of their religion, their politics and their ideology” (O’Brien 1998: 7). And indeed Heaneys’s concern with place is also political, insofar as “possession of the land, like possession of different languages, is a matter of particular urgency in Ireland” (Andrews 1990: 2)

The fact of the matter, though, is that he wrote in English and was truly an expert in the English poetic traditions—including the Old Germanic stock (remember his highly-reputed translation of *Beowulf*). Yet while he often organised his poetic discourse and his critical

thinking in the form of binary oppositions, his views on these issues were anything but simplistic or manicheistic. Central to his literary production, his exploration of place prepared him to come to terms with and transcend conflict and division—including political violence, past and present—as layers embedded in the native soil: an undeniable piece in the underlay of meaning that lies at the heart of places and place-names. By accepting that less agreeable part of the encoded significance of the latter, he was able, with his “archeological and ritual imagination” to unearth links between “present violence [and] a sub-historical urge for sacrifice”. (Rowe 2000: 7)

Notwithstanding Seamus Heaney proven competence as a lecturer, scholar and critic and the insightfulness of his theoretical account of the issue of place, it is in his poems where these conceptions develop their full impact. Since the scope of this graduation paper does not allow for a more comprehensive view of his multifaceted conception of locale, I shall next turn to a brief selection of his compositions in order to assess the extent to which these ideas were at the heart of his poetic vision.

2. Place in Heaney’s Poetry

Let us consider, in the context of Heaney’s conception of place, a small sample of representative poems chronologically arranged. Here are their titles preceded by those of the several works they belong to, even though we have taken them from the anthology *Selected Poems 1965 – 1975*. (Heaney, 1988)

Death of a Naturalist (1966): “Digging”.

Door into the Dark (1969): “The Peninsula”, “Bogland”.

Wintering Out (1972): “The Tollund Man”.

North (1975): “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication”.

2.1.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

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

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

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

"Digging" is a poetic composition of autobiographical inspiration. The title is certainly very significant in the terms we explained above, since the act of digging is an apt metaphor for Heaney's own exploration. The land—in its earthiest sense—is a central element in the poem, which possesses a reflective tone suited to the poet's search for links between the soil he treads at present and the Irish ancestral traditions that lie buried underneath. As P.R. King eloquently puts it, "'Digging' is about the poet discovering and locating his vocation within the rural traditions his father embodied, traditions that hold 'the historical roots of a nation'" (King in Bloom, 1986: 79-80)

The geographical setting for the poem is Mossbwan farm, Heaney's childhood home. This site is made to accommodate two simultaneous scenes: one revolves around the image of his father digging with a spade, and the other provides a view of the poet himself inside the home watching this moment while he prepares to write. In parallel to the above, however, another level of reality discreetly enters the picture: the poet daydreams about farming tasks performed in former times by both his father and his grandfather, which in turn triggers off his reflections on ancestral land-related jobs and traditions along the subtle thread of family history.

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

The land is in this way the repository of familial, local and national bonds. In this Irish rural setting, turning the soil to grow potatoes is an action enshrined in an age-old, nearly 'foundational' tradition, since for centuries potatoes were a staple nourishment of Ireland's

population. Here we have an apparently humble, yet powerful early model of identification with the poet's local and national roots.

As far as place as the seat of family history is concerned, on the other hand, digging brings together three generations of people. The poet's father and grandfather dug the land on which they grew the food for their family and Heaney himself 'digs' too —not with a spade, but with his pen. This does not imply a break with tradition, as the poet delves into the exploration of history through communal roots that are linked to the past. What Heaney does is observe the rural tradition and the family heritage and, given his lack of skill in handling the spade, he turns to writing as an alternative way of continuing not just with the tradition, but with his own attachment to the soil: he will excavate the original meanings enclosed in the land, just as his father and grandfather dug up the roots of potato plants for a living. With its charming simplicity, the metaphor of digging implies going beyond what shows apparently and already reveals the existence of valuable messages that are buried underground:

“going down and down
For the good turf.”

(Incidentally, another of Heaney's rural compositions with a similar title, "At a Potato Digging", discloses similar connotations and recalls the motif of ancestral Ireland as a guardian of a both tragic and mystical past).

Already in this and other poems from the same period, a rural spot provides the perfect location for the fruitful interplay of the natural and the mythical and hosts the poet's endeavour of cultural restoration, his reconciliation with a past, near or distant, which he wants to retrieve and bring to bear on the present through the medium of poetic writing. As for the image of digging, even though it is not literally present in other Heaneyan poems that hinge on the idea of place, it survives, transmuted into related terms and metaphors, in

much of his poetry, not the least in compositions that revolve around the Irish peatlands, as we shall be able to exemplify.

2.2

When you have nothing more to say, just drive
For a day all around the peninsula,
The sky is tall as over a runway,
The land without marks, so you will not arrive
But pass through, though always skirting landfall.
At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,
The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable
And you're in the dark again. Now recall
The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log.
That rock where breakers shredded into rags,
The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,
Islands riding themselves out into the fog.
And then drive back home, still with nothing to say
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
By this; things founded clean on their own shapes
Water and ground in their extremity.

The following composition that concerns us may well illustrate Seamus Heaney's more visual and aesthetic view of landscape: one that is complementary to the literate and learned and can also provide a rich source of poetic inspiration. "The Peninsula" depicts the stunning beauty of the Beara peninsula, astride Co. Kerry and Co. Cork, and the vivid effect its contemplation has on the poet's imagination. Subjective feelings strongly colour the poem, as well as a sense of ineffability and silence ("When you have nothing to say, just drive"). The poetic voice surrenders to that silence while traveling around the peninsula.

While the explicit mythical and cultural associations of place are absent from the composition, the idea of landscape as encrypted that we saw above is quite central to “The Peninsula”, the encoded message being this time an elliptic formula for pure, almost abstract beauty: an idea of great poetic vigour:

“And then drive back home, still with nothing to say
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
By this; things founded clean on their own shapes
Water and ground in their extremity.”

Here is another mode of relation between man and place, one demanding a keen aesthetic eye: the eye of the poet confronted with the sheer impact of a landscape bare of human signs or demarcations: “The land without marks, so you will not arrive/But pass through, though always skirting landfall.” Having said that, it would be perhaps misleading to treat this poem as a purely aesthetic and private experience, disconnected from Heaney’s broader search for the meaning —also cultural and historical— of places in Ireland. We borrow from Michael Parker perceptive study of the poet’s evolution to highlight the fact that this is just another step in a process that describes ever-widening circles:

The primeval, and sometimes pre-Celtic landscapes of “The Peninsula, “Whinlands, “The Plantation”, “Shoreline” and “Bogland” all illustrate Heaney’s increasing concern with Irish geography, history and archaeology, and how “home” now means something greater than the Mossbawn microcosm. [...] His imagination lights upon natural forms and shapes from both childhood and adult experience, ones which articulate the identity of the whole of Ireland, and not merely his own (Parker 1993: 85)

Otherwise the poem displays a powerful descriptive, nearly pictorial craft framed by an accurately drawn space-time sequence: we visualize the poet’s drive at dusk, his silent return home after sunset, still recollecting the vivid images of the rugged coastline —“water and land in their extremity”— and arriving at the cryptic revelation contained in the above-quoted finale.

2.3.

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening--
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

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

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

Heaney's collection of poems "Door into the Dark" contains one of his best-known compositions: "Bogland". This is, in my view, a truly ambitious poem, highly revelatory of the Nobel Laureate's elaborate insights into the issue of place. More particularly, his original approach to the ties between place and Ireland's communal past finds an ideal correlative in a specific type of habitat that is peculiar, but not exclusive, to Ireland: the so-called peatlands.

Composed mostly of water, boglands or peatlands accumulate partially decayed vegetation in the form of turf. Boglands preserve remains of organic substance dating back thousands of years. This geographical setting accounts for a large part the Irish geography, where forests or prairies are relatively scarce or simply absent. The key fact that underpins this poem is that "because of the strange power of bog water to prevent decay, much of Ireland's past has been preserved within its three million acres of bogland." (Foster 1995: 10). The preserving properties of turf make them a unique witness to the various civilizations and peoples that once settled in Ireland: an exceptional archaeological record. This fact provides Heaney with a powerful metaphor for place as the repository of history and a gateway that connects the past and the present.

This landscape type thus becomes a privileged tapestry of immense depth. Bogs literally harbor and preserve a substantial part of the history of Ireland, while, on a more symbolical level, they can be related to the underlay of myth and legend: the natural history, the long-forgotten Celtic traditions, the ancient mysticism, the history of the island are all secretly encapsulated in the country's mires. Could there be a better correlative for the interplay between 'the geographical country' and 'the country of the mind'?

It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited

culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (Heaney 1980: 132)

As one bores into the soil of this most representative of Irish landscape types, layer upon layer of archaeological findings are discovered in an exceptionally fine state of preservation, thus showing us the full substratum of civilization. In this way, archaeology provides the key to decoding the cryptic manuscript: the history of places is unveiled; the changes occurred, necessarily understood as determining factors in historical evolution, gradually become apparent to the individual interested in these findings. In Robert Pinsky's words:

Mr. Heaney's vitality and seriousness rely in large measure upon a particular soil and its past. As in his best book of poems, "North", the bogland that preserves in its wet peat bowels everything sustaining or murderous that goes into it becomes a totemic exemplar of Mr. Heaney's experience and poetry, and of Northern Ireland itself. (Pinsky 1980)

More particularly in this poem, the record of natural history, preserved in archaeological treasures buried in the deep heart of boglands, possesses an unparalleled revealing power. The finding of "the skeleton/Of the Great Irish Elk" leads to the fascinated realization that "The wet centre is bottomless": the ultimate sense of place can hardly be fathomed. Even so, the wet ground, that ancient formation of "black butter", gives us a glimpse of a history composed of ever-deeper strata that are nonetheless connected to the surface: the present time.

What is clear definitely is that these swampy formations were of great interest to Heaney and allowed him to establish symbolic connections and to act as a transmitter of memory: the secret knowledge that resides in these territories "that preserve[s] in its wet peat bowels everything sustaining or murderous." (Pinsky 1980)

2.4

I

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

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

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

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

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

II

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,

Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

III

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

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

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

Following the chronological order of our quick review of particularly relevant poems, and again in connection with the powerful symbolism of boglands against the backdrop of the sense of place, mention must be made of the poetic collection entitled *Wintering Out* (1972) and more particularly of the poem "The Tollund Man". Peatlands are again made to epitomize the way in which the natural environment encapsulates past civilizations and preserves historical continuity up to the present time. Scientific facts underpin the power of this metaphor, for as Dianne Meredith points out:

The normal process of bodily decay after death is arrested due to anaerobic and acidic conditions present in bogs. Bog bodies recovered from peat are fairly widespread throughout Northern Europe, especially in Denmark and Germany. Over 80 bog bodies have been discovered in Ireland alone. Iron-Age victims (murder or sacrifice) have been found blackened, but almost completely preserved, including their fingerprints, hair, caps, tunics, skirts, and often blindfolds and nooses around their necks.”(Meredith 1999: 129)

This is the central motif beneath “The Tollund Man”: the striking archaeological finding, in the Jutland Peninsula, of a 4th century Scandinavian sacrificial victim, this time involving a disquieting connection with human violence, that takes up once again the image of digging as a process of investigation and truth-finding in a geographical site. Indeed, Heaney’s acquaintance with Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob, the author of *The Bog People* (1965), is considered to have been instrumental in enhancing the poet’s awareness of the impact of discoveries like the Tollund Man. The naturally mummified bog bodies described by Glob go back to a tribal past where people were killed and deposited in peat fields either as ritual offerings or after an execution following the commission of a crime. The Tollund Man, more specifically, dates back to the Iron Age, and could have been executed as an offering to fertility goddess Nerthus to ensure a good crop.

Human history, including its violent side (which obviously extends into the present) , is in this way rediscovered and reconnected to as a result of a process of digging, both real and metaphorical, that puts place on the forefront. Heaney engages in the same kind of imaginative reconstruction of the historical past frequently in his poems, as for example in "Shoreline" (*Door into the Dark*, 1988) where the seascape of Antrim elicits in him fantasies of warlike Norsemen reaching the Irish coastline. Inspired and keen observation of place opens up a window onto historical associations that are linked to a place.

In the case of the poem that concerns us now, Heaney seeks to establish a relationship between Norse myth and social organization, on the one hand, and present-day political violence in Ulster on the other:

By virtue of “The Tollund Man” in *Wintering Out*, Heaney traces contemporary sectarian strife in Ulster back to the cult of a pre-Christian earth goddess, Nerthus, who was worshipped throughout northwest Europe. With “The Tollund Man” and the subsequent bog sequence of *North*, Heaney concocts a Counter-Sublime to the heroic ideals of Yeats (...), presenting a grim and fitting analogue to contemporary violence in Ulster. (Collins 2003: 105)

In the poem’s first section Heaney describes the mummified body with poignant details:

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

The latter refers to the fact that, after close inspection of the intactly preserved body, scientists found evidence that this man had had some kind of porridge made of seeds as his last meal. Heaney describes the Tollund Man as a "Bridegroom to the goddess", thus referring to the mythological notion that when a sacrificial victim died, he could breed with the goddess in order to ensure a good crop. The death of this man ensures the survival of the others. His violent fate makes him, as some critic has put it, “a ‘saint’ of political victims.” (Triggs 1992: 20)

“Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.”

The second part of the poem accentuates the correlation between the Iron Age sacrificial victim and the victims of politically-driven aggression in Northern Ireland, thus bearing out

Heaney's own claim that in *Wintering Out* he set out to "politize the terrain and the imagery of the first two books"⁴:

"Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines."

Death caused by religious hatred has left its lasting footprints on the soil, enduring signs in the encoded manuscript that are painfully relevant in the context of Northern Ireland's "Troubles" period. Place conveys valuable, but deeply unsettling knowledge. The connection haunts Heaney and inspires the elegiac tone of this eleven-stanza composition. His distressing identification with the victims from the Neolithic, as well as his paradoxical feeling of familiar rootlessness, is disturbingly expressed in the poem's conclusion:

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

Other "Bog Poems" by Heaney — "Bog Queen", "The Grauballe Man", "Punishment", "Strange Fruit" or the later "The Tollund Man in Springtime", which is included in the poetic collection *District and Circle* (2007), — illustrate with great clarity the political component in his conception of the sense of place and involve the same kind of imaginative recreations as we find in "The Tollund Man". Otherwise, the scope and extension of my graduation paper does not allow for a more comprehensive sample.

⁴ Quoted from "An Interview with Seamus Heaney by James Randall", *Ploughshares*, Issue 18, Fall 1979. Reproduced in <https://www.pshares.org/read/article-detail.cfm?intArticleID=9476>

2.5

Sunlight

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.
So, her hands scuffled
over the bakeboard,
the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat
against her where she stood
in a floury apron
by the window.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose's wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitened nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop

The Seed Cutters

They seem hundreds of years away. Brueghel,
You'll know them if I can get them true.
They kneel under the hedge in a half-circle
Behind a windbreak wind is breaking through.
They are the seed cutters. The tuck and frill
Of leaf-sprout is on the seed potatoes
Buried under that straw. With time to kill,
They are taking their time. Each sharp knife goes
Lazily halving each root that falls apart
In the palm of the hand: a milky gleam,
And, at the centre, a dark watermark.
Oh, calendar customs! Under the broom
Yellowing over them, compose the frieze
With all of us there, our anonymities.

sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

To complete my analysis, I will briefly discuss the compositions entitled "Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication", included in Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975). As was mentioned earlier, Mossbawn is the name of the farm owned by Heaney's family where he grew up as a child, a place that exudes an aura of ancestry, a sense of rootedness and place. Situated between Castledawson (Co. Derry), a village where the British influence is prominent, and Toome (Co. Antrim), a townland lying in a somewhat wilder terrain, on the northwest corner of Lough Neagh, and surrounded by boglands, this location represents a symbolic place for Catholics living in Northern Ireland.

Heaney revisits here his connection to his own personal roots, but also the challenge that this involves for his search for poetic identity. Place also involves the awareness of impasse, crisis and instability, as is perceptively pointed out by John Francis Healy in his dissertation *From Mossbawn to Station Island: A Sense of Place in Seamus Heaney's poetry*:

Place in Seamus Heaney's poetry signifies more than sentimentally revisited geographical locations. It serves as a vital stimulant for the developing imagination and represents cultural influences through which Heaney sifts to understand the social authority of poetry. The poetry is strengthened by places at which he uncovers traces of his heritage, satisfying a need to belong, to reconnect the artist's identity with home so as to reconfirm origins and stabilize the artist within familiar territory. Heaney nevertheless becomes wary of the control that place can impose upon the imagination; the sustenance of place cannot hold, and may never have held. Place comes to represent creative uncertainty and the instability of the poetic identity. (Healy 1997)

The two poems that make up "Mossbawn" continue developing the idea of place, but also bring to a crisis the relationship between the author and his work. In "Sunlight", the first of these compositions, the spark of childhood memories in a rural setting is rekindled in deceptively simple terms to arouse a powerful evocation of place. Far from being

commonplace or trite, images of Irish country life possess here a refined, nearly Modernist quality, a luminosity that seems to be at odds with the darker overtones of other compositions included in *North*. This warmth may be due to the central presence of love in what is actually a tribute to Heaney's Aunt Mary, who is remembered while busy at her baking. With a sense of delight in physical details, the poet portrays here a fleeting moment in rural life where the close attachment to place and landscape continues to be prominent. There is a beautiful sense of timeless isolation, of safe and quiet seclusion from the outer world that makes the poem particularly attractive. This is indeed a composition marked by silences and absence:

“There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed”

What appears to be a domestic scene soundly based on the sense of place, possesses far reaching implications. Once again Heaney's exploration place, memory and identity travels from the local to the universal: As Patricia Boyle Haberstroh describes in her article “Poet and Artist in Seamus Heaney's *North*”:

While “Sunlight” details one of the beautiful daily rituals of Irish country life, the domestic scene has broader applications. In the larger framework of Northern Europe, we should see Mary Heaney as one of a long line European peasants whose daily survival depends on the kitchen rituals Heaney describes. Picturing the passage of minutes on a long afternoon, the poem freezes an image of local life into a timeless picture of love quietly given and understood. (Boyle Haberstroh 1987: 208)

Balanced and mature, Heaney's poetic recollection may nevertheless betray a sense of uncertainty, a yearning rather than a sense of control. As Parker puts it, Heaney's endeavour here is “to find emotional sustenance... in a cold, starved time” (Parker 1993: 127). The handling of place in “Sunlight” is tinged with subjective impressions.

"The Seed Cutters", the second of the two poems we are briefly outlining, resumes Heaney's focus on historical continuities embodied by place. Heaney resorts to the sonnet form to describe an age-old rural farm task in Ireland as well as in a large part of northern Europe. His depiction of a group of Irish farmers growing potatoes in Ulster "stand(s) for the poet's recognition of the immemorial nature of the work done on the family farm, which he is intent on perpetuating in language". (Vendler 1998: 13)

As was mentioned before, potato-growing involves close ties to the land. It does not only constitute the historic sustenance of the Irish people, but a traditional that has survived for generations to the point of becoming metonymical with Ireland itself. In "The Seed Cutters", Heaney draws upon this symbolism to once again provide poetic insights into the topic of place and rootedness. The scene depicted in the poem is as (literally) earthbound as one could be, but it has a huge potential for historical evocation:

"They seem hundreds of years away. Brueghel,
You'll know them if I can get them true."

The allusion to Brueghel is not random, since both artists can be said to possess a similar "palette" for domestic scene portrayal (Reed, 2012). Once again the passage of time as reflected on the canvas of place provides the composition's main framework:

"With time to kill,
They are taking their time. Each sharp knife goes
Lazily halving each root that falls apart
In the palm of the hand: a milky gleam,
And, at the centre, a dark watermark."

Accuracy of detail should be attributed to both Heaney's familiarity with traditional cropping techniques, which he must have observed as a child, and his portentous gift for description, akin to that of the Flemish painter. And while impressive mythical associations

are absent from the apparently detached description of rural life that the poem contains, the old concern with preserving the link with the past that is harboured in the land and thus combating oblivion brought about by present-day hostile forces (including political occupation) is as fresh as ever. At the same time, the conflictive note that we traced in “Sunlight” —the sense of uncertainty in the face of a world that cannot provide the required confidence— is also traceable: “the failure of the windbreak in line 4 (...) echoes the possible failure of the poet’s project”. (Reed 2012: 233)

It may seem unfair and perhaps overdone to finish our quick review of a small selection of Heaney’s poems on a note of failure and pessimism. But it is also timely to remember, a year after his death, that his view of poetry —and indeed his view of place— was not one of self-satisfied nostalgic yearning for a bygone world, but rather a restless attempt to come to terms with a world that also features deeply disturbing aspects: “His preoccupation with nature’s rich, palpable, organic processes, with the feel of ooze and ripe fullness leads him through a door into the dark...” (Andrews, 1993, quoted in Collins 2006: 26)

Conclusion

In the course of this brief literary itinerary through the poetry and the broader contribution of Seamus Heaney, I have highlighted the centrality of the concept of place both in his critical thinking and in his literary production. I am aware that my approach, and the selection of poems that I have focused on, are limited; and also that this subject of study has been extensively dealt with by hugely qualified and competent scholars. Yet I can also say that as an exercise in apprenticeship the writing of this paper has been extremely enriching.

While the issue of what Heaney calls the sense of place is a recurring concern in writers of all kinds, periods and backgrounds, the Nobel Laureate’s formulation thereof is certainly unique and non-transferable, but also, despite its Irish context, truly universal. Perhaps never before were the intricate connections across locale, history, myth, identity, politics and literature so insightfully formulated and then transferred to a versatile poetic praxis. Heaney indeed wrote from a profound sense of place and his poetic production embodies,

perhaps more than anything else, the struggle to attain the “equable marriage” between the geographical country and the country of the mind which he proposed as an ideal occurrence in his historic lecture on the subject. In his vision of place he found a testing ground to explore a wide range of issues, both personal and communal. And this vision proved robust and original, perhaps because its strength derived from the fact that, as one obituarist said, “he had access to the original springs of the language, drew from its deepest roots”.⁵

His so-called “Bog Poetry” is perhaps the best-known showcase for these ideas embodied in verse, but we find the freshness and economy of compositions like "Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication" especially appealing. Whichever way, the fruitful alignment, through the medium of place, of past and present, local and universal, imaginative and real, subjective and communal can be experienced in all of the poems that we explored in the preparation of this paper and in many others of Heaney’s oeuvre, where locality is a structural concern.

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⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10288645/Seamus-Heaney-putting-feelings-into-words.html>

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