

North: The Politics of Plurality

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Abstract

This essay will offer a theoretical reading both of *North*, and its critics; it will also analyse the criticisms of *North* in terms of its speaking with the voice of the tribe. I hope to demonstrate that, in fact, what is taking place in *North*, is a pluralization of the "voice of the tribe" in a manner which is ethically driven in the sense of opening the tribe, and the language of the tribe, to the voice of the other.

Seamus Heaney's *North* has been criticised for a one-sided approach to the violence in Northern Ireland. He has been criticised for speaking from within his tribe, and for aestheticizing, and hence almost glorifying, the violence in the north of Ireland. Blake Morrison's comments are typical of the points made; speaking of the poem "Kinship", he notes that, like "Punishment":

it ends up speaking the language of the tribe, brutal though that language may be...It is one of several points in *North* where one feels that Heaney is not writing these poems, but having them written for him, his frieze composed almost in spite of him by the "anonymities" of race and religion. (68)

The opening paragraph of Edna Longley's essay "Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland", in *Poetry in the Wars*, extends the scope of such criticism, incorporating, as it does, the views of Conor Cruise O'Brien on this relationship between the poetic and the politic. The essay begins:

Poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated. And for the same reasons: mysteries distort the rational processes which ideally prevail in social relations; while ideologies confiscate the poet's special passport to *terra incognita*. Its literary streak, indeed, helps to make Irish Nationalism more a theology than an ideology. Conor Cruise O'Brien calls "the area where literature and politics overlap" an "unhealthy intersection"; because, "suffused with romanticism", it breeds bad politics - Fascism and Nationalism.¹ But it also breeds bad literature, particularly, bad poetry, which in a vicious circle breeds - or inbreeds - bad politics. (185)

It is clear that this passage assumes that language can, and should, escape the constitutive factor of ideology. Ideally, preconceived ideological baggage should be checked in at customs on the way to Longley's *terra incognita*. This view of language is central to the critical positions of both Longley and Cruise O'Brien. However, ideological preconceptions are part and parcel of our subjectivity. It can be seen, as Terry Eagleton notes, that there is no such thing as "presuppositionless thought, and to this extent all of our thinking might be said to be ideological" (3-4). If this is so, then literature, no more than any other form of discourse, cannot escape from the baggage of ideology.

This point can be proven by what Paul de Man would term a theoretical reading of Longley's own passage. Her essay would seem to denigrate Irish nationalism as a theology, given its seeming inability to separate church and state, and would seem to do so from a position of rationality "the rational processes which ideally prevail in social relations." However, the most popular politician (in terms of total percentage of votes) within the Unionist tradition is the *Reverend* Ian Paisley, a point not addressed by the essay. Longley, by her silence on this point, makes precisely the error of which she accuses Heaney. Her seemingly *Heimlich* (rational) series of points, is undermined by the *Unheimlich* (ideological), even as she criticizes the ideological. This, as de Man has noted, is precisely the force of a theoretical reading: "it upsets rooted ideologies [whether Orange or Green] by revealing the mechanics of their workings" (11).

This essay will offer a theoretical reading both of *North*, and its critics; it will also analyse the criticisms of *North* in terms of its speaking with the voice of the tribe. I hope to demonstrate that, in fact, what is taking place in *North*, is a pluralization of the “voice of the tribe” in a manner which is ethically driven in the sense of opening the tribe, and the language of the tribe, to the voice of the other. In this discussion, the term “ethics” will be used in a sense that derives from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Such an ethics has been defined by Simon Critchley, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, as the “putting into question” of the ego, the subject, self-consciousness or “what Levinas, following Plato, calls the Same (*le même, to auton*)” (4).² Such an interrogation of selfhood is precisely what is at stake in *North*. I would argue that this is an ethical work which enunciates the voice of self, as well as that of the other. I will begin by looking at the critical consensus that has been reached on *North*.

Following on from the attitudes expressed by Longley and O’Brien, the criticism of *North* focused on the notions of tribal loyalty and quietist support for republican violence, and I will quote the following examples seriatim:

I had the uncanny feeling, reading these poems, of listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution, the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland (“Slow North-East Wind” 404-5);

It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happened now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution. It is as if there never were and never will be any political consequences of such acts (Carson 184);

...and at such moments, like it or not, his poetry grants sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability which is not usually granted in day-to-day journalism: precedent becomes, if not a justification, than at least an “explanation” (Morrison 68);

He excludes the intersectarian issue, warfare *between* tribes, by concentrating on the Catholic psyche as bound to immolation, and within that immolation, to savage tribal

loyalties....“Kinship” defines the battlefield in astonishingly introverted Catholic and Nationalist terms. (Longley 154)

As these critics make clear, the received reading of the first part of *North* is one of “tribal” writing. The iron-age bog victims are seen as imaginative parallels to the victims of contemporary Northern Ireland. At another level, the “goddess” of the land, to whom these votive offerings were made, is seen as analogous to the personified Ireland that is part of Irish cultural nationalism.³ The vivid return of the “Bog people” to the present is also seen as symbolizing the return of the past, or the return of the repressed, in the form of Republican violence over the past twenty five years.

David Lloyd has made the point that the aestheticization of Irish politics is brought about by a connection between the “Irishness” and “Irish ground” and “Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the motherland” (17), and the above remarks on *North* are framed within this discourse.⁴ Their tenor appears to be based on the gulf between aesthetics and politics. As Longley has said: “*North* often falls between the stools of poetry and politics” (150). However, such criticism, it seems to me, does not take account of Heaney’s openness to a differential concept of identity, an openness that is signified by the aestheticization of Englishness, English ground, and more pertinently, of the English language itself, as a place from where the voice of the “other” may speak alongside that of the “self”. Nor does it grasp the function of the European frame of reference within which the whole notion of “North” is constituted.

In sharp contradistinction to the spatial familiarity conjured up by the title “North”, Part 1 of the book deals with areas of unfamiliarity and strangeness, both temporal and spatial, and it is this binarism which has been the main focus of critical commentary. Edna Longley speaks of the book as dealing with the “not very nordic North of Ireland, fertility rites and capital punishment in prehistoric Denmark” (159). Blake Morrison notes the book’s fascination with the “impure, sexual, necrophiliac” (62), while Andrew

Waterman suggests that when Heaney “ransacks Scandinavian or English as well as native images in order to establish a larger base for utterance of Ireland, he occasionally becomes prolix and tedious” (18). I would argue, however, that these critics miss the point in terms of Heaney’s use of the term “north”.

Given what Morrison terms the “search for war poets”, and given the surge of interest in the “troubles” in Northern Ireland, the general expectation must have been for a poetry that would “engage” with the issues involved. Heaney’s essays in *The Listener*, and in *Preoccupations*, had gestured towards these issues, and, on seeing the title *North*, the expectation would surely have been that here, at last, was a poetry of the troubles. Given the territorial imperative that underwrote (and indeed, as evidenced by the events on the Garvaghy Road in recent years, still underwrites) the conflict, this synecdochic placename, which mirrors the colloquial term “the North”, representing Northern Ireland, seems to highlight a desire to “voice” the conflict, in some way.

Some of the critical readings already adduced underscore this view, seeing the book as implicit in a voicing of tribal, nationalist pieties and myths of origins and belonging. However, Longley’s slightly puzzled comments on the “not very Nordic North of Ireland” would seem to me to be a *locus classicus* of Paul de Man’s notion of blindness and insight; in this seemingly dismissive phrase, Longley has hit on the ethical drive that informs the book as a whole, and Heaney’s dealings with myth.

The North of Ireland is characterized by a history of invasion, plantation and resistance. The politicization of place has become hypostasized in terms of Catholic terrain and Protestant terrain. This historically sanctioned sectarian divide permeates every area of Northern Irish life. In “Whatever You

Say Say Nothing”, in *North*, Heaney captures this sectarian polarization in a stanza which delineates how even the choice of Christian name is seen as pointing to one’s politico-religious identity:

Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,
Subtle discrimination by addresses
With hardly an exception to the rule

That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod
And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape. (N 59)

Within the republican and loyalist ideological formulation, the past is a sacred notion, which valorizes the actions of the present; within the republican and loyalist pantheons, anniversaries are potent signifiers of adversarial identity. The dates of the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and the Easter Rising (1916) are quasi-transcendental signifiers, outlining the temporal parameters of the military high points of each tradition. It seems as if each point of departure is a “given”, a moment in history which functions as a *terminus a quo* from which ideological positions can be traced. So Longley can talk about the “not very Nordic North of Ireland”, presumably with other adjectives in mind, which are more organically connected with the place, such as “sectarian”, “Protestant”, “Catholic”, “nationalist”, “loyalist”, “orange”, “green” *et al.* However, Heaney’s point in *North* is that all of these are *selections*, they are constructs dating from origins that have been validated *post factum*.

Given the seminal importance of place, Heaney, in *North*, proffers a theorization of place which has been flagged in the opening essay from his collection *The Government of the Tongue*, entitled “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh”. Here, he is speaking about a chestnut tree that an aunt of his planted under a hedge in front of the house where he lived as a child. This tree grew as Heaney grew, and was associated with him, and with the affection in which he was held in by his aunt. When new owners moved into the house, the tree was cut down. Heaney’s association with the tree gradually

became replaced by an association with the “space where the tree had been or would have been”, and he goes on to note that he saw this space as a kind of “luminous emptiness” (13). In a paragraph which has implications for any reading of Heaney’s poems which relate to place, he avers that:

It was not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife. The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place. (*GT* 4)

Here, we can see that Heaney’s concept of place has to do with the ideality of it, as opposed to the physicality of it. In 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, Heaney’s theorization of place is vectored in terms of a liberating of the self from the constraints of place: “the tight gag of place/And times” (*N* 59), as he terms it. In this quotation, the spatial and the temporal are imaged as gagging the free development of the individual, and the metaphor of rootedness that was used in the passage from *The Government of the Tongue*, foregrounds his concern with roots, both in a place that has ideological attenuations, and in terms of a specific reading of the past and of history.

Heaney’s orientation towards the past seems to be in keeping with this *Weltanschauung*. His artesian imperative, stated in “Digging”, has often been taken as a delving into a personal and mythic past. However, what this digging manages to achieve is the opening of the ground of the historical roots of division. What he does is demonstrate the constructedness of these points of ideological and sectarian origin by selecting another area of ideological terrain, namely the archaeologically and historically validated presence of the Norsemen, the Vikings, in Northern Ireland. Instead of seeing the present as being written by the past, he suggestively offers a reinterpretation of that past in terms of another

construction that is based on history. Viking invasions took place in Ireland over a period of some four hundred years. These “neighbourly, scoretaking / killers” (*N*, 23) came to raid and stayed to trade. Many Irish cities, Dublin and Limerick, for example, were founded by Vikings, and there is much archaeological evidence of their presence in early Ireland. Their pattern of intermarriage, and interaction with the native Irish has many similarities with that of the later Norman, and still later English, settlers. In terms of their influence on a native culture, it seems, the Vikings have as much right to be seen as seminal and originary as have the Catholic nationalist and Protestant loyalist traditions.

I would argue that the Viking theme provides Heaney with a lever which will facilitate the process of “unrooting” his psyche from the “memory incubating the spilled blood” (*N*, 20) and of imposing some form of plurality on the place, instead of allowing the place to be the ground of his ideas. Given the importance of “place” in definitions of culture and identity in Northern Ireland, the ultimate site of Heaney’s probing of Irish identity becomes, in the words of Derrida, a “non-site” (*non-lieu*) (*Deconstruction and the Other*, 159) which is both beyond the influences of essentialist identity and at the same time close enough to them to engage with, and redefine the parameters of, their assumptions. In *The Haw Lantern*, speaking of the same chestnut tree, Heaney has coined a similar phrase, “a bright nowhere” (*HL* 32). In this context, there is an ethicity of identity at work in *North*, and this ethical facet of his writing can be seen as a discourse wherein different identificatory facets engage in a dialogue, or *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) which can offer a negative definition of identity as an answer to essentialist formulations. By locating the Norse theme within this book, Heaney is attempting to unpack the blinkered binary oppositions between Catholic and Protestant; republican and loyalist; nationalist and unionist; and ultimately, Irish and British, by including another voice, a Norse voice, which has been elided from the historically and ideologically constructed location and locution of Northern Ireland.

This voice of alterity is located within the conceptualization of place in such a way as to create “a space/Utterly empty, utterly a source” (*HL* 32). This space allows for an exploration of the difference within sameness that is central to all ethical discourse. Given Levinas’s view that the imperative to enter into some form of relation with alterity can turn poetry from an aesthetic discourse into an ethical one, which brings forth the necessity of critique (147), I would argue that *North* is a critique, as opposed to a mystification, of the language of the tribe.

Interestingly, a point left largely untouched in the aforementioned readings is that within Part 1, it is not only the land of Ireland with which the poetic voice has a deep relationship. In “Bone Dreams”, it is England “Hadrian’s Wall...Maiden Castle...Devon” that is given face, and through *prosopopoeic* personification, achieves a physical relationship with the “I” of the poem: “Soon my hands, on the sunken/fosse of her spine/moves towards the passes” (*N* 29). In the second section of the poem, there is a loving catalogue of the different voices within the English language, as seen through a literary focalization, that lead from “Bone house” to “*ban-hus*”:

I push back
through dictions,
Elizabethan canopies.
Norman devices,

the erotic mayflowers
of Provence
and the ivied latins
of churchmen

to the scop’s
twang, the iron
flash of consonants

cleaving the line. (N 28)

Clearly the “tribal” readings of the first part of the book are resisted by the English location and locution of this poem. Speaking in the language of the tribe is difficult when one’s mode of locution is that of the “other” which is being placed in adversarial relation to that tribe. The fact that the discourse of this “other” is itself constituted by different European influences: “Norman devices...mayflowers/of Provence”, seems to deconstruct any essentialist tendencies within the poem, or its readings. The final voice in this temporal regression is the “*scop*”, an Anglo-Saxon poet or bard, the “originary” voice of the “other”, whose literature ultimately silenced the voice of Heaney’s own particular tribe. However, Anglo-Saxon, as a language, is now “other” in terms of how English is spoken today. Hence, it destabilizes the notion of a continuity in terms of language, and gestures towards an analogous politics of culture. In this sense, he is echoing the seminal imperative of Levinas’s work, wherein the ethical “is the location of a point of alterity...that cannot be reduced to the Same” (Critchley 5). Within language, Heaney is saying, sameness is always imbricated with difference, and his book is an example of how such linguistic structures are paralleled by political ones.

In terms of this linguistic association, Heaney’s poetry is far from being mythic in the sense of espousing a tribal myth of Irish essentialism. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, myths signify self-repetitive nature in which “sign and image were one”. Such a trope of sameness and repetition can be seen as persuasive of essentialism; indeed, “unending renewal and the permanence of the signified are not mere attributes of all symbols, but their essential content” (17). Heaney’s exfoliation of the different voices that comprise the English language dislodges such notions, and points towards the necessary imbrication of alterity within the self. Here, he is very much in tune with Derrida, who makes the point that cultural identity is not the “self-identity of a thing”, he goes on to say that “the identity of a culture is a way of

being different from itself”, and that “language is different from itself” (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 13).

This was the very point at issue in Joyce’s discussion of the “funnel – tundish” antinomy in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young*. This episode causes Stephen to make the programmatic point that:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. (316)

For Stephen, while these words may be “different” and while the language may cause “unrest of spirit”, nevertheless, the English language is the mode through which he expresses his dissatisfaction with the English language. As Heaney has already shown, the English language can be read as being both “familiar” and “foreign” and the same point can be made in terms of the linguistic and political constitutions of the Irish Catholic psyche in Northern Ireland. This notion, of the familiar and the foreign, parallels that of self and other, in language. As Heaney observed in *Station Island*, this passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was the “collect of a new epiphany” and a “revelation //set among my stars” (*SI* 93). This new epiphany was, I would contend, at least in part the notion of the ethical responsibility of language, and poetry. As Derrida has noted, in *Of Spirit*, language itself is ethical in that it begins as a response to the other (130), and it is this otherness that is voiced in *North*.

The linguistic polysemy of “Bone Dreams” would certainly seem to undercut the aforementioned readings of *North*, at a linguistic level. Indeed, these lines serve to reinforce the dictum of Mikhail Bakhtin that alongside the “centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted

processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (272). I would contend that it is this pluralizing discourse that is being enunciated in *North*. The book decentralizes and pluralizes the discourse of nationalism in a manner that is directly counter to the accepted critical readings.

The same linguistic and situational pluralization is to be noted in the poems which feature “bog people” of Danish origin. “The Grauballe Man”, “Punishment” and “Strange Fruit” all deal with people who died over two thousand years ago, in Denmark.⁵ In this sense, they act as incidences of *différance*, in the Derridean sense, foregrounding the conventional, as opposed to the seemingly motivated, connection between the two different temporal and spatial zones. The varied landscapes from which these figures from the past are sourced - Denmark, England, Ireland - deconstruct the narrow, tribal readings of Part 1. Given the huge variety of sources and references, *North* seems to valorize difference rather than sameness, the foreign rather than exclusively native, and the centrifugal rather than the centripetal in its mode of operation. The symbolic figures are chosen from different areas, temporally and spatially, rather than seeming to be ineluctably fused with a particular territory. In this sense, a reading of this section of the book as focusing exclusively on the “tragedy of a people in a place” seems to be undercut by the variety of cultures, languages, historical periods and nationalities that comprise this “people”. None of the languages involved - Anglo-Saxon, Elizabethan English, Scots, Danish, Swedish - can be seen to possess an Adamic relationship with place, if we are referring to the “place” of Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Norse aspect of *North* further deconstructs the view of the book as speaking the language of the colonially oppressed.

The Norse theme is introduced in “Belderg”, where the voice of the tribe is opened to alterity:

So I talked of Mossbawn,
A bogland name. “But *moss*?”

He crossed my old home's music
With older strains of Norse.
I'd told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound
And how I could derive
A forked root from that ground
And make *bawn* an English fort,
A planter's walled-in mound,

Or else find sanctuary
And think of it as Irish,
Persistent if outworn.

“But the Norse ring on your tree?” (N 14)

In terms of the structure of the book, which broadens the denotative referents of the term “north” to include the northern European homes of the Vikings, the “Norse ring on your tree” is thematically significant. The emendation of the “forked root” of “Mossbawn” into a trinity of influences - Irish, English, Norse - attempts to locate the “older strains of Norse” within the etymology (analogous to archaeology in this poem) of “Mossbawn”, and thence to provide a broadening of political and historical reference within which to situate Northern Ireland. Issues of identity are seen, like those of language, to derive from multiple sources, which of necessity intermingle and intersect, bring out new constructs in terms of identity and allegiance – the political ramifications of this process of linguistic archaeology are clear.

Having already pluralized the English language in terms of the voice of the other, Heaney is now foregrounding (almost literally in terms of the ground of Mossbawn, his “first place”), yet another voice of alterity, an alterity which is historically similarly implicated in the politics and ideology of

colonization and invasion. As Bakhtin puts it the importance of “struggling with another’s discourse” is enormous (348), and here, this struggle becomes part of a pluralistic identity that is brought into being by this section of *North*. The Norse theme serves the purpose of complicating and pluralizing notions of identity; it imbricates the foreign and the familiar. As Derrida puts it, “[d]issociation, separation, is the condition of my relation to the other” (*Nutshell* 14). In all cases, he sees such identity as self-differentiating, as having a gap or opening within it (*Other Heading* 9-11). For Derrida then, as for Heaney, it follows that this gap in personal identity allows the address and speech towards the other; such identificatory tensions allow a space for alterity, and so, far from being “a way of avoiding responsibility....it is the only way to...take responsibility and to make decisions” (*Nutshell* 14). It seems to me that this is the very process being dramatized in these early poems of *North*, and this process is the antithesis of the tribalism that is often seen as central to the book’s project.

Hence I would disagree with Neil Corcoran’s reading of the poetic process at work in this poem, especially in terms of the function of the Norse theme:

In “Belderg”, images of persistence from ancient to modern landscapes are matched by possible elements of continuity in the name “Mossbawn”, when the companion in the poem suggests a Norse derivation for the word....That “world-tree” is the Yggdrasil of Norse mythology, the ash tree which sustained the Viking world. In this vision, its sustenance is a matter of terror and savagery; and the vision is a hideous reversal of the images of sunlight and community which go under the name “Mossbawn” in the book’s dedicatory poems. (65)

Michael Parker agrees that “even supposedly academic questions - “moss” from Norse or Planter Scots...draw him...towards the fatalism of the Norse and perhaps now the Northern psyche” (130). Corcoran, Parker and Hart all take on board the suggestion that “moss” derives from “older strains of Norse” (Hart 82), and see these strains as locating the violence in Northern Ireland in terms of:

...and revenges

the hatreds and behindbacks
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood. (N 20)

It is from here that the above readings gain credence, as the placement of the Northern Irish violence within the paradigm of age-old Nordic feuding would seem to allow description without the necessity for ethical or moralistic commentary. It also allows the book to be read as falling back into a paradigm of feud and revenge, and even more dangerously, into an aestheticization of violence which is created by what Ciarán Carson has called “the laureate of violence” and “a mystifier” (183).

However, I would contend that this Nordic swerve deflects from the seemingly tribal voice, and instead, locates the book within a European *Weltanschauung* which refuses to valorize the troubles of a people in a place as unique and in some way beyond the political. The “Norse ring” is *not* part of the etymology of “Mossbawn” in any organicist sense. On looking up the etymology of *moss*, one finds the following etymological derivations:

Old English *mos*, bog (Bernhart 1343); Old English *mos bog*, moss from the Germanic (Allen 772); Dutch, Old German and Danish *mos*, Swedish *mossa*, Icelandic *mosi*, Anglo-Saxon *meós*, German *moos*, moss, a bog. Cognate Latin *muscus*, moss; German *moschos*, a sprout or tender shoot. (Thatcher 548)

The force of the above readings, rests on the assumption of an organic linguistic motivation between “Mossbawn” (synecdochic of the North of Ireland), and the Nordic theme, and of a resultant valorization of the revenge ethic by its placement in terms of Norse history. In effect, the etymology of *Moss* demonstrates the voiding of this organic connection, and the invasion of the centripetal by the

centrifugal, to paraphrase Bakhtin. The poem, and indeed the book, far from valorizing a monological enunciation of a nationalistic relationship between land and language, in fact acts as what Christopher Norris terms a form of “ideological critique directed against precisely that seductive will to treat language and culture as organic, quasi-natural products rooted in the soil of some authentic native tradition” (182). What Heaney is doing is creating, out of the forked root of Mossbawn, the “luminous emptiness”, the “imagined realm” (*GT* 3), where self and other can co-exist, and listen to each other, and where ideas create and constitute the changes in the place, and are not bound and gagged by predefined notions of place.

In “Belderg” then, polysemic, multi-cultural derivations of *moss* combine to deconstruct the desired fusion of signifier, signified and referent. Given the different languages within which *moss* signifies: it could just as easily be a Dutch/German/Danish or Anglo-Saxon ring on the tree. Indeed, a Latin ring would be as etymologically valid as the others, as the signifier *muscus* is obviously related phonetically, graphologically and semantically to *moss*. In Bakhtinian terms the linguistic pluralization of this poem proceeds apace the political process of “ideological decentering” which can only occur when a national language (or in this case, a nationalist ideology) loses its “sealed-off and self-sufficient character” by becoming conscious “of itself as only one among other cultures and languages” (370). By introjecting the Norse theme, Heaney is not trying to use the Vikings to justify essentialist notions of sectarian violence; far from it. Instead, he is attempting to define the culture of Irishness in a way which is “to be not identical to itself” but rather to be “different *with itself*” (*Other Heading* 9-10), in short, he is attempting to define Irishness *otherwise*.

In this context Blake Morrison has indicated the vast number of “linguistic finds” in *North* (60), and Richard Brown has made the interesting point that “*bog*, in modern Danish, is the word for book” (153).

Brown goes on to note the number of literary figures who are “buried” in *North*, noting that besides “Wordsworth and Hopkins, the writing of *North* unearths shards of Yeats, Kavanagh, Owen...Mansfield, Lowell, Shelley and Keats” (154). Brown’s initial point of entry to *North* is “The Digging Skeleton”, which has as subtitle “After Baudelaire”, so another book-person is unearthed in Part 1, and yet again, the very invocation of the French Baudelaire further broadens the nexus of cultural referents which define Irishness “otherwise”. The voice of this section is *not* narrow and tribal, it *is* a voice with many European accentual traces. Indeed, the framing myth of Part 1 is that of *Hercules and Antaeus*, a story of Greek origin, which further broadens the range and scope of this so-called “insular” section. The increasingly broad linguistic frame of reference, allied to the increasing use of literary figures and shards of writing from other writers and cultures, provoke a gradual transition in terms of reading. As Derrida has said, in *Positions*: “reading is transformational” (63); in this reading of *North*, the transformation refers both to the text, and its critical reception.

All of this demonstrates that the cultural and linguistic politics being enunciated in *North* is in broad agreement with that of Bakhtin when he speaks of a process of demythification that takes place when “the myth of a language that pretends to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified...perish simultaneously” (68). The multi-cultural framework of lyrical voices, the numerous designations of the lyric voices enacts this simultaneous perishing. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses what he terms *hauntology*, in answer to his question: “[w]hat is a ghost?” (10). In this book, he discusses the spectrality of many areas of meaning, seeing ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. One might compare his *hauntology* to the Norse theme in *North*. The hauntings of otherness, of difference can destabilize sectarian polarization, and literature, the genre where it is possible to say almost anything, is the perfect vehicle to enunciate such spectral notions of identity.

Heaney casts off the language of the tribe, and embraces all the uncertainty of a constructed and plural attitude to identity, an attitude which is epistemologically complex, and which is redolent of Yeats's similar attitudes in "A Coat". In this poem, Yeats describes the problems associated with nationalistic and tribal discourses, discourse which he helped to create but which he now sees as inadequate. Having made his song a coat "covered with embroideries/Out of old mythologies", Yeats outgrows this garment, which has been debased by being worn by "fools", and casts it off:

Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked. (*CP* 142)

In "Exposure", Heaney feels a similar uncertainty, but it is one out of which will grow a similar pluralistic attitude to identity. Like Yeats, he has cast off the coat and embroideries of a nationalistic identity and is now open to the winds of change and of discourse:

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

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows. (*N* 73)

The vulnerability that unites Yeats's nakedness and Heaney's similar openness to the elements, is caused by their mutual forsaking of the simplicities of tribal enunciation; instead they have both chosen a far more difficult road, that of centrifugal and dialogic examination of identity. In terms of contemporary politics in the North of Ireland, such an attitude is really the only way forward, and a correct reading of *North*, and the linguistic, cultural and political stance contained therein, is a seminal stage in this process

of dialogue. In Derrida's terms, they participate in one of literature's primary responsibilities, namely that their "concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise" (*Other Heading* 38).

NOTES

- 1 Longley provides the following references for these opinions of Conor Cruise O'Brien (255): "An Unhealthy Intersection", *Irish Times*, 21 August 1975; "An Unhealthy Intersection", *New Review*, 2 no. 16 (July 1975), 3-8.
- 2 Critchley's book is a seminal study of the interaction of the thought of Derrida and Levinas as well as a groundbreaking study of what has since become widely seen as the ethical turn of deconstruction (I would disagree that such an ethical turn is a recent phenomenon, as some of Derrida's early writings, notably the essay in *Margins of Philosophy* entitled "The Ends of Man" are clear in their ethical direction).
- 3 This trope of Ireland as a female figure has a long tradition in Gaelic political and literary discourse. The Irish name for Ireland, "Eire", or "Eireann", is female, as are the many prosopopeic female embodiments of Irishness (Erin, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Banba, Fodhla, Mother Ireland, the Shan Van Vocht, the Poor Old Woman). From ancient Irish writings to the most modern, the image of a female deity is seminal to Irish conceptions of self-identity. One thinks of Yeats's plays based on Cathleen Ni Houlihan, or of Pearse's poems "I am Ireland" and "The Mother", but the origins can be traced into pre-history. The most important geographical denominations of Ireland are Celtic or pre-Celtic goddesses of the land, Fodla, Banba and Éire (Ériu). Hence, the land itself is the bride of the king or chieftain, and after his death it becomes his widow.
- 4 Joep Leerson enumerates the many different proper names under which this prosopopeia of Ireland was known among different poets: Clíona na Carraige, Caitlín Ní Uallacháin, Gráinne Mhaol, Síle Ní Gadhra, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir, Méidhbhín Ní Shúilleabháin, etc. (247). In a further variation, this personification varies between Ireland as beautiful maiden and Ireland as old crone, who could be rejuvenated through the love of a hero
- 5 The same point can be made in terms of the bog poems of *Wintering Out*. Here, the connection is not Irish, but Danish, as the poet read about the bog people in P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People*.

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