

# CHAPTER SIX

## ‘Through-Otherness’: The Deconstruction of Language

In keeping with his view of poetry as encouraging complex and dialectical transformations of the actual, this chapter will discuss how Heaney grants both the effectiveness and plurality of notions of Irishness. In *North*, he writes in a manner which grants the strength of atavism, myth and visceral notions of Irishness. In the poems of the opening section, coming to a climax in ‘Kinship’, Heaney enunciates the strength and power of the mythos which causes people to kill for the good of the *Volk*. The phrase ‘how we slaughter for the common good’ (1975: 45) has become something of a *cause célèbre* in Heaney studies, and in this chapter, I will argue that what he is doing here is granting the efficacy and strength of this notion, as opposed to either celebrating it, or giving it some form of moral or ethical validation. Heaney’s ethical project in his writing involves, as we saw in the last chapter, foregrounding what might be termed the ecologic factor, the notion of choice in terms of the narrative strands that achieve hegemonic status in the construction of identity. Thus *North* has been offered to reductive readings which focused on two particular quotations which seemed to give a certain ratification to a visceral sense of nationalist aggression.

These quotations, from ‘Punishment’ and ‘Kinship’ respectively, have been used to point a finger at Heaney as a writer, and to accuse him of at the very least partiality, and at worst, of voicing the aims of the Provisional IRA:

I who have stood dumb...  
who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge. (1975: 38)

...report us fairly,  
how we slaughter  
for the common good

and shave the heads  
of the notorious,  
how the goddess swallows  
our love and terror. (1975: 45)

Critics have focused on these lines as signifying that Heaney is locating his voice very much within his *mythos*. In a word, he is being accused of the very epistemological flaw which he has warned against when he said that poetry has to be ‘a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify’ (1995a: 8). Different critics have isolated these points, and have extrapolated from this a pro-republican, pro-nationalist and pro-violence stance: ‘it is as if there never were and never will be any political consequences of such acts’ (Carson 1975: 184). Edna Longley accuses Heaney of being ‘“outrageously honest” about his own reactions’ (1986: 154), while Blake Morrison maintains that these poems give an ‘historical respectability’ to the ‘sectarian killing’ (1982: 68).

Heaney here is being seen as locating himself within the givens of his culture; it seems as if he is having these poems ‘written for him’ by his nationalist, Catholic psyche (Morrison 1982: 67). And if all of the poems in this book were to expand on this trope, perhaps this criticism would have some value. However, the connections between place, ideology and language are in fact much more plural and complex than it would originally seem, and this is especially true with relation to his use of language in this, and other books. The connections between land and language, as we have seen in the last chapter, are hegemonically foregrounded in terms of the choices that are made in our naming of places. Just as he has recontextualised placenames to underscore the complexity and nuanced nature of the connections between land and language, so too, he recontextualises the language aspect of that couplet in order to complicate the levels of response. Thus, for example, in *Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces* a Viking ship and the signifier ‘Dublin’ are joined by simile:

its clinker-built hull  
spined and plosive  
as *Dublin*. (1975: 22)

This would seem to deconstruct the tribal readings of North, as Dublin traces its etymology from two Irish language words ‘*dubh*’, meaning ‘black’, and ‘*linn*’ meaning ‘pool’. This name was clearly a descriptor

of the place as it was when first inhabited. However, in the poem, the word is being posited in some sort of motivated relationship with the ‘clinker-built hull’ of the Viking ship.<sup>100</sup> This is precisely the opposite of the aesthetic ideological perspective for which the book has been attacked: namely, the fusion of lands with a sense of Irishness as expressed through language. Instead, what is happening is that signifier and signified are being recontextualised in order to gesture towards that complexity of which Heaney has been speaking. Here, history is viewed as a field of force wherein different languages, ideologies and cultures interacted and intersected.

Clearly for Heaney, the connection between language and reality is plural and in no way confined to the nationalist republican paradigm. In ‘Bone Dreams’, for example, there is a constant interchange between the realms of phenomena and cognition, as a piece of ‘white bone’ becomes blended with ‘Bone-house’ which in turn leads to the Anglo-Saxon ‘ban-hus’. Then, there is an ideological progression from language: ‘come back past/philology and kennings’ to the sensuous phenomena of memory:

where the bone’s lair

is a love-nest

in the grass.

I hold my lady’s head

like a crystal

and ossify myself

by gazing: I am screens

on her escarpments. (1975: 29)

The kenning ‘ban-hus’ is transformed into its physical referent by appeal to the senses: ‘brain...cauldron of generation...love-den, blood-holt...love nest’, and through *prosopopeia*, the land is given face, and becomes the personified ‘my lady’. Of course, the irony here is that the personified ‘lady’ represents England as opposed to Ireland: here is the very complexity which we have been discussing. Once again, it is the plurality of the signifier that is at work as Heaney probes the language in all of its different aspects. It is in the interstices of the linguistic interchange that he is interested. Far from evoking a binary-oppositional confrontation between the Irish and English languages, as synecdoches of political confrontations, he is, I would argue, far more interested in the new structures that can be seen as

emerging from the connections between the different discourses. In *Among Schoolchildren*, there is a significant example of this process.

Heaney tells of seeing the word '*lachtar*' in Dineen's Irish language dictionary, and realizing that this word was part of the Irish language dialect of his own county Derry. The word means 'a flock of young chickens', and for Heaney it caused a cultural *frisson*, as up to then, he had thought that this commonly-used word was English in origin, but now, he realized that it 'lived upon our tongues like a capillary stretching back to a time when Irish was the *lingua franca* of the whole place.' He goes on to describe the effect that this realisation had on him, the animation 'with the fact of loss', and it is an important point for our discussion:

Suddenly the resentful nationalism of my Catholic minority experience was fused with a concept of identity that was enlarging and releasing and would eventually help me to relate my literary education with the heritage of the home ground. (1983a: 9)

That such a broadened perspective can be brought about by language is an important aspect of my argument: just as language can endorse forms of essentialism, so also, in particular in terms of the aesthetic, can it deconstruct such essentialisms. This interaction of the English and Irish languages can open a space which is salubrious to forms of interchange and discussion. It can help to progress the relationship between selfhood and alterity. It can also, in Gerry Smyth's words, help to produce:

cognitive maps which enable Irish people to locate themselves in relation to their own local environment and to the series of increasingly larger networks of power which bear upon these environments. (2001, 19)

It is this very relationship that is being created in Heaney's attitude to languages and their contextual interaction.

Heaney's moment of linguistic *anagnorisis* is deconstructive of any sense of oppositional logic. Immediately prior to this quotation, he locates his discussion within the ambit of the work of Daniel Corkery:<sup>101</sup>

What came to fill the gap between the parish and the academy, between the culture of the GAA hall and the culture of Shakespeare...was, first of all, Daniel Corkery and his potent

monocular vision of *The Hidden Ireland*. Corkery's message was succinct and potent. 'We were robbed', he said. We lost what made us what we are. We had lost the indigenous Gaelic civilization and he evoked that civilization in its decline with elegiac nostalgia as he wrote lovingly and romantically about the poets of Munster in the seventeenth century, poets of a people whom the parliament in Dublin regarded as 'the common enemy'. (1983a: 8)

So, it is within this nationalistic paradigm that his '*lachtar*' epiphany takes place, and the common enemy is transformed into a shared history. As he puts it later in the same essay, what had seemed 'disabling and provincial is suddenly found to be corroborating and fundamental and potentially universal' (1983a: 11).

Taking issue with Corkery's notion of Irish as the original language being supplanted by English, Heaney recontextualises the historical point being made. Instead of seeing the progression as an indigenous Irishness being supplanted, and eradicated by an imposed Englishness, a classic binary opposition with one side achieving dominance, he now sees the interaction as exemplifying what Derrida has described as supplementary logic. For Derrida, '*supplement* has a double signification. Firstly, it 'adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence' (1976: 144). Secondly, however, the supplement adds only to replace, to insinuate itself '*in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void' (1976: 145).

This is not to postulate any relationship of superiority or inferiority in terms of Irish and English; rather does it point to the dialectical economy of the inter-linguistic relationship, an economy which deconstructs the hierarchical structure that is posited in the passage in favour of a differential process: 'each of the two significations is by turns effaced or becomes discreetly vague in the presence of the other' (1976: 145). Here is the very complexity of expression that we saw traced in the signification of place in the last chapter.

A further implication of the signifier '*lachtar*' seems to be that, despite the political and linguistic colonization, the ancient tongue has still survived, and in fact has exercised a reversal by becoming part of the distinct dialect form of English which is spoken in a particular part of Ireland. The metaphoric use of 'capillary' deconstructs the 'we were robbed' trope as a capillary is one of the minute blood vessels that connect arterioles and venules. These blood vessels form an intricate network throughout the body for the interchange of various substances, such as oxygen and carbon dioxide, between blood and tissue cells. Capillarity then, metaphorically, is a symbol of interchange

and growth: it gestures towards an almost organic interaction of the languages over time. It does not symbolise the victory, in a political and cultural sense, of one side over the other; rather does it underline and reinforce the complexity of the field of force which is the language as it is spoken in the space of Irish discourse.

The use of '*lingua franca*' in the same sentence acts as a metaphorical post modifier, in this case as the term 'lingua franca' (literally, Frankish language), is defined as a:

hybrid language, consisting largely of Italian, used by the Latin races in dealing with Arabs, Turks, Greeks. Any hybrid language similarly used, as any jargon. Any language used internationally as a trade or communications medium' (Bernhart (ed.) 1972: 1206).

Hence, hybridity and interchange, the very points being symbolised by the use of the capillary metaphor is reinforced by this internationalisation of language. Heaney is foregrounding the hybridity that is a fact of all language, and which deconstructs the aesthetic ideology that attempts to locate an originary Adamic (Ashcroft *et al* 1989: 34) relationship between place and the Irish language. Indeed, hybridity can be seen as the very condition of language, specifically in the case of recontextualisation. In this perspective on the plurality of language, Heaney again echoes the thought of Derrida who has made a similar point with respect to the plurality of language:

*We only ever speak one language...*

*(yes, but)*

*We never speak only one language. [italics original] (1998: 10)*

Heaney's discussion of the plurality and contradiction that is the signifier '*lachtar*' follows this epistemology of language in recognising the paradox that inheres in a developed language wherein historical conflicts are often subsumed in the new structures of signification that result from cultural and ideological interaction. The 'one language' which we speak is shot through with traces of other languages, and specifically in the context of literature, the contradiction between the 'oneness' of language and the plurality of interchange, influence and intersection with other languages

becomes foregrounded. Herman Rapaport, in an incisive reading of Derrida's later work, makes the point that in Derrida's work, binary oppositions are found to be an inadequate metaphor for the sheer complexity of the synchronic structures of language, and instead, Derrida probes the 'interplay of implicative differences' that inhere in literary language (2003: 27).

In 'Something to Write Home About', Heaney speaks of a similar signifier which exerts a similar effect on his consciousness. Speaking of the different linguistic and political dimensions of his childhood, and exploring the diversity of these influences, Heaney notes that some words, which come from that world 'between times and languages' have a strong effect on him:

A word like 'hoke', for example. When I hear somebody say *hoke*, I'm returned to the very first place in myself. It's not a standard English word and it's not an Irish-language word either, but it's undislodgably there, buried in the very foundations of my own speech. (2002: 50)

The term means 'to root about and delve into and forage and root around' (2002: 50), and given what has been seen as Heaney's artesian imagination, one could be forgiven for expecting that he would use this word to dig back and down into his own tradition. However, this reaction would be over-simplistic and as we have seen, simplicity and partisanship are far from being *desiderata* in Heaney's epistemology of poetry. His use of the image of 'the very first place in myself' instantly parallels the early essay in *Preoccupations* where his childhood home, Mossbawn, is referred to in a similar manner: 'Mossbawn, the first place' (1980: 18). However, this first place is far from being either essentialist or autochthonous: as we have seen in chapter five, it is defined in terms of the Greek word for the centre of the earth, in other words, it is already being seen in terms of complex association and recontextualisation. His conception of a first place is already redolent with his concept of the field of force: there are two different centres in dialogue here: 'the stone that marked the centre of the world...the pump stands...marking the centre of another world' (1980: 17), just as there are different versions of the 'I' who is placed within this skein of memory. The 'I' who first saw the pump in the yard is not the same 'I' who can unselfconsciously conflate a rural part of county Derry with Delphi in classical Greece.

Interestingly, the word 'hoked' is similarly foregrounded in his poem 'Terminus' from *The Haw Lantern*:

When I hoked there, I would find  
An acorn and a rusted bolt.  
If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney  
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting  
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought  
I would have second thoughts? (1987: 4)

Like '*lachtar*', this word gestures towards the plurality of language and to the hybrid nature of the development of different aspects of signification. Whereas the poem foregrounds the strict binaries that are operative across the board in Northern Ireland in terms of the agrarian (acorn, mountain, horse) versus the industrial (bolt, chimney, engine), every time that the 'I' is mentioned, there is a crossing of those borders and mutuality of influences, which I will cite *seriatim*:

when I thought  
I would have second thoughts?....  
I was the march drain and the march drain's banks  
Suffering the limits of each claim....  
I grew up in between...  
Baronies, parishes met where I was born....  
When I stood on the central stepping stone. (1987: 4-5)

In this context, it is the crossing of borders and boundaries, or the place where they intersect that is important in the poem. The 'I', far from being driven by the signifier 'hoked' to stake a claim for his nationalist heritage, consciously situates itself 'in between' the two.

Language, specifically poetic language, is a central conduit for this process, as exemplified by his play on the meaning of the word 'march'. In a Northern Irish context, this word would generally be associated with parades of either tradition, but more usually the unionist one, where various dates connected with the victory of



William of Orange over James the Second are celebrated during the Summer ‘marching season’. The word has become associated with the division of the two communities as violence often flares up during these marches, and the right of various parades to march through areas which are predominantly Catholic has become an ongoing source of conflict each Summer, as encapsulated in the Garvaghy Road area of Portadown. In this poem, however Heaney is using the word in a more inclusive context as he explains: ‘the verb meant to meet at the boundary, to be bordered by, to be matched up to and yet marked off from’ (2002: 51). He goes on:

The word did not mean ‘walk in a military manner’, but to be close, to lie alongside, to border upon and be bordered upon. It was a word that acknowledged division but it contained a definite suggestion of solidarity as well. If my land marched your land, we were bound by that boundary as well as separated by it. If the whole of the liberating sky was over the head of the god terminus, the whole of the solid earth was under what he stood for, the march hedge and the march drain. (2002: 52)

Once again, it is the plurality of language that allows for this sense of connectedness between self and other: the boundary or border can be both a point of limitation as well as being a point of connection. In this sense, what is at work here is a paradigm of hybridity. Robert Young makes the point that the term hybridity was used originally to refer to a physiological phenomenon but has now been reactivated to describe a cultural one. He tells us that hybridisation consists of the ‘forcing of a single entity into two or more parts, a severing of a single object into two, turning sameness into difference.’ Hybridity thus ‘makes difference into sameness and sameness into difference, but in a way which makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different’ (1995: 26). Employing Derrida’s term ‘*brisure*’, Young discusses how ‘hybridity thus consists of a bizarre binate operation, in which each impulse is qualified against the other, forcing momentary forms of dislocation and displacement into complex economies of agonistic reticulation’ (1995: 26-7).<sup>102</sup>

Homi K. Bhabha has discussed this whole notion of hybridity and borders in his influential book *The Location of Culture*, where the notion of being ‘in-between’, a form of interstitial identity, is viewed as a positive, indeed, a necessary position to take in an increasingly

multi-cultural society. It is precisely such an ‘interstitial passage’ between ‘fixed identifications’ that, in the words of Bhabha, ‘opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’ (1994: 4). Such a politics would attempt to:

think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha 1994: 1-2)

This notion of cultural hybridity, which is based on difference rather than on similarity or some form of oppositional hierarchy, would seem to posit some hope of a political discourse which would be relevant to Northern Ireland. Significantly however, Heaney is not over-concerned with the macro-political import of his work; instead, his focus is on the individual mind which can be altered by such a strand of thinking.

‘Terminus’ participates in this process as the ‘I’ is influenced by both sides of the divide, while the felicitous ambiguity of the word ‘march’ also allows for an interaction between selfhood and alterity: ‘I grew up in between.’ Indeed, the image of the ‘I’ standing on a stepping stone in the third section of the poem is redolent of a border in itself as he is between the two sides of the river as well as merging land and water. As such the stepping stone is a polysemic symbol of an interstitial position, and one which embodies the complexity of which we have been speaking, a point made in poem xxxii of *Lightenings*:

Running water never disappointed.

Crossing water always furthered something.

Stepping stones were stations of the soul.

A kesh could mean the track some called a causey

Raised above the wetness of the bog,

Or the causey where it bridged old drains and streams. (1991: 90)<sup>103</sup>

As interstitial, liminal points, these stones enact his idea that borders, points of connection, the notion of the 'in-between' are all central to his field of force, and to that sense of space that is the provenance of literature and poetry. He reiterates that point, again availing of the image of a stepping stone, in his Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*:

I grew familiar with the names of foreign stations, with Leipzig and Oslo and Stuttgart and Warsaw and, of course, with Stockholm. I also got used to hearing short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from BBC to Radio Eireann, from the intonations of London to those of Dublin, and even though I did not understand what was being said in those first encounters with the gutturals and sibilants of European speech, I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival - whether in one's poetry or one's life turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination, and it is that journey which has brought me now to this honoured spot. And yet the platform here feels more like a space station than a stepping stone, so that is why, for once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air. (1995b: 11)

Here again, it is the sense of hybridity and recontextualisation that is being foregrounded with respect to the different languages and cultures which acted as influences on his developing consciousness. Language provided the space for that progression, and the image of the stepping stone, itself balanced between the two different banks of a river, as well as between land and water and sky, is a *terminus a quo* from which such a progression can be developed. Indeed, the whole notion of recontextualisation can be seen as a changing of borders and a redrawing of limits and contexts.

In his essay 'Signature Event Context', Derrida speaks of the iterability of every sign or phrase which is part of the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which posits the possibility of the mark being repeated outside of contextual or hermeneutic parameters, and cut off from 'its "original" meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context' (Derrida 1982: 320). In this case, the 'saturable and constraining context' of the word '*lachtar*' is the Irish language, the context and source of the signifier's 'original' meaning. The 'citational grafting' of this word into the English that is the 'natural speech' of Heaney is part of the

condition of language, and of the very ontology of the sign. As Geoffrey Bennington notes, 'every signifier functions by referring to other signifiers, without one ever arriving at a signified' (Bennington 1993: 33). This is because of the iterability of the sign. Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic can be '*cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion' (Derrida 1982: 320-321).<sup>104</sup> In other words, this is the condition of Heaney's idea of complexity and of his field of force, where single, motivated meanings are continually deconstructed by the altered significatory contexts.

The inerrability of '*lachtar*', the trace of the Irish language that has been cited and located within a new linguistic context, is not, therefore, a paradigm for the survival of an originary language, with its metonymic connection to an ur-culture with a privileged relationship to the land. Rather is it a paradigm of the *différance* that is a motive force of all language: one can always extract a syntagma from its context without losing the 'meaning' of the syntagma; indeed, by inserting it into other contexts, different and plural aspects of 'meaning' may be foregrounded. As Derrida notes, 'no context can enclose it. Nor can any code' (Derrida 1982: 317).<sup>105</sup> Hence, in his use of '*lachtar*', what Heaney is actually describing is not the survival of a Gaelic word, with the implied metonymic connection to the possible survival of some ideological aspects of an ur-Irish world *à la* Corkery, or some form of the return of the Gaelic repressed, but rather the process of the grafting of the signifier across a code or contextual barrier. This process is emblematic of his view of writing as complicating our response to culture and ideology, a view that also informs Heaney's notions of borderlines and their names.

In the beginning of this discussion, we spoke of the trope of anastomosis, and of how Heaney used this idea to set up an interaction between text and context in his work. This same process is operative in the connection between the essay 'Something to Write Home About', and 'Terminus'. The poem ends as follows:

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.

When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream

Still parleying, in earshot of his peers. (1987: 5)

The reference to the ‘last earl’ is a historical one, as Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, was one of the last great leaders of Gaelic Ireland. His forces were defeated by the English at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, and with the departure of O’Neill, and his ally Hugh O’Donnell from Ireland, an event that is iconically referred to as ‘the flight of the earls’, in 1607, the death knell of that Gaelic culture was signalled. O’Neill is one of the great figures in the Irish historical pantheon, and as such, would seem to be an unusual icon for Heaney to use in a poem and an essay which deal with notions of liminality and hybridity.

However, O’Neill’s historical situation is a little more complicated than it might at first seem:

By English law, O’Neill was the Earl of Tyrone, and therefore, in the understanding of Queen Elizabeth, the English queen’s loyal representative in the kingdom of Ireland. But by Irish birth and genealogy, O’Neill was descended from the mythic Irish leader, Niall of the Nine Hostages, and to the Irish he therefore appeared as the hereditary leader of the Gaelic O’Neills, with a destined role. (2002: 54-5)

In this light, O’Neill is a personification of those stepping stones of which we have been speaking. He is a liminal figure, educated in England while loyal to a sense of Irishness. Just as Heaney could have chosen to write about ‘*lachtar*’ and ‘hoked’ in terms of a return of an Irish repressed, but instead chose to see both words as part of a hybrid, and by extension, inclusive transformation of identity, so here, in the case of O’Neill, he sees his position as essentially liminal, and, iconically and metaphorically, imagines O’Neill as a type of stepping stone in one particular historical situation.

In 1599, in the throes of O’Neill’s nine years war against the armies of Elizabethan England, he was faced by the Earl of Essex, a strong favourite of Queen Elizabeth across the banks of the River Glyde, in County Louth, in Ireland. O’Neill, given his education in the English tradition, with Essex’s father, Walter Devereux, acting as his patron, was in a position where the binary opposition of Irishness-Englishness was not quite so well-defined, and, given his historical association with the Devereux family, he was able to arrange a parley with Essex in the middle of the river (obviously an iconic image for Heaney, given the significance he attaches to stepping stones):<sup>106</sup>

O'Neill was on horseback, out in midstream, with the water up to his horse's belly and his Irish-speaking soldiers behind him, speaking English to Essex, who was standing facing him on the other bank....So, for each of them, this meeting by the river was a mysterious turn, a hiatus, a frozen frame in the violent action....the balance trembled and held, the water ran and the sky moved silently above them. (2002: 55)

The significance of this dialogue for Heaney, and indeed, for the thrust of our discussion is that of liminal dialogue, in the midst of political confrontation. Here, while perhaps not an example of room to rhyme, both men found room to talk and this discussion served to avert a battle at that point in time.<sup>107</sup> What fascinates Heaney about this scene is that very notion of a liminal dialogue, of a space where the human relationship deconstructs the demands of the political one. The notion of two conflictual figures in dialogue is very much emblematic of his concepts of complexity, anastomosis and the field of force. As he puts it elsewhere poetry 'floats adjacent to, parallel to, the historical moment' (1988: 121), and as such, this is a moment where the space of literature becomes operative in that imagined realm contiguous to, but apart from, the real historical moment, and he describes this in terms of the ambiguity already discussed in terms of 'march':

There was no way, given their historical circumstances, that O'Neill and Essex could cross to each other's side. Their march had turned into something irrevocably military. They were at the terminus in an extreme sense of that word. There was no room for two truths. The brutality of power would have to decide the issue not the play of mind. And yet as we think about the scene, we want each of them to be released from the entrapment of history. We want the sky to open above them and grant them release from their earthbound fates. And even if we know that such a release is impossible, we still desire conditions where the longed-for and the actual might be allowed to coincide. A condition where borders are there to be crossed rather than contested. (2002: 56)

This is as clear a statement of Heaney's epistemology of poetry as we will see. It also echoes some comments Heaney has made about the idea of borders elsewhere. Borders, says Heaney, are made to be crossed, and poetry may provide the mode of such a crossing. In

political terms, Heaney has expressed the hope that the frontier which partitions Ireland into north and south, could become ‘a little bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take’ (1995b: 23). Yet again, there are echoes of Derrida who says that we ‘have to cross the border but not to destroy the border’ (Derrida 1993: 33). Instead, the border, as a limit point of one community, becomes an opening to the other community. We are in the symbolic constellation of the stepping stones here as these both form a border, a point of limitation, but also form a point of interaction between different types of identity. Linguistically the terms ‘*lachtar*’ and ‘hoked’, as well as the placenames discussed earlier: ‘Toome’; ‘Glanmore’; ‘Broagh’; ‘Anahorish’ and ‘Mossbawn’ also participate in this paradigm of the border, as the deconstructions of language exfoliate from the deconstruction of land in such a way as to create a sense of plurality and hybridity. It is not that one should choose one language, ideology, political position over the other: for both Heaney and Derrida, while the imperatives of *Realpolitik* may force such oppositional choices in the real world, the space of literature provides an opportunity where ‘the longed-for and the actual may coincide’, and where the ‘play of mind’ can create conditions where the choice no longer has to be ‘*neither the one nor the other*’ (Derrida 2000a: 89). The stepping stone is dry land in water, inhabiting both elements and yet also marking their line of demarcation. This is how the deconstruction of language works in Heaney’s writing: the signifier becomes a liminal point, open to different forms of influence.

For Heaney, the aesthetic should not merely reflect actuality: instead, it should critique actuality by offering a parallel vision of possibility which is sufficiently grounded in the actual to retain some purchase on real events, but which provides a form of extension which allows these events to be transformed. Like the shrine of Terminus on the Capitol, poetry while grounded, remains open to the sky. If we recall Heaney’s account of Vaclav Havel’s definition of ‘hope’, that we discussed in chapter two, this becomes clear. Hope, for Havel, ‘is a state of the soul rather than a response to the evidence. It is not the expectation that things will turn out successfully but the conviction that something is worth working for, however it turns out. Its deepest roots are in the transcendental, beyond the horizon’ (2002: 47). The image of roots being located in the transcendental is both deconstructive and very much at variance with what we might term the consensual critical position on Heaney’s writing.

It is, however, very much the *telos* towards which our discussion has been leading. The recontextualisation of the notion of the border in language has been ongoing, with the revisiting of placenames in different books contributing to a more pluralistic and hybrid form of signification. The stressing of the ‘border’ trope allows Heaney to gesture towards his view of poetry as being of value both in itself and in the cultural debate in Ireland. He concludes ‘Something to Write Home About’ with a *summa* of his thoughts on the poem ‘Terminus’, the idea of the border, and the value of poetry in cultural terms. Hardly surprisingly, he focuses on the emblematic trope of the liminal, one might say, terminal point, which he sees as representing the possibility of :

...going out on the stepping stone in order to remove yourself from the hardness and fastness of your home ground. The stepping stone invites you to change the terms and the *tearmann* of your understanding; it does not ask you to take your feet off the ground but it refreshes your vision by keeping your head in the air and by bringing you alive to the open sky of possibility that is within you. (2002: 58)

This open sky of possibility has been represented by the deconstruction of language in this chapter as words which seemed to be the possession of a particular identity were seen to embrace alterity as well. The final example that I will adduce in this chapter looks at borders in a broader context. Instead of focusing on the play of the individual mind, Heaney will now open up the political borders and attempt to cite a form of language which deconstructs the exigencies of history and instead offers a new form of identity which can be voiced under a new nominal dispensation.

In his essay ‘Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain’,<sup>108</sup> Heaney takes the opposition between self and other, a synecdoche of what we have been discussing in this chapter where the different meanings of a word were seen as being ideologically oppositional, and deconstructs it. The notion of ‘through-otherness’ is a coinage which echoes Derrida’s decisional paradigm of ‘neither this nor that; but rather this and that’ (Derrida 1981c: 161), and also Heaney’s own comments in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, where he spoke about his own efforts to transcend the cultural predispositions that urged him to think of



English and Irish as ‘adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and’ (Heaney 1999: xxiv).

He begins by quoting some lines of the Northern Irish poet W. R. Rodgers, from a poem entitled ‘Armagh’:

There is a through-otherness about Armagh  
Of tower and steeple,  
Up on the hill are the arguing graves of the kings  
And below are the people. (2002: 364)

Rodgers is seen as valuable in Heaney’s terms because of his sketching of a field of force between the different instances of ideological determination that were operative on the individual consciousness in Northern Ireland in his own time, a project which resonates with much of Heaney’s own thinking:

I am trying to suggest that in the triangulation of Rodgers’s understanding of himself between London, Loughgall and the Lowlands, in that three-sided map of his inner-being that he provided with its three cardinal points, in all of that there is something analogous to the triple heritage of Irish, Scottish and English traditions that compound and complicate the cultural and political life of contemporary Ulster. For Rodgers, it wasn’t a question of the otherness of any one part of his inheritance, more a recognition of the through-otherness of all of them. (2002: 366)

Once again, we see instantiated the notions of hybridity, of constellation, of anastomosis, of the field of force as Heaney attempts to probe the interstices of the different cultural influences on the individual, and he clearly sees poetry as the ideal space within which this probing should take place.

Rodgers’s work serves as an ideal template for Heaney’s own stance on these issues, as Rodgers himself becomes the border, or frontier, at which different influences are transformed by being brought into a dialectical interaction. Heaney’s sense of dealing with binaries is deconstructive in essence as he refuses to see each term as in any way either mutually exclusive or hermetically sealed within its own borders. Instead, he speaks of influences, confluences and a general sense of penetration and permeation which is constructive of those paradigms of complexity which have been so central to our discussion. For Heaney, the provenance of poetry is this sense of

through-otherness, a complexity of structure which deconstructs any essentialist or simplistic structures which refuse to take account of changes in context.

The terms we have examined, from '*lachtar*' and 'hoked' through the different placenames, all participate in this sense of through-otherness: it is a further element in his process of continuous adjudication wherein the relationship between selfhood and alterity is constantly being transformed, with numerous recontextualisations needing to be kept in view. The triangulation that he speaks of in Rodgers's formulation presages his own notion of the quincunx, an imaginative structure where Irish literature is imagined as a field of force with five nodal points, arranged in a diamond formation, which illustrates the complexity of Irish literary history and tradition.

In *The Redress of Poetry*, he outlines this structure in terms of 'a bringing of the frontiers of the country into alignment with the frontiers of writing,' and an attempt to sketch an 'integrated literary tradition'. This structure is imagined as five different towers facing each other in a diamond shape, with the fifth point located at the centre. This central tower 'the tower of prior Irelandness, the round tower of original insular dwelling, located perhaps upon what Louis MacNeice called "the pre-natal mountain"'. This tower stands for the essentialist, autochthonous, ur-Ireland which has so often been seen as the reality of Irish cultural experience. It is important to note, at this juncture, that Heaney is in no way attempting to elide this strand of Irishness: we recall the 'appetites of gravity' referred to in *North*. However, what he is doing is avoiding the complete adequation of Irishness with this single hypertrophied strand. Instead, while granting the status and constiuence of any definition of Irishness, he is placing it within a structure which grants the more complex interactions that in fact comprise what we term 'Irishness'. Thus, the other cardinal points, surrounding this central locus are associated with other important figures, themselves emblematic of movements and ideologies, who together comprise what Heaney sees as 'the shape of an integrated literary tradition'.<sup>109</sup>

At the south of the diamond is Edmund Spenser's Kilcolman Castle, symbolic of the English conquest and the Anglicisation of Ireland 'linguistically, culturally, institutionally'. At the west is Yeats's Thoor Ballylee, itself an actual Norman tower, but which in Heaney's construct symbolises Yeats's efforts to restore the 'spiritual values and magical world-view that Spenser's armies and language had destroyed', while on the eastern face of the quincunx is the Martello

tower of James Joyce,<sup>110</sup> which appears in the first chapter of *Ulysses* and is symbolic of Joyce's attempt to:

'Hellenise the island' his attempt to marginalize the imperium which had marginalized him by replacing the Anglocentric Protestant tradition with a newly forged apparatus of Homeric correspondences, Dantesque scholasticism and a more or less Mediterranean, European, classically endorsed world-view. (1995a: 199)

At the northern point of the diamond is Carrickfergus Castle, associated with William of Orange's landing in Ireland to secure 'the Protestant Settlement and where the British army was garrisoned for generations' (1995a: 200). Heaney also associates this traditionally Protestant icon with a sense of MacNeice's through-otherness, noting that this tower 'once it is sponsored by MacNeice's vision', no longer 'only looks' to the Glorious Revolution and the Mother of Parliaments, but also towards a concept of a 'visionary Ireland' (1995a: 200).

To see this structure as static is to completely misread the imperative that has driven Heaney's discussion of poetic epistemology thus far. What is at work in this structure is the deconstruction of a linguistic and literary essentialism which sees a particular strand of linguistic use as hegemonically 'Irish' to the exclusion or demotion of more complicated interactions. Each of the figures who are constitutive of the quincunx are proto-deconstructors of any simplistic adequation between language, tradition and place. In the work of Spenser, Yeats, Joyce and MacNeice, notions of culture, language, politics and place are interrogated and offered to ongoing critique.

Spenser is seen as a colonizing presence in Ireland and yet is also seen as a literary forebear of Heaney's own. Ironically, it is the Spenserian language and literary tradition that have had the most direct effect on succeeding generations of Irish people. Part of the complex association with Spenser embodies the through-otherness of which we are speaking as Heaney can feel a sense of political distance from Spenser the coloniser when the latter watches 'from his castle in Cork' a campaign 'designed to settle the Irish question' through starvation, and at that point Heaney feels 'closer to the natives' (1980: 34). However 'these incidental facts do not interfere with [his] responses to their poetry' (1980: 35). Spenser is an example of

through-otherness in that he evokes complex emotions as he crosses and recrosses that border between selfhood and alterity for Heaney:

One half of one's sensibility is in a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture, whatever one wants to call it. But consciousness and quarrels with the self are the result of what Lawrence calls 'the voices of my education'. (1980: 35)

Spenser, as poetic figure crosses that political barrier and Heaney, through his immersion in that tradition endorsed and progressed by Spenser's writing, finds himself crossing that border in a similar manner.

Joyce, as an Irish writer, further complicates issues of Irishness by cross-fertilising his characters with those from other cultures. In *Ulysses*, he creates the great Irish novel with:

Leopold Bloom, a Hungarian Jewish hero, Molly Bloom, a British heroine born in Gibraltar, and Stephen Dedalus, Irish, but whose name certainly betokens a pluralist vision of identity in itself, as we have seen. The organizing myth is Greek, and Bloom's comments on Irish Catholic rituals, themselves synecdoches of centripetal identity, are certainly those of a *spectator ab extra*,<sup>111</sup> while the structural parallel with Homer's classical *Odyssey* foregrounds the identificatory perspective of Joyce. His book is paralleled with one of the first great books of Western civilization; he is placing Ireland, and the subject matter of Ireland squarely in the ambit of European culture, against which Irishness will be defined negatively. The troped name of 'Patrick W. Shakespeare' brings this ethical definition of identity as an openness to alterity into focus, but I would argue that this is not confined to this passage in *Ulysses*. In fact, the Shakespearean spectre is to be found haunting many different portions of Joyce's writings, and this imbrication of Shakespeare and Joyce will have the effect of transforming them both. (O'Brien 1998: 244)

In his creation of the name 'Patrick W. Shakespeare', Joyce is creating the through-other *avant la lettre*, as this character stands in synecdoche for the anastomosis between language, ideology and history by enunciating the influence of the Irish tradition on the English language and literary tradition.

Yeats, too, embodies the through-other in that he has embraced both the Irish and English traditions and conflated them in his own work. In the introduction, we noted his comment that ‘I think we should accept the whole past of this nation and not pick and choose.’ Throughout his writing career, Yeats attempted to voice what he saw as the complexity of the Irish tradition: a stated aim to help Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland to unite so that ‘neither shall shed its pride’ (Yeats 1962: 337). He goes on to contextualise his comments by referring to unionists and nationalists who were ‘too busy keeping one or two simple beliefs at their fullest intensity for any complexity of thought or emotion’ to develop (Yeats 1975: 184). Throughout his work, with the constant recontextualisation of Ireland as part of a pan-European literature, Yeats is attempting to voice this complex sense of Irishness.

Louis MacNeice, the final figure in the quincunx, is another liminal figure, and given the prominence of cultural hybridity in the other chosen figures, this should hardly be surprising. Heaney advocates these qualities of MacNeice – definitely the least known of the chosen figures – in the essay immediately prior to his outlining of the quincunx and his points are well taken. He sees MacNeice as the sponsor of a notion of Northern Ireland which is ‘struggling to be born, one in which the allowances for the priority of some of its citizens’ Irishness would not prejudice the rights of others’ Britishness’ (1995a: 198). He goes on to see MacNeice exploring his ‘bilocated extraterritorial fidelities’ in his poem ‘Carrick Revisited’, and explores his sense of the complex inheritance of being Irish in a passage which immediately precedes the outlining of the quincunx and which is the embodiment of the through-other:

he did not allow the border to enter into his subsequent imaginings: his sense of cultural diversity and historical consequence within the country never congealed into a red and green map. In MacNeice’s mind, the colours ran – or bled – into each other. His ancestry in Mayo gave him a native dream-place in the south which complemented his actual birthplace in the north, while his dwelling in England gave him a critical perspective on the peculiar Britishness of that first northern environment. (1995a: 198-9)

In the image of the colours running, or bleeding, into each other, we see an iconographic picture of the through-other, as the

elements of a binary opposition merge into each other, creating a new, diverse entity.<sup>112</sup>

To see these figures at different corners of the diamond of towers, with a further tower at the centre as a static structure is to miss the point about Heaney's notion of the field of force. It is in the structures of dynamic interaction that this quincunx becomes an adequate emblem of the complex structure that Heaney's epistemology of literature brings to bare on Irishness. It is through the interaction of these figures, just as it was in the interaction of text and context in Catherine Bradley's sampler, that the complexity of the poetic structure is revealed.

Heaney stresses that it is, first and foremost, a literary and linguistic structure that is at work here, what he calls an 'integrated literary tradition' (1995a: 199). The deconstructive trend that we have traced through the last two chapters finds its apotheosis in Heaney's deconstruction of the signifiers traditionally associated with colonisation: Britain and Britishness. We have already seen Heaney accused of *echt*-nationalist writing in some of his earlier poetry, and he has certainly given voice to that aspect of his tradition. However, in his 'Frontiers of Writing' essay, he makes an interesting point in terms of Ireland as a colony of the British empire. Speaking of John Hewitt, he notes that until 1921:

Diversity was the norm within the union. From Belfast to Brandon, everybody, whether Gaelic speakers from Ballyferriter or Scots speakers from Braid, everybody had the one home under the crown; if they were not quite at ease within an old dispensation, they were at any rate held equally in place by it. (1995a: 198)

For a poet from the nationalist tradition, this sense of openness to the traditional political and ideological 'other' is an example of the complexity and continuous adjudication which we have been tracing. Rather than see the signifier Britain, or union as being predetermined and locked in to a fixed oppressive signification, Heaney deconstructs them to unveil a more expansive meaning.

This point is furthered in his essay from *Finders Keepers*, 'Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times'. In this essay we see a further deconstruction of language as he takes a signifier which is ideologically shot through with the residue of colonisation and conflict, and instead replaces it with a cognate term which, to use the vocabulary of 'Terminus' would open some sky above the horizon of expecta

tions of the signifier in question, along with its attendant signifieds. Comparing a recent history of the British isles by Hugh Kearney,<sup>113</sup> with his own co-editorship of *The School Bag*, with Ted Hughes,<sup>114</sup> Heaney notes that both books apply similar editorial guidelines. These guidelines were motivated by a conviction which is expressed at the beginning of the paragraph where the two books are compared: 'I have a dread of pious words like diversity but I believe in what they stand for', going on to add that both Hughes and himself were determined that their editorship of this anthology would 'insist on the diverse and deep traditions that operate through and sustain for good the poetry written in Ireland, England, Scotland and in Wales' (2002: 378). It is with this version of diversity in mind that Heaney approvingly cites Kearney's view that it is only by adopting what he calls 'a Britannic approach' that any possible sense can be made of the histories of England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall or the Isle of Man. Taking this approach, and pondering its ideological aspects, Heaney suggests that:

In a context where the word 'British' might function like a political reminder, a mnemonic for past invasions and coercions, there is a wonderful originality, in all sense, about employing instead the word 'Britannic', 'Britannic' works more like a cultural wake-up call and gestures not only towards the cultural past but also towards an imaginable future. (2002: 378-9)

That such a perspective enunciates Heaney's idea of the through-other is obvious; that this perspective can exercise a deconstructive force on the prevailing modes of signification should become equally obvious.

While the binary opposition between Ireland and England, so graphically captured by the encounter of Hugh O'Neill and Essex in 'Terminus', may attenuate the political interactions of the two traditions, nevertheless, language as used in poetry has the affirmative ability to suggest other possible interactions. Towards the end of this essay, Heaney talks about the value of imaginative fiction in dealing with the differences between the two islands 'linked and separated' by history and geography, language and culture, and concludes the essay by suggesting that such a practice prefigures work that will be done by Irish poets 'in the coming times' (2002: 382), and this Yeatsian allusion leads us to the final chapter of this discussion, where the relationship between Yeats and Heaney will be discussed.