

Seamus Heaney and the Ethics of Translation

'Seamus Heaney and the Ethics of Translation', in *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 27 (2) and (28) 1, pages 7-37

Eugene O'Brien

5 words

Translation, ethics, Heaney, language, Levinas

Abstract

This essay deals with two of Heaney's major translations, *Sweeney Astray* and *The Cure at Troy*, are connected in terms of their ability to enunciate the voice of the other as well as to convey increasingly more complex notions of selfhood and identity. Heaney's notion of translation is transformative in that meaning is rendered as a process of interpretation as opposed to a fixed essence. This creative concept of translation allows him to engage with the matter of the past while at the same time taking up a form of critical distance from that past.

Seamus Heaney has been variously accused of not speaking directly enough about the politics of Northern Ireland: "his poetry says nothing, plainly or figuratively, about the war" (Fennel, 16),¹ while at the same time he has also been described as a "laureate of violence" (Carson, 183). His translations of *The Cure at Troy* and *Beowulf* demonstrate that both of these readings are one-dimensional in that they do not recognize the complexity of perspective in Heaney's work. The transformations of language and thought that are central to the process of translation become templates for a process of constructive dialogue between the nationalist-republican-Catholic tradition and that of the unionist-loyalist-Protestant communities, a dialogue that is broached in aesthetic terms but which also embraces strong ethical and political components.

Stanislaw Baranczak, who collaborated with Seamus Heaney on the latter's translation of Kochanowski's *Laments*, has made the point that Heaney's aesthetics could well be termed an "ethics

of creativity” (Oeser, 85). If Baranczak is using the term ethics in the context of continental philosophy, then he is speaking about the standards and values that govern the relationship between self and other. Because translation generally involves the changing of the language of the other into that of the self, its ethical component would seem to be obvious. In bringing the texts of one culture before the readership of another, the aesthetic experience, by definition, has the ethical function of leading self and other into some form of interaction.

A major strand of Heaney’s work is unquestionably political in that it attempts to probe the many different discourses of allegiance that are to be found in the politics of Northern Ireland. He is unwilling to speak only the language of his tribe (though readers of *North* have accused him of doing precisely that),² and much of his work analyses the notions of belonging and responsibility that exist between an individual and a group. Undoubtedly, he is acutely attuned to those tribal voices which underline essentialist and often violent notions of ideological identity. However, he has stressed that the location of one’s identity in “the ethnic and liturgical habits of one’s group” is all very well, but if that group is then allowed to “confine the range of one’s growth” and if one allows “one’s sympathies [to be] determined and one’s responses [to be] programmed” by that group, then this is clearly a “form of entrapment” (*Place*, 6-7).

His work, while admitting the gravitational pull of the self towards its ideological and socio-religious grouping, at the same time attempts to avoid such entrapment by stressing an ethical reaching towards discourses of otherness.³ In his essay, “Frontiers of Writing,” he brings this to light in a context which is both personal and political and which also foregrounds his notions of the ethics of poetry. On May 12th, 1981 Heaney was a guest at an Oxford college dinner on the same day that Francis Hughes, an IRA hunger striker, died in prison. Hughes, Heaney tells us, belonged to a neighbour’s family in County Derry, and Heaney felt the contradictory emotions brought about by his own presence at an Oxford occasion, while imagining the funeral rites that would be taking place in

County Derry.⁴ In this lecture, he goes on to discuss the role of poetry with respect to such political problems, and makes the point that the individual consciousness is torn between conflicting demands, feelings of betrayal at enjoying the hospitality of an establishment college (*Redress*, 188), while also not wishing to support the hunger strike overtly because this would be taken as an endorsement of the “violent means and programmes of the Provisional IRA” (*Redress*, 187). In this very real context, he outlines the ethical and dialectical functions of poetry, namely to be “a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony,” to be capable of being “both socially responsible and creatively free” (*Redress*, 193). The use of “both/and” as opposed to “either/or” in this description of poetry has analogies with the thought of Jacques Derrida, who, speaking about his early neologism, *différance*, notes that it is “neither *this* nor *that*; but rather *this and that*” (“Deconstruction,” 161).

Two of his major translations, *Sweeney Astray* and *The Cure at Troy*, are connected in terms of their ability to enunciate the voice of the other as well as to convey increasingly more complex notions of selfhood and identity. Heaney’s notion of translation is transformative in that meaning is rendered as a process of interpretation as opposed to a fixed essence. This creative concept of translation allows him to engage with the matter of the past while at the same time taking up a form of critical distance from that past.

In thematic terms, Heaney is well aware of the socio-political contexts of this translation, the first version of which was completed in April 1973 (Parker, 121), a time when the “troubles” in Northern Ireland were at their height, and when Heaney himself had moved to Glanmore, in County Wicklow.⁵ In *Earning a Rhyme*,⁶ Heaney speaks of the pulls of politics on poets who had, up to then “ignored their different religio-political origins in the name of that greater humanity and flexibility which the imaginative endeavour entails” (96). As the conflict in Northern Ireland intensified, poets began “to find themselves tugged by undercurrents of historical memory and pleas for identification with the political aims of their groups,” and as a result, Heaney notes that “historical parallels” and “literary

precedents” began to assume importance as they offered “distances and analogies which could ease the strain of the present.” Such “free spaces” would allow writers to express honestly “the exacerbations of the local quarrel” without turning this expression into just “another manifestation of the aggressions and resentments which had been responsible for the quarrel in the first place” (*Rhyme*, 96).

It is important that his notion of the role of poetry here is understood. For Heaney, poetry should not be simply a voicing of the historical resentment of the tribe. Instead, in a manner similar to that of Dante, who was admired by Heaney as being “able to accommodate the political and the transcendent,” he wishes to discover a “properly literary activity which might contain a potentially public meaning” (*Rhyme*, 96). This public meaning was essentially ethical in that, while it gave voice to the feelings of northern nationalists, nevertheless it was shot through with the voice of their specific “other” – northern unionists. He notes that this book will make a unionist audience aware of the notion that:

Ulster was Irish, without coercing them out of their cherished conviction that it was British. Also, because it reached back into a pre-colonial Ulster of monastic Christianity and Celtic kingship, I hoped the book might complicate that sense of entitlement to the land of Ulster which had developed so overbearingly in the Protestant majority, as a result of various victories and acts of settlement over the centuries....I simply wanted to offer an indigenous text that would not threaten a Unionist (after all, this was just a translation of an old tale, situated for much of the time in what is now Co. Antrim and Co. Down) and that would fortify a Nationalist (after all, this old tale tells us we belonged here always and that we will remain unextirpated). (*Rhyme*, 97)

In this sense, he answers a question he had posed himself earlier in the discussion where he asked what has the “translation of the tale of a Celtic wild man to do with the devastations of the new wild men of the Provisional IRA?” (*Rhyme*, 97). The answer to this question is that through critical distance, both linguistic and temporal, *Sweeney Astray* allows him to complicate issues of identity which were in danger of becoming dangerously simple and polarized. To see alterity in one’s own

identity could run the risk of odium at best, and violence at worst, in the Northern Ireland of the 1970s.

This translation, by making the Irish language speak the language of the other, and at the same time, by making English literature accommodate a “text engendered within the Gaelic order of medieval Ireland” (*Rhyme*, 96), forces notions of complexity and transformation on readers that perhaps they would rather not acknowledge. In this sense, Heaney’s notion of translation is similar to that of Peggy Kamuf, who has noted the movement of the *trans*, “translation, transference, transport, transformation” which always differs/defers the movement of thought from point of origin to point of arrival (*Reader*, 242). It is this process of transformation and transference that is ethically creative in Heaney’s work, as it “complicates” notions of identity.

In terms of the dissemination of this translation, Heaney has further complicated the political and cultural *milieu*. Heaney saw as significant the fact that *Sweeney Astray* was originally published by the Field Day Company in Derry, in 1983 (published the following year by Faber). He talks of the “submerged naughtiness” in this act of publishing, noting that it connoted a “kind of all-Ireland event situated just within the North,” and also noting that he had translated the place names into their modern equivalents. He went on to express the hope that he did this so that “the Northern Unionist or Northern Protestant readership might, in some minuscule way, feel free to identify with the Gaelic tradition” (Corcoran, 261).⁷ Once again, it is towards notions of alterity that aspects of this poem are directed; he is far from writing only from his own tribe; here, all of Kamuf’s processes of transferral and transformation come into being, as Heaney attempts to use the critical distance of the translation to achieve some form of ethical *rapprochement* with possible readers of his work.

Interestingly, Seamus Deane has made the point that Field Day’s *raison d’être* has been an involvement with “a particular experience of what we may call translation.” However, Deane’s

notion of translation as predicated by a “traumatic political and cultural crisis” which causes “individuals and groups” to “forge for themselves a new speech,” seems narrower than that of Heaney. This view seems to see translation as confined to tribal or communal speech; it is the new dialect of the tribe talking to the tribe. It operates in a worldview which sees self and other in terms of a “a clash of loyalties which is analyzable but irresolvable” (Deane, 14). It is a worldview which sees the communities in Northern Ireland as condemned to “rehearse positions from which there is no exit” (15). Heaney’s aim, on the other hand, would seem to be a restructuration of language so that the tribe can talk to the other through an acknowledgement of the essential hybridity of language itself. For Heaney, to translate is metonymic of the ethical imperative: it is the quintessential form of dialogue with the other.

John Wilson Foster has pointed out that for Heaney translation is a seminal aspect of his vision of the world, and consequently of his writing. Describing Heaney’s reaction to the political situation in Northern Ireland, he says that if Heaney did not speak *out* about issues: “he spoke *in*, which is what a poet in his truest office does. Events are absorbed and internalized, re-issued and sometimes recognizable in their translation only by our disciplined reading” (Wilson Foster, 3). This transforming and re-issuing aspect of translation has to do with an expressed desire of Heaney’s in dealing with political material. In an interview with Barry White, he made the point that writers of his generation attempted to transcend their Catholicism and Protestantism: “I would prefer not to talk in those terms because they are terms I deplore.” He went on to say that the desire on the part of writers of his generation was “to get through the thicket, not to represent it” (White, 9). Crucially here, he is prescribing a political and ethical imperative to writing, in that the role of the writer is to transform perceptions in order to find some way out of the thicket of internecine sectarian violence.

In the same interview, Heaney makes the point that those in each community “live near their roots” and he goes on to suggest that “firm roots are terrific” but, and this is crucial, “they can also hamper

you transforming yourself.” For Heaney, the only way to get through the thicket of polarized communities is by “rethinking what you know and transforming yourself” (White, 9). Translation allows this transformation by allowing us to see the thicket from a new perspective.

This new perspective is part of the *dénouement* of Heaney’s translation of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*, written for Field Day in 1990, and first produced in October of that year in the Guildhall in Derry.⁸ Like *Sweeney Astray* before it, this translation sets out parallels between an ancient motif and that of the present: it allows for a revision of the present through the critical distance of the past. In *The Cure at Troy*, the conflicts between politics and ethics, between loyalty to one’s tribe and loyalty to a higher sense of humanity and truth, between values which are the products of a particular ideology and those which ascribe to some form of transcendence of that ideology, are set out.

In this play, Philoctetes has been left by the Greeks on the island of Lemnos, due to a foul-smelling suppurating wound, which left him “rotting like a leper” caused by a “snake-bite he got at a shrine” (*Troy*, 17). A Trojan soothsayer, Helenus, one of King Priam’s sons, had prophesied that Troy would only be captured if Philoctetes and his bow were present, so Odysseus and the hero of the play, Neoptolemus (the son of Achilles), are sent to obtain the bow. From the beginning, the stage is set in terms of a conflict between tribal loyalty and some transcendental notion of ethical value and responsibility.

The opening lines of the chorus reinforce the connection between the island of Lemnos and the island of Ireland, as well as the siege of Troy and notions of siege in Northern Ireland:

Philoctetes.

Hercules.

Odysseus.

Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.
All throwing shapes, every one of them
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what.

People so deep into
Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up.
People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
Shining with self-regard like polished stones. (1)

Here, the difference between hero and victim is elided, as the tribal certainties and loyalties of Greeks and Trojans have distinct resonances with the contemporary situation of Northern Ireland. These parallels become even more pronounced near the end of the play when the chorus sums up the developments with an interpolation that speaks of a "hunger-striker's father" standing in a graveyard, and a "police widow in veils" fainting at "the funeral home"(77), recalling the Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland, and reinforcing the creative connection between Greece and Ireland. Hence, the dilemma of the Greeks obeying orders, and taking the bow of Philoctetes against his wishes, can set up similarities with contemporary Irish communal and sectarian loyalties, but can also avoid succumbing to the gravitational entrapment of these "appetites of gravity" through the creative use of translation.

Consequently, the chorus can see that a loyalty to the tribe that is not counterweighted by some sense of personal ethics causes people who are convinced that they are "in the right" to "repeat themselves...no matter what." This parallel of the Freudian repetition complex (*Wiederholungszwang*)⁹ can also be seen as a constitutive factor in the replication of the violence in Northern Ireland, as generation after generation become involved in sectarian violence in the defence of the ideological certainties of their community, be these nationalist or unionist. The generative cause of this repetitive, trans-generational involvement is a sense of communal grievance, the "self-pity" that "buoys them up," which is developed and fed by pondering upon the pain of past injustices.

Philoctetes, as symbolic of this tendency, identifies again and again with his wound: “I managed to come through / but I never healed” (*Troy*, 18); “this ruins everything. / I’m being cut open” (40); “has the bad smell left me?” (57); “Some animals in a trap / Eat off their own legs” (53); “All I’ve left is a wound” (61). His subjectivity is intrinsically bound up with his wound; symbolically, he is unable to face the future because of his adhesion to the past; his wound locates him as a particular type of ideological subject. This perspective, which has a number of connections with the firm roots of the thicket already mentioned, is summed up by the chorus as follows: having spoken of “self-pity,” the chorus goes on to point out the self-fulfilling prophecy that such a perspective can make people spend “their whole life” “admiring themselves / For their own long-suffering” (2). This veneration of the wounds of the past is exactly how sectarian ideology seduces new identities into the mould of existing ones. Philoctetes embodies the siege mentality that is rife in Northern Ireland in his cry: “No matter how I’m besieged. / I’ll be my own Troy. The Greeks will never take me” (63).

Another aspect of such entrapment is the sense of immanence within a culture, which sees value only in those areas wherein the tribal imperatives are validated. In *The Cure at Troy*, it is Odysseus who symbolizes this voice of political pragmatism. He defines himself and Neoptolemus as “Greeks with a job to do” (3), and makes similar matter of fact pronouncements as the play proceeds, informing the younger man that “you’re here to serve our cause” (6). In the service of his cause, Odysseus can rationalize almost anything, telling Philoctetes that his “aim has always been to get things done / By being adaptable” (57), and this adaptability is grounded in his tribal loyalty. He can gloss over the sufferings of Philoctetes by invoking his own part of the thicket: “We were Greeks with a job to do, and we did it” and in answer to the ethical question about the lies that have been told, he gives the classic response of political pragmatism: “But it worked! It worked, so what about it?” (65).

In the climactic confrontation of the play, Neoptolemus, who had shared this perspective earlier in the play – “I’m under orders” (51) – and who had lied to Philoctetes in order to obtain his bow, realizes the error of his ways, and becomes a more complex character through the introduction of an ethical strand to his *persona*. In a colloquy with Odysseus, the gradual opposition between pragmatic tribal politics and a more open humanistic ethics is unveiled. In response to Neoptolemus’s statement that “I did a wrong thing and I have to right it” (52), and to his further remark that he is going to “redress the balance” and cause the “scales to even out” (65) by handing back the bow, Odysseus replies in clichés: “Act your age. Be reasonable. Use your head.” The reply of Neoptolemus demonstrates the gulf that exists between the two: “Since when did the use of reason rule out truth?” (66).

For Odysseus, “rightness” and “justice” are values that are immanent in the ideological perspective of the tribe or community. There is to be no critical distance between his notions of myth and history. He tells Neoptolemus that there is one last “barrier” that will stop him handing back the bow, and that is the “will of the Greek people, / And me here as their representative” (66). He sees no sense of any transcendental or intersubjective form of justice in what Neoptolemus is attempting. When Neoptolemus speaks of “doing the right thing,” he is answered by the voice of the tribe: “What’s so right about / Reneging on your Greek commission?” Their subsequent interchange deserves to be quoted in full as it is a *locus classicus* of the conflict between ethics and politics; between a view of self and other as connected and mutually responsible, as opposed to that of self and other as opposed and in conflict:

ODYSSEUS

You’re under my command here. Don’t you forget it.

NEOPTOLEMUS

The commands that I am hearing overrule

You and all you stand for.

ODYSSEUS

And what about

The Greeks? Have they no jurisdiction left?

NEOPTOLEMUS

The jurisdiction I am under here

Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek.

ODYSSEUS

You've turned yourself into a Trojan, lad. (67)

In this exchange, the critical distance already spoken of is evident in the value-ethic of Neoptolemus. He has moved beyond the inter-tribal epistemology of Odysseus, where not to be Greek necessitates one's being Trojan. Here, the range of choices is severely limited: one is either Greek or Trojan – a parallel with the population of Northern Ireland being divided into the adversarial binarisms of Catholicism or Protestantism; nationalism or unionism; republicanism or loyalism. That such identifications, such “firm roots,” exist is beyond question; what is open to question, however, is whether it is wise to see them as all-encompassing, as this can cause the “entrapment” which has mired Odysseus, and from which Neoptolemus is determined to escape.

In a ringing assertion earlier in the play, as he begins to have some form of sympathy with Philoctetes, he says “I'm all throughother. This isn't me. I'm sorry” (48). Here the beginnings of an ethics of identity, of a view that the self is not defined in simplistic contradistinction to the other, but rather is marked with traces of that other, is seen as a painful and self-alienating experience. Here one is reminded of Emmanuel Levinas's statement that “[l]anguage is born in responsibility,” implying that the responsibility involved is to the other, to other traditions, other ideas, but most essentially other people (*Levinas*, 82). A comparison can be made between the doubt and questioning of Neoptolemus and Odysseus's conviction that “he's in the right” (*Troy*, 1). For Heaney, poetry can aid in the creation of such an ethics of selfhood since, as has been noted, it aspires to be “a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony,” and also to be capable of being “both socially responsible and creatively free” (*Redress*, 193).

For Odysseus, the borderline between self and other is clear and finite; it encompasses all lines of vision. For him, “justice” is either Greek or Trojan; where Greek jurisdiction ends, then all he can imagine is Trojan justice. His binary logic is exactly that of many groupings in contemporary culture, if you are not for “us” then you must be for “them.” Heaney’s view of the relationship between self and other, as voiced by Neoptolemus, is profoundly at odds with this; he feels a sense of ethical responsibility for the other as well as the self. Speaking of the binary opposition between Ireland and England, as an origin of that between Catholic and Protestant, Heaney sees poetry as a constellation wherein both can be set in dialectical and transformative interchange: “I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience” (*Preoccupations*, 37).

Writing about George Herbert’s “The Pulley,” and one of his own poems from “Squarings,”¹⁰ Heaney notes that both works are about “the way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them” (*Redress*, xiii). This concept of negotiation is precisely what is meant by his comment that rhyme “surprises and extends” the fixed relationships between words, and, by extension, between individuals and communities; a possible path through the thicket is glimpsed again here. One of his methods of achieving this negotiation is the “field of force,” from *Preoccupations*, where he stresses that he felt it would be possible to:

encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. (56-57)

In such structures of thought, the border between self and other is symbolized, in *The Cure at Troy*, by the role of the chorus, which also takes on the voice of poetry:

For my part is the chorus, and the chorus
Is more or less a borderline between
The you and the me and the it of it.

Between

The gods' and human beings' sense of things.
And that's the borderline that poetry
Operates on too, always in between
What you would like to happen and what will –
Whether you like it or not.

Poetry

Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice
Of reality and justice. (2)

This borderline will be very much in line with Heaney's notion of a frontier of writing, which allows some form of passage across that border which separates different groups. 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 partitioning Ireland could become "a little bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take" (*Crediting*, 23). In Heaney's terms, the voice of the chorus, a poetic voice, is a point of opening between the "you" and the "me;" it is an intersubjective point of mediation between the "gods' and human beings' sense of thing." He goes on to make the ethical role of poetry *qua* poetry explicit by extending the connection between the voices which enunciate this poetic vision, and poetry itself: "And that's the borderline that poetry / Operates on too" (*Troy*, 2).

It is poetry (in this case, poetry as translation) as *genre* that facilitates this ethical interaction between self and other, this sense that borders are not points of closure but instead, points of opening. Hence, Neoptolemus can say: "I'm all throughother," meaning that he is becoming aware that there are not just two essential identities at work here; he realizes that there are alternatives to the essentialist ethnocentrism of Odysseus; he realizes that "reality and justice" are values which can have a transformative effect on notions of being Greek or Trojan. As Philoctetes puts it, in a moment of *anagnorisis*: "the wheel is turning, the scales are tilting back. Justice is going to be woken up at last"

(57). Neoptolemus, speaking of “justice herself,” makes the point that “she isn’t only Greek” (67), and this is perhaps the crucial message of this play.

While admitting that no “poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong” (77), this translation attempts to stake out the ground for poetry to have some effect in a world where people “suffer,” “torture one another” and get “hurt and get hard.” Realizing the lesson of history, which says: “*Don’t hope / On this side of the grave*” [*italics original*], the chorus concludes the play by suggesting that the:

once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme. (77)

The conditions required for such a tidal wave are the awareness of the necessary relationship between self and other, and of the transformative effects of this relationship in terms of future definitions of selfhood and otherness. By looking towards the future, as opposed to the past, space can be created for such a possibility.

Translation, as has become clear, is the vehicle which allows us to achieve this putative transformation, becoming a way, not of erasing the original, but of keeping the original alive. It is a way of “translating oneself into the other language without giving up one’s own language.” In political terms, Derrida notes, the act of translating is a way of “welcoming the other’s traditions” (“Responsibility,” 32). It is also a way of transforming the temporal orientation of a culture from the past to the present, as the old tongue becomes transformed into the new tongue which points towards a politics of the future:

Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes.
I say it again in friendship and say this:

Stop eating yourself up with hate and come with us. (61)

To see such an exhortation as politically naive would be to forget that, at the end of the play, Philoctetes still has his wound, and the chorus, while certainly hopeful, nevertheless retains a sense of doubt and uncertainty regarding the future that is set out before the characters in the play, and by analogy, before the communities in Northern Ireland:

I leave

Half-ready to believe

That a *crippled* trust might walk

And the *half-true* rhyme is love (81). [*my italics*]

The uncertainties that are enunciated in these adjectives certainly undercut any untoward optimism. The parallel with the ongoing peace-process, with its analogous uncertainties and half-steps forward, can be traced here but it would be incorrect to see this parallel as all-consuming. Heaney's notion of the role of poetry is very much focused on transforming the individual, as opposed to the group or tribe. To get through the thicket is to see it from a transcendent perspective; however, the adhesion of those firm roots is still a factor. Tribal loyalty may still be present, but a personal ethic can act as a counterbalance, whether in mythical ancient Ireland where Sweeney's wings gave him this Daedalan perspective, or in ancient Greece, where Philoctetes can become "all throughother" and see beyond Odysseus's identificatory thicket which is composed of the Greek-Trojan exclusive binarism, or in the actual space of Northern Ireland.

The process of translation is of seminal importance in the achievement of this counterbalance, enacting as it does, Heaney's ideas of the field of force. If one is to be capable of "rethinking what you know and transforming yourself," then some interactive connection with the voice and mind of the other is necessary. In his most recent translation, of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, this process of transformation is also important. This canonical fountainhead of the English literary

tradition begins with the exclamation “*Hwæt*,” usually translated as “low,” “hark,” “behold,” “attend” or “listen.” Heaney, however, has translated it as “so” (*Beowulf*, xxvii). His explanation for so doing underlines yet again, the ethical imperative that drives his own particular mode of translation, as self and other, Irish and English, colonized and colonizer interfuse and transform each other’s discourse.

As Heaney puts it, when speaking about the practice of translating this poem, he considered *Beowulf* to be part of his “voice-right” (xxiii), though such a conclusion was not easily reached. He goes on to describe his own gradual acceptance of the voice of the other, English, as part of his own voice-right (that very phrase being redolent of Anglo-Saxon metrical structure). What he is describing is the difficult process of the creation of an ethically complex selfhood – the acknowledgement that there are aspects of the other which are always already part of the self. Translation, in its different forms, played a major part in this process of rethinking his notion of selfhood, as individual words became polysemic texts which trailed contextual and ideological contexts in their wake.

He traces some key points on this journey, such as finding the word “*lachtar*” in an Irish-English dictionary, and realizing that this word, which his aunt had used “when speaking of a flock of chicks, was in fact, an Irish language word” which had managed to survive in his aunt’s “English speech generations after her forebears and mine had ceased to speak Irish” (*Beowulf*, xxiv).¹¹ As he puts it, he tended to see “English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and” (xxiv), and he sees this perspective, similar in its way to Odysseus’s Greek/Trojan binarism, as hampering any development of a more complex and creative way of coming to terms with the vexed questions of nationality, language and history. Earlier in this essay, Derrida’s explanation of *différance* was discussed, and the similarity in phrasing, and in epistemology, is striking: Derrida seeing the process of *différance* as governed by a logic of “this *and* that” as opposed to “this or that.” Clearly both writers have come to the conclusion that only by some form of

structure which accommodates selfhood and alterity in itself, can the complexities of identity be given an ethically correct enunciation.

For Heaney, the journey from the “either/or” sense of linguistic dispossession of “*lachtar*” to the “both/and” transforming confidence of “So” was measured in terms of creative translation. Words such as “whiskey,” which is “the same as the Irish or Scots Gaelic word *uisce*, meaning water,” and the resulting idea that the River Usk in Britain is therefore “to some extent the River Uisce (or Whiskey),” played a crucial role in setting in motion what he calls a “linguistic river of rivers...a riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak” which gave him a new perspective (xxiv). This confluence of translations made it possible for him to create, in some “unpartitioned country of the mind,” a language which “would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language” (xxv). This “further language” is what will allow progress, and it comes about through the process of translation which changes the language of self, and the language of other, into a language that is neither Greek nor Trojan but “all throughother.”

As he looked for the *mot juste* to translate “*Hwæt*,” he remembered another voice of his childhood, one which allowed him to achieve the correct timbre which he needed if he was to do justice to the poem, the voice of the other, and his own tradition, the voice of the self. He speaks of relations of his father’s called Scullions, on whose name he had punned, calling them “big-voiced scullions,” as when they spoke: “the words they uttered came across with a weighty distinctness,” as “phonetic units” which were “weighty and defined” (xxvi). When he began to translate *Beowulf*, and to ask himself how he wanted the words to “sound in [his] version,” he framed the lines in “cadences that would have suited their voices, but that still echoed with the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon” (xxvii). Here, the translation of English literature and Irish experience gave rise to a new form of discourse, where self and other are allowed to interact, and mutually transform each other:

In Hiberno-English Scullion-speak, the particle “so” came naturally to the rescue, because in that idiom “so” operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention. So, “so” it was. (xxvii)

So, the opening signifier of this foundational English text has been transformed by the creative ethics of translation. Heaney has determined to find his way out of the thicket of either/or into the “further language” of both/and. However, most importantly, his searches for answers have been conducted with an open mind, open to the possibilities that can accrue from a discourse which is focused on the future.

As part of his voice-right, *Beowulf* is a type of inheritance for Heaney, but like that of Philoctetes, it is one whose constraints will not hold him, or limit him. As he has put it in “The Settle Bed,” a poem from his volume *Seeing Things*, “an inheritance” is from “the long ago,” and yet it can be made “willable forward” if the old moulds can be broken (29). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes a similar point in terms of the fractured notion of an inheritance, which, far from issuing from a fixed centre, and from containing an unequivocal meaning, “is never gathered together, it is never one with itself” (16). This is precisely what Heaney had in mind when he spoke of taking a long and difficult time to be persuaded that he “was born into its [*Beowulf*’s] language” and that “its language was born” into him (*Beowulf*, xxii).

It is through such transformative structures that translation achieves its creative ethical warrant. By transforming texts from the past into those of the present, and those of one language into those of another, the essentialism that inhabits much binary political thought is gradually deconstructed through the creation of a new inclusive perspective. This, in turn, may lead to the possibility of some form of interaction between selfhood and alterity which allows one to get through the thicket of essentialist identity. Such a perspective has been partially achieved by Sweeney in his flights through the air, by Philoctetes in his new ethical concepts of the relationship between self and other, and by

Heaney himself, as he reclaims the Anglo-Saxon aspect of his poetic selfhood, through the device of Scullion-speak. So, ultimately, all three are involved in becoming “all throughother,” and the processes of translation have brought this ethical transformation about.

Finally, Heaney’s introduction to *Beowulf* closes with a discussion of his use of the word “bawn” as a translation for Hrothgar’s hall, in Heorot. This word has particular associations for Heaney, whose own home is called *Mossbawn*. He has discussed the etymology of the name a number of times in his work. In “Belderg,” he speaks of how this word is “mutable as sound,” and tells that he can make the word “*bawn* an English fort, / A planter’s walled-in mound,” or else “think of it as Irish” (*North*, 14). The Irish derivation is from “*bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle” (*Beowulf*, xxx), and Heaney uses the word “bawn” to indicate the amphibious nature of his allegiance to the two linguistic and cultural traditions. As he says, putting a bawn into *Beowulf* is a way of coming to terms with “that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned to render it ever more ‘willable forward / again and again and again’ ” (xxx). This final quotation, from “The Settle Bed,” brings to mind other lines from that poem which could well serve as an encapsulation of Heaney’s ethics of translation: “whatever is given / can always be reimagined” (*Seeing*, 29).

It is the transforming process of translation that allows this reimagining of the givens of cultural and ideological identity, it allows us to get through the thicket, it allows us to transcend the static vision of Odysseus where, if one is not Greek, one must be, *de facto*, a Trojan. It also helps to bring about Derrida’s idea of an opening of the borderlines between communities, which is oriented towards the future, and so, to reimagine a new discourse, a new translation and transformation, where “hope and history rhyme” (*Troy*, 77).

NOTES

1. Fennell's book *Whatever You Say Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1* is probably the most sustained criticism of Heaney's work currently in print. While there are interesting arguments to be found here, the majority of the book suffers from an under-theorization of the basic positions being defined, and also from a confusion between the epistemologies of, and relationships between, politics and poetry. One could do no better than cite a point made by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, where he notes that artworks: "detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity" (1).
2. See my "*North: The Politics of Plurality*", for an alternative reading of *North* which suggests that the book is, in fact, a polyphonic work in which a number of different notions of political, ideological, religious and temporal forms of identity, all associated in different ways, with the notion of "north," are allowed to interact and inform each other. It is the plurality of voices and identifications, with the poet speaking in the *personae* of Ireland, England, a number of dead bog people of Irish and Scandinavian origin, a piece of ivory and his own personal past among others which is an important feature of this collection, a feature which has received surprisingly little attention.
3. This dimension in Heaney's writing is completely missed by Fennell, who sees his response to the Northern Irish conflict in terms of its being conveyed as a "sad, atavistic, tribal feud, in which, as in a bog, the soldiers, police and prisons of the rational State flounder" (20).
4. Hughes was the second hunger striker to die in the hunger strike initiated in the Maze prison in County Antrim on October 27th 1980, as part of a demand for political status to be granted to IRA prisoners. Bobby Sands, elected M. P. for Fermanagh-South Tyrone while on hunger strike, was the first of 10 to die between April 20th and August 10th 1981.
5. The years between 1971 and 1977 saw a huge increase in the number of deaths in Northern Ireland. In 1969, 16 people were killed, and in 1970 a further 24 died. However, the death tolls in the following years were as follows: 1971: 170; 1972: 472; 1973: 252; 1974: 294; 1975: 257; 1976: 295 and 1977: 110. The political situation of which Heaney speaks in "Earning a Rhyme" should be seen in this context.
6. This lecture is an edited version of a talk given in Boston College at a Translation Seminar, and was later published, as a chapter in *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*.
7. This comment is taken from an interview with Heaney that is referred to in different places in Corcoran's book, and printed as an appendix to it, on pages 234-262. It took place on the 5th and 6th of July 1985.
8. In terms of nomenclature, 'Derry' is a contested term. The signifier 'Derry' is a transliteration of the original Irish language term 'Doire' meaning an oak tree. However, the city was renamed Londonderry by the English as a sign of its reappropriation under a new regime. .
9. See Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where this concept is discussed in connection with what he terms the death drive.
10. Herbert's poem, "The Pulley" is the subject of the opening essay of *The Redress of Poetry*, pages 11-12, while Heaney's "Squarings" sequence is to be found in *Seeing Things* pages 53-108.
11. This point was first raised by Heaney at the second John Malone Memorial Lecture, lecture in Queen's University Belfast, on June 9th 1983, subsequently published as *Among Schoolchildren*.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodore. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kantor. Eds Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann. London: Athlone Press, 1997.
- Carson, Ciarán. "Escaped from the Massacre." *The Honest Ulsterman*, vol. 50, Winter (1975): 183-186.
- Corcoran, Neil. *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*. 1986. London: Faber, 1998.
- Deane, Seamus. *Introduction to Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990: 3-19.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Deconstruction and the Other." Ed. Richard Kearney. *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. 156-176.

-
- Derrida, Jacques. "On Responsibility." *Responsibilities of Deconstruction: PLI – Warwick Journal of Philosophy*. Eds Jonathan Dronsfeld and Nick Midgley. Volume 6, Summer (1997): 19-36.
- Fennell, Desmond. *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Volume XXVII of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974.
- Heaney, Seamus. *North*. London: Faber, 1975.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. London: Faber, 1980.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Place and Displacement*. Grasmere: Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1985.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Earning a Rhyme." *Poetry Ireland Review*. Ed. John Ennis. No. 25, Spring (1989): 96-100.
- Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy*. London: Faber, 1990.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Seeing Things*. London: Faber, 1991.
- Heaney, Seamus. *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*. London: Faber, 1995.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Crediting Poetry*. Meath, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1995.
- Heaney, Seamus, *Beowulf*. London: Faber, 1999.
- Kamuf, Peggy, ed. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- O'Brien, Eugene. "North: The Politics of Plurality." *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, Volume II, Numbers 1 & 2 (Autumn 1998/Spring 1999): 1-19.
- Oeser, Hans-Christian ed. *Transverse II: Seamus Heaney in Translation*. Irish Translators' Association, 1994: 83-96.
- Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: "The Making of a Poet."* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993.
- Warren, Rosanna ed. *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989. 13-20.
- White, Barry. "Interview with Seamus Heaney." *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 June 1989: 9.
- Wilson Foster, John. *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1995.