

*THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE: HEANEY AND YEATS AND THE
PLACE OF WRITING*

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Abstract

This essay compares and contrasts the writing of William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney in terms of their respective enunciations of place. Both writers have a pluralist and emancipatory sense of place, and real places and imagined ones interact in a dialectical and complicated relationship. The essay will also compare their respective Nobel Laureate speeches in terms of their enunciations of place.

On the inside front cover of *Wintering Out*, a portion of a review of that book by Clive James is printed. James, in a laudatory review, makes the point that soon 'people are going to start comparing him [*Heaney*] with Yeats: the packed forms, that unmistakable combination of clarity with argumentative density – it's all there, robust and abundant'. As Heaney's writing has developed, these comparisons have become more overt, as the influence of Yeats becomes stronger on Heaney's work. I would argue that, over the years as Heaney's career has developed, the practice of poetry as embodied by Yeats has been perhaps the most important influence, from the Irish tradition, on Heaney's writing. This essay will trace the influences and parallels between the careers of these two Noble laureates, focusing specifically on their sense of place and on their Nobel acceptance speeches as indices of their sense of the political consequences of their work.

Both writers share an essentially postmodern project of unravelling the monological nationalist narrative of history and instead foregrounding the aporias, antinomies and fault lines that have been glossed over by the sweep of historical narrative. Speaking of the influence of Yeats, Heaney makes the admiring point that Yeats is a writer who ‘took the strain of both the major ideologies that were exacerbating Irish political life’ (Heaney 1997: 159). In terms of looking at any created sense of Irish identity, Yeats wished to commemorate and create an inclusive sense of Ireland as opposed to a form of selective memory ‘I think we should accept the whole past of this nation and not pick and choose’ (*Evening Telegraph* 1923: August 25th). This type of poetic imperative as espoused by Yeats presents a growing symphysis with Heaney who feels that, above all else, poetry should be a ‘working model of inclusive consciousness’ which ‘should not simplify’ (Heaney 1995a: 8). That both writers should be standing at the same podium in Stockholm, separated by some seventy years, but connected by a strong strand of agreement, would indicate points of connection between their work, but, as we will see, those strands, when examined, prove to be considerably stronger.

THE VALUE OF POETRY AND THE PLURALITY

It is certainly no accident that at the beginning of Heaney’s first collection of prose, *Preoccupations*, there is an epigraph from Yeats, whose own prose runs to a large number of volumes, as well as the two volume edition of his *Uncollected Prose*.¹ This piece, from ‘Samhain: 1905’, deals with Yeats’s response to being asked whether his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was written to ‘affect public opinion’. Yeats emphatically denies this, adding that the inspiration for the play came to him in a dream, and goes on to explain his own views on the relationship between the aesthetic and the politic:

If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about these others, but because all life has the same root. Coventry Patmore has said ‘The end of art is peace,’ and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands. (Yeats 1980: 7)

That Heaney should choose this particular piece to be an epigraph to his first collection of prose is particularly significant, especially in terms of the question and answer motif contained therein. The very title of Heaney's book, *Preoccupations*, comes from Yeats's quotation, and the contextual frame surrounding it is furthered by Heaney's ongoing preoccupations and interrogations of the whole notion of art itself. That Yeats managed to create 'a heroic role for the poet in the modern world' (Heaney 2000: xii) is an important point of connection with Heaney, especially in view of Heaney's ongoing questioning of the role of art in that very modern, or postmodern, world.

Perhaps one of the seminal interactions of the poetry of Yeats and Heaney is to be found in *Among Schoolchildren*. Towards the end of this lecture, speaking about the value of writing in general and poetry in particular, Heaney offers a reading of W. B. Yeats's late poem, 'Among School Children', from his collection entitled *The Tower*. This reading focuses on the final stanza of the poem:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (Yeats 1979: 244-5)

Heaney chose this version of the Yeatsian title, *Among Schoolchildren*, to highlight his interest in the educational process, an interest foregrounded by the occasion of a public lecture which was given in commemoration of the educator John Malone. The opening stanza of the poem places Yeats, a Senator in the Irish Free State, in a school in Waterford in 1926, and is told in the first person for the most part:

The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading books and histories,

To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way... (Yeats 1979: 244)

Heaney sees this stanza as positing a 'world of routine,' a world where we are 'our official routine selves' (Heaney 1883: 4). However, given his educational train of thought, he goes on to discuss the motivation behind such quotidian classroom routines in the following manner:

Yet any routine world, whether it be primary school classroom or college of education lecture hall, has based its routines upon some vision. The mechanics and humdrum of its operations are evolved to further or realise some end, some ideal result posited upon a vision of what the pupil or the student teacher should become. (Heaney 1883: 4-5)

In discussing Yeats's poem, Heaney goes on to examine further educational and linguistic issues which have a bearing on what he calls the 'cement of society, these shared conceptions, loyalties and ideals' (Heaney 1883: 5) without which society can become unstable. He feels this to be important as in Ireland, 'north and south, this social cement of a common culture and shared national attitudes is not strong or shared or common' (Heaney 1883: 6). Having discussed the interaction of traditions in his own life, Heaney brings his discussion back to the notion of 'vision' with which he began, and goes on to read the final Yeatsian stanza as an apotheosis of what education can, ideally, achieve:

Its final stanza is a guarantee of our human capacity to outstrip the routine world, the borders of ideology and the conditionings of history. It is a vision of harmony and fulfilment, of a natural and effortless richness of being, a vision, in fact, of the paradisaical place ... where the earthly conflicts between flesh and spirit, beauty, truth, effort and ease, will and temperament, are all elided and assumed into harmony and unity This is one of the high watermarks of poetry.... And what it suggests is the necessity of an idea of transcendence, an impatience with the limitations of systems, a yearning to be completely fulfilled at all levels of our being, to strike beyond the ordinary daily levels of achievement where one goal is won at the expense of another, to arrive at a final place which is not the absence of activity but is, on the contrary, the continuous realisation of all the activities of which we are capable. (Heaney 1883: 15-16)

Both writers stress the need for literature to form some type of dialogue between the immanent and the transcendent, and both use the metaphor of a particular type of place, or space, with all of the nuances of that term, as a symbol for this discourse. The stanza addresses for Heaney what has been at the centre of his own pedagogical imperative throughout his life: ‘what was at stake was the credibility of this honoured but hard to define category of human achievement called poetry’ (Heaney 2002: 67). The fact that Yeats’s stanza concludes with two rhetorical questions underscores Heaney’s own guarded view about the performative nature of poetry as an activity.² While he is certain of its societal, and moreover, individual value, Heaney’s descriptions of this value are highly nuanced and indefatigably complex and plural. As he puts in ‘The Placeless Heaven’: poetry is ‘a spurt of abundance from a source within and it spills over to irrigate the world beyond the self’ (Heaney 1988: 13); or again, one could cite his commentary on Robert Lowell: ‘Lowell succeeded in uniting the aesthetic instinct with the obligation to witness morally and significantly in the realm of public action’ (Heaney 1988: 233).

The rhetoric of the passage, with its gesture towards location and locution, embodies the thrust of what I take to be one of Heaney’s most pivotal aims: ‘to arrive at a final place which is not the absence of activity but is, on the contrary, the continuous realisation of all the activities of which we are capable’ (Heaney 1983: 16). In Blanchot’s terms, such a structure is paradigmatic of what he terms the ‘space of literature’ in that different poles of oppositions are placed in a structure which sees them ‘quitting themselves and detaining each other together outside themselves in the restless unity of their common belonging’ (Blanchot 1982: 200). Like Derrida, Blanchot stresses that this space will allow for different aspects of meaning to coexist and influence each other. As Derrida has noted: ‘literary writing has, almost always and almost everywhere ... lent itself to this *transcendent* reading, in that search for the signified’ (Derrida 1976: 160). It is in the interaction of signifier with signified that repressed aspects of language and meaning can become revealed: ‘polysemy is infinite’ (Derrida 1981: 253). Derrida, Blanchot and Heaney would agree that part of the value of poetry as

genre is precisely this polysemic space, which is close to the 'final place' he speaks of in his reading of Yeats's poem.

In a series of lectures entitled *The Place of Writing*, Heaney discusses the actual and imaginary towers that were central to Yeats's imagination.³ For Yeats, the notion of place was far from simplistic, and one can sense a resonance in Heaney's discussion of the relationship between place and poetry, a relationship that is directly addressed in Heaney's own symbolic metaphor of the quincunx. Heaney makes this very point:

the poetic imagination in its strongest manifestation imposes its vision upon a place rather than accepts a vision from it; and that this visionary imposition is never exempt from the imagination's antithetical ability to subvert its own creation. (Heaney 1989: 20)

This sense of a desire for transcendence in terms of an imagined place, coupled with an awareness of the political realities of notions of place as divisive and potentially violent, is crucial to Heaney's aesthetic. In his symbolic figure of the quincunx, with five towers representing Spenser, Yeats, Joyce, MacNeice and a pre-natal centre of Ireland, this desire will be enunciated, and in Yeats's use of the tower as symbol, another strong strand of influence is to be found.

The buying of a Norman keep in the Barony of Kiltartan, dating from the thirteenth century, and registered in *The Booke of Connaught* for £35 was an act which, for Yeats, was both pragmatic and symbolic. In both senses, the tower became part of his work. By the time he had ceased living in Thoor Ballylee, the tower had become the place, or space, of writing; it was his room to rhyme which became enunciated in the rhyme; it is a paradigm of the actual made into the imaginary. As Heaney puts it, speaking of Yeats who was by then in ill health and no longer living in the tower itself: it had 'entered so deeply into the prophetic strains of the voice that it could be invoked without being inhabited. He no longer needed to live in it since he had attained a state in which he lived by it' (Heaney 1989: 24).

In an overview of Yeats's work, Heaney stresses the interconnectedness of thought and place for Yeats, and also goes on to define the older poet in terms of the very complexity of response which Heaney himself has made an essential part of his ongoing searches for answers:

Yeats's radical devotion to the potential and otherness of a specifically Irish reality should never be underestimated....In his early conjuration of Neo-Platonic tradition with the deposits of Irish folklore, and in the mature symbolism of his dwelling in a Norman tower conjoined with a thatched cabin, Yeats intended to open and complicate the meaning of Irishness. In fact, his imagined Ireland represented not only a regenerative breakaway from the imperium of Britain but also from the magisterium of orthodox Christianity. (Heaney 2000: xv)

This sense of an ongoing process of complicating the identificatory discourse of Irishness, this sense of an imagined Ireland is an important *point de repère* between the work of Yeats and that of Heaney. Both writers are attempting to enculturate more complex definitions of Irishness through the creation of an inclusive and transformative language

By taking a Norman tower and using it as a symbol of his own contemporary Irishness, Yeats is being true to that complexity of response which is a touchstone for Heaney's view of poetry: he is acknowledging the complex history that is imbricated in any attempt to enunciate a sense of 'Irishness'. That the great sequence 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' was written there is further demonstration of the complexity of Irishness as envisioned by Yeats. That a Norman tower, built as a fortification to progress the colonisation of the area of Connacht by the Norman family the de Burgos, should now be witness to a civil war wherein Irish people killed each other, is a demonstration of the complexity of the whole situation, a complexity that would be paralleled in Heaney's own lifetime. For Heaney, Yeats's tower embodies that sense of place wherein 'the place of writing shifts its *locus* into psychic space' (Heaney 1989: 68). While taking up the matter of the givens of its culture, literature as genre, allows for the reconfiguration of that matter through a

revisoning of it: ‘a dialectic is set in motion in which the new writing does not so much displace the old as strive to displace itself to an enabling distance away from it’ (Heaney 1989: 55).

Here the Yeatsian influence is clear for all to see: it is an influence which dictates that the role of art with respect to ideology and culture is, of necessity, to be true to its own laws, while simultaneously operating at a distance from the actual, a process which can, in effect, be transformative of that actuality. Such transformational qualities are crucial to Heaney’s reflections on the value of poetry, a point he makes in an interview with John Brown: ‘what I was making up was making a difference in the real’ (Heaney 2002: 75). If the structures of reality are seen as structures, then, by definition, they are prone to the deconstructive force of language which, as we have seen, does not try to lessen or trivialise them but instead attempts to find a space wherein different traditions can be brought together in a new relationship. As Heaney puts it in his preface to the translation of *Beowulf*, such writing attempts to set up, 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’ (Heaney 1999: xxv).⁴

It is the room to rhyme, or the space of literature, that allows for this development of a further language, and his final sections of this essay, which further discuss ‘The Man and the Echo’ develop this notion to its fullest extent. Citing the lines:

Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of the sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out.
And its cry distracts my thought. (Yeats 1979: 395)

Heaney proceeds to comment on the final rhyme which conflates ‘crying out’ with ‘thought’. He makes the point that it is not a perfect rhyme, and proceeds to explain the signification of this imperfection, enacting as it does the sense that there is at best an imperfect fit between ‘the project of

civilisation' represented by thought and the facts of pain and death represented by the rabbit's 'crying out' (Heaney 1995a: 162). For Heaney, this sense of balance between the actual and the possible, between reality and the aesthetic apperception of that reality is crucial, and in Yeats he finds an avatar of his own thinking. As he puts it, what holds the 'thought' and the suffering together is the consciousness which tries to make sense of it all, which, despite the acknowledgement of reality, still asks that we should 'in that great night rejoice' (Yeats 1979: 394). For Heaney, the value of this poem, and by extension, of Yeats's project in general, is its attempt to pit 'human resources against the recalcitrant and the inhuman' and also by pitting 'the positive effort of mind against the desolations of natural and historical violence' (Heaney 1995a: 163).⁵ This is true in terms of his poetry and also of his prose, and it is to his prose that our discussion now turns.

PROSE: THE PLACE OF WRITING

Perhaps the most overt connection between these two poets is their winning of the Nobel prize for literature. In terms of their respective Nobel lectures, Yeats's *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, and Heaney's *Crediting Poetry*, there is a symphysis of thought in connection with the role that is played by the aesthetic in the realm of the political. Both writers stress the political circumstances within which their art was created. Yeats outlines the strains of the 'Anglo-Irish war' (Yeats 1980: 195), and goes on to delineate a gradual brutalisation of the national psyche brought about by the ongoing war, beginning with Lady Gregory:

The house where she was born was burned down by incendiaries some few months ago, and there has been like disorder over the greater part of Ireland. A trumpety dispute about an acre of land can rouse our people to monstrous savagery, and if in their war with the English auxiliary police they were shown no mercy, they showed none: murder answered murder. (Yeats 1980: 196)

Heaney, similarly, outlines the contemporary political violence that formed part of the context of his own writing, speaking of living with his own family, in Glanmore, County Wicklow, and listening to

the 'news of bombings closer to home-not only those by the Provisional IRA in Belfast but equally atrocious assaults in Dublin by loyalist paramilitaries from the north' (Heaney 1995b: 14).⁶

Indeed, there is a strong Yeatsian parallel later in the essay as Heaney, in a manner that will recall Yeats's 'murder answered murder', muses on the destructive and repetitive cycle of violence that has marked that era of political engagement in Northern Irish politics, as the 'violence from below was then productive of nothing but a retaliatory violence from above', and 'the dream of justice became subsumed into the callousness of reality' (Heaney 1995b: 17). Both writers are stressing the weight of the actual in terms of their sense of communal selfhood. For Yeats, Irishness was being defined in terms of an ongoing war against the British, while for Heaney, the same antagonists were still fighting, some seventy years later.

For both writers, any notion of literature must take into account the ideological and visceral appetites that have driven aspects of nationalist consciousness, while at the same time, attempting to transcend these. One is reminded of the already discussed Derridean idea that the limit point of a community can be seen as its opening, as opposed to its point of closure. Speaking about this very point, Heaney says that he does not believe in 'ditching attachments' but he is also wary about being 'mired in them', and he goes on to add that 'being dragged down into soul-destroying solidarity' is a major problem for people brought up in Northern Ireland (Brown 2002: 83). He goes on to discuss his own comment, made in an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977, concerning his own writing being a 'slow, obstinate papish burn emanating from the ground I was brought up on' (Deane 1977: 67), adding that in retrospect, this term 'caves into that same old clichéd idiom. It doesn't help. It's not a further language' (Brown 2002: 83).⁷ Yeats too has made a similar point, noting that some of the female actors in his theatre movement were from a 'little political society' whose object, according to its enemies, consisted of teaching the poor children in its care a catechism that began: 'What is the origin of evil?' and proceeded to give the monosyllabic answer 'England' (Yeats 1980: 199).

Clearly for both writers, there is a need both to grant the validity of these ‘attachments’ but concomitantly to avoid becoming enmired in them. In other words, they faced a choice between the either/or paradigm or the both/and one which might lead to that ‘further language’ of which Heaney spoke. It is Heaney who is the most overt in his readings of the dangers of these attachments, remembering an occasion when, on hearing that a friend had been imprisoned on suspicion of committing a political murder, he shocked himself by thinking that ‘even if he were guilty, he might still perhaps be helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential in the only way that worked, that is to say the violent way – which therefore became, by extension, the right way’ (Heaney 1995b: 18).

In the aforementioned ‘The Man and the Echo’, Yeats utters a similar sense of anxiety about the relationship between creative language and the actual, as he ponders the effects of his political plays, specifically *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot? (Yeats 1979: 393)

In this context, he is pondering the relationship between poetry and politics in a manner analogous to that of Heaney in his Nobel lecture. Both writers are probing the need for modes of identity through language which will be capable of transforming, as opposed to replicating, the surge of nationalistic feeling that has been a contextual framework for both of their respective bodies of work. There is a need for Heaney’s notion of a ‘further language’ here, one which is paralleled by Derrida’s advocacy of an ‘experience of language that would be as respectful as possible of linguistic difference’ (Derrida 1993: 31). Here, he means that language must always attempt to create that sense of difference and distance between the actuality of violence and the potentiality of writing. To paraphrase the idiom of ‘The Man and the Echo’, while the pain of the stricken animal must be

recorded, the overarching effort at making sense of such pain and suffering, through some form of aesthetic experience, is a necessary function of Heaney's aesthetic epistemology:

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place? (Yeats 1979: 394)

In this respect, there is a further parallel in the Nobel lectures, as Yeats proceeds to delineate the gradual birth of the Irish Dramatic Movement as a redressive function to a society where, increasingly 'murder answered murder' (Yeats 1980: 196).

Yeats, in some detail, discussed the practical and aesthetic development of the movement, a movement which attempted to bring a new vision, a further language, to the expression of an Irish aesthetic. The themes and topics became highly controversial – being denounced by unionists and nationalists alike for complicating the responses of those seemingly essentialist positions, while the church also took issue with some of the dramas that were produced: 'we were from the first a recognised public danger' (Yeats 1980: 201). What his Nobel lecture traces is a process whereby another avenue for the enunciation of a sense of Irishness was gradually and painstakingly created. That Yeats should foreground his dramatic, as opposed to poetic career, is an interesting point, but given the imperative he clearly felt, of creating a form of anastomosis between the political context and his own work, possibly drama was seen as a more pertinent option.

In an era when levels of literacy would have been quite low, any attempt to influence a large number of people would be far more likely to succeed in the dramatic, as opposed to the poetic, genre. However, it was aesthetic considerations that finally gave the movement success as that 'strange man of genius' John Millington Synge, was to become the synecdochal figure of the Irish Dramatic Movement. Yeats interestingly likens Synge's effect on Irish culture to that of Robert Burns on that

of Scotland: ‘when Scotland thought herself gloomy and religious, providence restored her imaginative spontaneity by raising up Robert Burns to commend drink and the Devil’ (Yeats 1980: 202), and this is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Yeats’s lecture, for the purposes of this discussion.⁸

While focusing on the political context, he foregrounds the transformations wrought in that context by specific textual encounters – by that gesture towards a ‘further language’, so to speak. Synge’s art, standing as the apotheosis of what the Irish Dramatic Movement was capable of achieving, created a different vision of selfhood to that espoused by what Yeats terms ‘the mob’. It is also significantly different from the three repressive strands that are woven through his Nobel lecture when speaking of the obstacles faced by the theatre: nationalist opinion, unionist opinion and the Catholic church. These ideological positions were all espousing culture-specific definitions of Irishness, and were valuing the aesthetic only in terms of how its imagery and symbolic structures matched the ideological subject-position espoused by each of them. Such subject definitions are simplistically constructed in terms of self and other set in binary opposition: Yeats, through the construction of his theatrical movement, was attempting to complicate this paradigm of identity.

That such art was transformational is a *sine qua non* of Yeats’s theme, specifically in urban areas where political and cultural opinion would be formed:

In the town, where everybody crowds upon you, it is your neighbour not yourself that you hate, and if you are not to embitter his life and your own life, perhaps even if you are not to murder him in some kind of revolutionary frenzy, somebody must teach reality and justice. You will hate that teacher for a while, calling his books and plays ugly, misdirected, morbid or something of that kind, but you must agree with him in the end. (Yeats 1980: 198)

For Yeats, the gradual development of the movement, a development replete with difficulty and political antagonism, allowed for the creation of a specific Irish representation of experience: ‘we

could experiment and wait, with nothing to fear but political misunderstanding' (Yeats 1980: 199). The *Playboy* riots were the most controversial period of the theatre, but Yeats outlines an ongoing 'political hostility' (Yeats 1980: 200), from diverse quarters.⁹

The reason that such attacks would be forthcoming are many and various, but specifically, complex expressions and images that are central to the aesthetic are much to be feared by ideologically motivated movements. To quote from Heaney's essay on Yeats again, 'we go to literature in general to be forwarded within ourselves' (Heaney 1995a: 159), and it is here that Yeats's concept of a theatre could prove most dangerous to ideological positions. As Yeats put it:

Every political party had the same desire to substitute for life, which never does the same thing twice, a bundle of reliable principles and assertions. Nor did religious orthodoxy like us any better than political; my *Countess Cathleen* was denounced by Cardinal Logue as an heretical play, and when I wrote that we would like to perform 'foreign masterpieces' a nationalist newspaper declared that 'a foreign masterpiece is a dangerous thing' (Yeats 1980: 201)

Perhaps the most important word here is 'orthodoxy': the aesthetic is setting out to deconstruct the fixed identificatory parameters of the times: text is transforming context through these interactions.

Another way to put this point, of course, would be to say that art should encourage a complexity of response, and here we are on familiar territory, as one of Heaney's first *credos* about poetry is, we remember, that it should not simplify. Speaking about the whole idea of identity politics in *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney made the allied point that, in terms of such a politics of identity, one function of a writer might be 'to disrupt all that. One of your functions is to say that your language and your consciousness are as wide as the world' (Murphy 2000: 94). Thus, the Yeatsian influence becomes all the clearer in this particular aspect of Irish identity.

In his own Nobel lecture, Heaney makes direct allusion to his famous predecessor a number of times. Speaking about the difficulty of attempting to balance the negative and positive aspects of the political situation, Heaney adverts specifically to the similar dilemma faced by Yeats ‘half a century before’, namely, ‘to hold in a single thought reality and justice’ (Heaney 1995b: 17). We have already seen the context of this quotation from Yeats, and noted the imperative towards transformation of the cultural psyche which Yeats, and by extension Heaney, see as part of the *telos* of the aesthetic. In a longer exploration of Yeats’s own Nobel lecture, Heaney cuts to the core of the exemplary role which Yeats plays in his own specific poetic context.

Heaney reminds the audience of the context of the Irish Civil War, which had ended in May 1923, some seven months before Yeats delivered his Nobel lecture. Heaney focuses on Yeats’s lack of overt reference to the Civil War, while agreeing that nobody understood better than Yeats the ‘connection between the construction or destruction of state institutions and the founding or foundering of cultural life’. It is in the context of this ‘connection’ that Yeats chose his lecture topic:

His story was about the creative purpose of that movement and its historic good fortune in having not only his own genius to sponsor it, but also the genius of his friends John Millington Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory. He came to Sweden to tell the world that the local work of poets and dramatists had been as important to the transformation of his native place and times as the ambushes of guerrilla armies. (Heaney 1995b: 24)

For Heaney, this sense of the redressive and restorative role of art is crucial. It places the aesthetic at a *point d’appui* in cultural and political discourse, as it sets out alternative definitions of selfhood and identity, definitions which necessarily complicate ideological positions.

Like Yeats, who spoke of ambushes and of murder answering murder, Heaney has told of the Kingsmills massacre, and highlighted the completely different relationships between self and other that were enacted on that dark night in County Armagh, in Northern Ireland. In a manner analogous

to Yeats, he is probing the value of art in such a context: he is reluctant to justify an aesthetic escape route which has little or no purchase on actuality. While willing to value the transcendent, he will not sanction any such movement which is not, in some way, grounded in the immanent, and it is this requirement for art to be engaged with both dimensions that underscores his thought process in *Crediting Poetry*.

Speaking of his early childhood in Mossbawn, he tells of how, when a ‘wind stirred in the beeches, it also stirred an aerial wire attached to the topmost branch of the chestnut tree’ (Heaney 1995b: 9), the self-same tree of which we spoke in chapter five. Here, the dialectic of presence and absence, of self and other, is enacted as it was through this aerial that the voices of alterity entered his early consciousness and he began his journey ‘into the wideness of the world beyond’ (Heaney 1995b: 11). The concreteness of place becomes transformed into the ethereality of space (indeed, he uses the term ‘space station’ a few sentences later). He traces this journey, as Yeats traced the development of the Irish Dramatic Movement, in the context of the complex issues of identity and belonging which would constitute the contextual framework which would circumscribe his work:

The child in the bedroom, listening simultaneously to the domestic idiom of his Irish home and the official idioms of the British broadcaster while picking up from behind both the signals of some other distress, that child was already being schooled for the complexities of his adult predicament, a future where he would have to adjudicate among promptings variously ethical, aesthetical, moral, political, metrical, sceptical, cultural, topical, typical, post-colonial and, taken all together, simply impossible. (Heaney 1995b: 13-14)

Heaney, all too aware of the pain and suffering of the actual, of, in Yeatsian terms, the ‘stricken’ rabbit’s cry, strove to grant the reality of the immanent: ‘bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his *prie-dieu*, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world’ (Heaney 1995b: 19-20). It was only later in his career that he felt able to credit the ‘marvellous as well as for the murderous’ (Heaney 1995b: 20).

Yeats as example hovers over this part of the lecture: the desire to express the full complexity of experience, and the reluctance to cede the task of defining Irishness to the politicians and the paramilitaries. At this juncture, Heaney is voicing the primacy of the poetic as a redressive force to that of the political. Poetic form is seen as an important element of complication: it no longer needs to mimic the actual: it can now reimagine the actual through a series of dialectical relationships and anastomoses:

Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a steadying, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and whatever is centripetal in mind and body. And it is by such means that Yeats's work does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic nature of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed. (Heaney 1995b: 29)

For Heaney, this is the shape that poetic writing takes. Yeats as example serves to underline the complexity and dynamism of the epistemology of poetry. The metaphors of shape that Heaney uses foreground the increasingly complicated sense of poetry that Heaney has been developing.

His lecture closes with a discussion of the shape of writing in section six of Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', entitled 'The Stare's Nest by the Window'. He speaks of the rhyme and structure of Yeats's lines, about the repetition of the refrain 'Come build in the empty house of the stare', with its 'tone of supplication, its pivots of strength in the words "build" and "house" and its acknowledgement of dissolution in the word "empty" ' (Heaney 1995b: 28). He goes on to speak of a similar complex formal dynamic in the 'triple rhyme of "fantasies" and "enmities" and "honey-bees", and in the sheer in-placeness of the whole poem as a given form within the language' (Heaney 1995b: 29). It is the relational qualities at the level of signifier and signified that strike him as important in the work of Yeats. These relational structures embody much that is central to Heaney's own aesthetic, and I would argue that the growing influence on Heaney's career is the work of Yeats, in both poetry and prose. It is often forgotten that Yeats has produced a truly formidable range of writing, on various

topics, in prose, and Heaney too, as we have seen, has amassed an impressive range of essays and lectures wherein an increasingly complicated epistemology of the aesthetic is enunciated. The ideas of reality and justice to which both men aspire, is expressed through this highly formal, complicated and carefully crafted poetic language.

In this reading, the Yeatsian example has underlined the full scope and power of poetic language.

Blanchot, writing about Hölderlin, makes a parallel point about the encompassing nature of the poetic:

As early as 1804, in the hymn *Germania*, in lines that have a splendid rigor, Hölderlin had formulated the task of poetic language, which belongs neither to the day nor to the night but always is spoken between night and day and one single time speaks the truth and leaves it unspoken. (Blanchot 1982: 276)

Heaney would agree, and his placing of Yeats at an important structural point of his own Nobel lecture underlines the influence of Yeats on his work, and on his epistemology of poetry: ‘It is at once a buoyancy and a steadying, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and whatever is centripetal in mind and body’ (Heaney 1995b: 29).

NOTES

1. These books are an invaluable source of information on Yeats’s life and work: *Uncollected Prose. Volume 1. First Reviews and Articles 1886-1896*, and *Uncollected Prose. Volume 2. Reviews, Articles and Other Miscellaneous Prose 1897-1939*. Edited by John P. Frayne. New York: Columbia University Press.
2. There has been much discussion as to whether these questions are, in fact, rhetorical, or not. For a contrastive reading of these questions, and of this poem, see Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*, specifically the essay: ‘Semiology and Rhetoric’.
3. These lectures were presented at the inauguration of the Richard Ellmann lectures in Modern Literature, and published by Scholars Press as part of the Emory Studies in Humanities series, under the title *The Place of Writing*.
4. Heaney’s long preface to his translation of *Beowulf* contains one of his most revealing accounts of the vexed, and sometimes chiasmatic relationship between identity, tradition, language and poetry to date.
5. In a long introduction to a recent selection from Yeats’s work by Faber, Heaney offers an overview of Yeats’s work. This essay is a revised version of the introduction to the selections from Yeats’s work which he provided for Volume II of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, in 1991.

6. For an overview of the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland, see *The Omagh Bomb and the History of Northern Ireland* (2000).
7. This interview with Seamus Deane, 'Unhappy and At Home', in *The Crane Bag*, has been one of the most quoted in Heaney studies. A recent in-depth interview between Heaney and Karl Miller (2000) offers one of the more acute contemporary conversations where Heaney discusses his work to date. Interestingly, there is still comparatively little interest in his prose in all of these interviews.
8. Interestingly, in the context of this discussion of the parallel projects of Yeats and Heaney, Heaney has an essay on Burns in *Finders Keepers*, entitled 'Burns's Art Speech', pages 347-363.
9. For a comprehensive discussion of the riots that accompanied early productions of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, see *Anglo-Irish Theatre and the Formation of a Nationalist Political Culture between 1890 and 1930: 'did that play of mine ... ?'* by Georg Grote.

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