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# *Anastomosis, Attenuations and Manichean Allegories:*

## *Seamus Heaney and the complexities of Ireland*

‘Anastomosis, Attenuations and Manichean Allegories: Seamus Heaney and the complexities of Ireland’.  
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### **Abstract**

This essay discusses the nature of postcolonial versions of Irishness and deconstructs the Manichean categories of selfhood and alterity which feature in both colonial and postcolonial discourse. Using some ideas from Derrida and looking at some work by Seamus Heaney, notably *An Open Letter*, this essay argues for a more nuanced sense of Irishness.

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### **The Postcolonial Context**

The area of the postcolonial has become one of the most popular facets of contemporary theory. Indeed, the very term “postcolonial” has become the latest “catchall term” to “dazzle the academic mind” (Jacoby 30). Writers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhaba have theorized the notion of cultural “otherness”, and have probed the interstices of colonial and imperial writings to unearth the “place of the other”. However, the parameters of the term “postcolonial” seem to have been drawn by a process of accretion, rather than by any form of rigorous epistemological enquiry, and it is towards an interrogation of this process, with particular reference to the case of Ireland, that this paper is directed.

The undercutting of Western universalism is an important tool in the arsenal of the postcolonial critic, an undercutting forged on the binary opposition of self and other. In an early overview of the postcolonial *mentalité*, entitled *The Empire Writes Back*, this critique of Eurocentric universalism is linguistically formulated in the dissipation of the initial capital in the signifier “English” (denoting Standard English orthography and pronunciation), into different “englishes”, which grant validity to the different “englishes” spoken throughout the world:

In order to focus on the complex ways in which the English language has been used in these societies, and to indicate their own sense of difference, we distinguish in this account between the “standard” British English inherited from the empire and the English which the language has become in postcolonial countries....We need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. (8)

This approach to language is admirable, focusing as it does on the fact that no linguistic usage, or reception, is politically innocent. Postcolonial theory poses these uncomfortable questions which, in Edward Said’s reading, transform the *Heimlich* world of *Mansfield Park* into the *Unheimlich* slave estate in Antigua, as the English provincialism of Sir Thomas Bertram’s estate is seen as dependant on Antiguan sugar plantations run by slave labour (Boehmer 25). Also, by revealing the repressed otherness that constitutes Eurocentric selfhood, such an approach performs the important theoretical act of bringing the signifier of slavery to the fore of the civilized drawing room, where hitherto, wealth was thought to have appeared without any proximate cause.

One could also interrogate Austen's own view of her work as a "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a brush" (Watt 3) from such a postcolonial perspective, by looking beyond Austen's Eurocentric scopic field to the skull, and corpse, of the elephant from whom the ivory was originally acquired. This economic reductivism, whereby a two-ton mammal is reduced in worth to the two ivory tusks, and in this case, to two inches taken from one of those tusks, is synecdochic of the colonial process. The value of this mammal is defined in terms of its material worth in a European capitalist market, as opposed to that of its indigenous ecological surroundings. Any aspect that is not valuable in this context is discarded to rot in its homeland. The eloquent silence as to the mode of origin of this piece of ivory is paradigmatic of the colonial mentality, whereby the "other" is not only assimilated into European society, but is deemed to have benefited by so doing. Austen further disassembles the violence that is a necessary part of the imperial and colonial process by her euphemistic choice of decorating tool in the metaphor. Generally, one associates ivory ornamentation with carving. Delicate designs are usually chiselled out of the ivory, to offer a relief against the smooth whiteness of the surface. By using the term "brush" instead of a carving or cutting tool, Austen is unloading the metaphor of all associations with violence and slaughter. Her metaphor, in short, is an aestheticization of the colonial and imperial processes of acquisition, appropriation and transportation of objects of value from the colonial margin to the imperial centre. *Skull* and *knife* are elided into *ivory* and *brush*, as aesthetics and notions of civilization and culture, silence any notions of violence and conquest.

However, just as Derrida and Lacan problematize the aetiology of meaning, so theoretical writing must interrogate theoretical writing if it is not to fall open to a *tu quoque* charge of preferential reading. The

epistemology of the postcolonial is based on the binary opposition of self and other, of Mansfield Park and Antigua, of ivory and a dead elephant. However, if the postcolonial reading practice stops at this point, is it not in danger of merely reversing the polarity of the existing signifying system while at the same time, remaining part of that system? It is with this question in mind, that I will turn to the issue of Ireland as a postcolonial society, with particular focus on the treatment of this issue in *The Empire Writes Back*.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Irish Experience**

Given the statement of the authors that “we use the term ‘postcolonial’, however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft *et al* 2), one would expect Irish writing to figure prominently in the list of literatures that are deemed to be “postcolonial”, and hence, worthy of study. Given that Ireland achieved independence from Britain in 1922,<sup>2</sup> and further, given the events in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years, one would expect Ireland to be seen as part of the postcolonial paradigm. However, this is not the case. The literature of African countries and that of Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka are all included, as they fulfil the requirements of having emerged through the experience of colonization, foregrounded the tension with the colonizing power, and continually emphasized their differences “from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively postcolonial” (2).

It would seem that Irish literature fulfils all of these conditions, and that it merits consideration as being quintessentially postcolonial. The writings of Yeats, where the Britain/Ireland binarism is deconstructed through the invocation of European and mystical avatars; the writings of Joyce, where the English

language, that hegemonic instrument of colonial domination, is disseminated into the polylogical *frisson* of *Finnegans Wake*;<sup>3</sup> the writings of Synge, where English becomes imbued with the rhythms and nuances of an Irish idiom, but also with the dramatic cosmopolitanism of French influences; the writings of Beckett, which etiolate the influence of English by eventually turning towards French, and the writings of Heaney, who persistently defines Irishness in terms that are aware of, but which also attempt to transcend, the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland over the past thirty years — all of these surely fulfil the condition of “emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre”. However, for the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, the literature of Ireland is worthy of study in a different light: “[t]he literature of Ireland might also be investigated in terms of our contemporary knowledge of postcolonialism, thus shedding new light on the British literary tradition” (24). Here, a question-begging assumption, which locates Irish literature as part of the British literary tradition, governs the treatment of the Irish situation, a treatment where the centre really does write back!

The opposing perspective, which suggests that Ireland *is* part of the postcolonial paradigm, is shared by a number of postcolonial theorists, David Lloyd’s *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment*, for example. While the title points out the anomalous nature of the Irish situation, the sub-title underlines the essentially postcolonial nature of Ireland. Lloyd makes the point that he has become increasingly aware of the theoretical value of:

other postcolonial locations in all their disjunctions and analogies with one another, to find ways in which to comprehend the apparent peculiarities of Irish cultural history. Of particular importance here have been the historical work of Indian “subaltern” historians and the cultural struggles of American minorities. (2)

For Lloyd, the similarities between the Irish experience and that of other colonies is clear. Given the historical framework adduced earlier in this discussion, it seems obvious that, to quote Homi Bhabha, the Irish question has “been reposed as a *postcolonial* problem” (229). Similarly, Declan Kiberd, in his *Inventing Ireland*, speaks of the colonialist crime, in an Irish context, as the “violation of the traditional community” (292), a notion that Ania Loomba sees as paradigmatic of the colonial process. As she puts it in her comprehensive *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, the process of “forming a community” in a new land necessarily means the “*unforming* or re-forming of the communities that existed there already” [*italics original*] (2). Finally, Edward Said observes that Yeats, while almost completely assimilated into the canons of “modern English Literature” and “European high modernism”, can nevertheless be seen as belonging to the tradition of “the colonial world ruled by European imperialism” (“Decolonization” 69). Said’s essay places Yeats as a postcolonial poet, and hence, through synecdoche, places Ireland within the postcolonial ambit. Finally, in his introduction to *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature*, Seamus Deane makes the point that colonialism is a process of “radical dispossession” and that a colonized people is often left without a specific history and even “as in Ireland and other cases, without a specific language” (10).

Clearly, Ireland provides an interesting case within the paradigm of postcolonial studies, in that it is deemed as being both postcolonial and non-postcolonial at the same time. The reasons for this are interesting: Ireland does not fit the usual typology of a third world country being colonized by a first world one, nor does it fit in to the European/non-European binarism which is so often the *sine qua non* of colonization. At a further level, there is the fact that the Irish are white, and thus racially similar to their

colonizers, although there was a strong movement in parts of the Victorian British media to compare the Irish to various non-white races.<sup>4</sup> These points, however, indicate a deeper problem at the level of the epistemological structure of the postcolonial paradigm, and this problem has been rehearsed, albeit protreptically, in Abdul Jan Mohamed's seminal article: "The Economy of the Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature".

JanMohamed's thesis is that colonial literature subverts "the traditional dialectic of self and Other" (18), and sets up a fetishized "nondialectical fixed opposition between the self and the native"; what is constantly reinforced here is the "homogeneity of his [*sic*] own group" (19). The colonial perspective initiates and perpetuates this notion of absolute homogeneity of races, hence the title of JanMohamed's article, referring to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Persian cult representing God and Satan as locked in conflict, and completely separate. Macauley's programmatic *Minute on Indian Education*, for example, makes this point from the colonial perspective, in its attempt to create a "class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (430), a perspective which seems to rule out any notion of an Indian having either indigenous or hybrid qualities of taste, opinions, morals or intellect. Even as Macauley attempts a form of interaction between the two, both races are strictly separated. JanMohamed's point is well taken; differences of race, language, religion and culture were all used to reinforce the coloniser's sense of superiority to the colonized.

However, one could turn this argument around and make the equally valid point that much postcolonial writing takes this Manichean allegory and inverts it, casting the colonizer as separate and other, while the colonized, cast in the role of victim, remains equally homogenous and disparate. Such an inverted



Manichean allegorical perspective is operative only when such differences are clear and simple; when areas of anomalous difference, or of more complex interactions between colonizer and colonized appear, then such a perspective is found wanting. For example, this is true of the attitude of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, when they speak of it being “difficult for colonized people’s outside Britain” to accept the Irish “identity as being postcolonial” given the “subsequent complicity” of the Irish in the “British imperial enterprise”? (33).

Here, binary oppositions between self and other have become reified and hypostasized into homogenous groupings with little room for interaction, let alone intersection. As Loomba perceptively notes, the question is now being asked of postcolonial theory as to whether, in “the process of exposing the ideological and historical functioning of such binaries, we are in danger of reproducing them” (104). I think, given the examples cited, that this is a real danger for the postcolonial paradigm. To allow oppositions to become reified is to attenuate the possibilities of influence, interaction, intersection and ultimately, transformation. It is also to predicate one’s theoretical premises on the past as opposed to the future. If the colonizer/colonized opposition is seen as definitive within a culture, even though, as in Ireland, the initial acts of colonization occurred hundreds of years ago, then *ipso facto*, developments in the fields of politics, society and culture are limited by this reified definition of self and other. Issues of identity are ultimately settled by reference to this *terminus a quo* from which all such identificatory politics derives. Such a perspective narrows the theoretical scope of postcolonial discourse, and oversimplifies complex issues of interaction and influence. It is in this context that I would suggest a reading of some of Seamus Heaney’s work, which deals with issues of identity in Ireland.

While Ireland may be somewhat of an anomalous case for postcolonialism, nevertheless Heaney's work can offer a way of acknowledging aspects of the truth of the Manichean allegory, while at the same time, avoiding the danger of a Freudian repetition complex which merely inverts and repeats the process. By stressing the interpenetration of text and context, an interpenetration that I see as synecdochic of a series of larger ones between colonizer and colonized as well as self and other, Heaney points towards a postcolonial epistemology which is predicated on the present and future, as opposed to the past, and which allows for interpenetration of the different perspectives. Such interpenetrations, while sustaining the integrity of each term, allows for mutual contact and communication which can become transformational of each.

### **Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Attenuation**

In the foreword to *Preoccupations*, Heaney makes the following points:

I hope it is clear that the essays selected here are held together by searches for answers to central preoccupying questions: how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world? (13)

I will argue that the concerns of this passage have a lot to say in terms of the Manichean allegory and the postcolonial paradigm. While some work has been done on Heaney's prose, generally it is seen as a useful extrinsic tool in the analysis of his poetry.<sup>5</sup> To see what Helen Vendler terms his "vivid, metaphorical and intelligent prose" (5) as merely a metalinguistic commentary, is to mistakenly transform generic considerations into epistemological ones. In his essays, one finds ongoing discussion of some of the central concerns of postcolonial theory: the nature of identity; the difficulty of writing about place,

given the historical and cultural baggage that always accrues, and the relationship of literature with politics.

Underwriting all of these concerns, or preoccupations, is the ongoing attempt to bring into focus some form of theorization of literature. What emerges in these essays is a sophisticated approach to poetry, an approach which grants the internal laws of language and aesthetics which are applicable within the domain of poetry, but which at the same time demonstrates a growing awareness of the need to reconcile what he terms “lyric celebration” (*Government* 12), and its concomitants “the phrase or cadence which haunts the ear and the eager parts of the mind” (*Preoccupations* 61), with the demands of an ethical imperative which “the poet may find as he exercises his free gift in the presence of the unfree and the hurt” (*Government* xviii). His perspective on self and other is not Manichean but rather relational.

For Heaney, the epistemological force of poetry is complex and multi-layered, involving the granting of voice to different perspectives, as well as setting up cognitive and intellectual structures which allow for their interaction. His careful readings of other texts always gesture towards such constructs, where the dialectical oscillation between the different perspectives creates a field of force wherein it is the *relationship* between the different perspectives that is the main focus of his “searches for answers”. He does not allow binary oppositions to become fixed; instead he focuses on the relationships that exist between them. Given the prevalence of the Edenic trope in postcolonial discourse, where colonizers see their “new land” as a new Eden, and assume, in Derek Walcott’s phrase an “Adamic” relation with their new paradisaical setting, an essay of Heaney’s on pastoral poetry will prove illuminating in terms of its reading of the issues of pastoral texts and their political contexts.

In this essay, entitled “In the Country of Convention”, about a collection of English pastoral verse, Heaney is critical of what he sees as an oversimplification of response on behalf of the editors to the notion of what they term “the pastoral vision”. John Barrell and John Bull see this vision as being ultimately false, because it posits a simplistic unhistorical relation between the land-owning class and the workers, which mystifies and obscures the actuality of working conditions: the parallel with a colonial literature that posits an equally simplistic connection between the colonists and the land is clear. Heaney notes the influence of Raymond Williams on this point of view,<sup>6</sup> and goes on to criticize this “sociological filleting of the convention” as being guilty of a “certain attenuation of response” which curtails the consideration of the poems as “made things” as “self-delighting buds on the old bough of a tradition” (*Preoccupations* 174).

Here, Heaney would seem to be offering an example of colonial reading practices as he privileges the text itself at the expense of context: he seems to be advocating the study of the inch of ivory and the gardens of *Mansfield Park* to the exclusion of the corpse of the elephant and the hardship of Antigua slaves. However, his position is more complex. It is the simplification, the *attenuation*, of response to which he objects; he is more than willing to grant the benefit of sociologically-driven criticism as “a bracing corrective” to what could prove an “over-literary savouring” of the genre as a matter of “classical imitation and allusion” (*Preoccupations* 174). He is obviously not against extrinsically driven criticism *per se*; rather he is against any form of “attenuation of response”, any thinning of the plurality and complexity of the field of force which should be set up in the process of reading; in short, he refuses any form of the Manichean allegory. He sees the relationship between the internal dynamics of the poems, and their

reflection, refraction, and transformation of external societal and cultural factors, in other words, between text and context, as far too complex to allow the “Marxist broom” to sweep aesthetic considerations aside in favour of societal and economic considerations.

Instead, Heaney’s notion of the relationship between text and context is far more complex and fluid. It could be seen as an example of the rhetorical figure of *anastomosis*, as cited by J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*, which he describes in terms of notions of “penetration and permeation”. Miller is also speaking about the relationship between text and context, and sees this notion of context as hovering “uneasily” between “metonymy in the sense of mere contingent adjacency and synecdoche, part for whole, with an assumption that the part is some way genuinely like the whole” (6). It is here that he cites the trope of anastomosis, adverting to Joyce’s verbal example “underdarkneath”, as well as Bakhtin’s view of language as a social philosophy which is permeated by a system of values “inseparable from living practice and class struggle” (6-7). One could just as easily see “con-text” as a similar case, with one word, “text” penetrating or permeating the other, “context”.<sup>7</sup> Here both words intersect and interfuse, but perform the dialectical action of remaining separate as well as blending.

Heaney’s reading sets up a further contextual aspect of this dialectical structure which, far from attenuating our response, will thicken and enable it. Heaney laments the decision of the editors not to print translations of Theocritus, Virgil, Horace, Mantuan, and Marot, as these were the “informing voices that were ‘modified in the guts of the living’ ”(*Preoccupations* 175), which underwrote the pastoral poetry of Spenser, Milton, Pope and Thomson, as they attempted to “adorn and classicize” the native literature. He feels that such a “classical penumbra” was automatic cultural capital for these writers, and thinks it a

pity that the “ancient hinterland, the perspectives backward, are withheld” (175). Here, the textual-contextual anastomosis becomes more intricate, as this withholding delimits our reading of the pastoral genre, and of the specific English writing of this genre. Analogously, one could make the same points about the corpse of the elephant and the Antiguan plantation slaves: rather than being forced to choose one or other side of the colonial/postcolonial manichean allegory, Heaney offers a position where text and context penetrate and permeate each other and by so doing, shed more light on each other, and allow for the possibility of new meanings, and of new discourses of intersubjective truth. Through this anastomosis, new perspectives can come into being which allow for aesthetic, political and cultural development. The chronotope (literally time-space), to use a Bakhtinian term,<sup>8</sup> of this reading is oriented towards the future as opposed to the past; such an anastomosis, of necessity, transforms the relationships of text and context, and *ipso facto*, alters the structure of each through contact with the other. It is precisely this transformative aspect of anastomosis that is of concern to us in this discussion.

What is set out as *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, with all the canonical, imperial, and culturally homogenous connotations that are implied by the proper adjective “*English*”, becomes something different when placed in such a relationship with these classical antecedents. Such external influences, in this case, far from attenuating the response to the lyrical impulse of the pastoral, thicken our reading of these works by complicating and interrogating how “*English*” this genre actually is. This “perspective backwards” is also a perspective outwards, pointing up the dependence of what is seen as the “*English*” poetic canon on generic and conventional borrowings from continental Europe. It is also a perspective inwards, as these extrinsic features have had a major influence on stylistic and thematic considerations, as well as on the aesthetic objectives of the genre. Here, the anastomosis between text

and context is enacted in the permeation and intersection of the poems in the book and the poems which preceded them; of the English language and Latin and French; of Latin and French and the process of translation; of classical pastoral convention and the English version of it and finally, of the texts that are present in the book and those enabling translations from the classics, which are absent.

Hence, the attenuation of approach is inverted, and instead, there is a new definition of the proper adjective “English” just as, by analogy, there is a new definition of ivory as artefact through a knowledge of the context of its production, as well as a new notion of the truth of Eurocentric civility in *Mansfield Park*, when we see that such civility is built on the backs of slave labour. In the same way, the position of Ireland as postcolonial or not can be seen as an opportunity to invert any manichean tendencies among postcolonial theorists, and instead, postulate new relationships between text and context, self and other. Rather than choose between the two, or collapse all difference into generalized notions of hybridity (which often blur all terms into a construct which has no purchase on either self or other), Heaney’s anastomosis of text and context offers a reading of the postcolonial that has strong similarities with the thought of Stuart Hall. Hall postulates a notion of self and other which keeps alive a “sense of difference” which at the same time is not pure “otherness” (395). So, the complexities of Heaney’s reading could be seen as interrogating fixed notions of “otherness” within the postcolonial paradigm, by refusing to become part of an inverted Manichean allegory. The “text” of Ireland as postcolonial is permeated and penetrated, rendered different, by the context of the type of colonization which it underwent.

This complex interrogation of the categories of text and context calls to mind a similar interrogation in the work of Jacques Derrida who, in *Limited Inc.*, has noted that “nothing exists outside context”, and that

consequently, the “outside penetrates and thus determines the inside” (*Limited* 153).<sup>9</sup> Derrida has made a similar point in *Positions*, where he speaks of how each seemingly simple term is marked by the trace of other terms, so that the “presumed interiority of meaning” being “worked on by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself” (*Positions* 33). In the case of Ireland, both the history of rebellion against British rule, and the equally valid history of acceptance of that rule, serve to create a complex theorization of the postcolonial which avoids any form of ideological attenuation. For example, it is ironic to note that far more Irish people fought for the British army in World War One, than fought against the British in the Irish War of Independence.

In this reading of Irish history, there is an obvious similarity with a reading by Derrida of Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. Here, Derrida also questions the borderlines of a text, suggesting that a text is no longer:

a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines). (“Living On” 84)

This is precisely the process of reading undertaken by Heaney in this essay; he takes the assumptions imposed by the title and format of the book, points to the attenuation of response that the selection criteria impose, an attenuation that has an analogous relationship to the Marxist broom and sociological filleting already mentioned, and proceeds to transform them into “more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines.”



In a swerve that is directly related to our discussion, Heaney brings into question the very homogeneity of the notion of “Englishness” that lies at the heart of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*. Through his probing anastomosis of text and context, he questions whether the editors’ “brisk dismissal” of the further possibilities of pastoral are well-founded, and goes on to suggest valid reasons for the inclusion of other writers – Edward Thomas, Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones, A. E. Houseman – and also wonders about Louis MacNeice’s eclogues which “represent the form as an enabling resource” (*Preoccupations* 180). Finally, he further extends the limits of his critique by multiplying some “strokes and lines” which figure as political borders, and asks whether such seminal works as Synge’s *Aran Islands* (pastoral), Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (anti-pastoral), and Montague’s *The Rough Field* are “not to be regarded just as ‘occasional twitches’ ” before finishing the essay with the ironic question: “[o]r are these latter works held at bay in the term ‘frontier pastoral’?” (180).

Given that these works were written by Irish authors, his anastomosis has now crossed a number of frontiers: that between English and Irish; between colonial and postcolonial, and finally, between self and other. The frontier, denotative of a spatial binary opposition between one notion of place and another, functions here as both a borderline of the anthology, and at the same time, as a point of possibility which will allow the “English” pastoral as genre, to develop. In a further expansion of these limits, this development would necessitate an ongoing problematization of the notion of Englishness in the title, as now, some form of “Irishness” would be included. Of course, as Heaney has already noted, the final poem in the anthology is Yeats’s *Ancestral Houses* (*Preoccupations* 177), so there has already been a crossing of the “frontier pastoral”. In a further complication, one which harks back to Said’s earlier

notion of Yeats as belonging to the tradition of “the colonial world ruled by European imperialism”, the point should be made that Yeats was, of course, born a British citizen, and that he accepted a pension from the British government. It becomes clear, then, that Heaney’s reading of the conventions of the pastoral becomes a paradigm of a possible epistemology of the postcolonial which effectively eschews the dangers of the manichean allegory. As he notes in *Crediting Poetry*, the hope exists 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” (*Crediting* 23). Instead of a binary choice of colonial/postcolonial, we see a variety of “crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides” (Miller 7), and I will argue that such transgressive and transgenerative crossings of frontiers are a central feature of the postcolonial as it should be.

In a manner that is strikingly similar to the thinking of Heaney, Derrida has described a similar process in *Positions*, where what he terms “undecidables” inhabit an opposition, “resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics” (*Positions* 43). The answers which Heaney’s enabling searches find are often similar “undecidables”, which encourage us to probe the interstices of the text, and to progress to the “network of textual referrals to *other* texts” where each term is “marked by the trace of another term” (*Positions*, 33). Therefore, I would see this reading of the convention of the English pastoral as a template for a possible postcolonial epistemology where it is on the *relationship* between different cultures that becomes the focus of attention, and where the past interaction is not allowed to hold manichean sway over the present and future anastomoses of text and context: the chronotope need not be limited by the past. In

the final section of this essay, having already examined an implicit postcolonial context in Heaney's work, I would like to look at a text of his which explicitly examines the issues that are pertinent to this discussion. The text in question is *An Open Letter*, which explores complex possibilities in terms of colonial and post colonial definitions of Ireland, through its reading of the issues involved.

### ***An Open Letter: an open mind***

In a recent book on Derrida, Julian Wolfreys makes the point that "good reading" may well be reading which "never avoids its responsibility, and which never falls into reading by numbers" (16). In the discussion of the ontological status of Ireland as a postcolonial country, we have rehearsed the manichean allegorical positions which have been taken. On the one hand, we have seen the view of *The Empire Writes Back*, where Ireland was seen as part of the colonial enterprise, a view in sharp contrast to that of Said, Bhabha and Lloyd, who see Ireland as a postcolonial society.

I would argue that both views are attenuations, oversimplifications, of a situation that is inherently heterogeneous and diverse. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin see Ireland as part of the imperial apparatus of colonization. This notion of complicity in British Imperialism possibly refers to the large numbers of Irish who served in the British army during its involvement in wars of colonization all over the world. However, this fact is not enough to abrogate the identity of Ireland as a colonized society, which desired independence; the same accusation could be levelled at the thousands of Indian soldiers who fought in the British army during the period of the Raj, and Indian literature figures prominently in the book, the title of the text coming from a phrase by Salman Rushdie (Ashcroft *et al* 33). Subsequent events up to, and including, the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland, further undermine the notion of complicity in the

“British” imperial enterprise. Whereas the general intellectual movement of the book is centrifugal, in the case of Ireland, there is a definite centripetal field of force at work which denies the reality of historical experience in favour of an imperial encompassing perspective. In short, the concentration is on the Anglocentric inch of ivory, and the civilities of *Mansfield Park*, and there is a colonial silencing of the dead elephant, the Antiguan slaves, and Irish history. The perspective of the book is similar to that of *Mansfield Park*, as outlined by Said, in terms of Antigua, or the Caribbean: “they stand for a significance ‘out there’ that frames the genuinely important action *here*, but not for a great significance” (“Decolonization” 111). Similarly, in *The Empire Writes Back*, the only value of Irish history is in terms of its providing a new aspect of study on “British literary history” (33).

On the other hand, any view which sees Irish history as a litany of rebellions and revolts against Britain is equally oversimplified. As a colony, Ireland was the only country represented at Westminster. The huge number of volunteers who fought in the British Army in World War One (conscription was never introduced in Ireland), the general unpopularity of the 1916 Rising at the time, and popularity of numerous Irish artists in the British cultural *milieu*, would seem to indicate that Ireland as an oppressed country is also an attenuation of history; indeed, many of the troops who fought against the various rebellions were, themselves, Irish militias. So, instead of any simplistic narrative of assimilation or resistance, what is to be found in the case of Ireland is that anastomosis of text and context, self and other, which has been the subject of this discussion. As a *locus classicus* of such a process, Heaney’s own pamphlet, will demonstrate that such seeming simplicities of response are invariably shot through with complexities.

*An Open Letter*, published by Field Day, was written in response to the poet's inclusion in Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, and begins as follows:

To Blake and Andrew, Editors  
Contemporary British Verse,  
Penguin Books, Middlesex. Dear Sirs,  
My anxious muse  
Roused on her bed among the furze,  
Has to refuse

The adjective. It makes her blush. (7)

Here, it would seem, we have the victimized postcolonial striking for freedom from linguistic centripetal oppression and co-option. 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, I would disagree with Deane's notion of translation as defined by a "traumatic political and cultural crisis" which causes "individuals and groups" to "forge for themselves a new speech" (14). 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" (14): in other words, an analogue of the manichean allegory. It is a worldview which sees the communities in Northern Ireland as condemned to "rehearse positions from which there is no exit" (15). Instead, I would see Heaney's aim as rather a restructuration of language so that the tribe can talk to the other through an acknowledgement of the essential hybridity of discourse and language itself.

I would further suggest that this text is a classic example of the type of postcolonial epistemology which I saw as implicit in Heaney's earlier imbrication of text and context. Here, having set out his stall, he seems to follow a binary oppositional course by beginning:

Caesar's Britain, its *partes tres*,  
United England, Scotland, Wales,  
*Britannia* in the old tales,  
    Is common ground.  
*Hibernia* is where the Gaels  
    Made a last stand

And long ago were stood upon –  
End of simple history lesson. (7)

The final line signals more than the end of the "simple history lesson": it also signals the end of the politics and poetics of attenuation in this text. Having seemed to delineate an inverted manichean allegory, by exposing and reproducing, in Loomba's terms the "ideological and historical functioning" of the colonial binarisms, he goes on to situate his seemingly "simple history lesson" within a contextual framework which complicates and transforms these simplicities, his own subjectivity, and his troubled relation to "the adjective", and, through synecdoche, complicates and transforms notions of Irishness in a manner similar to his pluralizing of notions of Englishness in his review of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*.

He begins by telling how “[t]his ‘British’ word / Sticks deep in native and *colon*” [*italics original*] (*Open* 7), with the final term signifying a French colonist, settler or planter. Immediately, the attenuations of the “simple” history lesson are broadened and thickened through the anastomosis of text and context, and of self and other. Ireland does not have a monopoly on feelings of victimization, and, in much modern theoretical discussion, the Francophone influence is strong, so his use of this term is a way of refracting his own, and by extension Ireland’s, subjective experience of colonization, through a broader European spatial context. The contextual chronotope is also broadened temporally in the earlier lines, as “Caesar’s Britain” was itself colonized by the Romans, before it set off on the colonizing and imperial trail. These complications set up a subjective oscillation in terms of the subjectivity which is speaking in the poem.

He does not see himself as an heroic figure here, his comparisons to the cowardly Shauneen Keogh, of *The Playboy of the Western World*, and to the indecisive J. Alfred Prufrock and Hamlet serve to render his text less of a return of the postcolonial repressed, and more of a self-questioning of notions of subjectivity and identity. He is more than aware that his own credentials on the issue of nomenclature are far from pure. He reminds us that his “anxious muse” had been called British before and had “acquiesced” (*Open* 7). He is also aware that his own writerly and publishing context, as somebody who publishes texts in “LRB and TLS / *The Listener*”, in other words, whose audience is “Via Faber, / A British one”, would seem to place him in the position of being “characterized / As British” (*Open* 9). It is here that the textual/contextual anastomosis offers a reading of postcolonial subjectivity that is truly transformative. Having spelled out the British context to his writerly subjectivity, a context which is positive in terms of its influence on his work, and which has clearly benefited his production of texts, Heaney goes on to

enunciate another context within which he exists, and which also permeates and penetrates his subjectivity and his texts:

But don't be surprised  
If I demur, for be advised  
My passport's green.  
No glass of ours was ever raised  
To toast *The Queen*. (9)

Here, again, we see the interaction of text and context, and we see the further transformation of the “simple history lesson” into a far more complex weave of influence and intersection. His sense of Irishness does not preclude any connection with, or influence by, the British tradition: it does, however, preclude any subsumption by that tradition which does not allow it to enunciate its own values and traditions. It is the relationship of the two contexts, the contextual anastomosis, that will eventually transform both texts and subjectivities into a new openness of identity, an openness which is presaged in the title of the pamphlet.

If poetry is to be of value, Heaney has noted, it must avoid the “consensus and settlement of a meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket” (*Government* 122). As I have pointed out elsewhere, the problems with such “consensus and settlement” are that the very complexity and ambiguity that are part of the force of poetry is denied and etiolated. If the security blanket of a consensual meaning is seen as something to be avoided, perhaps the best way to proceed is “not by throwing off the blanket altogether, but instead, to examine more closely the weft and weave of the textile of the blanket so as to



bring out the intersections, joins and interfusions that create the blanket in question” (*Prose* 51). This weave will disclose an ongoing anastomosis which counteracts the attenuations of the manichean allegory, and its postcolonial inverse, and instead enacts Miller’s notion of “crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides” (Miller 7).

Hence, the context of *An Open Letter* is more literary than political: the references are broad in the extreme with overt or covert gestures towards the writing of: Shakespeare, Eliot, Synge, Yeats, Wilde, Larkin, Davie, Lawrence, Houghton, Jordan, Joyce, Milton, Holub, Foucault, Horace, Livy, and Middle English lyrics (this is by no means an exhaustive list). The crossings and penetrations of such a broad range of writers, languages and contexts, are what lead to the definitions of selfhood that constitute the text of this poem, and by extension, of Heaney’s postcolonial reading of the relationship of Britishness and Irishness. Perhaps the most important point of the poem is the stress on the singularity of the subjectivity that is enunciating its opinion.

This letter is focused on an individual: there is no group or proto-nationalist agenda here: “I’ll stick to *I*. Forget the *we*” (*Open* 9). He goes on to cite the example of Horace, the Roman poet who fought at the Battle of Philippi in November, 42 BC which ended with the rout of Brutus’s army and the suicides of both Brutus and Cassius.<sup>10</sup> Heaney’s reference to Horace who “threw away his shield to be / A naked *I*” (9) as “exemplary”, speaks volumes for his notion of the role of the poet in such a political situation. To see Heaney as voicing the victimhood of Ireland in this poem is to remain totally locked within a manichean notion of a simplified colonial/postcolonial epistemology. His broadness of contextual

allusion, his purposeful inclusion of Livy's cry of each man for himself, and his citing of Horace's exemplary act of throwing away his shield so as to become a "naked I", should convince us that this poem is meant to end the "simple history lesson" and instead, begin one wherein the subject, located within a broad contextual frame of reference is, almost by definition, plural, open and definitely complex, as opposed to singular and single-minded.

The "naked *I*" is crossed and traversed by numerous contexts, and these are brought together in an aesthetic as opposed to political anastomosis in his notion of "a new commonwealth of art" (9). This newness focuses the chronotope of *An Open Letter* firmly on the future. This poem, while demurring at the possessiveness of the adjective "British", is nevertheless willing to grant that aspects of Britishness are part of the context that has created him as a text, as a subject. What he objects to are the rigidities of a manichean binarism which says that one must be either British *or* Irish, colonizer *or* colonized, self *or* other, conqueror *or* conquered. Here, Heaney is tracing out an argument that is analogous to that of Derrida, who, speaking about his early neologism, *différance*, notes that it is "neither *this* nor *that*; but rather *this and that* (e.g. the act of differing and of deferring) without being reducible to a dialectical logic either" (*Other* 161). I would argue that, by extension, this is the best epistemological option for the postcolonial paradigm, an option instantiated by the case of Ireland which, *pace* the critical debate traced in the second section of this paper, is both colonial and postcolonial, victimiser and victim, similar to and different from, Britain.

To cite the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas, what Heaney is doing in this poem is voicing his sense of responsibility to the contexts which have traversed and influenced him, and, importantly, which he is now

in a position, through anastomosis, to traverse and influence in his turn. Here one thinks of Levinas's statement that "[l]anguage is born in responsibility" (*Reader* 82), implying that the responsibility involved is to the other, to other traditions, other ideas, but most essentially other people. If postcolonialism is to have any ethical import, it must avoid the attenuations and static binary oppositions of the colonial Manichean allegory, and its postcolonial inverse, and instead, attempt to bring self and other into some form of intersubjective association wherein a form of dialogue may become possible. To be aware of the provenance of the ivory in Austen's metaphor is to understand that civilized effects often have far from civilized causes; to be aware of the source of the wealth of *Mansfield Park* is to come to a deeper understanding of many of the characters of that novel, and of their social class, an understanding that points towards the truth of the interaction of self and other, and which can only be created by a "less binary and altogether less binding vocabulary" (*Crediting* 23).

Such truth must, by its very nature, be intersubjective, and it is search of such intersubjectively that Heaney locates his views in *An Open Letter* in such a broad spatial and temporal commonwealth of art. His "naked *I*", harks back to "Exposure" in *North*, where he pictured himself as open to all influences:

An inner émigré, grown long-haired  
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

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

In his Channel Four interview with Jon Snow, on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1999, the occasion of the dawning of devolved government in Northern Ireland, Heaney was asked what he thought he had to say to the unionist community, given his placement as a nationalist. Heaney's reply demonstrates the political import of "feeling every wind that blows", of setting up permeations and penetrations in the relationships between text and context, and self and other. He said:

I have always thought of the Unionist community as my – as part of me. I never said anything I think that wasn't true for them too. I grew up in a small farming community, eye-to-eye with Protestant neighbours. I grew up with Protestant neighbours who had a sense of humour, a sense of proportion. Now it was rural and it was ritualised, the division. I would say to the Unionist community that they have actually included the nationalist minority in their imagining now and that is something that is a radical change. When I was growing up, Irishness as a value was written out of the official culture, it was not present in the official media. The Unionist community to some extent were in denial about the presence of other values. It was officially just occluded. That was an enraging situation and part of what has happened in the last 30 years or so, not only through politics but through culture and other areas, is the making of space for that value. Nobody's in denial anymore. (Heaney, 1999 Interview)

This, in essence, is the core of my argument. To remain silent about the elephants who die to produce the inch of ivory is wrong; just as to remain silent about the undoubted suffering and exploitation of the Antiguan slaves who contributed to Sir Thomas Bertram's fortune is also wrong. The return of such repressions into the discourse of culture is one of the abiding benefits of the postcolonial paradigm. However, if that paradigm is not to fall prey to the inverted manichean allegory of which we have been speaking, then postcolonial epistemology must eschew the mere inversion of binary oppositions; the voicing of repression should not involve the creation of an inverse repression; instead, context and text,

self and other, colonial and postcolonial must be included in a dialogue with each other which has, as a teleological goal, some form of intersubjective truth. In terms of the epistemology of the postcolonial, Heaney's anastomosis of text and context allows both perspectives to be enunciated, and offers a "both/and" as opposed to "either/or" possibility which allows each side of the binary opposition which is ultimately signified by selfhood and otherness to interact, permeate each other and ultimately transform each other in a manner which can only be of value to future culture and society, and to notions of intersubjective truth.

In the search for such truth, says Levinas, it is important that terms are clear, and that language involves a "saying" that is an "ethical openness to the other" (*Ethics* 194), and it is in this context that Heaney's text is an "open letter" at another level: he is open to change, but it is a change that must respect both the text and context of the individual subjectivities. As he puts it in the closing lines:

Need I go on? I hate to bite  
Hands that led me to the limelight  
In the Penguin book. I regret  
The awkwardness.  
But British, no, the name's not right.  
Yours truly, Seamus. (13)

Getting the names right is, at another level, what the anastomosis of text and context involves: granting a sense of respect to traditions, histories and contexts even as we use them, or silence them, in different cultural texts. His notion of "proper naming" (*Open* 12) involves accepting responsibility for the interactions of the past as we attempt to shape the chronotope of the future. Heaney's reading of the case

of Ireland is an example which postcolonial theory could well follow: through anastomosis, text and context, self and other, are brought into mutually transactional discourse, and it is this discourse which may yet lead to the goal of complex, difficult, intersubjective truth, a truth presaged by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, as he addressed “fullstoppers and semicolonials, hybrids/and lubberds!” (152, 16-17). It is in such transformations of selfhood and otherness, ones which acknowledge the past as a prelude to creating the future, that the postcolonial paradigm can best serve Ireland and all other examples of the colonial and postcolonial experience.

Finally, as a mimetic instantiation of this type of postcolonial epistemology, we can do no better than look at the opening of Heaney’s recent translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf*. This work, probably the first canonical text of the English literary tradition, the tradition which gave rise to Jane Austen, begins with the exclamation “Hwæt”. Traditionally, this has been translated as “low”, “hark”, “behold”, “attend” or “listen”. Heaney, however, brought his own sense of a transforming of both Irishness and Englishness to this word by translating it as “so” (*Beowulf* xxvii). His explanation for so doing is as potent an example of the political and cultural value of the anastomosis of which we have been speaking as can be imagined, as self and other, Irish and English, colonized and colonizer interfuse and transform each other’s discourse.

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 anastomosis of English literature and Irish experience gave rise to a new beginning, a contextually based transformation of a text that offers, by extension, a paradigm for the interaction of colonial and postcolonial:

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. (xvii)

So, the opening signifier of this foundational English text has been transformed by the complicated contextual anastomosis of its translator, who, himself, is a complex product of different contexts. But, 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. So, postcolonial epistemology which adopts this perspective will avoid the attenuations of the manichean allegory, and its inverse, and instead, will take the legacy of the past and transform it. As Heaney 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 / Again and again and again” (28), because: “whatever is given / can always be reimagined” (29), and this is the postcolonial paradigm that I would see as being of value in the case of Ireland, and beyond.

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- 1 Interestingly, in their second collaboration, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, published in 1995, the subject of Ireland is entirely absent from the index, but figures as the topic on one article, which is three pages long, and deals with Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the negative definition of Irishness contained therein. In percentage terms, Ireland as topic figures in 0.61% of the book.
- 2 In 1922, after a prolonged guerrilla war, twenty six counties of Ireland became the Irish Free State, while the remaining six counties separated from the former, and became what is now known as northern Ireland.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of pluralist aspects of identity in the work of Yeats and Joyce, see my *The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*.
- 4 This issue has been studied by Curtis, L. P. Jr in his *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*, and *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*.
- 5 Elmer Andrews, in his *Icon Critical Guide* to Heaney's work, makes frequent use of his prose in order to explain the backdrop of many of the poems. The same is true of Neil Corcoran's study where he sees Heaney's second collection of essays, *The Government of the Tongue*, as a companion to some of the poems in *The Haw Lantern*, with 'the essays sometimes fleshing out in discursive terms what the poems

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encode more obliquely' (1998, 138). Andrew Murphy, in his recent book, uses passages from *Preoccupations* as a gloss in his readings of *Requiem for the Croppies* (1996, 31-2).

6 Raymond Williams wrote of pastoral poetry and conventions in broadly similar terms in his *The Country and the City*, and Heaney sees this book as in many respects a 'companion volume', incorporating 'most of the texts he refers to and underlining or extending his discussion of them' (Heaney 1980, 174).

7 Strictly speaking 'context' is a cognate of 'text', but I contend that the example is still a valid one, working as it does both syntactically, semantically and etymologically with 'text' deriving from the Latin for fabric or structure while 'context' derives from the Latin for 'to weave together' or 'compose'.

8 Bakhtin used this term to signify 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'. He saw it as a 'formally constitutive category of literature' (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

9 This point, made in the 'Afterward' of *Limited Inc.*, is part of what can be seen as a redefinition of one of deconstruction's central axioms 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' (Derrida 1976, 158) as 'Il n'y a pas de hors contexte' (Derrida 1988, 136). Simon Critchley has an informative discussion of this point in his *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 31-43.

10 For the information on Horace, and on the classical context which his name signifies within this poem, I am indebted to Dr Anthony G. Corbett of University College Cork for sharing some of his expertise on such matters (and on many others) with me.