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"The boundaries of the land": Sectarian Division and the Politicization of Space in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

by CHRISTOPHER J. McGINLEY

EVEN A SUPERFICIAL SAMPLING of the work of Seamus Heaney will confirm the centrality of the poet’s notion of physical space in the construction of what David Lloyd has called Heaney’s “poetics of identity.” Indeed, any comprehensive treatment of the poet’s work will somewhere acknowledge the importance of geographical sites in Heaney, whose poetry is rife with allusions to the places that define him as both person and artist. My particular emphasis here is on Heaney’s conception of space as political site, as terrain contested by the Other (Protestant, police authority, British) and defended by what Heaney calls the “tribal” unit (Catholic, subaltern group, Irish nationalist). Like Lloyd, I am interested in the way in which Heaney constructs notions of individual and national identity through the deployment of various topographies. However, my focus is not on the way in which Heaney effaces history and forecloses the possibility of genuine interrogation into the very real problems of contemporary Ulster, as Lloyd contends he does. Instead, I will argue that physical territories in Heaney’s poetry are politicized in a manner similar to the actual politicization of sectarian enclaves in Northern Ireland, regions which figured crucially in the way in which the conflict was enacted there in the late 1960s and 70s.

As Allen Feldman has recently argued, violence within and across these territories is an “institution possessing its own symbolic and performative autonomy” (21). Thus it must be seen as self-generative, not merely as a consequence of things “exterior” to it. Feldman means that to understand violence in Northern Ireland one must not revert to simple appeals to “history” and to the conflicts of the past—an interpretive strategy, he notes, common to so many analyses of the region to date. While to some degree Heaney himself may look to this violent history in an attempt to explain the more recent sectarian violence in Ulster—in the bog poems, for example—his work also reflects the important “symbolic and performative” dimensions of violence in Northern Ireland and the way in which physical territories are conceptualized (symbolically) and transgressed (performatively) vis-à-vis that violence. By examining Heaney’s poetry of territories within the context of the parallel cultural and physical formations that continue to define the

sites of conflict in Northern Ireland, it becomes easier to make sense of the poet’s complex sectarian sympathies and their manner of articulation.

In a much quoted essay from *Preoccupations*, Heaney himself emphasizes the significance of place in his aesthetics. Here he describes several of the physical landmarks and topographies which constituted his “imagination’s nesting ground” as a young boy (“Mossbawn” 19). Heaney makes it clear, however, that these objects and spaces were invested equally with political significance:

For if this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division. Like the rabbit pads that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. (20)

For Heaney, the importance of “following boundaries” and claiming territories can be identified even in early poems like “Bogland” (1969): “We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening— / Everywhere the eye concedes to / Encroaching horizon” (1-4). By way of this initial distinction, and through the course of the poem, the poet declares the bogland part of his national consciousness and imagination. References are to “our unfenced country,” and “our pioneers” (emphasis added). Indeed, the bogland is as distinct from the prairies of the American frontier as the Irish “pioneers” are distinct from the early Americans. Nor does the bogland embody any of that sense of freedom associated with the wide open spaces of the American prairies: “Everywhere” the horizon is “encroaching” on the bogland; everywhere the eye “concedes” to it. The poem is significant because it marks the origins of Heaney’s preoccupation with spatial distinctions, boundaries, and territorialization. As Sidney Burris says,

it represents Heaney’s earliest musings on a topographical metaphor that will assume extraordinary significance in Heaney’s attempt to locate a precedent for the violent struggles that have plagued Northern Ireland since the partition agreement of 1921. (82)

Spatial divisions begin to acquire explicit sectarian connotations in Heaney’s work as early as *Wintering Out* (1972). “The Other Side” is about the poet’s days as a farmboy and his recollections of a Protestant neighbor who so intrigued him with his fantastic biblical “prophecies.” More than anything, though, the poem conveys the poet’s sense of the neighbor’s otherness and the degree to which sectarian distinctions are defined and maintained in Northern Ireland. The topography is rendered in terms of “ours” and “his”: “his lea meets our fallow”; “his promised furrows” and “our bank.” (Of course, this organizing motif is already expressed in the title itself.) The final stanzas are written in the present tense and reaffirm the overarching theme of otherness by demonstrating the poet’s uneasiness about addressing the neighbor even today: “Should I slip away, I wonder, / or go up and touch his shoulder / and talk about the weather / or the price of grass-seed?”
Elsewhere in *Wintering Out* Heaney confronts the issues of territorial expansion and the defense of the “tribal” community against the incursions of the Other. “A New Song” begins nostalgically with the poet’s recollections of a girl from Derrygarve, a place rendered in quaint, pastoral terms: “And stepping stones like black molars / Sunk in the ford, the shifty glaze / Of the whirlpool, the Moyola / Pleasuring beneath alder trees // And Derrygarve, I thought, was just, / Vanished music, twilit water” (1-10). In the final two stanzas, however, the pastoral elements are transformed into thinly veiled political instruments:

But now our river tongues must rise  
From licking deep in native haunts  
To flood, with vowelling embrace,  
Desmesnes staked out in consonants.  

And Castledawson we’ll enlist  
And upperlands, each planted bawn—  
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass—  
A vocable, as rath and bullaun. (12-20)

The imperative signalled in line 12 suggests confrontation. The rivers of Derrygarve (Catholic) “must” now rise to “flood” the “desmesnes staked out [defended?] in consonants.” For Heaney, it must be noted, the consonantal often implies a certain coarseness and hostility associated with British sensibility and imperialism. The poet’s “vowelling embrace,” then, acquires a more martial character in this light. By the poem’s close, the “bawns” of the Protestant regions are “enlisted” by those from “native haunts” like Derrygarve. These bawns—which can mean farm, fort, or both—are transformed finally into distinctly Irish “rath[s]” and “bullaun[s].” As Nicholas McGuinn argues, the Irish words which close the poem can be understood as a “nationalistic, anti-British gesture of cultural independence,” a kind of metaphorical reappropriation of territory through language (74).

It is important to assess the confrontational elements of “A New Song” in terms of these issues of border transgression and territorial reclamation, or “reterritorialization.” 2 The movement in this poem is “from” the “native haunts” (Catholic, tribal, marginal) “to” the “desmesnes” (the British estates). For Feldman, movements out of one’s territory and into another’s are profoundly important in sustaining sectarian ideologies and power in Northern Ireland. Encroachment on, or transgression of, borders is an action with serious ideological import. “Reterritorialization,” Feldman says, “constitutes a structural mechanism for the reproduction of ethnicity” (26). 3 Thus movements such as the kind suggested in “A New Song,” whether actual or fictional, represent an important means of sustaining sectarian beliefs, repro-
ducing national identity, and reaffirming territorial claims. The act of crossing borders into other sectarian enclaves, or the narrative rendering of that act, can constitute a symbolic assertion of territorial “right,” a symbolic reclamation of land “wrongfully” taken. In sectarian spaces, such acts, and the repetition of such acts in narratives, represent modes of legitimation for territory claiming and violence.

On the other side of territorial expansion is territorial defense against incursions of the Other, which is the subject of “No Man’s Land” from the series A Northern Hoard. On a surface level, the poem can be understood as a rendering of the poet’s feelings of guilt and sadness concerning an act of violence committed in his community:

I deserted, shut out
their wounds’ fierce awning,
those palms like streaming webs.

Must I crawl back now,
spirochete, abroad between
shred-hung wire and thorn,
to confront my smeared doorstep
and what lumpy dead?
Why do I unceasingly
arrive late to condone
infected sutures
and ill-knit bone?

The entire poem hinges in one way or another on the fact that the poet has “deserted” his community, has crossed the border of “shred-hung wire and thorn.” Both the title and the presence of this “wire and thorn” partition suggest a reference to those actual sites of intensified violence in Northern Ireland which Feldman calls “interfaces.” The term refers to zones directly contiguous to artificial partitions erected in places throughout regions of Belfast in the late 60s and early 70s. Such partitions were intended to stem outbursts of violence between adversarial communities, but they became sites of intense violence, borders symbolizing the proximity and threat of the Other. In “No Man’s Land,” the poet describes crossing the border and returning to the interface zone in his community where he confronts a corpse on his own doorstep.

It is also important to note here that doorstep assassinations occurred with great frequency in interface zones during the early 70s. Feldman explains that such assassinations—in which a member of one adversarial group kills a member of another at the latter’s home—signified much more than mere sectarian hatred for those involved. The doorstep assassinations became means of reterritorialization for the groups enacting them. Both the act and the corpse itself symbolized the precariousness of the violated community. Thus “the doorstep murder,” says Feldman, “transgressed both the domestic and community space as sanctuary constructs. . . . Doorstep murders deploy the stiff [corpse] as a differentiating and defiling sign, as an interruption
code within the moral order of the sanctuary” (71,73).

It is this sense of community defilement that the poem expresses, a defilement heightened by the fact that the poet regards the members of the violated group as Christlike (the “palms” of 1.3). It is appropriate, therefore, that the poet’s doorstep is “smeared,” and that he notes the “infected” sutures and “ill-knit” bones of the corpse. Enclosed in part by the partition he crossed earlier, the “sanctuary” has been desecrated and the poet feels guilt in “deserting” and not defending it. According to the logic of the community, he “arrives late” and thus “condones” the murder. Significantly, he expresses his guilt in the very action of recrossing the border he himself has “violated”: the poet must now “crawl” back home, slinking through the partition like some kind of inhuman “spirochete.” Once again, the poem operates around the devices of the border and the physical territories it defines. It is by way of these things that the poet expresses his guilt, and because of them that the corpse is so resonant with political meaning.

The following poem in the series, “Stump,” should be read in conjunction with “No Man’s Land.” Ostensibly, it is about the poet’s inability to respond to community members whose relatives are the victims of sectarian violence. “What do I say if they wheel out their dead?” he asks the reader: “I’m cauterized, a black stump of home.” But underlying the poet’s personal dilemma are the issues of tribal space and contested terrain. Those who wheel out their dead are gathered in what the poet calls a “pow-wow.” Important also is the “burnt-out gable” through which he watches these “needy” members of the tribe. More than likely, the image refers to the practice of forced dislocation enacted by members of adversarial groups in Ulster in the 70s. Burning dwellings was a common strategy of dislocation during the period and one which had profound significance for territorial reclamation and for reaffirming national identity. Social geographers Russell Murray and F.W. Boal explain the functions of violent forced displacement of this kind:

When the control of space is of crucial importance for the securities it offers and opportunities it provides, violence becomes a deliberate tool of social engineering. It is used as in the case of North Belfast both to define space against invasion and to gain new territory. . . . it is a means of ensuring social homogeneity. There have been examples in Belfast of orchestrated cycles of territorial violence which begins with group A forcing members of group B into another area. . . . These in turn are made room for by their co-religionists forcing members of group A out of another area. (Murray and Boal 153)

Given the references to tribal organization and forced dislocation, “Stump” must be read (at least on one level) as a poem about the politics of sectarian space. Appropriately, as in “No Man’s Land,” the sense of community defilement is again present: the poet is “riding to plague again. / Sometimes under a sooty wash.”

In the territory poems from North (1975) and Field Work (1979), Heaney continues to confront the issues of territorial violation, but now with explicit references to British police authority and Protestant/Loyalist displays of territoriality. Aptly titled, “The Ministry of Fear” recalls the young poet’s
encounter with British police who harass him at a roadblock one summer evening:

And heading back for home, the summer's
Freedom dwindling night by night, the air
All moonlight and a scent of hay, policemen
Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round
The car like black castle, snuffing and pointing
The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:
'What's your name, driver?'
'Seamus . . .'
'Seamus?'

The invasive sense of the encounter is heightened by a juxtaposition of events: the poet is on his way home from a romantic encounter, savoring the last days of the "summer's freedom," when the police stop him. In another instance recalled in the poem the police actually read his letters. It is this sort of personal invasion, the incursion into personal "territory" that Heaney takes up in the following poem.

In "A Constable Calls" the poet recollects another encounter with authority during his youth. This time a police officer has come to the family home in order to take the farm census. But Heaney renders even this seemingly innocuous act as something threatening. The ordinary trappings of the officer inspire a genuine fear in the young boy. His cap, holster, revolver, heavy ledger (Heaney calls it a "domesday book") and the recording of the tillage returns together generate a mood of "arithmetic and fear." He imagines a "black hole in the barracks." Even in nonthreatening circumstances, then, representatives of British authority generate feelings of fear. This sense is further intensified by, and is in fact largely a consequence of, the entrance of the constable into the domestic space of the poet—the violation of the domestic border.

In order to understand the type of rage expressed in a poem like "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966," the next in the series, one must first recognize the full importance of the traditional Protestant/Loyalist parade in Northern Ireland. As Feldman explains, ceremonial marches in Loyalist communities are an "axial rite." They function as a means of mapping sectarian space and as symbolic displays of aggression, especially when the marches themselves approach the borders of Catholic communities:

Marching along the boundaries transforms the adjacent community into an involuntary audience and object of defilement through the aggressive display of political symbols and music. . . . In the Loyalist community these parades synthesize historical symbolism, the command of space, and boundary transgression. This synthesis raises the conjuncture of commemorative history and sectarianized space to the heights of ritualized resolution. (29)

Heaney's poem conveys the same senses of aggression and defilement. The drummer's instrument is situated "grossly" between his chin and knees, and the drums themselves, sometimes sullied with blood, are described as "giant tumors" that "preside" over the "nodding crowd" which yields way to
the marchers. The final image of the air "pounding like a stethoscope" conveys a mixed sense of fear and power.

Heaney recalls a different kind of march in “At the Water’s Edge” (Field Work). Here, however, it is British police authority who violate both the Catholic marchers’ space and the space of the countryside, rendered partly in pastoral terms: “From a cold hearthstone on Horse Island / I watched the sky beyond the open chimney / And listened to the thick rotations / Of an army helicopter patrolling” (9-12). As Tony Curtis notes, the three poems from this series highlight the importance of “incursions of violence” into the rural landscape. In Field Work Heaney claims this rural space for his people, and thus incursions of British authority into such space are rendered as defiling and hostile. Curtis argues that the “countryside which in the earlier books meant bulls and water-pumps, furrows and forge, is now made to include icons of violent intrusion” (106). In “At the Water’s Edge” the presence of the army helicopter and its “thick rotations,” he says, creates “that sense of overreaching control by outside authority, of entrapment” (109).

The same icons of violent intrusion recur in “After a Killing,” another poem in the series:

There they were, as if our memory hatched them,  
As if the unquiet founders walked again:  
Two young men with rifles on the hill,  
Profane and bracing as their instruments.

Who’s sorry for our trouble?  
Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves? (1-8)

Here again Heaney documents the violation of the “tribal” territory by the ghosts of the colonizing, “unquiet founders.” The poet’s hope, that his people “might dwell among [them]selves” among “unmolested” flowers, is undermined by the “profane and bracing” men whose presence “sullies the landscape” and who “warp all that is natural” (Curtis 106). As in “The Other Side,” the poem operates in part around an “us/them” axis. It is “our memory” that “hatched them,” “our trouble,” and a home that belongs to “us.” But it is ultimately an issue of territorial control and the removal of the British presence that emerges most forcefully. Hence the poet’s dream: “that we might dwell among ourselves,” alone.

“The Toome Road” is even more territorial in its use of an “us/them” organizing motif. In this poem Heaney’s speaker expresses his agitation concerning the British military presence in “his” territory:

One morning early I met armoured cars  
In convoy, warbling along powerful tyres,  
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,  
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.  
How long were they approaching down my roads  
As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.  
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,  
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,  
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds  
Of outhouse roofs. (1-10)
As in "After a Killing" and "The Other Side," Heaney designates certain sites as his own, and his sense of their violation is expressed in especially confrontational terms: How long, he asks, were the soldiers "approaching down my road as if they owned them?" "I had rights-of-way," he insists. Like the poems from North and "A Northern Hoard" (Wintering Out), the sense of community defilement is strong. But here the "sanctuary" space is constructed in rural terms (e.g., the "fields," "cattle," "tractors," "silos," etc.). Indeed, as Sidney Burris argues, the sense of violation is heightened in the pastoral poems from Field Work through the creation of "perfected" rural landscapes:

Even though Field Work (1979) and Station Island (1984) return to a more traditional pastoralism . . . their tropes conceal a disquieting perspective that depends for its effect on the sudden realization that the pastoral world, the imaginatively perfected world of County Wicklow or rural Northern Ireland, is a world continually subject to violation and invasion. (xi-xii)

According to Burris, because an important aspect of pastoral poetry is its tradition of resistance to authority and to incursions into the rural landscape, it is appropriate that Heaney creates such a "saturating pastoral context" in "The Toome Road." Through the contrast between the images of military invasion and pastoral tranquility, the character of the violation becomes even more pronounced. "Pastoral writing, an inherently confrontational literature," writes Burris:

often demanded an attractive otherworldliness from its localities. In "The Toome Road," the poet expresses his indignation at being invaded by this "warbling" convoy; it is as if the intruders, "Camouflaged with broken alder branches," had disguised themselves to gain entrance into Toome, his private paradise. (119)

The tribal or "sanctuary" space is once more rendered in highly pastoral terms in "The Strand at Lough Beg." The poem is on the one hand an elegy on the death of Colum McCartney, Heaney’s cousin. But in an equally important sense it is about sectarianized space and the dangers of venturing out of the confessional community. As mentioned above, that community is represented here as pure, clean, rural, green, and pastoral generally. The only images of violence it contains are the guns of the local duck hunters, and even these alarm the nonviolent McCartney figure:

There you once heard guns fired behind the house
Long before rising time, when duck shooters
Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes,
But still were scared to find spent cartridges,
Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected. (17-21)

What is most significant is the movement of the McCartney figure beyond the safety of the tribal territory and into the realm of the Other. (Compare the Irish sounding “Lough Beg” with the British sounding “Newtownhamilton.”) Curtis likens his lot to that of the old fisherman in "Casualty," also from Field Work:

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Colum McCartney is leaving the banal, secure country town to climb away up into the hills. . . . It seems that the further this man drives from the town the more he divorces himself from safety and the known. As with the victim in “Casualty” Colum McCartney wanders out of his “tribal” area at his peril. (111)

 Appropriately, the regions beyond the “known” clays and waters of Lough Beg, while partly only mythological, are presented in threatening, horrific terms. The “bloodied heads,” “goat beards,” “dogs’ eyes,” and “demon pack” serve as effective contrasts to the dew-covered regions of Lough Beg with its “green rushes” and “moss.” Also significant is the “purifying” process represented in the final section. It is at “Lough Beg,” the sanctuary site, where the poet “cleans” the “blood and roadside muck” from his dying cousin with dew and moss. The sanctuary region is both clean and cleansing, pure and purifying. After the instance of violence, the McCartney figure is returned to the sanctuary space and thus is prepared for entrance into the Beyond: “With rushes that shot green again,” the poet tells him, “I plait / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.”

 Feldman notes that sanctuary sites in Northern Ireland were, and to a degree still are, places where “contamination” by violence can be removed. He explains the concept of the paramilitary group “wash house,” or “safe house”—a site of both “literal and symbolic decontamination” where weapons, clothing, and vehicles used in acts of violence can be disposed of or laundered (44). The wash house, and indeed the sanctuary space itself, are thus places of purification, places where literal and ritual cleansing take place. Of course, the McCartney figure does not belong to any paramilitary group, but he is clearly designated as a member of the tribal community and someone at odds with British authority: “For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy, / Spoke an old language of conspirators,” says the poet. That he is returned to the sanctuary space in the end for his ritual cleansing is perfectly fitting.

 “The Strand at Lough Beg” therefore crystallizes two important concepts regarding sanctuary space. First, it reflects the very real dangers of leaving that space (the violence enacted by adversarial groups). And second, it is encoded with key symbolic associations surrounding that space (it is pure, purifying, clean, and cleansing). Like all of Heaney’s territory poems, “The Strand at Lough Beg” is ultimately about boundaries, about what it means to transgress them and what it means to remain within their confines. In Heaney’s territory poems, these boundaries define the regions of the tribal community and the Other, the sites of violence and sanctuary: a continually contested terrain.

 Works Cited


