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## The All-Female Revolution in Seamus Heaney's *North*

*Abstract:* Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) is generally considered as the most political collection among his works of poetry. Amidst the rebellious years of The Troubles, the Irish Laureate Poet subverted the traditional metaphor of 'Mother Ireland' through a poetic message strongly embedded in political and social issues. Starting from the *topos* of the subdued and frail woman of the *aisling* tradition, Heaney moulded a modern entity that spoke better to the years of war and instability afflicting Northern Ireland in the 1970s. After reading P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, he endorsed a vision of the land which built on a comparison with the ancient Germanic goddess Nerthus, thus providing *his* Ireland with a fierce and headstrong personality. This essay delves into the dynamics of Heaney's choices linked to the representation of the nation and femininity.

*Keywords:* Seamus Heaney. *North*. Ireland. Rebellion. Poetry. Femininity.

1. One only needs to think of Seamus Heaney's fear of the warlike "gross-bellied frogs" in *Death of a Naturalist* to realise how his world was hardly free from peril. Nevertheless, Mossbawn, Heaney's *omphalos*,<sup>1</sup> that "first place"<sup>2</sup> with "[a] bogland name",<sup>3</sup> remained for him a dear and unwavering centre, located halfway between a traditional rural life-style and modern urban society. As the reality around him was shifting from one made of "ploughing with horses, lit the fire in the morning, carry water from wells and so on",<sup>4</sup> to one of war and instability, so did his poetry, which gradually came to grips with such feelings of vulnerability and fear. The duality of Ireland's social division is clearly outlined in his collection of essays *Preoccupations*, where Heaney wrote that if "this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division [...]. The lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land [...] like some script indelibly written into

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<sup>1</sup> With the Greek word *omphalos* Heaney refers to the belly button, although in ancient Greece it was also a stone placed at the centre of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Heaney sees the *omphalos* as "the first place you come from, the first place you belong to, the place where the mother link is holding you" ("Seamus Heaney Interview", *YouTube*, uploaded by ThamesTv, 2 April 1980, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yt4m2Z4Pmw>, last accessed on 6 June 2021). In this way, he somewhat assimilates the Grecian concept and transfers it into the context of Co. Derry: his stone is Mossbawn, the place that nourished and accompanied him into adult life.

<sup>2</sup> S. HEANEY, "Mossbawn", in ID., *Preoccupations: Selected Prose from 1968-1978*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, p. 18. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *PR*.

<sup>3</sup> S. HEANEY, *North*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 5. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *N*.

<sup>4</sup> S. HEANEY, "Making Sense of a Life", Interview with T. MOURA, *The NewsHouse*, 14 April 2010, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi_k) (last accessed on 23 May 2021). Mossbawn was also referred to as an untouched and unspoiled Middle Age.

the nervous system" (*PR*, p. 20).<sup>5</sup> As the years passed and he grew up in an increasingly rebellious country, his poetry changed from the disillusioned but still idyllic descriptions of *Death of a Naturalist* to the warlike scenarios of *North*. This evolution was triggered by his moving from Co. Londonderry to Belfast, where he lived from 1957 to 1972. The socially and politically active world of the capital of Northern Ireland brought Heaney closer to the 'spirit of the fight' and made him discover what it meant to cope with the cruelties of war: "We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart" (*PR*, p. 30). Despite his geographical displacement (which he always perceived as an "inner emigration"),<sup>6</sup> Heaney claimed that his poetry remained receptive to "the living speech of the landscape I was born into. If you like, I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading" (*PR*, p. 37). Indeed, notwithstanding his travels, his works do show how he looked back at his home as the true source of inspiration and to Ireland as the muse for his poems.

"Digging", the opening poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, was conceived as an attempt to unearth and pin down memories and feelings from his childhood, namely the relationship with his family and with nature, as well as the sense of belonging to his land and his fellow citizens. Heaney's following collections of poems – *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972) – paved the way for the volume that marked his 'coming of age', i.e., *North* (1975). Although *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966, included historically themed poems,<sup>7</sup> they were not as critical towards the conflict between Great Britain and Ireland as others would sound in the author's later works. Rather, they concerned Heaney's positioning in relation to his surroundings<sup>8</sup> as opposed to the later interest in the Irish political struggle. Among them is "At a Potato Digging", a poem dealing with the strong relationship of a people to its own land, and which seems to announce a shift from Heaney's childhood memories to a more socially involved perspective.<sup>9</sup> It also looks to the trope of fertility rites (with the reference to a 'black Mother') which will be further investigated in *North*. On the other hand, it lacks the impact of social denunciation and "intimate revenge" (*N*, p. 31) that underpins a text like "Punishment" in *North*, where love, which in *Death of a Naturalist* was portrayed in a delicate, timid and intimate way, also becomes violent, sexual and vengeful. For example, the "great slime kings" (*DN*, p. 4) mentioned in "Death of a Naturalist" are replaced in "Kinship" by the cool pupils "dreaming of Neolithic wheat"

<sup>5</sup> By connecting toponyms to the nervous system (very much like a DNA inscription), Heaney strengthens the link between words and places as an innate propulsive thrust that men sense towards the land, which, in the poet's imaginary, is female. This may be the reason why Heaney feels so intensely pushed towards it, as if a gravitational force were working on him.

<sup>6</sup> Heaney refers to himself as an "inner *émigré*" who cut loose from his homeland, Northern Ireland, to pursue a career in the Republic of Ireland. In "Exposure" he writes: "Escaped from the massacre, / taking protective colouring / from bole and bark, feeling / every wind that blows" (*N*, p. 68).

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, "At a Potato Digging" and "Requiem for the Croppies".

<sup>8</sup> Several poem titles refer to the natural surroundings of Mossbawn or to farm animals with which Heaney got in contact daily: "The Barn", "Cow in Calf", "Blackberry Picking", "Trout", "Waterfall", and "Storm on the Island".

<sup>9</sup> See in particular the following passages from "At a Potato Digging", in S. HEANEY, *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber & Faber, 1966: "Centuries / of fear and homage to the famine god", lines 14-15; "Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on / wild higgledy skeletons / scoured the land in 'forty-five, / wolfed the blighted root and died", lines 31-34; "A people hungering from birth, / grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth, / were grafted with a great sorrow. / Hope rotted like a marrow", lines 43-46. All further references to *Death of a Naturalist* will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *DN*.

and inhabiting the "slime kingdoms" (*N*, pp. 4, 34). Again, the pen/spade that the poet initially used as a vehicle to relieve himself from feelings and emotions ("Between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rests; snug as a gun", *DN*, p. 1) becomes a real weapon to be employed in his silent involvement in the Ulster uprising.

Heaney's early poetry was infused with a fresh enthusiasm over the progressive acquisition of a deeper consciousness about himself as an artist, his mastery of the writing craft and ability to transpose his feelings into words. The narcissistic desire to voice his intimacy and explore his inner soul is powerfully expressed in the tellingly-titled poem "Personal Helicon",<sup>10</sup> where one reads: "I rhyme / to see myself" (*DN*, p. 44). By looking down into the wells, the poet hopes that the stretch of water at the bottom will allow him, as it did to Narcissus,<sup>11</sup> to fully admire the profound beauty of his poetry. A few years later, he will "stand at the edge of centuries / facing a goddess" (*N*, p. 36) and, in "Punishment", give expression to the "exact / and tribal, intimate revenge" (*N*, p. 31) of an entire nation, almost forgetful of those first desires for self-definition.

From *Wintering Out*'s "Tollund Man", Heaney (likely triggered by the 1969 political crisis in Northern Ireland) started to widen his vision of the land from the homely landscape of Co. Derry to the whole of Ireland, not only geographically, but socially too. Despite his initial disengagement from that uproarious reality,<sup>12</sup> as a citizen of Northern Ireland and victim of social unrest, Heaney could not but end up becoming a nationalist. As he had already written in "Feeling Into Words", the poet reinvents himself as the land's diviner, "nervous, but professionally // Unfussed" (*DN*, p. 23) in his ability to mediate "between the latent resource and the community", and "[t]he diviner resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised" (*PR*, pp. 47-48).

A link between Heaney the sharp observer of his own private life and Heaney the public poet is provided by the image of the 'unmovable stone', the centre that *does* hold<sup>13</sup> and sleeps in the recesses of Irish history, binding together whole generations and constituting the very heart of the country. As an unlimited repository of memory ("The wet centre is bottomless",<sup>14</sup> to quote from "Bogland", while "Bog Queen" tells us that the "gemstones

<sup>10</sup> Mount Helicon, a Boetian peak, is hailed as the site where Apollo and the Muses putatively dwelled. Two springs, the Aganippe and the Hippocrene, originate from the mountain. Hippocrene was reputed to grant artistic inspiration to those who drank its waters. In Heaney's scenario, the fount is substituted by his childhood's wells, whose darkness stands for both the obscurity of his subconscious and the gloomy history of his land. But Mount Helicon was also the site where Narcissus mirrored himself in a pond. In this connection, at the very end of the poem, Heaney appears to distance himself from the narcissistic allure of his poetry and send out his verse to the "darkness echoing" (*DN*, p. 44).

<sup>11</sup> "Adstupet ipse sibi, vultuque inmotus eodem / haeret ut e Pario formatum marmore signum. / Spectat humi positus geminum, sua lumina, sidus et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines / inpubesque genas et eburnea colla decusque / oris et in niveo mixtum candore ruborem, / cunctaque miratur, quibus est mirabilis ipse. / Se cupit inprudens et, qui probat, ipse probatur, / dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet" (PUBLIO OVIDIO NASONE, *Metamorfosi*, testo latino a fronte, a cura di P. BERNARDINI MARZOLLA, Torino, Einaudi, 1979, p. 112).

<sup>12</sup> See B. COSGROVE, "Inner Freedom and Political Obligation: Seamus Heaney and the Claims of Irish Nationalism", *Irish Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 79 (315), 1990, p. 269.

<sup>13</sup> "This centre holds / and spreads, / sump and seedbed, / a bag of waters // And a melting grave" ("Kinship", *N*, p. 36).

<sup>14</sup> S. HEANEY, *Door into the Dark*, London, Faber & Faber, 1969, p. 44. All further references to this volume will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *DD*. The perception of bogs as bottomless was a sort of

[that] dropped / in the peat floe / like the bearings of history”, *N*, p. 26), the territory becomes a useful and tangible resource “to translate the present by viewing it from the perspective of the past”.<sup>15</sup>

In the first four collections by Heaney the land is portrayed as dark.<sup>16</sup> *Door into the Dark* unfolds as a journey into the darkness of the land aiming to discover its secret powers,<sup>17</sup> or rather, to re-discover them after the disenchantment experienced in *Death of a Naturalist*. But Heaney’s fascination with and curiosity for the “forbidden ground” (*PR*, p. 19) began when, together with a friend, he stripped naked and dived into the boggy soil in a cathartic ‘betrothal’ with the land, as attested in his memoir “Mossbawn” (1980). Heaney admits that, since his childhood years, he has heard voices calling to him: “I’m sitting as if just wakened from a winter sleep and gradually become aware of voices, coming closer, calling my name” (*PR*, p. 17). In “Belfast”, he reveals having always “listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery” (*PR*, p. 34).

As an adult remembering plunging into moss-holes, Heaney is aware that bathing in the bogs was not just a ceremony (a baptism, a marriage, or a union with the Earth), but the first step towards his poetic achievement. The land being female, both for him and according to traditional knowledge, Heaney wished to share her powers through a sort of osmotic bath and thus acquire that kind of instinctively ‘female’ sensibility and emotions that would help him to become a true poet. The descent into the “underground side of things” (*PR*, p. 21), through Ireland’s bogs (her ‘vagina’) and towards the land’s primordial uterus, is recalled as follows:

I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated. (*PR*, p. 19)

This is the first time the poet addresses Ireland as a mother figure, namely the ‘Black Mother’,<sup>18</sup> combining her femininity with the darkness of her bottomless and elusive self. The merging with the land is also an encounter, a first revelatory meeting between himself as a member of the male sex and his first woman, the Mother: “I think the process is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotions” (*PR*, p. 34). Still bearing the signs of the Mother (he is “smeared”, “weedy”, “darkened” and “smelling of the ground”), Heaney is pervaded with the feminine powers of the land.

folklore belief passed on to children. Heaney too remembers that, as kids, they were told they “shouldn’t go near the moss-holes because ‘there was no bottom in them’” (*PR*, p. 35).

<sup>15</sup> C. GREEN, “The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney’s Poetry”, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 14 (3), 1983, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Darkness refers to both the colour of the turf of the Irish ground and what is unknown and hidden.

<sup>17</sup> See R.R. RUSSELL, “Burrowing and Bogs: Early Poems”, *Death of a Naturalist, Door into the Dark, Wintering Out, North*, in ID., *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2016, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> The same words are used in “At a Potato Digging”: “Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black / Mother. Processional stooping through the turf” (*DN*, p. 18). The resort to the enjambement contributes to stressing the sense of darkness pervading the land, its secret identity and unfathomability.

The concluding poem of *Door into the Dark*, "Bogland", officially introduces the trope of Mother Ireland and the importance of bogs as symbols of Irishness. It testifies to the poet's newly-found interest in the merging of historical and mystical matters and brings back the symbol of darkness, "but one raised to the level of signifying Ireland's entire occluded history, buried in the depths of the boggy Irish ground, yet 'bottomless', unknowable".<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the last line of "Bogland" identifies bottomlessness not only as a boundless archive of historical events, but also as a "potent generator of images and ideas"<sup>20</sup> for Heaney's verse:

Our pioneers keep striking  
inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
seems camped on before.  
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless. (*DD*, p. 44)

The closing line leaves the reader wondering, as if in front of a *door* open to future encounters with the bottomlessness of the ground objectified by the Mother and her mystic force.

As I said, the starting point of Heaney's poetry was marked by the action of digging as a metaphor for the intimacy being established between man and the land. He later moved on to the idea of digging into the darkness, with reference to the female entity and to Mother Ireland cherishing the "memory incubating the spilled blood" (*N*, p. 11).<sup>21</sup> In the course of this transition, darkness changes meaning and acquires features akin to the subconscious, to the obscure sides of human nature that are only reachable through the words of the poet intent on 'sowing' historical memories into the present.<sup>22</sup>

After reading Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* (1965),<sup>23</sup> Heaney was able to enhance the feeling of belonging to a 'tribe' by transposing Glob's bog discourse into the dimension of Mother Ireland and her vengeful bog-born daughters.<sup>24</sup> He did this "to discover the atavistic forces of fertility rites and ritual sacrifices that are on full, terrifying display in *North*" (*PR*, p. 31). Once again, this is not a new topic, having been in Heaney's mind since his sacred bathing into the "realm of bogeys" (*PR*, p. 18). Nevertheless, in *North*, the subject matter developed in a new and stronger way, so much so that it became the archetypal pattern of that 'crisis-talk' onto which the author poured the dissatisfactions and anxieties of the period. Heaney came to the conclusion that only the recovery of an ancestral relationship between a people and a place could put an end to the revolts disrupting the land, and that is why he resorted to

<sup>19</sup> R.R. RUSSELL, "Burrowing and Bogs: Early Poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North*", p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> "Our mother ground / is sour with the blood / of her faithful, // They lie gargling / in her sacred heart / as the legions stare / from the rampants" (*N*, p. 38).

<sup>22</sup> In "Belderg" the poet writes that the opening of the bogs allows for "The soft piled centuries / [to fall] open like a glib" (*N*, p. 17).

<sup>23</sup> "Some of these emblems I found in a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People*. It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times" (*PR*, p. 57).

<sup>24</sup> These are the bodies uncovered from the bog-holes.

mythology.<sup>25</sup> Myth brings people together and helps them believe in something in the face of chaos and fear. Although Heaney's definition of the self drew lymph from a line of male ancestors (the "ur-makers"),<sup>26</sup> he metaphorically left the political and social matters of Ireland in the hands of a woman. He thus hoped that men, drawn to her by her feminine allure, would lead the nation to victory.

2. When the events in Ulster quickly escalated into the 1972 bombings, Heaney felt an ethical duty to dig deeper into the land's recesses not only because he had found a source of inspiration in that bottomless and boggy soil, but also because he wished to identify a suitable poetic instrument, capable of responding to the ongoing turmoil.

As Stephanie Alexander writes, "it is hard to read Seamus Heaney's *North* as something other than resistance writing".<sup>27</sup> Drafted in the turbulent 1970s, the book appears as the work to which the author's previous collections would lead: "I'm certain that up to *North*, that that was one book; in a way it grows together and goes together".<sup>28</sup> *North* is strongly rooted in political discourse and unleashes the uncanny feeling of "listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution, the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland".<sup>29</sup> At the same time, as partially announced in *Door into the Dark* ("Rite of Spring" and "Belderg") and *Wintering Out* ("The Tollund Man" and "Nerthus"), political discourse is muffled through the bog speech channel and, more specifically, via a metaphorical depiction of Mother Ireland. What remains unchanged is the unmovable *stone*, the land evoked first through a 'poetry of the roots' (the soil where Heaney's ancestors dug up potatoes) and later on as a mystified Mother Earth whose womb generates hundred-year-old "leathery" bodies (*N*, p. 32). In Eugene O'Brien's view, in *Death of a Naturalist* the soil was already reverberating with "mythic resonance, and we get our first glimpse of the earth as a mother goddess, a trope which will echo throughout his bog poems".<sup>30</sup>

Through the metaphorical portrayal of the bog people and the personification of Ireland as a nationalistic Mother, Heaney sets about interpreting and exorcising the savage events of his time by looking at the cruelties perpetrated on women from northern Europe in the ancient past – as outlined in Glob's book – and devising an allegory for the killings of Ulster Catholics. In so doing, he also gives voice to a long-lost feeling of belonging. If "[n]either internee nor informant"<sup>31</sup> (*N*, p. 68), Heaney feels a strong bond with his people, for whom he tries to act as a 'voice of cohesion'.

Triggered by the reading of Glob's volume, Heaney was finally able to give shape to the formless picture that had harboured in his poetry since his first collections, and to hold

<sup>25</sup> See J. LENNON, "Man Writing: Gender in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 29 (5), 2000, p. 632.

<sup>26</sup> P. COUGHLAN, "Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p. 189.

<sup>27</sup> S. ALEXANDER, "The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney's *North*", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 39 (2), 2016, p. 219.

<sup>28</sup> J. HAFFENDEN, "Meeting Seamus Heaney: An Interview" (1981), quoted in E. O'BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> C.C. O'BRIEN, "A Slow North-East Wind: Review of *North*", in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> E. O'BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> This double negation suggests how Heaney is caught in an inner conflict between epitomising a voice of the nation and carving out a space for himself.

on to an archetypal pattern including “the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon was Kathleen Ni Houlihan” (*PR*, p. 57).<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of his writing journey, the poet seemed to struggle to find a set of clear symbols capable of penetrating the chaos of contemporary Northern Ireland. Germanic fertility goddess Nerthus, first mentioned by Tacitus<sup>33</sup> and re-evoked in Glob’s work with more detail, offered him a lens and a basis for merging his new archetype of Mother Ireland with traditional folklore and ancient religious practices.<sup>34</sup> Heaney dedicated an entire poem to Nerthus, a four-line composition in *Wintering Out* where he described the goddess in her fetish form, “an ash-fork staked in peat, / its long grains gathering to the gouged split”.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this Germanic goddess was originally celebrated as Mother Earth and therefore could provide Heaney’s poetry with the link to the birth-death-rebirth cycle primarily associated with femininity.<sup>36</sup> In a Lacanian key, one can claim that, on the one hand, Heaney discovered elements of his own subjectivity by observing a ‘feminised territory’ (as he did as a child with wells and “the helmeted pump in the yard”, *N*, p. IX),<sup>37</sup> and that on the other he envisioned a mythologised Ireland as a vessel capable of containing all the intolerable events that were ravaging the island. Thanks to the figure of Nerthus, Heaney interwove reality and myth within the frame of an ancestral pattern through which one might also decipher the sectarian violence of twentieth-century Ulster.<sup>38</sup>

As it happened, time and events had changed the nature of Ireland, which, from the virginal and subdued woman of the *aísling* tradition<sup>39</sup> would turn into a sexually connoted and “Insatiable bride. / Sword-swallower, / casket, midden, / floe of history” (*N*, p. 24). The characterisation Heaney invested Ireland with blended with the state of things relating

<sup>32</sup> In what I believe to be a very inclusive description of the femininity trope, Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that the wild woman is sometimes called “the woman who lives at the end of time, or the woman who lives at the borders of the world. And this creature is always a witch-creator, or the Goddess of death, or a virgin in being, or a thousand other personifications” (C.P. ESTÉS, *Donne che corrono coi lupi*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 2009, p. XIX; my translation).

<sup>33</sup> Tacitus speaks of the goddess Nerthus in his *Germania* (98 AC). For her sake, men were said to perform ritual practices where criminals were hanged as sacrificial victims. Their corpses were laid into the bogs to ensure the divinity’s fertility and, therefore, the renewal of the land. Many of them were found with a noose around their necks, remains of their hanging loop but also symbols of their belonging to Nerthus.

<sup>34</sup> See J. LENNON, “Man Writing: Gender in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry”, p. 634.

<sup>35</sup> S. HEANEY, *Wintering Out*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972, p. 38. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *WO*. Heaney projects feminine attributes onto the sacred object of cult, “the gouged split” referring to the opening between the legs, complemented by the “long grains”, the “Venus bone” (*N*, p. 24).

<sup>36</sup> Elements concerning Nerthus and her regenerative powers can also be gathered from the title of Heaney’s third collection: *Wintering Out*. Via this ‘agricultural title’ the author highlights the soil’s ability to regenerate itself after a long winter season. At the same time, winter coincides with the difficult war period that Northern Ireland is going through, so that the seeds remind us of the people who are fighting in the hope of sowing a better future.

<sup>37</sup> Heaney claimed he had frequently appealed to the energy of the earth to write his poetry: “I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery” (*PR*, p. 24).

<sup>38</sup> See this pregnant comment: “I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity” (*PR*, pp. 56-57).

<sup>39</sup> This literary tradition is based on poems written in ancient Gaelic and dealing with love themes, feuds and questions of sovereignty. Ireland is here personified by a defenseless woman repeatedly raped by a foreign raider.

to the second half of the twentieth century and foregrounded a close relationship between the nationalistic discourse and the feminine paradigm. By appropriating the myth of Nerthus, Heaney twisted it as best suited him. In his view, like the pagan goddess, contemporary Ireland takes her strength from the roots of the earth (“her river-veins”, *N*, p. 3), but, most of all, she increases her power by means of the sacrifice of human flesh – that of the Irishmen – because blood is the nourishment through which “the goddess might redeem herself from colonial violation”.<sup>40</sup> In the Germanic tradition, to ensure the growing of new crops, sacrificial victims were required to lie with the goddess, so that their union might contribute to fertilising the land, along with other dead bodies. These ancient and generally violent sacrifices in honour of the goddess are evoked by Heaney to give a deeper and nobler sense to the deaths of Irish rebels. If the bodies found in northern bogs were seen as fulfilling their life purpose (and ensuring the following year’s crops), the dying Irish soldiers were similarly shown to sow the hope for a peaceful nation.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, such a violence is definitely devastating, with the land becoming wounded and torn apart just like the Irish rebels at war. These ruptures in the soil are represented by Heaney through the bogs, which, like cracks in the ground (and allusions to the shape of a vagina), hide the Mother’s children until their ultimate liberation, in an analogy with the unearthing of corpses from a hibernation state.<sup>42</sup> After their death, the Irish rebels are buried underground, where the Mother may finally re-join her offspring. The burial of dead soldiers, as well as the sacrificial victims meant as an offer to Nerthus, could then be interpreted in terms of a return to the protective uterus of Mother Earth. The ground is “soft as pulp”, similar to “kind, black butter // melting and opening underfoot”<sup>43</sup> (*DD*, pp. 44, 43). Heaney’s Ireland has thus a Janus-like personality of ‘provider and destroyer’. For Antaeus, the child of the earth in the eponymous poem, Ireland is a source of strength, “an elixir” (*N*, p. 3) working to heal him. He lives

Down here in my cave,

Girded with root and rock,

I am cradled in the dark that wombed me

and nurtured in every artery

like a small hillock. (*N*, p. 3)

<sup>40</sup> S. VAKIL, “Our Mother Ground: Seamus Heaney’s Use of Myth in *Wintering Out* and *North*”, St. Andrew’s College, 2019, p. 13, <https://standrewscollege.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Our-Mother-ground-Seamus-Heaneys-use-of-Myth-in-Wintering-out-and-North.pdf> (last accessed on 6 June 2021).

<sup>41</sup> One of the ancestral powers Heaney invests Ireland with is that of death and regeneration. It is useful to at least mention here T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (1922), namely a pregnant passage from “The Burial of the Dead”: “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers” (T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, lines 5-7, a cura di A. SERPIERI, Milano, BUR Rizzoli, 2018, p. 84). Similarly, in “Bog Queen”, Heaney shows how Ireland is able to swallow bodies: “through my fabrics and skins / the seeps of winter / digested me” (*N*, p. 25).

<sup>42</sup> In “Bog Queen” the unearthing of a bog body is recorded in terms of an extraordinary physical violence: “I was barbed / and stripped / by a turfcutter’s spade // Who veiled me again / and packed coomb softly / between the stone jambs / at my head and my feet” (*N*, p. 26).

<sup>43</sup> By these words Heaney alludes to the Irish soil’s consistency, with a further connection with the female sexual apparatus. Like the soil, the internal parts of the vagina are also soft, buttery and malleable, opening and closing whenever bog bodies (or male genitalia) penetrate her.



Although the Mother's intention seems to shield her children from the atrocities of the world, to keep them *in* with her "dark juices working / [each of them] to a saint's kept body" (*WO*, p. 36), in other cases her character also reveals downsides. At the edge of bipolarism, the land's intention seems both to help her children to live (by keeping them warm and safe inside the "pillow of turf" of her uterus) and to phagocytise them, claiming them before and after their death, rapaciously killing them after their birth or stifling them through stillbirth.<sup>44</sup> In other terms, for Mother Ireland corpses are both meals and offspring.

While the nourishment should give Nerthus-Ireland the power to re-create life from the sacrifice of victims (be they convicted Iron-Age offenders or departed Irish rebels) and consequently ensure biological cycles, the land "open(s) her fen" (*WO*, p. 36) only to liberate dead children, i.e., the bog people. On the one hand, Heaney embraces an ecological approach by giving his goddess the circular power of regeneration and placing "human deaths into the larger context of nature's ineluctable, regenerative rhythm".<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, instead of enhancing the rhythms of life, the sick union between Ireland and England gives birth to crippled children, to dead people who are only remotely similar to humans.

The bitter fruits of revenge, the corpses coming out of Ireland's 'dark vagina' – the bog bodies uncovered through time – can also be seen as the signature of Ireland's new self as an empowered and independent woman. Here, a self-determined Ireland chooses the mother role she wants to assume. Differently from previous representations, Heaney's Ireland proceeds to make her own history by rejecting the roles imposed on her by tradition. Repeatedly raped and dispossessed, she finally decides to control the only thing over which she still has power: the outcome of her pregnancy. But her rage and thirst for *vendetta* give birth to misshapen creatures, fossilised people with "red slobland around the bones / [...] skinned muscles" (*N*, p. 17) and "peat-brown head(s)" (*WO*, p. 36). Quite fittingly, Moynagh Sullivan interprets the failed delivery of Ireland's babies in light of the as-yet undelivered future of the nation.<sup>46</sup> It is as though Ireland were unwilling to welcome an heir until the rebellion is settled. Therefore, she continues to deliver dead bodies to paradoxically safeguard them from a world at war. Only in the context of a free Ulster will Ireland be ready to give the country a chance for change. With this in mind, it is hard to label Heaney's Ireland as a totally *unloving* mother: indeed, in a tragical plot, she loves her infants so much as to rather kill them than see them suffer.

The digestive process of which Heaney talks in "Bog Queen", once again associated with the ancient rite of feeding the goddess to ensure the renewal of the land and a full harvest,<sup>47</sup> also points to a sick and manipulative mother-child relationship. As with the process of digestion, where food is transferred from the mouth and pharynx to the stomach and intestine, the mother is seen as swallowing her children, be they interred bog bodies or

<sup>44</sup> It is important to remember that, although Heaney represents the bodies who come out of the bogs as dead entities, he always envisions them as a *living* proof of memory: "Who will say 'corpse' / to this vivid cast / who will say 'body' / to his opaque repose?" (*N*, p. 29).

<sup>45</sup> H. HART, "Seamus Heaney's Places of Writing", *Contemporary Literature*, 31 (3), 1990, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> See M. SULLIVAN, "The Treachery of Wetness: Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Parturition", *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (4), 2005, p. 451.

<sup>47</sup> One might here quote again a well-known passage from "The Burial of the Dead" in Eliot's 1922 poem: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, p. 92).

buried Irish rebels, so as to bring them back to their original ‘place of safety’. In this way, the children’s craving to go back to the mother might also be read as a consequence of her own plans to prevent them from achieving independence, forcing them to feel a constant need for her presence.

Having become a *Medea furens*, Ireland, like the Greek sorceress, loses her *humanitas*,<sup>48</sup> reminding the reader that she is *not* human, but a figure hovering at the margins between the anthropic and the metaphysical worlds. She repays the wrongs done to her by depriving herself of the joy of motherhood and disseminating a dead offspring. In this way, the outcome of her nefarious pregnancy turns into a symbol of her vengeful nature, in line with Medea’s infanticide, which was “*fratri patrique quod sat est, peperit duos*”.<sup>49</sup> Like her, Ireland becomes the emblem of a corrupted motherhood. However, despite these ruthless features, Ireland’s revenge is different from Medea’s. While the latter disavows her motherly nature by murdering her babies with the purpose of striking back at her antagonists, Ireland embraces her parenthood and kills her children in order to *protect* them, eventually recovering an empathetic quality that had been lost throughout the previous centuries.

3. From *Death of a Naturalist* to *North*, Heaney’s position on the man-woman relationship changed from, say, the canonical and marital to the potentially savage and ravenous. While engaged in voicing the sacred, circular, and eternal love between himself and his wife in “Poem”, a text included in *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney was covertly attracted by the notion of incestuous relationships and started to associate the feminine element with the maternal one.

By portraying Ireland as a powerful, stern woman who sets out to rule over life and death, he arguably chose for himself the role of a child *vis-à-vis* a mother. Interestingly, in the poem dedicated to his wife Mary, he refers to himself as a child entrusted to the care of his spouse and who tries his best to please her, as a good child would: “Love, I shall perfect for you the child / who diligently potters in my brain”, and again: “Love, you shall perfect for me this child / whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking” (“Poem”, in *DN*, p. 35). With reference to the two chiasmic expressions “I shall perfect for you” and “you shall perfect for me”, we might contend that Heaney seems at first to be willing to try and be a good child; yet, he soon delegates such a task to his wife, who emerges as a sort of mother in charge of yet another baby.<sup>50</sup> While “Lovers on Aran”, “Honeymoon Flight” and “Scaffolding” temporarily avoid the wife/mother juxtaposition in order to give space to a love relationship between peers, this is just a postponement of the sprouting of repressed stirrings that would become manifest in *North*. Indeed, the 1975 collection is interspersed with unresolved Oedipal compulsions that pivot on Heaney’s envisioning of the Mother as a figure transcending the actual progenitor’s features.

<sup>48</sup> See A. MARIA WASYL, “Le metamorfosi di Medea in Ovidio, *Metamorphoses* VII e Draconzio, *Romulea X*”, *Eos*, 94 (1), 2007, p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> LUCIO ANNEO SENECA, *Medea*, in ID., *Seneca’s Tragedies*, with an English Translation by F.J. MILLER, London, William Heinemann, 1917, Vol. I, p. 306. No less than the two children’s deaths are deemed necessary to avenge the killing of her father and brother.

<sup>50</sup> See this quotation: “Or in the sucking clabber I would splash / delightedly and dam the flowing drain, / [...] Love, you shall perfect for me this child / whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking” (*DN*, p. 35).

By choosing to embed elements of maternity in the poetical archetype of Nerthus, Heaney possibly aimed at filling the void generated by his cutting ties with both his real mother and his homeland, namely Co. Derry in Northern Ireland, which he left when moving to Co. Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, in 1972. The persistent allusions to sex and the erotically charged language referring to the goddess (Ireland) or to the bog bodies<sup>51</sup> might betray the presence of an unresolved Oedipal complex of attraction-repulsion.<sup>52</sup> Along these lines, one could approach *North* as a melancholy work by a poet committed to fighting against England – the ‘evil abuser’ of his Mother – but also expressing the anxieties of a child who has not yet overcome a sexualised attachment to his parent. The following excerpts speak volumes in this sense: “I estimate / for pleasure / her knuckles’ paving” (N, p. 22); “the dark-bowered queen, / whom I unpin, / is waiting” (N, p. 24); “I unwrap skins and see” (N, p. 24); “I reach past / the riverbed’s washed / dream of gold to the bullion / of her Venus bone” (N, p. 24); “the seeps of winter / digested me, / [...] the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis” (N, p. 25); “As I raised it / the soft lips of the growth / muttered and split” (N, p. 35); “Her entrance was wet, and she came” (WO, p. 15). These passages, together with many others scattered especially throughout *North*, reveal a wistful desire to return to the origins (the mother’s uterus), to the primordial bond between mother and child at the dawn of life, which also works as a metaphor for an ancestral communion between people and places.

Differently from King Oedipus, who is stained with the blood of his father Laius, Heaney is of course innocent of such hideous crimes, but he still seems convinced that the only way to save his beloved Island is to eliminate the ‘encumbrance’, i.e., England, his Mother’s lover. As love quickly grows into jealousy owing to the erotic pleasures that England experiences with Ireland, Heaney reacts by drawing on the child’s first stirrings of sexuality and the idea of lying with the mother. The *topos* of the discovery of the female body is indeed glaring and recurrent, as in “Bog Queen”: “My body was braille / for the creeping influences / [...] / Bruised berries under my nails, / the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis” (N, p. 25). In “Come to the Bower”, these feelings are strengthened by the eroticised manner of a voyeur: “where the dark-bowered queen, / whom I unpin, / lies waiting” (N, p. 24). In “Punishment”, the poetic I even relishes the sinuous forms of the corpses, skulls and skeletons, and savours the idea of touching them:

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging  
of her ribs.

<sup>51</sup> See this excerpt from “The Digging Skeleton. *After Baudelaire*”: “Your skinned muscles like plaited sedge / and your spines hooped towards the sunk edge / of the spade, my patient ones, // Tell me, as you labour hard / to break this unrelenting soil, / What barns are there for you to fill? / What farmer dragged you from the boneyard?” (N, p. 17).

<sup>52</sup> This is also suggested by M. SULLIVAN, “The Treachery of Wetness: Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Parturition”, p. 459.

[...]

I am the artful voyeur

Of your brain's exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all your numbered bones. (N, pp. 30-31)

This sexual discovery, made explicit by strong and direct words, is another staple of Heaney's poetry. Ever since *Death of a Naturalist*, he had looked at the land with hungry eyes. The already mentioned descriptions of the soil as a "soft pulp", a "kind, black butter // Melting and opening underfoot", with pioneers that keep striking "inwards and downwards" (DD, p. 44), cannot but be linked to images of female sexual organs and to the physicality of an intercourse, as suggested by the words "persistence", "interlacing", and "unrelenting" (N, pp. 4, 13, 17).

4. In the last part of *North's* first section, Heaney intermingles sexual and Oedipal stirrings with the history of his country, in a series of politically engaged poems. As regards the troubled scenario of colonised Ireland, C.M. Hillnan observes:

Irish destiny has been that which England has modelled and willed, and if that poor and angry land is imprisoned in time, it is by no choice of its own people. [...] This transformation of Ireland from national independence and growing self-development to feudal subservience to masters, foreign in both language and culture, was no accident of history. While the process was anything but even, it represented a conscious set of decisions and policies employed by the colonizer in order to create a dependency relationship with the "mother" country that would ensure the helplessness of the colonized to the designs of the Anglo-Saxon Irish landlord and commercial classes.<sup>53</sup>

British colonisation reached its first peak in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, the English managed to dispossess the Irish not only of their properties (seizing 85% of the land, particularly in Ulster)<sup>54</sup> but also of their language (replacing Irish Gaelic with English), culture and independence. And this is where the metaphor of Ireland as a woman expands into the rape-trope. The female is cast as the victim of an unreciprocated sexual act aiming to establish the male's dominion over the land. In this way, not only are the territory and culture subjugated by a foreign power, but also the woman's body is allegorically raped by the lustful coloniser.

The relationship of dominion and obedience between England and Ireland, then, calls to mind the well-known allegory which sees England as the male counterpart and Ireland as the female one, thus revamping the stereotypical gendering of the dominator-dominated hierarchy. But, as we have seen, Ireland is no longer the virginal woman of the past. She has become an Artemis outraged by Actaeon's contemplation of her nudity; she is like Old Norse Vigdis, seeking revenge for her rape; she is a double of Persephone, who brings

<sup>53</sup> C.M. HILLNAN, "The Subjugation and Division of Ireland: Testing Ground for Colonial Policy", *Crime and Social Justice*, 8, 1977, p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> See J. TOSH, "Rape Me, I'm Irish': An Analysis of the Intersecting Discourses of Anti-Irish Racism and Sexual Violence", *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity and Practice*, 4 (1), 2015, p. 61.

warm weather and scatters sprouting seeds when returning from the underworld; she is Nerthus herself, who demands sacrifices to ensure the continuity of life. Importantly, Heaney underlined that, during his earliest approaches to poetry writing, the feminine element was at one in his imagination with “the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain [was] drawn from the involvement with English literature” (*PR*, p. 34). Hence the paradigmatic image of Ireland’s dispossession in terms of a ‘virginal land’ violated by the English.

Before touching on a few other poems, it is worth noticing how the rhetoric of rape finds a phenomenological connection with both the natural world and the century-long political dominion over Ireland, and how this violence has been scrutinised in Heaney’s poetry since “The Tollund Man” in *Wintering Out*. Rape is blatantly linked to issues of violence and hegemonic power; most of the times, the victim is a woman, epitomising the ‘weaker sex’. Although in a deviant key, self-perpetuation drives are also involved in this kind of brutal prevarication. As a result, in a context of violence and subjugation, Ireland and England did engender an offspring capable of conveying a feeling of hope for the Irish people.

Among Heaney’s *North* poems which deal with the heinous dispossession of Ireland and with the ‘new face’ of the Isle is the sequence composed of “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, “Aisling”, and “Act of Union”. All the three texts deconstruct the paradigms of the *aisling* tradition. As a contemporary bard singing of the past, Heaney draws on the historical timeline of the brutal and strenuous colonisation of Ireland (“The ground possessed and repossessed”, *N*, p. 41) by “the tall kingdom” (*N*, p. 43), but reverses the land’s (or maid’s) reaction: Ireland is now a woman who both endures the pain inflicted on her and reacts to it as befits the Mother of a land enraged at such a persistent ravaging. It is here, in the final part of *North*, that Heaney’s Ireland comes alive as a fierce and unyielding warrior. The three poems range from the sixteenth-century conquest by Elizabeth I’s favourite corsair, Sir Walter Raleigh, to the political union between Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. Both “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” and “Act of Union”, with the interlude of “Aisling”, describe such events in the lexicon of sexual violence and rape perpetrated by male characters.

“Ocean’s Love to Ireland” (*N*, pp. 40-41) critically reflects on the historical circumstances of a plantation establishment on Irish grounds during Elizabeth I’s reign, an estate which was to develop into the Ulster plantation.<sup>55</sup> The poem abruptly opens with the unsparing submission of Ireland by Raleigh, who,

Speaking broad Devonshire  
[...] has backed the maid to a tree  
as Ireland is backed to England  
and drives inland  
till all her strands are breathless [...]. (*N*, p. 40)

The poem opens with an indictment of the brutality of colonisation, here brought about through a pitiless subjugation that robs the woman of her virginity, that is, of what she

<sup>55</sup> As underlined by Hillnan, Ulster was a particularly important settlement as well as the backdrop of the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants that, from then on, would tear Ireland apart. See C.M. HILLNAN, “The Subjugation and Division of Ireland: Testing Ground for Colonial Policy”, p. 55.

values most. The act of violence is described in terms of a power play, with Raleigh behaving despicably towards the Irish girl while “his superb crest inclines to Cynthia” (line 10) and showing a total obsequiousness to his beloved Queen.<sup>56</sup> Heaney capitalises on the disconcerting connotations of rape as, in Jemma Tosh’s words, “an adventure that would be rewarded”.<sup>57</sup> In line with many other colonisation ventures, Ireland too is ‘possessed’ in order to be transformed from an allegedly barren land into a fruitful territory.

As the poem unfolds, Ireland continues to be represented through images of a maid or a servant girl who, finding herself alone in the countryside, becomes the receiving end of male uncontrollable desire. But while any other girl might have given in to her ruined condition and miserable future, Heaney’s Island significantly “complains in Irish” (line 19). Language, and especially dialect, acquires a strength of its own and invigorates a girl who, despite the repeated violations and the failing of the Spanish Armada’s rescue (“The Spanish prince has spilled his gold / and failed her”, lines 21-22), does not feel compelled to act according to a foreigner’s rules.<sup>58</sup> Relying on the strength of her Catholic ancestors, Ireland endorses a policy of silent rebellion that looks up to the authority and dignity of her forefathers.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in “Bog Queen”, the unearthed bog woman is finally able to master her voice, speak out and use language as a weapon.

Therefore, Heaney does not depict “an inward-looking country, obsessed with the past and with a sense of inferiority”, but one that has begun “to take her place among the nations of the earth”.<sup>60</sup> In “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, Ireland ultimately goes back to her safe shelter into the ground: away from the “[r]ush-light, mushroom-flesh, / she fades from their somnolent clasp / into ringlet-breath and dew” (lines 24-26). Yet, the temporal shift from night to dawn in the last two stanzas seems to announce Ireland’s transition from the dark times of possession to the dawn of rebellion. When the sun rises, she retreats into the recesses of the land, back to Nature and her own homeplace, where she can wait for the right time to start a revolution. Through this description of Ireland’s coping with tragic events, Heaney reinforces the connection between the female agent and the land. Importantly, however, rape and subjugation now leave room for the more positive notions of resilience and of the capacity to gather strength from vulnerability.

“Aisling” testifies to Heaney’s dialectic revisitation of the *aisling* dream poems. As Coughlan contends, given that the *aisling* form focuses on a “potentially amorous encounter with allegorical content”,<sup>61</sup> Heaney’s positioning of the short poem between two politically engaged stanzas adds a different semantic nuance. The eight-line composition is a revival of an event from Greek mythology, i.e., the killing of Actaeon by Diana:

<sup>56</sup> The character of Sir Walter Raleigh is described through the lens of a sea imagery connected with the metaphor of an implacable and unrelenting force.

<sup>57</sup> J. TOSH, “Rape Me, I’m Irish’: An Analysis of the Intersecting Discourses of Anti-Irish Racism and Sexual Violence”, p. 61.

<sup>58</sup> See K.M. MOLONEY, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope*, London, University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 281.

<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to observe how Heaney himself seems to voice his own rage and need for vengeance through the words of the maid, who, again, serves as an instrument for the purposes of her ‘puppet master’, the poet.

<sup>60</sup> E. O’BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> P. COUGHLAN, “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney”, in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, p. 187.

He courted her  
with a decadent sweet art  
like the wind's vowel  
blowing through the hazels:

'Are you Diana...?'  
and was he Actaeon,  
his high lament  
the stag's exhausted belling? (*N*, p. 42)

The poem first describes a chivalric encounter where Actaeon flatters Diana by showing appreciation for her archery skills. However, the second stanza dampens any hope of a peaceful relationship between the two, as Diana does not allow him to finish his sentence but, rather, hastens to punish what she perceives as the man's insolence. If the goddess of the hunt harshly chastises those who pry into her intimacy, Heaney similarly shows no compassion for those who have perpetrated crimes against Ireland and abused of her divine pudency. Death turns out to be the obvious and sole consequence for all abusers of the island's modesty.

Taking a nearly two-century leap, Heaney's "Act of Union" plays on the word 'union', which in this poem refers both to the legislative agreement ratifying the union of the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland (*Acts of Union 1800*) and to the sexual intercourse involving the personifications of a female Ireland and a male England. With the union between the two countries being legitimised by an official Act of Parliament, Heaney switches from the metaphor of a violent rape to that of a forced and unbalanced marriage, wherein sexual intercourse is foregone and compulsory.

In this sonnet, the first-person speaker is the groom, who talks of the physical 'exploration' of his bride's body in a strongly gender-biased dramatic monologue. The choice of the sonnet form is manifestly ironic. While, traditionally, sonnets have conveyed meanings associated with love and romance, here love is replaced by the unrelenting violence of the "battering ram" (*N*, p. 43), in an atmosphere of sadistic lushness.

In a part of "Bone Dreams", another poem included in *North*, the I-speaker is similarly carried away by erotic fantasies concerning lying with the Mother and a skeleton made of "white bones" (*N*, p. 19). Here follow other passages:

## IV

[...] I hold my lady's head  
like a crystal  
and ossify myself  
by gazing: I am screees  
on her escarpments,  
a chalk giant  
carved upon her downs.  
Soon my hands, on the sunken  
fosse of her spine  
move towards the passes.

## V

And we end up  
cradling each other  
between the lips  
of an earthwork. [...] (*N*, p. 21)

The similarity between “Bone Dreams” and “Act of Union” produces uncanny effects. While the speaker in “Bone Dreams” estimates “for pleasure / her knuckles’ paving, / the turning stiles / of the elbows, / the vallum of her brow/ and the long wicket / of collar-bone” (N, p. 22), the other, England, caresses “the heaving province where our past has grown” (N, p. 43). Quite significantly, the fruit of this union is a ‘parasitical child’ which, in the interpretation of Michael Parker, is to be related to “Protestant paramilitaries, [but], as some commentators have pointed out, the I.R.A. can equally be viewed as the offspring of the rape”.<sup>62</sup> The child’s ‘obstinacy’ might be associated with the rebellious Ulster Protestants or, more in general, with the problems caused by the religious communities in Northern Ireland.<sup>63</sup> The baby’s parasitical presence and ‘ignorant little fists’ can be ironically read as just a nuisance to the mighty England, while, for Ireland, the child remains the only glimmer of hope.

The closing lines of “Act of Union” show an intermingling of the voices of England and of the poet himself as they both strive to draw a conclusion on the fate of Ireland: “No treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / and stretchmarked body, the big pain / that leaves you raw, like opened ground, again” (N, p. 44). Almost forgetful of her ability to close ranks and bring her children together with her into the recesses of the earth, in the last line of the poem Ireland is compared to a ground ripped apart. Now she is wounded, defenceless and irrevocably damaged.

By merging old myths, personal experience and social reality within the metaphor of Mother Ireland, Heaney compellingly gives voice to the complexity of his land’s political situation. By doing so, he also puts down on paper his own feelings relating to motherhood and childhood, thus strengthening the bond between his poetry and Irish history and electing ‘womanhood’ to one of the main themes in his works. While acknowledging Ireland’s sacrifice of her children and of her virginity with a view to building a better future, the poet covertly reveals some of his intimate feelings concerning the sense of belonging to the mother/land. After cutting the umbilical cord that tied him to his family home (as he moved to Belfast) and to Northern Ireland (as he moved to Co. Wicklow), Heaney seems to have been overcompensating for this split by imbuing his poetry with female agents and entities. Mother Ireland, though still flawed and imperfect owing to her violent nature and excessive attachment to her children, is in fact referred to in loving terms, and this cannot but confirm Heaney’s devotion to a land ever present in his mind and heart.

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<sup>62</sup> M. PARKER, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1993, pp. 143-44.

<sup>63</sup> See J.M. ARMENGOL, “Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney’s ‘Act of Union’ (1975)”, *Atlantis*, 23 (1), 2001, p. 15.



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