In Search of Identity in Language and Irish Geography: On Seamus Heaney's *Wintering Out*

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Seamus Heaney in his lifespan of 74 years is lauded not only for his great accomplishment in the field of poetry, but also for his translation, editing and literary criticism. Yet, when it comes to socio-political affairs, the poet is not a unanimous favorite. Far from being an influential political activist sometimes anticipated by his friends and countrymen in Ireland, Heaney resorted to his search for identities and for answers to his nation's predicament in the world of words. As a poetic collection published during the political unrest in the seventies, *Wintering Out* discloses Heaney's composition of the dialectic between the aesthetic and the historical. In this essay, the author will look into Heaney's four poems in the collection, in which the poet's linguistic as well as geographical survey of his hometown is indispensable for readers who intend to discern his attitude in the critical period of his artistic formation.

Keywords: language, geography, identities, Ireland, *Wintering Out*

Introduction

As the fourth Irish writer winning the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature, after William Butler Yeats, Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney has been regarded as one of the most successful poets in the world. Throughout his productive artistic career, *Wintering Out*, his third collection of poetry, is equally acclaimed for its achievement like most of his other collections, but more for its graphic imagery in terms of its delineation of the triangular relations among landscape, language and human beings.

Wintering Out stands in Heaney's oeuvre as his crucial transition from naturalist writing into the stage of his merging history, geography, language, and politics altogether. Specifically speaking, it sketches out Heaney's further development in his composition of poetry, and it can be seen as the poet's steppingstone to his search for personal identities. Heaney in *Wintering Out* kept nature elements found in his previous works and foresaw his conceptual formation in his later poems. The collection is crucial in terms of the fact that it establishes him thereafter as a conscientious poet searching for the balance between the weight of art and politics. Although the balance is never easy to achieve, Heaney kept his pace on this path in a self-questioning and self-criticizing gesture. This third collection brings forth a geographical and linguistic mapping of Ireland in its political history. Heaney followed his literary forerunners in locating the crucial status of language in quest of national identity. In addition, he is most celebrated for his depiction of Irish places, which stresses the distinguishing features of

Ireland in contrast with England. I will discuss in the paper that by putting political and historical realities into his discussion of language problem and Irish territory, Heaney sought to locate his national identity in poetry.

Poetic Resistance Reconsidered in the Dialectic of Aesthetic Autonomy and Political Immersion

Year 1969 is a watershed for Heaney: owing to the escalating political conflict in Northern Ireland, *Door into the Dark*, his second poetry published in the year, begins to smack of politics. His following three collections, including *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979), become more politics-involved. *Wintering Out* is, especially, “[t]he most significant departure from the previous volumes” and “a more developed sense of a political context” (O’Donoghue, 2009, p. 3). His status as one of the major poets in Ireland required him to act out manifest support for his Catholic sect. Nevertheless, Heaney was careful of this easy choice of personal stance, in spite of the fact that he once stepped out in the street and joined activist parades. He wrote the political situations in his works but refused to relegate them to black-and-white propaganda for any warring activities. Michael Molino, when speaking of Heaney’s encounter with the binary choice between artistic autonomy and political involvement in poetry, described Heaney’s exploration of

Poetic “resistance” that voiced both halves of that divided mind while avoiding the extremes of political activism and political escapism. Heaney needed to find a form of creative dialogue, an emancipating discourse that would face the realities of the ideologically motivated, violent, pragmatic political arena but would also circumvent the monologic, exclusionary, and restrictive discourses so often used by those who function in that arena. (Molino, 1993, p. 181)

Although writing in English, Heaney used it as a tool to bring out his concern for Mother Ireland. His type of resistance was different from that of combating strategies against the English side. Rather, his was to search for a compromising result of the dialectic process of the two poles, that is, the direct political immersion and apolitical estrangement. This self-positioning of oneself in betweenness was his response to those who asked him to declare his stands. Later in his *An Open Letter*, which was published in 1983 objecting to his being put into Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s edited *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, he pointed out his identity as an Irish poet instead of a British poet. Nevertheless, as early as in his *Wintering Out*, he already started his manifest declaration of this position, setting both identity and subject as his themes in his poems. His quest of national identity was not a total denial of anything belonged to the English side. As I will argue later, Heaney attempted to look for a newly formed identity which, on the one hand, supported his insistence upon not being labeled as either an English poet or a Catholic nationalist; on the other hand, enabled him to render himself mobile identities in different contextualization of social affairs in Ireland. Considered in Anthony Smith’s words, Heaney’s conception of identity-searching fits into the former’s assertion that “[c]ultural nationalisms are primarily concerned with issues of cultural identity, social harmony and moral purpose” (Smith, 2001, p. 77). Compared with political nationalism, which places emphasis upon the independence of the (quasi-)colonial states, cultural nationalisms consist more of what Heaney indeed voiced his concern. The plural of the term “cultural nationalisms” also implies that there are multiple aspects Ireland should attend to, instead of blindly groping after Molino’s abovementioned remarks of “monologic, exclusionary, and restrictive discourses so often used by those who function in [the political] arena.”

To search for the root, an etymologically geographical word, of one's culture, Heaney delved into two of the most important elements of a country—tongue and land, which are correlative with each other. He wrote in one of his crucial books of collective essays, *Preoccupations*, that “[w]e have to retrieve the underlay of Gaelic legend in order to read the full meaning of the name and to flesh out the topological record with its human accretions. The whole of Irish landscape [...] is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read” (Heaney, 1984, p. 132). He asserted his intention in these very sentences in the hope of not only to redeem the possibility of reading the land, which he thought his contemporary Irish people failed to do, but also to retrace the evolvement of Irish language under force from outside. He also tried to associate the human affiliation with the landscape of Ireland, to see how, from hundreds of years ago to the present, mankind were fostered and nurtured in this native soil. On the one hand, Heaney retrieved the past in the present, and on the other hand, he explicated his opinion for the present in comparison with the past, through his insertion of the history into the Ireland's landscape.

Henry Hart, while analyzing *Wintering Out*, validly argued that “[e]tymology was [Heaney's] archaeological tool with which he could dig to the bottom of even the most tangled metaphysical problem. All he had to do was reveal the physical objects the abstract terms referred to” (Hart, 1989b, p. 211). In the series of his place-name poems such as “Anahorish,” “Toome” and “Broagh,” in this collection, Heaney indeed presented himself as an archaeologist and tracked the encroachment upon the lands and the naming of these native lands in foreign words by Scottish planters and English invaders. The lands were existentially in Ireland but were phonemically pronounced in the combination of the Irish, English and even Scottish languages.

Wintering Out celebrates the beauty of the Gaelic language, but at the same time mourns the fading away of the language. Heaney was not only an archaeologist, as far as excavating Irish history is concerned; he was also an etymologist and geographer to a certain degree. A combination of the three, he employed the characteristics of these three identities to bring out a graphic panorama of Ireland in his poetry. As Stallworthy pointed out: “[i]n *Wintering Out* the naming of places gives Heaney magical access to his own country through the mirror of its language” (Stallworthy, 1982, p. 166). Speaking of his casual geographical survey in one of his essays titled “The Sense of Place,” Heaney commented that

All of these places now live in the imagination, all of them stir us to responses other than merely visual, all of them are instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry. [...] our sense of the place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. (Heaney, 1984, p. 132)

Landscape is no longer seen as simply visual/visible realities. It, as Heaney remarked, can be felt in imaginary/invisible abstract conceptions. In addition, the lands can draw Irish people's attachment to their national imagination. By writing the geography of the island into his poems, Heaney was able to locate his Irish identity by synthesizing the land and the poet's artistic achievement. The following four poems are cogent examples of Heaney's intension of reclaiming Irish identity by linking his mother language with the territory itself, the result of which echoes Heaney's poetic resistance.

The Trinity of an Archaeologist, an Etymologist and a Geographer

Heaney was clear in his discussion of the “sense of place”: “in Irish poetry there is a whole genre of writing called *dinnseanchas*, poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology” (Heaney, 1984, p. 131). To the non-Irish readers, these titles could be very confusing

before they go into the details of the poems. The poet's birthplace is "Anahorish" (Heaney, 1998, p. 47), which, as the first line of the namesake poem points out, means "place of clear water." Under the brisk delineation of the Ireland's landscape "where springs washed into / the shiny grass / and darkened cobblers in the bed of the lane," sits Heaney's nostalgic emotions. Once more, the recurrent hard-working scenes of his father's and his grandfather's images from the first poem in his first collection, "Digging," which is also the most frequently quoted one, emerges here in the final stanza: "With pails and barrows / those mound-dwellers / go waist-deep in mist / to break the light ice / at wells and dunghills." This is a scene in which he could hardly see in the violent times of conflict. The poet's love for his native soil also reminds himself of his native language, which has now been outweighed by the more dominant English language. This is both the poet-narrator's search for his own origin and for the origin of his mother tongue, when the language is not yet adulterated with English elements. Lloyd pointed out in his *Anomalous States* that "'Anahorish' itself becomes the adequate vocable in which the rift between the Gaelic word and its English equivalent is sealed in smooth, unbroken ground, speech of the landscape: 'Anahorish, soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow'" (1993, p. 25). Since Anahorish is an anglicized word for *anach fhiar uisce* in Gaelic (Heaney, 1984, p. 36), the word can be pronounced, if not understood, by the English easily. Consonant is often regarded by Heaney as the sound for English, while vowel for Irish (Heaney, 1984, p. 37). Here, nevertheless, the two are merged together. The inevitability of the mergence of the two and the gradual corrosion of the latter by the former becomes what the poet implies in this poem.

"Toome" (Heaney, 1998, p. 54) bears rich symbolic elements within its sixteen lines. The poet's love for the land in the previous poem goes to be symbolized into the integration of the human body and Toome the river. By transforming himself into a river, he is able to find out what is buried under the land and the bog water for "a hundred centurie[s]": "loam, flints, musket-balls, / fragmented ware, / torcs and fish-bones." His tongue becomes the tongue of the river, and the sound he pronounces becomes the murmuring voice of the stream. And in the final stanza, the river changes back into the poet himself when he feels that the "elvers tail my hair." Through the metamorphosis the poet-narrator experiences what nature experiences and also feels what it feels. However, we have as well noticed that what buried deep beneath includes, besides "ware," which symbolizes civilization, "musket-balls," which stands for sectarian violence that had happened in the past. According to Thomas Forster (1989, p. 36) and Henry Hart, Toome is the site of archaeological finds, "where prehistoric relics mingle with the musket balls of Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen, the revolutionary (and ecumenical) ancestors of the I.R.A. who fought government troops in the Rebellion of 1798" (Hart, 1989b, p. 218). Thus, the pronunciation of the name of the river "Toome" is described by the poet as "soft blasting," which also imitates the sound of the gun shot. The revisualization of the conflict or battle scenes past is triggered by Heaney's reflection on the present situation he was in, the eventful 1972: "What *Wintering Out* does is to explore the deeper structures of present hostilities, the way in which divisions of Protestant and Catholic communities are embedded in language and topography" (Morrison, 1982, p. 39). To parallel the present with the past is one of the most frequently seen methodologies in Heaney's poetry. By rendering the diachronic time into a synchronic one, he is able to investigate the violence happening in his society, and also asks his readers to judge the present political accidents in Ireland.

"Gifts of Rain" and "A New Song" tell of the deprivation of the Irish people's linguistic origin. The image of water is pervasive throughout "Gift of Rain" (Heaney, 1998, pp. 51-53). The function of water here, like the two abovementioned "Anahorish" and "Toome," serves as an assuager and companion to human beings. Yet it

functions more than that. The four sections of the verse actually mark Heaney's progression in his creative career. The first section recounts the period of the poet's exploration in his field: "he begins to sense weather / by his skin." He tries out his subjects to find things he can dedicate to in his writing. That is why he "fords / his life by sounding. / Soundings." Compared with the "Still mammal," mankind is full of worries and concerns. The mammal reminds us of Friedrich Nietzsche's remarks on the cows (1997, pp. 60-63), which seem to know only the present time of being and don't even remember the things in recent past. Animal's forgetting is what Nietzsche thinks human beings should own as well so as to get rid of too much burden from the past and move forwards to the future. However, the ability to forget is almost impossible for human beings. Even if one can selectively forget certain past events, there is no promise that it won't come back to haunt him/her again: "To let bygones be bygones is impossible in a culture wedded to the dead" (Hart, 1989a, p. 405). For Heaney, he chooses to remember by recording, or more precisely, by transforming what he sees and feels into artistic format, sometimes metaphorized or symbolized.

The second section implies the poet's facing the social and political reality. When he moves on in the uneven pavement towards poetic creation—"A man wading lost fields / breaks the pane of flood," he encounters "a flower of mud- / water blooms up to his reflection / like a cut swaying / its red spoors through a basin," which symbolizes the bloody conflict of the Irish civil war, a topic he won't cease coming back to in his poetry. At the opening of the third section, composed in the past tense, the rain continues and flows to Moyola, the river near Heaney's living place in his childhood, Mossbawn. The Moyola river so "overflowed each barrel / in long tresses" that it becomes a mother figure fostering every inhabitant on the land. Everyone is "in the shared calling of blood" since the river links together the people, dead or alive, living on this soil: "Soft voices of the dead / are whispering by the shore." Here the poet-narrator constructs a linear history of Ireland by memorizing the dead, situating the alive and anticipating the future generation—"my children"—in a horizontal line, thereby connecting the history of Ireland intimately to her native soil. In the final section, the bard once more returns to celebrate Celtic language and endows the river with the sound of the language:

The tawny guttural water
 Spells itself: Moyola
 Is its own score and consort,
 Bedding the locale

 In the utterance,
 Reed music, an old chanter
 Breathing its mists
 Through vowels and history. (Heaney, 1998, p. 53)

The "guttural" sound refers to the native language of Ireland, into which the Moyola river is symbolized. To a reed accompaniment the old mother river chants the story of her children on the land. Again, vowels, Heaney's synecdoche of the Celtic language, are amalgamated with history, whose materialization is here and elsewhere been carried out by the river. At the end of this poem, the Moyola river has become the poet's Muse and makes him another Dives, not rich in financial property but in spiritual and creative assets.

"A New Song" (Heaney, 1998, p. 58) starts with the poet's meeting "a girl from Derrygarve," a county in Northern Ireland. This accidental encounter draws him into the recollection of the territorial scenery of that place,

with a long river swerving along it. A “lost potent musk,” which seems to come from the girl, reminds the poet of another lost things—Ireland’s lands and language. Heaney’s merging the landscape right with the language here shows his great poetic craftsmanship of transformative images. The shape of the river area is transformed into a human’s mouth. The “stepping stones” around the river become “black molars” and the whole Moyola river, the same river in a similar image in “Gift of Rain,” turns into a big mouth speaking in Irish people’s stead. However, the river sings in a different kind of voice, “a new song.” It means that the “[v]anished music” of pure Irish language can not be retrieved since the change of the river’s music symbolizes that of mother tongue. Suddenly, different from the sweet tone which recounts the good old days in the first three stanzas, the last two is brought out in a rapid and urgent style of narrative. In the present tense now, he speaks of the exigency of reconsidering what his country has lost in the colonized past—both the land and the language. The poet, nonetheless, doesn’t urge his people to resort to violence. Rather, he recognizes that his mother tongue has already been blended with the foreign language of English.

But now our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts
To flood, with vowelling embrace,
Demesnes staked out in consonants. (Heaney, 1998, p. 58)

The last two sentences are reminiscent of the anglicized place-name like Anahorish. The representation of vowel as feminized Ireland and that of consonant as masculinized England come together to produce a new language. What Heaney intends to stress is not the binary oppositional confrontation between the two sides. Instead, he shows the inevitable formula of linguistic alloy under the encounter of the two cultures. This short poem is the poet’s reflection of a possible production of a blended language in such an encounter. In an interview, Heaney tried to view the result in a constructive way:

It seems to me a mistaken approach towards being an Irish poet to dismantle the melodies that are already in English. I mean, our own natural way of speaking English in Ireland is what we should be true to; we should refine our ear to pick up that key which we are tuned to. (Kinahan, 1982, p. 406)

Heaney the poet and cultural critic, though mourning for the disappeared linguistic origin, was willing to base himself in a current situation, positively reconstructing a language as a resistance tool, to disturb the hegemonic status of English language, the interventional language in the Irish tongue. If we use Daniel Ross’s words when he comments on the poet’s relationship with the language of English, we could say that “Heaney has put his own linguistic stamp on the tradition of ‘English’ poetry” (2007, p. 93). Heaney’s resistance to the total English assimilation is to quest for a negotiation with it, under the situation that the return to a prelapsarian Edenic origin of a certain language is impossible. Thus a symbiosis of the two languages is demonstrated in this verse. Heaney took Joyce as his model, employing English as a weapon not to fight English back, but to relocate oneself in the pave of identity formation:

With Joyce in his wake, Heaney’s allegories of vowels and consonants seem traditionally Irish rather than eccentrically English. Both authors treat Ireland’s Anglo-Gaelic language as a labyrinth of history’s tortuous workings. They fly over it not to escape it but to gain a more panoramic perspective of the vestige of a colonial past scarred on its walls. (Hart, 1989b, pp. 210-211)

For Joyce and Heaney alike, English doesn't replace Irish as an essential language in daily life. Instead, it has been localized as a tool to speak out Irish identity. In these poems, Heaney traced colonialism and attempted to bring his people out of this unfavorable past towards a promising future. He didn't fly overboard, like Stephan Dedalus, to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce, 1916, p. 253). He chose to remain in his motherland Ireland. Although many criticized that he left Belfast for Wicklow in the South, his decision was understandable: he refused to be forced to assert his political stance as a Catholic nationalist and also refused to be used as a political mouthpiece for the North. This, however, doesn't mean that he estranged himself from politics. Rather, Heaney intended to preserve the poetic art form as the last Pure Land free of soils of political sectarian violence. Heaney quite realized that politics is a subject matter in poetry, not the essence of it. Via poetry he expressed his concern for his nation and relocated his identity in the process of dialectic.

Conclusion

All these four poems in *Wintering Out* are typical instances of Heaney's landscapic and linguistic topic, in which the perspectives of political history are drawn in. The interwoven process of the triad—the poet, the territory and the language—becomes, in the sequence of these poems, a continuous dialectic movement which finally unfolds the history of Ireland. The connection of man to his land brings out the past history with the history today. Kinahan hit the mark on Heaney's poetry in an interview: "[i]t seems to me that [his] poems might fairly be described as a series of recoveries, with things long buried—people, events—rising back toward the surface again and again, bringing the past back into the present" (Kinahan, 1982, p. 413). Heaney's topology of Ireland in his poetry especially anatomizes the national spirit of Irish people, helping his readers dig out the constant dissonance in both religion and politics. As far as the native language is concerned, Heaney unfolds how it was being severed by the English language and how important it is for the retrieval of one's cultural and national identity, based on the crucial fact that language preserves a nation's historical development. The geographic and linguistic poems Heaney dedicates to writing so much here in the collection of *Wintering Out* not only become a pattern for his overall poetry, but also settle him as one of the most favored poets in Irish literary history.

Throughout his career of artistic creation, Heaney was always searching for his personal and national identity. Instead of acting out radically as an Anglophobic fighter, he was more like a Hegelian philosopher, bringing together the thesis of his Irish heritage of linguistic, topological and spiritual property, and the antithesis of English adulteration of Irish cultures, to achieve a synthesis of rapprochement in his poetic pieces. The poet's searching for identity is based on his recognition of a hybrid in-betweenness, in which the confrontation finds no room. And the search for identity is by no means an atavistic return to the past Ireland. Heaney's imagination and remembrance of the past is a process of his re-positioning of himself in certain socio-political contexts. That is to say, the poet intends to guide us from tenaciously reclaiming what is lost in any historical senses. In its stead, a recasting of oneself in the present with the assistance of the past through our reflection and imagination should come to the fore because, as Heaney has shown us in his poems, it is more resilient and reconciliatory, compared to the arbitrary nature of violence. The linkage of the past and the present, and the linkage of the individual and the collective, are correlative: to understand past events is necessary when it comes to reflecting on what one is now standing upon the flow of history. The present and the future join the once intervened, if not severed, line of the

past, in the building of personal identities. Linking himself with the past by shaping two of the most significant elements—language and territory—into his literary production of *Wintering Out*, Heaney was at least able to find peace from time to time on the thorny path of his predicament regarding the everlasting question of who a person living under the canopy of two divided cultures really *is*.

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