

**Translating Heaney:**  
***A Study of Sweeney Astray, The Cure at Troy, and Beowulf***

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines Seamus Heaney's approach to translation with specific reference to *Sweeney Astray*, *The Cure at Troy*, and *Beowulf*. An assessment of Heaney's translations, and the ways in which they relate to his poetry, is essential to an understanding of his work as a poet. This thesis demonstrates the centrality of translation to Heaney's oeuvre as an effective means to comment on his Northern Irish socio-political context without producing political propaganda. Translation is a valuable means for Heaney to elucidate his contemporary experience by considering it in terms of the recorded past captured within his chosen translations. Instead of comparing the three translations with their original texts, this thesis concentrates on Heaney's translations as a continuation of his own creative work and as catalysts for further poetry. The translations are explored in chronological order to allow a sense of Heaney's development as a translator and his efforts to remain critically attuned to the Northern Irish political situation. The first chapter examines Heaney's translation of the Gaelic poem *Buile Suibhne*, which is published as *Sweeney Astray*. In this first major act of translation Heaney recognises the political role that translation is able to play. He draws attention to the protagonist's sense of cultural ease in both Britain and Ireland, which he argues is exemplary for the people of Ulster and renders the narrative particularly accessible to a Northern Irish readership due to his anglicisation of the text, which is intended as a reminder to both Catholics and Protestants of their shared identity as Irishmen. The second chapter focuses on Heaney's translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*. Heaney's translation contextualises the Ancient Greek concern for personal integrity in the face of political necessity, a situation relevant to his own complex relationship with Northern Irish politics. His alterations to the text accentuate the positive aspects of the play, suggesting the very real possibility of social change within the seemingly constant violence of Northern Ireland. The third chapter explores Heaney's engagement with the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf*, as a means of coming to terms with the complex history of Irish colonisation through language. This chapter assesses Heaney's incorporation of Irish dialectal words into his translation, which lend the poem political weight, and yet prove to be contextually appropriate, rendering Heaney's *Beowulf* a masterpiece of readability and subtle political commentary.

## Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction    Translating Heaney</b>	<b>1</b>
I      Northern Ireland: “the split culture”	<b>1</b>
II     The Troubles	<b>4</b>
III    A “free state of image and allusion”	<b>14</b>
IV    “The Tollund Man”: a cultural translation	<b>16</b>
V     Heaney’s translations	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 1      <i>Sweeney Astray</i>: a “dreamself in the branches”</b>	<b>24</b>
I <i>Suibhne</i> ’s story	<b>24</b>
II     Identification: “the green man and the rural child”	<b>26</b>
III    1973 – 1983: “Heaney Astray”	<b>31</b>
IV    Sweeney’s poetry: “from lament to celebration”	<b>38</b>
V <i>Dinnseanchas</i> : the language of place and time	<b>47</b>
VI <i>Sweeney Astray</i> : anglicised accessibility	<b>53</b>
VII <i>Station Island</i> : Heaney’s poetic peregrination	<b>60</b>
VIII   Sweeney Redivivus	<b>64</b>
IX    Exposure	<b>71</b>
<b>Chapter 2      <i>The Cure at Troy</i>: rhyming “hope and history”</b>	<b>77</b>
I      Sophocles and Athenian politics	<b>77</b>
II     Heaney’s translation: <i>A Version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes</i>	<b>80</b>
III    Neoptolemus: “the moral agent”	<b>85</b>
IV    Odysseus: “the political man”	<b>90</b>
V     Philoctetes: a victim of his own self-pity	<b>92</b>
VI    The poetic connection to Heaney’s oeuvre	<b>94</b>
VII   A “presumptuous” second addition	<b>97</b>
VIII   The <i>deus ex machina</i> : “a workable conclusion”	<b>100</b>
IX    Nelson Mandela: “hope . . . with the aid of history”	<b>103</b>
<b>Chapter 3      <i>Beowulf</i>: claiming a “voice-right”</b>	<b>106</b>
I      A dream of <i>Beowulf</i>	<b>106</b>
II     The “cud of memory”: Heaney’s affinity for the <i>Beowulf</i> story	<b>115</b>
III    An engagement with “the first stratum of the language”	<b>126</b>
IV    Assailing the “word-ward”: a technical approach	<b>131</b>
V     “Heaneywulf”	<b>140</b>
VI    The “guttural” resilience of Heaney’s <i>Beowulf</i>	<b>151</b>
<b>Afterword</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>163</b>

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## Abbreviations

In order to simplify referencing of Heaney's own publications, quotations within the text of this thesis will be referenced parenthetically thus:

### Poetry Volumes

<i>DN</i>	<i>Death of a Naturalist</i> (1966)
<i>DD</i>	<i>Door into the Dark</i> (1969)
<i>WO</i>	<i>Wintering Out</i> (1972)
<i>N</i>	<i>North</i> (1975)
<i>FW</i>	<i>Field Work</i> (1978)
<i>SI</i>	<i>Station Island</i> (1984)
<i>HL</i>	<i>The Haw Lantern</i> (1987)
<i>NSP</i>	<i>New Selected Poems</i> (1988)
<i>ST</i>	<i>Seeing Things</i> (1991)
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Spirit Level</i> (1996)
<i>EL</i>	<i>Electric Light</i> (2001)
<i>DC</i>	<i>District and Circle</i> (2006)

### Translations

<i>Sweeney Astray</i>	<i>Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish</i> (1984)
<i>Cure at Troy</i>	<i>The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes</i> (1991)
<i>Sweeney's Flight</i>	<i>Sweeney's Flight</i> (1992)
<i>Beowulf</i>	<i>Beowulf: A Verse Translation</i> (2002)
"Introduction"	Translator's Introduction to <i>Beowulf</i> (2002)

### Prose Works

<i>Preoccupations</i>	<i>Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978</i> (1980)
<i>Government</i>	<i>The Government of the Tongue</i> (1988)
<i>Redress</i>	<i>The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures</i> (1995)
<i>Finders</i>	<i>Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001</i> (2002)

### Other

"Earning a Rhyme"	"Earning a Rhyme": Notes on Translating <i>Buile Suibhne</i> (1989)
"Crediting Poetry"	"Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture" (1995)
"Guttural Muse"	"The Guttural Muse": Public Lecture (2002)
"Hope and History"	"Hope and History": Graduation Address (2002)

## **Preface**

This thesis is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this thesis from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

## Introduction

### Translating Heaney

In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as a distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves

Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*

#### I Northern Ireland: “the split culture”

Seamus Heaney grew up on a fifty-acre farm in County Derry and in *Preoccupations* he notes that the political divisions within Northern Ireland were captured clearly in the very name of his own home:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and *ban* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my own home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster. (*Preoccupations* 35)

Heaney’s grasp of the metaphor that the word “Mossbawn” becomes in his analysis requires an act of translation – a creative interpretation of the very syllables that make up the name. His elucidation of the complex histories inscribed into the name of the Heaney’s family farm illustrates the integral part played by translation within his understanding of his experiences in Northern Ireland. As a boy Heaney attended the Anahorish primary school where his early academic prowess earned him a scholarship to St Columb’s College in Derry (Parker 11) and it is here that he experienced the linguistic division within his country most keenly. At St Columb’s Heaney became more aware of his rural accent, which he describes as “guttural” since it is “a word associated with the backwardness of the countryside” (“Guttural Muse” 18). Heaney recalls that “the English teacher took great delight in mocking the accent of those of us from beyond the mountain” (“Guttural Muse” 18), revealing not only the division between the rural and the urban children but the dialectal forms of English that

differentiated Catholic scholars from Protestants. As Heaney recalls in his poem, “The Ministry of Fear” (*N* 63), the common misconception was that “Catholics, in general, don’t speak / As well as students from the Protestant schools” (32–33). In order to “correct our backwardness”, Heaney remembers, the English teacher imposed a linguistic exercise: the perpetual repetition of the phrase “The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue. The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue”, in an attempt to “bring the speech forward in our mouths” and to integrate the Catholic children into the form of spoken English known as “Received Pronunciation” (“Guttural Muse” 18). While Heaney gently mocks the attempt of his Catholic teacher to iron out the particularities of accent in his rural Irish pupils, he clearly recognised the benefits of the education he received in order to prevent what he calls becoming “green to the point of regression”, which would result in “a refusal to engage with the adult reality that waits” (“Guttural Muse” 19). Accepting this education, Heaney realised, would lead to “a widening of the world and a new sense of how and where one stands in it” (“Guttural Muse” 19). Heaney recalls, however, that if a Catholic scholar adopted what was then called “an English accent” it was viewed as “a kind of betrayal of the group” (“Guttural Muse” 23). “The politics were there”, Heaney notes, “in the very phonetics” (“Guttural Muse” 23). Heaney’s wife, Marie, recalls a similar incident from her childhood when a group of Protestant children visited Ardboe on the shore of Lough Neagh:

When they arrived where we were playing, and had always played, they spread themselves out and we shied away apologetically. We, who had spent all the days of our living memory on that shore, crept off . . . We went further along the lough shore and went on playing and paddling and one girl followed us, pursued us. She said, “C’mere you two, are you two papishes?”. . . “Say the Lord’s Prayer. Go on say it, at once.”

“Our Father Who art in Heaven,” I said . . . when she heard ‘Who art in Heaven’ instead of ‘which art’ which is how they said it, she said, “You dirty wee papishes, you wee bitches, get on home.” (Devlin, in Parker 48)

The incident clearly reveals that even the most minor differences in their form of spoken English immediately placed the speakers within a particular social, religious, and political group.

Heaney went on to attend Queen’s University in Belfast where his poems started appearing in “the Queen’s literary magazines, *Q* and *Gorgon*” (Parker 24). Despite his growing command of the English language Heaney notes his conviction that “if I was to feel whole and remain convincing to myself, I still had to tune my spoken language

to “that first guttural note”, the dialectal accent of rural Derry (“Guttural Muse” 19). Heaney’s poem, “Tractors”, appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph* in November 1962 and “Turkeys Observed” was issued the next month (Parker 49). These early publications were followed by appearances in the *Kilkenny Magazine*, which printed “Mid-Term Break”, and *The Irish Times*, which featured “An Advancement of Learning” (Parker 49). Heaney recounts that “when a fashionable English magazine published a couple of my own poems in the mid-nineteen sixties, the headline they ran said ‘Poems from the Back of Beyond’” (“Guttural Muse” 18). The headline gestured towards his rural childhood and subject matter, of course, but also proved that Heaney’s faithfulness to his background, and to his Ulster vernacular, was evident in his poetry and it was this, in the eyes of the English poetry editors, that served to place him within a provincial social context quite different from their own. Heaney himself, however, has been conscious throughout his career of the importance of this difference and has not sought to eradicate it from his writing. In *Preoccupations* he clearly articulates his socio-political identity:

I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspectives of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home . . . At school I studied the Gaelic literature of Ireland as well as the literature of England, and since then I have maintained a notion of myself as Irish in a province that insists it is British. (*Preoccupations* 34–35)

Here Heaney notes his complex relationship with the English language and literary traditions. Despite speaking and writing in English, he has remained aware that the English of his “first speech” was of a particular kind (“Guttural Muse” 18). What he calls the “guttural note” is an essential aspect of “self-formation and identity building” for Heaney and he recalls an early recognition that staying true to himself involved standing his ground “in the home place and in particular its local speech” (“Guttural Muse” 19). If his talents opened the doors to the wider world beyond his rural beginnings Heaney never allowed his education to rob him of his rootedness in County Derry culture and as a poet he has remained true to this identity despite his immersion in the English linguistic world. This has not meant, however, that he has allowed his identity to circumscribe his response to the political violence of Northern Ireland. A major part of Heaney’s struggle to find his own voice as a poet involved discovering a means to adequately express his particular viewpoint without becoming

a political mouthpiece for the Northern Irish Catholic cause. The focus of this introduction will be to demonstrate the centrality of translation, in both its linguistic and cultural forms, to Heaney's work as a whole and how it is an effective means by which he is able to comment on his own socio-political context without becoming involved in the production of political propaganda.

## II      The Troubles

The Troubles, as they are commonly known, are rooted in a complex and interrelated history of politics, religion, and language. A full account of this history is beyond the scope of this study but a basic understanding of these issues is necessary to appreciate Heaney's work as a poet. I will thus briefly sketch an outline of the historical events that initiated the volatile situation in Northern Ireland into which Heaney was born.

Although officially an English colony since the Norman invasion in AD 1169, Ireland only experienced the full impact of British rule when Henry VIII assumed the title of "King of Ireland" in 1541 (Palmer 11). The English population in Ireland at this time was concentrated in the areas surrounding Dublin but during the course of Henry's reign English law was extended to encompass the whole island, "ending its effective partition into Gaelic and English jurisdictions" (Palmer 11).<sup>1</sup> Henry introduced a policy of "unification by assimilation" (Palmer 11) in order to integrate the native population into the emerging English society within Ireland. Henry's policies were fortified during the reign of Edward VI, whose additional policies included "thoroughgoing religious reform" in order to homogenise the population in the name of a single faith (Palmer 13). The native Irish could not, however, be easily converted to Protestantism unless they could understand the language of their English colonisers. Anglicisation of the Gaelic-speaking population was thus "intimately bound up with the ideologies that legitimised colonisation and shaped its unfolding" (Palmer 14). Edward understood that "linguistic conformity promoted political compliance" (Palmer 136) and by the time Elizabeth I came into power in 1558, the government had resorted to anglicisation "by force" (Palmer 13).

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with common critical practice Gaelic and Irish will be used interchangeably within this thesis, both in terms of culture and language.

In 1609 Scottish, English, and Welsh settlers arrived in Northern Ireland to take possession of the large tracts of land offered to them under the reign of James I. The “plantation of Ulster”, as it is commonly known, rapidly increased the English-speaking population in Ireland and forms the basis of present day Northern Ireland’s Protestant majority (Brams and Togman 33). The settlers ensured the promotion of Protestantism and the English language in Ireland while simultaneously serving to dispossess the native Catholics of their land, thereby solidifying English political control of the island. John Darby argues that the outlines of the current conflict in Northern Ireland can be seen within the dynamics of the plantation: “the same territory was occupied by two hostile groups, one believing the land had been usurped and the other believing that their tenure was under constant threat of rebellion. They often lived in separate quarters. They identified their differences as religious and cultural as well as territorial” (Darby “Conflict” n.pag.).<sup>2</sup> The “plantation” proved chillingly effective and Darby notes that by “1778 less than 5 percent of the land of Ulster was still in the hands of the Catholic Irish” (Darby “Conflict” n.pag.).

The Catholic population was further dispossessed of its land, and increasingly marginalised as a social group, when the first of the Irish Penal Laws were passed by the Protestant parliament of Ireland in 1695 (“What is Irish?” n.pag.). The official intention of the Laws was to pressure the colonised population into conversion to Protestantism and thereby assimilate them into English culture since the only means by which a Catholic might avoid the oppressive effects of these laws was to convert (“Laws for the Suppression of Popery” n.pag.). A brief summation of the Penal Laws suggests something of their sinister effect:

- 1.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden the exercise of his religion.
- 2.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to receive education.
- 3.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to enter a profession.
- 4.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to hold public office.
- 5.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to engage in trade or commerce.
- 6.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to live in a corporate town.
- 7.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to own a horse of greater value than 5 pounds.
- 8.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to purchase land.
- 9.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to lease land.
- 10.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to vote.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the first of several references taken from the CAIN website, which was initially developed between 1996 and 1997 by the University of Ulster, the Queen’s University of Belfast, and the Linen Hall Library, Belfast. CAIN (an acronym for Conflict Archive on the Internet) is composed of source materials taken from existing publications, commissioned works and progressive research papers dealing with the numerous facets of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The CAIN project is maintained by Dr Martin Melaugh of the University of Ulster.

- 11.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to keep any arms for his protection.
- 12.) The Irish Catholic was forbidden to hold a life annuity.
- 13.) He could not be a guardian to a child.
- 14.) He could not attend Catholic worship (and would be fined for missing the Protestant service).
- 15.) He could not himself educate his child.
- 16.) It was against the law to speak or write in the Irish language. ("Penal Laws" n.pag.)

The Penal Laws were introduced in the years following the defeat of James II by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne ("Irish Potato Famine" n.pag.). James was deposed by his daughter (and wife of William), Mary II, due to widespread dissatisfaction with his public support of Catholicism since his conversion to the faith in 1669 ("Penal Laws" n.pag.). During his reign James attempted to introduce freedom of religion for Catholics and as a consequence gained extensive popularity amongst the Irish. James fled to Ireland after he was deposed in order to rally support for the reclamation of his crown, which threatened the authority of Protestant rule in Ireland. The Penal Laws were passed after James' defeat to serve a single purpose: "to disenfranchise the native majority from all power, both political and economic" ("Laws for the Suppression of Popery" n.pag.) and to degrade the Irish so severely that "they would never again be in a position to seriously threaten Protestant rule" ("Irish Potato Famine" n.pag.). Instead of propagating Henry's early ideals of "unification by assimilation" the Penal Laws served, rather, to drive a firm wedge of division between the impoverished Catholics and the privileged Protestants of Ireland.

The "plantation of Ulster"; the Williamite Wars of 1689-91; and the enactment of the Penal Laws, cumulatively served to eliminate the native Irish ruling classes ("What is Irish?" n.pag.). The Irish-speaking nobility of the island were simply replaced by an English-speaking aristocracy, known as the "Ascendancy", and as such the English language became the "sole language of government and public institutions" ("What is Irish?" n.pag.). This seemingly inexorable shift to English was not limited to the political sphere, however. As the Penal Laws were slowly relaxed towards the end of the eighteenth century, social and economic mobility became possible for the native Irish. As a result, the more prosperous members of the Irish-speaking community began to conform to the prevailing middle-class ethos by voluntarily adopting English as their spoken tongue.

In an attempt to secure direct control over Irish affairs the Irish parliament and government were abolished by an Act of Union, signed on 1 August 1800 by King George III (Darby "Conflict" n.pag.). The Act was approved by the Irish parliament,

which was comprised wholly of Protestants, and political control of Ireland was handed over to Westminster. On 1 January 1801 the United Kingdom of England and Ireland was born (Walsh n.pag.). The Act of Union benefited Protestants in the North Eastern corner of Ireland most where industries such as linen mills, shipyards and metal works expanded due to financial investment from England, which brought untold prosperity to their communities (Walsh n.pag.). Religious affiliation was no longer just an indicator of cultural identity but became a marker of political and economic power.

The Irish language gradually began to be associated with poverty and economic deprivation (“What is Irish?” n.pag.). The Gaelic-speaking population of Ireland soon consisted almost entirely of “an impoverished rural population”, which was decimated by the Great Famine that devastated Ireland in 1845 (“What is Irish?” n.pag.). In the mass migrations which followed the famine the Irish language became ever more closely associated with the rural poor and was regarded as an impediment to progress and economic improvement. There was a conviction held by many that “English was necessary to get ahead, particularly for emigrants” (“What is Irish?” n.pag.). Ireland, by this point, had not only been colonised geographically and culturally but had now been deprived of her own language.

After the union with Britain several bodies emerged urging revolt against the imperial powers. The most significant of these was the Irish Republican Brotherhood, formed in 1858, whose expressed aim was to “overthrow British rule in Ireland and to create an Irish Republic” (“The Irish War of Independence” n.pag.). The first of these rebellions failed in 1867 due to poor planning but by 1914 plans to revolt against British rule were once more under way. In accordance with the old Republican adage, “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity”, the members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood decided that there must be an Irish insurrection before the end of Britain’s war with Germany (“Easter 1916” n.pag.). The plan was to “seize certain key points in the city (Dublin) and hold these for as long as possible, thus disrupting British control of the capital” in the hopes that Britain would realize that she would never maintain complete political control of Ireland (“Easter 1916” n.pag.).

The Easter Rising, as it has become known, began on Monday 24 April 1916 but seemed doomed to failure almost before it had started. On 21 April 1916 Sir Rodger Casement, who had been responsible for securing weapons for the Rising, was arrested before landing the shipment of German arms intended for the rebel Irish

forces. Despite this set back, several strategic buildings in Dublin were captured by the Irish Republicans, most notably the General Post Office in Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street), which was seized by Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and Michael Collins among others. It was here that a green flag emblazoned with the name "Irish Republic" was raised while Pearse proceeded to read aloud the "Irish Republic Proclamation" in which he announced "the creation of a provisional government of the new Irish Republic", known as the Dail Eireann ("Easter 1916" n.pag.).

The Rising was short lived, however, due to the massive influx of British troops and the continual bombardment of central Dublin by a British Naval vessel. Pearse and Connolly surrendered unconditionally on Saturday 29 April 1916, less than a week after the Rising had begun, and were executed in the Kilmainham Jail in Dublin along with twelve other leaders of the Rising after a swift court-martial ("Easter 1916" n.pag.). Although the majority of Irish citizens had initially been against the Rising, the British murder of its leaders and the military abuses against Irish civilians during the conflict turned public opinion in favour of the Republican cause. The Rising itself had failed but the support it created amongst the Irish population for the formation of an Irish Republic proved far stronger than its leaders could ever have hoped. After the events of Easter 1916 "permanent English rule in Ireland became an impossibility" ("Easter 1916" n.pag.).

The Easter Rising was a major catalyst for the Irish War of Independence, which started in January of 1919, when the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army began a guerrilla campaign against the British government in Ireland. The combined forces of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, which were by this time known as the Irish Republican Army, directed their attacks primarily against the Royal Irish Constabulary who were viewed by the IRA as the eyes and ears of the British government. The IRA stated that they would treat "the armed forces of the enemy – whether soldiers or policemen – exactly as a national army would treat the members of an invading army" and considered themselves to be in a "perpetual state of war" against the enemies of the new Republic ("Easter 1916" n.pag.). Continued IRA attacks on the RIC police barracks forced them to withdraw into larger towns for safety, leaving large areas of the countryside under Republican control ("The Irish War of Independence" n.pag.). The British responded to these IRA attacks by banning the newly formed Dail Eireann (the provisional government of the Irish Republic) and Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) and increased their military and police

presence within Ireland. These additional British forces, comprised mainly of ex-military men, became notorious for their violent reprisals against Irish citizens in response to IRA attacks on British soldiers. Britain came to understand that the direct military methods employed were effectively uniting Ireland against her and the War of Independence in Ireland ended with a truce signed on 11 July 1921 (“The War of Independence” n.pag.). The peace talks held between representatives of Sinn Fein and the British government in the relative peace of the cease fire led to the end of British rule in 26 of the 32 Irish counties. In the months following the truce Ireland was officially partitioned following the signing of the “Anglo-Irish Treaty” on 6 December 1921 where Northern Ireland was separated from the Irish Free State - which was recognised as the Republic of Ireland in 1949 - and became a part of the United Kingdom (Arthur and Jeffery 109).

This complex history of religious, political, linguistic and economic segregation resulted in the divided Ireland of the twentieth century, comprising a Catholic majority in the South that makes up the Republic of Ireland and a Protestant majority in the North, known as Northern Ireland, or Ulster, which sought to remain under British rule. Political attitudes in Northern Ireland commonly mirror religious affiliation “with Catholics generally favouring a united Ireland and Protestants supporting the maintenance of the link with Britain” (Whyte 343).

Heaney was born on 13 April 1939 and grew up in Northern Ireland where the Catholic minority had long been discriminated against by a Protestant majority who remained politically dominant. As Darby notes: “on many indicators of socio-economic disadvantage – employment, education and health-care provisions – Catholics experienced higher levels of need or disadvantage than Protestants” (Darby “Northern Ireland” n.pag.).<sup>3</sup> The discrimination was especially apparent in Derry, which was governed by a “City Corporation which was dominated by Unionist Councillors” despite the fact that Derry had a clear Catholic majority amongst its population (“The Derry March” n.pag.). Derry suffered from particularly high rates of unemployment and many believed that the Stormont Government<sup>4</sup> was “deliberately under-investing” in the area because of the high proportion of Catholics living there. The government, for example, did little to address the massive influx of unemployed

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<sup>3</sup> Fionulla McKenna notes that in 1971 “only 63 percent of Catholic homes had hot water, a fixed bath or shower, and an inside WC, as opposed to 72 percent of Protestant homes”. (McKenna n.pag.)

<sup>4</sup> The Northern Irish Government sanctioned by the British parliament in Westminster.

Catholics after the closure of the Great Northern Railway Line and British Sound Reproducers Ltd, a major employer in the district (“The Derry March” n.pag.). The controversy reached a climax when the construction of the New University of Ulster was allocated to the town of Coleraine instead of Derry. Having spent his formative years in and around Derry, Heaney would have experienced many of these social imbalances first-hand.

The “Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association” was founded on 1 February 1967 by the Catholic minority in order to demand liberal reforms in Northern Ireland’s political system. The demands were focussed on discrimination against Catholics in the allocation of jobs and public housing, which were most often allocated to Protestants, and the gerrymandering of local-government boundaries, which ensured Unionist dominance in the local councils (Arthur and Jeffery 5). The founding of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was accompanied by demonstrations and marches against the abuses in Northern Ireland (Whyte 344). The first civil rights march, which took place on 24 August 1968 in Dungannon, was a peaceful event unlike its successor in Derry, on 5 October 1968, which resulted in rioting throughout the Catholic Bogside area of the city after the Royal Ulster Constabulary attacked the protestors (Arthur and Jeffery 5). Heaney recalls during a graduation address at Rhodes University in August 2002:

When the Royal Ulster Constabulary baton-charged a civil rights march in the city of Derry on 5 October 1968, they set in motion a chain of violent events that has not yet completely run its course. The rights and wrongs that set those events in motion don’t concern me here, except to say that there were indeed rights and wrongs involved, and to say further that when those wronged by an administration that was rigged against them, that is to say the Catholic minority, when they began to be represented by a campaign of violence waged by the Provisional IRA, the moral colours began to run. At that point, when the baton charge was answered by the IRA bombing, the clear divide between the right and the wronged began to blur. (“Hope and History” 14)

The Royal Ulster Constabulary proved unable to cope with the escalating riots in Derry and Belfast and when the demonstrations reached a peak in mid-August 1969 the Northern Irish government in Stormont sought the assistance of the British military (Whyte 344). The British army was rapidly deployed in “a ‘peacekeeping’ role on 15 August 1969” in order to address the “immediate and urgent crisis” (Arthur and Jeffery 10). The violence escalated over the next two years, however, and saw the renewal of IRA offensive attacks against the Protestants and the British military forces deployed in Northern Ireland, and in 1971 the first British soldier was killed by

the IRA (Arthur and Jeffery 110). While the IRA was primarily a defensive organization, claiming descent from the Old IRA of 1919-1921, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, who split from the IRA during the turbulent political climate of 1969, pursued a more aggressive campaign against the Northern Irish state. The PIRA emerged with “the stated aim of removing the British from Northern Ireland, protecting Catholics from Loyalist sectarian attacks, and to the unification of Ireland by force” (“The Provisional Irish Republican Army” n.pag.).<sup>5</sup>

Republican paramilitary activities took the form of frequent civilian bombings that clearly impacted on Heaney’s life. While he recalls the bomb-disposal squad that attempted to defuse an unattended bundle of books belonging to one of his colleagues in the “Queen’s University staff common room” (*Preoccupations* 31), the anxieties of the time were often far more serious. The poet found himself in a Belfast Marks & Spencer store during a bomb scare while his wife, Marie, was later accosted by security guards for carrying “a timing device . . . an old clock from an auction” in her Robinson and Cleaver shopping bag (*Preoccupations* 31). Heaney notes that Marie narrowly missed the effects of someone else’s timing device a few days before “when an office block in University Road exploded just as she got out of range” (*Preoccupations* 32). The tension and emotional exhaustion of the period is brought sharply into focus by Heaney in *Preoccupations*, in the section entitled “Belfast”, in which he describes his “weary twisted emotions that are rolled like a ball of hooks and sinkers in the heart” (*Preoccupations* 30).

In retaliation against Republican attacks the Northern Irish government, with the approval of Westminster, introduced internment in August 1971, a political strategy that legalised the incarceration of suspected members of paramilitary groups without trial (Whyte 346). Between 9 August 1971 and 5 December 1975, 1981 people were detained. Of those arrested, however, 1874 were Catholic while only 107 were Protestant (Bew and Gillespie “1968-1999” n.pag.). Over three hundred Catholics were interned initially, most of whom subsequently proved not to be associated with the Republican paramilitaries and had to be released. Catholic anger against the internments increased when the severe brutality accompanying the incarcerations was uncovered. The situation came to a head during a demonstration in Derry against the

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<sup>5</sup> Separating the activities of the IRA and the PIRA is necessarily difficult considering the secrecy under which both organisations operated. As such further references to their operations will be combined under the heading of Republican paramilitary activities.

internments. The killings of “Bloody Sunday”, when thirteen Catholics were killed by the British Army on 30 January 1972, have come to epitomise Irish sectarianism. The Republican forces replied with a massacre of their own: nineteen bombings in Belfast that left nine dead and 130 injured (Arthur and Jeffery 110). In response to these attacks the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Union stepped up their activities in Northern Ireland, which resulted in the reprisal killing of Catholics (Whyte 347). Having introduced internment as a last attempt to impose control, the local Northern Irish government proved itself unable to handle the escalating violence. As a result, the Northern Irish government was suspended under “the Government of Ireland Act” and replaced with direct rule from Westminster once more (Darby “Conflict” n.pag.). By the end of 1972, 468 people had been killed as a direct result of political violence in Northern Ireland.

Heaney describes his own complex feelings towards the violence in *Preoccupations* where he notes:

I am fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung at one moment by the long tail of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror. (*Preoccupations* 30)

The personal impact of the Troubles in Heaney’s own life is often recorded directly in his poetry. In his poem “Casualty” (*FW* 21), for example, he recalls the actual graffiti written on the walls in the Bogside area of Derry documenting the horror of “Bloody Sunday”: “PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said, / BOGSIDE NIL” (43–44). In this same poem Heaney presents a tender recollection of his friend, whom Hart identifies as “Louis O’Neill” (Hart 135), who was out after curfew and killed in a Republican bomb blast.

Although the IRA believed that political change in Northern Ireland was only possible through the use of force they were partly responsible for bringing the violence to an end by peaceful means, beginning with the 1981 hunger-strikes. The End of Special Category Status Prisoners was announced on 1 March 1976, which meant that all Irish prisoners would be treated equally regardless of the alleged political motivations of their crimes. In protest at the End of Special Category Status Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, announced:

As further demonstration of our selflessness and the justice of our cause, a number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger-strike to the death unless the British Government abandons its criminalisation policy and meets our demands. (Beresford n.pag.)

Bobby Sands, the leader of the IRA at the time, was incarcerated in the Maze Prison when he began his hunger-strike on 1 March 1981, a significant date since it marked the fifth anniversary of the ending of Special Category status for political prisoners.<sup>6</sup> Sands was soon joined in his hunger-strike by members of the IRA and other Republican paramilitary groups, who were protesting the fact that political prisoners were treated the same as common criminals. Their demands included the right to wear civilian clothing, the right to free association within a block of cells, the right not to do prison work, the right to recreational and educational facilities and the right to the restoration of lost remission of sentence (Bew and Gillespie “1968-1993” n.pag.). Public support for the hunger strikers became evident when Bobby Sands was elected a Member of Parliament during a by-election for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat on 11 April 1981 while still in prison. After refusing food for 66 days Sands died on 5 May 1981. An estimated 100 000 people attended his funeral (“The Hunger Strike of 1981” n.pag.). By the time the hunger-strike was called off by Sinn Fein ten men had given their lives. As a direct result of the hunger-strikes Catholic support for Sinn Fein increased dramatically and fears arose in the British government that the party might overtake the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as the main representative of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. This was a key turning point which led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (Bew and Gillespie “1968-1999” n.pag.) and more importantly changed Republican attitudes to the efficacy of the ballot box in bringing about social change in Northern Ireland.

Approximately 3 200 people have died in Northern Irish political violence since 1969, with an estimated 20 000 injured, a considerable figure when compared to the total Ulster population of 1.5 million (Brams and Togman 33). In anticipation of peace talks with the British Government “the IRA announced a unilateral ceasefire” on 31 August 1994, which resulted in seventeen months of relative political stability in Northern Ireland (Stevenson 46). The British Government insisted on the complete

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<sup>6</sup> On 14 September 1976 Kieran Nugent, an incarcerated member of the IRA, refused to wear prison clothing in reaction to the criminalisation of political prisoners, choosing to wear a blanket instead. Nugent was joined by many in what became known as the “Blanket Protest”, which lasted until 2 March 1981 when they called off their protest so as not to distract attention from the hunger-strikes which had recently begun. (“The Hunger Strike of 1981” n.pag.)

disarmament of the IRA before the peace talks began, however, which led to a resumption of the IRA bombing campaign in February 1996, with detonations in London and the British Army headquarters in Northern Ireland (Brams and Togman 32). The stepped-up bombing campaign quickly brought peace talks to a head and had many journalists commenting on how Sinn Fein “bombed its way to the negotiating table” (Clarity, in Bram and Togman 38). Despite the unusual circumstances leading to the peace talks, the Governments of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and the Northern Irish political parties signed a historic peace treaty on 10 April 1998, which has become known as “The Good Friday Agreement” (Stevenson 41). The tangible benefits of this agreement became apparent on 28 July 2005 when the IRA made a detailed statement of its intentions to return Northern Ireland to a peaceful state:

The leadership of Oglaiġ na hEireann has formally ordered an end to the armed campaign. This will take effect from 4pm [1600 BST] this afternoon [Thursday 28 July 2005].

All IRA units have been ordered to dump arms.

All Volunteers have been instructed to assist the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means. (“Irish Republican Army” n.pag.)

### III A “free state of image and allusion”

Heaney’s carefully considered political position within the complexities of Northern Irish politics is captured clearly in his poem “Sandstone Keepsake” (SI 20). Barbara Hardy notes that the subject of the poem, a russet sedimentary stone, was “picked up in a lough which separates the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland and the political world of civil war and rebellion”, which identifies an essential tension in Heaney’s life (Hardy 161). Neil Corcoran elucidates Heaney’s position when he notes that the “shingle beach on Inishowen” (7) “is at the opposite side of Lough Foyle from the Magilligan internment camp” (Corcoran 158) where suspected IRA activists or sympathisers were interned without trial during the Troubles. Heaney is thus situated in the natural world between the imprisoned Catholic minority and the controlling Protestant majority of Ulster. Heaney states in the poem that while wading in the lough he finds himself “staring across at the watch-towers / from my free state of image and allusion” (18–19). Heaney’s “free state” is not confined to his physical

location but significantly refers to his position within poetry from where he is allowed the freedom to comment on the Troubles without the entrapments of being politically partisan.

The poem also reveals Heaney's tendency to question the efficacy of his poetry, when he states that he is "not about to set times wrong or right" (23) and yet the imagery he deploys in his poetry serves a distinctly political purpose. In an interview with Robert Druce, Heaney justifies his political poetic stance by arguing that:

it wasn't the artist's function just to be liberal and deplore it, but if you believed in one set of values over the other, to maintain those values in some way. You needn't necessarily maintain that belief by writing political poetry or writing deploring the army . . . But I think you can write about, or out of a sensibility or a set of images which imply a set of values. (Heaney, in Hart 50)

The complexities of Northern Irish sectarianism are clearly captured in the images of the poem, especially when "light after light / came on silently round the perimeter / of the camp" (8–10) where Heaney knows "innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated" (*Preoccupations* 34). Heaney also creates a vivid metaphor of the personal experience of Northern Ireland's bloody conflict when he describes the sandstone as "the wet red stone / in my hand" (17–18), implying that the bloodshed of Northern Ireland is on the hands of all involved.

Hart notes that many critics feel that Heaney's poetry should be a more "transparent window on the Irish turmoil around it" but Heaney has remained unwilling to become a political mouthpiece (Hart 77). His reluctance is evident in his poem "The Flight Path" (*SL* 22), in which a militant Catholic acquaintance demands: "When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us?" (30–31). Heaney's quick response: "If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself" (31–32) epitomises the poet's preference for writing poetry from a personal perspective rather than from the perspective of political propaganda. Avoiding direct political judgements in his poetry to a large degree and exploring political violence more broadly, often through the lens of myth and history, enables Heaney to retain his autonomy while coming to a clearer understanding of his position as both poet and Irishman in a volatile social situation.

Heaney is unfairly accused of having no political stance, however, since his stance is clearly defined throughout his poetry, a poetry that remains characteristically "descriptive instead of prescriptive, emotionally rather than legislatively involved in

the political turmoil of Ireland” (Hart 75). In conversation with Karl Miller, Heaney has argued that “you hold your own politically by doing a good job” (Miller 52), realising that in expressing his own experience of Northern Ireland’s Troubles through his poetry is the best way for him to serve the political needs of his country. So, while Heaney’s poetry is admittedly not efficacious in a practical sense, the individual perspective that it conveys reveals more clearly to his readers, an audience that is not limited to Irishmen alone, the complexities of Northern Irish violence.

#### IV “The Tollund Man”: a cultural translation

In considering Heaney’s poetic response to the violent political situation in Northern Ireland Malvern van Wyk Smith compares his efforts to the poets writing in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1970s and 80s. Van Wyk Smith recalls that some, “confusing poems with petrol bombs, thought that a verbal shotgun approach would do” but notes that their “efforts were mostly hysterical then and are unreadable now” (van Wyk Smith 11). It is precisely this type of direct response to the sectarian violence that Heaney’s poetry seeks to avoid. Heaney recalls that during the Troubles:

poets were needy for ways in which they could honestly express the exacerbations of the local quarrel without turning that expression into just another manifestation of the aggressions and resentments which had been responsible for the quarrel in the first place. (“Earning a Rhyme” 15)

In Heaney’s encounter with P. V. Glob’s book, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, he found a way to comment on the Troubles that could in no way be seen as adding fuel to the political fire: his primary concern was to find a means of acknowledging the presence of the violence in all its complexity. Heaney began this practice in his exploration of the bog bodies uncovered in Jutland in Denmark.

“The Tollund Man” (WO 47), from *Wintering Out*, for example, finds the poet exploring the contemporary Irish situation, during the height of Northern Irish violence in 1972, through the lens of Scandinavian history. The poem draws parallels between the ritual sacrifice of an iron-age man found by turf cutters in a Danish peat bog and the brutal deaths of the victims of Northern Irish violence. Heaney’s beatific

portrayal of the Tollund man, describing the “mild pods of his eye-lids” (3), reposing in the museum at “Aarhus” (1), conveys a sense of the iron-age man’s dignified acceptance of his death. The man was sacrificed as a “Bridegroom” (12) to Nerthus, the earth goddess, and fed a last meal “of winter seeds” (7), in order to ensure the fertility of the year ahead. The preserving quality of the peat bogs transforms his corpse into what Heaney describes as “a saint’s kept body” (16), attributing no small measure of religious potency to the Tollund man.

In the second section of the poem Heaney takes the body out of its initial context and considers it in the light of the Northern Irish situation. Although “The Tollund Man” cannot be viewed as a linguistic translation, I would argue that it may be viewed as a cultural translation. To translate, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, is to “express the sense (of words or text) in another language” but translation is also defined as to “move from one place or situation to another”. In Heaney’s poem the mythology inherent in the sacrificial corpse has been moved into a Northern Irish context, allowing a complex blend of interpretation and identification in which the poet portrays a resolution for the violence in his own land. Heaney starkly juxtaposes the Tollund man’s gently anticipated death with the savage and unexpected deaths of sectarian violence. Unlike the immaculately preserved body of the Tollund man the victims of the Troubles barely retain their humanity and can only be identified as the “Flesh of labourers” (26), “Stockinged corpses” (27), and the “Tell-tale skin and teeth / Flecking the sleepers / Of four young brothers, trailed / For miles along the lines” (29–32). The ritual and solemnity that accompanied the Tollund man’s death are entirely absent from the sectarian deaths, suggesting the senselessness of their sacrifice. Heaney considers drawing on the power invested in the Tollund man to “pray / him make germinate” (23–24) the tattered remains of the Irish youths, in his hope that this might bring about a positive yield in the Irish political future, but understands that their deaths have ultimately been in vain.

In the third section Heaney admits that he feels at home “In the old man-killing parishes” (42) of Denmark, an association emphasised by his allocation of a Christian label to the pagan setting. Heaney’s affinity for the bog body inheres in his own experience of violence in Northern Ireland and as such highlights the paradox that “parishes” are intimately associated with violent death. The religious divide of Ulster and its conflict is captured in this final image and yet Heaney apportions blame to neither side of the conflict. His focus on the two-thousand-year old body, and the

mythological significance of the Tollund man's death, enables Heaney to offer a new perspective on Northern Irish society without inciting further violence.

## V Heaney's Translations

Heaney notes of his creative processes in *Preoccupations* that "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" (*Preoccupations* 34). Ovidio Carbonell argues similarly of translations that a "text is chosen in the first place" because the translator has in some sense "discovered" it (Carbonell 86), revealing a deeply personal significance in each of the works that Heaney has chosen for translation. In the summer of 1972, soon after the violence in Northern Ireland reached its peak, Heaney resigned from his academic post at Queen's University and moved with his family to the woods of Glanmore in County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland (*Preoccupations* 13). While the move was criticised by many it is clear that Heaney was not moving away from the North in order to escape it but rather to gain a clearer poetic perspective on the political situation. It is here too that Heaney's activity as a translator of other works began as he embarked on an English translation of the Gaelic narrative poem *Buile Suibhne*. Heaney discovered in this Gaelic text a character with whom he could readily identify as a young poet seeking objectivity away from the violence of the North and I will consider this relationship in detail in the first chapter. While Heaney completed this first translation by 1973, he was dissatisfied with the result, and so abandoned the manuscript only to make another attempt at the text a decade later. Translation itself, however, continued to prove a valuable means for what Heaney, speaking of the function of poetry in general, said was "to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past" (*Preoccupations* 60) and the prevalence of translation within his oeuvre reveals the importance of this activity to his work as a poet.

The first published example of translation in Heaney's work is to be found in *Field Work* (1979) where he offers lines from Dante's *Purgatorio*, I, 100–103 as an epigraph to his poem "The Strand at Lough Beg" (*FW* 17). The same volume is concluded by his rendering of Canto XXXII and XXXIII of Dante's *Inferno*, which he entitles

“Ugolino” (FW 61). *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney’s second attempt at translating the Gaelic narrative poem *Buile Suibhne*, was published in 1984, and concerns the events surrounding the banishment of the Gaelic king Sweeney who was cursed with madness for his assault on a Catholic cleric. In 1987 Heaney’s poem “A Ship of Death” (HL, 20) appeared in *The Haw Lantern*. The poem, which deals with the ship-burial of Shield Sheafson,<sup>7</sup> is an example of the poet’s early attempts at translating *Beowulf*. Heaney introduces *Seeing Things* (1991) with his translation of the *Aeneid*, Book VI, lines 98–148, entitled “The Golden Bough” (ST 1), while his translation of Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 82–129, entitled “The Crossing” (ST 111), concludes the same volume. *The Cure at Troy* (1991), Heaney’s version of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, dramatises the predicament of Philoctetes, the famous Greek archer who is stranded on the island of Lemnos. The warrior is marooned because of his wounded foot at the beginning of the Trojan War but he possesses a bow necessary for Troy’s downfall and the Greek commanders return to the island to secure his support. The play focuses on the conflict between personal morality and political expediency. *The Midnight Verdict* (1993) is Heaney’s rendering of Brian Merriman’s satire *Cuirt an Mhean-Oiche* (*The Midnight Court*), originally composed in 1780 (O’Brien 281). The poem recounts a story from Gaelic mythology, set in County Clare, in which the fairy queen of Munster, Aíobheall, summons the men of the village to court for failing to perform their conjugal duties (*Redress* 41). Heaney describes Aíobheall’s court as “fair and just and incorruptible, a dream court which momentarily redresses the actual penal system under which the native population have to endure”, thus suggesting its relevance to contemporary Northern Ireland (*Redress* 41). “The First Words” (SL 38) in the *Spirit Level* (1996) is Heaney’s translation of a Romanian poem by Marin Sorescu. Heaney’s much-heralded translation of *Beowulf* appeared in 1999. As Kevin Kiernan notes, *Beowulf* may be described as “the earliest English epic” (Kiernan 197), and is concerned with a Geatish warrior of this name who sails to the land of the Danes in order to rid them of a demon named Grendel. Beowulf destroys Grendel and is then forced to confront the demon’s mother whom he slays in her underwater lair. Returning home from his journey Beowulf is confronted by a dragon, who dies by his hand, but he receives a mortal wound in the process. Heaney’s translation of the Czech folk tales written by Ozeň Kalda followed in 2000 and is entitled *Diary of One*

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<sup>7</sup> Heaney’s rendering of the Scandinavian name of the Danish King, *Scyld Scefing*.

*Who Vanished: A song cycle by Leos Janacek of Ozef Kalda.* Leos Janacek, the original translator of the work, had a love affair with a married woman at the age of 63, and the experience inspired him to recreate Kalda's lyrics, which recount the heartbreaking story of a farm boy lured to the woods by a young gypsy girl. The rural Czech setting of the folk songs is deeply reminiscent of Heaney's recollections of rural Derry. *Electric Light* (2001) contains translations of Virgil's Eclogues IV and IX, entitled "Bann Valley Eclogue" (EL 11) and "Virgil: Eclogue IX" (EL 31) respectively. The volume also boasts a translation from the Russian of Alexander Pushkin called "Arion" (EL 72). Heaney's translation, *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), is his version of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The text recounts the ancient Greek story of Antigone who defies the orders of the Greek king, Creon, when she buries her brother, Polydeukes, who was left unburied after his death as punishment for his attempt on the throne. Antigone is buried alive in a cave because of her actions and it is in this cave that she commits suicide in defiance of the law. The play thus dramatises the tension between her personal sense of justice and the constraints of the law. Heaney's most recent volume of poetry, *District and Circle* (2006), contains four translations, including a translation of one of Horace's Odes entitled "Anything can Happen" (DC 13); two poems translated from the German of Rainer Maria Rilke which appear as "Rilke: *After the Fire*" (DC 16) and "Rilke: *The Apple Orchard*" (DC 68) respectively; and Heaney's translation from the Irish of Eoghan Rua O'Suilleabhain called "Poet to Blacksmith" (DC 25).

This extensive list of translations to be found within Heaney's volumes of poetry, and published as independent works, indicates the range and diversity of Heaney's translation activities, which include an engagement with an impressive variety of languages, poets, cultural and political contexts. Heaney seldom translates directly from the original language texts, however, but is, as I will demonstrate, content to work with, and from, extant English translations during his own acts of translation. His approach to the role of translator is one which is both dynamic and flexible and remains in agreement with contemporary theorisations of the act of translation and its value. For example, Daniel Donoghue observes that the word-for-word task that aims for "faithfulness" provides at best only "a partial description of all that a good translation entails". Donoghue contends that "every act of translation is also an act of interpretation" (Donoghue, *Philologer Poet* 237) and I will argue that it is the interpretive approach with which Heaney tackles his translation that has made his

renderings both accessible and effective. The wide-ranging list that comprises Heaney's translations, as briefly outlined here, offers many choices for an academic study but I will confine my attentions to a detailed examination of three of his translations. I will explore these works in chronological order so as to allow an assessment of Heaney's developing sense of himself as a poet and his effort to remain critically attuned to the political situation of Northern Ireland.

*Sweeney Astray* is the result of Heaney's first engagement with *Buile Suibhne* and as his first foray into translation, and the first book-length publication of a translated text, it deserves special academic attention within the larger framework of his translation activities. As mentioned above, the protagonist of the narrative poem became in many ways a mask for Heaney's own preoccupations. The figure of Sweeney facilitated Heaney's recognition of the value of translation as an extension of his own poetic work and revealed the manner in which it might operate as a means of subtle political commentary. Heaney notes that during his writing of *Sweeney Astray*: "I wanted to deliver a work of the imagination that could be read universally as the thing-in-itself but which would also sustain those extensions of meaning that our disastrously complicated predicament at home made both urgent and desirable" ("Earning a Rhyme" 16). Heaney draws attention to the political significance of the translation in his introduction where he points out that the Gaelic king Sweeney's "easy sense of cultural affinity with both western Scotland and southern Ireland" is exemplary for contemporary Ulster (*Sweeney Astray* vi). The political note of the translation does not only inhere in the story but, as I will show, is combined with Heaney's subtle anglicisation of the text, which makes the narrative more readily accessible to a modern audience. These changes, combined with Heaney's evocative descriptions of the natural world of Ireland, embodied in Sweeney's praise poetry of specific places, transform the ancient Ireland of *Sweeney Astray* into a landscape familiar to a contemporary readership.

In *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney chooses not one of Sophocles' "famous Theban tragedies" but translates instead what he describes as "a quieter drama of moral and political conflicts" ("Hope and History" 15). In this translation the Irish poet focuses on the conflict between the individual and the political. While *The Burial at Thebes* explores similar issues, the relevance of *The Cure at Troy* is revealed in the marked similarity between the protracted Northern Irish Troubles and the ten-year Greek siege in the Trojan War. Heaney's depiction of a ruthless, politically motivated

Odysseus and a long-suffering, self-pitying Philoctetes highlights the role played by Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, whose moral choices comprise the central interest of the play. In his translation Heaney thus seeks to emphasise and contextualise for a contemporary audience the Ancient Greek concern for the sanctity of personal integrity, especially in a time of war. Heaney has made notable additions to the lines spoken by the Chorus within the text, which introduce a particularly optimistic tone. I will pay extensive attention to the ways in which Heaney's additions and amendments prepare the audience for the *deus ex machina*, which concludes the play, making the resolution of events both acceptable and inspirational for a modern audience, particularly in the Northern Irish context of the first performances in the early 1990s.

A consideration of Heaney's translation of the oldest surviving Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, is essential to any study of his translation activities, especially in light of the overwhelming response to its publication. James Shapiro's review of the text in the *New York Times*, for example, called it "a translation that manages to accomplish what before now had seemed impossible: a faithful rendering that is simultaneously an original and gripping poem in its own right" (Shapiro n.pag.). The political violence of Northern Ireland is clearly reflected in the cycles of tribal warfare around which the events of the *Beowulf* narrative unfold. Heaney's translation is also characterised by the inclusion of a number of local Irish dialectal words, which transform the Old English poem into what might be termed an Hiberno-English poem. I will explore how these vernacular words lend the poem a political aspect, and yet prove to be remarkably appropriate in context, rendering Heaney's *Beowulf* an accessible and readable masterpiece and subtle political commentary.

In *Sweeney Astray*, *The Cure at Troy*, and *Beowulf* Heaney has chosen to translate three texts which significantly reveal his tendency to juxtapose the historical and the contemporary, the private and the public, the pastoral and the political. I regrettably have no knowledge of the Gaelic, Ancient Greek or Anglo-Saxon languages, but, for the immediate purposes of this study, while such knowledge would be valuable, it is not essential. My purpose is to consider the way in which these translations function as an inherent part of Heaney's oeuvre. An assessment of Heaney's translations, and the ways in which they relate to and serve to stimulate his creative output, is crucial to an understanding of his work as a poet. Instead of drawing simple comparisons between Heaney's three translations and the original Gaelic, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon texts respectively, this thesis will instead focus on his use of the act of translation

itself to explore the complexities of his identity as a Northern Irish poet writing in English. I will also consider the extent to which the three translations, in remarkably different ways, allow a unique commentary on the situation in Northern Ireland. As Conor McCarthy has argued in relation to *Beowulf*: “the optimism of Heaney’s translation lies not in a conviction that feuds may be settled (although that hope is there), but in a confidence in the power of poetry” (McCarthy 155).

## Chapter 1

### *Sweeney Astray: a “dreamself in the branches”*

#### I *Suibhne’s story*

Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* is a contemporary translation of the legendary Gaelic story *Buile Suibhne*. The narrative revolves around Sweeney, a minor king of Dal-Arie, in what is now Ulster, who is twice cursed by St. Ronan, an ascetic Catholic priest attempting to establish a church in his kingdom. Sweeney is first cursed by the cleric for throwing his psalter into a nearby lake during their initial confrontation. He is cursed again on the morning of the battle of Magh Rath<sup>1</sup> when the pagan king kills one of Ronan’s acolytes with his spear and dents the bell worn around the priest’s neck with a second spear cast. Ronan’s curse transforms Sweeney into a bird-man and condemns him to a life among the trees, makes him fearful of all other creatures in his madness and promises him death on the point of a spear. Sweeney’s flights take him as far afield as Scotland and England but his roaming is largely contained within the borders of Ireland. In his exile Sweeney composes and recites poetry in which he alternately bemoans his lonely exposure to the harsh elements or finds vocal consolation in his praise of the beauty of the natural world that he is forced to inhabit. While Sweeney encounters a number of characters during his wanderings it is only another priest, named Moling, who is finally able to coax him from the trees, lift the curse of St Ronan, and convert the pagan king to Christianity.

As I will demonstrate, Sweeney proves to be a remarkably apposite alter-ego for Heaney, who, like the mad Irish king before him, travelled “far from what he knew” (“The Strand at Lough Beg” 14). Heaney began work on his translation of *Sweeney Astray* shortly after his move to the woods of Wicklow in Glanmore in the summer of 1972. According to the poet his move to the South, away from the political immediacy of Ulster, was a decision “to put the practise of poetry more deliberately at

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<sup>1</sup> In the battle of Magh Rath the armies of Congal Claen invaded the kingdom of the high king of Dal Riada, Domhnall, son of Aedh, in a clash for independence, which resulted in the complete rout of the invaders (O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne* iv–vi).

the centre of [his] life. It was a kind of test” (*Preoccupations* 13). During this period of voluntary exile, Heaney kept the figure of Sweeney very much in mind. The character becomes a means by which Heaney articulates his identity as a poet firmly rooted in the natural landscape of Ireland. Moreover, Sweeney allows Heaney to unite the disparate experiences of his childhood affinity for nature and his sense of displacement and uncertainty in Glanmore. Sweeney thus becomes an integral part of Heaney’s writing: a way of figuring the processes through which he comes to an acceptance that his poetry should be composed on his own terms

James G. O’Keeffe made the first notable translation of the narrative in 1913, a bilingual edition of the Middle Irish<sup>2</sup> tale published by the Irish Texts Society as *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeney), being The Adventures of Sweeney Geilt: A Middle-Irish Romance (Sweeney Astray v)*. O’Keeffe’s efforts were based on a manuscript penned in County Sligo between 1671 and 1674 by Daniel O’Duigenan and comprises an edited rendering of the original in Gaelic accompanied by a straightforward modern English translation with annotations (O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne* iii). Although the O’Duigenan manuscript, which is now part of the Stowe collection in the Royal Irish Academy, was relatively easy to date the composition of the narrative itself is not. There are several arguments concerning the dating of the composition and transcription of *Buile Suibhne*. H. A. Kelly suggests that the narrative was probably composed “in the late twelfth century” (Kelly 293), which accords with O’Keeffe’s own estimates that the tale must have been composed before the death of the last chief of Tirconnell in AD 1197 (O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne* iv). This is contradicted by Henry Hart, however, who argues for a much earlier date, insisting that the original began to take shape as early as the ninth century and refers to events that took place in the seventh (Hart 139). In his introduction to *Sweeney Astray* Heaney draws attention to the *Book of Aicill*, an Irish law tract, which dates from the tenth century at the latest, and which contains stories and poems referring to the madness of Sweeney, thus supporting Hart’s early estimates (*Sweeney Astray v*). Sweeney was cursed with his madness during the battle of Magh Rath, which took place in AD 637, affirming Hart’s early dating (Kelly 296). One might conclude then that the historical events of the narrative took place in the seventh century, were recounted in individual stories and poems up to the tenth century and were finally

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<sup>2</sup> The terms Gaelic and Middle Irish are used interchangeably by most critics.

collected together in the approximate likeness of the narrative poem that exists today sometime after the twelfth century. The focus of this chapter will be a consideration of the two versions of *Buile Suibhne* produced by Heaney: his first and unpublished 1973 manuscript and his later 1983 publication of the Irish legend. These two versions were both based on the O’Keeffe translation and may be usefully examined in terms of their relationship to each other and to Heaney’s volumes of poetry.

## II Identification: “the green man and the rural child”

Heaney’s affinity for the natural world of Ireland is evident from his very first volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, in which he recounts his early interactions with the Irish countryside. In *Preoccupations* Heaney recollects an early childhood hiding place inside an old willow tree:

It was a hollow tree, with gnarled, spreading roots, a soft, perishing bark and a pithy inside. Its mouth was like the fat and solid opening in a horse’s collar, and, once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of a different life, looking out of the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness. Above your head, the living tree flourished and breathed, you shouldered the slightly vibrant bole, and if you put your forehead to the rough pith you felt the whole lithe and whispering crown of willow moving in the sky above you. (*Preoccupations* 18)

As a child the willow tree may have simply been a place of seclusion where he could hide away from his parents but as he matured Heaney recognised the tree as representative of his growing connection to the natural world of Ireland. Although contained within the boundaries of his familiar experience, the space inside the willow tree also took the young Heaney “behind a pane of strangeness” affording him an alternative, mysterious, perspective from which to view his own life. In *Wintering Out* Heaney recreates his experiences inside the willow in the poem “Oracle” (WO 28). In “Oracle” the youthful Heaney puts his forehead to the inside of the willow tree, which becomes for him, as a poet, both the “lobe and larynx / of the mossy places” (13–14), a place from which to experience the Irish world around him while allowing him a local Irish voice through which to speak. The experience of being “at the heart of a different life”, which Heaney describes in *Preoccupations*, is explored again in his later poem, “In the Beech” (SI 100). In this poem Heaney describes a beech tree, which he used as a childhood lookout post, as both “a strangeness and a

comfort” (7), a clear echo of “the pane of strangeness” afforded by the willow tree. Enconced in the safety of the beech tree, the young Heaney has a concealed view of the military manoeuvres of the troops stationed in Ireland during World War Two. Both poems resonate with a sense of Heaney’s experience in Glanmore, where he experienced a similar “strangeness” in his voluntary exile and, as I will detail, it is from within “the heart of a different life” in the Wicklow woods that Heaney is able to comment most clearly on the internecine violence in the North.

Heaney notes approvingly the belief of some authorities that the role of the *file*, “the official poet in historic times”, is continuous with that of the druid in early archaic times (*Preoccupations* 186). The etymological root of the word druid, Heaney notes, is related to the oak grove or *doire*, in which many druidic rites were practised. In this way, he continues, “the poet is connected with the mysteries of the grove, and the poetic imagination is linked with the barbaric life of the wood” (*Preoccupations* 186).<sup>3</sup> When Heaney describes his “small mouth and ear / in a woody cleft” (11–12) of the willow tree, however, a distinctly sexual element is introduced to the poem “Oracle”. Heaney suggests a similar sexual association in his poem, “In the Beech”, “where the school-leaver discovered peace / to touch himself in the reek of churned-up mud” (5–6) of the tree. The image from “Oracle” brings to mind the forked oak branch found in a Danish bog that P. V. Glob believed to be a representation of the earth goddess Nerthus due to “the natural feminine form” of the branch, which had been strongly incised in the fork to indicate its sex (Glob 180). Heaney’s early experiences of the natural world as recalled in these two poems centred on trees thus seem to marry him to the Irish landscape as much as Sweeney, as sacral king, would have been. Seamus MacGabhann notes that the sacral kings of early Ireland were ritualistically married to the land over which they ruled in an inauguration ceremony known as the “*banais righi*”, which translates as “the wedding-feast of kingship” (MacGabhann 133). The ceremony was meant to guarantee not only a prosperous reign but also the fruitfulness of the years ahead. Sweeney, as one of the sacral kings of early Ireland, takes this role even further, almost becoming one with the land, especially with the trees of Ireland, in his wanderings. In his exile Sweeney becomes a

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<sup>3</sup> In *Preoccupations* Heaney notes that the name “Derry”, where he grew up as a child, is itself derived from the word “*doire*”, which specifically connects his own poetic creativity to the natural world of Ireland (*Preoccupations* 36).

poet, drawing his inspiration from the trees which offer him both comfort and protection.

Although the trees of Ireland provided “a strangeness and a comfort” for the young Heaney, his intense physical connection with the natural world as a resource for both nurturing and self-knowledge could not be maintained in adulthood. Heaney describes this separation from the natural world in his early poem “Personal Helicon” (DN 46), which details his childhood fascination with wells. He observes that such activity is out of place in the adult world:

to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. (17–19)

Heaney thus had to relinquish the sensuous, bodily connection that he had with the land as a child but he is able to maintain this bond with the natural world through his poetry. In the final lines of “Personal Helicon” Heaney concludes: “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (19–20). In the rhymes he makes concerning Sweeney a complex pattern of identification with the mad wanderings of the Irish king who made a life in the trees is created. Hart takes this association one step further arguing that Sweeney essentially becomes a mask for Heaney through which he is able to affirm his own experiences in exile (Hart 140). After completing his translation of *Sweeney Astray* Heaney recalls the intense identification he felt between “the green man and the rural child”, an identification which stimulated the poems that make up the “Sweeney Redivivus” section of *Station Island*, the collection he wrote alongside his published translation (“Earning a Rhyme” 20). In writing these poems Heaney states that “Sweeney was unreservedly rhymed with Heaney” and allowed him to openly explore aspects of his own life through the medium of the Sweeney character (“Earning a Rhyme” 20).

Heaney argues in his introduction to *Sweeney Astray* that his fundamental identification with the mad king Sweeney is topographical since his kingdom is located in what is now south County Antrim and north County Down (*Sweeney Astray* vii). Having lived in the near vicinity, first in Mossbawn and then in Belfast, for over thirty years Heaney is intimately acquainted with the places that Sweeney visited, such as “Slemish, Rasharkin, Benevenagh, Dunseverick, the Bann, the Roe, the

Mournes” and of course Sweeney’s final resting place at St Mullins, which is just a stone’s throw from the Heaneys’ later Glanmore home (*Sweeney Astray* vii). Hart notes that Heaney’s move to Glanmore in 1972 was only one of many journeys the poet undertook in the seventies and eighties, starting with a year’s teaching at Berkeley in California and another family move to Dublin in 1975 (Hart 144). He then returned to America in 1979 to take up a teaching position at Harvard and, having accepted the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory, commuted between Dublin and Cambridge, Massachusetts, from January to May of that year (Hart 145). Heaney’s almost perpetual “house hopping, college hopping and continent hopping” makes his identification with the mad Irish king, who flew ceaselessly between England, Scotland, and Ireland in his madness, all the more compelling (Hart 145).

Heaney’s identification with Sweeney began much earlier, however, and may be traced back to the poet’s childhood. Heaney recalls in his introduction “a family of tinkers, also called Sweeney” (*Sweeney Astray* vii–viii) whom he often saw on the road leading to Anahorish, the small Catholic and Protestant primary school he attended between 1945 and 1951 (Hart 62). The poet’s early engagement with the Sweeneys is recollected in poem I of “Station Island” (*SI* 61) where Heaney addresses the father of the tinker family directly: “I know you, Simon Sweeney, / for an old Sabbath-breaker” (18–19). His early memories of the Sweeneys suggest a continuing congruence between the folk myth of *Buile Suibhne*, whose protagonist roams the Irish countryside, and his personal experience of the tinkers of his childhood who similarly wandered the backwoods of Ireland.

In his introduction to his translation Heaney muses on his relationship with Sweeney, suggesting that “one way or another he seems to have been with me from the start” (*Sweeney Astray* viii). The main character of *Buile Suibhne* remains a major point of contact between Heaney and the poem and Hart argues that it is Sweeney himself who “provides an ancient mask for his contemporary dilemma” (Hart 6). Heaney obliquely refers to this personal identification with the Ulster king in his introduction, stating that:

in so far as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation. (*Sweeney Astray* vi)

Such a statement clearly indicates Heaney's recognition that it is possible to read the story of *Sweeney Astray* as a means to understand the conflict between duty and creative freedom that characterised his own experiences.

Despite his extremely strong connections to Ulster Heaney had to free himself of religious, political, and domestic obligation in order to ensure the continuation of his own poetic growth. In "Roots", the first of five poems comprising the series entitled "A Northern Hoard" (WO 39), Heaney narrows the situation he faced in the North to a binary choice between two life changing alternatives: "We petrify or uproot now" (12). Petrification is the deprivation of feeling and vitality, disabling the capacity for change and it was to prevent this that necessitated Heaney's uprooting from the familiar (OED).<sup>4</sup> In Heaney's case the possible petrification to which he refers is the very real fear of his gradual conversion, under the duress of those who wished it, into a propagandistic poet writing in support of the Catholic minority of Ulster. In his essays, Heaney quotes Osip Mandelstam, who argued that the ideal situation of the lyric poet would be "a condition in which he was in thrall to no party or programme, but truly and freely and utterly himself" (*Government* xix). These sentiments echo those of Patrick Kavanagh who insisted that the poet's duty was merely "to state the position" and not be forced to back one or other political party (*Preoccupations* 121). Heaney reveals that a number of his poems simply could not have been written without that course in what he terms "the hedge school" of the Wicklow woods where he found the kind of freedom not possible in Ulster ("Seamus Heaney Writes" n.pag.). But, as the poems written after the move illustrate, such freedom came at a high price. If Sweeney is the artist figure with whom Heaney can identify, he provides a connection not only to the boy in the hollow tree but to the man displaced from his home, uncertain of his purpose, and suffering both self-imposed and external criticism.

During an interview with Robert Druce, Heaney admits of his relationship with Sweeney that he "began to think of him as being like myself" (Heaney, in Hart 152). As his remark about the character indicates, Heaney does not simply find in Sweeney a mirror of his own situation but a medium onto which he is able to project his own feelings. Heaney notes that his translation of *Buile Suibhne* was not a neutral commission but rather "a way of housing things that I had in me anyway" (Heaney, in

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<sup>4</sup> References made to the OED indicate the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* while references made to COED indicate the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

MacGabhann 137). As will be more fully explored in the pages ahead, the “Sweeney Redivivus” section of his collection *Station Island*, published soon after *Sweeney Astray*, is voiced for the Irish king. Here Heaney resurrects Sweeney, who “displaced from his medieval context” (*NSP* 241) is more deliberately deployed as a vehicle for the expression of Heaney’s own concerns.

### III 1973 – 1983: “Heaney Astray”

Heaney first began his translation of *Buile Suibhne* in September 1972, which culminated in a manuscript copy completed in April of 1973 (“Earning a Rhyme” 13). Heaney recalls that he was afraid he might become bogged down during his first translation of *Buile Suibhne* and so “hurled [him]self at the task”, passing difficulties and subtleties of interpretation by in an effort to maintain the momentum of composition (“Earning a Rhyme” 16). As a result of his furious working pace, however, Heaney largely limited his focus to O’Keeffe’s parallel English translation rather than giving the transcription of the Gaelic original the attention it deserved (“Earning a Rhyme” 16). MacGabhann notes that Heaney’s first translation was composed of “highly lyrical, very lush verse” that took considerable liberties with the O’Keeffe text on which it was based (MacGabhann 138). In the unpublished version, for example, Sweeney is described on the morning of the battle of Magh Rath as wearing:

next his white skin, the kisses of silk;  
his girdle, a satin embrace;  
his tunic, his valour’s insignia,  
a reward of service, a clasp of friendship from Conall. (MacGabhann 138)

The original O’Keeffe rendering, notably written in prose as opposed to Heaney’s poetic form, reads:

A filmy shirt of silk was next his white skin, around him was a girdle of royal satin, likewise the tunic which Congal had given him the day he slew Oilill Cedach. (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 8)

Heaney's early lines, although imitating the vivid description of the O'Keeffe translation, are clearly overwrought. This is especially evident in Heaney's unusual personification of Sweeney's battle dress, which "kisses", "embrace[s]" and "clasp[s]" the king like a lover. Heaney candidly admits, however, that his early version "did not give much obedience to the original text" (Heaney, in Kelly 308). The version often embellished the sense of the original by substituting "imagery for declaration in places" and incorporated elements from English literary traditions and the Bible (Kelly 308). In comparison to the O'Keeffe exemplar the 1973 rendering became what Heaney himself calls a "much more jacked up performance altogether" ("Earning a Rhyme" 17), which is apparent in the example of Sweeney's lament below:

Though I am Lazarus,  
there was a time  
when I dressed in purple,  
and they fed from my hand.

I was a good king,  
the tide of my affairs  
was rising, the world  
was the bit in my horse's mouth. ("Earning a Rhyme" 17)

The O'Keeffe translation is far more subdued:

Though I be as I am to-night,  
there was a time  
when my strength was not feeble  
over a land that was not bad.

On splendid steeds,  
in life without sorrow,  
in my auspicious kingship  
I was a good, great king. (O'Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 19)

O'Keeffe's lines, although they clearly express Sweeney's pride and arrogance in his position as king, wither in the face of Sweeney's self-importance in Heaney's translation. While in the O'Keeffe text Sweeney states boldly that "I was a good, great king", for example, the hyperbolic metaphor of Heaney's version is content with nothing less than "the world / was the bit in my horse's mouth". O'Keeffe's rendering, unlike the relentlessly boastful tone of Heaney's lines, incorporates some sense of Sweeney's present state of deterioration. This is indicated by the

compounded negatives of “not feeble”, “not bad” and “without sorrow”, which suggests, of course, that Sweeney is in fact currently “feeble”, “bad” and full of “sorrow”. Heaney’s comparison of Sweeney to Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, suggests that although Sweeney is effectively as dead to the people of Dal-Arie as the biblical character he knows that he will regain his sanity and return to society (John 11.1). Heaney’s metaphor proves true, of course, when the priest Moling coaxes Sweeney from the trees and draws him out of his madness, thus lending Sweeney a confidence absent from O’Keeffe’s lines.<sup>5</sup> Although the version was not a complete reinvention of the O’Keeffe text it was too far removed from the original to be considered a translation (Kelly 308). Realising this, Heaney abandoned the work and eventually presented the manuscript to the National Library of Ireland in 1986 where it is still held (MacGabhann 144).

After his first semester of teaching at Harvard University in 1979 Heaney tried his hand at translating *Sweeney* once more, this time, as he notes, “keeping [his] eyes as much to the left, on the Irish, as to the right, on O’Keeffe’s unnerving trot” (“Earning a Rhyme” 18). In this second foray into the work, Heaney discovered a previously unrecognised intensity in the poetry which did not require his earlier haste to sustain his interest. Instead of what Heaney calls the “enjambéd propulsion” of his first attempt, he was content to focus his translating attention on the quatrains themselves as individual units of poetry (“Earning a Rhyme” 18). As a result, the form of the quatrains became “more end-stopped and boxed-in” according to the poet, the majority of which form single sentences (“Earning a Rhyme” 18). In his essay “The God in the Tree” Heaney comments favourably on the “unique cleanliness of line” of early Irish nature poetry, which is especially evident in the compact quatrains of *Buile Suibhne* (*Preoccupations* 181). Heaney decided that the “right noise for Sweeney would be the clear hard line, a cold temperature and a very bare style”, which would take away the superfluous sweetness of his early efforts and result in a more literal translation true to the style of the Gaelic original (Heaney, in MacGabhann 138). The published translation, as a result, offers a far less romanticised version of Sweeney’s battle dress:

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<sup>5</sup> Even though Heaney could not have known it at the time his metaphorical comparison of Sweeney to Lazarus, who was resurrected, is a forerunner of Heaney’s own resurrection of Sweeney in the *Station Island* poems entitled “Sweeney Redivivus”, or Sweeney Reborn.

next his white skin, the shimmer of silk;  
 and his satin girdle around him;  
 and his tunic, that reward of service  
 and gift of fealty from Congal (*Sweeney Astray* section 8)

and his lamentation:

Far other than to-night,  
 far different my plight  
 the times when with firm hand  
 I ruled over a good land.

Prospering, smiled upon,  
 curbing some great steed,  
 I rode high, on the full tide  
 of good luck and kingship. (*Sweeney Astray* section 19)

What Flann O'Brien, who incorporated Sweeney's character as part of his 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (*Sweeney Astray* v), described as the "steel-pen exactness" of Gaelic verse became Heaney's stylistic inspiration for completing his version of *Buille Suibhne*, which was finally published as *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish in Ireland* in 1983 (*Preoccupations* 181).<sup>6</sup>

When compared with the version published in 1983 it is clear that Heaney's earlier poetic rendering of O'Keefe's text was too heavily invested with his own preoccupations. MacGabhann argues that Heaney's ongoing concern with the political Troubles of Ulster "infiltrates the idiom of the first version" and makes Heaney's political identification with Sweeney explicit (MacGabhann 138). Hart supports this reading, arguing, for example, that the confrontation between Ronan and Sweeney is clearly allegorised into a clash between "Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionist in Northern Ireland" in the 1973 manuscript (Hart 152). The Nationalists accused the Unionists of "bully boy tactics" (MacGabhann 138) during the escalating violence of 1972, and this label appears in one of Heaney's early quatrains where St Ronan narrowly escapes the wrath of Sweeney:

My relief  
 was a pivot of history.  
 A snap of Donal's fingers  
 called off the bullyboy. (MacGabhann 138)

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<sup>6</sup> *Sweeney Astray* was only published in Great Britain a year later in 1984.

The lines refer to Sweeney's initial assault on Ronan while he marked out the foundations of his church to be called Killaney in Sweeney's kingdom of Dal-Arie. Sweeney attacks the cleric in his rage and sacrilegiously casts his psalter into a nearby lake before being called to battle by a servant of Congal Claon, his high king, thereby preventing further harm to the ascetic Christian. In this early allegorical version of *Buile Suibhne* Heaney strangely presents Ronan as a Catholic Nationalist and Sweeney as a Protestant Unionist. The roles ascribed to the two characters, although superficially appropriate, prove to be incorrectly allocated, especially when one considers Heaney's affinity for Sweeney as a character. If Sweeney is a Protestant, allegorically, and Ronan is a Catholic, as he is historically, then it would appear that Heaney is taking sides against himself as a Catholic, even if not a practising one. The "bully boy tactics" assigned to Sweeney are more than fitting in the context of the narrative, considering his violent reaction to Ronan's architectural aspirations, but it seems inappropriate to cast the pagan king as a Protestant (MacGabhann 138). Heaney insists in his introduction, however, that the "literary imagination which fastened upon [Sweeney] as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament" (*Sweeney Astray* v–vi). This tension may be more easily allegorically transposed onto the (relatively) newly dominant Protestantism of Northern Ireland and the stubborn Nationalism of Ulster Catholicism. This suggests that if an allegorical translation was intended Sweeney should have been assigned the Catholic role while Ronan would be far more suited to the role of Protestant. Heaney himself felt that these early lines were too "infected with the idiom of the moment" (Heaney, in Hart 152) and in consequence decided to aim for a more faithful transcription, which appears in the 1983 text:

So I offered thanks and praise  
for the merciful release,  
that unhoped-for, timely summons  
to arm and join the high prince. (*Sweeney Astray* section 6)

Heaney realised that his original translation of the Gaelic narrative was not appropriate and admits that "I was using *Buile Suibhne* as a trampoline: I should have been showing it off, but instead it was being pressed into service to show me off" ("Earning a Rhyme" 18). His 1983 published translation, although still "A *Version*

from the Irish”, finds Heaney’s influence on the text far less evident where the poet “valued more the defined otherness of *Buile Suibhne* as art” (“Earning a Rhyme” 20). His identification with Sweeney, both as story and character, did not subside, however, but “simply became more subtle” in his later published version of *Sweeney Astray* (Hart 152). The published version may thus be read as a carefully crafted translation of *Buile Suibhne* that respects the artistry of the original Gaelic prosimetrum. *Sweeney Astray* may, however, be simultaneously read as an intentionally perspectival commentary on the tensions between the religious parties of Northern Ireland that finds Heaney exploring his personal experiences as an Irish poet.

Heaney’s English title, *Sweeney Astray*, is gently euphemistic when compared to the defined meaning of the original *Buile Suibhne* or *Suibhne Geilt*. The Gaelic *ar buile* means frenzy or madness rather than “astray” or “flight”, as used in Heaney’s two published editions (Vendler 92).<sup>7</sup> P. H. Henry, in his study of early Celtic and English poetry, argues that the Gaelic word *geilt* accords with the Anglo-Saxon *gylt*, which signifies “guilt, fear, exile, cowardly flight, and exclusion” (Henry, in Hart 146). The Gaelic word itself refers to “terror, fear, dread, cowardice, timidity” but more specifically indicates “one who goes mad from terror; a panic-stricken fugitive from battle; a crazy person living in the woods and supposed to be endowed with the power of levitation” (Henry, in Hart 146). The definition may be etymologically traced to the Old Norse work “*Konungs Skuggsja*” in which “a *gelt* was one who went mad with fear in battle, and thenceforth lived in the woods like a wild beast” (*OED*). It is obvious, then, that *ar buile* and *geilt* are fitting titles for the afflicted Irish king Sweeney who fled from all he knew to live in exiled terror amongst the trees like a bird. Hart adds that *geilt* may also be etymologically linked to the Gaelic words for flying and singing, which encapsulates the condition of Sweeney as poet and bird-man, and in many ways the very theme of the poem itself, in a single word (Hart 146). The definition of the noun “astray” as “a stray beast” may offer Heaney’s title some verisimilitude but the verb, defined as “to wander” and “away from the proper path,” seems at first to be a poor substitute for the overtly negative associations of the original (*OED*).

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<sup>7</sup> Heaney has also published a revised edition of *Sweeney Astray* titled *Sweeney’s Flight* in 1992, a coffee table book comprised of selected lyrics from the prosimetrum which are accompanied by photographs of the Ulster countryside taken by Rachel Giese.

When Heaney describes Sweeney's transformation, however, it is apparent that the poet is intimately aware of the mad king's horrific condition. The original lines in the O'Keeffe translation read:

darkness, and fury, and giddiness, and frenzy and flight, unsteadiness, restlessness, and unquiet filled him, likewise disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached. (O'Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 11)

In comparison Heaney translates in the prose of section 11 that Sweeney "was possessed by a dark rending energy" and converts the remaining prose of the original into verse:

His brain convulsed,  
his mind split open.  
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings  
And launchings came over him,  
He staggered and flapped desperately,  
He was revolted by the thought of known places  
And dreamed strange migrations (*Sweeney Astray* section 11)

The poetic form with which Heaney structures the original prose intensifies the transformation that Sweeney undergoes, with each successive line revealing a new torturous metamorphosis in the cursed king, culminating in a sense of revulsion in, and thus a movement away from "known places". Sweeney's dreams of "strange migrations" thus reveal the deliberate intention on Heaney's part in titling his translation *Sweeney Astray*. In *Government of the Tongue* Heaney recollects Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, especially "Stephen Dedalus's enigmatic declaration that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead, implying that departure from Ireland and inspection of the country from the outside was the surest way of getting to the core of Irish experience" (*Government* 40). While Heaney's recollection becomes an act of self justification for his withdrawal from the North into the seclusion of the South it is at the same time an articulation of the value of what Jung called a "displaced perspective", which Heaney considers in his article "Place and Displacement" (Heaney, in Smith 234). This "displaced perspective", Heaney argues, allows the poet a vantage point from where he is able to "keep faith with origins" while outgrowing "particularist allegiance" (Heaney, in Smith 234). This displaced vantage point is clearly a development of the "pane of strangeness" through which

Heaney experienced his life as a child in the willow tree (*Preoccupations* 18). The title *Sweeney Astray* thus draws attention to Sweeney as a character from a different perspective, emphasising his role as poet rather than as madman, a poet who during his flights throughout Ireland is able to observe and capture holistically the Irish experience. Heaney's identification with Sweeney thus suggests that the poet has wandered away from the known, in his move from Derry to Glanmore, to reach "the heart of a different life" in order gain a clearer perspective on the Northern Irish situation of which he is still a part (*Preoccupations* 18).

#### IV Sweeney's poetry: "from lament to celebration"

Hart notes that Sweeney's story bears some resemblance to "the widely dispersed story of the Wild Man of the Woods", which he argues is the basis of the well known Merlin legend (Hart 149). Heaney himself draws attention to this possibility in his introduction when he says that Sweeney "may well have been a development of a British original, vestigially present in the tale of the madman called Alan" who appears in sections 46 to 50 of the text (*Sweeney Astray* vi). Sweeney is neither the first madman in literature nor is he the first literary example of a man cursed to live a bird-life, however. The biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel recounts the similar fate of the Babylonian king. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed one night of an immense tree, which fed and sheltered all creatures under its spreading branches. A messenger from heaven appeared in his dream commanding the branches to be sawn off and stripped bare and the remaining stump to be bound with rings of iron and bronze. Daniel interprets the tree to be symbolic of Nebuchadnezzar himself and urges the king to acknowledge the God of the Jews lest his control over his kingdom be cut down like the branches of the tree. Nebuchadnezzar remains proud in his position of power, however, and consequently "was driven from men and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagle's feathers and his nails like bird's claws" (Dan. 4.33). Nebuchadnezzar is transformed into a bird-like shape because he is not willing to accept the authority of the Jewish God in much the same way that Sweeney is cursed to flit about like a bird of the air for attempting to arrest the spread of Catholicism in his own kingdom. As soon as Nebuchadnezzar accepts the authority of the God of the Jews he is returned to

his normal form and thus the feathers that covered him are a fundamental symbol of his outcast status.

Kelly doubts whether Sweeney is literally transformed into a bird-man, however, suggesting rather that his metamorphosis is simply metaphorical (Kelly 296). His doubts are supported by the O’Keeffe translation, which seldom describes Sweeney as physically sprouting feathers from his skin but does, at times, attribute bird-like characteristics to him. When he is first set astray by Ronan’s curse, for example, Sweeney “went, like any bird of the air” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 11), a simile comparing his madness to the flight of birds but not necessarily indicative of a physical change. When Sweeney first escapes Dal-Arie “it was seldom that his feet would touch the ground because of the swiftness of his course” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 12), which indicates the speed of his departure more than an ornithological metamorphosis. Sweeney is later found resting “on top of a tall ivy-clad hawthorn tree” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 18). While this may be a bird-like attribute it is a tactic that any exile might employ to evade the eyes of his enemies. Even when he is described as having “leave / to go with the birds” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 29) the lines allude to his mad wanderings rather than his transformation into a bird-man.

MacGabhann argues on a more anthropological level, however, that Sweeney, as sacral king, was the spiritual conduit of his tribe and as such was host to “external forces and energies, spiritual and physical” (MacGabhann 134), which, coming into conflict with the spiritual forces surrounding Ronan, could plausibly have caused a physical mutation in the Irish king. O’Keeffe’s version does, on rare occasions, lend weight to MacGabhann’s argument. Sweeney boasts of his new found speed “since my feathers have grown” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 40), for example, which deliberately portrays the king as physically feathered. Sweeney is also later proud that: “I have borne many a fight without cowardice / since feathers have grown on my body” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 61), suggesting that feathers did in fact pen his frame.

In lamenting the news of the death of his family Sweeney says that the pain of their loss is “a garb of feathers to the skin” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 36), however, alluding to feathers as a symbol of emotional suffering and hardship. Heaney deliberately emphasises this association in his version of the tale by consistently referring to Sweeney and his actions using bird imagery. Feathers later

become a symbol of penitence when Sweeney wails: “I have endured purgatories since the feathers grew on me” (*Sweeney Astray* section 60). Sweeney’s feathers, like the hair shirts worn by ascetic Christians to atone for their sins, symbolise his status as a penitent enduring suffering for his sins. Feathers thus symbolise not only emotional pain and physical discomfort but are an essential aspect of Sweeney’s penance.

Heaney argues that we cannot be sure that Sweeney is based on an actual Irish king, even though a king named Sweeney existed as a historically situated character. Sweeney must therefore be viewed, in Heaney’s own words, as “a literary creation” (*Sweeney Astray* v). It is not important for the reader to know for certain whether Sweeney did or did not physically possess feathers in his madness, but it is essential that the reader believes that he does and Heaney’s version creates this impression more overtly than the O’Keeffe rendering on which it is based.<sup>8</sup>

In Heaney’s version Sweeney “roosts in his tree” (*Sweeney Astray* section 14), and is later “cooped up” (*Sweeney Astray* section 17) in a hawthorn like any bird. Sweeney is described with his “plumage rushing” (*Sweeney Astray* section 40) but soon after, however, the text describes him as “frayed, scant and raggedy” (*Sweeney Astray* section 40). This suggests that his “plumage” is not literally feathers but rather his battle dress tattered after years of wandering in the woods and yet it is significant that Heaney specifically describes it as “plumage”. In the final lines of section 40 Sweeney laments: “I am a timorous stag / feathered by Ronan Finn” (*Sweeney Astray* section 40) a marked change from the O’Keeffe lines which read “The curse of Ronan Finn / has thrown me into thy company, O little stag” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 40). Heaney has obviously introduced bird imagery into the lines and defends his decision by arguing that “feathered” in this context refers to the hunting term which means “tracked” or “pursued” (Heaney, in Kelly 297). The prevalence of bird imagery used by Heaney in his translation suggests, however, that “feathered” should be read as both literal and metaphorical. The word is highly suited as a description of Sweeney in his exile since it conveys both the bird-like qualities of the mad king’s existence and the impression that he is being constantly pursued. It is symbolically important that readers think of Sweeney as actually “feathered” since his condition as

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<sup>8</sup> Sweeney’s feathers, to which Heaney purposely draws attention, may also be read as a reminder of the “punishment attacks” that occurred in Northern Ireland during the Troubles (“Tarring and feathering” n.pag.). Women accused by the IRA of fraternising with the police or British soldiers were most often victims of tarring and feathering, which clearly marked them as traitors within their own communities. These attacks were not limited to women, however, and were meted out equally to any member of the Catholic communities that the IRA suspected of collusion.

bird-man is an essential aspect of his exiled character. The O’Keeffe version renders the final quatrain of section 85, in which the priest Moling comforts Sweeney in his death swoon, as:

Melodious to me was the converse of Suibhne,  
 long shall I keep his memory in my breast.  
 I entreat my noble King of Heaven  
 above his grave and on his tomb! (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 85)

Heaney’s version offers an obviously more ornithological rendering of the same lines:

I ask a blessing by Sweeney’s grave.  
 His memory flutters in my breast.  
 His soul roosts in the tree of love.  
 His body sinks in its clay nest (*Sweeney Astray* section 85)

Kelly draws attention to Heaney’s “roosts” in the third line of the quatrain but the “flutters” of the second and the “nest” of the fourth are equally compelling images created by Heaney that deliberately imprint Sweeney’s fate as penitent bird-man in the minds of the reader (Kelly 297).

*Buile Suibhne* is technically termed a prosimetrum as it consists of alternating sections of prose and verse (Kelly 293) which, according to O’Keeffe, came about as an amalgamation of the oral stories and poems composed after the battle of Magh Rath that used Sweeney as their subject matter (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* iv). Ciaran Carson notes that the prose sections narrate the physical events of Sweeney’s wanderings while the verse sections recount his psychological journey. Carson argues that much of the effectiveness of *Buile Suibhne* is gained by the “creative interplay” between the prose and verse sections of the story poem (Carson 142). The prose of section 42, for example, simply conveys the bare bones of the story in recording that Sweeney:

proceeded to Roscommon in Connacht, where he alighted on the bank of the well and treated himself to watercress and water. But when a woman came out of the erenach’s house, he panicked and fled, and she gathered the watercress from the stream. Sweeney watched her from his tree and greatly lamented the theft of his patch of cress. (*Sweeney Astray* section 42)

The verse of section 43 which follows, however, reveals the more intimate repercussions of this event. Having been robbed of his watercress Sweeney recites:

Woman, picking the watercress  
and scooping up my drink of water,  
were you to leave them as my due  
you would still be none the poorer.

Woman, have consideration!  
We go two different ways:  
I perch out among tree-tops,  
you lodge here in a friendly house.

Woman, have consideration.  
Think of me in the sharp wind,  
forgotten, past consideration,  
without a cloak to wrap me in.

Woman, you cannot start to know  
sorrows Sweeney has forgotten:  
how friends were so long denied him  
he killed his gift for friendship even. (*Sweeney Astray* section 43)

The first quatrain relates most clearly to the prose of section 42 since it is an expression of Sweeney's denial of watercress and water. The quatrain, however, also notably offers the reader an insight into Sweeney's psyche. The repetitive "my" portrays Sweeney as overly possessive of the cress and water that he insists is his "due". The reason for Sweeney's possessiveness becomes apparent in the second quatrain where Sweeney begrudges the woman her "friendly house" since the only shelter available to him is in the "tree-tops". Sweeney also has no cloak to protect him from the harsh elements and his bitterness is evident in the third quatrain. The fourth quatrain finds Sweeney at his lowest point. Deprived of food, water, shelter and clothing Sweeney expresses his intense loneliness due to lack of human contact, which reveals the king to be as fragile in mind as he is in body. This is especially evident when he refers to himself in the third person, which serves to dissociate him from himself. The cumulative effect of Sweeney's lament in the quatrains, which progresses incrementally from physical to psychological needs, reiterates the effect of the physical hardships he undergoes on his mental state. The use of anaphora in these four quatrains is a deliberate stylistic change made by Heaney that adds an accusatory edge to Sweeney's lament. By the end of his tirade, twenty one quatrains later, Sweeney curses the woman who inadvertently gathered the cress that Sweeney had been collecting: "As you snatched cress, may you be snatched / by the foraging, blue-coated Norse. / And live eaten by remorse" (*Sweeney Astray* section 43). The lines

thus reveal, far more vividly than the prose, the mental anguish of the exiled king brought about by the harsh conditions in which he has to live.

Heaney notes that “it was the bareness and durability of the writing” with “its double note of relish and penitence” that first prompted him to translate *Buile Suibhne* and gave him “the encouragement to persist with stretches of less purely inspired quatrains” (*Sweeney Astray* vi). A number of the prose sections, as in the example above, and at times the poetry sections, are relatively flat, a feature that Brendan Kennelly, “Heaney’s friend and fellow poet”, observes to be even more evident in Heaney’s translation than in the Gaelic original (Hart 141). The sometimes tedious rendition of Sweeney’s fate in both prose and poetry is a deliberate technique, argues Kennelly, used by the original poet to intensify the climactic lyric moments. Heaney admits that his “first impulse” as a translator “had been to forage for the best lyric moments” and present them out of context “as poetic orphans” (*Sweeney Astray* vi–vii). Yet he gradually felt he had to “earn the right to do the high points, by undertaking the whole thing: what I was dealing with, after all, is a major work in the canon of medieval literature” (*Sweeney Astray* vii). When contrasted with the merely factual stretches, Heaney’s lyrics are lent what Kennelly describes as “an ecstatic, soaring quality”, arguing that we “appreciate the moments of flight all the more deeply because we have been earthbound for a while” (Kennelly n.pag.). At the same time, however, the bland solidity of the prose sections allows the reader a momentary psychological break from Sweeney’s almost constant lamentation of his banishment which renders his mind fragile and his body broken. A sample of the quatrains from section 61, in which Sweeney proclaims his woes aloud, offers an apt example of the effect that his laments can have on the reader:

Almighty God, I deserved this,  
my cut feet, my drained face,  
winnowed by a sheer wind  
and miserable in my mind.

Last night I lay in Mourne  
plastered in wet; cold rain poured.  
To-night, in torment, in Glasgally  
I am crucified in the fork of a tree.

I who endured unflinchingly  
through long nights and long days  
since the feathers penned my frame  
foresee nothing but the same.

Hard weather has withered me,  
 blizzards have buried me.  
 As I wince here in the cutting wind  
 Glen Bolcain's heather haunts my mind.

.....

All this is hard to thole, Lord!  
 Still without bed or board,  
 crouching to graze on cress,  
 drinking cold water from rivers.

Alarmed out of the autumn wood,  
 whipped by whins, flecked with blood,  
 running wild among wolf-packs,  
 shying away with the red stag.

Son of God, have mercy on us!  
 Never to hear a human voice!  
 To sleep naked every night up  
 there in the highest thickets,

to have lost my proper shape and looks,  
 a mad scuttler on mountain peaks,  
 a derelict doomed to loneliness:  
 Son of God, have mercy on us! (*Sweeney Astray* section 61)

The quatrains demonstrate the intensity of Sweeney's psychological suffering, the personal nature of which is accentuated by an abundance of first person pronouns. Sweeney's emotional state is associated with the foul weather in the first quatrain when he complains that he is "winnowed by a sheer wind / and miserable in my mind". This association is reiterated when he declares that "hard weather has withered me", which is emphasised by the strong "w" alliteration. The unforgiving weather is almost tangible when Sweeney lies "plastered in wet" while the "cold rain poured". Sweeney's persistent references to the wintry conditions thus stress his deteriorating mental condition. The quatrains similarly draw attention to Sweeney's physical decline, which is accentuated by his description of his perpetually "cut feet", a "drained face" and a body "whipped by whins, flecked with blood". Sweeney's condition is further described in progressively more animalistic terms, which find him "crouching to graze on cress", like an antelope and "drinking cold water from rivers". He is later pictured "shying away with the red stag", which embodies the continuous fear that attends his cursed condition. Sweeney also makes it clear that his physical and psychological privations only came upon him after "the feathers penned my frame", thereby underscoring the symbolic significance of his feathered state. He

finally describes himself as “a mad scuttler on mountain peaks”, an indefinite animalistic condition that portrays Sweeney as separated not only from his friends but from his own humanity. In his banished state Sweeney is “without bed or board”, and longs for human companionship. Sweeney’s cry: “Never to hear a human voice!” is an exclamatory sentence which by itself highlights the intensity of his loneliness.

The quatrains are more than a simple lament, however, and the lines may be read as Sweeney’s prayer for salvation from the life he is forced to lead. Sweeney addresses the “Almighty God” in the opening line of his lament, lending his poem a religious overtone that is emphasised in the Christian imagery of the poem. Sweeney is initially portrayed “crucified in the fork of a tree” and this association that is continued when Sweeney cries twice: “Son of God have mercy on us”. Sweeney’s plea suggests a parallel to Jesus’ cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27. 45–46), which once again reinforces Sweeney’s sense of complete abandonment. When Sweeney laments that he “foresee[s] nothing but the same” it tangibly conveys the entrapment in the reader’s own mind of the isolation and desolation of his curse. The reader is trapped in the repetitive lament in much the same way that Sweeney is trapped in his wilderness existence and thus effectively experiences Sweeney’s own misery. If the poem did not offer stylistic respites from this ever present note of agony Kennelly suggests that the reading of it would become all but unendurable (Kennelly n.pag.).

The poetry is not limited to expressions of grief, however, but remains carefully balanced by the praise poems uttered by Sweeney who finds consolation in the beauty of the Irish landscape. As I shall discuss in more detail, Sweeney’s praise poems are a clear example of early Irish nature poems which Heaney describes as possessing “the tang and clarity of a pristine world full of woods and water and birdsong” (*Preoccupations* 181). The most comprehensive example of Sweeney’s praise poetry, in section 40 of the prosimetrum, offers the reader an insight into the natural beauty that consoles the mad king:

The bushy leafy oak tree  
is highest in the wood,  
the forking shoots of hazel  
hide sweet hazel-nuts.

The alder is my darling,  
 all thornless in the gap,  
 some milk of human kindness  
 coursing in its sap.

The blackthorn is a jaggy creel  
 stippled with dark sloes;  
 green watercress in thatch on wells  
 where the drinking blackbird goes.

Sweetest of the leafy stalks,  
 the vetches strew the pathway;  
 the oyster-grass is my delight,  
 and the wild strawberry.

.....

I would live happy  
 in an ivy bush  
 high in some twisted tree  
 and never come out. (*Sweeney Astray* section 40)

Sweeney identifies the majestic oak that dominates the first quatrain as the tallest and most leafy tree in the woods, indicating the shelter that it affords him. The oak is immediately followed by the hazel, “the sacred tree of the Celtic groves”, which symbolises “wisdom, inspiration, [and] divination” (Cooper 80). The hazel nuts are thus not only a nourishing food source for the mad king but are symbolic of the wisdom that Sweeney is able to glean from the woods. Sweeney’s affinity for trees is evident once more in the second quatrain where he describes the alder as “my darling”. He longs most for human companionship in his exile and it is evident that the alder, with the “milk of human kindness / coursing in its sap”, serves as a worthy substitute.<sup>9</sup> The trees are thus not merely inanimate vegetable matter to Sweeney but possess an innate vitality of their own, which Heaney is at pains to accentuate. This is most evident when the blackthorn is compared to “a jaggy creel”, an image normally associated with eel fishing, which infuses the tree with writhing vigour. The blackthorn is “stippled” with fruit, emphasising the abundance of food available to Sweeney in his banishment. The wandering king has obviously acquired knowledge of, and a taste for, the plants of the wilds as shown in the detail about the sweetness of the vetches, oyster grass, and wild strawberries. The final quatrain encapsulates the consolation that Sweeney feels in the woods when he states simply “I would live happy / in an ivy bush . . . and never come out”.

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<sup>9</sup> The significance of Heaney’s incorporation of a quotation from *Macbeth* into his translation will be considered below.

Despite the obvious spiritual solace that Sweeney finds in his praise poetry and the physical safety he is afforded in the protective branches of the trees, even the magnificence of the woods is a perpetual reminder to him of his outcast state. In the midst of his praise of the trees Sweeney remembers that:

Briars curl in sideways,  
 arch a stickle back,  
 draw blood and curl up innocent  
 to sneak the next attack. (*Sweeney Astray* section 40)

The briars are a corporeal reminder of his continually bleeding feet, torn hands and bare legs. The quatrain draws on the fish imagery initiated by Heaney in Sweeney's description of the blackthorn. The briar is metaphorically compared to the stickleback, a small freshwater fish with sharp spines along its back, used as a defence mechanism. The metaphor not only enhances the potency of the briar's spines in the reader's mind but also lends the plant a seemingly malicious intent, which it would not otherwise possess. The final line of the quatrain again suggests the malevolence of the briar, which is exacerbated by the relentlessness of its sneaking attacks. "Menace", insists Kennelly, "lives even at the heart of praise", and becomes a characteristic facet of Sweeney's pitiful condition (Kennelly n.pag.).

## V *Dinnseanchas*: the language of place and time

Heaney's own intimacy with the natural world and his praise of the Irish landscape corresponds, as MacGabhann argues, with his psychological retrieval of his first life in the Derry countryside when he moved to the woods of Wicklow in Glanmore in 1972 (MacGabhann 140). In "May" (*WO* 75), for example, Heaney encapsulates this sense of affinity for the land beautifully when he describes how:

Wading green stems, lugs of leaf  
 That untangle and bruise  
 (Their tiny gushers of juice)  
 My toecaps sparkle now

Over the soft fontanel  
 Of Ireland. I should wear  
 Hide shoes, the hair next my skin,  
 For walking this ground. (8–12)

The lines reveal Heaney's sense of ease in the natural world but also indicate his awareness of the impact of his presence where the leaves "bruise" with his passing. The vulnerability of the natural world is tenderly captured when Heaney metaphorically compares Ireland to the soft "fontanel" of a new born baby's head where the skull has not yet fused and hardened. The lines also serve as a metaphor for the fragility of a Northern Ireland emerging into the unstable peace after the upheaval of the Troubles and, as such, convey a sense of Heaney's feelings of accountability as a poet. The "hide shoes", that he feels obliged to wear, convey the care with which he walks the Irish ground, and the delicacy with which he explores the Northern Irish situation through his poetry. The shoes are reminiscent of hair shirts, however, especially since Heaney states that he will wear "the hair next my skin". Hair shirts, as mentioned before, were worn by ascetic Christians as a form of self-abasement to encourage humility. The shoes thus intimate the almost religious reverence with which Heaney approaches the natural world but also convey a sense of the political guilt that Heaney experiences as a poet whose work has an all but intangible effect on the violence on which it comments. Heaney's lasting veneration for the Irish soil is eloquently captured in his statement:

If you're involved with poetry, you're involved with words, and words, for me, seem to have more nervous energy when they are touching territory that I know, that I live with. I don't think of it as the Irish landscape: I think of it as a place that I know is ordinary, and I can lay my hand on it and know it, and the words come alive and get a kind of personality when they're involved with it. In other words, the landscape, for me, is image, and it's almost an element to work with as much as it is an object of admiration or description. (Heaney, in Brown 26)

As Carson argues, for Heaney "a place was not simply a place; it was a story, a history, a creative act, an ordering of time" (Carson 142). As I will show, this concern, and its relation to *Sweeney Astray*, can be better understood by taking into consideration Heaney's conscious link of his own practise with early traditions of Irish writing.

In *Preoccupations* Heaney notes the observations of P.H. Henry, whose study, *The Early English and Celtic Lyric*, identifies two strains of early Irish poetry, namely the

“penitential” and the praise poem, which are both to be found in *Buile Suibhne* (*Preoccupations* 183). Henry records that by the thirteenth century these two poetic forms had developed to the extent that “a convention of celebrating specific places also emerged”, suggesting perhaps that *Buile Suibhne* itself is a celebration, not of a specific place, but of Ireland as a whole (*Preoccupations* 184). Heaney notes that this “love of place and lamentation against exile from a cherished territory is another typical strain in the Celtic sensibility” that finds itself voiced in the genre of early Irish writing known as *dinnseanchas* (*Preoccupations* 184). These poems relate the mythological associations and original meanings of place names and constitute what Heaney defines as “a form of mythological etymology” (*Preoccupations* 131). He demonstrates this in his analysis of the name Ardee in County Louth in *Preoccupations*. Heaney informs us that Ardee means “Ferdia’s Ford” since it was at that place that Cuchullain, the legendary warrior of the Irish Ossianic cycle, fought in the river with Ferdia, his childhood companion. The two were locked in relentless single combat by day and then tended each other’s wounds by night until Cuchullain killed Ferdia with his magical weapon: “the *gae bolga*” (*Preoccupations* 131). Heaney argues that the place name Ardee, in recalling the struggle, “succinctly marries the legendary and the local” and becomes a part of the Ardee man’s sense of his place in the Irish world (*Preoccupations* 131). Heaney laments, however that “the Irish landscape . . . is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read” (*Preoccupations* 132). He urges others to reread and reinterpret the land so that what Hart has called “the old mystical bond between sacred word and sacred place” can be reaffirmed (Hart 61).

In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney agreed that as a poet he is “obsessed with the desire that this landscape be distinctly of this culture”, a desire which is most eloquently expressed and realised in his own place-name poems (Heaney, in MacGabhann 132). In “Anahorish” (*WO* 16), “Broagh” (*WO* 27) and “Toome” (*WO* 26), Heaney explores his connection with the land in his celebration of the places and the names that are inseparable from them. “Anahorish” (*WO* 19) describes the small town in County Derry where Heaney grew up. Here the landscape is described in terms of the phonetic units that make up its name: “*Anahorish*, soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow” (7–8). Heaney’s description thus fuses language and landscape in order to demonstrate their inseparability. The landscape is immediately associated with its previous inhabitants, “those mound-dwellers” who “break the light

ice / at wells” (13–16), the same wells from which the present occupants draw their water. “Anahorish” thus combines the present and past, language and land, in a way that offers its inhabitants an intense sense of their place in their Irish world.

Heaney argues further that there are two ways in which a place is known and cherished, namely the “lived, illiterate and unconscious” experience of the place and the “learned, literate and conscious” understanding of the place (*Preoccupations* 131). In an interview with Elgy Gillespie in *The Irish Times* Heaney expresses his intentions in writing “Broagh”:

If I can write the right poem about Broagh it might be a miniscule definition, getting in affection, elegy, exclusiveness . . . I mean it might touch intimately, though not spectacularly, the nerve of history and culture. (Heaney, in Hart 65)

In “Broagh” (*WO* 27), a short poem that details the affinity between the place and its name, Heaney explores the distinct identity of the Irish within an English speaking world, highlighting the “last / *gh* [of Broagh] the strangers found / difficult to manage” (14–16), despite the fact that Broagh is an anglicisation of the original Gaelic *bruach*. Even though English has become the official language of Ireland the Irish still possess the essence of their Gaelic roots in the place names that surround them. It is not only the names that retain this Irishness but the landscape itself, which is inscribed with the very letters and sounds of those names:

the shower  
gathering in your heelmark  
was the black *O*  
in *Broagh* (6–9)

The name Broagh is similarly to be found echoing amongst the sounds of the “windy boortrees / and rhubarb blades” (11–12) along the riverbank. Rita Zoutenbier has argued that while Heaney’s intimacy with particular locales may seem a limitation “his feeling for his own territory is a source of emotion for the poet, which infuses his language, and makes it come alive” (Zoutenbier 52). In this way Heaney interprets the landscape, of which the very name “Broagh” is an inextricable part, as a celebration of the unique Irishness of the place that distinguishes it from the British Empire of which it is a part.

In the poem “Toome” (WO 26) Heaney finds not only a strong connection between the place and its name but a consequent connection between himself and the land. A suitable homophone of tomb, “Toome” is the anglicised version of the Gaelic *Tuaim*, which means “a tumulus or burial mound” (Joyce n.pag.) and may be textually connected with the souterrain that Heaney describes in the poem:

My mouth holds round  
the soft blastings,  
*Toome, Toome,*  
as under the dislodged

slab of the tongue.  
I push into a souterrain  
prospecting what new  
in a hundred centuries’

loam, flints, musket balls,  
fragmented ware,  
torcs and fishbones (1–11)

The “soft blastings” (2) of the first stanza allude to the rich diatomite deposits in the Toome area, the fossilised remains of hard shelled algae, which are used as an absorbent in the manufacture of gelignite and dynamite (“Toome” n.pag.). The repetition of the name “*Toome, Toome*” (3), however, brings audibly to mind the underground echo chambers of the souterrain in which Heaney imagines himself. These underground chambers are a marked feature of Ireland and were first built during the late Bronze Age and continued through to the Early Christian period (Hart 63). Hart argues that the underground passages “harmonize strangely with Wolfe Tone’s [United] Irishmen” who were forced “underground” in 1794 before their rebellion in 1798 and the later IRA who started their “underground” militant campaign in 1970 (Hart 63). In *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside*, Sean O’Riordain notes that “some ancient souterrains were used as hiding places or deposits for ‘dumps’ of arms during the recent periods of fighting in Ireland”, thereby linking the mythical past with the historical present (O’Riordain, in Hart 63). Toome was the site where certain members of the United Irishmen fought against the British government troops in the uprising of 1798 and hence became home to the “musket-balls” (9) fired during the rebellion (Hart 62). As one of the oldest inhabited places of Ireland, Toome is also home to major archaeological finds such as the “flints”, “fragmented ware”, and “torcs” listed by Heaney, which represents the inhabitants of Ireland from the

Stone Age through to the Viking raids of the ninth and tenth centuries (“Toome” n.pag.).

Heaney describes his entry into the souterrain: “under the dislodged / slab of the tongue” (4–5), a metaphor suggesting an identification between language and the archaeological finds contained within the earth of Toome. Heaney’s image intimates that the very history of the place is captured in the enunciation of the sound that makes up the name Toome. The land speaks for itself through the history that resides within it and its chain of habitation bonds the poet firmly to the land. It is in his archaeological dig through the land that Heaney becomes truly connected to it and finds himself:

sleeved in

alluvial mud that shelves  
suddenly under  
bogwater and tributaries,  
and elvers tail my hair (12–16)

Clothed in the very soil of Toome Heaney becomes as much a part of the rich history of the district as the people who walked upon it before. This connection is not only a “learned, literate and conscious” (*Preoccupations* 131) experience but rather a living, interactive, symbiotic relationship with the land in which “elvers tail [his] hair” (16). The eel imagery proves appropriate when considering the major eel fishing industry in Toome (“Toome” n.pag). Hart suggests that Heaney’s head, alive with young eels, vividly conjures images of Medusa, the snake haired goddess whose gaze would turn anyone who dared to look at her to stone. Hart also notes, however, that the head is a “solar symbol” representative of the ancient Celtic paganism of Ireland in much the same way that the cross is symbolic of Christianity (Hart 64). He argues that Heaney, in appropriating this symbol, has assumed, momentarily of course, the godhead of Ireland, fusing the Classical and Celtic symbols (Hart 64). I would argue in addition that the young living fish tailing Heaney’s hair are symbolic of his living connection to the land, a connection that promises both growth and a constant return like the breeding cycle of eels which finds them returning annually to the land in which they were spawned. Heaney ponders this at length in “Beyond Sargasso”, the second part of “A Lough Neagh Sequence”, in *Door into the Dark* (DD 39), where he describes the life cycle of the eels as being “sure as the satellite’s / insinuating pull / in the

ocean” (8–10). The eels, then, return to land with the same regularity with which the moon draws the tides and, by association, reflect the constantly renewed connection Heaney seeks with the natural world.

In attempting to read the landscape, which Heaney does through his own personal *dinnseanchas*, our imaginations, he argues “assent to the stimulus of the names, 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” (*Preoccupations* 132). As MacGabhann notes, it was in order to relive the joy that he felt in writing these place-name poems, Heaney’s “experience of faithfulness to his own origin, of affirming his affinity with the land of south Derry and with the places of that part of Ulster that he began to translate *Buile Suibhne*” (MacGabhann 132). In this sense *Sweeney Astray* may be viewed as an extended *dinnseanchas*, perhaps the *dinnseanchas* of Ulster or even of the whole of Ireland.

## VI *Sweeney Astray*: anglicised accessibility

Heaney does not only change the title of his translation from *Buile Suibhne* to *Sweeney Astray* and the name of his title character from *Suibhne* to Sweeney, however, but more significantly changes the very names of the places that Sweeney visits in his exile. *Buile Suibhne* is a Gaelic poem translated by an Irish poet and yet the place names contained within Heaney’s *Sweeney* have been anglicised and one has to inquire why a poet so intent on retaining his individual Irish identity would do this. Heaney even draws attention to this practise in the *Notes and Acknowledgements* that precede his version of the story, stating simply that:

I have anglicised the name of Sweeney’s kingdom, Dal Araidhe to Dal-Arie, and in dealing with other place names have followed the suggestions in O’Keeffe’s notes and index. In the following cases, where no help was offered, I took the liberty of inventing my own equivalents of the Irish: Kilreagan, Cloonkill, Kilnoo, Drumfree, Drumduff, Kilsooney, Doovey. (*Sweeney Astray* ix)

While O’Keeffe anglicised the place names of *Buile Suibhne* to some extent Heaney was not content to simply follow in his footsteps but radically anglicised the place names of his own translation. The Gaelic *Ceall Luinni*, which is the name of Ronan’s

church, for example, is rendered “Cell Luinne” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 3) by O’Keeffe but is rendered as the far more recognisably English “Killaney” (*Sweeney Astray* section 3) in Heaney’s text. The battle of *Mhuighe Rath* is converted to “Magh Rath” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 4) in O’Keeffe’s translation but becomes even more palatable to English-speaking readers in the “Moira” (*Sweeney Astray* section 4) of Heaney’s version. When compared with Heaney’s later deliberate Hibernicisation of *Beowulf* through the inclusion of several Ulsterisms (which I will explore in my final chapter) the anglicisation of Gaelic aspects of *Buile Suibhne* might seem contrary. Heaney argues, however, that translating the place names into their English equivalents was an attempt to “give some kind of common possession” to his readers and it is in this that the political subtlety of his translation lies (Heaney, in MacGabhann 142).

Heaney insists that any “work which binds people to the ground, to the place where they are, is a service of some sort” (Heaney, in MacGabhann 142). In anglicising the geographical place names of *Sweeney Astray* Heaney makes both the story and the character more accessible to what has become a global English-speaking audience. MacGabhann argues that Heaney was especially determined that “the tale in translation should be accessible and available to the Unionists in the North who reject the Irish tradition and do not see themselves as part of it” and still support the maintenance of Ulster’s link with Britain (MacGabhann 142). “My hope”, explains Heaney, “was that that book might render a Unionist audience more pervious to the notion that Ulster was Irish, without coercing them out of their cherished conviction that it was British” (“Earning a Rhyme” 16). The anglicised place names that Heaney assigns to *Sweeney Astray* are thus a reminder to the majority of the North that even though they are British in a political sense they remain inhabitants of Ireland in a physical sense and, as such, are Irish and share a common bond with the Catholic minority with whom they live.

Anglicising, or rather modernising, the place names of *Sweeney Astray*, is also a simple and effective way to remove the barrier of time from the historical distance of the text.<sup>10</sup> *Dhuine Sobharci*, for example, changes to “Dun Sobairce” (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 41) in the O’Keeffe edition and to “Dunseverick” (*Sweeney Astray* section 41) in Heaney’s lines. Rendering the place name as

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<sup>10</sup> In terms of Heaney’s linguistic conversion of place names within *Sweeney Astray* ‘anglicisation’ and ‘modernization’ may simply be considered connate.

Dunseverick links the story to a locale in which people still live, giving the text an immediacy which it would otherwise not have possessed. In reading *Sweeney Astray* the reader is thus not simply reading about the Ireland of some thirteen centuries past but in a very real sense the Ireland and Northern Ireland of today, an Ireland that is jointly inhabited by Catholics and Protestants alike. MacGabhann supports this notion, arguing that Heaney's use of anglicised names affords "the contemporary landscape a new dimension" offering the people living there and the people familiar with the region "a renewed vision, of a life-enhancing and liberating perception of themselves" (MacGabhann 143). Identifying with the places in *Sweeney Astray* is akin to identifying with the people who lived in those places, an Irish people who were the ancestors of Protestants and Catholics alike.

The anglicisation of names in Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* must also be understood in relation to his other poetry. In considering Heaney's earlier place name poems, such as "Anahorish" (WO 16) and "Broagh" (WO 27), discussed above, MacGabhann argues that Heaney was able to remain faithful to the English language of his poetry while at the same time remaining faithful to his Irish origins (MacGabhann 132). Mossbawn, where Heaney grew up, was "bordered by the townlands of Broagh and Anahorish", which are the anglicised versions of the original Gaelic names *bruach* and *anach fhior uisce* for "the riverbank" and "the place of clear water" respectively (*Preoccupations* 36). Despite the fact that the place names have been anglicised through the processes of colonisation it is obvious that they still retain an inherent Irishness. Heaney's very childhood was influenced by the etymological changes brought about by colonisation but he retains the anglicised version of the place names in his poetry since it is these modern places, not the historical *bruach* and *anach fhior uisce*, with which he is so intimately connected and with which contemporary readers are able to identify.

In addition to his anglicisation of place names Heaney has deliberately included a number of distinctively English colloquialisms in his translation of *Sweeney Astray*, which Kelly criticises as "slangy clichés" that seem misplaced in a text that contains such serious verse (Kelly 301). Nora Chadwick argues that "Suibhne is meant at least in part as a figure of fun" (Chadwick, in Kelly 295), which might explain Heaney's inclusion of the colloquialisms. I would argue, however, that they are not compatible with what Heaney himself calls "that kind of steel pen chill in the writing" that characterises early Irish poetry (Heaney, in MacGabhann 138–139). In Kelly's

example Sweeney's wife, Eorann, calls out to him, "I wish we could fly away together, / be rolling stones, birds of a feather" (*Sweeney Astray* section 32). The construction is clearly a combination of both "rolling stones gather no moss" and "birds of a feather flock together". The English idiomatic expressions appear contradictory in their juxtaposition, however, since the first implies a lack of attachment while the second suggests a strong identification. While the bird imagery may be contextually suitable when considering Sweeney's status as bird-man, and Sweeney's mad wanderings are captured in the moss-free stones of the colloquialism, they sit uncomfortably in Heaney's lines. The priest Moling later asks Sweeney, "Aren't you the early bird?" (*Sweeney Astray* section 74) The immediate association with "catches the worm" produces a comic effect that is decidedly unwarranted considering the physically and emotionally drained husk of the mad Irish king. As Kelly argues, the language of Heaney's *Sweeney* sometimes veers toward a rather "flippant mode" of narration which seems most unsuited to the prosimetry (Kelly 301).

Heaney also peculiarly utilises a quotation from *Macbeth* to describe the alder tree as containing "some milk of human kindness" (footnoted above), which offers the wandering king some solace in his loneliness:

The alder is my darling  
all thornless in the gap  
some milk of human kindness  
coursing in its sap. (*Sweeney Astray* section 40)

This Shakespearean anachronism brings to mind Heaney's comments on his first translation of *Buile Suibhne* where he "allowed [him]self to import echoes from the English literary tradition" ("Earning a Rhyme" 17). But this tendency is one of the reasons he abandoned the 1973 translation in the first place. Retaining the quotation in his published version of *Sweeney Astray* is a deliberate act, however, that serves to shed some light on Heaney's intentions in incorporating English colloquialisms in his translation.

Chadwick has suggested that the colloquialisms offer the story a note of comedy, which reflects the art of "the Irish Shanachie, or professional storyteller" (Chadwick, in Kelly 295). I would argue, however, that, like the anglicised place names of the prosimetry, the colloquialisms serve a more specifically political function. Eugene

O'Brien identifies the relationship between "the English and Irish languages, as metonymic of the political one between England and Ireland" and I would suggest that it is from this perspective that the colloquialisms should be viewed (O'Brien 277). While the colloquialisms may weaken the identity of *Sweeney Astray* as an Irish narrative, by incorporating distinctively English elements into the text of his translation, Heaney clearly demonstrates the degree to which the English language has penetrated Irish culture. And yet the story is firmly rooted in Irish history, the Irish landscape, and remains distinctively Irish. If the translation is viewed from O'Brien's perspective then what becomes apparent is Heaney's eagerness for a Northern Irish readership to acknowledge the unique Irishness of their British existence and to accept the fact that, despite political loyalties, and the ubiquity of the English language that they now speak, they are in a very real sense still Irish.

The changes that Heaney introduces to his version of *Sweeney Astray* are not limited to the linguistic sphere, however, but include a number of excisions from the original text. In his *Notes and Acknowledgements* preceding *Sweeney Astray* Heaney offers an explanation for three of the abridgements made to his translation. He notes six stanzas cut from section 16 due to their historical allusiveness, seven from section 40 where he admits that "obscurity defeated ingenuity" and a single stanza from section 43 because he felt that "the English poem came to rest better at the penultimate stanza" (*Sweeney Astray* ix). Kelly is unperturbed by the quatrains omitted from section 16: a conversation between Donal and Congal, the two Irish kings who led the armies that clashed at Moira. The exchange offers an explanation of their personal conflict but remains tangential to the *Sweeney* narrative and so their absence does not affect the impetus of the story. Heaney's cut from section 40 arbitrarily details Sweeney's reason for labelling the mill-hag he encounters a witch and is summarily dismissed by Kelly. The single quatrain cut from section 43 finds Kelly severely criticising Heaney's decision, however (Kelly 298). The omitted lines recount Sweeney's polite request to a woman to give half the watercress she had stolen from him to Lynchseachan, his half brother and pursuer. While the omitted lines may simply have functioned as a narrative salve for Sweeney's anger, Kelly argues that the quatrain is important because of its stylistic similarity to Ronan's earlier cursing of Sweeney and blessing of Eorann, Sweeney's wife (Kelly 298). Having cursed Sweeney to "roam Ireland mad and bare" and "find death on the point of a spear" (*Sweeney Astray* section 6) Ronan goes on to bless Eorann for trying to

halt Sweeney's rage at the cleric's initial trespass on Dal-Arie. Ronan's second curse condemns Sweeney "to the trees / bird-brain among the branches" (*Sweeney Astray* section 10) and is again followed by a "blessing upon Eorann, / that she flourish and grow lovely" (*Sweeney Astray* section 10). In his habit of following curse with blessing it is obvious that the original poet searches for a balance, a balance that is missing from Heaney's *Sweeney* as a result of his editing. I would argue, however, that although section 16 of *Sweeney Astray* lacks the narrative balance of the original it serves the more essential function of portraying Sweeney as an isolated character who has even lost his capacity for simple human compassion. The final quatrain of the O'Keeffe version reads:

O woman, if there should come to thee  
Loingseachan whose delight is sport,  
do thou give him on my behalf  
half the watercress thou pluckest. (O'Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 43)

The quatrain depicts a far more considerate and generous Sweeney than the destitute king of earlier quatrains in the same section who is insanely possessive of the watercress that he considers his only worldly possession. In Heaney's rendering of section 43, Sweeney condemns the woman in his last line, insisting that she will regret the theft of his watercress and will come to "curs[e] God that our paths crossed", which reiterates the exiled king's loneliness.

Heaney felt that the whole of section 82, and the first fifteen quatrains of section 83, his largest omission, was "a recapitulation and seemed to . . . impede the momentum of the conclusion" (*Sweeney Astray* ix). The absent prose section and its accompanying quatrains recount the exchange between Sweeney, the priest Moling and Mongan, the swineherd who killed Sweeney with a spear. In the excised lines Mongan expresses his remorse for his actions, which, to credit him, were due to jealous rage in the belief that Sweeney had been with his wife, Muirghil, rather than malicious intent. Moling vociferously curses the swineherd, however, and according to Kelly "prays damnation upon him, while promising salvation for Sweeney" who is converted to Christianity by the saint prior to his death swoon (Kelly 298). The omitted lines thus display once more the structural counterbalance of the curses and blessings of St Ronan in the first sections of the narrative. I agree with Heaney, however, that the lines slow "the momentum of the conclusion" and needlessly repeat

in prose and verse what is already concisely captured in sections 79 to 81. Heaney's lines are far more easily digestible as a result of his editing and as such the focus of the conclusion is on Sweeney's salvation from madness and his conversion to Christianity. While Heaney obviously does not intend *Sweeney* to be read as a conversion tract the final lines of his version denote the possibility of reconciliation between two faiths that is suggestive of his hope that a similar resolution might present itself in the religious division of Ulster.

The basic poetic unit of *Sweeney Astray* is what Heaney has termed the "end-stopped and boxed-in" quatrain, which draws the reader's eye down the page in the characteristic fashion of Heaney's poetry, which began with "Bogland" (*DD* 55), the final poem of his second volume *Door into the Dark* ("Earning a Rhyme" 18). Carson notes that the *Sweeney* quatrains are like "drills or augers for turning in and they are long and narrow and deep" (Carson 144), which may be equally expressive of Heaney's quatrains, which according to the poet had become "a habit in the course of writing *Wintering Out*", his third volume ("Earning a Rhyme" 17). This is where the similarities between Heaney's free-flowing enjambed stanzas and the quatrains of *Buile Suibhne* end, however. Carson notes that "eleven different types of quatrain are in fact used in the original, each with its complex set of rules of metre, assonance (or rhyme) and alliteration" (Carson 144) and according to Kelly each section of poetry in the original is limited to one of the eleven quatrain forms (Kelly 299). Heaney candidly admits that his translation does not "reflect the syllabic and assonantal disciplines of the original metres" but argues that:

since the work could be regarded as a primer of lyric genres – laments, dialogues, litanies, rhapsodies, curses – I trust that the variety of dramatic pitch in the English will compensate to some extent for the loss of the metrical satisfactions in the Irish. (*Sweeney Astray* vii)

Hart is quick to remind us that Heaney has been severely criticised "for recasting the complex patterns of meter, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration of the Gaelic original into a simulacrum of his trademark style" (Hart 155). And yet this is the very poetic style that has earned Heaney the praise of English readers and literary critics across the world. Instead of his translating with relentless accuracy the Gaelic metrics, which might be unpalatable to certain readers, Heaney's translating *Buile Suibhne* into the terms of his own poetry is perhaps the most effective way of making *Sweeney Astray*

easily readable. In this way Heaney makes his translation accessible to all English readers, but especially to both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland who Heaney suggests have the most to gain from an insight into Sweeney's life.

## VII *Station Island: Heaney's poetic peregrination*

Nora Chadwick, in her book *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, notes a central ascetic Christian discipline known as "*peregrinatio*", defined as "'peregrination', 'wandering', literally 'pilgrimage'" during which early ascetic Christians would voluntarily exile themselves from society either to commune more closely with God or be exiled under duress in order to atone for sins or crimes committed (Chadwick, in Hart 142). Sweeney's banishment from Dal-Arie by Ronan Finn, in which he is forced to take up the isolated suffering and consolation of poetry and contemplation in the woods, may be viewed as a form of peregrination since it fulfils both characteristic functions of the practise. The constant torment that Sweeney is subjected to, symbolically represented by his feathers, is a form of imposed penance for killing Ronan's acolyte and assaulting the cleric, while his final voluntary submission to the Christian faith under the guidance of the priest Moling does in fact bring him closer to God. Hart argues that Heaney must have felt "a profound psychological bond with the Celtic King" because he too undertook a form of peregrination when he moved to the woods of Wicklow (Hart 140). Sweeney was banished for his sin and Hart argues that Heaney's sin "at least in his eyes, is that he renounces direct political engagement with Northern Ireland's Troubles in order to devote his energy to poetry" (Hart 143). Although Heaney's exile was voluntary the move is still certainly a peregrination and may be viewed as an example of what MacGabhann calls "the pursuit of sanctity" (MacGabhann 135). The sanctity for which Heaney searches is not, of course, religious in nature but rather literary. Four years of writing in the relative confinement and solitude of Glanmore allowed the poet to ponder questions which had been plaguing him for some time, questions that he first formulated in *Preoccupations*: "How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?" (*Preoccupations* 13) Heaney's pilgrimage to the woods of Wicklow was a deliberate decision to remove himself from the political pressures of

the North and the incessant urgings of those who wanted him to write more propagandistic poetry. While his peregrination was undertaken in order to pursue his poetry, Heaney's move to Glanmore was simultaneously a penitential sojourn in which he acquired some form of literary purity, writing poetry more for himself than anybody else.

*Station Island*, the volume of poetry which Heaney wrote at the time of the publication of *Sweeney Astray*, finds numerous correlations with the Gaelic prosimetrum. This is especially evident in the second section of the volume, eponymously titled "Station Island", where Heaney focuses on the penitential aspects of pilgrimage that are so noticeable in *Sweeney Astray*. Station Island, in the middle of Lough Derg in County Donegal is where St Patrick established what has become a penitential vigil of praying and fasting. St Patrick's Purgatory, as the island has become known, is made up of a number of stations, each of which makes up a single spiritual exercise. Heaney undertook this pilgrimage three times as a youth, which involves fasting, prayer and walking barefoot around the stations: stone circles thought to be the remains of ancient monastic cells (Corcoran 159). Heaney notes simply that the twelve poems comprising the "Station Island" section are "a sequence of dream encounters with familiar ghosts", each of which represent a station through which Heaney, as a "contemporary pilgrim", has to pass (*SI* 122). Writing "Station Island" is thus a symbolic return to the pilgrimage of his childhood. The poems each focus on an encounter with a separate ghost from Heaney's past, including persons as varied as Simon Sweeney, the tinker from his childhood, and James Joyce. I wish to focus on poem VIII, however, which deals with the sectarian murder of his second cousin, Colum McCartney, as an example of Heaney's penitence and self-examination. His cousin's death was first elegised in *Field Work's*, "The Strand at Lough Beg" (*FW* 17). It is in this collection, in "Glanmore Sonnet IX" (*FW* 41), that Heaney poses the question "what is my apology for poetry?" (11) This question drives him to query his own poetic approach to the violence of Northern Ireland and is demonstrated clearly in his approach to his cousin's murder, which is reconsidered in a more introspectively penitential light in the eighth "Station Island" poem.

*Field Work's* "The Strand at Lough Beg" opens with an epigraph from Dante's *Purgatorio*:

All round this little island, on the strand  
 Far down below there, where the breakers strive,  
 Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand  
 Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 100–103.

The first section describes a gradually darkening opening scene that sets the tone for the tragic event which follows: the “white glow of filling stations” (1) is replaced by a “few lonely street lamps among fields” (2), which are in turn replaced by “the stars” (4) in the distant night sky. The first section draws strongly on imagery from *Sweeney Astray*, which is most evident in the opening sentence where “bloodied heads, / Goat-beards and dogs’ eyes in a demon pack” (6–7) rise out of the ground to meet Heaney’s cousin. Sweeney is similarly accosted during his wanderings in the Fews Forest by “five scraggy goat-bearded heads” (*Sweeney Astray* section 64) who strike fear into the heart of the pagan king and drive him back into his madness. The “bleeding headless torsos and disembodied heads” (*Sweeney Astray* section 64) that confront Sweeney are metaphorically juxtaposed with the harsh lights of the road block or headlights of the car that signalled the approaching murder of Heaney’s cousin who, like Sweeney, found himself “far from what [he] knew” (14). The metaphor is poetically effective in that it instils some sense of what Colum must have felt like in his last lonely drive along what Heaney calls “a high, bare pilgrim’s track” (5) but it remains an imagined reconstruction of events. This is apparent in the series of questions posed by Heaney in the poem:

What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?  
 The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling  
 Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold nosed gun? (9–11)

The second section of the poem is a flashback to Heaney’s childhood spent together with his cousin when on one occasion they found the “acid, brassy, genital, ejected” (21) cartridges left behind by duck hunters on the shore of Lough Beg. The accumulative effect of the listed adjectives reiterates Heaney’s personal distaste for bloodshed, which is underscored by his use of the term “duck shooters” (18) instead of “hunters”. The “guns fired behind the house” (17) are a subtle reminder to the reader of the proximity of the sectarian violence that formed the backdrop of everyday life in Northern Ireland. Despite their apparent familiarity with the gunshots and empty shotgun shells the two cousins are still “scared” (20) by the gunfire, which is

representative of the constant air of fear that accompanied the Ulster Troubles. Lough Beg itself is described as “a dull blade with its edge / Honed bright” (33–34), suggesting an inherent hostility in Ireland that, like a regularly used blade, has not lost its keenness despite constant use. In spite of these numerous allusions to brutality, Heaney does not specifically link his cousin’s death to the Troubles in Ulster, preferring to steer clear of any direct political commentary.

The third section of the poem fuses the present tense reconstruction of the first section and the remembered past of the second section. It depicts Heaney and his cousin walking out of the “squeaking sedge” (32) of their childhood into the “blood and roadside muck” (37) caking Colum’s eyes in his adult death. Heaney cleans his cousin’s face with “cold handfuls of the dew” (39), an imagined cleansing of Colum’s dead body which finds his fiercest personal criticism in his later “Station Island” poem. The rushes described in the epigraph appear in the final lines of the poem where Heaney uses rushes to “plait / Green scapulars” (43–44) to be worn on his cousin’s shroud. This death-garment is symbolic of the poet’s hope that something positive will come out of Colum’s murder and yet he condemns himself harshly for this somewhat sentimental image in his later “Station Island” poem.

While poem VIII of “Station Island” is not wholly concerned with the death of Colum McCartney (the first two sections do not mention him at all) it proves to be an exercise in self chastisement for Heaney that takes the form of a dialogue with his deceased relative. The “bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud” (52) to whom the reader is introduced in poem VIII is far more horrific than the “blood and roadside muck” (37) from “The Strand at Lough Beg”, and introduces a note of realism markedly absent from the *Field Work* poem. When Colum’s own voice enters the poem, his immediate accusations leave the reader in no doubt of the intention of the lines. While Colum’s first grievance is that Heaney showed little “agitation” (64) at the news of his murder his most pressing criticism is that Heaney “confused evasion and artistic tact” (74) when writing “The Strand at Lough Beg”. In poem VIII of “Station Island” Heaney recounts that he “kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg / and the strand empty at daybreak” (70–71) in his mind’s eye after the news of his cousin’s murder. The image conjured memories of his youth with his cousin and inspired the poem “The Strand at Lough Beg” and yet served as a diversion from the reality of Colum’s death. Heaney’s later poem suggests that he had not come to terms with Colum’s death but rather tried to deal with it in a poem that ultimately lacked

honesty. This evasion is most apparent when Colum simply refers to “The Protestant who shot me through the head” (75), a political fact markedly absent from Heaney’s earlier poem. The reader is also given the impression that Heaney is present at his cousin’s death in “The Strand at Lough Beg” when he supposedly cleans his cousin’s face with dew. Colum’s ghost gives the lie to this imagined event, however, when he notes Heaney’s absence during the transportation of his body to “Bellaghy from the Fews” (63). Colum ultimately dismisses Heaney’s earlier elegiac efforts saying that his poem:

whitewashed ugliness and drew  
the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio  
and saccharined my death with morning dew. (78–80)

The lines refer to the Dantean epigraph of “The Strand at Lough Beg”, of course, but it is the image of Colum’s “saccharined” death that is most revealing. Speaking through the accusatory mouth of his dead relative, Heaney realises that “The Strand at Lough Beg” romanticised the death of his cousin and served as a buffer for his distanced emotional involvement in the event. In writing poem VIII of “Station Island”, however, Heaney admits to what Michael Hulse describes as “an acute awareness of guilt and ineffectuality” in his poetry (Hulse 72). The poem thus enables Heaney, if only in a symbolic sense, to atone for the sins of his first failed efforts at elegising his cousin in poetry.

### VIII Sweeney Redivivus

One of Heaney’s reasons for abandoning his first attempt at translating *Buile Suibhne* was his recognition that the early 1973 manuscript had incorporated too much of himself into his rendering, which produced a version that was admittedly more Heaney than Sweeney. In the process of translating *Sweeney Astray* Heaney was thus much more restrained in his identification with Sweeney despite the strong connection he evidently felt for the mad Irish king, as discussed above. The poet was, however, obviously reticent to cast off what Hart calls his “mask” so easily (Hart 6). Heaney claims that “it was only after the translation had been completed for the second time and I had earned that familiarity which I had originally arrogated . . . that the work

truly yielded itself over” (“Earning a Rhyme” 20). In describing his relationship with Sweeney, Heaney considers two possible options for deploying the literary character:

whether one is content to take Sweeney as he appears in the manuscript and to invest that version of the manuscript with things from within myself. Or whether to take Sweeney out of the old fable, and make him *Sweeney Redivivus*, and make him bear other experiences. (Heaney, in Hart 155)

Heaney’s poem, “The King of the Ditchbacks” (*SI* 56), is structurally mimetic of *Sweeney Astray* and clearly captures Heaney’s identification with Sweeney, making it a perfect forerunner of the poems “voiced for Sweeney” in the final part of *Station Island* (*SI* 123). The poem, like *Sweeney Astray*, may be termed a prosimetrum since it is composed of alternating sections of poetry and prose, incorporating the quatrains so characteristic of *Sweeney Astray* in the first section and the rhyming couplets used in Sweeney’s dialogues in the third section. The title of the poem recalls Heaney’s fascination with the tinkers “who used to camp in the ditchbacks along the road” leading to his primary school (*Sweeney Astray* vii–viii). Heaney explores this relationship in the first lines of the poem where:

a trespasser  
unbolted a forgotten gate  
and ripped the growth  
tangling its lower bars -  
  
just beyond the hedge  
he has opened a dark morse  
along the bank,  
a crooked wounding  
  
of silent, cobwebbed  
grass (1–10)

The unspecified “he” of the lines is not limited to the tinkers of Heaney’s youth, however, but also alludes to Heaney’s early awareness of Sweeney himself. The “forgotten gate” opened by Sweeney leads to a natural life that Heaney had known as a child in rural Derry but had lost contact with as an adult. Heaney’s return to this natural world is not simply a physical one in his move to the woods of Glanmore but an intellectual one in his creative association with Sweeney during his translation of *Buile Suibhne*.

Heaney notes that “The King of the Ditchbacks” “evolved from [his] experience of translating *Buile Suibhne* in the first place” and this is clearly evident in the second part of the poem (*Sweeney’s Flight* viii). In this prose section Heaney offers a vivid description of the intertwined processes of his identification with, and translation of, Sweeney: “He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase like a youngster dared out onto an alder branch over the whirl-pool. Small dreamself in the branches” (28–31). The image of “a youngster dared out onto an alder branch” superimposes Heaney’s childhood experiences in the willow and beech trees and Sweeney’s own experiences, perched precariously on the branch of “a single young blackthorn standing up out of the thorny bed” (*Sweeney Astray* section 18). Heaney’s intellectual adult bond with Sweeney is also captured in the image where Heaney as an adult “hung out on the limb of a translated phrase”, revealing his uncertainty in translating *Buile Suibhne*. The “whirl-pool” over which he hangs symbolises Heaney’s fear of failing in his attempt at translation but in the final lines of the prose section Heaney remembers that he “had been vested for this calling”, affording Heaney a measure of personal confidence in his task.

Heaney must have been retrospectively aware of this “calling” as early as the surfacing of his memory of being lost in the family pea drills as a child where “a green web, a caul of veined light, a tangle of rods and pods, stalks and tendrils” caged him from the world he knew (*Preoccupations* 17). This image is mirrored in “The King of the Ditchbacks” where Heaney describes how they set “plaited leafy twigs” (47) on his head. Inaugurated into the way of the ditchbacks, Heaney’s vision is like “a bird’s / at the heart of a thicket” (48–49), an image that recalls “the heart of a different life” Heaney experienced inside the willow tree as a child as well as Sweeney’s experience. It is from this position within the natural world that Heaney’s voice gains authority, becoming like the biblical “voice from a shaking bush” (51). Although the poem initially suggests that “The King of the Ditchbacks” is one of the tinkers that Heaney found so alluring, perhaps Simon Sweeney from his youth, the second section intimates that it is the figure of the Gaelic king Sweeney himself who reintroduces Heaney to a natural life of poetic inspiration. In the final section of the poem, however, Heaney clearly identifies himself as the “King of the ditchbacks” (52) who, in his quest for a poetic life, left “everything he had / for a migrant solitude” (68–69) in the woods of Wicklow. It is in this final image that Heaney and Sweeney

are doubled, sharing the same role in their poetic relationship with the natural world of Ireland.

In the third section of *Station Island*, which he labels “Sweeney Redivivus”, Heaney is finally able to take up residence within his character completely and give Sweeney a voice outside of his role in the Middle Irish story. Heaney’s acts of translation thus not only provide a space for the “displaced perspective” on preoccupations already evident in his work but, more significantly, a catalyst for the creation of further poetry. Helen Vendler argues that the truest value of his translation of *Sweeney Astray* “appeared in what translation stimulated” (Vendler 92), namely the “Sweeney Redivivus” poems. The “Sweeney Redivivus” section is thus a direct result of his process of translation. Neil Corcoran argues, however, that the “Sweeney Redivivus” sequence offers little more than “a medieval-anchorite colouring in some poems, and a tolerant hospitality to others which could just as easily have appeared without its support-system” (Corcoran 175). I would respond that although a number of the “Sweeney Redivivus” poems all but exclude Sweeney’s voice his presence in the poetry gives more depth, especially in terms of historical perspective, to Heaney’s lines.

“Redivivus” means to come back to life, be reborn, be renewed (*OED*) and by giving Sweeney a new voice in contemporary times Heaney cements his identification with the wandering poet king and is most clearly able to parallel the events of the Middle Irish tale with his own experiences in Ulster. The poem “In the Beech” (*SI* 100), for example, which is concerned with his adolescent experiences of the Second World War, seems to be spoken by Heaney alone since it is concerned with the British military emplacements in Ireland that he reconnoitres from his adolescent tree house, “because Northern Ireland, remember, was and remains part of Britain, and Northern Ireland was therefore also a part of the allied war effort” (“Guttural Muse” 26). From his secluded outpost in the beech tree Heaney “felt the tanks’ advance beginning / at the cynosure of the growth rings” (15–16) and watched “the pilot with his goggles back c[o]me in / so low [he] could see the cockpit rivets” (19–20). Corcoran singles out “In the Beech” as a particular example of a poem that could have appeared without Sweeney’s influence (Corcoran 175). Heaney’s affinity for the beech tree at the end of “the laneway that led from the main road into the farmyard of the house” where he grew up clearly aligns the poet with Sweeney, however, who used trees as vantage points from which to map out the military manoeuvres in his old kingdom of

Dal-Arie (“Guttural Muse” 20). In the final lines of the poem Heaney describes the tree as:

My hidebound boundary tree. My tree of knowledge.  
My thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post. (21–22)

The lines create a fluid connection between the poet and Sweeney, who similarly praises the trees, and when Heaney describes the tree as “soft-fledged”, which denotes the growth of flying feathers in a young bird (*OED*), the connection to Sweeney becomes overt. One can easily imagine Sweeney voicing these same words of praise while ensconced in the protective boughs of his own beech tree. Corcoran’s identification of the tree’s solid, rooted connection to the Irish soil as “a boundary between the old rural ways and military industrialism” is revealing (Corcoran 176). The tree proves to be not only a vantage point from which the young Heaney has an unimpeded view of the preparations for D-Day but on a metaphorical level the tree comes to represent Sweeney, as both man and poem, from whose perspective Heaney is afforded an alternative bird’s eye view of the militarised landscape of contemporary Ulster. Sweeney’s presence, although inconspicuous in this poem, affords “In the Beech” an additional level of interpretation that infuses Heaney’s lines with historical allusion.

Sweeney’s voice is not always so subdued in the “Sweeney Redivivus” poems, however, and often merges with Heaney’s own. James Stewart argues that in these poems “one might speak of double vision, or, rather, double exposure, with Heaney superimposed on Sweeney, or Sweeney on Heaney. Sometimes the thing is so subtly done that it is difficult to decide” (Stewart 17). In “The First Flight” (*SI* 102), for example, the distinction between Heaney and Sweeney is blurred to the extent that the speaker in the poem could be either of the two poets. “The First Flight” refers, of course, to Sweeney’s initial levitation when cursed to a bird life by Ronan Finn and yet may also be read in reference to Heaney’s migration to the woods of Glanmore. In this poem the play on the words “flight” and “astray”, which operates to indicate identification in the titles given to Heaney’s translation, becomes pronounced and definite. The speaker recalls that his first flight “was more sleepwalk than spasm” (1) which refers to Sweeney’s ungainly transition to bird-man. The lines that follow support this reading since they note that “the times / were also in spasm” (2–3), which

brings to mind the battle of Moira and the ensuing confrontation between Sweeney and Ronan. At the same time, however, the lines resonate with the violent political upheavals of Northern Ireland, where:

the ties and knots running through us  
split open  
down the lines of the grain. (4–6)

The metaphor captures the common Irish bond shared by Protestants and Catholics in the textured surface of a piece of wood while simultaneously depicting the political and religious differences that split them “down the lines of the grain”. Sweeney’s banishment from the familiarity of Dal-Arie is, however, equally present in the lines, which allude to his imminent tree-life. Sweeney soon becomes accustomed to the natural world of his exile, drawing close to “pebbles and berries, / the smell of wild garlic” (7–8), much like Heaney did in his move to the woods of Wicklow where he “relearn[ed] / the acoustic of frost” (8–9) in a symbolic return to his rural childhood. These lines are also particularly reminiscent of a quatrain from the O’Keeffe text, which describes Sweeney’s growing affection for the natural world he inhabits:

wood-sorrels, goodly wild garlic,  
and clean topped cress,  
together they drive hunger from me,  
mountain acorns, *melle* root. (O’Keeffe, *Frenzy of Sweeney* section 57)

The superimposition of Heaney and Sweeney is especially prominent in the sixth stanza where Heaney writes: “they came to the tree . . . to whistle and bill me back in” (16–18). The lines recall the repeated attempts of Sweeney’s half-brother, Lynchseachan, to coax him down from the trees and restore his sanity. The lines are equally reminiscent of the attempts of Heaney’s friends and associates to convince him to return to his promising academic career and abandon his chosen life of poetry in the woods of Wicklow. Sweeney’s madness “left [him] with the fears of a bird” (*Sweeney Astray* section 28), however, and so the mad king would flee determinedly from all attempts to persuade him from the trees:

I would collide and cascade  
through the leaves when they left,  
my point of repose knocked askew. (19–21)

These lines also convey a sense of Heaney's own irritation at being disturbed and Heaney might himself have uttered Sweeney's words to Lynchseachan to his own pursuers: "I am exasperated at the way you are constantly after me" (*Sweeney Astray* section 28).

In the most politically explicit lines of the poem the speaker explains that:

I was mired in attachment  
 until they began to pronounce me  
 a feeder off battlefields  
  
 so I mastered new rungs of the air  
 to survey out of reach  
 their bonfires on hills, their hosting  
  
 and fasting (22–28)

The lines describe Heaney's intimate poetic relationship with the Troubles, which he felt he had to "survey out of reach" in order to avoid labels like "the well-known Papish propagandist", which appeared in the headlines of Belfast's *Protestant Telegraph* (Morrison, "Hedge School" 129). Although Heaney's employment of the Troubles in verse make him a literary "feeder off battlefields" Sweeney's habit of "slaying a man each day before the sides were engaged and slaying another each evening when the combat was finished" (*Sweeney Astray* section 7), proves him to be a literal "feeder off battlefields". The Irish king took to the air in fulfilment of Ronan's curse and "survey[ed] out of reach" the battles in his old kingdom of Dal-Arie from the safety of the trees. Heaney's Glanmore home also offered him a form of protection from the immediacy of the Northern violence and yet allowed him to keep track of political events and pursue his poetic interest in the Troubles. "The First Flight" then comes closest to a complete identification between Irish poet and Gaelic character as it explores Heaney's poetical concerns as much as it does Sweeney's banishment.

Heaney's poetic appropriation of Sweeney, as both character and story, is captured succinctly in an eight line poem from the first part of *Station Island* entitled "Widgeon" (*SI* 48), which I quote here in full:

It had been badly shot.  
 While he was plucking it  
 he found, he says, the voice box –

like a flute stop  
 in the broken windpipe –  
  
 and blew upon it  
 unexpectedly  
 his own small widgeon cries.

A widgeon is a small sized duck with reddish-brown and grey plumage that is characterised by a whistling call. Heaney's poem relays the story of a duck hunter's unusual experience with the body of a recently shot widgeon. While plucking the bird, the hunter comes upon the voice box and, blowing into it, is surprised to hear the familiar call of the duck and yet this call is identified as "his own". The widgeon thus serves to integrate the hunter into the natural world of which, he now realises, he is a part. This simple poem may be read as an extended metaphor for Heaney's discovery of the Sweeney story and his consequent identification with its title character. The widgeon connects the hunter with the natural world in much the same way that Sweeney is Heaney's medium for returning to the perspective of his earlier country life in rural Derry. The poem is written in reported speech, which is made plain by the "he says" of the third line, and as such is specifically identified as a retelling of a story told to the poet. The poem thus alludes to Heaney's experience of translating the tale of *Buile Suibhne* narrated some eight centuries before by an unknown poet. Heaney found, in Sweeney, an alter-ego through whose story he was able to tell his own, and from whose perspective he was able to comment on his own society. In appropriating Sweeney in the "Sweeney Redivivus" poems, however, he is able to draw his character into the contemporary world and make heard "his own small widgeon cries", through the poems "voiced for Sweeney" (*SI* 123).

## IX Exposure

It is not only in *Station Island*, however, that Heaney's identifications with Sweeney occur. The final poem in *North*, "Exposure" (*N* 72), is Heaney's self reflective consideration of his poetry during his sojourn in the woods of Wicklow. The poem is set in the woods of Glanmore and the content is visibly paralleled with that of the narrative of the mad Irish king. The title links his physical exposure to the natural world with the personal exposure to which Heaney feels subjected and to which he

subjects his own writing. The poem finds Heaney clearly identifying with Sweeney and the ten concise quatrains of the poem, spread across two pages of the volume, are immediately reminiscent of the visual effect of the quatrains of *Sweeney Astray*.

Heaney's description of the natural world, specifically the trees, in the first stanza could easily have been uttered by mad Sweeney consoling himself in his exile by admiring the beauty of the treed Irish landscape. The poem opens with:

It is December in Wicklow:  
Alders dripping, birches  
Inheriting the last light,  
The ash tree cold to look at. (1-4)

The quatrain describes the alder, the birch, and the ash, three trees which are similarly recalled by Sweeney in section 40 of *Sweeney Astray*. Carson argues that “the trees become ciphers for Sweeney’s state of mind” (Carson 145) and Heaney’s contemplation of the trees in “Exposure” must also reflect on the poet’s own state of mind. The alder is known for its imperishable quality “the wood of which resists decay for an indefinite time under water” (*OED*). This lends greater significance to the “dripping” branches of Heaney’s lines, which suggest the fortitude of both Heaney and Sweeney in their exile. The birch tree is commonly associated with corporal punishment since bundles of birch twigs bound together were often used for flogging (*OED*). Heaney’s reference to the birch is thus an allusion to the discomfort of Sweeney’s penance in the woods but also suggests that Heaney’s own voluntary exile to the south is a form of “self-chastisement” (Hart 143). The three years he spent in the woods were a way for Heaney to atone for his poetry, which he felt had little, or no, impact on the very world on which he was commenting. The “birches / inheriting the last light” lends the trees a capacity for enlightenment, however, which intimates that Heaney’s self imposed penance serves to open him to further poetic inspiration. The ash tree, like the birch before it, possesses a peeling silvery white bark that makes it ideally suited to the wintry landscape so evocatively sketched by Heaney. The whiteness of the ash and the birch reflects Heaney’s pure intentions in turning to a life of poetry.

Heaney elaborates on the light imagery in the second stanza where he recalls a comet<sup>11</sup> visible to the naked eye that he imagines is composed of a “million tons of light” (7). The comet is perceptible only as a mere “glimmer of haws and rose-hips” (8), however, appearing no brighter than dully burning lanterns or the deep red fruit of the rose. As a metaphorical representation of Heaney’s poetic inspiration and writing talents the dimly visible comet suggests that Heaney’s work touches only the very tips of a vast store of inspirational poetic energies available to him. He notes in the third stanza that he “sometimes see[s] a falling star” (9), indicating those moments when his “feeling had got into words” (*Preoccupations* 41). Falling stars burn up completely in the earth’s atmosphere, however, which, along with Heaney’s pensive “sometimes,” alludes to the inconsistent realisation of his ideas in his poetry. Heaney’s most pressing wish is to “come on meteorite!” (10), which reveals the poet’s ardent desire for writing poetry that, like an asteroid that has managed to penetrate the earth’s atmosphere, truly captures the essence of what he would say and has an impact on his world.

These astronomical metaphors stand in stark contrast to the description of Heaney’s return to the woods of Glanmore, however, where he “walk[s] through damp leaves, / Husks, the spent flukes of autumn” (11–12). The lines reveal Heaney’s waning faith in his creative abilities and depict a man uncertain of his poetic mantle. Heaney imagines “a hero / On some muddy compound” (13–14), a character from Irish legend who becomes an alter-ego for Heaney himself. The hero’s weapon is described as “a slingstone / Whirled for the desperate” (15–16), which is an obvious continuation of “the sling of mind” (13) wielded by the poet in his poem “Bone Dreams” from the same collection (*N* 27). The slingstone in the earlier poem is a linguistic projectile, however, in the form of the Anglo-Saxon word “*ban-hus*” (36). Heaney uses this word to lay claim to the English language, which will be discussed in detail in the chapter on *Beowulf*. The potency of the sling is diminished in “Exposure”, however, which once again suggests Heaney’s discontent with the practical efficacy of his poetry. The irony, of course, is that the collection in which

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<sup>11</sup> Possibly the comet named P/Tuttle-Giacobini-Kresak, which was first discovered by Horace Parnell Tuttle on May 3, 1858, and re-discovered independently by Michel Giacobini and L’ubor Kresak in 1907 and 1951 respectively. The comet still holds the interests of astronomers since it has been noted to flare dramatically. The comet’s flare in 1973 was 10 magnitudes brighter than predicted and as a result was easily visible to the naked eye, making it a plausible referent of the poem’s final line: “the comet’s pulsing rose” (Kronk n.pag.).

“Exposure” is to be found has become the most successful of Heaney’s poetry volumes.

The five questions which appear in the fifth and sixth stanzas reveal Heaney’s continued frustration, despite his previous successes, and express what Hart calls “a restless dissatisfaction with the work already done, a fear of repetition, an anxiety about too casual an assimilation and acclaim, a deep suspicion of one’s own reputation and excellence” (Hart 141):

How did I end up like this?  
I often think of my friends’  
Beautiful prismatic counselling  
And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing  
My responsible *tristia*.  
For what? For the ear? For the people?  
For what is said behind-backs? (17–24)

The “beautiful prismatic counselling” (19) of his friends, although carefully measured and insightful, no doubt, does little to console Heaney and their best intentions dissipate like a beam of light dispersed by a prism. Heaney’s “responsible *tristia*” (22) is a reference to the five books of poetry written by Ovid while “banished by Augustus to Tomis on the western shore of the Black sea” for an unrecorded offence (“Ovid”). The poetry conveys the misery of Ovid’s exile on the edges of the Roman Empire and recounts the bard’s hopes for “some mitigation of his severe punishment” and a welcoming return to the empire (“*Tristia*”). Ovid’s work obviously echoes the poetry of Sweeney’s exile, which was composed in order to console the mad Irish king in the woods of Ireland. Even though Heaney migrated south voluntarily the comparison is expressly intended for him. Heaney’s “*tristia*” is to come to terms with his role as poet and the possible practical inefficacy of his poetry and the reference to both Ovid and Sweeney suggests that his trial is an intensely personal one. The cumulative effect of the four successive questions in the final lines of the sixth stanza, along with the incrementally increasing syllable count of each, find the poet reaching a climax in his thoughts. The rhetorical questions of the stanza find the reader responding in the negative to each possibility. The final question brings to mind the “behindbacks / of the althing” (25–26), the deception and scheming of the Icelandic

parliament described in the poem “North” (N 19), which lends a political edge to his crisis, and yet it is clear that Heaney’s “*tristia*” remains his own.

Heaney’s perseverance is evident again when “Rain comes down through the alders” (25), fortifying the wood while affording Heaney a similar measure of strength in the soothing rain. In the whisperings of trees Heaney hears the “let-downs and erosions” (27), the consequences of his choice to practise poetry, but a significant contrast is introduced in the words “And yet” (28). The rain dripping off the alders reminds Heaney of “the diamond absolutes” (29), which divide Northern Ireland into Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionist. In the most decisive lines of the poem he simply marks out his political stance:

I am neither internee nor informer;  
An inner émigré, grown long haired  
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,  
Taking protective colouring  
From bole and bark (30–35)

Heaney declares that he is “neither internee nor informer”, slave to neither the Catholic minority of which he is a part nor the Protestant majority of Ulster and displays the “faults-on-both-sides tact” that his wife first accused him of in “An Afterward” (FW 44). He also describes himself as an “inner émigré” (31) in his political exile from Ulster, which incorporates a subversion of expectations. Heaney’s move south finds him far from the familiarity of his Ulster home but still within the borders of Ireland and as such he is an exile in his own country as much as Sweeney was an exile in his. Heaney’s emigration is not only from a physical location, however, but from himself, or at least his old self who felt pressured to write more political poetry. This again accords with Sweeney who, in his lonely madness, wails: “God has exiled me from myself” (*Sweeney Astray* section 14). His long hair further parallels Heaney with the bedraggled king of *Sweeney Astray* and represents his return to a more natural state of being, a resumption of his contemplative role as poet. Heaney compares himself to “a wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre”, a metaphor that recalls the British onslaught of 1798 against the United Irishmen in which the Irish soldiers, or wood-kerne, were “driven to the hills by the English army” (Vendler 87). This also serves to recall Sweeney’s own flight from battle

(Vendler 87). Heaney takes “protective colouring / From bole and bark” in the Irish countryside like the wood-kernes and Sweeney before him. The sense of belonging that Heaney feels within the woods of Glanmore is apparent and once again reiterates the sense of consolation and protection the wood affords him, much as it did Sweeney. But there remains a sense of emptiness here, a sense of hiding away in the woods that is deliberately self-critical.

Despite his exile Heaney is still aware of “Every wind that blows” (36), a cold wind of violence and death from the North that he feels keenly. While the poet’s geographical distance from his subject prevents physical contact with the North it allows him a better perspective from which to write his poetry and yet he still seems overly pessimistic about the outcome of his poetic endeavours. The “meagre heat” (38) that the poet is able to coax from his inspirational “sparks” (37) reveals an artist dissatisfied with the fruits of his labours, an artist who believes that he has irretrievably missed the “once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet’s pulsing rose” (39–40).

Heaney’s move to Glanmore was a decision to commit himself to a life of poetry and the questions that he poses in “Exposure” suggest the difficulty of that choice and reveal his continuing uncertainty in his role as poet. “Exposure”, however, illustrates lucidly the reasons for the resonance of Sweeney in Heaney’s poetic imagination. Sweeney embodies the intense bond with nature that Heaney has felt since he was a child and serves to reintroduce Heaney to “the heart of a different life” in the natural world of Ireland. “Exposure” conveys not only the psychological bond that Heaney feels for Sweeney but the keenness of his personal experiences in the woods. The experience of exile that Sweeney articulates in his lonely wanderings tangibly captures Heaney’s own lived experience in the voluntary exile of his sojourn in the woods of Wicklow. Heaney’s identification with Sweeney in “Exposure” suggests that although his poetry may not have a practically efficacious impact on the world his decision to practise poetry was as inevitable as Sweeney’s own exile. Despite the negative finality of the last line, the poem is a clear statement of Heaney’s recognition of the limitations of poetry that simultaneously reveals his acceptance of the indispensable role that poetry plays in his own life. In “Exposure” Heaney comes to accept that his role is not that of the political poet but that of “the hermit-artist” (Hart 139) whose creative work encompasses the entirety of his experience as a poet and in this way serves as a reflection on the political world of which he is a part.

## Chapter 2

### *The Cure at Troy: rhyming “hope and history”*

#### I Sophocles and Athenian politics

The events of Sophocles' tragedy, *Philoctetes*, take place during the closing stages of the Trojan War. The war begins when Menelaus and his brother, Agamemnon, supported by the entire Greek fleet, set sail in order to avenge the abduction of Menelaus' wife, Helen, by Paris, the prince of Troy. Philoctetes, the famous archer, unites willingly with the Greek forces and bolsters their fleet with seven of his own ships. Before reaching Troy, however, Philoctetes visits the temple of the goddess Chryse where he is bitten on the foot by a venomous serpent. The infected snake bite does not heal and the malodorous, suppurating wound soon reduces Philoctetes to pitiful screams of agony. The Greek commanders, disgusted by his condition, turn against Philoctetes and abandon him on the island of Lemnos. In the tenth and final year of the prolonged war the Greeks capture the Trojan seer, Helenus, who foretells that Troy will only fall to the invincible bow and arrows of Hercules. Philoctetes received this magical bow as a gift when he put flame to Hercules' funeral pyre, relieving him from the pain of the poisoned shirt of Nessus.<sup>1</sup> Odysseus is the Greek commander chosen to return to Lemnos, retrieve the weapon, and sue for Philoctetes' support.

It is at this point that Sophocles' play commences. Odysseus' embassy is precarious since he was instrumental in Philoctetes' abandonment on Lemnos. Certain in the knowledge that Philoctetes will shoot him on sight, Odysseus enlists the assistance of Neoptolemus, and convinces him that deception is the only means to ensure Philoctetes' cooperation and a Greek victory at Troy. Odysseus directs

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<sup>1</sup> Nessus, a centaur from Greek mythology, carried Hercules' wife, Deianeira, across the River Euenos and was killed by an arrow loosed from Hercules' bow, tipped with the poison of the Hydra, when he attempted to rape her. Nessus' dying words to Deianeira promised true faithfulness from her husband should Hercules wear a shirt daubed with his blood. Deianeira foolishly believed him and offered Hercules the shirt soaked in the centaur's poisoned blood, which he wore to a gathering of heroes. The shirt clung to Hercules and burned his skin but was not able to kill him, leaving the hero in ceaseless agony (Lindemans n.pag.).

Neoptolemus to reveal his identity as Achilles' son to Philoctetes and explain his personal loathing of Odysseus for having claimed his father's armour, which should have been presented to him after Achilles' death. In this way, Odysseus suggests that Neoptolemus will be able to win Philoctetes' trust and be in a strong position to commandeer the bow of Hercules. Neoptolemus is reluctant to beguile Philoctetes but is aware of the necessity of his cooperation in the Trojan War. It is this personal dilemma that generates the dramatic tension in Sophocles' play. Neoptolemus is torn between being obedient to his superiors and the Greek cause, in the sense of duty he feels toward Odysseus, and remaining true to his own personal morality, in the obligation he feels towards Philoctetes. Although his choice in the end is a moral one, Neoptolemus' predicament is only satisfactorily resolved when Hercules appears, in a *deus ex machina*, at the end of the play.

*Philoctetes* was first performed in 409 BC in the theatre of Dionysus but was written earlier during a particularly unstable period of Athenian history. Carola Greengard argues that the play may be read as a reflection of the political climate in Athens at the time and yet specifies that it "is not historical allegory" (Greengard 11). Athenian politics were greatly influenced by the protracted Peloponnesian War, fought between Athens and Sparta, which began in 431 BC. Alcibiades, a noble by birth who had been raised in the house of Pericles, rose to political prominence during this time. In 420 BC Alcibiades demonstrated his growing influence when he convinced the Athenian leaders to make an alliance with Argos, a small city state gathering her forces to rise up against Sparta. Against all expectations the Athenians were subsequently defeated by the Spartans at Argos (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 34). In 415 BC Alcibiades once more persuaded the Athenian democracy to make an alliance with a small city state. Under the guidance of Alcibiades the Greeks sailed to Sicily in order to aid the city of Segesta in its battle against Selinus. Although the battle between the two cities was of small interest, Selinus was supported by Syracuse whose grain and wood supplies were attractive to Athens. The city was also a cultural centre and the Greeks set sail in the hope of expanding their empire and converting Syracuse into what Ernle Bradford calls the "Athens of the West" (Bradford 181). The night before the fleet sailed, however, a number of Hermae, or busts of Hermes, which were symbolic of Athenian good fortune, were defaced and Alcibiades was charged with the crime and, in due course, sentenced to death (Bradford 183). Alcibiades fled to Sparta without delay, where he changed allegiance, and advised the

Spartans how to defend Syracuse against the soldiers from his own city (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 36). Five thousand Greek soldiers sailed to Sicily initially and although they were reinforced by a further five thousand men, the Greeks were ultimately defeated and the Athenian fleet destroyed in 413 BC. Despite these two major defeats, partly due to his influence, the Athenians recalled Alcibiades to Athenian politics in 411 BC because he had the influence to persuade the Persians to withdraw their offer of military support to Sparta (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 38). In return for this service Alcibiades requested “the overthrow of the radical democracy at Athens”, which would allow him to return to his mother city (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 38). Alcibiades, not unexpectedly, reneged on his promise but the coup went ahead and the democracy of Athens was replaced by the Four Hundred oligarchs in 411 BC (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 39). After only four months, however, the Four Hundred found themselves unable to secure the promised peace with Sparta. In September 411 BC the oligarchy was replaced by the rule of Five Thousand: a body made up of the wealthiest Athenian citizens. The Five Thousand made the greatest financial contributions to the war effort and it was decided that they should be allowed the political leverage to direct the usage of their funds. This opened the way for the restoration of the traditional democracy to Athens, which returned to power in 410 BC (Jones, Sidwell, and Corrie 39). Thus, in the space of a single year, Athens had been governed by no less than four consecutive ruling powers. The outcome of the constantly raging Peloponnesian War remained unpredictable, however, and as such “figured strongly in the uncertainty of what new revolutions or counter-revolutions were in store for the city” (Greengard 74).

Several of these historical events are reflected in Sophocles’ play, especially the extended duration of the war, the unpredictable shifts in Athenian political power, and the changing allegiances of military leaders, notably Alcibiades. Scholarly efforts to demonstrate the direct connection of events within the play to contemporary historical events have proven ineffectual, however, and for this reason Greengard argues that the play should not be read allegorically. And yet *Philoctetes* clearly conveys a sense of the political instability of the time and the public confusion that resulted.

Greengard suggests that:

the appropriate analogy, therefore, is not between personages and characters or events and plot, but rather between public attitudes toward contemporary historical circumstances and audience attitudes towards dramatic events. (Greengard 11)

It is the social awareness of the significance of current events, argues Greengard, rather than the particular historical events themselves, to which Sophocles' drama is directed (Greengard 8). I would argue that it is a similar consciousness of the political situation of Northern Ireland, and a personal consciousness of the role of his own poetry, which drew Heaney to attempt a translation of *Philoctetes*. As I will demonstrate, Heaney's appropriation of the Sophoclean play is a deliberate aesthetic act through which he is able to make the political undertones of the play more accessible to his contemporary audiences and specifically those in Northern Ireland.

## II Heaney's translation: *A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*

Heaney's translation of *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*, was first performed at the Guildhall, in Derry, on 1 October 1990. The published text includes two stanzas of W. H. Auden's poem, "As I Walked Out One Evening", as an epigraph to the play. The lines, from the thirteenth and fourteenth stanzas of the poem, read:

*'O look, look in the mirror,  
O look in your distress;  
Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.*

*O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;  
You shall love your crooked neighbour  
With your crooked heart.'*

The "mirror" of the first stanza represents the need for self-reflection during times of hardship, and intimates that such contemplation enables one to appreciate the unrecognised "blessing[s]" that one's life holds. It is from this perspective, of positive self-awareness in the face of pain, that the second stanza proposes the importance of consideration for others. The stanza suggests, in the repetition of the word "crooked" in the last two lines, that a self-conscious appraisal of one's neighbours will reveal that their suspected faults are more often than not reflected in one's own. Auden's

lines thus emphasise the common bonds of human experience, connoting the importance of mutual understanding and sympathy.

*The Cure at Troy* is written by a Northern Irish poet, however, and performed for the first time in front of a Northern Irish audience, which suggests that the epigraph serves specifically as a commentary on the relevance of the play in a Northern Irish context. The effects of the violence and turmoil of the Troubles is clearly evident in the “distress” and “tears” of the two stanzas and yet the epigraph apportion blame for the suffering to no particular party. The epigraph thus prepares the reader for a more nuanced view of the personal impact of the Troubles, which suggests that both Catholics and Protestants are involved in similar activities and that their responses to the violence through which they live are comparable. The play itself may initially be seen as a mirror of the violence of the Ulster Troubles, but it then becomes a window through which to view the possibility, however unbelievable it might seem, of a more peaceful future.

The epigraph is only effectively able to contextualise the play in the published text, however, as it is not included in the performance of the play.<sup>2</sup> But the epigraph is not the only indication that Heaney’s translation of the play is meant to be read as relevant to the Northern Irish situation. The subtitle of Heaney’s text specifically marks it out as “*A Version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes*” and as such his rendering should not be regarded as a verbatim translation of the original Greek text but as an engagement with the classical story which produces a uniquely pertinent interpretation. Heaney’s version displays two major divergences from the Sophoclean original, which are all the more important for being additions to, rather than omissions from, the text. Heaney’s additions prove to be an essential guide to the interpretation of his rendering of the Philoctetes story. The first addition to the text appears in the form of introductory lines spoken by the Chorus that are suggestive of the public response to the Northern Irish situation. Heaney’s second addition to the text appears prior to the *deus ex machina* and will be considered in greater detail later in this chapter. As the introductory lines are assigned to the Chorus, it is apparent that they function as a commentary which contextualises the events of the drama.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It may well have been included in the printed theatre programmes that accompanied the first performances but I have not been able to determine this for certain.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. B. Burton argues that the chorus in Greek tragedy represents “an average group, sailors, young girls, elders of a city, mature women, guardians of a sanctuary; it expresses the reactions of its group to situations of high tragedy and thus helps to bridge the distance between the characters on the stage and

In the very first lines of *The Cure at Troy* Heaney intentionally complicates the roles traditionally assigned to the main characters. The play opens with the following lines from the Chorus:

Philoctetes.  
                   Hercules.  
                           Odysseus.  
 Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.  
 All throwing shapes, every one of them  
 Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad  
 To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,  
 No matter what. (*Cure at Troy* 1)

The appellations that Heaney attaches to Philoctetes, Hercules, and Odysseus initially appear to be attached to the specific characters but the plural form used suggests that the designations: “Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings” apply to each of the three characters in varying degrees. Heaney is careful to demonstrate that the characters do not regard themselves in this multi-faceted light, however, when he describes them “throwing shapes”, convinced of the rightness of their differing positions and thus cementing their own particular identities. The absolutism of their individual positions is irrefutably captured in the last lines of the speech where Heaney reiterates the fact that they would all “repeat themselves and their every last mistake / No matter what”. The intractable attitudes that the characters espouse and articulate in the course of the action of the play are similarly suggestive of the stubborn Catholic and Protestant stances within the Northern Irish conflict. Heaney’s early complication of the roles of the characters deliberately hints at the complexity of the Northern Irish situation but more significantly suggests that both sides of the conflict react to the violence in comparable ways. Heaney draws special attention to the self pity he recognises in the victims of the play and this is most clearly expressed when his Chorus describes the three characters as:

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the average audience in the theatre” (Burton 3). Burton notes that Sophocles, in particular, uses the chorus “to produce certain dramatic effects and to interpret his plays to an audience” (Burton 4). Heaney’s Chorus proves to be markedly influential in the audience’s response to *The Cure at Troy* and this becomes most apparent in the lines he adds to the Chorus, which will be considered below.



And that's the borderline that poetry  
 Operates on too, always in between  
 What you would like to happen and what will –  
 Whether you like it or not. (*Cure at Troy* 2)

When placed in a Northern Irish context the lines intimate that Heaney hopes that his poetry, including *The Cure at Troy*, will be able to exert some influence on the way the world views the Troubles. The poetry is not efficacious in and of itself, however but is reliant on the receptive alertness of its readers at all times. Heaney's description of the role of his Chorus is very reminiscent of his musings on the role of poetry in *The Government of the Tongue*:

In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. (*Government* 107–108)

Like the “mirror” in the epigraph from Auden's poem, the above quotation suggests, as does his Chorus at the outset of Heaney's play, that although poetry remains ineffective in any practical political sense it is able to offer an incisive perspective on situations that is not otherwise available. The intimation is that it is from this alternative, and powerfully self-reflexive, point of view that change in a Northern Irish context might occur.

As I shall explore in detail later, Heaney's decision to translate Sophocles' rendering of the story of Philoctetes, rather than any of the other available versions, was in part motivated by the fact that the play contains a *deus ex machina*. *Philoctetes* is in fact the only Sophoclean play concluded by the use of such a dramatic device and, although it is normally deployed to provide an unexpected resolution to the events of a play, Heaney deliberately anticipates the *deus ex machina* in his introductory lines where his Chorus points out that:

Poetry  
 Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice  
 Of reality and justice. The voice of Hercules  
 That Philoctetes is going to have to hear (*Cure at Troy* 2)

Heaney's insistence that "Philoctetes is going to have to hear" the voice of Hercules alludes to the forthcoming intervention of the god who will relieve Philoctetes of his years of suffering and resolve the conflict of the play. The title of Heaney's play, *The Cure at Troy*, in conjunction with the introduction spoken by the Chorus, therefore hints that the cure will be embodied in the deified person of Hercules. The lines create an awareness of the relationship between Hercules and Philoctetes from the outset, which prepares the contemporary audience for an event which is now considered atypical as a conclusion to a play. The Chorus urges the audience to "remember this" (*Cure at Troy* 2), which emphasises the importance that Heaney places on the concluding events of the play. Heaney clearly states, moreover, that "Poetry / Allowed the god to speak", which highlights the role of poetry in enabling the "cure" in the play, and suggests that it may similarly be a part of the solution to the Northern Irish Troubles.

### III Neoptolemus: "the moral agent"

Heaney is not alone in making additions to the Philoctetes story but follows in the footsteps of Sophocles himself, whose play differs considerably from earlier versions of Philoctetes mythology. Greengard notes that in early epic sources it was Diomedes who was sent to retrieve Hercules' bow and persuade Philoctetes to return to the Greek army while Odysseus was sent independently to present Achilles' armour to the young Neoptolemus in an effort to draw him into the Trojan War (Greengard 16). Aeschylus' version of the play, in the fifth century BC, finds Odysseus replacing Diomedes as Philoctetes' persuader while Euripides subsequently incorporates both men into the embassy to Lemnos (Greengard 16). Greengard argues that, so far as is known, Sophocles was the first playwright to include Neoptolemus in the dramatic action of the play and as such his presence must have served a specific artistic purpose (Greengard 16). It is significant then that Heaney chooses to translate the Sophoclean *Philoctetes*.

Joe Park Poe argues that Neoptolemus brings neutrality to a play that would have otherwise consisted of a simple opposition between the cunning Odysseus and the obstinate social outcast Philoctetes (Poe 27). I would argue that Neoptolemus' role is

not nearly as neutral as Poe suggests, however, and his contention that Neoptolemus “stands midway between the other two characters with their strong wills and clear certainty, entirely convinced by neither”, is too simplistic a reading of the Sophoclean play (Poe 27). Greengard notes that the struggle of wills between Philoctetes and Odysseus is only converted into effective action “through the orders that the impressionable child-general Neoptolemus chooses to give his sailors”, placing Neoptolemus in anything but a neutral role (Greengard 16). Rather than an element of neutrality, Neoptolemus introduces an element of morality into the play that would not have otherwise been present. Heaney himself clearly indicates this when discussing his writing of *The Cure at Troy* in his graduation address, entitled “Hope and History”, to the assembly at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, where he was awarded an Honourary Doctorate in 2002:

No need to go into all the twists and turns of the plot that reveal the different value systems of the political man Odysseus and the moral agent Neoptolemus, the manifold ways in which personal integrity sees itself compromised by the demands of political expediency. The irresolution of the young man caught between the pleas of the suffering hero and the logic of the military commander provides the central interest. (“Hope and History” 15)

As Heaney points out in his graduation address Neoptolemus comes to embody what he terms the conflict between “personal integrity” and “political expediency” and I would argue that this role is one of the most potent features of the play in the hands of the Irish poet.

Judith Affleck defines Neoptolemus’ predicament as “*aporia* – his confusion and uncertainty as to how to respond – torn between Philoctetes and loyalty towards Odysseus and the Greek army” (Affleck 72). On first being asked to beguile Philoctetes into joining the Greek fleet at Troy Neoptolemus replies to Odysseus bluntly: “I’d rather fail and keep my self-respect / Than win by cheating” (*Cure at Troy* 9). Neoptolemus complies with his commander’s request, however, perhaps due to Odysseus’ promise of praise from the Greek people for “courage first / Then for farsightedness” (*Cure at Troy* 11). The lure “of being the one who would take the citadel” (*Cure at Troy* 21), as it was prophesied, must also have been greatly appealing to the young Neoptolemus. Greengard agrees, arguing that Neoptolemus is ambitious to move into his promised role as “the young general who will finally finish the job that his father’s generation could not” (Greengard 76). Neoptolemus’ initial bending to the will of Odysseus, against his better judgement, may thus be

understandable. Neoptolemus' moral character develops as the play progresses, however, and this is symbolically captured in his interaction with Philoctetes' bow. The first time that Neoptolemus has contact with the bow of Hercules he asks Philoctetes for the honour: "Can I hold it in my hands?" (*Cure at Troy* 36). Philoctetes acquiesces willingly and even seems eager for Neoptolemus to hold the bow:

You and you alone can tell the world  
You touched this weapon, and the reason why  
Is the reason I got it from Hercules  
In the first place: generous behaviour. (*Cure at Troy* 37)

And yet the dramatic irony of this scene is evident since Neoptolemus has won Philoctetes' trust not due to generous behaviour but by deceiving him as per Odysseus' orders. Neoptolemus convinces Philoctetes that he had also been wronged by Odysseus when the Greek commander robbed him of his father's armour, which should rightfully have come to him after Achilles' death:

Achilles arms were being worn already  
By another man. By Laertes' son, in fact,  
Odysseus himself. (*Cure at Troy* 21)

Having established common ground with Philoctetes, Neoptolemus leads him to believe that he will take him home to "Malis, the home country of Philoctetes and his father, Poetas" and it is in this gesture that Neoptolemus' supposed generosity lies (Affleck v). Neoptolemus' first contact with the bow is short-lived, however, and Philoctetes is quick to reclaim the weapon.

Yet the play's uncanny power stems from the fact that, although Neoptolemus fakes his anger at being wronged by Odysseus, his statements regarding the dubious character of the Greek commander are not completely untrue. Neoptolemus soon finds in the wounded Philoctetes a father figure far more fitting than the one which Odysseus first is. Introducing himself to Philoctetes, Neoptolemus declares: "Achilles was my father" (*Cure at Troy* 16), to which Philoctetes immediately responds: "Then you are one lucky son" (*Cure at Troy* 16), the first of twenty-three occasions on which he refers to Neoptolemus as "son", not to mention the eight times that he calls him "child" or "boy". Neoptolemus' affection for Philoctetes stems not only from the fact

that he had been similarly treated by the Greeks when his father's armour was refused him but also, in part, because of the similarity of Philoctetes' situation to that of Achilles who was also personally wronged by the Greeks. After sacking the small Trojan town of Lyrnessos, Achilles took a woman named Briseis as a war prize. In order to demonstrate his dominance Agamemnon claimed Briseis, whom Achilles had grown to love, as his prize. The king's actions dishonoured Achilles, who, in his all-consuming rage, refused to fight any further. Only the death of his close friend Patroclus drew Achilles back into the war (Hunter n.pag.). In both cases, argues Greengard, "the individual drives of the wronged hero are pitted against the needs of the military society" (Greengard 17) and I would argue that it is this same focus on the sanctity of the individual in the face of political obligation that Heaney emphasises in his rendering of the play. Philoctetes thus becomes a surrogate father for the orphaned Neoptolemus but never imposes his will on the young man in the way that Odysseus does.

The second time that Neoptolemus has contact with the bow is prior to their supposed departure to Malis. Philoctetes' wounded foot flares up and he is quick to hand the bow to Neoptolemus urging him to "guard it till this turn is over" (*Cure at Troy* 42). Affleck argues that "entrusting the bow to Neoptolemus increases Philoctetes' dependency upon him and Neoptolemus' moral obligations in return" (Affleck 58). His moral obligation is further emphasised by the fact that he finds himself faced with the opportunity of abandoning the sleeping Philoctetes on Lemnos like Odysseus before him. Philoctetes' trust proves that Neoptolemus' ruse has been successful but at this point Neoptolemus' self-doubt is dramatised for the first time when he realises: "Obviously now we could steal away with the bow. / That would be easy. But easy and meaningless" (*Cure at Troy* 46). The impact that Philoctetes has had on the young man becomes apparent in Neoptolemus' decision to wait for Philoctetes to wake up and confess his trickery: "I have to take you from this plight you're in. / You have to go with me and level Troy" (*Cure at Troy* 50). And yet when Philoctetes demands: "Give me back my bow" (*Cure at Troy* 51) Odysseus' influence on young Neoptolemus is still evident. Neoptolemus responds: "I cannot. / There's a cause, a plan, big moves, / And I'm a part of them. I'm under orders" (*Cure at Troy* 51). Neoptolemus' words even echo those of Odysseus who admitted earlier: "I left Philoctetes here. / Marooned him – but / Only because I had been ordered to" (*Cure at Troy* 3). At this moment in the play Neoptolemus is caught squarely between his

allegiance to the Greeks and the personal connection that he feels with Philoctetes. Neoptolemus' affinity is reflected in the stage direction, which notes: "Neoptolemus moves, Philoctetes reaches, the body language and handling of the bow suggest that their original mutual rite of exchange will be repeated" (*Cure at Troy* 53). The exchange is interrupted by Odysseus, however, who sways Neoptolemus' decision and leads the young man, still clasping the bow, to the awaiting ship.

Ready to set sail for Troy with the bow of Hercules, Neoptolemus' personal dilemma reaches a climax and he suddenly insists "I'm not leaving till the thing's put right" (*Cure at Troy* 65). He hurriedly leaves the ship and returns to Lemnos where he offers Philoctetes the bow. Philoctetes does not wholly trust Neoptolemus, however, and is only convinced of Neoptolemus' good intentions when the bow is in his possession once more. Although Greengard, like Poe, suggests that "it is Philoctetes who dominates the play and succeeds in overpowering Neoptolemus' personality", I would argue that this is not the case (Greengard 20). Neoptolemus' decision to return the bow to Philoctetes and take him home includes a number of very personal consequences. On hearing Neoptolemus' decision Odysseus immediately reaches for his sword, intent on physically preventing him from escaping with Hercules' bow, and accuses him directly of "Reneging on [his] Greek commission" (*Cure at Troy* 67), which has its own dire consequences. Taking Philoctetes home would not only result in "charges" (*Cure at Troy* 68) being brought against Neoptolemus but would also destroy his very real desires for the glory promised him in the Trojan War. Neoptolemus is even aware of the fact that his decision to return Philoctetes to Malis might be against the will of the gods when he implores: "I also pray that the gods' intentions and our destination won't be at odds" (*Cure at Troy* 42). So, it must be evident that Neoptolemus' decision to return the bow and sail with Philoctetes to Malis is a carefully weighed personal decision. Neoptolemus returns to his initial standpoint by the end of the play, content to "fail and retain [his] self-respect" (*Cure at Troy* 9), indicating that he has been true to himself rather than to either Odysseus or Philoctetes.

#### IV Odysseus: “the political man”

In order to accentuate Neoptolemus’ role as a moral agent Heaney deliberately portrays Odysseus as an aggressively self-serving political character. This is especially evident when compared to the more direct translation of *Philoctetes* by E. F. Watling.<sup>4</sup> In the Watling version, after Neoptolemus has Philoctetes’ bow in his possession, Odysseus berates Philoctetes, saying:

We have your weapon, that is all we want.  
Teucer is with us, and he will know how to use it;  
Or my own hand and eye may prove to be  
No worse than yours. (Watling 198)

In Heaney’s version the same lines are rendered as:

All we need  
Is Philoctetes’ bow. Not him. Don’t forget  
I am the bender of as great a bow  
Myself. And don’t forget Teucer either.  
You’re only another archer among archers. (*Cure at Troy* 58)

In Watling’s translation Odysseus is not directly dismissive of Philoctetes but states simply that they only require his bow in order to win victory in the Trojan War. Heaney’s handling of the same lines is more vehemently personal, however, a fact crystallised most succinctly in the two stressed syllables dismissing Philoctetes’ usefulness to the Greeks: “Not him”. While Watling offers Teucer as the first alternative wielder of the great bow of Hercules, Heaney’s version finds Odysseus proclaiming himself the obvious replacement. Odysseus’ boastfulness in Heaney’s lines is also a reminder of his illegitimate acquisition of the armour of Achilles, which

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<sup>4</sup> Cliona Ni Riordain notes that “Heaney does not in fact read Greek and works from other translations of the Greek texts” (Ni Riordain 175 footnote). I have been unable to find a reference to the edition that Heaney consulted during his translation of *Philoctetes* but have good reason to believe that he worked closely with E. F. Watling’s rendering of the play (1969) due to numerous textual similarities. Watling, for example, translates Odysseus’ speech to Neoptolemus as: “I know it goes against the grain with you / To lie” (Watling 166), which is near identical to Heaney’s lines, “I know all this goes against the grain / And you hate it” (*Cure at Troy* 8). Neoptolemus later introduces Philoctetes to a merchant saying: “That is none other than the famous Philoctetes” (Watling 181), which is similar to Heaney’s: “This, friend, is the famous Philoctetes” (*Cure at Troy* 31). “Come, give me back my bow” (Watling 194) pleads Watling’s Philoctetes, as does Heaney’s who requests: “Give me back my bow” (*Cure at Troy* 51). A final example finds Odysseus speaking to Neoptolemus: “You made this voyage of your own accord, not bound by oath to anyone” (Watling 166), which is reflected in Heaney’s lines: “you didn’t sail / Under oath to anybody” (*Cure at Troy* 7).



however, for the sake of “coming out ahead”, or what Heaney would call “political expediency” (“Hope and History” 15). The marked indentation within Heaney’s lines dramatises Odysseus’ argument since they are suggestive of pauses in which Neoptolemus might respond to Odysseus’ argument. The pauses remain unfilled, however, indicating that Odysseus anticipates Neoptolemus’ reservations and counters them with further persuasion. Odysseus admits that Neoptolemus will “be ashamed” for deceiving Philoctetes but assures him that “that won’t last”, which indicates the man’s extensive personal experience of deception. Odysseus argues that Neoptolemus will have “the whole rest of [his] life / To be good and true and incorruptible”, which reveals his failure to acknowledge the lasting consequences of his immediate actions. In the final line Heaney makes it overtly clear that Odysseus’ actions are in opposition to all that is “good and true and incorruptible”, an accumulative list that gains emphasis due to the repetition of “and”. The Odysseus of the Watling version, by contrast, is far less brazen and concludes his persuasion of Neoptolemus with a pleading: “I beg you” and a distinctly uncertain: “will you do it?” (Watling 166).

Heaney’s characterisation of Odysseus emphasises his inflexible mindset that dictates the necessity of achieving political goals even in the face of likely harm to others, in this case Philoctetes, who will more than likely “die of hunger” (*Cure at Troy* 59) without the aid of his bow. I would argue, therefore, that Odysseus may be viewed as representative of the manipulators on both sides of the Northern Irish conflict whose focus on political ends results in complete disregard for the young recruits or innocent bystanders who may be harmed in the process.

## V Philoctetes: a victim of his own self-pity

While Heaney’s disapproval of Odysseus’ character is apparent in the lines considered above he is no less judgemental in his attitude toward “the wounded and obdurate Philoctetes” (Greengard 76). Heaney specifically draws attention to Philoctetes’ self-absorption and the contemplation of his wound, which is not merely the running physical sore caused by the snake bite but more particularly the man’s wounded pride at being left behind on the way to the battle of Troy. Heaney’s criticism of Philoctetes’ attitude is apparent from the very start of the play where he

describes “People so deep into / Their own self-pity, self-pity buoys them up” (*Cure at Troy* 1), an obvious reference to the wounded Greek. Philoctetes’ stubbornness is most clearly dramatised in his response to the promise of a cure for his foot and glory in the Trojan War. Odysseus tells Philoctetes that leaving Lemnos will be “his first steps / Towards Troy and Triumph” (*Cure at Troy* 55) and, for once, the cunning Odysseus is not lying. Philoctetes immediately refuses: “Never. Not while earth / Is under me and the rocks above” (*Cure at Troy* 56), which is an understandable response considering Odysseus’ part in Philoctetes’ abandonment. But Philoctetes refuses to budge even when Neoptolemus assures him that:

you’re to be  
The hero that was healed and then went on  
To heal the wound of the Trojan war itself. (*Cure at Troy* 73)

Philoctetes remains adamant, however, that: “Never again can I see myself / Eye to eye with the sons of Atreus” (*Cure at Troy* 73). Who, argues Philoctetes, would want glory amongst a people whom one considers an enemy?

Heaney chastises Philoctetes for this attitude through the Chorus who argue that:

Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes.  
I say it again in friendship and say this:  
Stop eating yourself up with hate and come with us. (*Cure at Troy* 61)

Heaney’s lines are far more accusatory than the Chorus in the Watling translation who plead:

Escape from the devil that drives you, devours you,  
With endless torture beyond endurance. (Watling 201)

Watling’s lines depict Philoctetes as the victim of a physical wound: “the devil that drives you, devours you”, and suggest that his abandonment on Lemnos gives him good reason for his self-pity. The Heaney lines, however, portray Philoctetes as the initiator of his own self-pity: “Your wound is what you feed on”, focusing instead on Philoctetes’ contemplation of the social wound inflicted on him. Heaney has Philoctetes lament: “All I’ve left is a wound” (*Cure at Troy* 61) when he is momentarily left behind on Lemnos for a second time by Odysseus. The Watling

translation of the same lines does not mention the wound at all saying simply: “How shall I live? Will air support me, having no power to win life from the lap of mother earth?” (Watling 201). Heaney thus intentionally represents Philoctetes as a man wallowing in his own victimhood, using his wound to justify “the isolating rage that separates him from social contact and social communication” (Greengard 95).

Philoctetes is aware that a few well-placed arrows from his bow will end the Trojan War, win him personal glory, and cure him of a ten-year-old wound. Heaney deliberately emphasises Philoctetes’ role as a self-pitying character whose stubborn refusal to join his own countrymen will result in the death of countless more Greeks and Trojans. The implication in a Northern Irish context is that self-pity and the contemplation of old wounds will only serve to prolong the Troubles.

## VI The poetic connection to Heaney’s oeuvre

The arguments outlined above may appear specious, however, especially since Heaney’s translation of *Philoctetes*, like Sophocles’ original play, does not operate allegorically but is simply suggestive of contemporary Northern Irish social attitudes. The diction used in *The Cure at Troy* is characteristic of Heaney’s poetry, as one might expect, but also includes specifically Irish words that confirm the play’s intended contextualisation in terms of the Northern Irish conflict. Neoptolemus, for example, describes Philoctetes’ cup as “hagged out of a log” (*Cure at Troy* 5), which would be at home on the lips of a Derry farmer, rather than the “hacked” or “hewed” that the *OED* offers as alternatives. When Neoptolemus later instructs the Chorus to remain on Lemnos and continue urging Philoctetes to unite with the Greeks, Odysseus protests that: “The thing’s / Ruined if you start shilly-shallying” (*Cure at Troy* 58). When Neoptolemus uses the same word in his reply: “Whether it’s shilly-shallying or not, / What you’ll do is wait here to the last” (*Cure at Troy* 58–59), a distinctively Irish flavour is lent to the play. While its definition as “indecisive behaviour” (*COED*) is perfectly suited to the context of the scene, “shilly-shallying” seems out of place in the translation of a classical play. I would argue, therefore, that the inclusion of the word reveals Heaney’s intentional commentary on the Ulster Troubles in *The Cure at Troy*. In his decision to go against the orders of Odysseus, Neoptolemus declares: “I’m all throughother” (*Cure at Troy* 48), a description of his inner turmoil and

confusion that traces its etymology to Scotland (*OED*). As Heaney notes in his introduction to his later translation of *Beowulf*, however, numerous Scottish words made their way “across into Ulster with the planters” and so the word may be viewed as part of the Irish vernacular that imbues Heaney’s translation with political significance (“Introduction” xxxv). Driven to distraction by the pain of his wounded foot Philoctetes declares: “I am astray” (*Cure at Troy* 44) and later reiterates: “The sore has me astray” (*Cure at Troy* 63). Heaney’s word choice here is an obvious reminder of Sweeney, the Gaelic king driven to madness by the curse of St Ronan in *Sweeney Astray*. The use of this word lends the pain and frustration of Philoctetes’ wound, and his complete isolation on Lemnos, further intensity in its association with the madness of the outcast Irish king.

Heaney’s version of the play is also very obviously coloured by political diction, which stresses the significance of the play in a Northern Irish context. In Heaney’s version, for example, Hercules commands Philoctetes:

Win by fair combat. But know to shun  
Reprisal killings when that’s done. (*Cure at Troy* 79)

The lines contemporise the play in their overt reference to the sectarian violence of Northern Ireland embodied in Heaney’s journalistic word choices, such as “fair combat” and “reprisal killings”. The command is obviously meant for the aggressors in the Northern conflict and yet, spoken by Hercules, the lines are not specifically directed at either Protestant or Catholic and as such serve as a commentary on the political situation rather than as propaganda for either side. When Philoctetes labels Neoptolemus’ speech as “real turncoat talk” (*Cure at Troy* 74), the audience is reminded of the informers that played such a pivotal role in the Troubles, emphasising the significance of the lines in a Northern Irish context. Neoptolemus’ self-reflexive question: “Why did I go / Behind backs ever?” (*Cure at Troy* 53) is a deliberate reference on Heaney’s part to “the hatreds and behindbacks / of the althing” (25–26) from his earlier poem “North” (*N* 19). The “althing” is the name given to the Icelandic parliament which was notorious for the fights between the various factions of which it was constituted. The intertextual reference created by the word thereby lends Neoptolemus’ lines a political resonance that in turn reflects on the “behindbacks” similarly evident in the political instability of Northern Ireland. A further reference to

political unrest is made when Odysseus asks: “What blather’s this?” (*Cure at Troy* 56) in response to Philoctetes’ refusal to join the Greek fleet at Troy. The line is an echo from “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” (*N* 21) where Heaney proclaims:

I am Hamlet the Dane,  
skull-handler, parablist,  
smeller of rot  
  
in the state,  
.....  
dithering, *blathering*. (54–64, my italics)

The echo of these lines in Odysseus’ words, accessible to anyone reasonably familiar with this poem that contains Heaney’s criticism of his own position, illustrates that for men of Odysseus’ persuasion, for whom power and political expediency are paramount, any other response to conflict, including the poetic, should be regarded as mere “blather”.

The diction of the play identifies it as Heaney’s work, of course, but it is the more descriptive passages of the play that serve to further highlight this fact. After being tricked out of possession of his bow, for example, Philoctetes imagines Odysseus admiring it and recalls the fine detail of the bow itself:

Turning it over and over,  
Trying it out in his hands,  
Testing the weight and the lift.  
I loved the feel of it,  
Its grip and give, and the grain  
That was seasoned with my sweat. (*Cure at Troy* 60)

Philoctetes’ description of the bow recalls Heaney’s poem, “The Pitchfork” (*ST* 23), in which the poet describes the farm implement, used for lifting hay, in minute detail:

He loved its grain of tapering, dark-flecked ash  
Grown satiny from its own natural polish.  
  
Riveted steel, turned timber, burnish, grain,  
Smoothness, straightness, roundness, length and sheen.  
Sweat-cured, sharpened, balanced, tested, fitted. (7–11)

The lines are obviously similar to those from *The Cure at Troy*, an unsurprising coincidence when considering that the play was published at the same time as *Seeing Things*, the volume in which the poem appears. The similarity between bow and pitchfork inheres in the wooden grain of each that is burnished by the hand of their respective wielders. The sweat from both the speaker of Heaney's poem and Philoctetes physically penetrates the wood of their respective implements, making the men a part of their tools as much as their tools become a part of them when they are used, suggesting the intimate bond between implement and handler. The pitchfork is also represented as a weapon, however, "like a javelin, accurate and light" (3–4), drawing further parallels with Hercules' bow. It is not merely the physical description of bow and pitchfork that coincide, however, but also the way in which each of the instruments is used. In *The Cure at Troy* Hercules' bow is famous for shooting arrows that "never miss and always kill" (*Cure at Troy* 9), indicating that the bow itself possesses a special potency that is independent of the archer who bends it. Greengard argues, however, that "the power of the man must match that of the bow and there is only one right man who can wield it in order for its magical force to be harnessed" (Greengard 66). This results in a mystical union of able wielder and magical weapon that is similarly evident in "The Pitchfork". Heaney writes that "Of all implements, the pitchfork was the one / That came near to an imagined perfection" (1–2). While its wielder considers the pitchfork to be nearly flawless in the physical sense, the final line of the poem suggests that the pitchfork also possesses some supernatural perfection. Heaney informs the reader that this perfection resides "Not in the aiming but the opening hand" (20). The pitchfork is thus only able to achieve its accuracy and power when it is in flight and free from the influence of its wielder in much the way that Hercules' arrows find their mark only when released from the string of the bow.

## VII A "presumptuous" second addition

The second extensive addition that Heaney makes to the play occurs once Neoptolemus has made his decision to return the bow of Hercules to Philoctetes and sail with him to his home in Malis. The additional lines are again spoken by the Chorus and appear immediately prior to the *deus ex machina* that concludes the play.

The lines thus serve to guide the audience's response to the divine intervention. In the first stanza of the additional lines the Chorus observes:

Human beings suffer,  
 They torture one another,  
 They get hurt and get hard.  
 No poem or play or song  
 Can fully right a wrong  
 Inflicted and endured. (*Cure at Troy* 77)

The pain endured by Philoctetes is clearly acknowledged in these lines but at the same time the stanza acknowledges all those "Human beings" who suffer at the hands of others. This suffering is strangely juxtaposed by Heaney's admission to the practical inefficacy of poetry when he states that "No poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong". And yet the "fully" of the line suggests that poetry does in fact have an impact on the world of human suffering. While the first stanza does not refer directly to the violence of Northern Ireland, the second stanza makes it clear that Heaney intends the audience to consider his additional lines in terms of the Troubles:

The innocent in gaols  
 Beat on their bars together.  
 A hunger-striker's father  
 Stands in the graveyard dumb.  
 The police widow in veils  
 Faints at the funeral home. (*Cure at Troy* 77)

"The innocent in gaols" refers directly to the Northern Irish Catholics who were interned by the Royal Ulster Constabulary for their supposed collusion with the IRA. These men and women "beat on their bars together", which conveys a clear sense of their indignation but also suggests the number of Catholics who were mistreated in this way. The solitary "hunger-striker" represents the extremes to which Catholics were prepared to go in order to protest against the internment. Singling him out, along with his father standing alone in the graveyard, allows Heaney to express the deeply individual impact of the Troubles. Heaney's record is not limited to the victimisation of Catholics, however, but includes the description of a "police widow" whose Protestant husband was presumably killed by Catholics in retaliatory violence. The lines thus reveal the horrible truth that "the funeral home" was a commonplace on both sides of the religious divide in Northern Irish life.

Despite the harsh realities of political violence depicted in the first two stanzas Heaney recounts of his additions to the play that “I did something presumptuous: I wrote an extra set of lines for the Chorus. I was able to invest these lines with a high and hopeful note because they are not, after all, spoken by me but by the Chorus as representative of all our hope” (“Hope and History” 16). Heaney notes that his vocalisations through the lines of the Chorus are significant since it is one of the rare occasions on which he felt able to speak not from “the first person singular, the admittedly shaky pronoun ‘I’”, which characterises his poetry, but in the first person plural, “in the ‘we’” (“Hope and History” 14). While the “we” obviously refers to the Chorus, it is simultaneously the “we” of Northern Ireland removed from any political affiliation. As Heaney makes clear, this is not “the ‘we’ of the wronged minority”, that is, the Catholics of Ulster, a position he has avoided taking at all costs in his poetry, but instead the “we” of Northern Irish experiences as a whole (“Hope and History” 14). Thus, in these extra lines, Heaney is able to speak not as a Catholic but as an Irishman voicing his own hope, and the hope of all around him, for a significant change in their turbulent land. The hope of Heaney’s message becomes evident when he insists in the third stanza that:

once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme. (*Cure at Troy* 77)

The lines suggest the possibility of a cataclysmic change that is able to make people’s hopes a reality but indicates, in the maritime imagery used, that such a change will not be without its own upheavals.

Heaney’s optimism unfurls in the fourth stanza where he continues his marine imagery and urges his audience:

So hope for a great sea change  
On the far side of revenge  
Believe that a further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells. (*Cure at Troy* 77)

Heaney draws attention to “revenge” in these lines specifically in reference to the Northern Irish Troubles where the violence was perpetuated by endless cycles of vengeance between Catholics and Protestants. Although Heaney makes no mention of what the “great sea change” may be, he reiterates the importance of belief and hope in his lines, emphasised by his repeated command to “believe”. The final lines recall those things in which people once strongly believed, such as “miracles / And cures and healing wells”, which indicates the subjective power inherent in the hopes and beliefs of a population, however implausible they might seem. plausibility of returning to such beliefs. The “healing wells” are especially significant since they refer to the ancient holy wells of Ireland, which still dot the landscape and remain a part of rural belief. It is believed that drinking from these wells or bathing in their water will bring about miraculous healing or the gift of wisdom (*Irish Culture* n.pag.).

In reference to Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* Greengard argues that the playwright “was indeed trying to change the political and social attitudes of his audience” (Greengard 12) and although Heaney is intimately aware of the limitations of poetry his version of *Philoctetes*, particularly his second addition to the play, similarly displays a strong desire for a change in public attitudes. Heaney clearly elucidates the intentions of the fourth stanza when he explains that these lines refer to:

a miracle in the original sense, the kind of cure we may desperately hope for but cannot reasonably predict. The kind of intervention that comes about through the intervention of something or somebody out of the ordinary. (“Hope and History” 16)

It is from this point of hopeful belief in the possibility of justice in the midst of discrimination, and peace in the midst of violence, that Heaney introduces his *deus ex machina*.

### **VIII The *deus ex machina*: “a workable conclusion”**

The *deus ex machina*, as a theatrical device, was introduced into Greek theatre in order to resolve the conflict within a play in which the conclusion brought about by the unfolding plot proved unsatisfactory. The Latin term may be simply translated as “god from the machine”, a term that refers to the original Greek theatrical practice of

lowering the actor playing the god with a crane, representing, of course, his descent from the heavens of Mount Olympus. The device has often been criticised, however, since the sudden and unexpected plot change, or even reversal, as is the case in *Philoctetes*, which it brings about is thought to destroy the audience's suspension of disbelief. *Philoctetes* boasts the "only extant Sophoclean *deus ex machina*", a conclusion that Greengard argues has long sat uneasy on the minds of its audiences (Greengard 3). This uneasiness has only increased with time since modern audiences are far less accustomed to the device than their ancient Greek counterparts would have been. Heaney has noted that the play "requires a god to get through to a workable conclusion" ("Hope and History" 15) and I would argue that in *The Cure at Troy* he has succeeded in preparing the audience for the *deus ex machina*, making it not only a believable but an anticipated conclusion to the play.

Heaney's translation makes the relationship between Hercules and Philoctetes overtly clear when he introduces his play with a reminder of why Philoctetes is bound to the ancient hero, a reminder absent from the Watling text. As noted above, Philoctetes was the only Greek warrior willing to put flame to Hercules' funeral pyre and thus release him from the "suffering of a lingering and agonising death in the shirt of Nessus" (Greengard 89). This connection may have been common knowledge amongst the original Greek audience but contemporary audiences remain largely unaware of this relationship. By drawing the audience's attention to the relationship between Philoctetes and Hercules in the opening lines of the play Heaney lays the foundation for the *deus ex machina* to come.

The introductory lines of Heaney's Chorus not only clarify the relationship between Hercules and Philoctetes but also create a sense of a continuing mental bond existing between them:

Every time the crater on Lemnos Island  
Starts to erupt, what Philoctetes sees  
Is a blaze he started years and years ago  
Under Hercules's funeral pyre.

The god's mind lights up his mind every time. (*Cure at Troy* 2)

The "blaze" refers to Hercules' funeral pyre, of course, and in juxtaposing this fire with the volcano on Lemnos Heaney intimates that with every eruption on the island Philoctetes is reminded of his connection with the deified hero. Heaney also reiterates

the psychological connection between the two when he concludes his introductory lines with: “The god’s mind lights up his mind every time”. Heaney, it seems, is eager to ensure audience awareness of the intimate bond between Philoctetes and Hercules, which makes the later *deus ex machina* far more believable than it might otherwise have been. Furthermore, Heaney assigns to Hercules “the voice of reality and justice” (*Cure at Troy* 2) thus affording the god a greater sense of authority, which makes Philoctetes’ acquiescence to the will of the god far more acceptable to the modern audience prior to the appearance of the *deus ex machina*.

The tie that binds Hercules and Philoctetes is intentionally reinforced by Heaney when he adds to Philoctetes’ lines prior to the *deus ex machina*. The stage direction indicates a “full thunderclap and eruption effects” followed by “a lingering, wavering aftermath of half-light” (*Cure at Troy* 78), which, in Heaney’s play, is symbolic of the relationship between Hercules and Philoctetes. At this point Philoctetes declares:

Hercules:  
     I saw him in the fire.  
 Hercules  
     was shining in the air.  
 I heard the voice of Hercules in my head. (*Cure at Troy* 78)

While the first two sentences obviously refer to the death and apotheosis of Hercules, which Philoctetes recalls in the volcanic eruption, the third explicitly situates Hercules within the mind of Philoctetes. These additional lines recall Heaney’s introduction and prepare the audience for the appearance of Hercules, who commands:

Go Philoctetes, with this boy,  
 Go and be cured and capture Troy.  
 Asclepius will make you whole,  
 Relieve your body and your soul.  
  
 Go, with your bow. Conclude the sore  
 And cruel stalemate of our war. (*Cure at Troy* 79)

On hearing Hercules’ command, Philoctetes’ stubbornness melts from him and he miraculously changes his mind and enthusiastically agrees to join the Greeks at Troy. This, as I’ve argued above, is the point that Heaney has been building up to and as such Philoctetes’ submission to the will of Hercules is not as unexpected as it might

have been. Even after the *deus ex machina* Heaney reiterates the predictability of the archer's reaction, in Philoctetes' greatly altered lines:

Something told me this was going to happen.  
 Something told me the channels were going to open.  
 It's as if a thing I knew and had forgotten  
 Came back completely clear. I can see  
 The cure at Troy. All that you say  
 Is like a dream to me and I obey. (*Cure at Troy* 80)

In the Watling translation, in stark comparison, Philoctetes simply states:

The very voice  
 That I have longed to hear!  
 The face  
 As I once knew it!  
 I shall not disobey. (Watling 211)

The anaphora of Heaney's first two lines convey far more clearly the inevitability of the *deus ex machina* as opposed to Watling's rendering, which reads more like the reunion of old friends than the voice of destiny. Heaney's alternative version blends the "forgotten" past and the now "clear" future in a way that suggests Hercules' command is not a new order but an old reminder. Heaney describes Philoctetes' reaction as being "like a dream", which emphasises the realisation of his deepest wishes rather than the unreality of the situation. The halting double negative of Watling's "I shall not disobey" is replaced by Philoctetes' markedly more positive response to Hercules' command in Heaney's lines: "I obey". So, in adding to and altering the text, Heaney has carefully worked the *deus ex machine* into the very fabric of the play to give it the force of a destined intervention rather than that of an arbitrary one.

## IX Nelson Mandela: "hope . . . with the aid of history"

Heaney's emphasis on the suitability of the *deus ex machina* as a conclusion not only to the Sophoclean play but to his own translation reiterates what he describes earlier as the possibility of "a great sea change". While Heaney's optimism may seem

somewhat ephemeral, especially since it is captured in the lines of a fictional play, the circumstances in which he translated *The Cure at Troy* prove otherwise. In writing the play Heaney recalls:

I set the phenomenon of hope against the evidence of history, and yet I did so with the aid of history itself, since I was working on the translation of *Philoctetes* at one of the most hopeful historical moments of the twentieth century. It was the spring of 1990 and while Northern Ireland was still locked in its own violent stalemate, the key was turning sweetly and doors and walls and borders and hearts were opening elsewhere. (“Hope and History” 16)

Heaney specifies a number of the historical events that made the moment possible, including regime changes in “Prague and Berlin and Warsaw and Sofia and Budapest”, a list punctuated by the reiterated word “and” which points toward the possibility of numerous other, unnamed, moments of hope (“Hope and History” 16).

Of special significance to the South African context in which I am writing, Heaney singles out the release of Nelson Mandela from Robben Island as particularly evocative of the “great sea change[s]” possible in seemingly impossible situations. Heaney notes that while he was translating *Philoctetes*, buried in the depths of Widener Library in Harvard in February 1990:

Nelson Mandela walked out of the depths of his long imprisonment and into his destiny as a leader and reconciler, an intervention by somebody out of the ordinary, a *miraculum* that would issue in an administration. The marooned man, the betrayed one, without the aid of divine *fiat*, but with a trust that we share a common human sympathy and dignity, went on to win the city. (“Hope and History” 16)

Mandela, like *Philoctetes*, is “the marooned man”, imprisoned on an island, he had been “betrayed” and might well have hardened from the pain he had born from his struggles. Instead of bringing vengeance, hatred, or anger, however, Mandela became the “reconciler”, the “miracle”, the “cure” for a country torn apart by violence. The parallels between Mandela and *Philoctetes*, and between South Africa’s long struggle and Northern Ireland’s ancient anguish allow Heaney to find a rhyme between “hope and history” (*Cure at Troy*, 77) and thus to offer the possibility of hope to his audiences, specifically those closest to home in Northern Ireland.

The additional lines of the text do not then only serve to make the dramatic *deus ex machina* more believable but serve as a means for Heaney to muster the hope in his

audience that the same sort of miraculous change is possible since it has already happened elsewhere in the world. The implication in a Northern Irish context is that if a man imprisoned for twenty-seven years can walk free and become president of his own country, how much more likely is the peaceful resolution of the Troubles. The final lines of the play, spoken by Heaney's Chorus, are thus a fitting conclusion, expressing the sense of hopefulness he wishes to create in his audience:

What's left to say?

Suspect too much sweet talk  
 But never close your mind.  
 It was a fortunate wind  
 That blew me here. I leave  
 Half ready to believe  
 That a crippled trust might walk

And the half-true rhyme is love. (*Cure at Troy* 81)

Although the lines evidently refer to Philoctetes, who will soon be relieved of the pain of his lingering wound and find himself reinstated amongst the ranks of the Greek soldiers at Troy, the lines are spoken by the Chorus and as such come to represent far more than the singular hope of Philoctetes. The lines convey some sense of what Nelson Mandela must have felt when he walked out of the confines of his cell on Robben Island and reveal to an extent what Heaney himself must have felt when he heard about the global "regime change[s]" ("Hope and History" 16). In the physical performance of the play, however, it is the very audience members who are rising to leave the theatre in which they have been viewing *The Cure at Troy* and it is within these individual men and women that Heaney hopes to most effectively plant the seeds of belief in "the half-true rhyme [of] love".

## Chapter 3

### *Beowulf*: claiming a “voice-right”

#### I A dream of *Beowulf*

Heaney’s various poetic preoccupations are clearly encapsulated in “Bone Dreams” from *North*, his fourth and most widely acclaimed volume. The poem, although written some time before its 1975 publication, possesses a remarkable resonance with Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*, which appeared almost a quarter of a century later. In “Bone Dreams” (N 27) Heaney takes a shard of bone collected in an Irish grazing ground as his central subject. He uses his find to initiate a poem that deliberately explores his ambivalent relationship with the English language. The poem also delves into his continued identification with the land as a repository of language – particularly as a colonised landscape. A further preoccupation evident in this poem, and one that is most apt for this study, is the clear reference to Heaney’s initial discovery of the Anglo-Saxon language, which is embodied in the word “*ban-hus*” (36), and the fruitful connection it forms with his recurrent poetic themes. The compound word is metaphorically paralleled, by means of the direct translation “Bone-house” (17), with the shard of bone and becomes a symbolically powerful literary tool that Heaney uses to respond to the linguistic colonisation of Ireland by the English. “Bone Dreams” is an early example of Heaney’s recognition that his linguistic heritage is rooted in English as much as it is in Gaelic and that the English language is indeed a medium through which he is able to express his own particular Irish identity. Much of Heaney’s poetry utilises his awareness of the distinctiveness of the Irish dialect to great effect and this is an important aspect of his translation of *Beowulf*.

In “Bone Dreams” Heaney’s discovery of the bone shard prompts a search in which he digs down through the layered history of the English language to connect, finally, with its earliest form, Anglo-Saxon:

I push back  
 through dictions,  
 Elizabethan canopies.  
 Norman devices,

The erotic mayflowers  
 of Provence  
 and the ivied latins  
 of churchmen

to the scop's  
 twang, the iron  
 flash of consonants  
 cleaving the line. (21–32)

The lines intimate the complex formations of English as a language and suggest that while Heaney, as an Irish poet, can read a complex encoding of colonial histories into the Elizabethan forms of English and its Norman, French, and Latin influences, he is finally able to find a linguistic grounding in Anglo-Saxon, the very root of Modern English. When Heaney describes “the scop’s / twang, the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line”, he reveals his early fascination with the word craft of the Old English poet, or *scop*, who plays such a vital role in the narrative of *Beowulf*. The lines are also a microcosmic representation of Anglo-Saxon prosody. The final two lines are characteristic of Anglo-Saxon verse not only in the alliteration of the stressed ‘c’ but also in the division caused by the line break that mimics the Old-English caesura, which divides the four stresses of the line into two halves. The halves remain closely connected, however, by means of the alliteration and enjambment of the lines. Heaney concentrates this technique in the single word “cleaving”, a homonym that means both to sever and to adhere, which reflects the functioning of the Anglo-Saxon line directly (*COED*). The “iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line” is not only reflective of Anglo-Saxon poetry but conjures images of ancient broad swords cleaving the skulls of invaders, bringing to mind the Scandinavian tribal wars of *Beowulf*. The use of battle imagery emphasises Heaney’s awareness of the powerful consonantal sound of Old English verse – a crucial aspect of his translation of *Beowulf* that I will explore in detail.

Heaney studied Anglo-Saxon poetry, including *Beowulf*, as an undergraduate at Queen’s University in Belfast where he developed “a fondness for the melancholy and

fortitude that characterised the poetry” (“Introduction” xxxii). In “Bone Dreams” Heaney recounts how:

In the coffered  
riches of grammar  
and declensions  
I found *ban-hus* (33–36)

The linguistic importance of “*ban-hus*” is made plain in its metaphorical comparison to the bone shard collected on Irish ground, which Heaney describes as:

a small ship-burial.  
as dead as stone,  
  
flint-find, nugget  
of chalk (7–10)

A “ship-burial” is a funeral rite described in detail in the first lines of *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf* the deceased Danish king, Shield Sheafson, has his body piled with “far-fetched treasures” (*Beowulf* line 36) and “precious gear” (*Beowulf* line 37) before being released onto the waves.<sup>1</sup> In comparing the shard to an Anglo-Saxon “ship-burial” in “Bone Dreams” Heaney alludes to the treasures of the past lurking within the dormant whitened bone and simultaneously within its linguistic counterpart. As an Irish poet writing in the English colonial language such a direct identification with Anglo-Saxon and his use of the word in both his poetry and, as I will show, in his translation of *Beowulf*, is one way for Heaney to lay claim to the very roots of the English language and it is in this that the bone shard’s value lies. Heaney’s description of the bone shard as “dead as stone” is immediately contradicted by the lines that follow, which describe it as a “flint-find, nugget / of chalk”. Flint is commonly used to spark life into fire and as such symbolises potential incendiary energy while the “nugget / of chalk” is lent greater value as it connotes both nuggets of gold and writing ability. The bone shard thus possesses, and is able to convey, meaning. When it is identified with the Anglo-Saxon “*ban-hus*” the

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical references to *Beowulf* refer to Heaney’s translation in the Norton Critical Edition of *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* and will appear as such throughout the chapter. Parenthetical references not including a specific reference to “line/s” refer to page numbers in the Norton edition.

symbolic value of the piece of bone as representative of a linguistic history, and Heaney's first poetic link to the Old English language, is established.

Heaney vociferously states that he will utilise this linguistic history in his deployment of the bone shard:

I wind it in  
the sling of mind  
to pitch it at England (12–14)

This bold statement, and the complex trajectory on which the splinter of bone takes the poet, indicates his intentional use of language, and “*ban-hus*” specifically, as a weapon that allows him to lay an independent claim on the English language, a weapon that is given even greater immediacy through his use of present tense verbs. The “sling” is reminiscent of early English weapons that would have been used at places like “Maiden Castle” (80), which is mentioned later in the poem. Excavations at “Maiden Castle”, an Iron Age hill fort defended by the Durotriges tribe against the Roman invaders, have uncovered thousands of river-worn pebbles thought to be used as sling stones (Miles 135). The “sling” is also a reference to the biblical confrontation between David and Goliath in which the young shepherd boy slew the Philistine giant with a stone cast from his sling (1 Sam. 16–18). The story dramatises the defeat of a seemingly insurmountable foe by a supposedly weak defender and is a most suitable analogy for a young Irish poet assailing an English linguistic Goliath.

Heaney's poetical claims on English are not simply a means to establish his right to use the language but also an articulation of his Irish-English as distinctive. *Field Work's* “The Toome Road” (FW 15) is written from the perspective of a farmer who, herding his cattle along a country lane, is confronted by an armoured English “convoy, warbling along on powerful tires” (2). The Irish farmer is strongly contrasted with the British soldiers from the outset and is presented as a part of the landscape, caked in the mud and muck of the farm road, when compared to the alien mechanisation of the English. The poet's defiance is evident in the reaction of his speaker, the farmer, who insists that he “had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in [his] keeping” (8) and displays Heaney's firm belief

in the sanctity of the independent Irish way of life in his silent inner affirmation that “It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass, / The invisible, untoppled omphalos” (16–17). The “Omphalos” specifically refers to a stone in Delphi, which was thought to be the navel of the earth but in a wider sense also represents the centre of something, the essence, in this case, of Irish culture. In *Preoccupations* Heaney links the sound of the Greek word “omphalos” to the rhythmic noise made by the iron hand-pump near his rural childhood home, which provided water for five households (*Preoccupations* 17). Despite the English presence in Northern Ireland the farmer in “The Toome Road” never questions the strength of his Irish identity. In much the same way Heaney, though writing in English, is still able to maintain a particularly Irish voice. “A Sofa in the Forties” (*SL* 7) describes the Heaney children playing on an imaginary sofa-train while listening to an English newscaster on the wireless. The poet in retrospect recognises that:

Between him and us  
A great gulf was fixed where pronunciation  
Reigned tyrannically. (28–30)

The concern with differing pronunciation of English words is a characteristic that has informed many of Heaney’s lines. A clear example of this is to be found in “Fodder” the first poem of *Wintering Out*, where Heaney insists that as Irishmen “we said, / *fother*” (1–2), underscoring the individuality of the Northern Irish vernacular that is so apparent in his translation of *Beowulf*.

Heaney’s revelation in “Bone Dreams” of his discovery of the Anglo-Saxon “*ban-hus*” in the “coffered / riches of grammar” reveals the poet’s immediate identification with the Anglo-Saxon language and its similarities to his own poetical style. The word “*ban-hus*” conveys not only the physical definition of a skeleton supporting and protecting the body but also a more specifically spiritual one that encapsulates the belief that the body houses a spirit residing only temporarily in a less than perfect cage of bone and flesh:

I found *ban-hus*,

its fire, benches,  
wattle and rafters,  
where the soul  
fluttered a while

in the roofspace. (36–41)

In the section quoted above Heaney incorporates an Old English metaphor into “Bone Dreams”, which Daniel Donoghue notes was originally found in the second book of the *History of the English Church and People* by the Anglo-Saxon historian, Bede (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 238). The analogy compares a man’s life to a sparrow flying through a brightly lit hall in the midst of a stormy winter’s night before passing once more into the cold and rainy darkness. As a Christian historian Bede’s account stresses not only the brevity of life but also the possibility of “something better than a winter storm when the bird flies out” in the form of the Christian heaven (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 238). In much the same way, Donoghue argues that Heaney’s discovery of “*ban-hus*” and his incorporation of the compound into “Bone Dreams” resuscitates the word, breathing life into a language that was all but dead (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 238). The ancient analogy not only expands the meaning of “*ban-hus*”, giving the word a mythical dimension and suggesting its significance in an Anglo-Saxon context, but also highlights the poet’s continuing interest in history and myth that is prevalent throughout his poetry and specifically in his translation of *Beowulf*.

In “Bone Dreams” Heaney further associates “*ban-hus*” with:

a cauldron

of generation  
swung at the centre:  
love-den, blood-holt,  
dream-bower. (44–48)

This description alludes to a specifically Anglo-Saxon setting. The “cauldron” refers not only to an iron cooking vessel, historically situated in the age under discussion, but may also be defined as “a situation characterised by instability and strong emotion” (*COED*).

As a precursor to Heaney's relationship with *Beowulf* it might be plausible to interpret the "cauldron / of generation" in "Bone Dreams" as representing the continuing blood feuds of the Anglo-Saxon epic which continue inexorably from one generation to the next. The cauldron similarly conjures images of a crucible, or melting pot, an association that is especially apt considering the fusion between paganism and Christianity occurring at the time in which the *Beowulf* poet was writing. The juxtaposition of "*ban-hus*" with "fire, benches, / wattle and rafters" (37–38) refers directly to the hall in Bede's analogy while simultaneously creating vivid images which are strongly reminiscent of Hrothgar's great hall, Heorot, in *Beowulf*. This connection is especially appropriate when considering the descriptive compound "blood-holt", which follows, in its strong resemblance to a gore-stained Heorot after Grendel's nocturnal attacks. These imagistic allusions to *Beowulf* emphasise Heaney's continued interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry and lore and are evidence of the poet's early engagement with the Old English epic. Heaney discovered "*ban-hus*" in his early readings of Anglo-Saxon, which included *Beowulf*, and he includes the compound in his own translation of *Beowulf* where he describes how, during a border skirmish with the Frisians, Beowulf's "bare hands stilled his heart beats / and wrecked the bone-house" (*Beowulf* lines 2507–2508) of Dayraven the Frank. Heaney later applies the word to the burning body of Beowulf himself, where:

flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house  
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate  
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease. (*Beowulf* lines 3147–3149)

In the fifth section of "Bone Dreams" Heaney draws attention to both "Hadrian's Wall" (78) and "Maiden Castle" (80), two historical sites in England that are closely related to the colonisation of England by the Romans. Construction on Hadrian's Wall was initiated by the Roman emperor Hadrian in AD 122 in order to demarcate the northern extreme of his empire and defend his territory against the barbarian peoples of the north that he felt could not be subdued (Birley 130). A number of the defensive turrets along the length of the wall also face south, however, indicating that the Roman Empire also had reason to fear the people already colonised. The immense stone wall, which rose four metres in height and was three metres in width when constructed, runs

the entire width of England, separating north from south, and is intersected by the Pennines, mentioned in the final section of “Bone Dreams”, a range of mountains in Northern England that act as a natural barrier dividing the country into east and west (Birley 131). In “Bone Dreams” the two landmarks, one man-made and one natural, create a cross covering the northern tip of England. The Christian symbol thus created in a geographical space may represent the arrival of Christianity to the British Isles with the Romans and as such may be symbolic of the violence catalysed by religion that has characterised the processes and aftermath of Irish colonisation.

The fifth section continues with Heaney’s portrayal of a couple lying entwined on the grass who come to personify the colonial relationship between England and Northern Ireland. This is not the first time Heaney personifies the colonial process as a sexual relationship, however. In a pair of Shakespearean sonnets entitled “Act of Union” (N 49), the dominant male role of the speaker is England and the submissive female listener is Northern Ireland. The relationship between the two is suggestive of rape and it is certainly the woman who feels most keenly the violent effects of the union: “the big pain / That leaves [her] raw, like opened ground again” (27–28). When acknowledging the irreparable colonial harm to Northern Ireland Heaney regrets that “No treaty / I foresee will salve completely [her] tracked / And stretchmarked body” (25–27). The sexual act is a colonising force in the poem that finds the unborn Irish offspring already “cocked / At [England] across the water” (24–25), indicating the violent reaction that inevitably follows colonisation.

In “Bone Dreams”, when Heaney personifies the land once more, the male speaker is far removed from the violent and overbearing colonial England of “Act of Union”:

I hold my lady’s head  
like a crystal

and ossify myself  
by gazing: I am scree  
on her escarpments,  
a chalk giant

carved upon her downs. (55–61)

He holds his lover's head "like a crystal" – evidently a medium for peering into the future, a future in which the male speaker is able to see himself as an Irish feature embedded in the English landscape. The "chalk giant" is an ithyphallic fertility symbol carved into a chalk hillside near "Maiden Castle" in Dorchester ("Cerne Abbas Giant" n.pag.) and the speaker thus becomes the symbols and natural formations that adorn the feminised landscape of England. The male role may be more specifically viewed as representative of the language of Northern Ireland while his silent female lover is identified with the English language. The speaker, in his relationship with his lover, "ossif[ies] [him]self", which effectively affords him the symbolic qualities earlier attributed to the shard of bone. The male speaker insists that he is "a chalk giant / carved upon her downs", which suggests that he is able to inscribe, and therefore alter, the landscape, and metaphorically the language, of England. As such the chalk symbol comes to represent Heaney's appropriation of Anglo-Saxon and his insemination of the English language, which results in his recognisably Irish-English vernacular, the same distinctive English that, as he describes in his "Translator's Introduction", comes to characterise his engagement with *Beowulf*.

The final section of "Bone Dreams" deals with Heaney's discovery of a dead mole in Devon in the southern most tip of Britain. Heaney recalls how:

I had thought the mole  
 a big-boned coultter  
 but there it was  
 small and cold  
 as the thick of a chisel. (84–88)

He later describes the mole's shoulders as "small distant Pennines" (94), mountains which are rich in both limestone and chalk (*North Pennines* n.pag.). The mole is thus also associated with the shard of bone described earlier as a "nugget of chalk" (9–10), which lends its habit of digging tunnels greater significance. While the "chalk giant" (60) is clearly marked on the earth's surface and remains visible for all to see, the mole digs its tunnels beneath the ground, signifying a more subtle inscription of the landscape or, if the metaphor is continued, alteration of the language. Despite the diminutive size and

fragility of the mole it is still a potent animal and one that is notoriously difficult to eradicate and thus is an invisible agent of underground, foundational change. Heaney identifies the mole as “the thick of a chisel” cutting into the landscape and this image symbolises Heaney’s own forays into the linguistic landscape of England through his poetry and translations.

## II The “cud of memory”: Heaney’s affinity for the *Beowulf* story

Heaney’s connection to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and to *Beowulf* in particular, is not as simple as the preceding section makes it out to be, of course. It is the very story of *Beowulf*, its careful composition and the similarities that it bears to his own time, place, and poetic style, that first piqued the Irish poet’s interest in translating the epic poem. Heaney argues in the introduction to his translation that *Beowulf* may be read as a tale of “three agons in the hero’s life” and even the most superficial reading of the poem makes this clear (“Introduction” xxvii). Beowulf, the hero of the story, is a young Geatish warrior who travels to the land of the neighbouring Danes in order to rid them of a man-eating demon named Grendel that has plagued their great hall, Heorot, for some twelve years. Having slain Grendel, Beowulf then dives into the depths of a lake to confront and defeat his second monster, the demon’s mother, who seeks vengeance for the death of her son. When Beowulf returns home to Geatland he is crowned king and rules peacefully for fifty years. His reign is disrupted by a dragon who wreaks havoc in the Geatish lands and when Beowulf confronts this, his third agon, he is killed after having dealt the death blow to the dragon.

While the bones of this story are too simple to be considered the stuff of epic poetry, the true epic quality of the poem inheres in the complex structure of the composition. Heaney argues that the poem may be read not only as a heroic tale but also as a contemplation of “the destinies of three peoples by tracing their interweaving histories in the story of a central character” (“Introduction” xxvii). The main narrative of *Beowulf* is constantly juxtaposed by what Adrien Bonjour labels “digressions”, independent accounts of Scandinavian history and legend along with historical recollections of the

battles between the Danes, Swedes and Geats (Bonjour xi).<sup>2</sup> These digressions range from a few lines, such as the “anticipation of the burning of Heorot” (Bonjour xii) to what may be viewed as completely self-sufficient poems within the poem, such as the “Finnesburg episode” (*Beowulf* lines 1070–1157). Although, as Bonjour notes, these digressions collectively make up no more than a quarter of the poem, scholars initially considered them the only part worthy of academic interest (Bonjour xi). Archibald Strong, for example, who translated the poem in 1925, declared that “*Beowulf* is the picture of a whole civilisation, of the Germania which Tacitus describes. The main interest which the poem has for us is thus not a purely literary interest. *Beowulf* is an important historical document” (Strong, in Tolkien, “Monsters and Critics” 104). Strong thus suggests that the academic interest of the poem lies in its reference to the history and genealogy of the Scandinavian tribes of *Beowulf*. Bonjour has argued convincingly, however, that the digressions are an intrinsic part of what makes *Beowulf* a great poem and I have chosen two of the more than twenty digressions identified by the Anglo-Saxon scholar as examples. Bonjour distinguishes between the digressions concerned with episodes in *Beowulf*’s life and the historical digressions not concerned with the hero. The first digression to be considered is an example of the former.

After *Beowulf* is killed by the dragon, a messenger reports his death to the Geatish warriors and recounts the history of the Swedish-Geatish enmity, a digression which Bonjour has labelled “The Battle at Ravenswood in the Earlier Swedish War” (Bonjour 40). The Geats, under the leadership of the two brothers Haethcyn and Hygelac, invade Sweden and capture the Swedish king’s wife. The Swedish king Ongentheow retaliates, however, and kills Haethcyn, forcing a Geatish retreat to Ravenswood where they are taunted by the Swedish king throughout the night. In the morning Hygelac rallies Haethcyn’s warriors and, having assumed his brother’s throne, rouses them to battle. Under the command of their new king, the Geats attack the Swedish forces and drive them back into their lands where Ongentheow is pitched in combat against two Geatish brothers, Wulf and Eofor. While he manages to best Wulf, Eofor takes the aged Swede’s life and so begins a peaceful reign for Hygelac, a peace that prevails during *Beowulf*’s

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<sup>2</sup> The digressions that characterise the structure of *Beowulf* may also be viewed as examples of the appositive style of the poem but this will be discussed later in the chapter.

rule (*Beowulf* lines 2922–2998). The peaceful outcome of the digression is not as inspiring as it may at first appear, however, and the messenger is quick to point out that:

this bad blood between us and the Swedes,  
this vicious feud, I am convinced,  
is bound to revive; they will cross our borders  
and attack in force when they find out  
that Beowulf is dead. (*Beowulf* lines 3000–3003)

So, while the digression may obviously be read as an inherently valuable historical tale, thereby supporting Strong's reading of the poem, it additionally serves the poetic function of anticipating the imminent attack of the Swedes (Bonjour 40). The digression sets up a contrast, which suggests that the early victory of the Geats serving under Hygelac will be repaid by a final Swedish victory, "probably amounting to practical annihilation" (Bonjour 42). The digression simultaneously operates as a glorious reflection on the character of Beowulf whose solitary influence was able to repel the might and fury of the Swedish tribes. It is apparent then that a perception of the digressions as worthy of historical interest alone ignores their function as a rich poetic device.

Bonjour identifies six digressions not concerned with Beowulf, of which the Modthryth episode is an example. When Beowulf returns to Geatland after defeating both Grendel and his mother he is met by Hygelac and Hygd, the Geatish king and his young wife. The narrative suddenly "sidesteps" ("Introduction" xxvi), in Heaney's words, and goes on to describe the young princess Modthryth who:

perpetrated terrible wrongs.  
If any retainer ever made bold  
to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's  
stared at her directly during daylight,  
the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound  
in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured  
until doom was pronounced – death by the sword (*Beowulf* lines 1933–1939)

Heaney is correct in saying that the digression tends to "leave an unprepared audience bewildered", since it is far removed from the story of the poem ("Introduction" xxvi).

While the digression appears disconnected, at best, from the narrative, Bonjour argues that it serves as a stylistic contrast to Hygelac's new bride, Hygd (Bonjour 54), who:

was thoughtful and her manners sure.  
Haereth's daughter behaved generously  
and stinted nothing when she distributed  
bounty to the Geats. (*Beowulf* lines 1928–1931)

Modthryth's "terrible wrongs" are a disturbing example of unacceptable royal behaviour, which serves to emphasise Hygd's own graceful manner. Fred C. Robinson argues further that the digression may be directed at Hygd that she "heed and avoid the negative example of Thryth in shaping her own conduct" (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 55). The poet soon reveals, however, that Modthryth marries Offa, king of the Angles, and grows famous for "her good deeds and conduct of life, / her high devotion to the hero king" (*Beowulf* lines 1952–1953). The tale thus reinforces the Scandinavian belief in the benefits of marriage and suggests to the attentive reader that Hygd will far surpass Modrthryth's later fame as queen considering her early social graces.

While sometimes stylistically confusing to the first-time reader, the digressions offer a reader more familiar with the text a far deeper level of interaction with the poem because they require active reader interpretation to reveal their artistic purpose. David Wright, a prose translator of *Beowulf*, argues that the poem's structure depends "like the alliterative measure in which the poem is written, on a balance – thesis and antithesis – rather than straightforward narrative" (Wright 12). This juxtaposition of mythical narrative with historical digression lends *Beowulf* its poetic force.

In terms of Heaney's relationship with the poem, the digressions of the epic are largely concerned with the tribal violence of the Scandinavian tribes and are thus of value to the Northern Irish poet who finds in them a close parallel to his own society. In an interview with Karl Miller, Heaney recalls that in his translation of *Beowulf*:

the adequacy of the poetry to the present time became apparent to me, and I began to be grateful for the gravitas of the *Beowulf* poet's mind and the steadiness of his gaze at the bloody realities of face-to-face feuds. (Heaney, in Miller 42–43)

Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* is not the first time that he explores these "bloody realities", however, and his poetry demonstrates a marked concern with the violence and bloodshed of the past – no surprise considering a life so accented by sectarian violence. In "Funeral Rites" (N 15) Heaney deals with his transition into manhood and his early exposure to death. In the poem he describes how the "news comes in / of each neighbourly murder" (33–34), an obvious reference to the intimate violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Heaney points out that after the funeral of each dead relative, "arbitration / of the feud *placated*" (66–67, my italics) but not concluded, which suggests only a temporary respite from the sectarian violence. Heaney lays the blame for the continuing bloodshed on "the cud of memory" (65), which connotes a constant regurgitation of and rumination on past wrongs which keeps the Troubles alive, with neither side being prepared to give way. In "Funeral Rites" Heaney draws on Icelandic history in what might be considered a digression of his own. Having detailed the "ceremony" and "customary rhythms" (35–36) accompanying Ulster funerals, Heaney refers to the Icelandic king, Gunnar Hamundarson, a character from *Njal's Saga*, which was written in about AD 1280 and concerned with Icelandic tribal warfare (Hart 80). The significance of the digression becomes evident in the last lines of the poem when he describes Gunnar:

who lay beautiful  
inside his burial mound  
though dead by violence  
  
and unavenged. (70–73)

The digression thus voices Heaney's admiration of Gunnar's hope for peace and reveals his own wish that one side in the Irish conflict will relent and, like Gunnar, rest "unavenged" in order to break the cycle of violence. While Heaney's is a fitting wish, the irony is that Gunnar's son, Hogni, refuses to accept his father's wishes for peace and along with Skerp-Hedin, Njal's son, murders four of Gunnar's enemies, thereby reinstating the cycles of Icelandic violence once more (Hart 84).

In "Funeral Rites" Heaney alludes to Gunnar's attempt to halt the cycles of bloodshed. There are many such attempts detailed in *Beowulf*. The Swedish king, Onela, for

instance, refuses to claim the expected man-price for his nephew's death at the hand of Weohstan, a Geat, and therefore a lifelong enemy (*Beowulf* lines 2616–2619). The fragile peace secured by the magnanimity of Onela proves to be as ephemeral as that achieved by Gunnar when the Geats, under Beowulf's command, invade Swedish lands and kill the king. The three major tribes of *Beowulf* are enmeshed in constant blood feuds that inexorably perpetuate themselves despite all politically motivated attempt to achieve peace. The inevitability of these cycles of violence is underscored in *Beowulf* by the digressions, which recall the past wars and allude to future battles between the Danes, Swedes, and Geats. Beowulf himself foretells the outcome of the proposed peace marriage between the Danish princess Freawaru, and Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards, in a prophetic digression. He insists that the marriage will ensure only a temporary peace even though:

the kingdom sees good in it  
and hopes this woman will heal old wounds  
and grievous feuds. (*Beowulf* lines 2027–2029)

Beowulf argues that the Heathobards will keep the truce until stirred by a glimpse of “some heirloom that brings alive / memories of the massacre” (*Beowulf* lines 2041–2042), which is immediately reminiscent of “the cud of memory” that kept Irish fires of vengeance burning in “Funeral Rites”. Heaney illustrates the phenomenon succinctly in his discussion of the similar “Finnesburg episode” which he argues immerses the reader in:

a society that is at once honour-bound and blood-stained, presided over by the laws of the blood-feud, where the kin of a person slain are bound to exact a price for the death, either by slaying the killer or by receiving satisfaction in the form of *wergild* (the “man-price”), a legally fixed compensation. (“Introduction” xxvi)

The “Finnesburg episode” is possibly the most famous digression of the poem and a detailed example of the blood feuding in *Beowulf*. Heaney notes that he draws attention to its importance in his translation by italicising the text and quickening the metre of his lines (“Introduction” xxvi). The story revolves around an embassy of Danes led by

Hnaef, Hildeburh's brother, to Friesland. Hildeburh, a Danish princess, was married to the Frisian King, Finn, as a political peace offering. During their visit the party is attacked by men under Finn's command and Hnaef is killed along with Hildeburh's unnamed son. Hengest, the replacement Danish leader, agrees to an uneasy alliance with the Frisians during the bitterly cold winter months in which his troops are forced to share the Frisian hall with Finn's men. The arrival of spring heralds a thirst for revenge, however, and when his sword is laid on his lap by Hunlafing, one of his men, Hengest, is quick to avenge the death of Hnaef and attacks the Frisians, killing Finn and returning to his own land with Hildeburh (*Beowulf* lines 1070–1158). This law of revenge is similarly evident in the early Irish family clans who, as Byrne notes, "were responsible for the misdeeds of its members and bore the duty of blood-vengeance if any member were slain" (Byrne 49). Thus Heaney's introduction, and his translation, suggests the resonant parallels between the ancestors of the *Beowulf* poet and those of Heaney himself.

The cycles of violence are not only highlighted by the digressions, however, but are embedded within the mythical events of *Beowulf* itself. The dragon, which Beowulf confronts at the end of the poem, is defined by Heaney as being "wyrð rather than *wyrm*, more a destiny than a set of reptilian vertebrae" ("Introduction" xxx). While Beowulf actively seeks out Grendel and his mother, who plague a foreign land, the dragon is hidden within Beowulf's own kingdom, emphasising what Heaney calls its "wonderful inevitability" ("Introduction" xxix). The dragon enters the story after fifty years of Beowulf's peaceful reign over Geatland and, as such, is not only a fitting and glorious end for the great warrior king but a symbol of the inevitable return of violence to society. The dragon comes to represent the final Swedish assault on the Geats after Beowulf's death (*Beowulf* lines 2910–2923) while Grendel and his mother may be read, as Wright suggests, as "a manifestation of the evil that will overtake the Danes", in the form of the Heathobard attack on Hrothgar's kingdom (Wright 15). The dialogue between mythical narrative and historical digression in *Beowulf* thus emphasises the inevitability of tribal warfare and is a representation of what Heaney calls the "pagan Germanic . . . heroic code" that demands vengeance ("Introduction" xxiv).

The tribal violence that characterises the peoples of *Beowulf* is not Heaney's only link to the Scandinavians, however. Irish history comprises extensive contact with Viking

raiders, starting in AD 795 when “long low ships, with patterned sails, appeared from the ocean and ran their prows up on the beach” (de Paor 92). The Vikings not only looted and pillaged the outlying coastal regions of Ireland, however, but sailed far inland on the Irish rivers to establish small towns, the first of which was established on the mouth of the Liffey (de Paor 95). The Irish named these defended bases “longphorts”, which indicates that they began with the building of a stockade around the ships, one of which eventually became the foundation of the city of Dublin (de Paor 95). Heaney explores the settlement of Dublin in his poem “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” (N 21) where he describes the zoomorphic prows of Viking ships “sniffing the Liffey, / swanning it up to the ford” (28–29). The Scandinavian impact on Ireland is still apparent in the philology of many of the town and county names which hark back to the Viking past, such as “Wicklow, Waterford, Wexford, Leixlip, Lambay” and the word *Ireland* itself, which is of Norse origin (de Paor 106). The close relation between these Scandinavian clans and the early Irish finds the Vikings “influencing the Irish and being influenced by them”, revealing yet another point of contact between Heaney and the narrative of *Beowulf* (de Paor 105). The arts and crafts especially reveal external influence, where the Irish embodied Scandinavian animal patterns in such works as “the cross of Cong and the carvings of Romanesque doorways” (de Paor 105). Heaney explores this connection further in “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” (N 21) where he describes bones incised with such patterns as:

trial pieces,  
the craft’s mystery  
improvised on bone:  
foliage, bestiaries,  
  
interlacings elaborate  
as the netted routes  
of ancestry and trade. (17–23)

Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* then becomes not only an exploration of the similarities between the blood-feuds of *Beowulf* and the recurring violence in Northern Ireland but a literary archaeological dig into the roots of his own society and culture.

Heaney's personal interest in *Beowulf* stems in large part from the infusion of poetry into all levels of Scandinavian society and perhaps the way in which it is reminiscent of early Irish society in which poets once possessed "equal status with a bishop or the king" (Byrne 51). The important place held by poetry in all levels of Scandinavian society is emphasised when Beowulf returns to Geatland and enthusiastically recounts the celebration in Heorot after the death of Grendel. Beowulf dramatises the "singing and excitement" (*Beowulf* line 2105) and makes specific mention of "an old reciter, / a carrier of stories" (*Beowulf* lines 2105–2106), a reference to the Heorot *scop*, and his essential role in keeping fresh the history of his people. In Danish society recollecting and retelling stories is not limited to trained bards, however, but is embraced alike by warrior "hero[es]" (*Beowulf* line 2107), "battle scarred veterans" (*Beowulf* line 2111) and even "at times the king" (*Beowulf* line 2109) who "gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale" (*Beowulf* line 2110).

The digressions that characterise *Beowulf* are often instructive and this is demonstrated when Hrothgar's *scop* recounts the story of Sigemund, who slew "the dragon of the Volsungs, *Fafnir*", in praise of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel (Tolkien, "Monsters and Critics" 109). The *scop* is described by the *Beowulf* poet as:

a carrier of tales,  
a traditional singer deeply schooled  
in the *lore* of the past (*Beowulf* lines 867–869, my italics)

The *OED* defines "lore" variously as "act of teaching; . . . instruction, tuition, education", "Advice, counsel; instruction, command, order", and "Something that is spoken; information; story; language". Heaney's word choice is particularly suitable in this instance as it underscores the role of the *scop* as an essential conduit through which the history, and thus the experience and wisdom, of a people is channeled and maintained. The *scop* includes in his narrative of Sigemund the story of his predecessor, Heremod, who:

was betrayed  
ambushed in Jutland, overpowered  
and done away with. (*Beowulf* lines 903–905)

In comparing Beowulf to Sigemund and Sigemund to Heremod the *scop* implies that Beowulf is fated to either become like the legendary Sigemund or the evil Heremod. Hrothgar's later advice to Beowulf before he sails to Geatland is an expansion of the *scop*'s story, revealing that Heremod:

vented his rage on men he caroused with,  
killed his own comrades, a pariah king  
who cut himself off from his own kind (*Beowulf* lines 1713–1715)

Hrothgar urges Beowulf to “learn from this / and understand true worth” (*Beowulf* lines 1723–1724), which is not only the correct way to behave as king but more importantly to understand the value and relevance of a people's history.

The digression that Bonjour calls the “Stories of Sigemund and Heremod” is not merely an advisory tale, however, but fulfills a specifically artistic purpose (Bonjour 46). Gerald Richman argues that Hrothgar's *scop* was not witness to Beowulf's fight with Grendel and insists that in order to “praise Beowulf, lacking specific details, he turns to comparison of Beowulf with great heroes from the past” (Richman 75 footnote 19).<sup>3</sup> The reason for the *scop*'s comparison of Beowulf with Sigemund, however, is not this simple. The poet could easily have learned the course of events from any of Beowulf's thanes and, if not, one imagines that the details of the story would have spread quickly amongst a people so recently relieved of a twelve-year-old fear. The *Beowulf* poet includes the comparison rather to prepare the reader for Beowulf's future role as king and as a foreshadowing of Beowulf's final defeat of his own dragon.

I would argue, additionally, that the *Beowulf* poet limits the *scop*'s praise of Beowulf to a comparison with Sigemund so as to allow the warrior to recount the details of his

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<sup>3</sup> Marijane Osborne argues in a more philological light that the very name of the legendary dragon slayer, Sigemund, to whom Beowulf is compared, “contain[s] a reminder of the great Germanic ideal that a man's victorious deeds (*sige*) will live on in the speech (*secgan, ealdgesegen*) of a man (*secg*) remembering him afterwards (-[*gi*]munde, *gemunde, gemyndig*)” (Richman 76 footnote 20). Osborne's point is that Beowulf's defeat of Grendel is not only similar to Sigemund's defeat of the dragon but will be remembered in stories much like Sigemund has been. Beowulf's own memorial is not only the burial mound raised on the cliff at “Hronesness” (*Beowulf*, line 3136) but more importantly the lasting story told about the hero and the *Beowulf* poet seems to understand that the greatest elegy for a man is a story that will last for millennia.

fight with Grendel himself. Beowulf proves himself not only a worthy warrior but an increasingly competent poet during the course of the narrative, which forms another point of contact between *Beowulf* and Heaney. The hero's poetic abilities are carefully revealed to the reader in progressive stages. A feast is held on the Geats' first night in Heorot and in an attempt to discredit Beowulf, Unferth, chief advisor to Hrothgar, the Danish king, asks Beowulf if he is the man who once swam in a contest with Breca. Unferth then recounts the story in which Beowulf lost to Breca after five nights in a savage sea swarming with "whale-beasts" (*Beowulf* line 541). Unferth's story intimates, of course, his hope that Beowulf will fail in his future fight against Grendel, having failed at the attempt himself. Beowulf retorts immediately, however, suggesting that "it was mostly beer that was doing the talking" (*Beowulf* lines 531–532) for Unferth. In Beowulf's own version of the event he records how he aids his friend Breca, the weaker swimmer, managing to slay nine of the "whale-beasts" before being washed ashore by a storm. Beowulf's story is convincing and identifies him from the outset as a worthy story-teller. Beowulf's simple and clear account of his defeat of Grendel (*Beowulf* lines 956–978) and his later victory over Grendel's mother to the Danish court (*Beowulf* lines 1650–1676) finds the warrior honing his narrative skills, which he wields once again when repeating the stories in the hall of his own king, Hygelac. Beowulf interrupts his recitation to the Geatish king, however, with a prophecy regarding the outcome of the peace marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld, discussed above. In doing so Beowulf is placed on a vatic par with the Heorot *scop*, whose Sigemund story is similarly prophetic, and finds the structure of his story reflecting that of the *Beowulf* poet in the digression that he includes in his tale. In Heaney's own words Beowulf possesses a "wisdom refined in the crucible of experience" ("Introduction" xxxi), denoting the wisdom that comes with age but connoting the wisdom required to become a true poet. In perhaps his most poetic reminiscence in the epic, Beowulf recounts the sorrow of King Hrethel, whose son, Herebeald, was accidentally killed by an arrow loosed by his own brother. Beowulf compares the king's grief to:

the misery endured by an old man  
 who has lived to see his son's body  
 swing on the gallows. He begins to keen  
 and weep for his boy, watching the raven  
 gloat where he hangs (*Beowulf* lines 2444–2448)

The extended metaphor finds *Beowulf* comparing Hrethel's grief to an imaginatively created event rather than an historical one, cementing his accession to the role of poet. Heaney suggests that "such passages mark an ultimate stage in poetic achievement", which find the Irishman overtly identifying with *Beowulf*'s attained poetic status ("Introduction" xxxi).

T. W. Rolleston notes that in the times of Finn mac Cumhal<sup>4</sup>, the legendary hero of the Ossianic Cycle of Irish mythology, "no one was ever permitted to be one of the Fianna of Erin<sup>5</sup> unless he could pass through many severe tests of his worthiness" (Rolleston 264). He records that a warrior was required to be well versed in "the Twelve Books of Poetry, and must himself be skilled to make verse in the rime and meter of the masters of Gaelic poetry", which fuses the role of warrior and poet into one. Evidence from the epic therefore suggests that *Beowulf* would have easily passed these Irish tests of worthiness (Rolleston 264).

### III An engagement with "the first stratum of the language"

While the story of *Beowulf* and its unique composition provide Heaney with compelling reasons to translate the Anglo-Saxon epic, his connection to the poem proves to be even more deep-seated. The very sound of the poem connects Heaney with *Beowulf* in a way that makes his translation of the poem almost an inevitability. In his introduction to *Beowulf* Heaney quotes the poet W. R. Rodgers, who insists that Ulsterians are "an abrupt people / who like the spiky consonants of speech / and think the soft ones cissy" and he emphasises the suitability of a Hiberno-English translation of a poem dominated

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<sup>4</sup> A mythical Irish leader more commonly known as Finn McCool.

<sup>5</sup> The Fianna of Erin were "a kind of military Order composed mainly of the members of two clans, Clan Basca and Clan Morna". They "were supposed to be devoted to the service of the High King and to the repelling of foreign invaders" (Rolleston 252).

by the Anglo-Saxon alliterative measure (“Introduction” xxxiii). Heaney draws attention to “Digging” (*DN* 3), the first poem of his first volume, and notes his initial surprise at discovering an example of Anglo-Saxon metrics in his poem without having intentionally included it (“Introduction” xxxiii). The lines in question: “The spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging. I look down” (4–5), reveal four stresses per line and strong alliteration, which serves to join the two halves across the caesura in the second line. “Part of me”, Heaney realises, “had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start” (“Introduction” xxxiii).

Heaney’s exposure to Anglo-Saxon verse during his undergraduate studies was augmented by the earlier school influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins who, according to Heaney, was “a chip off the Old English block” (“Introduction” xxxiii). The marked stress of consonants and the characteristic alliteration of Hopkins’s style are clearly imitative of Old English prosody and in *Preoccupations* Heaney argues that there is a similar connection between “the heavily accented consonantal noise of Hopkins’s poetic voice, and the peculiar regional characteristics of a Northern Ireland accent” (*Preoccupations* 44). Heaney thus associates the Ulster dialect, which “strikes the tangent of the consonant rather more than it rolls the circle of the vowel” with his readings of the Anglo-Saxon language (*Preoccupations* 45). It is evident, then, that Heaney’s poetic ear has been tuned into the metre and sound of Old English verse since he first started writing poetry, and he observes that his poems often echo “the bumpy alliterating music, the reporting sounds and ricocheting consonants typical of Hopkins’s verse” (*Preoccupations* 44). As Heaney himself notes, one of his first published works, “October Thought”, offers a clear example of the linguistic influences on his early poetry:

Starling thatch-watches, and sudden swallow  
 Straight breaks to mud-nest, home-rest rafter  
 Up past dry dust-drunk cobwebs, like laughter  
 Ghosting the roof of bog-oak, turf-sod and rods of willow (*Preoccupations* 44)

The lines display not only his early imitation of Hopkins, accompanied by alliteration, consonantal stresses, and in-line rhymes, but also find the young Heaney dabbling in the creation of compound words as characteristic of Hopkins as they are of Anglo-Saxon

verse. Although Hopkins was one of the first poets to inform Heaney's ear his influence has remained through the years. It is evident in the "Earth-pantry, bone-vault, / sun-bank" (37-38) used to describe the Irish bog banks in "Kinship" (*N* 40) and the "midge-veiled, high-hedged side-road" (4) detailed in the later poem "At the Wellhead" (*SL* 65). Heaney's retention of the compounds and Anglo-Saxon alliterative measure in his rendering of *Beowulf*, then, is not merely an exercise in structural translation but a near seamless progression of a poetical style influenced by the consonantal vernacular of rural Northern Ireland and the characteristically alliterative style of Hopkins.

Heaney was invited to translate *Beowulf* by the editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* while employed by Harvard University in a teaching position ("Introduction" xxxiii). He readily accepted the invitation, which is not surprising considering his long-standing relationship with the Anglo-Saxon language and literature, and argued with himself that working on the translation would be "a way of ensuring that [his] linguistic anchor would stay lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea floor" during a period of constant exposure to contemporary American verse ("Introduction" xxxiii). The act of translation, however, proved to be "scriptorium-slow" with Heaney deliberately setting himself twenty lines of poetry a day and writing out a glossary of the difficult Anglo-Saxon words in his laborious endeavour to clearly convey the intent and meaning of the relevant lines ("Introduction" xxxiii). He admits that he found the task was much like trying to "bring down a megalith with a toy hammer" and since the publishers put little pressure on him to produce the work the project was abandoned well before its completion ("Introduction" xxxiii). In conversation with Karl Miller, Heaney recalls that "[i]t was too hard, and what I was achieving was good enough, but not noticeably better than other translations" but although the project went into abeyance Heaney did not dismiss it altogether (Heaney, in Miller 40).<sup>6</sup>

Heaney's interest in the project was renewed when he stumbled on the Anglo-Saxon word *tholian*, which means "to suffer", in the glossary of C. L. Wrenn's translation of *Beowulf*, which he was using as an aid to his own act of translation ("Introduction" xxxv). Originally spelt with the Anglo-Saxon thorn symbol (*þolian*), the word was

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<sup>6</sup> Heaney's poem "A Ship of Death" (*HL* 20), from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), is an example of his early engagement with the translation of *Beowulf* and includes his rendering of lines 26-52, which deal with the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing.

immediately familiar to Heaney since it was regularly used by the older and less educated people in his community, including his aunt who, in reference to a family who had recently suffered a bereavement, would say: “They’ll just have to learn to thole” (“Introduction” xxxv). As he notes in his introduction to his translation, Heaney’s encounter with *tholian* thus created a linguistic link between Anglo-Saxon and the Irish vernacular of his childhood, which made his own tongue a functional part of the English language itself. The fact that the Old English word, “while long obsolete in Standard English, survived in the Ulster dialect of his parents” suggested to Heaney that his own language was as rooted in the language of *Beowulf* as English itself (*Beowulf* 3 footnote 4).<sup>7</sup> He soon came to realise, as he puts it, that his “aunt’s language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage”, a heritage that allowed him both the inspiration and linguistic right to translate *Beowulf* (“Introduction” xxxv). Heaney asserts what he terms his “voice-right” (“Introduction” xxxiii) to *Beowulf* on the first page of his translation where he writes:

a boy-child was born to Shield,  
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent by God to that nation.  
He knew what they had *tholed*,  
the long times and troubles they’d come through. (*Beowulf* lines 12–15, my italics)

While *tholian* had opened his way into *Beowulf*, Heaney still needed to find what he calls “the enabling note” that would set the tone for the entire poem (“Introduction” xxxvi). He soon found this note in the reserved speech of his father’s relatives whose surname he had once punned on in “The Strand at Lough Beg” (*FW* 17). He labelled them “Big-voiced scullions” (26) due to their almost “Native American solemnity of utterance” (“Introduction” xxxvi). Seth Lerer argues that in associating the Scullions with the North American Indians Heaney identifies them as people under colonial domination, yet “recognise[s] that in them both lies an enduring dignity that, in our modern world, survives only in language” (Lerer 95). The adopted “Scullion-speak” of his translation conveys Heaney’s initial impression of the poem as being “attractively direct” (“Introduction” xxxvi). Tom Shippey, however, seems less enamoured with Heaney’s

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<sup>7</sup> The footnotes to Heaney’s translation appear only in the Norton edition of *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*.

acquired tone and insists that: “If he is under the impression that ‘Scullion-speak’ . . . somehow preserves a native purity which other and more effete dialects of English do not, then that is a delusion” (Shippey, “Big Voiced Scullions” 9). Shippey’s “native purity”, surely a reference to the linguistic style of the Anglo-Saxon original, cannot be preserved in any translation, however, considering the millennium of changes separating Old from Modern English. Heaney’s use of “Scullion-speak” was not intended to preserve the Anglo-Saxon purity of *Beowulf* but rather finds the poet identifying the separate and defined “phonetic units” of his relatives’ speech in the sombre brevity of the Beowulfian lines (“Introduction” xxxvi). The cadences of “Scullion-speak”, in fact, turn out to be remarkably suited to the rhythmic quality of the Old English lines and mimic to an extent the laconic style of Anglo-Saxon composition.

This laconic style of Heaney’s “Scullion-speak” is evident from the very first word of his translation. The Anglo-Saxon “Hwaet!” which opens *Beowulf*, has been variously rendered as “What!” by Wentworth Huyshe (Huyshe 1), “Lo!” by John R. Clark Hall (Clark Hall 20), “Hear!” by David Wright (Wright 27) and is non-existent in Edwin Morgan’s translation, which simply begins: “How that glory remains in remembrance” (Morgan, 1). Heaney offers “hark”, “behold”, and “attend” as further examples of attempts to translate the first word of the poem (“Introduction” xxxvi). The “Hiberno-English Scullion-Speak” of his translation, however, immediately presented Heaney with a simple solution (“Introduction” xxxvi). In his poetry Heaney is not only concerned with what he calls the craft, or “the skill of making”, that is necessary for writing poetry but more especially with the technique, which he defines as the “watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines” (*Preoccupations* 47). Heaney recalls that in his early literary education he was taught to recognise a piece of work by its “diction, tropes and cadences” rather than its title or date in an effort to identify the particular style of an individual poet (*Preoccupations* 43). Avoiding the archaic literary words used in past translations Heaney opted for the humble particle “so”, which stands alone as the first word of his *Beowulf*, free even from the conventional exclamatory punctuation. Heaney argues in his introduction that the word “operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for

immediate attention” (“Introduction” xxxvi). The small word then possesses the “weighty distinctness” and authority that Heaney attributes to his relatives, and in a sense dismisses all previous translations, watermarking the poem as specifically his own (“Introduction” xxxvi).

#### IV Assailing the “word-choard”: a technical approach

In translating *Beowulf*, Heaney was intent on instilling his Modern English lines with what he calls “the power of verse”, indicating the emphasis he placed on retaining the poetic techniques at work within the epic poem (“Introduction” xxxiii). His 1999 translation of *Beowulf* retains not only the Anglo-Saxon alliterative measure but also incorporates the synonymic variety, kennings, and appositive style of the original. Heaney notes, however, that he was disinclined to “force an artificial shape or an unusual word choice just for the sake of correctness” and thus allowed his personal “sound of sense” to prevail (“Introduction” xxxvii). Heaney’s translation retains the complex prosody and poetic techniques characteristic of *Beowulf* and demands the same scrutiny of each densely-packed line in order to appreciate the poem as a whole. While the mythological narrative and historical digressions remain the major constituents of the complex structure of *Beowulf*, it is the poetic techniques that lend the poem its interpretive and formal richness.

Old English metre is characterised by a four stress line composed of “two opposed word-groups” each containing two stressed syllables (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxix). The poetic line as such was “essentially a balance of two equivalent blocks” (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxx) termed “hemistichs” (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 25), joined across a break, or caesura, by alliteration. Tolkien insists that Anglo-Saxon alliteration “depends not on *letters* but *sounds*” and as such “a *stressed* vowel of any quality” alliterates in addition to the more commonplace consonantal alliteration (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxxv). The alliteration is governed by rules, which insist upon one stress in each half line alliterating. The first stress in the second half of the line sets the alliterative sound and both stresses in the first half may alliterate. While the dominant stress in the first half must always alliterate, the weaker may follow the alliteration or not.

In order to maintain the variety sought after in Anglo-Saxon poetry the rules specify that no two successive lines may alliterate on the same sound, so a line alliterating on a *b* sound must be followed by an alliterating line with anything but a *b* sound (Donoghue, “Poetics” xviii). On the first page of Heaney’s translation, for example, the line “Afterwards a *boy-child* was *born* to *Shield*” (*Beowulf* line 12, my italics) is followed by “a *cub* in the yard, a *comfort* sent” (*Beowulf* line 13, my italics), which displays an alliterative stress in each half line with variation on the alliterative sound between lines.

While Heaney has followed the basic rules of Anglo-Saxon metrics in his translation of *Beowulf* he has allowed himself leeway, like other translators before him, to alliterate sometimes on the fourth stress. This tendency is normally associated with Modern English poetry in which a stress on the final word of a line causes it to be emphasised and simultaneously allows for the strong end-rhymes characteristic of Modern English verse. Anglo-Saxon metrics are not concerned with rhyme, however, but rather with rhythmic variety within the line. The fluid changes of alliterative stresses in Anglo-Saxon metrics create the sought-after rhythmic variety while linking the two halves of the line across the caesura. Heaney explains in his introduction that he did not feel compelled to sacrifice the vernacular voice of his *Beowulf* for a precise duplication of Anglo-Saxon metrics and as such not every line alliterates as it should (“Introduction” xxxvii). Heaney allowed himself the freedom “to alliterate on the fourth stressed syllable” (“Introduction” xxxvii), which allows for both rhythmic variety, perhaps even more so than the original, and still serves to join the two halves of the poetic line, evident in his own example: “We have heard of those *princes’* heroic *campaigns*” (“Introduction” xxxvii). So, while Heaney is not completely faithful to the prosody of Anglo-Saxon metrics, his translation still reflects the alliterative structure of the original manuscript.

The rhythmic variety within the alliterative line is mirrored in the array of synonyms used throughout *Beowulf*. A good translation should include more than the conveyance of the general meaning of individual words and Tolkien argues that the translator who contents himself with ‘shield’, for example, “to render Old English *bord*, *lind*, *rand* and *scyld*” is admitting linguistic defeat (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxi). Even if the translator is unable to accurately pinpoint the original meaning, it is imperative that “the variation, the *sound* of different words” is represented to some degree as this variety is an

essential feature of the *Beowulf* poet's style (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxi). The words for 'sea', 'ship' and 'sword' are the most popular synonyms to be found in *Beowulf* as well as more than ten variations for the humble "man", including "*beorn, ceorl, freca, guma, haeled* and *hael, leod, mann* and *manna, rinc, secg* and *wer*", which in Tolkien's reckoning could be increased to a list of over twenty-five items if a more specific definition was required (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xxi). A list of virtually identical synonyms such as this finds no comparison in Modern English and leaves the translator with a difficult task that must inevitably result in a version with a less rich vocabulary. Modern English readers, however, are not accustomed to such a profusion of synonyms and as such are appreciably easier to please with far less variety. In his introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney admits that he has "tended to follow modern usage" when it comes to the wide variety of synonyms used for the accoutrements of battle ("Introduction" xxviii). The comparatively limited vocabulary of Modern English and a lack of insistence upon the variety that characterises Old English verse, however, make Heaney's habit of calling "a sword a sword" more than acceptable to a twenty-first century reader ("Introduction" xxxviii).

While the synonymic variety of Heaney's translation may be lacking, his creative use of compounds certainly is not. The word "*ban-hus*" (36), on which Heaney elaborates in "Bone Dreams" (N 27), is only one of many Anglo-Saxon compounds which, according to Robinson, are "a cardinal feature of traditional Old English poetic diction" (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 14). These compounds, known as "kennings", from the Old Norse word *kenna*, which means to know or perceive, are metaphorically complex word pairs used to describe particular objects and require active reader interpretation (*OED*).<sup>8</sup> The word pairs consist of two independent elements in simple juxtaposition, leaving the reader to infer the relationship between the two and their composite meaning (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 14). Tolkien argues that:

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<sup>8</sup> Although contemporary compound words do not normally require the interpretative attention that Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon poets expected of their audiences the terms 'kenning' and 'compound' are generally used interchangeably by critics, including Robinson, Donoghue and even Tolkien. The similarity between 'kennings' and 'compounds' is most evident in newly invented compound words, which require additional reader interpretation to understand the full significance of the relationship between the two compounded words.

the primary poetic object of the use of compounds was compression, the force of brevity, the packing of the pictorial and emotional colour tight within a slow sonorous metre made of short balanced word-groups. (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xiv)

The precise meaning of kennings is often difficult to arrive at, and so their precise significance is difficult to know. A clear example is *sundwudu*, which literally translated means “flood-timber or swimming-timber”, retaining a sense of danger and mystique that must have surrounded sea journeys in the early years of the first millennium (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xiii). *Sundwudu* is more simply translated as “boat” (*Beowulf* line 198) by Heaney and while this is the simplest solution to the linguistic riddle it remains what Tolkien would have called “the best available, though quite an inadequate, rendering” (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xiii). Heaney’s later “wave-crosser” (*Beowulf* line 1907) represents more justly the complexities of Anglo-Saxon poetry and his “swan’s road” (*Beowulf* line 200) philologically captures the “*swan-rad*” of Old English. Heaney’s translation of the word thus incorporates a sense of “the region which is to the swimming swan as the plain is to the running horse” and conjures images of the majestically curved prows of the *sundwudu* (Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks xiii). The translator has to decide between rendering the kennings as simple equivalent words and rendering them as compounded words that convey some idea of the reader interpretation required by the original. *Beowulf* remains a poem, of course, and the retention of the kennings so characteristic of Anglo-Saxon literature, and of *Beowulf* in particular, must be regarded as essential to the story being told because of the interpretive complexity that they bring to the text.

As discussed earlier, Heaney’s own poetry has long been characterised by the use of compounds. His recognition of the interpretative possibilities that the use of compounds allows is most evident in his poem from *Seeing Things*, “The Settle Bed” (ST 28). A settle bed is of wooden construction with a high headboard and typically incorporates a storage space under the sleeping platform (*OED*). The compounds that Heaney uses in the first three lines to describe the bed are particularly interesting since four of them are newly created by Heaney especially for this poem:

Willed down, waited for, in place at last and for good.  
 Trunk-hasped, cart-heavy, painted an ignorant brown.  
 And pew-strait, bin-deep, standing four-square as an ark. (1–3)

While “trunk-hasped”, “cart-heavy”, and “bin-deep” are fairly simple to decipher as rural and domestic images the compound “pew-strait” deserves additional consideration. I would argue that the amalgamation of the two words “pew” and “strait” serves as a clear example of the multiple meanings inherent in kennings. On first reading, the words conjure images of ranked lines of upright benches arranged for the seating of religious congregations. Donoghue argues, however, that Heaney’s “pew-strait” also intimates “the narrowness of religious doctrine” (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 240). As such the metaphor not only describes the bed but possibly also the character of its previous owners and perhaps, more broadly, the confines of organised religion. This reading is especially apt in Heaney’s Northern Irish context. The discomfort and rigidity traditionally associated with pews is evident in the second half of the compound and yet Heaney’s spelling of “strait” introduces seafaring imagery into the poem. The reason for this becomes clear when he compares the settle bed to the “boards of a funeral ship” (5), which surely refers to a ship burial similar to that of “Shield Sheafson” (*Beowulf* line 4) in the opening scene of *Beowulf*. This image is audibly echoed in the “tide awash in the headboard” (7) of the bed. The “tongue-and-groove” (17) joints of the settle bed reflect the similar wooden construction of pews and bring to mind again the “clinker-built ship” that bore the great Danish king on his final journey (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 239). The various references to be found within “pew-strait” are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however, and the simple collocation of the two words leaves the choice of interpretation up to the reader.

While Anglo-Saxon readers would have been more accustomed to what Donoghue calls “the interplay within compounds” than the modern reader (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 241), Heaney’s inclusion of such words in his own poetry suggests that the poet feels similarly confident in his audience’s ability to appreciate the multiple meanings characteristic of his own kennings. Robinson argues that “as far as surviving records allow us to judge” numerous compounds are unique to *Beowulf*, and so the original audience of the epic would frequently have to decipher the ambiguity of kennings which

they had rarely, if ever, encountered before (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 16). Relatively few Anglo-Saxon manuscripts survive and the possibility exists, of course, that the kennings thought to be unique to *Beowulf* were once commonly used. In response to such suggestions Robinson is quick to retort that the laconic and indirect style of the poem indicates an intelligent poet who expected much of his audience and as such it is not improbable that the *Beowulf* poet created new kennings to suit his purpose (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 30). Heaney does not limit his rendering to direct translations of kennings but also introduces “newly minted creations” (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 241). He describes, for example, the “feud-calloused hand” (*Beowulf* line 2488) of Ongentheow, the Swedish king. The kenning intimates the many battles fought by the aged king, of course, but also intimates his complicity in the cycles of Scandinavian tribal wars. The fact that the hand is “calloused” may also represent the irreparable harm that the blood-feuds have inflicted on their society. Heaney’s poetry, as in “The Settle Bed” above, is similarly characterised by the frequent use of invented compounds, several of which have found their way into his version of *Beowulf*. *Beowulf*’s dragon, for example, lives in a bower “under-earth” (*Beowulf* line 2825) while in “St Kevin and the Blackbird” (*SL* 20) the saint “has the shut-eyed blank of underearth” (18) creeping up through him.

Kennings may be regarded as an example of apposition in their simple collocation of two unrelated words, which require the reader’s active interpretation. The *Harbrace College Handbook* defines apposition as “a noun or a noun substitute set beside another noun or noun substitute and identifying or explaining it”, with no expressed logical connection between the two (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 3). Robinson argues that apposition may, however, assume a wider linguistic role encompassing parts of speech other than the noun and may include both phrases and clauses and even the juxtaposition of large sections of narrative, as is the case with the digressions of *Beowulf*. Apposition, as Robinson defines it, requires only that “the two elements in an appositive construction be the same part of speech, have the same referent, and not be connected except by syntactic parallelism” (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 3). The lack of a clearly stated connection between the apposed halves places the onus on the reader to make the implicitly stated connections within the “syntactically open” construction (F. Robinson, *Appositive Style* 15). Apposition requires the reader to make the logical connections

between the collocated words, phrases, or narrative segments, thus completing the detail of the story intended by the poet but not actually included in the text.

Donoghue offers his own literal translation of lines from *Beowulf* as an example of apposition. While fighting Grendel's mother in her underwater lair Beowulf "saw among the war-gear a victory-blessed sword, an ancient sword made by giants, strong in its edges, of warriors the glory" (Donoghue, "Philologer Poet" 242). The simple collocation of the phrases within the sentence does not place any proposition in a superior position and requires the reader to infer their connection. The construction intimates that the ancient sword will bring Beowulf victory over the monster as it possesses the strength of the sword-smith giants, renowned as the finest of steel workers, in addition to lending Beowulf an air of worthiness as the warrior able to wield such a legendary battle-tested blade.

The digressions discussed above are also an excellent example of apposition in that the *Beowulf* poet introduces external narratives into the structure of his text without directly indicating their significance to the reader. "The Scyld Episode" (Bonjour 1), for example, which acts as a prologue to *Beowulf*, details the exploits and death of the greatest Danish king, "Shield Sheafson" (*Beowulf* line 4). Although Shield was:

A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on  
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.  
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts  
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him  
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king. (*Beowulf* lines 7–11)

The *Beowulf* poet goes on to describe Shield's son and then his grandson, "the great Hafdane" (*Beowulf* line 58), detailing the wealth, strength, and success of the expanding Shielding dynasty, but he never mentions the relevance of this prologue. Bonjour argues, however, that Shield saved the Danes from leaderless vulnerability when he became their king (Bonjour 4). The digression thus anticipates the arrival of Beowulf who, like Shield, arrives unexpectedly and saves the Danish people. The "Scyld Episode" also glorifies Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and his mother since the greatest warriors of the Danes, who according to Heaney were in "the full summer of their power", were unable to do so. ("Introduction" xxvii)

Heaney retains the Beowulfian apposition for the most part and in his translation of the “Scyld Episode” even makes one passage more appositive than the Old English original (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 245). Heaney’s version reads:

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,  
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent  
by God to that nation. (*Beowulf* lines 12–14)

In Heaney’s rendering the “boy-child”, “cub”, and “comfort” are what Donoghue terms “parallel nominals” that increasingly emphasise the importance of Shield’s son, Beow, to the Danes (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 244). In comparison Donoghue’s translation, in original word order, reads “To that one [Shield] a son was later born young in the yards whom God sent to the people as a comfort” where the nominals form part of separate constructions and lose the efficacy of Heaney’s appositive syntax (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 244).

Donoghue argues that “Heaney finds an affinity in the deftness of *Beowulf*’s appositive style”, since it leaves much of the interpretation up to the reader and is characteristic of Heaney’s own poetry (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 246). Heaney has used apposition before, often in the form of lists “flowing together without the help of syntax” (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 243). An example of this is to be found in “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” (*N* 21) where Heaney describes the Northern men as:

neighbourly, scoretaking  
killers, haggars  
and hagglers, gombeen-men,  
hoarders of grudges and gain. (69–72)

This extensive list of attributes elucidates the Viking lifestyle, emphasising their violent blood feuds, propensity for trade and profit, and their role as greedy usurers. The list of overtly negative characteristics is initiated by the strangely affirmative adjective “neighbourly”, however, which is not of itself a negative attribute. It is only when “neighbourly” is apposed with the list that follows that the inversion of its meaning becomes evident, suggesting perhaps the detrimental effect that the Vikings have on the

populations amongst whom they settle. The contradiction apparent between the words “neighbourly” and “score-taking” creates a tension, however, which underscores the similarly destructive nature of the “neighbourly” violence of Northern Ireland where the murder of a Catholic is soon repaid by the death of a Protestant. While this may be a tenuous connection the final stanza supports this reading and reveals that the appositive style of the poem is not limited to sentence construction alone but is reflected in the structure of the poem as a whole. The last stanza of section V, for example, categorises the Vikings as:

Old cunning assessors  
of feuds and of sites  
for ambush or town. (78–80)

The stanza is immediately juxtaposed with a question voiced by an Irish local in the first stanza of section VI, who asks:

‘Did you ever hear tell,’  
said Jimmy Farrell,  
‘of the skulls they have  
in the city of Dublin? (81–84)

Heaney includes no explicit connection between the skulls of Dublin and the Viking “assessors of feuds” and yet the attentive reader must recognise the comparison he is trying to make between Irish history and Viking culture. Heaney concludes the poem by personifying his words, which:

go hunting  
lightly as pampooties  
over the skull-capped ground. (94–96)

According to Helen Vendler, Heaney’s role as poet in *North* is that of “the comparative archaeologist”, searching the histories and literatures of the past “in order to propose an explanation for contemporary violence” (Vendler 86). The lines then intimate the poet’s interest not only in the violence of the past but also that of the present. Heaney’s use of

apposition in his poetry suggests his expectation that the reader actively create these connections within his translation of *Beowulf* as much as in his poems.

## V “Heaneywulf”

Despite the fact that Heaney has remained remarkably true to the translation of the poetic technicalities of *Beowulf*, some critics were less than pleased with his efforts. Howell Chickering notes that “professional Anglo-Saxonists early on derogated it”, greeting Heaney’s rendering with thinly veiled hostility. Chickering makes particular mention of Tom Shippey and Nicholas Howe who, like Chickering himself, insist that Heaney’s translation diverges too far from the original (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 161). The primary criticism of Heaney’s effort, according to Chickering, is that it does not “accurately represent the language of *Beowulf*” (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 173). His claim is in fact supported by textual evidence, especially when considering the frequent use of Hiberno-English words in Heaney’s version. Most of the words in question are what Donoghue terms “Hibernicisms, that is, usages characteristic of the English in Ireland – or more specifically the English Heaney recalls from his Ulster relatives” (Donoghue, Preface ix). Throughout the progress of Heaney’s act of translation, Professor Alfred Davis, an Anglo-Saxon scholar, was commissioned to keep an eye on Heaney by the Norton editors. Heaney mentions, however, that he “was often reluctant to follow his advice and persisted many times in what we both knew were erroneous ways” (Heaney, in Eder n.pag.), an obvious reference to his deliberate inclusion of Hibernicisms. In an interview with Mel Gussow from the *New York Times* Heaney even admits that his translation is “about one-third Heaney, two-thirds ‘duty to the text’” (Heaney, in Gussow 1). I will argue, however, that the Hibernicisms, which create what Heaney himself calls “a certain strangeness in the diction”, are well suited to the context in which they appear and, as I will show, serve to bind Heaney’s *Beowulf* strongly into his own oeuvre and poetical preoccupations (“Introduction” xxxviii).

One of the first Hibernicisms that Chickering flags for consideration is the dialectal word “mizzle” (*Beowulf* line 596), which is used to describe an imagined spray of

Grendel's blood. Unferth, chief advisor to the Danish king, Hrothgar, is very quick to insult Beowulf on his arrival in their lands, questioning his prowess as a warrior, but Beowulf is equally quick to remind him that:

[Grendel] knows he need never be in dread  
of your blade making a *mizzle* of his blood  
or of a vengeance arriving ever from this quarter (*Beowulf* lines 594–596, my italics)

Chickering argues that American readers are unlikely to know, even within the context, that “mizzle” is simply a synonym for “drizzle” (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 163) and yet the *OED* lists the word as colloquial in both Britain and North America. Heaney candidly admits that “at certain points, it is the very translation that has to be translated” and has been derided by Chickering for the often necessary inclusion of explanatory glosses of Hibernicisms in his edition (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 173).<sup>9</sup> Heaney does not, however, include a gloss for “mizzle”, indicating his belief in his readers’ abilities to aurally decode the meaning of a word that fuses mist and drizzle and is not, in fact, a Hibernicism. The word first appears in Heaney’s poem “Bog Oak” from *Wintering Out* (*WO* 14) where “mizzling rain / blurs the far end / of the cart track” (13–15), offering anybody familiar with the poet’s work a simple descriptive definition of the colloquialism.

Chickering also criticises Heaney’s description of Grendel as “hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain” (*Beowulf* line 975) after his struggle with Beowulf. He argues that the alliteration of the line is an example of Heaney’s “showy overkill” in the translation (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 167). The line accords with the norms of Anglo-Saxon metrics, however, in its alliteration of the first, second, and third stresses of the line. While Chickering insists that the words are not contextually appropriate, I would suggest that the words are entirely suited to the situation. At this point in the poem Grendel’s arm has just been savagely torn off by Beowulf, separating the arm from the body at the joint, a hinge that is now “hasped”, or locked, with pain. The word “hooped” is first used, in Heaney’s poem “Gifts of Rain” (*WO* 23), to describe an Irish farmer’s inherent

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<sup>9</sup> These take the form of extensive footnotes to the text of Heaney’s translation in the Norton Critical Edition.

connection to his land, where “he is *hooped* to where he planted” (23, my italics). In his introduction to *Beowulf* Heaney also revealingly notes that the feuding tribes of *Beowulf* are themselves “*hooped* within the great wheel of necessity, in thrall to a code of loyalty and bravery, bound to seek glory in the eye of the warrior world” (“Introduction” xxvi, my italics). Such a description indicates their inability to escape their situation. Grendel finds himself in much the same position, attempting to flee from the excruciating pain of a mortal wound that he cannot escape. Chickering’s final criticism of the line is the word “hirpling”, that he insists was unrecognizable even when he mentioned it to his British acquaintances (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 167). But the line’s efficacy stems not only from the meaning of the words themselves but from the cumulative effect of the *h* alliteration, which mimics Grendel’s gasps of agony and heaving breath. The final onomatopoeic force of “hirpling” conjures images of a terrified Grendel clutching his wound and stumbling home across the moors. Shippey notes that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien often has his characters speak in created Elvish languages “*without bothering to translate them*” (Shippey, *Tolkien* xiv). Shippey argues simply that Tolkien’s point is “made by the sound alone” (Shippey, *Tolkien* xiv) and, similarly, it is the very sound of “hirpling” that conveys Heaney’s intended meaning. The *OED* notes that to “hirple” is to “move with a gait between walking and crawling; to walk lamely, to drag a limb, to hobble”, which is as precise a definition of Grendel’s condition as one could hope to find.

Chickering has been quick to point out Hibernicisms in the text that he feels are not suited to the Anglo-Saxon epic but the critic seems to have skimmed past one of the more obviously Irish words in Heaney’s translation. The word is found in the “Finnesburg episode” in which Hildeburh, the Danish princess, sings “keens” for her dead son and brother killed in their fight with the neighbouring Frisians. The relevant lines read:

Hildeburh ordered her own  
 son’s body be burnt with Hnaef’s,  
 the flesh on his bones to sputter and blaze  
 beside his uncle’s. The woman wailed  
 and sang *keens* (*Beowulf* lines 1115–1119, my italics)

The footnotes to the Norton edition of the translation that would normally accompany a Hibernicism in Heaney's rendering are absent in this case, which, along with a lack of attention from the critics, suggest that the word is easily understandable to the average English reader. In the *OED* a "keen" is explicitly defined as "an Irish funeral song accompanied with wailing in lamentation for the dead" and as such must be viewed as one of the words incorporated into the translation from the Irish. Chickering complains that the Hibernicisms used in Heaney's *Beowulf* will be either misunderstood or completely unintelligible to English readers of the poem but it is apparent that "keens" requires no explanation. The single word amply illustrates the degree to which many Hibernicisms have already been incorporated into the English language. The colonial history of the English language has resulted in the inclusion of words from several cultures, making "keens" as English as "verandah" or "khaki", and an eminently suitable word for Heaney's purposes. Chickering further fails to take issue with the adjectival phrase "scaresomely burned" (*Beowulf* line 3041), which is used to describe the condition of the dragon slain by Beowulf, even though it is deliberately marked as a Hibernicism within the footnoted text of Heaney's translation (*Beowulf* 75 footnote 8). The word previously appears in the final poem of Heaney's first volume "Personal Helicon" (*DN* 43) where he describes a well as "*scaresome*, for there, out of ferns and tall / Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection" (15–16, my italics).

As these examples illustrate, Hibernicisms are far more prevalent in the English language than Chickering is perhaps prepared to admit and as such his contention that their inclusion in the translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic leads to misunderstandings or unintelligibility must surely be dismissed. Chickering argues, in effect, that the purity of the Anglo-Saxon original can only be retained by translation into an English untainted by the linguistic influence of other cultures, an English that has never truly existed. This misconception in terms of the English language is especially ironic since English was not even purely Anglo-Saxon in the Anglo-Saxon period. As David Crystal points out, by the time the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain "there had already been four centuries of linguistic interchange between Germanic and Roman people on the European mainland" (Crystal, *Stories of English* 57–58). I would argue, therefore, that although Heaney has

adapted the language to his own personal Irish linguistic style he has created an easily readable and remarkably accurate rendering of *Beowulf*.

The issue of the Hibernicisms raised by Chickering, however, suggests another dimension to the Heaney translation that rankles. Chickering's main gripe with Heaney's translation proves to be not so much the suitability or intelligibility of the words chosen, as the fact that he sees Heaney's *Beowulf* as part of "his own canon formation" (Chickering, "Heaneywulf" 175). Chickering maintains that it's "just not *Beowulf*" and seems to resent the fact that the poem is as much a part of Heaney's oeuvre as any of his other works (Chickering, "Heaneywulf" 161). Chickering complains that at a Heaney reading "when he turns to excerpts from his *Beowulf* after an hour of his other work, they sound very like his own poems" (Chickering, "Heaneywulf" 175). He argues that the inclusion of Hibernicisms transforms the epic from a translation of *Beowulf* into a Heaney poem, which he condescendingly entitles "Heaneywulf" (Chickering, "Heaneywulf" 161). While Loren Gruber agrees that such a transformation has taken place she does not view the change in such a negative light. Gruber argues, and I agree, that Heaney's translation "may inspire readers to pursue *Beowulf* studies further and translators to refine their work" despite the fact that he has chosen to view the Scandinavian past through an Irish lens (Gruber 79). Gruber notes that when she teaches *Beowulf* in translation her own students soon realise that verse translators of the epic, "guided by their own subjective relationships to the ancient and modern word-hoards, write poems about poems" (Gruber 80) and as such the translation will inevitably bear the marks of the translator.

Gruber, despite being a great admirer of Heaney's work, is not entirely positive in her criticism of Heaney's translation and the changes he makes to its language, and remains extremely critical of certain word choices. For instance, she argues that his use of the word "bothies" (*Beowulf* line 140) to describe the outlying buildings surrounding Heorot, the Danish hall, makes a class distinction between the Danish royals who sleep in "women's quarters, chambers, and dwellings" (Gruber 76) and those who bed down in "huts" or "shanties" as Heaney's footnote describes them (*Beowulf* 6 footnote 1). I tend to agree with the class distinction drawn but take issue with Gruber when she suggests that Heaney "seems to mutter behind his Ulster door that the Danes are little better than

animals” in their rustic habitation (Gruber 76). Warriors regularly slept in Heorot after a night’s carousing on its gold-gilded benches and all but the lowliest of the Danish society would have been welcome to do so. The main reason that the men vacate the hall to sleep in the “bothies” is that they are afraid of being savagely killed by Grendel who has terrorised Heorot for the past twelve years and would rather lie down in a lowly “bothy” than die in a gilded hall. It seems then that Gruber has taken the word out of context and Heaney’s lines support this view when he translates:

It was easy then to meet with a man  
shifting himself to a safer distance  
to bed in the bothies (*Beowulf* lines 138–140)

This emphasises the Danes’ fear of Grendel rather than their crude living conditions.

Heaney’s word choice also reveals his personal connection to the landscape of *Beowulf* and Ireland, binding the two landscapes together across time and culture by attributing to one the characteristics of the other. Along with the “fens” (*Beowulf* line 104), “meres” (*Beowulf* line 845), “moors” (*Beowulf* line 710), and “tarns” (*Beowulf* line 1519), describing the marshy land surrounding Heorot, the “windswept crags / and treacherous keshes” (*Beowulf* line 1360) are immediately reminiscent of Heaney’s rural Northern Ireland. Heaney grew up in a “traditional thatched farmstead” (“Crediting Poetry” 4) in the countryside near Lough Beg, which was dotted with “scraggy marshland”, “overgrown ditches”, “swamps”, and “bog pools” (*Preoccupations* 18) and he states that even today:

green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation . . . possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction.  
(*Preoccupations* 19)

The natural imagery of the Irish landscape Heaney incorporates into the *Beowulf* text is also accompanied by several references to the largely agricultural life of his youth. A Danish father lamenting the death of his son:

lies down on his bed  
and sings a lament; everything seems too large,  
the *steadings* and the fields. (*Beowulf* lines 2460–2462, my italics)

A “steading” refers to the outbuildings surrounding a farmhouse (*OED*), which brings to mind Heaney’s Mossbawn childhood. The collective nouns “thresh” (*Beowulf* line 227) and “stook” (*Beowulf* line 328) are unusually used in the translation to describe the war gear and spears of the Geats. A “thresh” would normally refer to “a clump of rushes” and a “stook” to “a bundle of straw” (*OED*) but here they are strangely suitable as collective nouns for the closely packed spears and swords of the Geats. Heaney’s lines read: “There was a clash of mail / and a thresh of gear” (*Beowulf* lines 226–227) and “They collected their spears / in a seafarers’ stook” (*Beowulf* lines 327–328), which emphasises the battle-readiness of the Geats and yet also harks back to Heaney’s childhood. Heaney himself highlights his use of the word “graith” in the introduction to his translation (“Introduction” xxxviii). The word refers specifically to the Geatish accoutrements of battle when “they duly arrived / in their grim war-graith and gear at the hall” (*Beowulf* lines 323–324). The word “graith” is actually an Irish term for an animal’s harness, however, and as such Heaney’s word choice subtly superimposes the familiarity of rural Ireland onto *Beowulf*, effectively demonstrating his affinity for the epic poem and the history on which it is based.

Heaney’s choice of diction is not limited to espousing rural affinities, however, since the translation also incorporates specifically political words and phrases. He labels Unferth, the chief Danish adviser, a “brehon” (*Beowulf* line 1457), an allusion to Brehon law which prevailed in Ireland prior to English occupation (*OED*), and which is glossed in the footnotes of the Norton edition of Heaney’s translation as “one of an ancient class of lawyers in Ireland” (*Beowulf* 39 footnote 8). In their initial encounter, as discussed above, Unferth condescendingly recounts a version of the story in which Beowulf lost a swimming contest with his childhood friend, Breca. Unferth’s story is intended to discredit Beowulf, of course, and bolster his own lack of courage in facing Grendel. Unferth is only offered the brehonic title, however, when he finally offers Beowulf his own sword after Beowulf has slain Grendel and returns to slay Grendel’s mother. The sword is described as:

a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.  
 The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns  
 had been tempered in blood. It had never failed  
 the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle (*Beowulf* lines 1458–1461)

This detailed description of the priceless blade, which would have been passed down from father to son over many generations, serves to emphasise Unferth's complete submission to Beowulf and symbolises his apology to the Geat for initially misjudging him. Unferth's actions effectively raise him to the stature of true judge, or brehon, and a worthy leader of his people. Conferring the title of "brehon" on Unferth may also be read as a nod of respect from Heaney to a character whom he views as having acted admirably, and thus to illustrate a point of similarity between the ideals of the Scandinavian peoples and his own.

Heaney also later classifies Hrothgar's people as a "sept" (*Beowulf* line 1674), when Beowulf has cleansed Heorot of Grendel, a term which is defined as an Irish clan or tribe in the Norton footnotes (*Beowulf* 44 footnote 1). Labelling the Danes a "sept" thus draws the reader's attention to the similarities between the cycles of violence that inexorably perpetuate themselves in the Scandinavian tribal wars that form the backdrop to the *Beowulf* narrative and the continuing antagonism between Catholic and Protestant in contemporary Ulster. By attaching an Irish designation to the Danes Heaney is further able to draw close "historical links between Gaelic and Scandinavian society" (McCarthy 153).

The similarities between the two societies are further emphasised in Heaney's use of the phrase "beyond the pale", which is the border between a place of refuge and the surrounding hostile territory. Grendel is described as being "warped / in the shape of a man, [and] moves beyond the pale" (*Beowulf* lines 1351–1352). The phrase is not glossed in the Norton edition, and as such is not earmarked as a Hibernicism, but Conor McCarthy argues that it is a reference to the early period of Irish colonisation in which the safety of the fortified English enclosures was originally known as "the pale" (McCarthy 154). Dublin formed the centre of the English colonial presence in Ireland and according to McCarthy is colloquially known as "the pale" to this day (McCarthy 154).

Lending the Danish landscape this colonial title links the setting of the Anglo-Saxon epic to the Irish city of the colonial past but also to the Irish present in its continued colloquial use. While the comparison of Heorot to colonial Dublin may be fitting, Heaney's use of the phrase "beyond the pale" suggests rather a reflection on contemporary Northern Ireland and the constant threat of violence in daily life, much like the fear which must have been present in Heorot. Gruber supports Heaney's choice in this instance arguing that the phrase does not merely bear political weight but, by including it, Heaney is able to "invoke the present to metamorphose past treasures" (Gruber 70). In seeking relationships between Beowulfian society and his own Heaney is able to invigorate the past, making it more accessible and relevant to a modern readership and thus, Gruber argues, "open[s] the epic to a wider audience" (Gruber 68).

As mentioned in the Introduction, Heaney has stated that "in order to have political effect . . . you don't have to be writing 'political poetry'", a sentiment that has proved remarkably true throughout his work (Heaney, in Miller 52). Heaney's *Beowulf* does possess a finely honed political edge, however, which is especially apparent in his use of the word "bawn", a word used by "English planters in Ulster to describe fortified dwellings they erected on lands confiscated from the Irish" (*Beowulf* 15 footnote 6) and used by Heaney to describe Hrothgar's hall. Heaney concludes the introduction to his translation by stating that "putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism" that has influenced his poetry from the start ("Introduction" xxxviii). This statement, above all others, has attracted the most negative responses from Heaney's critics. The use of "bawn" has been specifically attacked by Chickering who insists that if Heorot is identified as an English fortification then Grendel and his mother must represent the colonized Irish. Heaney even seems to agree with Chickering on this point when he states simply that "Grendel comes out of the darkness as the Gael came out of the dark toward those bawns in Ulster" (Heaney, in Miller 41). And yet I would argue that in his reading of what he calls Heaney's "historical equation" Chickering has far too literal an understanding of the nuanced analogy drawn by Heaney (Chickering, "Heaneywulf" 174). It must be noted that Heaney's comparison is a simile and as such must be read as a figurative rather than a literal comparison. The ruthless

vengeance of Grendel's mother, the "monstrous hell-bride, brood[ing] on her wrongs" (*Beowulf* line 1259), should not be read simply as symbolising Irish violence against the English colonists but rather as hinting at the retributive violence that has similarly characterised Irish politics. Heaney's sympathetic description of her as "grief-racked" and "desperate for revenge" (*Beowulf* line 1279) is perhaps an indication of the poet's attempt to look beyond the characterisation of Grendel's mother as a monster, which is akin to his frequent attempts to find an objective view of the cycles of violence within his own society.

"Bawn" is initially used in the text to describe the "strongroom and bawn" (*Beowulf* line 523) to which Breca returned after his swimming contest with Beowulf. It is only later used to refer to Heorot (*Beowulf* line 721) and so should not be viewed as specifically related to Hrothgar's hall alone. The word is similarly used to describe Hygelac's hall where the Geatish king was "dispensing rings / inside his bawn" (*Beowulf* lines 1969–1970). While Heaney specifies in his introduction that "bawn" refers to "the fortified dwellings that the English planters built to keep the dispossessed natives at bay" ("Introduction" xxxviii), his use of the word to describe both Breca's and Hygelac's hall lends itself to an interpretation of the word as a more generalised "fortified enclosure or outwork of a castle" (*OED*). Such a description is highly suited to Heorot, but Heaney's earlier comparison of the Scandinavian setting of *Beowulf* to "the pale" (the term used to describe Dublin) offers a more complex interpretative perspective on "bawn". The term, as his introduction clearly suggests, reminds Heaney of certain historical events but within the text of *Beowulf* also functions simply as a contextually appropriate word to describe the besieged situation of Hrothgar's people.

Heaney's use of "bawn" is not limited to *Beowulf* and is present in much of his earlier poetry and it is here that the word is more intensely infused with political meaning. Discussing his childhood home, Mossbawn, in the poem "Belderg" (*N* 13), Heaney describes:

how its foundation

Was mutable as sound  
 And how I could derive  
 A forked root from that ground  
 And make *bawn* an English fort,  
 A planter's walled-in mound (30–35, my italics)

In these few lines the meaning of the word “bawn” is converted from a peaceful place of familial security into one that intimates an English stronghold in Ireland. The poem “Traditions” (WO 31) also subtly evokes the echo of his childhood home as he describes the Irish “lowlanders” refusing to surrender possession of their landscape “shuttling obstinately / between bawn and mossland” (23–24). The word assumes an even more politically possessive stance in “A New Song” (WO 33) where Heaney insists that the Irish:

river tongues must rise  
 From licking deep in native haunts  
 To flood, with voweling embrace,  
 Demesnes staked out in consonants. (13–16)

In this poem the native Gaelic language of Ireland is characterised by its abundance of vowels while the quality of modern English stems from its consonantal Anglo-Saxon roots. The lines, therefore, urge the linguistic recovery of the language lost during English colonialism and the return of a land demarcated by the English planters to its natural state. When Heaney later imagines “each planted bawn – / Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass” (18–19), the natural reclamation of the English “bawns” by Irish grasslands, the reclamation of language and land alike has already occurred in the poet’s mind. In the context of these poems it becomes apparent that although the word “bawn” must retain some of its earlier politically infused meaning within *Beowulf*, it still operates fluidly within the translation of the poem. The handful of Hibernicisms used in Heaney’s *Beowulf* should thus not be viewed as the stumbling blocks that Chickering and, to a lesser extent, Gruber make them out to be but may be viewed as canny choices for the purpose of translation.

## VI The “guttural” resilience of Heaney’s *Beowulf*

Heaney’s *Beowulf* is only one of numerous translations of what must be considered the most valuable Anglo-Saxon manuscript in the British Library. The manuscript was previously in the collection of the bibliophile, Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, who housed it in his library at the ominously named Ashburnam House in Westminster where it was catalogued as “MS Cotton Vitellius A xv” (Mitchell and Robinson, “Beowulf Manuscript” 82). Cotton’s library was somewhat eccentrically catalogued into several book cases surmounted by the busts of Roman emperors and so the *Beowulf* manuscript’s label denoted “the fifteenth book on the first shelf of the Vitellius case” (Kiernan 195). A fire ravaged the library in 1731, however, reducing the manuscript to a stack of charred vellum leaves with crumbling edges. Robinson notes that the *Beowulf* manuscript survives today in a state of “arrested decay” only thanks to careful restoration in 1845 by officials of the British Library where it is still held (F. Robinson, “Beowulf” 62).<sup>10</sup>

While *Beowulf* managed to survive its trial by fire it may still have been lost to the literary world if not for the fortunate mistake of Humfrey Wanley, who made the first noted reference to the epic poem in 1705. Wanley erroneously described it as a story about “Beowulf *the Dane* who fought with Swedish princes”, which brought the existence of the manuscript to the attention of an Icelandic archivist working in Denmark, Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin, who was searching the British Isles for references to Danish heroes (Kiernan 196 *my italics*). After finding the *Beowulf* manuscript, Thorkelin hired a professional scribe to make a transcription of the poem in 1787, labelled Thorkelin A, after which he made a second copy of the epic himself, labelled Thorkelin B (Kiernan

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<sup>10</sup> The restoration work at the British Library stopped the damage in its tracks but unfortunately also resulted in the loss of several hundred letters. The restorers traced the outline of each leaf onto heavy paper before cutting out the shape with a “retaining space of 1-2mm” (Kiernan 206) around the edges. The vellum leaf was then glued by its edges onto the reverse of the retaining paper and secured in place by transparent strips along the front edges where the paper met the vellum leaf. The restoration resulted in a beautifully bound copy in calf-hide, supposedly mimicking the original covers, but also permanently lost to view the letters hidden by the retaining edges of the newly bound paper sheets (Kiernan 206). In 1882 Julius Zupitza attempted to make a record of all the letters covered during the British Library restoration by holding each vellum leaf in its paper border up to the light. Kevin Kiernan did much the same thing a hundred years later with the aid of fiber-optic light, managing to make out a further 300 covered letters and found that Zupitza’s original record was remarkably accurate although his work was accomplished before the days of the light bulb (Kiernan 206).

196). Even though the copies were made after the Cotton fire of 1731 they preserve almost 2000 letters which have since been lost to decay. Thorkelin used these transcriptions to create a Latin rendering entitled “*De Danorum rebus gestis*” (F. Robinson, “Beowulf” 50), which loosely translates as “*The Exploits of the Danes*”, the very first translation of the poem in 1815 (Kiernan 196).<sup>11</sup>

Donoghue estimates that since Thorkelin’s “*editio princeps*” (F. Robinson, “Beowulf” 50) more than sixty translations of *Beowulf* have appeared and since Heaney’s translation in 1999 almost a dozen more have been published (Donoghue, Preface ix).<sup>12</sup> Heaney’s *Beowulf*, however, is penned by a writer whom Joseph McGowan calls “the foremost poet writing in English” and as such his act of translation deserves special attention (McGowan 40). Furthermore, as Susan Bassnett argues, “a culture scrutinizes translation with special attention wherever the text being translated is perceived as central to that culture” (Bassnett, “The Meek” 15) and *Beowulf* remains the oldest, and therefore the most academically valuable, Anglo-Saxon text in existence. It must also not be forgotten that Heaney’s *Beowulf* was expressly commissioned for inclusion in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, a text which has served as the first introduction to the Anglo-Saxon poem for a vast number of English-speaking readers. Heaney’s rendering must be viewed as one of the most significant translations of the text into the English language in recent times and his intentions in translating *Beowulf* must be carefully considered.

Although there is obviously a political undercurrent present in Heaney’s *Beowulf*, particularly evident in his inclusion of Hibernicisms, discussed above, this is not the sole reason for his translation of the poem. Bassnett emphasises the fact that translation is “a discipline firmly rooted in practical application” (Bassnett, *Translation Studies* 16), a

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<sup>11</sup> Robinson has noted that “Old English poems [are] almost always untitled in the surviving manuscripts” (F. Robinson, *Beowulf* 49) and the title given to a translation serves to direct the interpretation of its readers, who might, for example, overlook the immense significance of Beowulf himself when perusing Thorkelin’s historical record of the Danes. John Pinkerton labelled the narrative “A romance on the wars between Denmark and Sweden” (F. Robinson, *Beowulf*, 50), which focuses the reader’s attention rather more on the historical as opposed to the poetical elements of the poem. Kemble’s 1833 edition of the poem, the first English translation published, was the first to be entitled “*Beowulf*”, a simple title that deservedly draws the reader’s attention to the protagonist and his deeds, setting the trend for the many translations to follow.

<sup>12</sup> Syd Allan, a fanatical collector of Beowulfiana, claims to have 93 English translations of the poem in his hoard at present (Allan n.pag).

reminder that the primary aim of translation is to allow readers access to texts which they would otherwise not have been able to understand due to linguistic, cultural, and temporal differences. Heaney intended his translation of the epic to introduce *Beowulf* to a wider body of readers and he makes this explicit in his introduction where he notes that:

An English speaker new to *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid* will probably at least have heard of Troy and Helen, or of Penelope and the Cyclops, or of Dido and the Golden Bough. These epics may be in Greek and Latin, yet the classical heritage has entered the cultural memory enshrined in English so thoroughly that their words are more familiar than that of the first native epic, even though it was composed centuries after them. Achilles rings a bell, but not Scyld Scefing. Ithaca leads the mind in a certain direction, but not Heorot. The Sibyl of Cumae will stir certain associations, but not bad Queen Modthryth. (“Introduction” xxv)<sup>13</sup>

Here Heaney voices his desire that in translating *Beowulf* he will make “the first native epic” as familiar to the English-speaking world as the classical Greek and Latin epics. He also reveals that his translation is not aimed simply at an academic readership but is intended for the pleasure of all English-speaking readers. Apart from the copious amount of academic attention it received since it was first published, Heaney’s *Beowulf* was awarded the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize in 1999, evidence of its broad appeal. The significance of Heaney’s accomplishment is especially apparent in light of the fact that *Beowulf* secured this coveted prize ahead of J. K. Rowling’s eagerly anticipated *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Lyall n.pag.). Thus, to use Bassnett’s terms, Heaney’s translation is an achievement that “injects new life blood into a text” that was once largely the intellectual territory of academics alone (Bassnett, “The Meek” 12).

Heaney’s *Beowulf* has proved to be an easily readable and accessible translation of the epic and even Chickering begrudgingly admits that the text “stands up as one of the better poetic paraphrases of the original” (Chickering, “Heaneywulf” 177). Bassnett and Lefevere argue, however, that “there is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed” (Lefevere and Bassnett 11). It must be evident then that Heaney had more than faithful translation and a wider readership in mind when he translated the oldest English epic.

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<sup>13</sup> Evidence of Heaney’s point about the presence of Greek and Latin classical heritage in Anglo-American culture is made clearly apparent when the names “Scyld Scefing”, “Heorot” and “Modrthryth” are highlighted as incorrectly spelled, or unrecognised, by Microsoft Word, while “The Iliad”, “The Odyssey”, “Achilles”, and even “The Sibyl of Cumae”, are accepted.

The linguistic, political, and social context from which Heaney writes is clearly evident and his concern with the relationship between language and power is one that recurs. As he notes in his “Translator’s Introduction” his relationship with the English language, and thus the Anglo-Saxon of *Beowulf*, is a complex one: “to persuade myself that I was born into its language and that its language was born into me took a while” and he notes that for someone who grew up in Northern Ireland “it could hardly have been otherwise”:

Sprung from an Irish nationalist background and educated at a Northern Irish Catholic school, I had learned the Irish language and lived within a cultural and ideological frame that regarded it as the language that I should by rights have been speaking but I had been robbed of. (“Introduction” xxxiv)

This concern is one that recurs in Heaney’s poetry. In “Traditions” (*WO* 31), for example, Heaney is aggrieved that:

Our guttural muse  
was bulled long ago  
by the alliterative tradition (1–3)

The “alliterative tradition” refers, of course, to Anglo-Saxon poetry, which becomes a metonym for the English language that replaced Gaelic as the spoken tongue in Ireland. While the verb “bulled” is intended to remind the reader of “John Bull”, the personification of England, it is also reminiscent of Kelly’s bull from Heaney’s earlier poem “The Outlaw” (*DD* 16) who “slammed life home, impassive as a tank” (18), suggesting the violent and impersonal nature of the English colonisation of Ireland. Douglas Robinson argues that not only must “the imperial conquerors find some effective way of communicating with their new subjects; they must develop new ways of subjecting them, converting them into docile or ‘cooperative’ subjects” (D. Robinson 10). The most effective way to subject a people is to dissociate them from their own language and culture by forcing them to speak the colonial language, which, in the case of Northern Ireland, is English. In “Traditions” Heaney intimates with distaste that the colonisation of the Irish language was too readily accepted when England, “that ‘most / sovereign mistress’” (9–10), linguistically “bed[ded the Irish] down into / the British isles” (11–12).

McCarthy notes that within the Irish nationalist movement there is an expression that reads “*tir gan teanga, tir gan anam*: ‘a country without a language is a country without a soul’” (McCarthy 149), a sentiment probably familiar to Heaney and one with which he would, no doubt, strongly identify. The fact remains that the local Irish tongue, Gaelic, was completely suppressed during the period of British colonialism. Although with tongue in cheek, Heaney notes in his speech “The Guttural Muse” that the introduction of English to Ireland meant “goodbye the Irish language”<sup>14</sup>, and as such it must be apparent that in his translation of *Beowulf* Heaney was engaging with the painful loss of his own linguistic heritage.

As a young poet, Heaney notes that the awareness of “language-loss and cultural dispossession” affected him like “a rapier point of consciousness” and prompted him into what he calls “binary thinking”:

I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and, and this was an attitude that for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with the whole vexed question – the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland. (“Introduction” xxxiv)

Heaney recalls a lecture he attended as an undergraduate on the history of the English language as an experience which hinted at “the possibility of release” from this binary thinking (“Introduction” xxxiv). The lecturer revealed that the English word “whiskey” was derived from the “Irish and Scots Gaelic word *uisce*, meaning water” (“Introduction” xxxiv). The River Usk in Britain thus became the River Uisce for the young Heaney and this point of contact between the languages thus transformed the Uisce into what he calls “a kind of linguistic river of rivers issuing from a pristine Celto-British Land of Cockaigne, a riverrun of Finnegan’s Wakespeak” (“Introduction” xxxiv). McCarthy elucidates Heaney’s description of his experience when he notes that in writing *Finnegan’s Wake* Joyce was attempting to create a language that re-enacts the perfect language of Eden while “The Land of Cockaigne” is the earliest example of a truly Hiberno-English poem (McCarthy 150). As Heaney describes it: “the place on the

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<sup>14</sup> This quotation is not included in the official published transcription of his speech but was taken from the video footage taken of Heaney’s delivery of his address, “The Guttural Muse”, on 27 August 2002 at Rhodes University.

language map where Usk and the *uisce* and the whiskey coincided” allowed a momentary collapse of the “Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Anglo-Saxon antithesis” allowing a place “where the spirit might find a loophole” to a region where language was not simply “a badge of ethnicity” (“Introduction” xxxiv-xxv).

With time Heaney recognised a more creative way of dealing with “the whole vexed question”, which proved to be a more nuanced “both/and” conception of his relationship with the English language. In his public lecture “The Guttural Muse”, Heaney expands on what he means by his “both/and” conception of the language as he describes himself as a poet living in two linguistic worlds: the English-speaking world of the *lingua franca* and the guttural world of his “first speech”, the rural Derry accent with which he grew up (“Guttural Muse” 18). Heaney conveys most succinctly the existence of these two worlds in his recollection of a night spent in an Irish countryside hotel. The calm of the evening was broken when a group of youngsters left the discotheque in the basement of the hotel. Heaney witnesses, from his window, the youths wearing their Nikes and Levis and listening to commercial pop music, and recalls being “overcome by feelings of pathos and regret, and began to reflect on the sad erosion of the local life” (“Guttural Muse” 25). In what he calls his “very conventional, very sentimental stock response to the sound of rock music” Heaney concluded immediately that the local youths had evidently succumbed to the homogenising forces of global culture (“Guttural Muse” 25). But this first impression is overturned when he hears their “country shouts” and their “raucous and unruly vowels and consonants” (“Guttural Muse” 25). “What I was hearing”, Heaney realises, “was the sound of a culture enjoying itself, celebrating itself and making a song and dance about itself” (“Guttural Muse” 25). Heaney’s observation makes it apparent that, although the teenagers were a part of commercial world culture, their local accents and speech ensured their individual Irish identity. As Heaney himself puts it; “what I was hearing was a guarantee of the resilience of . . . the guttural life, of all that was resurgent and untameable at a local level” (“Guttural Muse” 25). The youths, although operating within the *lingua franca* that English has become, still retained, like Heaney himself, the “guttural” sounds of their “first speech” (“Guttural Muse” 18). This countryside experience became the inspiration for Heaney’s poem “The Guttural Muse” (*FW* 28), in which he compares the “thick and comforting” (6) voices of “a young crowd leav[ing] the

discotheque” (5) to the “oily bubbles” (7) of the tench fish, “Once called the ‘doctor fish’ because his slime / Was said to heal the wounds of fish that touched it” (9-10). As Heaney’s poem makes clear, there is something profoundly healing for the poet in the sound of these young voices “puddl[ing] into laughs” (13) and in hearing it he feels like “some old pike” (14) swimming “in touch with soft-mouthed life” (15). Heaney realised in this encounter that the specificity of his own local dialect meant that he would always be able to maintain his Irish identity despite the fact that he was creating poetry in the English language.

As we can see from “Bone Dreams” (N 27), much of Heaney’s poetry is concerned with coming to terms with what he calls the “rift between the Irish language past and the English language present” (*Government* 30). Translating *Beowulf* allows him to symbolically bridge this rift, and one of the key processes in this bridging is his identification of traces of the Anglo-Saxon language, such as *tholian*, which have been preserved in his own dialect rather than in English. This bridge is further strengthened by Heaney’s recognition of the particular Irishness of his own English, represented by his inclusion of Hibernicisms, which clearly set Irish English apart. What Neil Corcoran calls a “cultural weapon” (Corcoran 83), if it may be defined as such, is Heaney’s assertion of his possession of English, an Irish English that is apparent in his translation of *Beowulf* and symbolises his personal mastery of what for Heaney was once simply the language of the colonisers. As his introduction demonstrates, the Heaney who translated *Beowulf* is a far cry from the timid student who scribbled down poems in his undergraduate years, calling himself “*Incertus*, uncertain, a shy soul fretting and all that” (*Preoccupations* 45). By the time Heaney translates *Beowulf* he is a poet in full command of his talents. Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* reveals a poet who is fully aware that English is as much his “voice-right” as the native Gaelic language that was suppressed during the period of English colonisation (“Introduction” xxxiii). Heaney’s *Beowulf* thus becomes an articulation of the dialectal language spoken in Ireland that allows the poet to keep “[his] feet on the Irish ground, as it were, and [his] head in the international air” (“Guttural Muse” 21).

Heaney reveals in an interview with the *Paris Review* that he has “a definite desire to write a kind of poem that cannot immediately be ensnared in what they call the ‘cultural

debate” and *Beowulf* at first glance cannot be (Cole n.pag.). The Hibernicisms included in the text are poetically appropriate for the semantic role which they fill and need not necessarily be read from a political perspective. Heaney’s true skill lies in his ability to create lines that may be read as both politically motivated and as an Irish writer’s attempt to translate an epic poem in his own poetic style.

I would like to consider Heaney’s translation in terms of the “chalk giant” (60) and “the mole” (84) from “Bone Dreams” (*N* 27), as metaphors for the poet’s complex relationship with the English language, which might be usefully deployed as a means to symbolise his two-fold purpose in translating *Beowulf*. The “chalk giant” is representative of Heaney as one of the most respected contemporary writers in the English language who, as an Irish poet, includes a number of Hibernicisms in his translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic and openly discusses his reasons for incorporating these words in his introduction to the translation. The Hibernicisms are marked out as having political intent in the introduction, as discussed above, and clearly operate as moments of political polemic within the larger structure of the narrative of the translation. The Hibernicisms have, however, also been shown to be contextually suited to the linguistic role they play and as such must be simultaneously viewed as part of a readable translation of *Beowulf*. Through these inclusions Heaney draws the reader’s attention to the relationship that exists between the English and the Irish, especially in terms of the linguistic colonisation of the Irish by the English, without turning the entire translation into a political diatribe. Heaney is thus able to alter the English epic and articulate his own distinctly Irish English in much the same way that the “chalk giant” inscribes the surface of the English landscape. The subtlety of Heaney’s Hibernicisation of the text may, however, be simultaneously identified with the covert behaviour of the “mole” whose habit of digging tunnels under the surface of the English landscape goes largely unnoticed. By the simple act of including these Hibernicisms Heaney is quietly able to take possession of the very language that once suppressed his native tongue.

Donoghue claims succinctly that Heaney’s *Beowulf* “self-consciously reverses the movement of colonisation by using an Irish dialect to appropriate a foundational text of English literary history” (Donoghue, Preface xi). Heaney is under no delusion that the simple Hibernicisation of an Anglo-Saxon epic will return Gaelic to prominence as a

spoken language in Ireland. What Heaney has achieved is far more subtle than a reversal of colonialism and Bassnett suggests what this might be when she notes that “if a literature belongs to a nation, then in certain circumstances translation can be perceived as theft, as a violation of the right of a language to keep its own literature to itself” (Bassnett, “The Meek” 13). Bassnett’s argument here relates to the translation into English of the literature of colonised cultures, but this function of translation ties in beautifully with Heaney’s Hibernicisation of *Beowulf*. Although the Hibernicisation is only represented by about a dozen dialectal Ulster words, the fact remains that Heaney is an Irish poet and the immense popularity of his translation has, in a sense, claimed *Beowulf*, the oldest and most valuable Anglo-Saxon epic poem, for the Irish language. In his introduction, Heaney quotes Joseph Brodsky’s statement that “poet’s biographies are present in the sounds they make” (“Introduction” xxxiii). Heaney’s *Beowulf*, I would argue, has caused the controversy it has with critics such as Chickering because the translation represents the resilience of his culture – “the sound of a culture enjoying itself, celebrating itself”. As Heaney notes “in attending as much to the grain of my own vernacular as to the content of the Anglo-Saxon lines” (“Introduction” xxxvii) he created a poem that sounds as if it were spoken by one of his own relatives, recreating the speech he “heard as a youngster in the Scullion kitchen” (“Introduction” xxxvii). In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney argues that poetry is “a symbolic resolution of conflicts insoluble in experience” (Heaney, in van Wyk Smith 11). I would thus argue that in his translation of *Beowulf* Heaney has been able to symbolically repossess from the English what was once taken from him: a linguistic heritage.

Robinson enthuses that “nowhere has twentieth-century *Beowulf* scholarship shown itself more hot for certainties than in the quest for an established text of the poem” and for the moment Heaney’s translation fills this position more than comfortably (F. Robinson, “Beowulf” 46). His *Beowulf* has taken over the mantle previously worn by Anglo-Saxon scholars such as C. L. Wrenn, whose edition Heaney consulted during his translation of the text (Lerer 88), John R. Clark Hall, whose prose version is graced by Prefatory Remarks by J. R. R. Tolkien, and Friedrich Klaeber, whose work, according to Robinson, has been “widely received as virtually canonical” since the middle of the twentieth century (F. Robinson, “Beowulf” 45). Donoghue insists simply that no other

translation “has caught the reading public’s attention as much as Heaney’s” (Donoghue, Preface ix). Despite the remarkable success of his translation, however, Heaney is aware that his *Beowulf* will not be the endpoint of the epic’s translation.

In “The Settle Bed” (*ST* 28), which Donoghue argues may be read “as a metaphor for the poem *Beowulf*” (Donoghue, “Philologer Poet” 240), Heaney writes “whatever is given / Can always be reimagined” (21–22). In these lines Heaney reveals his recognition that the perpetually changing face of the English language will prove his re-imagining of *Beowulf* antiquated and possibly unintelligible in the next millennium, or possibly even the next century. Bassnett argues further that translations “turn out differently, not because they are good or bad, but because they have been produced to satisfy different demands” (Lefevere and Bassnett 5). Heaney’s translation is written for a particular time and a particular place. There is no guarantee that it will endlessly maintain its popularity but it will, no doubt, be read and referred to by generations of scholars and future translators. The epigraph which introduces Heaney’s translation, taken from “The Settle Bed” (*ST* 28), seems to be the most fitting conclusion to this chapter:

And now this is “an inheritance” –  
Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked  
In the long ago, yet willable forward  
  
Again and again and again (13–16)

The lines capture Heaney’s affinity for the text, his identification with the *Beowulf* poet and his “inheritance” of the Anglo-Saxon language that he has claimed as his “voice-right” through his translation. The epigraph demonstrates the future-focused nature of translation – a process of retrieving and reviving an ancient epic and calling it forward into the present context “again and again”. It suggests then, not only Heaney’s awareness that translations of *Beowulf* will be perpetually recreated in the years to come, but also the vibrant relationship between poetry and the lived world.

## Afterword

As a development of his poetic oeuvre, Heaney's translations are a means for the poet to consolidate the preoccupations that have become prominent in his writing. Translation is a continuation of Heaney's attempt to create through poetry what he calls "images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (*Preoccupations* 56) and in this study it is apparent that these "images and symbols" have become more subtle, and yet, as I have argued, more effective with each successive act of translation. Heaney's first attempt at translation is linguistically close to home in his interaction with the Gaelic narrative poem *Buile Suibhne*. Heaney's developing relationship with the particularities of the Middle-Irish prosimetrum is a conscious engagement with the Gaelic language that he felt he had been "robbed of" ("Introduction" xxxiv) as an Irishman born into the social instability of Northern Ireland under British rule. The narrative poem's real importance, however, stems from what Heaney is able to learn through Sweeney, both as a character and as a story. Sweeney's exile from Dal-Arie is particularly illuminating for Heaney whose own flight from his Northern home becomes a way for the poet to transcend political partisan views. Sweeney affords Heaney not only a new perspective on his identity as a Northern Irish poet but introduces him to the subtle political role of translation, which is so evident in the published version of the text. *Sweeney Astray* also allows Heaney to recall the intimate connection to the landscape of Ireland, which has proved so influential in his poetry, and in so doing to urge his Northern Irish readership to reconsider their identities as Irishmen rather than as Catholics or Protestants.

*The Cure at Troy* takes this engagement with Irish identity even further in providing a platform from which Heaney, for once, is able to speak on behalf of all the inhabitants of Northern Ireland. In comparison to the relative textual accuracy of *Sweeney Astray*, *The Cure at Troy* finds Heaney asserting his role as author within the frame-work of translation, which is most evident in the extra lines he assigns to the Chorus. The additions that Heaney makes to the text specifically contextualise the Sophoclean play for a Northern Irish audience, which allows the poet to instil in his fellow countrymen a belief in not only the possibility but, more significantly, the probability of social change. In his translation of the play Heaney is able to put aside his characteristic caution as a

poet and in so doing is able to articulate, in his own hopes, the hopes of an entire community.

*Beowulf*, which may be regarded as the peak of his achievement as a translator, allows Heaney the expression of the “guttural note” (“Guttural Muse” 19) that has inspired his poetry from the outset. The note is prevalent throughout the translation and yet the translation is at its most intense in the moments when Hibernicisms are incorporated into the text, making Heaney’s *Beowulf* the most accurate of his translations while remaining politically efficacious. In addition to being an exhibition of the distinctive English spoken by the Irish in Ulster, and a means by which Heaney is able to symbolically reverse the process of linguistic colonisation in Northern Ireland, the “guttural note” that characterises *Beowulf* is, on a more personal level, evidence of Heaney’s ultimate confidence in his own poetic voice. As Richard Eder from the *New York Times* has argued, Heaney’s “translation is not mainly the work of preserving the hearth – a necessary task performed by scholarship – but of letting a fire burn in it” (Eder: 2000). It is in the incendiary new life with which Heaney infuses his translations that their deservedly earned praise resides.

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