Seamus Heaney's Ireland

Didac Pujol

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Dìdac Pujol [1]
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."
(Wallace Stevens,
"The Man with the Blue Guitar," I)

This article aims at giving an account of how Ireland is portrayed in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Although reference will be made to several volumes of Heaney's earlier poetry, the main frame of analysis will be one of his latest works: *The Haw Lantern*.[2] The first part of this article will analyse Heaney's rootedness, especially his sense of social division and his awareness of linguistic oppression. The second part will turn to explore how Heaney's Northern Irish background is re-mapped or transfigured into a poetic place halfway between reality and fantasy, between present and past, a place both external and mental. This effect is often achieved by attributing to Ireland different allegorical levels each of which

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[1]. Didac Pujol, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística, Edifici B, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona (Spain).

[2]. Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987). All further references are to this edition. References to any Heaney poem will be to titles rather than to pages and line numbers. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from *The Haw Lantern*.

has a resonance that evokes other realities, the result being a multi-layered Ireland that reaches out beyond the actual mimetic spatio-temporal boundaries described in the first part of the article.

The Haw Lantern is a book deeply permeated by social issues and, more concretely, by Heaney's Northern Irish (Catholic) background. Let us take the very first poem in the book, "Alphabets." In it, "the letter some call *ah*, some call *ay*" shows the different pronunciation of the first letter of the alphabet when it is spelled by a Northern Irish ("ah") or an English speaker ("ay"). *The Haw Lantern* thus records, already from the first part of the first poem in the book, a sense of difference and division and becomes, to put it in Bakhtinian terms, "a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants of class, social group, and speech community."[3] Another poem in the book, "Terminus," illustrates this point in so far as it shows a Heaney who is "in between" two communities (English and Northern Irish) already as a child:

> Two buckets were easier carried than one.
> I grew up in between.
> ...
> Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
> When I stood on the central stepping stone
>
> I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
> Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

The poem expresses Heaney's idea that "if this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division":[4]

> 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 that it is British. Lately I realised that these complex pieties and dilemmas were implicit in the very terrain where I was born. ... Mossbawn lies between the villages of Castledawson and Toome. I was symbolically placed between the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experience, between "the demesne" and "the bog."[5]

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[3]. M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 6th. ed. 1993), p. 231.
[4]. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 20.
[5]. Ibid., p. 35.

Heaney is very much aware of boundaries, and it is no surprise that in ancient Roman mythology "Terminus," the title of the poem, referred to the god of boundaries and landmarks. The words "drain," "limit," "between," "parishes," "met" and "midstream," all of them appearing in the poem, are signs of autobiographical elements from Heaney's childhood that emphasise the aforementioned division:

> From the beginning I was very conscious of boundaries. There was a drain or stream, the Sluggan drain, an old division that ran very close to our house. It divided the townland of Tamniarn from the townland of Anahorish and those two townlands belonged in two different parishes, Bellaghy and Newbridge ... I was always backwards and forwards. I went to school in Anahorish school, so I learnt the Armagh catechism; but I belonged, by birth and enrolment, to Bellaghy parish. So I didn't go with the rest of the school to make my first communion in Newbridge. ... When we moved to the other end of the parish when I was fourteen, I still played football for Castledawson, though I was living in the Bellaghy team's district. I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start.[6]

This sense of division and displacement, experienced by Heaney also as an adult,[7] is counterbalanced at the end of "Terminus": "When I stood on the central stepping stone / I was the last earl on horseback in midstream / Still parleying, in earshot of his peers." These lines are extremely revealing, both as a reflection of a historical process and as Heaney's personal attitude towards the split between Catholics and Protestants. On the one hand, Heaney the child feels he is the last of his generation ("the last earl") before the violent and definitive division (namely, the Troubles)[8] between Catholics and Protestants. On the other hand Heaney, despite the division he experiences as a child, becomes an establisher or "hoarder of common ground"[9] in a divided land: he stands "on the central stepping stone," suffering "the limit of each claim."

In *The Haw Lantern*, the idea of social division and displacement affects Heaney not only as a member of a social group; it also affects Heaney's awareness of linguistic oppression. He feels an "exile" because the Irish language,

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6 . Seamus Heaney interviewed by Neil Corcoran, in Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 13.

7 . "I am neither internee nor informer; / An inner émigré" ("Exposure," in *North* [London: Faber, 1975]); note also the title of one of the poems in *The Haw Lantern*: "From the Canton of Expectation" (a canton is a territorial division).

8 . This term has often been used to refer to the violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northen Ireland after "Bloody Sunday" (30th January 1972).

9 . Seamus Heaney, "Gifts of Rain," in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972).

Gaelic, was silenced long ago by the English language.[10] Thus, "From the Land of the Unspoken" can be interpreted in colonial terms:

> I have heard of a bar of platinum
> kept by a logical and talkative nation
> as their standard of measurement,
> the throne room and the burial chamber ...
> I could feel at home inside that metal core slumbering at the very hub of systems. ...
> When or why our exile began
> among the speech-ridden, we cannot tell ...
> Our unspoken assumptions have the force
> of revelation. How else could we know
> that whoever is the first of us to seek
> assent and votes in a rich democracy
> will be the last of us and have killed our language?

The "bar of platinum" of the first line refers to "the one-kilogram cylinder of platinum-iridium alloy established by *the imperial Napoleon* and kept by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures near Paris (a duplicate is kept in America by the National Bureau of Standards)"[11] (my emphasis). "The imperial Napoleon": the phrase is worth noting, for it may be associated with "the standard of measurement," that is, with the military imposition upon conquered territories of literal units of measurement (miles, kilometres, etc.), which enabled imperial conquerors to shift soldiers around following a "standard of measurement" or coordinate, and which later on were useful for bureaucratic purposes such as drawing maps of the conquered territories. The "standard of measurement," however, may also be associated with the fact that in post-colonial writing the empire always imposes "a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalises all 'variants' as impurities."[12] In this light, the lines "I could feel at home inside that metal core / slumbering at the very hub of systems" could be interpreted as an articulation of the notion of "'Anglophonocentrism',"[13] of "'Standard' English as a 'core',"[14] as the language of the imperial, "talkative"

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10 . Already in "Traditions" (*Wintering Out*) Heaney wrote: "Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago / by the alliterative tradition, / her uvula grows // vestigial, forgotten / like a coccyx ..."

11 . Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 193.

12 . Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 7.

13 . Howard Felperin, *The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 99.

14 . Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, ibid., p. 47.

centre that silenced long ago the Irish language. This is what the tribe's "unspoken assumptions" reveal (they "have the force of revelation"). If Heaney feels "at home" in this imperial "hub" it is because, paradoxically, his native tongue is not Gaelic but English (it is in this sense that he and his clan are "speech-ridden") and, furthermore, because he is "valued by many as *the* central poet in the English-speaking world."[15] The unwillingness to speak ("Our unspoken assumptions have the force / of revelation") is due to the resistance to the incorporation into the imperial centre of the English language. For, in "From the Land of the Unspoken" the English tongue is described as a "throne room," an image with connotations of monarchy. This monarchy is absolutist in so far as its linguistic oppression[16] and tyranny (ironically called "a rich democracy") are "killing" the language of the tribe: English is "the burial chamber," and — of course — "that means one more of us is dying somewhere." Thus the English language is turned into a weapon against itself: using English, Heaney speaks in favour of the Irish language and against the language he uses, therefore undermining English from within, as Joyce did in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or in *Finnegans Wake*.

As we have just seen, "From the Land of the Unspoken" acts as a political comment on the present situation of the Irish language. The poem, however, is not straightforward. It has a certain elusive quality, it suggests rather than affirms. Let us take, for instance, the lines:

> We are a dispersed people whose history
> is a sensation of opaque fidelity.
> When or why our exile began
> among the speech-ridden, we cannot tell ...

The first two lines may be a reference to the artificial division (hence the adjective "dispersed") between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland:

> Although they are an occupied nation
> and their only border is an inland one
> they yield to nobody in their belief

15 . Hart, ibid., p. 193.

16 . The Irish are "Besieged within the siege" in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" (*North*).

> that the country is an island.
> ("Parable Island").

These lines, however, may also insinuate an allusion to the Jewish diaspora and the fact that the Jews have maintained "fidelity" to their religion and have kept their sense of a people, a meaning reinforced by the word "exile" in the third line, with its echoes of the exile of many Jews under the Hitlerian government, or even perhaps of the exile of the Jews in Babylon (from 597 and 586 B. C. till around 538). The fourth line develops the idea of totalitarian regimes by introducing the word "speech-ridden," which suggests either the deprival of a common language after Babel (note the Babylon / Babel connection), or the deprivation of the freedom of speech suffered by many people, a fact Heaney is very much aware of, as (for example) when he comments on the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who lived in exile for three years and whose books were silenced under the Stalinian dictatorship.[17] From Northern Ireland to the Jews, Hitler and Stalin: this is the poem's suggestive elusiveness, its power of connotation, but also its distancing effects, its ungraspable, time-shifting as well as non-univocal quality, its dissemination of meaning, the effects of undecidability that it has on the reader. This applies especially to Heaney's allegorical poems, where there is a blurring, displacing element which prevents the reader from identifying in its totality the contents of the poem with the social (Northern Irish) reality that the poem partially portrays. For, as Paul Muldoon has sharply pointed out:

> Clearly any landscape or locale is going to be remapped by a writer — Hardy's Wessex, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, Joyce's Dublin, Yeats' Country — I'm not setting myself against any of them, but these are places which are recognizable in their fixtures yet are changed by the creative process.[18]

"Re-mapping" a place, translating it into something "recognizable yet changed": this may be applied not only to "From the Land of the Unspoken," but also to the other allegorical poems in *The Haw Lantern*. "From the Republic of Conscience," for instance, describes a stay in a republic — the Republic of Ireland. This interpretation of the republic as a place that can be located on the map is supported by the reality effect created by the poem: the poet lands in the republic, hears "a curlew high above the runway," meets a clerk with a "homespun coat" at the immigration office, who shows him a photograph of the poet's grandfather, meets a

17. See Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp. 217-220.
18. Paul Muldoon interviewed by John Haffenden, in John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 130.

female custom officer who asks him to "declare," and is finally recognised as a "dual citizen," a reference to the fact that Heaney now lives in the Republic (Dublin) but has lived for many years in Northern Ireland. As an allegorical narrative, the poem certainly works at this "reality" level. But there are in it other elements that disrupt the reality effect and create a second, and even a third plane of referentiality, although none of them seems to be subordinated to the other: rather, and like the embassies in the last stanza, they are "everywhere" in the poem but operate "independently." If the first allegorical level is that of the contemporary reality of the Republic of Ireland, the second allegorical plane refers to Celtic Ireland. Thus, the poet is asked "to declare," but in the next two lines the modern effect is blurred and displaced by a Celtic reference to the fact that "Druid priests were ascribed magical powers for casting spells and defeating enemies":[19] "The woman in customs asked me to declare / the words of our traditional cures and charms / to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye." Thus the narrator is no longer Heaney the contemporary poet but a sort of Druid with magical powers. Once again, as in *North* or "A Postcard from Iceland," Heaney acts as a "hoarder of common ground" ("Gifts of Rain," *Wintering Out*), using what Eliot called the "mythical method," manipulating "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."[20]

This second allegorical level is completed by other references to the Celts and Celtic Ireland. The republic is "noiseless," silent like the Celtic language in "From the Land of the Unspoken." There are, of course, no taxis in this remapped (Celtic) country. Salt is the inhabitants' "precious mineral," a reference to the importance of salt trade, which the Celts extracted from salt-mines and exported to the Greek world at about 600 B. C.[21] The lines "Their sacred symbol is a stylised boat. / The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen, / The hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye" beautifully record the Celtic pagan religion and transport us to the realm of early Irish nature poetry, in which, according to Heaney, we are "nearer to the innocent eye and tongue of Adam as he named the creatures."[22] And finally, the fact that "At their inauguration, public leaders /

19. Richard B. Finnegan, *Ireland: The Challenge of Conflict and Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1983), p. 7.
20. T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 177.
21. See Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), p. 36.
22. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 185.

must swear to uphold unwritten law" is again a reference to the Celts, for customary law was the only law in pre-Christian times.[23]

The third allegorical plane in "From the Republic of Conscience" is indicated in the very title of the poem: the republic may be an allegory of conscience, and the journey would thus be an introspective one, working (like Marlow's journey in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness)* both at the physical and psychological levels. The poem, we read in the acknowledgements at the beginning of the book, "was published as a pamphlet by Amnesty International, Irish Section, on Human Rights Day, 1985." Heaney has glossed the genesis and meaning of this allegorical journey into the Republic of Conscience:

> In the autumn of 1984 I was approached by the Sandymount Branch of Amnesty International to write a poem in celebration of the organization's work ... I agreed that the local representative send me several files, full of information about prisoners of conscience all over the world ... All of these people were imprisoned not because of violent crimes or anti-social actions but because of declared and sincerely held beliefs. ... I got the idea of making conscience a small, frugal republic where each citizen would be constantly exposed to a kind of immense maritime silence, and self-scrutiny would be unavoidable; and this idea was simultaneous with my recollection of an especially luminous moment in my own life ... This was when I landed for the first time ever on the Orkney Islands. ... The airfield was indeed truly a field, and the thing that was uniquely strange and beautiful about it was its silence. ... And then the utterly memorable thing happened: as I walked from the plane across to the small airport building, I heard a curlew crying in the air. It was as if I had landed in the Celtic Twilight rather than at a British Airways terminal. ... I was able to obey the tune of the poem itself, float the invented world out in its own terms and yet keep it in harmony with the data, the world of moral sympathy and suffering lives.[24]

This journey into the Republic of Conscience, into "a country of the mind"[25] as Heaney has put it discussing the later Yeats is, then, a personal journey: Heaney goes into his own conscience and meditates on the prisoners of conscience all over the world, he speaks "on their behalf" in his own tongue because they are "speech-ridden" ("From the Land of the Unspoken").

Let us take now the beginning of "From the Frontier of Writing," another poem that deals with scrutiny as well:

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23. Chadwick, ibid., pp. 113 & 119.
24. Seamus Heaney, "A Curlew in the Orkneys," in *Mica*, I.1 (University of Aberdeen, 1992), pp. 7-9.
25. Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing: The Inaguration of the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars, 1989), p. 21.

> The tightness and the nilness round that space
> when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
> its make and number and, as one bends his face
>
> toward your window, you catch sight of more
> on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
> down cradled guns that hold you under cover
>
> and everything is pure interrogation
> until a rifle motions and you move
> with guarded unconcerned acceleration ...

On a political level, "From the Frontier of Writing" is about crossing the border ("the frontier") that separates Northern Ireland from the Republic, but maybe most explicitly it is about the situation in present-day Northern Ireland:

> People keep asking me what it's like to be living in Belfast. ... And we have to live with the Army ... Everywhere soldiers with cocked guns are watching you — that's what they're here for — on the streets, at the corners of streets, from doorways, over the puddles on demolished sites. At night, jeeps and armoured cars groan past without lights; or road-blocks are thrown up, and once again it's delays measured in hours, searches and signings among the guns and torches. As you drive away, you bump over ramps that are specially designed to wreck you at speed ...[26]

"From the Frontier of Writing" mirrors this reality: Heaney is stopped at a road-block, his car is scrutinised and finally he drives away "between / the posted soldiers flowing and receding / like tree shadows into the polished windscreen" of the car.

"From the Frontier of Writing," however, may also be an allegory of the act of creating a poem. The images of giving birth are recurrent: the "nilness round that space" may thus refer to a woman's womb; the troops inspecting and bending their faces towards the car "window" would allegorically stand for the doctors examining the baby with "cradled guns" (that is, with surgical instruments) as it is about to get out of the mother's body / "window;"[27] and just before birth, "everything is pure interrogation," but finally the baby moves "with guarded unconcerned acceleration" and the mother is left "a little emptier, a little spent / as always by that quiver in the self." This idea of Heaney-as-mother creat-

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26. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 30.

27. "If I came to earth / it would be by way of / a small east window / I once squeezed through," writes Heaney in 'On the Road,' in *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984).

ing a poem may be linked with the fact that "From the Frontier of Writing" is, on a further allegorical level, a rather elaborated poem about criticism.[28] In this sense, the poem reflects Heaney's anxiety of being scrutinised by critics every time a new book of poems is published. Substitute "troops" by "[menacing] critics," "car" by "new book," the "rifle" motioning by the critics' approval of the new book, and the allegory becomes obvious.

"The Haw Lantern"[29] is another allegorical poem that works at several levels:

> The wintry haw is burning out of season,
> crab of the thorn, a small light for small people
> wanting no more from them but that they keep
> the wick of self-respect from dying out,
> not having to blind them with illumination.
>
> But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost
> it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes
> with his lantern, seeking one just man ...

The haw is described as a "small light for small people." Surely this "small people" must be the small people of Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland has only one and a half million people. But they may also be the small people of "From the Republic of Conscience." Heaney thus becomes, as we saw earlier, the "representative" who speaks for the oppressed, who speaks "on their behalf in my own tongue" ("From the Republic of Conscience"), who speaks both for the prisoners of conscience and for those who have to keep "the wick of self-respect from dying out": the line probably refers to the Northern Irish people, and it implies that they have been dispossessed of everything (a country of their own, their original language) except self-respect. But even this is "dying out," for they do not respect each other — as prove the violence and deaths which the country experiences at this very moment.

The image of the haw lantern may be further related to contemporary Northern Ireland: if "From the Frontier of Writing" deals with a police inspection, the haw lantern may stand for a police torch scrutinising Heaney. After all, "torch" and "lantern" are more or less synonyms (they irradiate red light): in "The

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28. This view was corroborated by Mr George Watson, Aberdeen University, who was told by Heaney that the poem was originally intended as a meta-poetic commentary.

29. A haw is the berry from a hawthorn, a gnarled shrub.

Ministry of Fear" (*North*), policemen swing "their crimson flashlamps, crowding round / The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing / The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye." In the same poem, Heaney recalls that "They once read my letters at a roadblock / And shone their torches on your hieroglyphics," and in "The Strand at Lough Beg" (*Field Work*) the police "red lamp" at a roadblock reappears. The police crimson flashlamps are thus related to the crimson of the haw: "I have spent a year on the mountain / enduring my [Sweeney's] transformation, / dabbing, dabbing like a bird / at the hollyberries' crimson."[30] The haw in "The Haw Lantern" has therefore an incredible power of suggestion: it may stand for the police flashlamps at roadblocks, for a "sten-gun" held (like Diogenes' lantern) "at eye-level," and for Sweeney's (Heaney's) "transformation" or poetic evolution.[31] The haw lantern "burning out of season" could point to the fact that the police flashlamps at the roadblocks should not be in Northern Ireland (they are there "out of season").

In the same way as the republic in "From the Republic of Conscience" referred both to present-day Ireland and to Celtic Ireland, the haw lantern may also be related to Celtic Ireland. According to Robert Graves, among the Celts the hawthorn is

> an unlucky tree and the name under which it appears in the Irish Brehon Laws, *sceith*, is apparently connected with the Indo-Germanic root *sceath* or *sceth*, meaning harm; from which derive the English "scathe" and the Greek *a-scethes*, scatheless. ... The destruction of an ancient hawthorn tree is in Ireland attended with the greatest peril. Two nineteenth-century instances are quoted in E. M. Hull's *Folklore of the British Isles*. The effect is the death of one's cattle and children and loss of all one's money.[32]

This Celtic belief seems to have lasted not only until the nineteenth century, as reported by Graves, but until nowadays: as Heaney has written, "The single thorn-tree bound us to a notion of the potent world of fairies, and when my father cut such a thorn, retribution was seen to follow inexorably when the horse bolted in harness, broke its leg and had to be destroyed."[33] The destruction of a hawthorn, then, brings about misfortune and more destruction. Let us remember that in "The Haw Lantern" a haw (and by metonymy, the hawthorn) is burning: it is, in other words, destroyed and — even worse — it is burnt "out of season." The

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30. Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 74.
31. In *The Haw Lantern* poetry is "A Daylight Art" (title of one of the poems in the book) rather than a *Door into the Dark* (title of Heaney's second book).
32. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 2nd. ed., 1961), pp. 174-175.
33. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 133.

consequences are terrible and can be seen in the bad luck of the "small people" in Northern Ireland: they have been deprived of their country and tongue, and their "self-respect" is "dying out" because of the contemporary violence. What is more, the Northern Irish inhabitants also die because of violence. The haw lantern is therefore an emblem of death as well. In fact, the adjective "wintry" applied to "haw" is significant in itself: it suggests death, or going towards death. "Wintry," however, may also hint at the present situation in Northern Ireland: "I'm back in winter / Quarters where bad news is no longer news" ("Whatever You Say Say Nothing," *North).* The most explicit identification between winter and Northern Ireland is to be found, however, in Heaney's own explanation of the title of his third volume of poetry, *Wintering Out:*

> ["Wintering out"] is a phrase associated with cattle, and with hired boys [shepherds, or even the British police] also. In some ways, it links up with a very resonant line of English verse that every schoolboy knows: 'Now is the winter of our discontent.' It is meant to gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the minute. It is meant to be, I suppose, comfortless enough, but with a notion of survival in it.[34]

The "notion of survival" clearly links up with the wintry haw "wanting no more from them [the Northern Irish] but that they keep / the wick of self-respect from dying out." Also worth noting here is the fact that hawthorns are incredibly tough shrubs that survive for decades, if not centuries. "The Haw Lantern" is, in brief, an extraordinarily syncretic poem, apparently a fiction, a fable about Diogenes. Underneath its surface, however, there is a whole variety of allegorical meanings, ranging from the metapoetic theme to the intricacies of contemporary Northern Ireland. The social and political commentaries may not be as straightforward as in the second part of *North,* the result being that in the "encounter between social obligation and artistic freedom,"[35] the latter prevails. This may make the poems elusive, even escapist — some will say. They may be elusive, but certainly not escapist, as it has hopefully been demonstrated here. Moreover, it is in this blurring, displacing elusiveness that lies the pleasure of the allegorical poems in *The Haw Lantern,* whether it is "The Haw Lantern," "From the Frontier of Writing," "From the Republic of Conscience" or "From the Land of the Unspoken," for underneath the elusiveness, underneath the detail that gives the poem its suggestive, polysemic, disseminating meaning, underneath the dressing, imaginative,

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34. Seamus Heaney, "Mother Ireland," in *Listener* (7 Dec. 1972), qtd. in Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 71.
35. Heaney, "A Curlew in the Orkneys," p. 8.

fictional element, one can find naked reality. As Juan Ferraté has written commenting on Góngora's poetry, "Góngora faces reality, from a fictional point of view, of course, but in order to render us a reality which is richer, clearer, purer."[36]

"Parable Island" is another instance in which the reality of Northern Ireland is made suggestive, this time by mixing within the same poem (as in "From the Republic of Conscience") contemporary and Celtic Ireland. The opening lines of the poem reflect the idea that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic is artificial:

> Although they are an occupied nation
> and their only border is an inland one
> they yield to nobody in their belief
> that the country is an island.

As in "Terminus," here is Heaney worried again about boundaries. Even though there is a certain distance in the "they" pronoun, this first stanza no doubt conveys Heaney's (and in general a nationalist) bitterness (expressed in the word "Although") at the presence of British troops in Northern Ireland: "they are an occupied nation." The fact that "their only border is an inland one" articulates the traditional nationalist view of Northern Ireland, summed up by Whyte in two propositions: "(1) the people of Ireland form one nation; and (2) the fault for keeping Ireland divided lies with Britain."[37] For those who want a United Ireland, then, the only thing that separates the Northern Irish from those living in the Republic is an artificial border; for them, North and South constitute a single "country," a single "island." As Whyte has pointed out, the term "these islands" applied to the British Isles "may sound unneutral because it is the phrase preferred by nationalists."[38] The nationalists, then, regard Ireland as "an island," and in this belief "they yield to nobody;" they may yield politically, they may be "subjugated, yes, and obedient" ("From the Frontier of Writing"), but their ideas will not be changed despite the imperial oppression.

It is worth noting that later in the poem the idea of the border is somewhat reversed: "To find out where he stands the traveller / has to keep listening - since there is no map / which draws the line he knows he must have crossed." At this

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36. Juan Ferraté, *Dinámica de la poesía. Ensayos de explicación, 1952-1966* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2nd. ed. 1982), pp. 332-333. My translation.
37. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 117.
38. Ibid., p. XII.

point the poem becomes, like all allegorical poems, elusive. Is the Irish border not drawn on the map by any chance? Not at all. There may be several explanations for these lines. One of them is the sensation you have as you drive through the frontier that "You can't see the border, or touch it, or taste it, but you know it's there, like a great breach in nature."[39] Another explanation could be that at this point in the poem there is a shift in the conception of Ireland: now the island has been re-mapped or transfigured into a country without a border; it has been turned, in other words, into "a country of the mind"[40] or, as Heaney has put it commenting on the later Kavanagh, the actual place has been deprived of its "status as background, as documentary geography ... The country he visits is inside himself."[41] The traveller, then, seems to have internalised the border in the same way as Heaney internalises the boundaries in "Terminus:" "I was the march drain and the march drain's banks / Suffering the limit of each claim." The reason why in this mental country there is no map indicating the border may be that in the ideal nationalist map there is no border at all. The lack of the border in this internalised, transfigured country would thus indicate a "tension with the imperial power" by emphasising the "differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre."[42] "Parable Island," then, describes both a physical and a mental country, and in doing so it defies any single interpretation, for underneath the "mountain of the shifting names" (to put it in the poem's own terms), underneath the allegorical poem, there is no single "point where all the names [or interpretations] converge." There is no "ore of truth," and all interpretations are divergent in the same way as both the "subversives" (the I. R. A.) and the "collaborators" (the Anglophiles or unionists) are unable "to set `the island story' straight;" they provide different histories of Ireland.

This discrepancy in interpretation can also be found in the first part of the poem. The first stanza, for instance, may be taken to describe the "real" Ireland, but in the next two stanzas the reader is presented with a kind of magic and unreal, or at least exotic, Ireland: "the forked-tongued natives," for example, refers to the inhabitants of the Republic, where Irish and English are the two official languages. At the same time, though, in the second and third stanzas the island becomes physically elusive and blurred: the "mountain of the shifting names" can only be vaguely located "Somewhere in the far north." Such a land-

39. Tom Paulin interviewed by John Haffenden, in Haffenden, ibid., p. 161.
40. Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, p. 21.
41. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 5.
42. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, ibid., p. 2.

scape gives the reader the impression of being halfway between fable and reality, for it seems to be a combination of the real Ireland ("the far north" is possibly an allusion to Cape Malin, situated northernmost of Ireland) and a magical mountain which is "a point where all the names converge." This mountain might be the Hill of Uisnech, "reputed to mark the centre of Ireland. A big natural [pentagonal] rock on its side was supposed to be the meeting-point of the [five] provinces of Ireland."[43] If Heaney calls this place "the mountain of the shifting names" it is because each of the five sides of the pentagonal rock was supposed to belong to a different province, namely Ulster, Connacht, Munster, Leinster and the Midland province.

The idea of the "mountain of the shifting names," of the poem with multiple interpretations, may be applied not only to Ireland as both real and magical, but also to the "border." "Parable Island" first states that there is a political border, but later on we read that, even though there is no map indicating the border, the traveller "knows he must have crossed" the "line" and "has to keep listening" in order to know where he stands. The text has led us to two undecidable and contradictory meanings: there is a border and yet there is no border but the traveller has the feeling that there is a border. This aporia may be solved if we interpret the border not drawn in the map as the "line" separating Catholics from Protestants in Northern Ireland: they live in different districts and streets, and children go to different schools. This internal division does not appear in the map, of course, but it is there, always felt as a presence in the mental maps of the Northern Irish: "The Ulsterman carries the map of ... religious geography in his mind almost from birth."[44] With this reference to religion we may have solved the aporia, but at the same time we have created another interpretation of the poem.

Such is the "shifting" virtue of Heaney's allegorical poetry: a single poem portrays different realities at once. Stephen Greenblatt, writing on museums, has called this power of suggestion "resonance," and has defined it as "the power of the object displayed [in this case, the poem] to reach out beyond its formal

43 . Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946), p. 171.

44 . A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground*, qtd. in Edna Longley, "The Aesthetic and the Territorial," in Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 79.

boundaries to a larger world."[45] This is, in short, Heaney's masterly achievement in *The Haw Lantern*: to be rooted in his native present-day Ireland as nobody else may be, yet at the same time to render us a richer reality by means of allegory, that is, by displacing, transgressing and blurring the spatio-temporal boundaries of contemporary Ireland.

45 . Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 170.