

# The Two Voices of Seamus Heaney's North

DAVID LLOYD

SEAMUS Heaney's *North* is a collection of poems which examine the poet's native Ulster from both an historical and a contemporary viewpoint. The book is divided into two sections. Part I examines Ulster in terms of historical and geographical connections to the Vikings and to the "bog-people" — those individuals sacrificially buried in Danish bogs. Part II contains an eloquent series of "personal" poems which yield the poet's more direct reactions to the violence and hopelessness which have engulfed his land. These last poems proceed without the "bog" metaphor and accompanying symbolism.

Upon first reading *North*, one is immediately struck by the differences in technique, tone, approach and even subject matter which make Parts I and II of *North* appear to be two separate collections placed capriciously in a single volume. But despite the obvious differences between the two sections, there is a unifying thread in Heaney's book (besides the fact that both sections deal with Northern Ireland). In both sections, the poet's attempt to understand the violence, division, and occupation of his country and his own reactions to these things are clearly central concerns. In Part I the articulation of his feelings is accomplished primarily through an examination of "connections" between Northern Ireland and the boglands of Northern Europe, but in Part II a more direct statement is employed. The resulting differences of "voice" obscure the underlying unity, but essentially both parts attempt to deal with and reveal the poet's personal reactions to "the problem of Ulster." The same concern — how a writer, born and bred in Ulster and lately self-exiled to the South, must react to the complex and seemingly endless violence and inbred hostilities of Ulster — is explored in two widely differing styles. In this

study I shall examine how each section approaches Heaney's subject matter, and then I shall demonstrate how the poet's personal response to his material unifies the book.

The form of the poetry of Part I differs significantly from that of the poetry of Part II. In Part I Heaney most often employs a series of quatrains, favoring a "tight" syntax with a large number of hard, consonantal sounds. Off-rhymes or exact end-rhymes are common in this rather traditional approach, as is apparent in "Come to the Bower":

My hands come, touched  
By sweetbriar and tangled vetch,  
Foraging past the burst gizzards  
Of coin-hoards.<sup>1</sup>

This approach is seemingly unrelated to the conversational tone, looser syntactical arrangement, and colloquial rhythms characteristic of the poems of Part II:

Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived  
In important places. The lonely scarp  
Of St. Columb's College, where I billeted  
For six years, overlooked your Bogside.

("The Ministry of Fear," p. 63.)

(The seedy violence of Graham Greene's novel *The Ministry of Fear*, set during wartime conditions in London, is appropriately alluded to.) Longer lines, irregular stanzas, contractions, and a frequent use of the first person singular are characteristic of Part II. Heaney's change of form is, however, a result of his change of *approach* to the same subject matter. In Part I, Heaney feels the need to examine Ulster — and his own responses to Ulster — indirectly; and he needs to remove himself as much as possible from that examination. In Part II, a personal, direct response replaces the complexities of his "bog" metaphor.

In the highly crafted "bog poems," Heaney uses the Irish peasants' ancient necessity for "digging" (peat digging or potato digging) as a metaphor for his own interest in digging into the history of Ulster and into the Viking culture. At this point one should examine how Heaney defines "the North"; in these poems it refers to a Northern European culture which includes

tracts of Ulster having been overrun by, or under the influence of, the Northmen. Thus Heaney connects the Northern European bogs, where men were murdered and buried, with the bogs of Northern Ireland. Some difficulties arise at this point since Heaney's primary source, P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*, makes no reference to Ireland, except to say that Ireland has had only nineteen bog-people finds (as compared to one hundred and sixty-six in Denmark).<sup>2</sup> Glob goes on to say, concerning the total number of bog finds, that:

More than half of these come from Central and West Germany. It is thus apparent that these remarkable discoveries have been principally made in North Western Europe.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Heaney uses those bog people (such as the Grauballe Man and the Bog Queen) who primarily come from the bogs of Denmark. A non-European reader might assume that there is an actual, physical connection between the bogs of Ireland and the bog people Heaney writes of. The connection, however, is in Heaney's mind.

But Heaney displays a purpose for making these connections. He has an especial fondness for the Viking period of Irish history; he associates the revenge, casual violence, and "clannishness" evident in the Viking culture (seen clearly in Norse sagas such as *Njal's Saga*) with the cultural and political situation in Ulster. Terrance Brown, in his book *Northern Voices*, writes on this aspect of Heaney's work:

Heaney has explored these parallels between pre-history's feminine territorial religion that demanded human sacrifice, and Ulster's contemporary violence, through a sequence of poems which relate the recently discovered bodies of sacrificial victims in a bog in Denmark (Heaney learnt of these in P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People*) to recent republican atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

When examining the poems, this is obvious enough, although the atrocities should not be limited to "republican" acts. While Heaney clearly is disgusted and saddened by the violence (as is evident in "Punishment"), he also shows a great deal of respect for the Vikings of *North*. This "respect" apparently complicates matters until one realizes that there are qualities of integrity, courage, and deep belief which are to be admired in the Viking culture as well as in the Ulster "situation". Fortunately,

Heaney refuses to simplify this question. Feelings of kinship, historical loyalty, and perseverance may sometimes be admirable qualities.

In examining Ulster through this historical perspective, Heaney uses a parallelism of reference, so that the reader sees the poet's commentary on aspects of the Viking and early Irish cultures as also being a direct comment on contemporary Ulster. In these poems, Heaney is deliberate in his desire to guide the reader towards making necessary cultural connections. One might, however, question whether the Vikings are important enough in Irish history to be granted the kind of mythic or archetypal stature Heaney presents; but certainly the "parallelism of reference" is an effective device, as we see in "Punishment," or, more obviously, in "The Grauballe Man." In each of these poems Heaney describes and reflects upon a body exhumed from the bog. The violence done to the Grauballe Man is a thinly disguised parallel to the street violence which is a part of Heaney's Ulster environment:

but now he lies  
 perfected in my memory  
 down to the red horn  
 of his nails,  
  
 hung in the scales  
 with beauty and atrocity:  
 with the Dying Gaul  
 too strictly compassed  
  
 on his shield,  
 with the actual weight  
 of each hooded victim,  
 slashed and dumped.

("The Grauballe Man," p. 36.)

The "slashed and dumped" victims of sectarian murder in Belfast and the surrounding areas are brought to mind when one reads the last stanza of the above poem. And the last two lines of the last stanza of "Punishment" show Heaney to be an Ulsterman very much aware of the kind of revenge being exacted on both sides of the conflict; the poet understands the nature of ritual revenge.

In poems such as "Punishment," "The Grauballe Man," and "The Bog Queen" Heaney reveals a sado-masochistic complex of

emotion concerning the bog victims — he shows feelings which are honest, moving, and frightening. In "The Grauballe Man" for instance, we see a fascination for an exact presentation of the grotesque details: "His instep has shrunk / cold as a swan's foot / or a wet swamp root." This is related to the hunger many of us have for the gory details of the sectarian atrocities; but more important, this revelation leads us deeper into the actual nature of "ritual revenge." Glancing through the photographs in *The Bog People*, one can see how "beauty and atrocity" may be inter-related in a complex manner. We stare at the twisted, semi-preserved figures and our reaction may combine a sense both of fascination and of revulsion.

In "North," the title poem, Heaney displays feelings of affinity with the Vikings. In listening to the Northmen speaking "with hindsight," Heaney isolates some fundamental forces behind the Ulster situation. In "North," the Vikings

were ocean-deafened voices  
warning me, lifted again  
in violence and epiphany.  
The longship's swimming tongue

was buoyant with hindsight—  
it said Thor's hammer swung  
to geography and trade,  
thick-witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behindbacks  
of the althing, lies and women,  
exhaustions nominating peace,  
memory incubating the spilled blood.

("North," pp. 19-20.)

The things which "Thor's hammer" swings to — geography, trade, revenge, etc. — are also central to the Ulster conflict. Memory incubates, or nourishes and promotes "the spilled blood." And indeed memory — of Cromwell's invasion and Catholic rebellions, of old loyalties — is a potent force in Northern Ireland. If the poet learns about these things (or is "warned" about them) from the Vikings, he also, as we see in the poem "Funeral Rites," learns about how one might put an end to the killing. In "Funeral Rites," the poet has a vision of all the dead of the North marching towards the "great [burial] chambers of Boyne" (p. 16). In this vision the dead are buried

with no revenge exacted, like Gunnar the Viking, who lies dead, yet unavenged. A final burial will put an end to the conflict:

we will drive north again  
past Strang and Carling fjords

the cud of memory  
allayed for once, arbitration  
of the feud placated,  
imagining those under the hill

disposed like Gunnar  
who lay beautiful  
inside his burial mound,  
though dead by violence

and unavenged.

("Funeral Rites," pp. 17-18.)

By using the old Scandinavian names ("Strang" and "Carling") for loughs whose more familiar place names are Strangford and Carlingford, Heaney reinforces Irish cultural connections with the North by uncovering the Scandinavian linguistic background. The vision contained in the above lines, which is to be enacted in the minds of the people of Ulster, seems impossible in the present conditions; but the poet's concern lies in providing the vision, idealistic though it is. Perhaps because he affords no *practical* solution, because he left Northern Ireland for the South, and because he takes no strong political stand in his poetry, Seamus Heaney, throughout both sections of *North*, displays an unmistakable sense of complicity in, and responsibility for, the violence and divisions of Ulster. The poet's responses — his admitted confusions, doubts, feelings of helplessness and of complicity — are evident in both sections of *North* and help unify the book. In Part I, as we have seen, Heaney reveals these feelings through metaphor and through parallel references concerning the Vikings and the contemporary situation in Ulster. In Part II, however, the poet reveals himself very directly. The qualities of sincerity and honesty are inherent in this section and are projected through the poet's sudden change of "voice". The first person speaker in Part II of *North* may be a persona; but I shall, for convenience sake, refer to the speaker as "the poet," because, considering the note of personal revelation which seems so strong in this section, it is difficult to differentiate between persona and poet.

In Part II the poet confesses his *own* lack of courage in a brave and forthright self-analysis which also implicates all those who cannot react with strength to the devastating situation:

We tremble near the flames but want no truck  
With the actual firing. We're on the make

As ever. Long sucking the hind tit  
Cold as a witch's and as hard to swallow  
Still leaves us fork-tongued on the border bit:  
The liberal papist note sounds hollow

When amplified and mixed in with the bangs  
That shake all hearts and windows day and night.

("Whatever You Say Say Nothing," p. 58.)

Here, Heaney states that he, as well, has become "fork-tongued" concerning the delicate border question, and that the common "liberal papist note" (one assumes this to be a stance Heaney, at least at times, has adopted) is an ineffective and empty response to the extreme situation. The poet has also learnt all the formulaic, empty responses expected from the "civilized" people of Ulster:

Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,

Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbors  
On the high wires of first wireless reports,  
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours  
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

'Oh it's disgraceful, surely, I agree,'  
'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse.'  
'They're murderers.' 'Internment, understandably. . .'

("Whatever You Say Say Nothing," pp. 57-8.)

His own admission about using the "old, elaborate retorts" must be a particularly difficult confession for a poet to make — a man who by trade feels a strong responsibility for effective, honest language. But I feel that far from being cowardly or overly hesitant, this poetry radiates sincerity. Heaney admits failure of a kind, yet he has the strength to take the first step in rectifying that situation — he honestly reveals his confusions.

Also in Part II, Heaney displays a humility about his writing:

Yet for all this art and sedentary trade  
I am incapable. The famous

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place  
 And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing  
 Where to be saved you only must save face  
 And whatever you say, you say nothing.

(“Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” p. 59.)

The effectiveness of poetry and the purposes behind writing at all are brought into question here. What value is poetry, or indeed any communication, if “whatever you say, you say nothing”? This phrase is a colloquialism particularly favored by Catholics, describing a way of “getting by” in the six counties of Ulster. When faced with irrational bigotry or potential hostility, it is safest to “say nothing.” (One remembers the “Cyclops” chapter of *Ulysses* where Leopold Bloom refuses to let nationalistic bigotry and a gathering atmosphere of violence stop him from speaking out in the name of “fairness” and “good sense.”) In the poem “Exposure,” we see Heaney apparently feeling remorseful and guilty, certainly about problems I have already touched upon — inaction, self-exile, an absence of firmly stated convictions; Heaney, in his writing up until *North*, has not directly commented on the Irish struggle, which is metaphorically seen as the “comet’s pulsing rose.” “Exposure,” the final poem in *North* (actually Part Six of the sequence “Singing School”), is certainly one of the most moving poems in the book. It is aptly titled, since here Heaney once more reveals his self-doubt (“How did I end up like this?”), and he again wonders if there is a purpose to his writing. This poem is the final self-exposure in *North*:

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?

(“Exposure,” pp. 72-3.)

However, the most moving part of the poem is contained in the last three stanzas where Heaney writes of his position, “straddling the fence.” He is not committed to living and fighting in the North; he feels remorseful and guilty, and in his



self-doubt this "reticent" man exposes his innermost anxieties concerning Ulster:

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

Escaped from the massacre,  
Taking protective colouring  
From bole and bark, feeling  
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks  
For their meagre heat, have missed  
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
The comet's pulsing rose.

("Exposure," p. 73.)

It can be seen that despite the tremendous difference of voice between Part I and Part II, there is an underlying unity of subject — in both sections the poet reveals his complex attitude to Northern Ireland, his doubts and his feelings of remorse. The poems of Part I are involved with reaching back to origins and with parallel historical developments which might help in understanding the Ulster problems. In Part II Heaney sacrifices his concern for historical connections and a useful symbology for a poetry which closely involves the poet himself. This is natural since his material is not the kind of material from which one can easily be distanced or from which one can successfully escape — as Heaney has almost admitted attempting. And certainly different critics, depending on their sympathies, will react to each "voice" of *North* in differing ways. But there is no doubt that *North* is a unified work in at least this sense: both sections reveal a poet trying to come to grips, honestly, with his place in Ireland and with his occupation as a poet.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975), p. 31. (Subsequent documentation from *North* will be in-text notes within parentheses.)
- <sup>2</sup>P. V. Glob, *The Bog People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 101.
- <sup>3</sup>Glob, p. 101.
- <sup>4</sup>Terrance Brown, *Northern Voices* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), pp. 176-77.