An Outline of the Relationship Between Romanticism and Contemporary Irish Poetry

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Continuities between Romanticism and contemporary poetry are multi - farious. In the Irish context there is almost a straight line connecting Romanticism with the contemporary scene. The Literary Revival was governed by a Romantic aesthetic, its yearning for the unspoilt Irish landscape and its mythologising of the peasant and the rural are ample proofs of this. Turbulent times facilitate the politicisation of poetry—the Revival is an obvious example of this. The specific cultural and political context of contemporary Northern Ireland has driven critics as well as readers to press poets for a public statement rooted in private exp eri- ence,[1] perhaps not without an eye on Shelley's idea about the role of poets in relation to their communities. On the technical level this in - volves the device of the autobiographical persona, which is a frequent element of contemporary poetry inherited from the Romantics.

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Seamus Heaney begins his essay 'Feeling into Words' with a quotation from *The Prelude,* the part about Wordsworth's 'hiding places':

> The hiding places of my power
> Seem open; I approach and then they close;
> I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
> May scarcely see at all, and I would give,
> While yet we may, as far as words can give,
> A substance and a life to what I feel:
> I would enshrine the spirit of the past
> For future restoration.

The short explanation for the quotation is as follows:

[1] Cf. Wills, C. *Improprieties. Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry.* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

> Implicit in those lines is a view of poetry which I think is implicit in the few poems I have written that give me any right to speak: poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants.[2]

This is a passage at once modest and ambitious: modest in referring to those 'few poems' of his and ambitious in establishing a kinship between his poetry and that of Wordsworth. The sentence is a rhetorical victory in its meandering structure and also in its manipulations of bringing to light Heaney's own (in a positive sense) obsession with the physical and metaphorical acts of uncovering, or as he calls them, 'digging.' As far as actual physical uncovering is concerned, Wordsworth is perhaps not the archetypal digger but his 'spots of time' render him as an important precedent to the kind of poetry defined above.

The idea of 'revelation of the self to the self' is a point of crucial significance: it defines an essential moment of the Romantic tradition and it establishes a link between the contemporary scene and the Romantic period. There is an emphasis on the self, in fact a double emphasis as the 'self' is both the direct and indirect object of the clause, which is one of the cornerstones of Romanticism. The overtones of the word 'revelation' suggest something of the religious or quasi-religious nature of the poetic act. If poems are considered as 'elements of continuity' that may echo the idea that the language of poetry has preserved something of the original relationship between language and reality; this may be yet another point where Romantic and contemporary are linked.

Heaney's affinities with Wordsworth have been noted by various critics; it is especially his first two volumes, *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark,* whose poems are noted for their allegiance to Words-

[2] Heaney, S. "Feeling into Words." In: *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968–1978.* New York, The Noonday Press, 1980, p. 41. The essay is the script of a lecture given at the Royal Society of Literature, October 1974.

worth.[3] The closing poem in *Death of a Naturalist,* 'Personal Helicon' could stand as an illustration for some of the points of this kinship.

> As a child, they could not keep me from wells
> And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
> I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
> Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.
>
> One, in a brickyard, with a rotted top.
> I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
> Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
> So deep you saw no reflection in it.
>
> A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
> Fructified like any aquarium.
> When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
> A white face hovered over the bottom.
>
> Others had echoes, gave back your own call
> With a clean new music in it. And one
> Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall
> Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.
>
> Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
> To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
> Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
> To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.[4]

The poem is a tracing of the history of the drive of self-exploration: the early interest of the child in wells and pumps is not only for their own sake. The major importance these objects bear is the fact that they keep water in their depth—and, beside of its usual association with life, the water functions like a mirror in them; yet it is a curiously artistic mirror reflecting more than sights. The 'trapped sky' is an actual image of reflection as well as an arrested moment, a potent symbol for the powers of poetry, to be discovered later, both in life and in the poem itself.

[3] Corcoran, N. *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney.* London, Faber, 1986. Also: Parker, M. *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet.* London: Macmillan, 1993.

[4] Heaney, S. *New Selected Poems 1966–1987.* London: Faber, 1990, p. 9.

Heaney uses all but one sensory fields (it is only taste that is missing)—and there is an interesting relationship between hearing and seeing, senses preferred by Wordsworth as well. The wells and pumps offer primarily sounds but time after time he balances these sounds with sights. The 'dark drop' is followed and balanced by the 'trapped sky', the 'rich crash' is paired by the reflection (though in the second stanza it is 'no reflection'), the echoes of the fourth stanza add a 'clean new music' to the original voice and the rat crosses his reflection. The most captivating instance of this balance comes at the end of the poem: 'I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing'—the voice creates vision as well as echo.

Heaney's descriptive details are exact, which is another instance of Wordsworthian influence. The external phenomena are introduced from the point of view of their significance for the observer, focusing the emphasis on the imagination rather than on the phenomena themselves. The resolution at the end is at once a rejection of the 'old' way of looking at the world and the assertion of a higher level of consciousness through poetry.

From among other elements of affinity between the two poets their childhood influences are of great significance. The rural background of their childhood has a formative influence for both of them, the natural scenery provides an important stimulus for their poetry. Just as The Prelude contains episodes of careless happiness as well as of threatening moments, Heaney's account of his relationship with his childhood environment includes a variety of episodes covering a similar range of experience.

Politics is yet another issue which may connect the two poets. Wordsworth was deeply affected by the French Revolution, deeply enthusiastic at first, even more deeply disappointed later. His disappointment kept forcing him to find redemption in poetry by an attempt to integrate the experience in his world view.[5] Similarly, the Ulster Troubles are a haunting political presence in Heaney's poetry—his bog poems show the attempt of finding a mythic framework for the interpretation of the violence—and his painful recognition of the futility of any such at-

[5] Cf. Wiley, B. *The Eighteenth-century Background. Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1946, Chapter XII. Nature in Wordsworth, pp. 253–293.

tempt. Wordsworth instinctively, and before the time of its explicit definition, embodied the role of one of the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world', whereas Heaney was forced to take the position as the Northern Irish poet cannot escape the obligation of being a spokesman for the community.

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The autobiographical persona is one of Wordsworth's major innovations: 'Tintern Abbey' and later *The Prelude* are unprecedented in their preliminary supposition that autobiography may sustain major poetry. This is especially revolutionary in the case *of The Prelude:* any earlier attempts at poems of similar length took some myth as a framework—Wordsworth was brave enough to build his monument on the foundation of his own experience. The personal universe of the poet as the essential scope of experience gained prominence in the 20th century. Contemporary Irish poetry abounds in pieces explicitly growing out of personal experience, featuring a persona who is easily identified as the poet.

There is an important relationship between the persona and the poetic voice. In Heaney's view the poetic voice is always connected with the poet's natural voice—this implies the formative influence of the tradition of the autobiographical persona. The personas of Heaney and of Derek Mahon are mainly such ones; Heaney started his poetic career exploiting his early experience as a child on a County Derry farm (the poems in *Death of a Naturalist*), whereas Mahon's experience of being displaced and alienated even from his own background animates his speakers. In one extreme case he reports his own homecoming in the third person singular, as an outsider ('Homecoming').

The autobiographical experience, however, is often turned into something symbolic in poetry; as Edna Longley puts it, poetry 'transmutes the autobiographical into the symbolic.'[6] Romanticism is once again a beginning for an important element of modern literary works through another 'innovation', the capturing of the epiphanic moment which enables us to 'see into the life of things.' This vision or as Frank Kermode labels it, the Romantic Image,[7] has had a long history ever

[6] Longley, E. *The Living Stream.* Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994, p. 154.
[7] Cf. Kermode, F. *Romantic Image.* 1957. (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986).

since—it has lived through various incarnations referred to by numerous terms but it has been essentially the same phenomenon.

The vision is one of the cornerstones of Modernist poetry and it has survived into the contemporary scene as well, though perhaps on a more modest scale. Heaney's 'Bogland' is a poem of such an epiphanic moment—Heaney sets out to find the Irish myth, a sister to the American one of the frontier, and the finding ends up as a plant: it grows by its own rules.

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening –
Everywhere the eye concedes
To encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.[8]

The poem almost writes itself, as image yields image through associations. The last line of the poem, 'The wet centre is bottomless', is the culminating point: this is the epiphanic moment when the poem opens up to include the endless vertical dimension which, as it is also geology, is the past at the same time—the depth brings together space and time in one image.

The vision takes its origin in the isolation of the artist. The most extreme case of contemporary isolation is exemplified by Mahon—he sees the world as a hostile place in which poetry has a limited sphere and an even more limited influence on events. A short quotation from his poem 'Rage for Order' may illustrate the case:

Somewhere beyond
The scorched gable end
And the burnt-out
Buses there is a poet indulging his
Wretched rage for order –

Or not as the
Case may be, for his
Is a dying art...[9]

Mahon takes the phrase 'rage for order' from Wallace Stevens—though in Stevens's late-Romantic concept it reads as 'blessed rage for order.' Mahon's replacement of 'blessed' with 'wretched' and the end of the passage are pessimistic enough as to the nature of poetry yet the fact that there is a poet present may be encouraging. Still, the idea that poetry is a 'dying art', similar to another activity, skinning a fairy, in another Mahon poem, shows his scepticism about the sphere of influence of his art.

[8] Heaney, S. *New Selected Poems 1966–1987,* pp. 17–18.

[9] Quoted by Longley, E. "The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry." In: *Poetry in the War.* Newcstle: Bloodaxe, 1986, p. 172.

Several of the recorded epiphanic moments of the Romantic period originate from a contemplation of nature. As Heaney comments, Wordsworth read the natural world as signs.[10] The stimulus provided by the natural scene induces a meditation which in turn leads the poet to recognitions of great significance. With these recognitions he returns to the natural scene but his sense of understanding has deepened, which allows him to read the landscape with more 'comprehensive' eyes.[11]

The increased significance of nature, in this way, is another heritage of the Romantic period. In contemporary Irish poetry nature has different functions for different poets but its importance is universal. For Heaney it is the starting point, for exploration and for poetry—and these two activities are often synonymous for him. The best example is 'Bogland'—in this poem the landscape functions in a similar way as in a Wordsworth poem: it ignites the imagination of the poet. Yet, just as in 'Personal Helicon', the structure of the poem does not follow the Romantic model—the natural phenomena immediately become the basis of associations. Heaney's eyes are perhaps trained by the example of the Romantics.

Derek Mahon's bleak landscapes reflect his sense of isolation, they are projections of the persona's (and ultimately of the poet's) inner reality, which is an indication of Romantic antecedents. In the poem 'Going Home' the persona sets out from a place with rich vegetation: 'I am saying goodbye to the trees / The beech, the cedar, the elm, / The mild woods of these parts', and travels to one marked by the absence of such fertility: 'But where I am going the trees / Are few and far between. / No richly forested slopes'.[12] In another poem, 'Beyond Howth Head', the persona is writing from a desolate place:

[10] Heaney, S. "Feeling into Words," p. 51.

[11] Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature.* London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 357.

[12] Mahon, D. *Selected Poems.* Harmondsworth: Penguin/Gallery, 1993, pp. 96–98.

> The wind that blows these words to you
> bangs nightly off the black-and-blue
> Atlantic, hammering in haste
> dark doors of the declining west
> whose rock-built houses year by year
> collapse, whose strong sons disappear
> (no homespun cottage industries'
> embroidered cloths will patch up these
>
> lost townlands on the crumbling shores
> of Europe)...[13]

The coasts of Ireland are the scenes of destruction, the tide eating the land away, houses falling into the sea—and these areas are at the same time the 'crumbling shores / of Europe', signalling perhaps more than a change of the physical environment, as Europe is also a cultural term. The richly alliterative music of the lines makes the vision even more haunting and the scene even darker.

Michael Longley escapes to Mayo from the violence. He is extremely fond of the lush world of the countryside and the vegetation plays an important role in his poetry: names of plants of various kinds feature significantly in his poems. Plants may act as 'instruments' of redemption in time of violence, as in the poem 'Finding a Remedy':

> Sprinkle the dust from a mushroom or chew
> The white end of a rush, apply the juice
> From fern roots, stems of burdocks, dandelions,
>
> Then cover the wound with cuckoo-sorrel
> Or sphagnum moss, bringing together verse
> And herb, plant and prayer to stop the bleeding.[14]

Specimens of plants are used here explicitly for curing, and the last two lines indicate the kinship between curative plants and poetry.

In another short poem, 'In Memory of Charles Donnelly', botany is represented by the olive tree. The Biblical resonances of the olive tree

[13] Mahon, p. 44.

[14] Longley, M. *Poems 1963–1983*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1986, p. 159.

are sharply contrasted with the atmosphere of the Spanish Civil War (the subtitle of the poem is *Killed in Spain, 27.2.37, aged 22*):

I

Minutes before a bullet hits you in the forehead
There is a lull in the machine-gun fire, time to pick
From the dust a bunch of olives, time to squeeze them,
To understand the groans and screams and big abstractions
By saying quietly 'Even the olives are bleeding'.

II

Buried among the roots of that olive tree, you are
Wood and fruit and the skylight its branches make
Through which to read as they accumulate for ever
The poems you go on not writing in the tree's shadow
As it circles the fallen olives and the olive-stones.[15]

Longley juxtaposes the horrible scene of the bullet hitting the forehead with the moment of silence and peace preceding it, and the squeezed olives become analogous with the wounded person as both are 'bleeding'. The second section is reminiscent of Wordsworth's Lucy, who also becomes one with the natural world after her death, 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees'—the young victim of Longley's poem is now the 'Wood and fruit and the skylight'.

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Schelling considered mythology as the essential condition and primary material of all art;[16] 'for Keats myth was of the same imaginative order as the poet's knowledge,'[17] and Blake went as far as the attempt at creating a private mythology. These ideas clearly indicate the preoccupation of the Romantics with myth, based on the conviction that the experience contained in and communicated by myths is fundamental to humanity. Modernism returned to this conviction—T. S. Eliot's view of

[15] Longley, M. *Gorse Fires*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1991, p. 48.

[16] Schelling, quoted in Péter, Á. *Roppant szivárvány*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1996, p. 88.

[17] Kermode, p. 9.

his present as 'the immense panorama of futility' called for no less organising principle than mythology. The two seminal texts of Modernism, *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are the par excellence examples of the importance of myth in (modern) art.

The Irish scene offers a number of examples of the use of myth in poetry. One of the preoccupations of the Revival was the mythologising of the peasant and the rural world; side by side with this went the incorporation into poetry of mythological figures from the Irish past. The chief exponent of the latter strain is William Butler Yeats. As far as the former is concerned, though it suggests a different treatment of the mythic, it is equally important: Patrick Kavanagh, in his poem entitled 'Epic', relates his local Monaghan world to the experience on which Homer based his work, and John Montague turns the rural world into a myth of continuity and tradition.

Contemporary poetry also returns to myth on certain occasions. The most well-known Irish instance of this is Heaney's bog-motif, his attempt at finding a mythic framework which could enable him to interpret the contemporary outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland. Heaney's myth is a complex one, bringing together the Iron Age fertility ritual of the goddess Nerthus and the figure of Mother Ireland. Heaney's myth lives its own life after a time and fails to provide any rational explanation for the violence—it is similar in this sense to Eliot's complex myth, which also proves abortive in bringing the required salvation for the wasteland of the early 20th century. The fact that these myths fail to provide solution for the problems may justify the Wordsworthian 'revolution' of using autobiographical experience instead of mythology for his major poetic enterprise.

The return to myth and the subsequent experience of its inadequacy as an explanation for the present conflict suggest and create a sense of loss, and a deep sense of loss is a pervasive element of modern poetry. Blake is the main Romantic antecedent, and Wordsworth's poetry also contains moments of loss—though the adult finds compensation for the loss of the child's way of experiencing nature, the political disappointment following the French Revolution is a lasting wound. The theoretical dimension of the problem is expressed in Friedrich Schiller's anxiety

about the fragmentation of human personality.[18] The Modernists mourned the loss of totality and the fragmented world in the wake of it; in a way this is also the lost innocence, though on a more comprehensive level. The Postmodern, in Lyotard's view at least, is signalled by the loss of the grand narratives—among others, that of history as well.

The consequence of the sense of loss is a sometimes nostalgic yearning for what has been lost. Irish history is more than a rich soil for nostalgic poetry: the long centuries of political antagonism between the Irish and the English yielded several cultural consequences as well, among them the relegation of the Irish language into a marginal position. One moment of cultural imperialism was the early 19th century Ordnance Survey during which the Irish placenames were 'anglicised.' John Montague's poem entitled 'A Lost Tradition' concerns the consequences of such an event. 'The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read, / A part of our past disinherited'[19]—such a heritage makes the question of identity a rather difficult one. In a way, 'identity', especially in relation to Northern Irish poetry is reminiscent of the lost innocence, of a natural and given state which, having been lost, seems all the more valuable.

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One of the significant innovations of Wordsworth was the celebration of the common by presenting it from an unusual viewpoint. He managed to prove that a fresh eye may turn even the simplest and most trivial element of life into an experience of profound significance. Contemporary poetry may be seen as a rich record of the common scrutinised and poeticised. Heaney's poem, 'The Rain Stick' is also a celebration of something common:

> Upend the rain stick and what happens next
> Is a music that you never would have known
> To listen for. In a cactus stalk

[18] Schiller, F. *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man—Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen.* 1795...

[19] In Mahon, D., Fallon, P. (eds.) *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, pp. 44–45.

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water, you shake it again lightly

And diminuendo runs through all its scales
Like a gutter stopping trickling. And now here comes
A sprinkle of drops out of the freshened leaves,

Then subtle little wets off grass and daises;
Then glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air.
Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once,
Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven
Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.[20]

The poem suggests the possibility of looking at common things with a fresh eye, of savouring the experience regardless of its triviality, regardless of its having happened before on several times. On another level the poem may be read as an apology for contemporary poetry as well: for repeating what has been said before, for making a music which is perhaps not as smooth as it could be and also for not being able to get away from the heritage of earlier traditions—traditions such as Romanticism.

[20] Heaney, S. *The Spirit Level.* London: Faber, 1996, p. 1.