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"MIRED IN ATTACHMENT": CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE
POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND THOMAS KINSELLA

By
ROBERT JOSEPH BRAZEAU

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the connection between Seamus Heaney's and Thomas Kinsella's poetry and the dominant themes of contemporary Irish cultural production and criticism. I begin my study by contextualizing Heaney and Kinsella within the framework of contemporary Irish literary criticism. The discipline is marked by its explicitly political orientation, and in his critical work, The Dual Tradition, Kinsella contributes to the partisan rhetoric that has made Irish studies so inflammatory. In the first chapter, "An Equivocal Response: The Explicitly Political Poetry of Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney," I consider the overtly ideological poetry of both writers within the larger context of contemporary Irish post-colonial criticism. In the next section of my study, "Receding From The Public: Markers of Identity in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella," I argue that both poets respond to the public demands placed on poetry in Ireland by redressing the narrowly-construed vision of sectarian identity with a more complex and accommodating subjectivity. Both poets turn toward fundamental concerns like a consciousness of place, the linguistic colonization of Ireland, and the vicissitudes of the Irish literary
tradition in order to distance themselves from the oppressive demands of contemporary Irish politics. In the final chapter I look at how both poets respond to what they perceive to be a discontinuous Irish literary tradition by intervening actively in that tradition. Specifically, I consider how their employment of bardic poetic modes and traditional themes suggests that both poets feel that this tradition represents a usable past for the modern writer. As well, both poets have translated numerous works from the Irish in order to demonstrate the value of this rich tradition to a contemporary, non-Irish speaking, readership. Finally, in lieu of a formal conclusion, I situate Heaney and Kinsella within the larger context of contemporary Irish poets like Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, John Montague, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, and Eavan Boland. In the work of this group of Northern Irish and Republic of Ireland poets, I perceive, in different ways, a similar desire to move contemporary Irish poetry and culture beyond the debilitating politics of sectarian identification. Here I consider a number of political, public, and cultural concerns that have come to the fore in contemporary Irish writing.
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ABBREVIATIONS

(complete bibliographical information is provided in the Works Cited)

CP

Collected Poems by Thomas Kinsella

DD

Door into the Dark by Seamus Heaney

DN

Death of a Naturalist by Seamus Heaney

DT

The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics by Thomas Kinsella

FD

Fifteen Dead by Thomas Kinsella

FDA

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, ed. Seamus Deane

N

North by Seamus Heaney

P

Preoccupations by Seamus Heaney

Poems

Poems 1956-73 by Thomas Kinsella

PT

Poems and Translations by Thomas Kinsella

SA

Sweeney Astray by Seamus Heaney

SI

Station Island by Seamus Heaney

WO

Wintering Out by Seamus Heaney

vi
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**
The Changing Face of Irish Studies .................. 1

**CHAPTER 1**
Ideology and the Politics of Criticism in Contemporary Irish Studies ....................................... 18

**CHAPTER 2**
Receding From the Public: Markers of Identity in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella .... 69

**CHAPTER 3**
Repossessing the Past: Mythology and Translation in the Work of Kinsella and Heaney ...................... 128

**CONCLUSION**
Challenging the Canon: Rejoinders to Critical Nationalism in Contemporary Poetry ....................... 212


Introduction

The Changing Face of Irish Studies

In "The Field of Cultural Production," Pierre Bourdieu examines the relationship between aesthetic practices and economic and political power. At the centre of Bourdieu's argument is what he terms "principles of hierarchization" (40), which are conventions and codes that structure cultural production in any given society. According to Bourdieu, there are essentially two principles which govern the formation and orientation of any field of cultural production: the "autonomous principle," which reaches its apogee in the "art for art's sake" movement, and the "heteronomous principle," which asserts that works of art derive from social, material, and ideological forces beyond the aesthetic intention of the individual artist. These competing views of aesthetic production exist in a state of tension, which characterizes the political and aesthetic orientation of the field itself:
The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake'), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree [sic] of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise. (40)

While Bourdieu himself warns against accepting historically contingent facts for universal truths regarding artistic fields in general, there is a strong argument to be made that, with minor modification, many of Bourdieu's assertions are applicable to contemporary Irish writing. In this specific artistic field, however, the conflict is not between bourgeois values and a politically disinterested aesthetic practice, but rather between a movement I would call critical nationalism and its various others. In this brief introduction, I will outline the central debate in current Irish literary and cultural criticism: this debate counterposes nationalist critics against the various critical models that would try to liberate aesthetics from such a strictly defined critical methodology.
Critical nationalism, as I am using the term, refers to a propensity among critics to see nationalist political concerns as the determinative horizon of meaning in literary works. This position is perhaps most clearly represented by critics like Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd (and the Field Day group, with which they are associated). While I discuss various aspects of Deane’s critical position in chapters one and two, it is worth noting here that he is clearly the central force behind the contemporary orientation of Irish literary studies around questions of political nationalism. In fact, many of his critical writings include a brief history of the emergence of critical nationalism against the backdrop of other, seemingly politically disengaged, modes of critical inquiry. For example, in the introduction to the collection *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, Deane offers a view of contemporary Irish studies that is repeated often in his critical works. According to Deane, Irish studies is, to borrow language from Bourdieu, a heteronomous field governed by the tension between a "new orthodoxy" (which places a primacy on politically disinterested aesthetic practices) and a fundamentally
politicized view of art (represented by the Field Day group):

Field Day regards this new orthodoxy with disfavor because it shows little or no capacity for self-analysis. Its own demolition of nationalism rebounds on itself. Moreover, it has paid no serious attention to the realm of culture, regarding it as in some sense separate from politics. In this it has been supported by many who still believe in the autonomy of cultural artifacts, and who, as a consequence, subscribe to the Arnaldian notion that the work of art that most successfully disengages itself from the particularities of its origin and production is, by virtue of that 'disengagement,' most fully and purely itself. (7)

It is difficult to imagine a more explicit representation of the competing principles of hierarchization at work in the field of contemporary Irish studies. If Deane's writing reveals a recurring deficiency, however, it is that he is frequently unable to think between the extremes of Arnaldian disinterestedness and unflinching and unequivocal political commitment. Similarly, Declan Kiberd has offered the view that the measure of poetic efficacy in Ireland is indexed to the effacement of private or personal concerns in poetry. In his introduction to the section on contemporary poetry in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing,¹ Kiberd champions a poetics which resists
"privatization" (*FDA*, 3, 1316) in favour of one governed by an explicit political orientation. I spend some time looking at how Kiberd's critical views pertain to Heaney's and Kinsella's poetry in chapter two, and, in the final chapter of this study, consider how they are implicitly responded to by a number of Irish poets, so I will not discuss them any longer here.

Critics like Deane and Kiberd, however, in no way have a monopoly on these political and critical concerns. The orientation of Irish studies around questions of nationalism, colonialism, and sectarian identification has so saturated the discipline that even critics opposed to the oppressiveness of nationalist ideological concerns bestow a legitimacy on this position by unwittingly accepting its assumptions. For example, in the concluding chapter of this study I will look at how Edna Longley, and others opposed to the homologies advanced by nationalist critics, frequently and unwittingly endorses the conflation of the terms "political" and "nationalist" in her writing. Longley, as we will see, allows a fundamental assumption of critical nationalism --that the only important political
questions involve discussions of colonialism and the nationalist response to it -- to go uncontested.

While I will be isolating a number of important critics in my discussion of nationalism and the process of canon formation that ensues from the hegemony that this single political concern is granted in this discipline, I am forced to delimit my inquiry solely because of the constraints of space. Critics like Deane and Kiberd are only two among a great number of contemporary critics who have championed the notion that literature is fundamentally a political vehicle, and that the debates circulating around questions of nationalism and history should be the single rudimentary focus of contemporary literary scholarship. For example, Sydney Burris opens his book, *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition*, by recounting the story of a hunger-striker, with whom Burris discusses Heaney’s decision to move south to Co. Wicklow. What is interesting in the exchange between the two is not that Heaney’s decision is denounced because it does not serve the interests of his religious faction, but that it is regarded as having aesthetic consequences for Heaney’s poetry. Burris’s interlocutor
asserts the following regarding the relationship between the artist and political crises: "I believe that if artists live in a particular society, the conflict affects them in one way or the another, and I don’t believe that artists can help taking sides. Their work should in some way reflect the side they have chosen" (viii). For his part, Burris endorses the view espoused by the prisoner as "unflinchingly reasoned" (viii), and expressed with a "sophistication and urbanity rarely encountered by the American reader who faces 'political' verse" (viii).

This debate, however, is not as simple as Burris suggests. The response to Heaney's move to the Republic recorded by the inmate harbours an assumption regarding the relationship of the artist to his or her community that needs to be debated, and not simply asserted. Inherent in the prisoner's account of Heaney's decision is a belief that the artist must uphold a vision of what Shelby Steele, in another context, has termed "racial orthodoxy."

According to Steele, the goal of a racially orthodox aesthetic ideology is "to make the individual artist responsible for the collective political vision. This orthodoxy arbitrates the artist's standing within the
group: the artist can be as individual as he or she likes as long as the group view of things is upheld” (30). It is by no means obvious that entrusting the artist with this mandate is beneficial for either aesthetic practice or the community whose views are supposed to be unproblematically rendered in works of art.

The critic who has argued most stridently against the conflation of aesthetic and political writing in contemporary Ireland is Conor Cruise O’Brien. In books like States of Ireland and in his influential essay "An Unhealthy Intersection," O’Brien has posited the fundamental belief that the "area where literature and politics overlap has...to be regarded with some suspicion" ("Unhealthy" 7). He is right to urge critical caution here, because, as we have seen with our brief look at Sidney Burris’ account of Heaney’s departure for the Republic, there are many assumptions that inhere in overtly political modes of criticism that remain unchecked. For example, according to O’Brien certain writers "remind us how easy it seems to be to pass from politics to literature and back again" (4). But, O’Brien continues, there are fundamental questions that need to be addressed before we
can begin to understand what we are discussing when we consider the political or ideological content of literary works: "It seems easy, yet may perhaps not be possible at all. The politics to which writers are drawn may not be quite the same as the politics which politicians practise" (4).

O’Brien’s sometimes subtle critical insights have gone, to a large extent, unexamined. While it may be salutary to consider the difference between politics as it is practiced in the public sphere and politics as it is represented in literary works, very little has been done to advance this kind of a reading of aesthetic practice. In fact, O’Brien himself fails to offer any direction for such a study, or even a tentative rhetoric through which such a comparison of different types of "politics" might take place. And yet, there are numerous examples which help to confirm O’Brien’s view, especially of cases where critics move too quickly between public or mass politics and the political views represented in literary works. James Simmons, for instance, offers just such a foreshortened reading of Heaney’s politics in his essay "The Trouble with
Seamus.” Simmons quotes the following stanza from Heaney’s “Exposure”:

It is December in Wicklow:
Alders dripping, birches
Inheriting the last light,
The ash tree cold to look at. (Simmons 60)

Simmons’ exegesis of this stanza, however, proceeds by a series of non sequitur indictments of the politics evinced by the whole volume. I quote Simmons at length:

Lovely. He certainly can evoke place and mood, but his thoughts and his spiritual hauntings are blurred and vain. I have lived recently in the Protestant ghetto of working-class Belfast. There was a UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) pub opposite. I have seen sordid punch-ups, intruders kicked on the pavement. Once, talking to the manager of my local garage, I saw two young men in casual clothes and sneakers run to their car after the harsh explosions of another killing....These young murderers came in with their rough justice. Seamus would understand. In a sense I understand, but I think it exactly right for someone to lift the telephone and ring the police to catch these amateurs of justice and put them away, be they Catholic or Protestant. Far more than any of Seamus’s dilemmas I want the local police to be given a chance to establish law and order, to stop pub fights, to stop killings, and try to ensure that politics are left to the hustings and the ballot box. (61)

Arguably, this analysis of the poem ceased being literary criticism after the word “vain.” As well, although he can offer no substantiation for his position, Simmons infers
that Heaney is against the law-and-order side because Simmons too quickly extrapolates a clear public stance from a poetry that represents and seeks to get to the roots of certain political beliefs. There is very little (if anything) in North that supports the caricature of Heaney's politics offered in Simmons' essay. Finally, it has to be noted that Simmons' assertion regarding the proper place for political expression risks being read as self-contradictory at best (and unself-circumspect at worst) given the explicit political content of his own essay.

Given the importance of politically oriented criticism in contemporary Irish studies, it is surprising that very little work has been done on the dialectical space between the extreme positions articulated by writers like Deane, Kiberd, and Burris on the one hand, and the position presented by Conor Cruise O'Brien on the other. Clearly, there must be some merit in both positions, since works of literature are situated within, and frequently respond to, political crises, and yet still maintain some degree of distance from the types of unequivocal, divisive forms of ideological utterance that seem to dominate public debate in volatile times.
In this dissertation I will examine the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella against the politicization of contemporary Irish studies. I have chosen to focus on Heaney and Kinsella because they treat a number of the signal themes in contemporary Irish poetry, frequently from divergent positions. In fact, I believe that reading each poet against the other reveals certain important facets of the aesthetic ideology that subtends each writer's work. As I will show, while both poets approach very similar material in their poetry, the existence of distinct aesthetic aims causes both poets to respond in very different ways to the same debates.

In the first chapter of this study, I will be looking at the ways in which both Heaney and Kinsella treat their own political visions as aesthetic material, and how both poets work towards a more complex politics than simple sectarian identification permits. Both poets have commented on the political views that are at work in their most public poetry, and both have also produced poetry that, in some measure, asserts a divisive political opinion. While Kinsella has written a number of important public poems ("Old Harry," "Nightwalker," and others) I
have chosen to focus on his *Butcher's Dozen* in this chapter because it is his most overtly partisan poem. As well, much of the Heaney poetry I look at here is from early in his career, and I have chosen to focus on these poems, again, because they best exemplify the sometimes divisive tone sounded in his political poetry from this time. However, as I will argue, this overtly public poetry frequently turns away from the entrenched dogma of sectarian identification, and restores a complexity to political and social issues that is effaced within the rhetoric of sectarian politics.

The second phase of my study looks at the desire evinced by both poets to recede from the public demands placed on poetry in the politically volatile environment of contemporary Ireland. Both poets turn away from strict identification with a certain group, and towards an inquiry into the various modes of relationship with both a community and a history. Here, I contend that both poets attempt to restore a complexity to questions of identity, history, and tradition that conventional nationalist discourse effaces. Thomas Kinsella's frequently introspective poetry serves as a kind of model for this
chapter, in that Kinsella's poetry reveals an acute sensitivity to questions of subject-formation within divisive political contexts. In "Baggot Street Deserta" and "A Country Walk," Kinsella represents the sense of discontinuity with a community and its past that finds expression in many of his poems. Similarly, Heaney's "Anahorish" and "Exposure" represent contemporary politics as the subject of strife in the poet's life, but see poetry as possessing the ability to imaginatively recuperate an unfissured history and identity that are located in some historically anterior, imaginary space. Here Kinsella's and Heaney's poetry confront similar themes and issues, and work, interestingly, in divergent directions: while Heaney uses poetry to reconnect with an imagined, continuous past, Kinsella's poetry records the anxiety that ensues from having no usable past with which to reconnect.

Chapter two concludes with a discussion of the lack of a single, uncomplicated nurturing tradition in Irish literature, and the effect of this absence on both writers. In the third chapter I examine how both Heaney and Kinsella move beyond an anxiety about tradition by intervening as agents in that tradition. Both poets reinvestigate Irish
literary history and find a nurturing and enabling tradition. Of particular interest here is Heaney's use of the myth of Sweeney as offering a precursor for his own idealistic, transcendental poetics. As well, Kinsella's use of Irish mythology is central to his relatively recent discovery of the richness of the Irish literary past and its importance for the present. Kinsella offers a contemporary, politically charged retelling of the myths of Fintan and Amairgen that confirm the importance of this inheritance for the poet.

The use of traditional, mythological material is only one way in which both poets return to the past in order to suggest its contemporary relevance. In the final phase of my study I consider how, as translators, both Heaney and Kinsella have worked to revive a usable past in a politically divisive climate. In this chapter, I consider how a divergent ethos of translation underwrites the practices of both poets. Heaney offers what the theorist of translation, Lawrence Venuti, would call "fluent translations," in that they render the original document in unproblematic, contemporary English. Kinsella's translations from the Irish, however, are intentionally
non-fluent, and work to represent both the temporal
distance and aesthetic difference of the source-culture
from which the original emerged. Again, the point bears
stating that both poets approach similar material from
ideologically diverse points of view: Kinsella’s
translation, while it appears to be the more aesthetically
conservative, recognizes the source-culture in a way that
Heaney’s major translation from the Irish, Sweeney Astray,
does not. It is not that one ethic of translation is
superior to the other, but that different strategies of
translation bring different issues to the fore. While
Venuti might claim that Kinsella’s translations are more
responsible politically because they do not efface the
differences of the source-culture, Heaney’s translation
strives to represent universal themes, and because of this,
the markers of historical specificity would imbricate
against this aim in his translation.

In lieu of a formal conclusion, in my final chapter I
revisit many of the issues at the heart of Irish critical
nationalism in order to suggest ways in which other
contemporary poets have tried to move away from the
overwhelmingly nationalistic orientation of Irish studies.
Specifically, I look at the historical perspective evinced in the work of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon as representing a challenge to history conceived in strictly nationalistic terms. Both Mahon and Muldoon rise above historical analyses which are motivated by attributing blame for past injustices, and instead see in different histories common processes that contextualize and clarify recent Irish history. As well, in this chapter I look at the challenge to critical nationalism posed by Irish feminist poets who see nationalism as an oppressive doctrine in contemporary Irish public life. Medbh McGuckian, Eavan Boland, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill critique the domestic and religious codes that underwrite Irish nationalism, and, in different ways, work to both demystify these practices and liberate themselves from the subjectification of women within the ideology of nationalism.
Chapter One

Ideology and the Politics of Criticism in Contemporary Irish Studies

In her introduction to The Living Stream, Edna Longley offers a polemical account of the state of contemporary Irish literary criticism. Embarking from the observation that "it has grown harder to discuss Irish literature without being drawn into arguments about culture and politics" (9), Longley chronicles the impact that political, especially post-colonial, modes of reading have had on the study of Irish literature. According to Longley, post-colonialism, especially "in its simpler models" (28), serves as a thinly-veiled discourse of Irish nationalism, which, by obscuring its own politics, benefits from the imprimatur of critical disinterestedness. Longley is especially critical of Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd, as well as the Field Day enterprise with which they are associated, as central figures in what she considers to be
the general displacement of aesthetics by nationalist politics.

Although I agree with Longley that Irish criticism frequently ignores the "formal and aesthetic dimensions" (10) of literary works, I disagree with many of her more contentious arguments regarding current Irish criticism. In fact, Longley's essay and the book it introduces appear divided on how exactly to proceed in this discipline, since she seems to disagree both with its overt politicization, and also with the specific political orientation that pervades Irish studies. That is, Longley does not simply desire that more traditional aesthetic criticism supplant political criticism; she also argues that the specific political "platform" of the discipline be expanded to accommodate non-nationalistic interpretations of Irish literature and history. The antithetical relationship between these two positions is made eminently clear when we consider that Longley advocates a depoliticized criticism in the introduction to a book that contains essays like "Progressive Bookmen: Left-wing Politics and Ulster Protestant Writers," and "'Defending Ireland's Soul'; Protestant Writers and Irish Nationalism after
Independence."

In an earlier essay on the same topic, "Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland," Longley offers the somewhat more strident view that "poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated" (Poetry 185). In that essay, Longley offers a compelling critique of both poetic and critical practices that articulate divisive ideological positions. In the introduction to The Living Stream, however, Longley seems pessimistically resigned to the politicization of literary and critical writing.

Longley's introduction, then, harbours an instructive duplicity that is increasingly common in contemporary Irish literary criticism, where a desire to speak about things other than politics is frequently coupled with a deferral of that desire. In this respect, Longley's essay not only chronicles, but also performs, the central crisis in the criticism. Early in the essay, Longley asserts that literature (specifically poetry) "possesses the semantic means, the metaphysical audacity, to press beyond existing categories, to prepare the ground, where, in Derek Mahon's words, 'a thought might grow'" (Living 9). However, by the end of the introduction, Longley has convinced herself that criticism, hampered by its ideological and partisan
inscriptions, can never excavate the ground prepared by literature:

Perhaps Irish Studies, as we now call them, have inherited two broad modes of enquiry. One, derived from the Enlightenment, is the empirical quest for data: an inter-disciplinary burden not only borne by historians. But the approach can never be wholly detached from another tradition: the discursive tradition of "talking about Ireland" which grew up with nineteenth-century Nationalism and is, indeed, politics by other means. At the moment Irish literary studies (including this book) are uneasily caught between the two. (Living 68)

Longley's fatalism notwithstanding, it seems that efforts to "wholly detach" the effects of the empirical and the discursive traditions are important, and that although the critic can not claim absolute neutrality, there are important facets of even overtly political poems that are being elided in an increasingly divisive critical arena. Before turning to Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella's explicitly political poetry, I would like to offer a sketch of the most pervasive assumptions extant in Irish literary criticism.

An assumption that surfaces frequently in Irish studies is that the work of the critic is hopelessly ideological and contentious, while literature remains
untainted by this miasma. I have already cited Longley's subscription to this somewhat uncritical position, but hers is far from the most egregious instantiation of this idea. In "Beyond Art and Politics," Richard Kearney describes politics as a dead-end enterprise that has to be ultimately overcome by the artist:

The artist refuses to take sides because he [sic] knows that no side can embody the totality which man must become. He cannot be partial to one ideology because every ideology is partial, and therefore refractory to the vision of a total man to which he is committed. (18)

This depiction of the artist as free from all political or ideological bias is appealing for a variety of reasons, but it simply fails to account for the readily observable phenomenon of explicitly political and ideological poetry. If poets are truly committed "to the vision of a total" (18) person, as Kearney suggests, they frequently pause in this pursuit in order to involve themselves, and their poetry, in overtly political matters. In fact, Kearney's view reveals itself, in the face of the poetic evidence to the contrary, to be much more idealistic than realistic.

According to John Brenkman, idealistic assertions have in common "an essentially critical attitude toward society,
in that society is always implicitly condemned as a lower order or unfulfilled or incomplete mode of existence" (6). That is, arguments or positions that we denote, and even perhaps derogate, with the term "idealism" frequently evince a mode of engagement with reality that disrupts the mutual exclusivity of the terms "idealism" and "materialism." Viewed in this way, Kearney's argument takes on a new significance and, instead of dwelling on the evidence that contradicts his position, it may be useful to reflect on the implicit critique of contemporary literary scholarship that is embedded in Kearney's idealistic assertion. In other words, Kearney's argument implicitly reminds us that critics are perhaps far too eager to ascribe a fairly narrow political and ideological agenda to poets who integrate political themes into their poetry.

Conversely, other critics openly condemn poetry that does not clearly mark its ideological position. For example, in his introduction to contemporary Irish poetry in the Field Day Anthology, Declan Kiberd asserts:

There has been a minor renaissance in Irish poetry in the past quarter century. It coincides, almost exactly, with the period that saw the collapse of unionist government in Northern Ireland, the waxing and waning of the
Irish economy, the hunger-strikes and bombings, and an apparent drift towards ungovernability on the island. Yet, with only rare exceptions, the leading poets of the period have had remarkably little to say about these things. (1316)

As Edna Longley astutely notes, Kiberd's assertion "may simply mean that [contemporary poets] don't say what [he] wants to hear" (Living 27). Speaking generally, the assumption underlying Kiberd's reading of contemporary poetry is that since poetry is situated in the real world of political crises, it has to respond explicitly and unequivocally to that world. It is interesting to note that Kiberd's most recent critical work, Inventing Ireland, seems to recede from this strident opinion. Early in the book, Kiberd asserts that one of his principal critical aims will be "to see works of art as products of their age; to view them not in splendid isolation but in relation to one another; and, above all, to celebrate that phase in their existence when they transcend the field of force out of which they came" (4). To those familiar with Kiberd's earlier writing, this seems almost like a complete overhaul of his critical practice, since immersing the texts in, and not transcending, the historically specific time and place of production has been the signal engagement of his work.
Indeed, shortly after the assertion cited above, Kiberd suggests that he will even allow "[his] chosen texts to define their own terms of discussion" (5). If this assertion seems to suggest that Kiberd is now a disinterested critic, this impression is not borne out by the volume itself, and Kiberd’s interests in post-colonial theory and Irish critical nationalism come to the fore throughout this work. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that immediately after suggesting that he will refrain from allowing any "fashionable literary theory" (5) to dominate his discussion of Irish literature, Kiberd quickly defines the terms "colonialism" and "imperialism" for his readers as a portent of the ostensibly nationalist analysis of the history of Irish writing to come.

Having said this, I feel it is imperative to characterize my own inquiry relative to the terms provided above. In what follows it may seem at times that I am advancing a somewhat idealistic notion of literature, in that I see Heaney and Kinsella, even in their explicitly political poetry, resist the simple truths and fixed positions that are inscribed within dogmatic ideologies. However, there are many assumptions at work in the
contemporary critical practice of equating poetical and political writing that have gone essentially unexamined, and which may suggest that the "materialistic" reading of poetry is subtended by an idealism of its own. As well, a closer look at the theoretical positions that inhere in the equation of poetry and politics will yield a broader series of questions through which to critique both Heaney's and Kinsella's political poetry.

The contemporary Irish critic who seems most resistant to the separation of poetry and politics is Seamus Deane, and it seems appropriate to regard his work as the apogee of a dominant school of Irish political and post-colonial criticism. Furthermore, as a leading member of the Field Day enterprise, Deane occupies a central position in Irish studies as an important editor and anthologizer. Although Field Day has published fifteen pamphlets, most of which present an explicit articulation of nationalist concerns, the monumental *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* represents both its greatest achievement, and, as Edna Longley remarks, "the key to all its mythologies" (*Living 22*). In his "General Introduction" to the three-volume
work, Deane offers his rationale for producing the anthology:

It is important to do this now because the political crisis in Ireland, precipitated in 1968, but in gestation for many years before that date, has exposed the absence within the island of any system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimize and secure the existing political arrangements. There has rarely been in Ireland any sustained coordination between prevailing cultural and political systems; indeed, when this has existed, its oppressive nature and function was always visible. (xx)

According to Deane, culture and politics are continuous enterprises, and any attempt to dis-integrate them results in a mystification of the former. This explains why the argument above, which seems self-contradictory, is absolutely clear to those familiar with Deane's critical position. What Deane derogates as the potentially "oppressive nature and function" of a cultural-political system in the final sentence is the same entity that he calls a "system of cultural consent," and whose absence he laments, in the opening sentence. We should not dwell for too long on the difference between "consent" and "oppression," since they are equal terms that simply describe the relationship between the individual consumer of culture and the political viewpoint that is expressed in
that work. This position seems somewhat simplistic in that it permits the critic to ignore all manner of nuance in his or her interpretations of aesthetic objects. As well, this equation of culture and politics elides the possibility that works of art can criticize political and ideological viewpoints while still recognizing the importance of situating themselves within the political context of their time. As we will see shortly, the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella overtly signals its complicity with a specific ideology, not as part of a narrative of cultural consent that seeks the oppression of others, but to reveal the tendency within sectarian politics to explain history as simplistically as someone like Deane explains aesthetics.

Deane's reduction of culture to politics is part of a general Marxist reading of culture and history that surfaces throughout his writing. For example, in a roundtable discussion titled "The Arts and Ideology," Deane offers the following explanation of his aesthetic ideology: "But I can't think of art, I can't enjoy art as something transcendant [sic], a floating cloud. It's always involved, even if only in the dream of innocence. In some
ways what you produce is something that is written and produced through you. This is usually clear in retrospect; but it seems repellent in prospect" (69). There are a number of interesting rhetorical gestures here that deserve attention. Most obviously, Deane tries to head off the charge of being what is called a "vulgar" Marxist³ by hedging somewhat ("in some ways") before offering his overbearingly deterministic reading of individual agency. Furthermore, it does not help his argument that he presents the notion of historical determinism within the context of a seemingly liberated individual making a free choice ("I can’t think of art" and "I can’t enjoy art").

More importantly, however, in this discussion Deane rehearses what I regard as the fundamental critical blindness that inheres in many of his works: art is either transcendent or political; a paradigm of Arnoldian disinterestedness or an explicitly ideological vehicle. Put simply, Deane offers no middle ground for an aesthetic theory that would agree that art and culture are politically inscribed, while admitting that they are able to maintain some distance from narrowly construed political views. Furthermore, determining why this synthesis of
culture and politics is consistently excluded from Deane’s critical writings is seminal in understanding how contemporary poetry offers a critique of positions that view politics as the ultimate horizon of all aesthetic production and reception.

Although Deane’s criticism reveals the workings of a fairly orthodox Marxism, it is possible to isolate a more immediate critical precursor for his arguments here. In “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” the German theorist Herbert Marcuse offers a genealogy of the construction of the space of culture within nineteenth-century bourgeois society. According to Marcuse, the realm of culture, with its twin emphases on beauty and the soul, fosters a sense of individuality and interiority that both mystifies our domination under capitalism and pacifies our impulse to resist this domination: “By exhibiting the beautiful as present, art pacifies rebellious desire. Together with the other cultural areas it has contributed to the great educational achievement of so disciplining the liberated individual, for whom the new freedom has brought a new form of bondage, that he [sic] tolerates the unfreedom of social existence” (121). Marcuse claims that bourgeois society
reifies the realm of culture as antithetical to the realm of production; furthermore, culture becomes "affirmative" in that, as John Brenkman notes, "the very satisfactions that the inner world provides -- be they spiritual, intellectual, or aesthetic -- become justifications for the outer world as it is" (6). Because it offers a cloistered realm into which we may recede, culture implicitly affirms exploitative social relations.

Deane's view of the relationship between culture and politics is derived from Marcuse, and his reading of the ethically compromised space of culture is explicitly polemical:

To believe that there is such a thing as fine writing, and that it is somehow autonomously separate from a speech by Ian Paisley, John Hume, or Margaret Thatcher, is to show that you truly have been brainwashed. It shows that you actually believe that there is a stable place called 'culture', to which you can retreat from the shouts and cries of the street, from the murder and mayhem that takes place there, and that you can go into that realm of humanist subjectivity in which literature or great art prevails. When you do that you are actually responding to an invention of the 19th-century bourgeois culture, the idea of autonomous individual character. ("Canon Fodder" 26)
Deane attempts to demystify culture here by exposing the "lie" of subjective interiority, and by unwriting the fixed opposition between the material and idealistic realm on which the notion of affirmative culture rests. However, Deane's argument rests on Marcuse's, which in turn develops out of a critique of the artistic movement known as Aestheticism. The defining characteristic of this movement, as Jochen Shulte-Sasse notes, is that Aesthetic art "severs itself consistently from all social relevance, establishing itself as a medium of purely aesthetic experience" (xiv). Marcuse clearly has this aesthetic paradigm in mind in his essay:

What is decisive in this connection is not that art represents ideal reality, but that it represents it as beautiful reality. Beauty gives the ideal the character of the charming, the gladdening, and the gratifying -- of happiness. It alone perfects the illusion of art. For only through it does the illusory world arouse the appearance of familiarity, of being present: in short, of reality. (Marcuse 120)

Whether or not this accurately describes the prevailing ethos of cultural production in the nineteenth century, as Marcuse claims, is of little interest here. That it simply does not describe the prevailing ethos of contemporary Irish cultural production suggests that Deane's unself-
conscious rehearsal of Marcuse’s theory is inadequate in terms of the works Deane attempts to critique.

That Deane’s critical writings are subtended by Marcuse’s definition of affirmative culture precludes the former from investigating the most important aspects of current poetry. Furthermore, by continuing to pursue the question of whether or not art is fundamentally political, Deane and others represent a fairly orthodox critical position within this discipline. The more compelling question for critics of contemporary Irish literature presupposes poetry’s involvement in the realm of politics. However, as Peter MacDonald notes, such an involvement does not diminish poetry’s essential difference from political rhetoric. MacDonald poses the following two challenging questions to critics investigating the relationship between politics and poetry: “What, for example, is poetry’s distinctiveness as a mode of discourse? And how might a critical language be found to account for this distinctiveness which is not itself compromised by the insistent crises and demands of its cultural and political context?” (19). In the ensuing discussion of Heaney’s and Kinsella’s explicitly political poetry, I will present what
I perceive to be the signal characterizing feature of these works in terms of how they inscribe themselves within current political debates. As well, I will show how poetry, in its persistent refusal to submit to confining and dogmatic political and critical doctrines, poses questions that force a rewriting of those practices which would seek to delimit its subtlety and thereby reduce its efficacy as social critique.

**An Equivocal Response: The Explicitly Political Poetry of Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney**

Both Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella have demonstrated in their poetry, critical writings, and interviews that they are not immune from taking ideological stances. Kinsella's *Butcher's Dozen*, a poem about the Widgery Report that followed the murder of thirteen civil rights marchers on Bloody Sunday, is a fundamentally partisan poem. Similarly, Heaney's early poems like "Docker," "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966," as well as poems seemingly too partisan to collect in volumes, like "Craig's Dragoons," reveal him to be engaged with the political realities of his time in a way that is concerted with
Catholic, nationalist, and therefore partisan, sensibilities.

*Butcher's Dozen* is a difficult poem for many of Kinsella's critics to discuss. For example, in "Poetry and the Avoidance of Nationalism," Vincent Buckley remarks defensively that the poem, "written in shock and protest...is extraneous to [Kinsella's] life work, and needs no further comment here" (28). It is true that the poem does not readily situate itself among Kinsella's other poems, as Kinsella suggests in the notes that accompany it: "One changed one's standards, chose the doggerel route, and charged" *(FD 58)*. However, this does not mean that the poem does not represent Kinsella's political views, only that overt politics very rarely finds its way into his poetry. It would seem all the more imperative for Buckley to focus on *Butcher's Dozen*, given that the stated aim of his paper is to research the prevalence of nationalist themes in contemporary Irish poetry. The difficulty for critics like Buckley is to balance what Thomas Jackson refers to as "the assertive public stance" *(Whole 112)* of the poem with Kinsella's generally introspective poetic practice. In fact, there is a tendency among Kinsella's
critics either to ignore or devalue his public, socially engaged poetry, because of the generally introspective orientation of many of his poems. For example, Jackson himself ultimately obfuscates Butcher's Dozen by viewing it through the lens of Jungian theory, but his assertions regarding the "Jungian— not 'Freudian' — symbolic sexual overtones of the unseen bullets and rifle shapes" (135) seems too abstract a reading of the poem to be of much explanatory value.

The bullets and rifles are "unseen" in Butcher's Dozen because the poem is not about the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry on January 30, 1972. Instead, the poem, as Kinsella explains, is about the whitewash of that massacre by a "Tribunal of Inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Widgery" (FD 53). Set one month after the massacre, the poem uses the traditional form of the aisling (FD 57) to present not only the victims' response to both the report and the massacre, but also to the state of English-Irish relations at the time. Due to this politically volatile subject, the poem has had many harsh critical responses. For example, Norman Vance asserts that "the facile rhymes and rhythms of Kinsella's pamphleteer doggerel reduce
there in a ghostly pool of blood

A crumpled phantom hugging the mud:

A pig came up, and away he ran.

Once there lived a hooligan,
who lost his life for throwing stones.

More voices rose. I turned and saw
three corpses forming, red and raw. (FD 13)

There are, however, many legitimate criticisms directed at this poem, and Kinsella has acknowledged many more in his notes to it. However, Butter's Dozen is interesting because of its inability to remain a strictly partisan or divisive work, although its readers have to endure much partisan rhetoric before appreciating the poem's more complex political statements. Early in the exegesis of literary works, it is equally mistaken to reduce literary criticism to the emotive tangle of political aggravation (220), then surely it is a mistake to look for "simple answers in the unconstructed nationalist rhetoric" (220). If, as Vance argues, it is a mistake to look for "simple answers in the emotive tangle of political aggravation" (220), then surely
There is a discernible continuity between the corpses, the inhumanity of the massacre, and the poem itself. Phrases like "red and raw," as well as references to "mangled corpses, bleeding, lame, / Holding their wounds" (FD 14) are jarring, and serve to inscribe the horror of the original violence of the event with their evocative diction. Edna Longley has commented on the "rather gruesomely evoked phantoms of the dead victims" ("Searching" 136), without suggesting that the poem's diction recalls the violence of the event at a fundamental, visceral level.

Perhaps more interesting than the effects achieved by vivid description, however, is Kinsella's use of enjambment. The prevalence of this device at once disrupts our easy reading of the poem, and paratactically mirrors Kinsella's frequent stops along the route of the march to listen to the dead. The significance of enjambed lines is demonstrated very early in the poem:

A month had passed. Yet there remained
A murder smell that stung and stained.
On flats and alleys -- over all --
It hung; on battered roof and wall. (FD 13)
The full stop after "passed" calls attention to itself because it could easily be replaced by a comma. However, the full stop causes us to dwell on the thought expressed in the phrase, which is a significant one in the poem, and reminds us that *Butcher's Dozen* is about the Widgery Report, and only obliquely about the massacre itself. The semi-colon after "hung" is more evocative still, since it causes us figuratively to "hang" suspended in the middle of a line, and therefore provides a deeper, emotive rendering of the tension that exists a month after the event itself. Both the disconcerting (because too vivid) diction and the stifled rhythm of the poem make this a difficult work to read, and this difficulty is at least partly responsible for the predominantly negative response the poem has received among its critics.

Perhaps more culpable, however, are the final ghostly speeches presented in the work, two of which serve as an explicit response to the only extended gloss on the events provided by the narrator:

The group was silent once again.
It seemed the moment to explain
That sympathetic politicians
Say our violent traditions,
Backward looks and bitterness
Keep us in this dire distress.
We must forget, and look ahead,
Nurse the living, not the dead. (FD 16)

These lines present a parody of the facile response to
generations of colonial oppression that would not, in fact,
end the violence in Northern Ireland. The suggestion that
the victims of violence "must forget" is especially
transparent, and this passage serves a kind of "straight
line" for the rejoinder by the eleventh victim:

'Here lies one who breathed his last
Firmly reminded of the past.
A trooper did it, on one knee,
In tones of brute authority.' (FD 16)

The clichéd lesson here is that forgetting history dooms
one to repeat it. This victim then goes on to espouse the
doctrines of violent Republicanism:

Persuasion, protest, arguments,
The milder forms of violence,
Earn nothing but polite neglect.
England, the way to your respect
Is via murderous force, it seems;
You push us to your own extremes. (FD 17)

The expression of this sentiment in the poem causes Buckley
to assert that "it is worth guessing... that this work
and [Kinsella's] continued attitude to it are in part
responsible for the weak reception Kinsella's poetry now
receives in Britain" (28). Even among a non-British
audience this reads like a defense of an indefensible position, and the poem reaches its brutal apex with the speech of this victim. It is not surprising that in the most recently published version of the poem these lines are simply deleted.  

The speech of the twelfth victim is the first to expand the scope of the poem, and introduces, at least, some degree of complexity into its reading of the historical process that culminated in the events of Bloody Sunday. For this victim, the massacre and the Widgery Report are connected with the ethos of "Empire-building":

The time has come to yield your place  
With condescending show of grace  
-- An Empire-builder handing on.  
We reap the ruin when you've gone,  
All your errors heaped behind you:  
Promises that do not bind you,  
Hopes in conflict, cramped commissions,  
Faiths exploited, and traditions. (FD 18)

The ideological terrain of the poem has shifted from the immanence of political violence as it is practiced on both sides to some sense of the historical causes of that violence. The clearly Republican politics of the previous victim is replaced, even moderated, by the nationalist but non-violent politics of this speaker.
The progress toward a more sophisticated understanding of the event is confirmed by the final speaking victim, who appears as a possible figure of rapprochement between the two nations even at a time when this seems impossible:

They, even they, with other nations
Have a place, if we can find it.
Love our changeling! (FD 19)

What is required, according to this commentator, is a degree of self-scrutiny by the English on the nature of their relationship to Ireland:

Their is the hardest lot to bear,
Yet not impossible, I swear,
If England would but clear the air
And brood at home on her disgrace
--Everything to its own place. (FD 19)

This sympathy for the English risks not being taken seriously in a poem that has expressed some of the disturbing sentiments that have surfaced in Butcher's Dozen, and yet the poem is finally sympathetic. When the speaker asserts that England's "is the hardest lot to bear" (FD 19) he or she is not arguing that the English are the real victims of the massacre, but that they find themselves at a difficult historical crossroads, and that it is no longer possible, in good conscience, to ignore the many sources of the violence in Northern Ireland. The challenge
to the English will be to "Purge the filth" (19), to adopt humane and democratic policies in Northern Ireland, and to reflect on the events as, at least partially, caused by English and Unionist attitudes toward the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Declan Kiberd makes a similar claim at the end of his essay "Anglo-Irish Attitudes":

British commentators are rightly outraged whenever London is bombed by the IRA, and they ask "What kind of people could do such a thing?" But they never ask an equally pressing question -- "What kind of people are we supporting in Ulster?" The ignorance of Ireland among English people is considerable, but the ignorance of Ulster Unionism among English liberals is almost total. The current crisis has promoted most Irish people to re-examine some of their deepest historical assumptions, but it has as yet given rise to no similar self-questioning in England. (642)

For writers like Kinsella and Kiberd, then, a crisis like Bloody Sunday offers, potentially at least, a chance to rise above the antagonistic politics that prevail in Northern Ireland, if both sides are willing to examine their deepest assumptions about the other.⁹

Interestingly, then, Butcher's Dozen does not subscribe to the reading of history advocated by the eleventh victim: "Simple lessons cut most deep" (FD 16).
Instead, the poem develops a degree of complexity and distance from the event itself (and the report) to arrive at a guardedly optimistic view of the future: if both sides could honestly reflect on the things that they can legitimately change, and on their fundamental similarities ("we all are what we are, and that / Is mongrel pure" FD 19) then there may be genuine progress made in English-Irish relations. When Edna Longley comments that "it is alarming that Kinsella's search for meaning and an inspiring cause in contemporary Ireland should find expression in a backward -- rather than forward-looking emotion" ("Searching" 137), it seems that she is ignoring both the speech of the final victim and the way in which the poem develops a more complex, future-oriented vision of the Troubles. As well, Donatella Badin offers a scathing attack on the poem, calling it "crudely sarcastic, embarrassing, even, in its invective" (175). Badin only recognizes in passing that "the narrator of the vision does not take sides, giving the last word to a more balanced victim" (177), and does not integrate the changing perspective toward violence offered in the poem within her overall reading of the work. While the poem may be
uncomfortable to read at times, it must be admitted that this is partly to do with the atrocity itself, and not with Kinsella's handling of the material, which, while not even-handed, is still much more tempered than is often recognized in critiques of the poem. Butcher's Dozen may have been written with "anger at [Kinsella's] heel" (FD 13), but in the dissipation of that anger we see that even the most partisan of impulses is tempered by the imperatives of serious, thoughtful poetry.

"Docker," one of Seamus Heaney's most overtly partisan collected poems, similarly resists a complete identification with a dogmatic, monological view. The poem, although it contains anti-Protestant sentiments, develops an understanding of the consequences of pervasive violence that outstrips its characterization as a partisan work. The poem substantiates an argument advanced by Michael Bernard-Donals regarding the prevailing ethos of Heaney's collection Death of A Naturalist. Although Bernard-Donals discusses only "Digging" at any length, his remarks apply equally well to many poems in the collection, including "Docker": Heaney's language "leads readers . . . to believe that the poet's inspiration . . . comes from the
realm of brute material reality" (79). However, this offers only a very general guideline for reading the volume, as the material reality of a poem like "Digging," set on the family farm and concerned with the transmission of values and traditions in rural households, contrasts the urban reality that informs the context of "Docker." To draw a perhaps overly-simplified trajectory through the volume, poems like "Digging," "Death of A Naturalist," "The Barn," "Blackberry Picking" and others provide a loose autobiographical sketch that helps us understand the values and beliefs inscribed in the more political poems like "Docker," "The Early Purges," "At A Potato Digging" and "For the Commander of the 'Eliza'."

In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney has acknowledged that "poetry and politics are, in different ways, an articulation, an ordering, a giving of form to inchoate pieties, prejudices, world-views, or whatever. And I think that my own poetry is a kind of slow, obstinate, papish burn, emanating from the ground I was brought up on" ("Unhappy" 67). The poems that render Heaney's rural childhood life therefore provide a kind of ideological context for the more overtly political poetry
in the volume. In all of these works, to extend Bernard-Donals' argument, Heaney is drawing on the most fundamental and material conditions of his life, including his rural childhood and religious identification.

The opening stanza, and particularly the opening line, of "Docker" locates us emphatically in the realm of material reality:

> There, in the corner, staring at his drink.  
The cap juts like a gantry's crossbeam,  
Cowling plated forehead and sledgehead jaw.  
Speech is clamped in the lips' vice. (DN 41)

The indexical "there" puts poet and reader into the bar with the subject of the poem, and suggests that Heaney's poem is explicitly and self-consciously engaged with the society from which it emerges. The grammatical error in the first line connotes an expected lack of formality, which here suggests the intimacy of the speaker and the implied interlocutor. The effect of this opening line is perhaps best appreciated if we rewrite it as a grammatically correct sentence: "There, in the corner, the docker stares at his drink." This line would be much weaker, since the tone would shift from one of engagement to one of observation, as if the poet does not really
inhabit the same world as the docker, but chronicles it from a detached perspective. Clearly, the speaker in "Docker" does inhabit the same world as the subject of the poem.

Furthermore, the industrial, dehumanized description of the docker makes plain the sectarian bias of the speaker. Heaney does not simply draw on the political and cultural divisions in this society for his material; he intimates that his poetry is fundamentally connected to those divisions and is itself motivated, partisan rhetoric. The poem's second stanza extends its partisan ethos:

That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic --
Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again;
The only Roman collar he tolerates
Smiles all around his sleek pint of porter.

(DN 41)

Heaney is aware that this poem will be read as a Catholic poet's response not only to the docker himself but to Protestantism in general. It would, therefore, be pointless to present this portrait as in any way above the political and cultural realities of its world. However, the idea of engagement takes on another, more sophisticated sense in the second stanza. In the first stanza, the poet and interlocutor (or reader) are situated in the bar with
the docker, and are, therefore, figured as engaged participants in his world. In the second stanza, the notion of engagement extends beyond the setting of the poem and into the world where, Heaney realizes, this poem will be regarded as overtly engaged, perhaps even propagandistic, writing.

Perhaps the tone of partisanship or propaganda accounts for why "Docker" is relatively under-represented in critical works on Heaney. Neil Corcoran and P.R. King say nothing about the poem except that its second stanza is prophetic in anticipating the recurrence of violence in Northern Ireland, but most critics seem to think that it shows either good sense or good taste to ignore the poem entirely. For example, Elmer Andrews offers the following dismissive remarks on the poem:

'Docker' deals with the 'Northern sectarian problem' in terms of a typological portrait of a Protestant labourer. The poem is an attempt by the young Heaney to deal with the ugliness of bigotry. He yields instead to mere ridicule of the docker -- his family life, his job, his appearance -- and disregards the matter of prejudice almost entirely. (17)

Andrews goes on to imply that the poem is "hysterical" (17), and congratulates Heaney for shifting his focus in
subsequent volumes: "Instead of confronting the trouble of Ireland's present, he deals with the troubles of Ireland's past" (17). This telling remark suggests that for Andrews, as for many others, poems like "Docker" are difficult to read because they threaten a widely-held belief that poetry should remain aloof from mundane, divisive politics. Interestingly, however, Andrews does not cite a single line from the poem in his denunciation of it, and fails to offer a reading of the final two stanzas of "Docker," where Heaney concentrates his most important observations on this society.

In the third stanza, Heaney introduces the central theme of the poem, and the specific facet of Northern Irish society that he wishes to consider. "Docker" becomes less about the docker himself, and more about the overbearing proximity of religious beliefs in the daily life of this community:

Mosaic imperatives bang home like rivets;  
God is a foreman with certain definite views  
Who orders life in shifts of work and leisure.  
A factory horn will blare the Resurrection.  
(DN 41)
Clearly religious doctrine is inscribed at too fundamental a level here, and does not encourage Christian sympathy and goodwill, but exists as a crux for the religious ideology of both sides. The phrase "certain definite views" is a euphemism for racial and religious hatred, but Heaney is not simply condemning Protestants, since both sides share the blame for the tension and violence which result from mutual intolerance. This view is confirmed in the next stanza, where Heaney, by likening the docker to a Celtic cross, connotes that both groups are equally responsible for the situation in the North:

He sits, strong and blunt as a Celtic cross,
Clearly used to silence and an armchair:
Tonight his wife and children will be quiet
At slammed door and smoker's cough in the hall.
(DN 41)

In his remarks on "Docker," John Wilson Foster asserts that Heaney's symbolic association of the docker with Catholicism through the image of the Celtic cross is an "unwitting incongruity or misguided stroke of ethnic ecumenism" (84). Heaney, however, is not attempting to elide the difference between Protestants and Catholics: a poem which refers to the Protestant's "cowling plated forehead" is hardly meant as a gesture of rapprochement.
Instead, the poem's closing lines, which refer equally to "working-class family men other than dockers" (Foster 85), point to how the systemic religious hatred in Northern Ireland infects domestic relations: "Tonight his wife and children will be quiet / At slammed door and smoker's cough in the hall" (DN 41). The pronounced specter of domestic tension is seen here as a consequence of religious hatred in the North, and the poem closes by suggesting that violence creates its own anti-logic in this world, since the family is equally victimized by the docker's hatred of Catholics. As René Girard, arguably the foremost theorist of violence, asserts, "Once violence has penetrated a community it engages in an orgy of self-propagation" (67).

With the closing stanza of "Docker," Heaney posits the contiguity between religious and domestic violence in Northern Ireland.

Although it is engaged with the world of "brute material reality" (Bernard-Donals 79), "Docker" develops a distance from the debilitating partisanship that can sometimes displace engaged social commentary. The poem is ultimately about the various kinds of tension and violence that inscribe themselves in Northern Irish society as a
result of overbearing religious fundamentalism, and provides a sense of the other victims of this social crisis. In asserting that violence can not be pointed at certain individuals or groups as easily as the docker is pointed out in the first line of the poem, "Docker" outstrips its own ideology and makes an important, constructive argument that implicates all of those who dogmatically adhere to any ideology.

Heaney’s later poem "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966" reads somewhat like a companion to "Docker" in that Heaney is again writing out of a specific partisan point of view, and again the poem rises above any affiliation with a simple dogmatic politics. In "Orange Drums" the strong, central image of the drum itself dominates the poem, and suggests an element of complexity in Heaney’s treatment of the Orange march:

The lambeg balloons at his belly, weighs Him back on his haunches, lodging thunder Grossly there between his chin and knees. He is raised up by what he buckles under. (N 68)

The drum symbolizes the ideology of the drummer and captures the paradox of that ideology. Although this figure feels empowered by his identification with the
group, we see that the drummer is ultimately disabled or
victimized by this ideology. Seamus Deane makes a similar
point in his description of the paradoxical nature of
sectarian identification: "Our main experience of
alienation has been sectarianism; and sectarianism is one
of the deepest forms of loyalty. To be alienated from that
to which you are most loyal is a complicated fate"
("Writer" 17). Furthermore, the difficulty that the drummer
has in keeping his balance (rendered paratactically by the
use of enjambment in the first and second lines) suggests
the disorienting, fundamentally debilitating effect that
sectarian identification has on the individual.

The poem extends its investigation of the idea that
sectarianism is an illness for both the individual and the
community with two important medical references: "the drums
preside, like giant tumours" (N 68) and "The air is
pounding like a stethoscope" (N 68). The first of these is
perhaps the most straightforward, with the drums and the
march figured as the symptom of the chronic, perhaps fatal
disease of sectarianism. The symbolic importance of the
stethoscope, however, requires some detailed exegesis of
the manner in which art and politics are brought into relation in Heaney's early poems.

In "Digging," Heaney offers a somewhat disturbing equation of the pen and the gun: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun" (DN 13). The implication, although not developed any further in this poem, is that poetry, and culture in general, can be used as a weapon. Jonathan Allison offers an unconvincing apology for these lines when he asserts, "It might be argued that the poem figures the gun as a defensive rather than offensive weapon" (30). Allison himself is clearly unconvinced by this reading, and revises it to the point of retraction in the next paragraph of his essay: "The gun signifies the subject's anger at the bigotry which Paisley is invoking in Ulster, and represents resistance on behalf of his [sic] marginalized laboring forefathers" (30). Although I find Allison's reading of the anti-Paisley aspect of the poem unsubstantiated, I agree that Heaney is figuring art as a weapon that can be used in sectarian conflict. Furthermore, Heaney confirms this aesthetic ideology, the view of art-as-weapon, in an essay on the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. While discussing
Mandelstam's "premonition and almost celebration of doom and resurrection" (P 219), Heaney adds the following self-reflexive comment:

We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes. Some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth. Mandelstam's life and work are salutary and exemplary: if a poet must turn his resistance into an offensive, he should go for a kill and be prepared, in his life and with his work, for the consequences. (P 220)

On the one hand, this passage reflects the necessary commitment associated with writing politically engaged poetry and journalism in a volatile and divided era, but on the other hand it presents a troubling and obfuscating view of the relationship between culture and prevailing political realities.

In "Culture, Conflict, and Murals: The Irish Case," Bill Rollston discusses the role of the artist in times of political hostility. Although Rollston does not specifically discuss the view of art that Heaney advocates in his essay on Mandelstam, he does address the assumptions that underscore the idea that poets "should go for a kill":
In February 1990, as the end of apartheid drew near in South Africa, Albie Sachs, political activist and victim of a state terrorist murder attempt, addressed some provocative thoughts on culture to his fellow members of the ANC. He argued for a moratorium on the use of the metaphor of 'culture as a weapon', a metaphor which he admitted he had himself used frequently in the past. 'A gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose', he argued. Art and literature, on the other hand, deal in ambiguity and complexity. Artists need to explore the world around them in all its complexity. (Rollston)

According to Sachs, a salient difference between art and politics, especially politics in times of crisis, is that the former realizes the complexity of social and political relations, while the latter seeks the kind of simplicity and clarity that can only come from a suppression of conflicting viewpoints.

"Orange Drums" captures the complexity of the artist's role in society by turning away from the notion that poetry is a weapon, and towards the notion that poetry can approach difficult political matters only obliquely. The symbolic importance of the stethoscope as a diagnostic instrument is telling here, and harbours none of the simplifications of ideological or sectarian rhetoric. Again, however, the complexity of the poem is elided in
many critical responses to it. Edna Longley asserts that the poem is ultimately divisive: "Combining aural and visual menace, the drums define Unionist hegemony in terms of 'giant tumours'" ("North" 71). It is, however, not Unionist hegemony but sectarianism itself that is indicted as cancerous. Predictably, Longley does not comment on the fact that Heaney's reproach is directed toward the dehumanizing, disabling effects of sectarian identifications and ideologies. This is not to say that the poem is intended to efface irreconcilable and antagonistic political positions. Moreover, the vision of the marchers (and extreme Unionism in general) in the final stanza can hardly be called inclusive on Heaney's part:

To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,  
His battered signature subscribes 'No Pope'.  
The pigskin's scourged until his knuckles bleed.  
The air is pounding like a stethoscope. (N 68)

However, "Orange Drums" offers an explicit challenge to all readers to recognize the disabling, even injurious consequences, of sectarian identification. It is not simply that Heaney is criticizing those who hold political opinions different from his own, but that he is chronicling the many problems associated with deriving an identity
based solely on oppositional politics: such an identity is, in fact, a burden. The final irony here, of course, is that a similar divisiveness is frequently enacted within Irish criticism. Even critics like Longley, who argue elsewhere on behalf of restoring formal and aesthetic concerns to literary criticism -- of depoliticizing it--often fail to record the ways in which this poetry critiques sectarian political divisions.

With the examples provided by poems like Butcher’s Dozen and "Docker," it is possible to return to the critical assumptions that characterize contemporary Irish studies. First, it becomes difficult to accept Seamus Deane’s view that poetry is simply a type of political discourse, evincing the same simple-minded will to power as partisan speeches. In fact, what the poems we have looked at have in common is a desire to liberate experience from the types of single-mindedness offered by sectarian ideology. "Docker" perhaps accomplishes this most successfully. The poem opens on an explicitly sectarian note only to show that sectarianism effaces other deep-seated problems in Northern Ireland. In fact, "Docker" shows that Northern Irish sectarianism is “affirmative" in
Marcuse's sense of the term, since it constructs a social logic that reifies one type of conflict and violence while effacing others. Sectarianism shows itself, perversely, as the realm into which one can recede in order to escape other real social problems.

Although poetry shows itself to be more than simply a species of political writing, we must acknowledge that a certain aesthetic ideology is at work on us if we regard the separation of poetry and politics as an unqualified or unconditional attribute of it. In his Theory of the Avant-Garde, the German theorist Peter Burger posits what he calls the "institution of art"12 as a key concept in helping to define the relationship between the aesthetic and the wider issues of culture and society. According to Burger, "works of art are not received as simple entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of works" (12). In other words, regardless of strategies at work (on the level of content) in specific poems that may cause us to regard some poems as politically engaged and others as not, the institution of literature itself will have a certain relationship with the overall political or social structures of a culture. The
status of the institution, at least in part, mediates whatever explicit political statements are offered in any work.

Burger’s view of the importance of assessing the institutional status of the aesthetic (or literary) relative to the political in general has come under much criticism.\textsuperscript{13} It would take too long to gloss all of them here, but those offered by Hans Sanders and Gerhard Goebel are especially pertinent. Sanders rejects the notion that autonomy and engagement are binary opposites, suggesting instead that they represent a “structural range of possibilities for art in bourgeois society” (as cited in Burger 97). It is interesting to recall that Burger’s binary view of art as either wholly distinct from politics or fundamentally ideological constituted the most egregious critical blindness in Seamus Deane’s writing. Burger, however, acknowledges that in some sense art is semi-autonomous, citing Gerhard Goebel’s argument that “Literature must already have a relative autonomous institutional status for political engagement or ‘autonomy’ to be possible alternatives” (Burger 97). Goebel seems to be working more deductively than either Burger or Deane,
and sees the validity of the theory of semi-autonomy in the fact that individual works of art evince different modes of political engagement. The notion of semi-autonomy is difficult for Burger to accept because the corollary of this position is that "art as an institution in bourgeois society would be an institution without a doctrine" (97). However, Burger is not clear on how such a doctrine would be formulated in the first place, and why individual artists would consent to the tacit control implicit in a prescriptive, doctrinaire aesthetics.

Some of the most explicitly political poems of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella show themselves to be resistant to the prescriptive demands of both a doctrinaire aesthetics and a sectarian ideology. Butcher's Dozen revisits the Bloody Sunday massacre and suggests what each side can learn from both the event and each other. This happens in two distinct phases within the poem: the first is a rehearsal of the tenets of violent Republicanism, which imbues the poem with a decidedly backward-looking perspective that has been the focus of almost all of the criticism of it. However, in its final phase, Butcher's Dozen saves itself, and, by extension, the massacre and the
Widgery Report, from the simple answers that sectarianism provides for complicated questions. As well, "Docker" closes by re-examining Northern Ireland from a perspective beyond sectarian division. Like Butcher's Dozen, the poem does not try to gloss over political animosities, but inscribes them into itself as part of the process of overcoming them. The final stanza of "Docker" calls our attention to the types of violence that are simultaneously caused by, and paradoxically effaced within, the experience of sectarian conflict. Lastly, "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966," more directly than either Butcher's Dozen or "Docker," shows that politically engaged poetry offers a possible rapprochement between two cultures in a way that, perhaps, can be incorporated within the larger scope of political affairs. The irony here is that whatever ecumenism is suggested within the poem takes place within the fundamentally divisive context of sectarian division.

While poems like "Docker" and Butcher's Dozen are able to engage with the material world of violence and conflict without, finally, affirming the ethos of sectarianism, it must be noted that not all political poetry maintains its semi-autonomous status. In his Aesthetic Theory, Theodor
Adorno captures the difficult balance associated with writing politically engaged poetry: "Freedom, the presupposition of art and the self-glorifying conception art has of itself, is the cunning of art's reason. Blissfully soaring above the real world, art is still chained by each of its elements to the empirical other, into which it may even sink back altogether at every instant" (8). This sentiment is expressed with uncanny similarity by Heaney himself, who has no doubt fretted over the manner in which real political crises both nourish and threaten aesthetic freedom:

On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps--destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps exhilarating, are in the air. At one minute you are drawn towards the old vortex of racial and religious instinct, at another time you seek the mean of humane love and reason. (P 34; italics added)

Only rarely does Heaney seem seriously to entertain the validity of what he here calls "religious and racial instinct" (P 34). For example, in an article in The Listener (1968) titled "Old Derry's Walls," Heaney adopts a
strident and divisive political stance that is atypical in his writing: "Two years ago, in an article on Belfast, I tried to present both sides as more or less blameworthy. But it seems now that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland at large, if it is to retain any self-respect, will have to risk the charge of wrecking the new moderation and seek justice more vociferously" ("Derry’s Walls" 522). Although this is hardly a call to violent resistance, it expresses a political sentiment that is rarely seen in Heaney’s poetry.

However, it must be noted that Heaney has produced poetry that has (to borrow Adorno’s terms) “sunk back into the empirical world.” Michael Molino has written on some of Heaney’s uncollected, explicitly political poetry, and has singled out two poems, “Intimidation” and “Craig’s Dragoons,” as works which “rearticulate the old antagonisms of Ulster politics from a single, exclusionary perspective” (184). “Intimidation,” another poem about Orange Day marches, lacks the subtlety and progressiveness of “Orange Drums”:

Each year this reek
Of their midsummer madness
Troubles him, a nest of pismires
At his drystone walls.

Ghetto rats! Are they the ones
To do the smoking out?
They'll come streaming past
To taste their ashes yet. (34)

The ambiguity of the title is perhaps the only complexity
in this poem: the poem is about the attempt by marchers to
intimidate Catholics, but the strident diction ("pismires"
and "ghetto rats") suggests that perhaps Heaney's poem, in
some ways, is itself meant as a gesture of intimidation.

"Craig's Dragoons,"¹⁴ however, is unfortunately simple
and direct. Michael Molino refers to the poem as "a
caustic political ballad designed solely to stir Catholic
emotions and promote solidarity" (182), and even Karl
Miller, who praises the poem, refers to it as "propaganda"
(48):

Come all ye Ulster loyalists and in full chorus join,
Think on the deeds of Craig's Dragoons who strike below the groin,
And drink a toast to the truncheon and the armoured water-hose
That mowed a swathe through Civil Rights and spat on Papish clothes.
(As cited in Miller 47)

The poem recalls the recent history of civil rights abuses
but, despite this admirable aim, it remains a fairly
divisive, ideological work. The familiar rhythm of the
poem recalls the genre of Irish rebel songs (the poem comes
with a note that it should be sung to the tune of "Dolly's Brae"). The comparison is appropriate enough here, since we would hardly expect rebel songs, which are meant to stir the emotions to a fever pitch, to contain subtle reasoning in the face of sometimes difficult political and historical circumstances.

In part, poems like "Intimidation" and "Craig's Dragoons" help to explain why the issue of sectarianism surfaces so infrequently in the poems of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella. Quite simply, there is nothing autonomous about such poetry, as it readily articulates a divisive political message. Elsewhere, Heaney paraphrases Yeats's often-quoted dictum, "Poetry is out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is rhetoric" (P 34), and, by this accounting, poems like "Intimidation" and "Craig's Dragoons" are clearly "rhetoric." The "public and brutal" (P 34) world in which this poetry is written cannot be simply ignored, nor can it be simply appeased in serious, engaged poetry. That is, poetry loses its idealistic, critical relationship with the material world when it sinks back into it and adopts the unreflective positions inherent in sectarian ideologies. According to
Theodor Adorno, "Even the most sublime work of art takes up a definite position vis-à-vis reality by stepping outside reality's spell, not abstractly once and for all, but occasionally and in concrete ways, when it unconsciously and tacitly polemicizes against the condition of society at a particular point in time" (7). Poems like "Intimidation" polemicize against certain individuals and, therefore, affirm the status quo of sectarianism. As we will see in the next section of this study, both poets generally approach the issue of political and cultural division obliquely in their writing. Both contend with the related issues of tradition, identity, and the linguistic colonization of Ireland, and in doing so infuse their poetry with a historical sensibility that redresses the power, and pervasive threat, of what Adorno terms "reality's spell" (7).
Chapter Two

Receding From the Public: Markers of Identity in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella

The overtly political and public poetry discussed in the previous chapter has been the focus of much critical writing on Kinsella and Heaney. While these poems merit an engaged and extensive critical consideration, they have, especially in the case of Heaney, been reified into a meta-statement regarding his poetics by critics intent on advancing narrowly-focused readings of his work. In fact, the overwhelmingly political orientation of contemporary Irish studies has contributed to the construction of various canons that include overtly political, even sectarian, poetry, while frequently taking little notice, except to disparage, poetry that is less explicitly political. For example, in his introduction to The Field Day Anthology’s section on contemporary poetry, the influential critic Declan Kiberd laments what he calls “the
general political reticence" (FDA, 3, 1316) of many contemporary poets, and further criticizes these writers for the increasing “privatization” (FDA, 3, 1316) of their work. For a critic like Kiberd, writing that takes a step back from the public sphere is in danger not only of becoming socially obsolete, but even complicit with the forces that maintain the status quo in Ireland.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, if Kiberd’s arguments are not persuasive enough on their own, he evokes the ghost of Yeats as a disciplinary figure and benchmark of politically important poetry. Kiberd states that “it is impossible to believe that a Yeats would have been [as] reticent” (1316) as contemporary poets on the current matter of Ireland. More specifically, Terry Eagleton has used Yeats as the yardstick against which to assess Seamus Heaney’s merits as a poet. Eagleton concludes a luke-warm review of one of Heaney’s collections by asserting that “Most of the poems in Field Work are superb, but the plain truth is that Heaney doesn’t really have much to ‘say’ which is inherently more complex or compulsive than a whole range of more ‘minor’ writers. A lot of what Yeats had to ‘say’ was nonsense, but he did after all have a lot to say” (“Review”
105). Notwithstanding his transparent attempts to ground his arguments in common sense or objective criteria ("the plain truth", "after all"), Eagleton presents himself here as an arbiter of what is and is not worth saying. Furthermore, his evocation of Yeats as the muse of political poetry leaves us with no doubt as to what constitutes the proper subject matter of poetry.

It seems entirely feasible, as well as deeply ironic, that criticisms like Kiberd's and Eagleton's are a good part of the reason that many contemporary poets turn away from explicitly political matters and towards more private and personal themes. Furthermore, Kiberd's narrow definition of what constitutes political engagement is shown in the works he praises:

In raw poems and atavistic images, Padraic Fiacc has described the sufferings of Northern nationalists; and, with an always astringent irony, Tom Paulin hasvaluably documented the humiliations to unionist pride from the proroguing of Stormont (1972) to the Anglo-Irish agreement (1985). But the celebration of the rituals of a domestic life, to which the 'Troubles' are a merely subordinate backdrop, is the more common strategy of the generality of poets, epitomized by Paul Muldoon and Frank Ormsby. (FDA, 3, 1316)
The term "atavistic" above is a kind of shorthand for "partisan," as Edna Longley explains: "Try this triad: 'I'm atavistic; you're bigoted; he's a terrorist'" (Poetry, 188-89). More importantly, however, we see that Kiberd praises poetry that, in some measure, represses the markers of individual identity. In the final chapter of this study, I will look at the diverse themes that Kiberd collapses into the phrase "the rituals of domestic life" as they surface in the work of a number of Irish poets, while here I want to focus on how Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella turn towards a poetics of identity as a way to distance themselves somewhat from the demands placed on their poetry by the political and material exigencies of contemporary Irish cultural politics. Specifically, I will be looking at how both writers approach the sometimes difficult issue of identity in their poetry, and how a consciousness of place and past, figured as both history and tradition, functions as a marker of individual identity in this poetry.
Identity and its Vicissitudes

As a concept, "identity" is a difficult one for politically oriented literary criticism. While the concept is undoubtedly at the centre of most meditative poetry (Seamus Heaney's "Digging" and Kinsella's "Baggot Street Deserta," to which we shall turn shortly, are two examples), it threatens to disrupt the drive towards generality that is central to political criticism. That is, at some level, "Digging," and, I would add, Heaney's much maligned Bog poems, are about Heaney himself, and these poems, therefore, contain an admixture of themes which preclude the totalizing goal of deterministic critical readings. "Identity" has proven to be a difficult critical concept because it threatens to disrupt the boundary between historical and political generality, and individual agency and specificity. Furthermore, as I will show, the turn towards Derridean deconstruction enacted by a number of Irish critics serves as a way to police the concept of identity. This use of Derrida's work is especially opportunistic and transparent in studies which elide idiosyncrasy and individual expression in service of
historically expansive and deterministic readings of culture.

In terms of his explication of the concept of identity, Seamus Deane is perhaps the most illuminating of contemporary critics. His earliest writings cohere around the theme of Irish identity, and he is singularly responsible for both the complexity and trajectory of the discourse surrounding this important idea. In an early essay, "The Writer and the Troubles" (1974), for example, Deane traces the intricacies of Northern Irish national and individual identity:

For Northern Ireland has never been either state or nation, nor has it ever had any consciousness of itself that has not been fundamentally beleaguered by the contrary consciousness that each of the different sects there knew the other to possess, each knowing that this implied a belonging to others outside Northern Ireland which excluded such belonging to "others" inside it. Sectarianism, so savage in its political expression, can reach existential heights in its definition of "otherness". (16-17)

This is a very challenging depiction of Irish identity, and one that has been influential for even the most recent critics of Irish writing. According to Deane, identity is always inhabited by its contrary, and this has prevented the emergence of a stable sense of self and community in
the North. Following Deane's argument, Declan Kiberd, Terry Eagleton, and Richard Kearney, to name only three among many, embark, in recent critical studies, from the view that Irish cultural and political identity is as much a thing in itself as it is a response to the other.

In a more comprehensive treatment of the importance of "identity" from roughly the same time, Deane isolates it as the signal concept of Irish literature, and the hermeneutical key to understanding the progress of Irish politics. I quote from Deane's "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism" at length:

The notion of a Gaelic and free Ireland was a dream of identity to the realization of which the course of revolution was directed. It failed certainly, but not completely...The masks of subservience, of foreign power, of colonialism are stripped off the Irish psyche slowly. Still, the political impetus of the initial period of the Irish revolution was given added force by the capacity of the Irish writers to create for each mask its appropriate mirror, to give to nationalist history a physiognomy which betrayed in its changes the evolution of the face of truth. Red Hanrahan, Christy Mahon, Leopold Bloom, Stephen Daedalus, Father Moran are all, even to blatancy, representative Irish figures. Each incarnates an achievement in self-consciousness, a triumph of identity, which is closely meshed in with the democratic impulses which produced Sinn Fein -- the meaning of which (Ourselves) is precise and significant. (5-6)
According to Deane, identity, especially in its chameleon-like form, is the concept that links Ireland’s literary and political history, and it would, therefore, seem imperative that politically oriented critics pay it particular attention. In fact this has happened, and critics like Terry Eagleton have followed the broad-strokes of Deane’s argument. In his essay “Nationalism: Commitment and Irony,” published by Field Day, Eagleton stresses that identity has to be simultaneously cherished and kept at a distance:

What any oppressed group has most vitally in common is just the shared fact of their oppression. Their collective identity is in this sense importantly negative, defined less by shared positive characteristics than by a common antagonism to some political order. That negative collective identity, however, is bound over a period of time to generate a positive particular culture, without which political emancipation is probably impossible. (15-16)

This view of identity in general, and the specific relationship between culture and political liberation, is derived from Deane’s work in the mid-seventies, which continues to dominate many current critical treatments of Irish literary and political history.
It is somewhat surprising, given Deane's long-standing interest in this important critical concept, that he is among a number of contemporary critics who have repudiated the usefulness of "identity" as a critical category. In a recent conference paper, Deane has suggested that "there should perhaps be a moratorium on words like 'tradition', 'identity', their plurals and all their associated cohorts" ("Canon Fodder" 23) in contemporary Irish studies, without giving a clear sense of why this drastic act of self-censorship is necessary. In a somewhat concerted vein, the critic David Lloyd has published perhaps one of the most contentious and often-quoted articles on Seamus Heaney, "'Pap for the Dispossessed': Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity." In this essay, Lloyd deconstructs Heaney's aesthetic ideology on the basis of the poet's engagement with the markers of his own identity. In fact, it may be beneficial to examine Lloyd's argument in some detail as it offers both a comprehensive deconstruction of the concept of identity and a contentious reading of Irish political history.
Lloyd contends that Heaney's poetry gestures towards serious political and aesthetic questions, but that these gestures are "almost entirely formal" (164), since the final recuperation of a consoling identity defuses the "disruptive effect" (164) created by the poet bringing that identity into some crisis. That is, Lloyd sees Heaney's poetry as subtended by an over-riding simplicity which allows the poet to reaffirm his identity in the face of challenges to it, because Heaney's themes, "place, identity, and language" (166), always serve sameness, and delimit the threat to identity posed by difference, or the Other. While this may be counted a mere stylistic quirk if it appeared elsewhere, Lloyd suggests that the consequences of Heaney's persistent eclipse of difference is especially derelict given the history of Irish politics. According to Lloyd, sectarian division in Ireland is bolstered by a politics of identity, and Heaney's poetry is, therefore, implicitly helping to determine the "form of the current civil war in Ireland" (161).

Although this is not the place to critique Lloyd's analysis at great length, a few of the most glaring shortcomings in his essay must be noted. By failing to
contextualize the development of Catholic nationalist identity as a response to English colonialism, Lloyd is unable to appreciate the political necessity of establishing and strengthening that identity. Lloyd presents the history of sectarian division in a foreshortened way, as if political and racial identities spring up overnight instead of in a response to political oppression, and this blindness leads Lloyd to the stupefying assertion at the heart of his argument: that national identities cause violence. Lloyd, it seems, is unwilling to concede that identities, especially those formed in response to oppression, are a necessary phase, as Terry Eagleton asserts, in the achievement of political emancipation.  

Lloyd's reading of nationalism emerges from the most glaring critical blindness extant in his essay. Lloyd seems too willing to suppress the specifics of Irish history in order to present Ireland as one European nation among many. For example, Lloyd offers the following gloss on the recent history of Ireland: "It would be generally true to say that the history of Ireland in the last seventy years -- to regress no further -- exemplifies both the
efficacy and the disabling contradictions of the politics of identity. The peculiar and largely anomalous position of Ireland as an ex-colonial state in a Western European context has led to political and social developments which are untypical of but by no means entirely alien to the general political frame of recent European history" (160, emphasis added). By regarding Irish nationalism as continuous with all European nationalisms (and Lloyd does so on two occasions in this paper), he suppresses the idiosyncrasies of Irish history in the same way that, he contends, group identity eclipses individuality. As well, Lloyd continually criticizes what he sees as Heaney’s disrespect for difference, but repeats that error himself when he refuses to consider how Irish history is discontinuous with European history.

It would be risking very little to say that the largely negative response to Lloyd’s essay stems from his attempts to elide the discontinuities between Irish culture and general European culture. Robert Welch, for example, takes this discontinuity as the point of embarkation for his book Changing States: Transformation in Modern Irish Culture. According to Welch,
Ireland, unlike most other European countries, did not have the opportunity of fully experiencing the experiments of individualism, enterprise, collectivity and modernization that are known as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Being a colony of England, Ireland was cut off; her people experienced Europe, in the modern period, that is to say from about 1600, through an English transmission. (1)

Furthermore, I would suggest that the concertedness that Lloyd traces between Irish history and European history is of methodological significance for his paper. Lloyd approaches the issue of identity as a kind of anachronism, the surety of which has been deconstructed, in France at least, since the late 1960s. By asserting that Ireland can equally afford to dispense with this admittedly problematic political concept, Lloyd once again is arguing for a single European culture and identity that would suppress the specifics of Ireland's experience as a colonized and post-colonial nation. Finally, Lloyd incorporates Derridean deconstruction in his reading of Irish history not because it is at all pertinent to that history, but simply because it offers theoretical support for the displacement of identity as a central concern of Irish studies. In fact, Derridean deconstruction is fundamentally incompatible with Lloyd's overarching argument, as Peter MacDonald summarizes
it: "Lloyd's critique of Heaney...can be seen to amount to little more than a theoretically dense series of allegations that the poet, read in the totalizing discourse of cultural politics, fails to be republican enough" (11). Similarly, but in more accusatory terminology, Edna Longley also sees the affirmation of a specific political identity as the goal of Lloyd's paper: "Behind [Lloyd's] piling of abstraction upon abstraction, his unmasking of the collusions between 'imperial ideology' and 'bourgeois Nationalism,' one glimpses once again a sinister purity" (LS 31). Clearly, then, Lloyd's use of Derrida's deconstruction of identity is opportunistic, and does not fit, finally, with Lloyd's recuperation of a less politically ambiguous identity than we find in Heaney's poetry.

I want to leave Lloyd's general discussion of identity politics, nationalism, and history, to consider the validity of the reading of Heaney's "Digging" on which Lloyd bases many of his subsequent arguments. This reading of the poem suffers from a common but no less unsettling critical ideology that posits works of literature as simple, utopian, and naive, while critical discourse is
complex, demystifying, and rigorous. "Digging," however, is a much more intricate poem than Lloyd contends, especially in terms of its representation of the relationship between the poet and the father. As I noted earlier, Lloyd sees Heaney's poetry as enacting a formal, almost empty crisis of identity as a preliminary gesture in the process of consolidating and confirming that identity. However, Lloyd seems too quick to elide the negative moment, the moment of discontinuity, that is recorded early in the poem:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down.

(DN 13)

According to Lloyd, Heaney here reduces "physical labour to a metaphor for cultural labour" (163), and attempts to elide the essential differences between himself and his father. If anything, however, the poem emphasizes these differences, and foregrounds the disconnection between the world of the poet and that of his father ("I look down"). As well, the father is depicted almost as an object in the poem, which heightens the sense that the poet does not understand, and is not included, in his work and world:
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds 
Bends low, comes up twenty years away 
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills 
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft 
Against the inside knee was levered firmly. 
(DN 13)

The impenetrability of the father is rendered by the 
derivation of this figure in parts, and the "rump," "boot," 
and "knee" never quite coalesce into a coherent 
representation of a single, knowable individual. 
Interestingly, the poet's father is humanized and 
individualized in other poems from this period, most 
notably in "A Boy Driving His Father to Confession." This 
poem, however, was not collected in Death of a Naturalist, 
possibly because it presents the father as knowable, and, 
therefore, disturbs the sense that some aspect of the 
poet's own familial, agrarian past is inaccessible to the 
poet. Contrary to Lloyd's argument, it would seem that the 
distance between these two figures is rendered most acute 
here because of the unbridgeable gap between their distinct 
types of labour. Heaney does, of course, conflate rural 
and cultural labour in many poems from his early volumes 
("Thatcher" and "The Diviner" are two obvious examples),
but this does not happen in "Digging," which allows the aura of distance and unknowability to accrue to the figure of the father in this poem.

Heaney's disconnection from his father, and the rural existence that he comes to symbolize, is confirmed when the father drops out of the poem entirely, and is eclipsed by the poet's grandfather:

By God, the old man could handle a spade. Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. (DN 13)

This is an interesting moment in the work, where the poet, seemingly anxious about the proximity of the father, and on the verge of discovering the fundamental gap between them, opts to focus on the grandfather, who is a less problematic because more distant figure. The poet remembers a time when he had a legitimately uncomplicated relationship to the land, his past, his family, and his identity, as a way to avoid or truncate his current angst over these relationships. Lloyd, having already convinced himself that "Digging" celebrates the victory of identity over
historical disruption, misses the complexity of this transition in the poem:

What assures that continuity, both across generations and across the twenty-year span of the writer's own history, is the symbolic position of the father in possession of and working the land. Standing initially as a figure for the writer's exclusion from identity with land and past, the father, by way of his own father, slides across into the position of a figure for continuity. (164)

The cryptic phrase "slides across" completes a connection between the two figures that is never made in the poem itself. As well, the relationship between the speaker and the father remains aporetic, suggesting that any contemporary relationship between the poet and this rural identity is problematic. At the conclusion of the poem, the poet's exclusion from this world is emphasized by anticlimax. The lines,

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head. (DN 14)

seem to gather momentum, and bring us to a point where we might expect Heaney finally to confirm his intimate connection to the land, his past, and his father, but instead we read the final, almost embarrassed conclusion of the poet's contemplation: "But I've no spade to follow men
like them" (14). The poem does not neatly resolve the issue of disconnection, as Lloyd contends, but emphasizes the poet's distance from his own past.

In fact, many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist* follow a clear temporal pattern: the rural and agrarian poems are written as unproblematic memories from an idyllic childhood, and are, therefore, set in the past,\(^{20}\) while the poems set in the present, like "Ancestral Photograph" and "Follower," are pervaded by a sense of discontinuity and loss:

I wanted to grow up and plough,  
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.  
All I ever did was follow  
In his broad shadow around the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,  
Yapping always. But today  
It is my father who keeps stumbling  
Behind me, and will not go away.  
("Follower," *DN* 24-25)

Here, and in "Digging," we see the paradox associated with personal history and the past in general in Heaney's (and, I will argue, Kinsella's) poetry: the sense of separation from the past causes that past to be more acutely and viscerally felt, to be, in a word, more "present," than if that past posed no problem for the poet. The phrase "will
not go away" that concludes "Follower" neatly captures this paradox with its ambiguous tone, and we are left unable to determine exactly how the poet feels about the ubiquity of the memory of his father.

Poems of Place

While "Digging" articulates a certain anxiety about identity, Heaney has a number of early poems that connote a sense of belonging and connection to both the past and the land. Many of the poems in Door Into the Dark celebrate rural labour and values, while suggesting that the poet's agrarian roots have imprinted him with a kind of memory or identity which stretches into the primordial past. "The Forge" is exemplary in this respect:

All I know is a door into the dark.  
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;  
Inside, the hammered anvil’s short-pitched ring,  
The unpredictable fantail of sparks  
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.  

(DD 19)

The opening line casts this as a self-reflexive poem, and while "the dark" could symbolize a variety of things, it does conjure up images of psychological depth, personality,
and subjectivity. As well, this poem, and the volume as a whole, locates the roots of this subjectivity in the distant past, immune from historical process and change. In this respect, *Door into the Dark* sits oddly between *Death of a Naturalist*, where Heaney contemplates the sense of disruption and discontinuity with his agrarian identity, and *Wintering Out*, where Heaney examines the multivalent historical processes that impact on individual identity. In the latter volume, Heaney ponders this identity in greater detail, eschewing the sense that it somehow accrues to the individual from a distant, barely perceptible past, and representing it instead as an accumulation of sometimes contradictory impulses. As well, the nostalgic, intractable strata that informs individual, and even communal or national identity, collide with the forces of historical change that impact on the life of the poet.

It is not surprising that a more complex vision of identity would find expression in *Wintering Out*. Published in 1972, the volume contains poems that were written after the reinstatement of political violence in the North, and Heaney's unwillingness to commit to the sectarian ideology of his group infuses these poems with a sense of distance.
from his "people." Reflecting on this time some years later, Heaney would explain his withdrawal from overt politics as a poetic imperative:

To locate the roots of one's identity in the ethnic and liturgical habit of one's group might be all very well, but for the group to confine the range of one's growth, to have one's sympathies determined and one's responses programmed by it was patently another form of entrapment. The only reliable release for the poet was the appeasement of the achieved poem. ("Place and Displacement" 6-7)

This position is stated somewhat more axiomatically by the ghost of Joyce in Heaney's Station Island: "That subject people stuff is a cod's game/...You lose more of yourself than you redeem/ doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent" (SI 93). For Heaney, keeping at a tangent meant detaching his poetry from expressly political interests, "privatizing" it, as Kiberd would say.

The weight of Joyce's approval notwithstanding, many regarded Heaney's decision to emigrate from Belfast to Co. Wicklow in the Republic as a betrayal. In the introduction I discussed how Sidney Burris, for example, opens his book on Heaney by describing a correspondence between himself and an inmate accused of killing a police officer during the sectarian violence. Burris quotes approvingly the
prisoner's opinion of Heaney's withdrawal from explicit politics: "I believe if artists live in a particular society, the conflict affects them in one way or another, and I don't believe that artists can help taking sides. Their work should in some way reflect the side they have chosen" (viii). Instead of taking sides, however, Heaney has noted that the poets of his generation "did not feel the need to address themselves to the specific questions of politics because they assumed that the subtleties and tolerances of their art were precisely what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerances of public life" ("Place and Displacement" 5). As we will see shortly, Heaney's conviction that art can and should rise above antagonistic ideologies comes at the price of painstaking self-doubt and self-consternation. "Station Island," for example, provides a thorough accounting of the personal consequences that attend Heaney's attempts to avoid narrowly-construed dogmatic political positions in his poetry.

The cost to Heaney of emigrating is written into his subsequent poetry in a variety of ways. The poetry of this
period is replete with images of exile, guilt, and dismay:

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?

(N 73)

For those familiar with his earlier writing, the final stanza of the poem records a particularly interesting dilemma for the poet:

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

(N 73)

The crisis being articulated here revolves around Heaney's obligations, as a public figure, to his community, and his obligations to himself and his poetry. The "sparks" which provide "meagre heat" are the circumstances of Heaney's own life, and, more specifically, in this poem, his response to the Troubles. Here we find perhaps the most direct representation of what Shelby Steele has called "racial orthodoxy" (30). As a public figure, the writer is expected to confirm for a certain group the legitimacy of
its ideological beliefs. However, the aesthetic demands Heaney places on himself prevent him from offering the simplicities of propagandistic utterances in his poetry. What is exemplary about "Exposure," however, is that here it is the aesthetic demands and not the ideology that is the burden. Obsessing on his situation as an artist has caused the poet to miss out on the historically significant changes that the reinstatement of violent revolution may bring about in the North. Heaney attributes to the violence a positive quality by referring to it as a "portent" or an omen of something to come.

The image of the poet at the end of "Exposure" is a very attractive one for Heaney's apologists. The persona here evokes some sympathy, since he is depicted as having his community and identity usurped from him by political and social forces beyond his control. In fact, the poet is depicted as a unique victim of the violence in Northern Ireland, since he can not write with any kind of detachment in that politically volatile context. Eamon Halpin has summed up the prevailing political ethic of Heaney's middle period as follows: "Heaney is nostalgic for a lost homeland because that homeland was never properly his to begin with;
he is an exile, not because he abandoned Northern Ireland, but because -- in a sense -- it abandoned him" (67).

Halpin's argument, however, is unconvincing. The notion that Northern Ireland was never properly Heaney's home is refuted by much of Heaney's early poetry, which establishes him, first and foremost, as a poet of a specific time and place. In fact, what has intrigued and attracted most readers of these volumes is precisely how inalienably "at home" Heaney appears in them. For example, Heaney's use of the dinnseanchas tradition in poems like "Anahorish," "Broagh," and "Toome," suggests that the poet is, in some measure, articulating a sense of belonging to this place even while political realities problematize that identity.

"Anahorish" furnishes an excellent example of the complex style of belonging recorded in Heaney's place-poems:

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My 'place of clear water'
the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass. (WO 16)
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The possessive pronoun in the opening line should satisfy us that the poet feels a connection to the land, and the romanticization of this locale, the hill as omphalos(to
borrow an idea from Heaney’s essay "Mossbawn"), perhaps of the poet’s identity, suggests that Heaney is recuperating a personal vision of this terrain outside historical and political circumstances. Seamus Deane has remarked that “an ideology devoted to a place, a specific area, surrounds that place in a shimmering aura of significance which intensifies its brilliance in a period of violence” (“Irish Poetry” 6), and Heaney’s place poems clearly work out of such an ideology of place. The final two stanzas of the poem stress the connection between poet, place, and history, extending the scope of the poem into the intractable past:

After-image of lamps
Swung through the yards
On winter evenings.
With pails and barrows

Those mound-dwellers
Go waist-deep in mist
To break the light ice
At wells and dunhills. (WO 16)

The poem ends by consciously circumventing historical change and disruption to represent Heaney’s relationship to this place as somehow prehistorical and prepolitical. It is almost as if the ancestral mound-dwellers still inhabit this ground and symbolize a stability and continuity that
can not be disrupted by history. Read against the backdrop of the political upheaval of the late 1960s in Northern Ireland, these poems evince a complexity that an ahistorical reading would perhaps miss. For example, Elmer Andrews offers the following gloss on the conclusion of the poem: "Past merges with present, and the feeling of loss and hardship intensifies. At the end the well-water no longer runs freely and cleanly and the 'mound-dwellers', though still in touch with the life-force, are now lost in dreamlike mists" (Poetry 55). Far from being "lost," the "mound-dwellers" are saved from history by the poet’s imagination, which enlists them in his effort to resist the upheaval caused by political forces in Northern Ireland. However, even critics who do appreciate the tension between historical change and primordial continuity in the poem can miss the subtlety of Heaney’s vision. David Lloyd comments that "What is dissembled in ["Anahorish"] is that the apparent innocence, the ahistoricity, of the subject’s relation to place is in fact preceded by an act of appropriation or repossession" (168). Again, Lloyd’s critical ideology forces him to see this poem as unaware of its own practices when it clearly is not. How he can posit
that "Anahorish" dissembles its act of appropriation after the first line so blatantly emphasizes this practice is simply mysterious. Lloyd, in fact, misses the point of the poem: the poet reappropriates this locale as a space beyond political discord in an act of critical idealism. For the Heaney of Wintering Out, the unthinkable alternative to such idealism is to refuse to intervene, simply to give this place over to material and historical reality.

A contrary approach to place is at work in Thomas Kinsella's poetry: where Heaney recuperates an idealistic version of place beyond material reality, Kinsella chronicles the impact of history on the land. As well, while Heaney romanticizes his connection to a certain locale, Kinsella demystifies the nostalgic impetus behind this practice, presenting figures in his poetry who seem to be in permanent exile. Also, for the Heaney of "Anahorish," places can be saved from history in and by the poet's imagination, while for Kinsella places are inexplicably "mated...with time" (Poems 54), and testify to the violence of history. As we will see, Kinsella's "A Country Walk" explores the intimate connection between place and past in an uncompromising fashion.
The title, "A Country Walk," is not only ironic -- this poem is anything but a description of quiet contemplation in an idyllic natural setting -- but also an evocative pun, since the poem is an imaginary "walk" through the sometimes brutal history of Ireland, specifically the Republic. The poem opens on a note of divisiveness that not only reinscribes, or at least complicates, the title, but sets the dominant theme of the work:  

Sick of the piercing company of women  
I swung the gate shut with a furious sigh,  
Rammed trembling hands in pockets and drew in  
A breath of river air.  (Poems 53)

The poem quickly expands its scope, however, moving past the emotions of the speaker, and a description of the symbolic elements in the landscape, to chronicle Ireland's violent history, beginning with mythological tales of conflict:

Those murmuring shallows made a trampling place  
Apt for death-combat, as the tales agree;  
There, the day that Christ hung dying, twin  
Brothers armed in hate on either side;  
The day darkened but they moved to meet  
With crossed swords under a dread eclipse  
And mingled their bowels at the saga's end.  
(Poems 54)
Though not literally "twin brothers," Ferdia, as Kinsella explains in his translation of The Tain, is "Cuchulainn's own ardent and adored foster brother" (168), who is conscripted by Medb to win Ulster from Cuchulainn. As Brian John notes, Kinsella's description of the two as twins in "A Country Walk," "suggests not just tragic fratricidal enmity and distortion of normal personal relationships, but division within the self" (Reading 62). In fact, because of the unbearable ordeals he must endure, the acts of unspeakable violence that make up his life, and the implicit self-division he comes to embody, Cuchulainn is attractive to Kinsella as a symbol of Ireland's history.

The poem progresses fairly quickly through that history, from the Norman invasion to Cromwell's wars of genocide:

There the first Normans massacred my fathers,
Then stroked their armoured horses' necks, disposed
In ceremony, sable on green sward.

Twice more the reeds grew red, the stones obscured;
When knot-necked Cromwell and his fervent sword
Despatched a convent shrieking to their Lover.

(Poems 55)

These moments of a history of defeat and dispossession are written into the palimpsest of the land itself, "the
martyred countryside" (Poems 55), and this poem vacillates between descriptions of historical violence and the specific features of the territory to which those acts are linked. For example, it may seem somehow beside the point that Irish rebels "forked" their victims "half living to the sharp water" (Poems 55), but by providing such details Kinsella emphasizes the connection between past and place that is central to this poem.

The history of violence extends into the present for the morose speaker of the poem, who sees in the aftermath of the 1916 rebellion a country that has "exchanged/ A trenchcoat playground for a gombeen jungle" (Poems 56):

> Around the corner, in an open square,  
> I came upon the sombre monuments  
> That bear their names: MacDonagh & McBride  
> Merchants; Connolly's Commercial Arms...  
> Their windows gave me back my stolid self  
> In attitudes of staring as I paced  
> Their otherworldly gloom. (Poems 56)

As Brian John notes, for the speaker "the Ireland of the Free State and the Republic has changed utterly, giving birth not to some terrible beauty but to Paudeen's greasy till, in which Catholic conservative attitudes and policies make a mockery of the rebels' sacrifice" (Reading 63). Furthermore, the irony here is that a history of violent
defeat and trauma are fundamentally enabling for the poet, who finds that, although he "turn[s] away" (Poems 56) from the crassness of the present, he is nonetheless symbolically anointed by the process of remembering, even re-experiencing, the violent history of this place:

Naked sycamores,
Gathered dripping near the quay, stood still
And dropped from their combining arms a single
Word upon my upturned face. (Poems 56)

That the sycamores unite in action and drop a single "word" on the poet suggests an end to the fundamental divisiveness at work throughout the poem. Kinsella concludes this walk through history optimistically, with the evening star "In green and golden light; bringing sweet trade" (Poems 57). Furthermore, the poet is able to write, as suggested by the self-quotation that serves as the closing line of the poem: "'The waters hurtle through the flooded night....'" (Poems 56). In all, the final vision of the poem is unified, peaceful, and forward-looking. Kinsella reappropriates a past that is fundamentally divisive, violent, and disappointing, and converts it, in this poem, into a present that will be none of these things. "A Country Walk" is, finally, a strident intervention in Irish
cultural politics because it suggests, unlike Heaney's "Anahorish," that the Irish need not ignore the past in order to recuperate a positive view of the present. While this reading of history may seem simplistic and naïve to some, Kinsella shares with Heaney an unwillingness to abandon both place and past entirely to the forces of material and political change.

It must be emphasized, however, that the essentially positive, epiphanic moment experienced by the speaker at the end of "A Country Walk" does not dismiss the traumatic history associated with Dublin and its environs as they are represented earlier in the poem. In fact, Kinsella has returned to this locale and its traumatic history in subsequent poems in order to emphasize their personal and historical importance. In "Ritual of Departure," for example, Dublin and the surrounding area once again fuse personal and political history, and the strong sense of place drives the speaker toward a deeper understanding of history. The poem begins in the register of the personal:

A man at the moment of departure, turning
To leave, treasures some stick of furniture
With slowly blazing eyes, or the very door
Broodingly with his hand as it falls shut.

(Poems 115)
Soon, however, the strictly personal gives way to an identity which is more historically and politically oriented:

Stones of a century and a half ago.
The same city distinct in the same air,
More open in an earlier evening air,
Dublin under the Georges...
    stripped of the parliament,
Lying powerless in sweet-breathing death-ease
    After forced Union.
(Poems 115)

The speaker, who is soon leaving the city,²³ is trying to sink deeper into its past in order to retain a more vivid memory of it. This process leads him past any individual experience of place, and towards a more general and historical consciousness of the city. In the poem’s final section, another cue from the landscape, fields of “pale wet potatoes” (116) trigger the final historical “memory” that emerges from this place:

Landscape with ancestral figures...names
Settling and intermixing on the earth,
The seed in slow retreat, through time and blood,
Into bestial silence.
    Faces sharpen and grow blank,
With eyes for nothing.
    And their children’s children
Venturing to disperse, some came to Dublin
To vanish in the city lanes.  (Poems 116)
The famine and its effects on rural life are not simply historical phenomena, but are literally part of this place, and are, therefore, part of the speaker’s consciousness of this locale. Furthermore, it is worth noting that “Rituals of Departure” does not end on an epiphanic or forward-looking note, like “A Country Walk.” The middle-class crassness that the poet triumphs over in that poem is of a different magnitude than the devastation and pain of the famine, and that the past must sometimes be endured, and not overcome, is a persistent theme in Kinsella’s historical poems.

As we have seen, a sense of place functions in distinct ways in Kinsella’s and Heaney’s poetry. For Kinsella, place and past are “mated” (Poems 54), while for Heaney a consciousness of place allows the poet to circumvent the forces of historical disruption. Seamus Deane has isolated two distinct and, for our purposes, pertinent views of the land that emerge out of the nineteenth century in Ireland:

There is a difference between the Irish battle for the land in the nineteenth century and the battle for the soil. Soil is what land becomes when it is ideologically constructed as a natal source, that element out of which the Irish
originate and to which their past generations have returned. It is a political notion denuded, by a strategy of sacralization, of all economic and commercial reference....The struggle for the land and, indeed, the struggle with the land, is contrastingly marked by an inexhaustible series of references to economic status.

("Production" 126)

Heaney's consciousness of place corresponds closely to an ideology of the soil, while Kinsella's poetry offers a divergent ideology of the land. As well, Heaney's nostalgic, even conservative approach to wish history away is implicitly critiqued by a poem like "A Country Walk," where Kinsella seems to focus on the seemingly unendurable past in order to emphasize the necessity of enduring. Brian John asserts that "To the very act of enduring ...Kinsella attributes considerable moral and epistemological importance: to endure is a necessary feature of man's spiritual growth toward fulfillment and understanding" (Reading 61). Kinsella unmistakably derives strength by focusing on, and either simply enduring or dialectically overcoming, the phenomena, usually historical or aesthetic, that seem most disabling. As we will see shortly, the challenge offered to the poet by what he regards as the lack of a useable tradition of Irish poetry
is perhaps the most controversial representation of this idea in Kinsella's poetic and critical writing. Contrastingly, for Heaney the crisis is not one of paucity, but of excess, feeling a sense of belonging to two distinct, sometimes irreconcilable, literary traditions.

Tradition and Crisis

In his landmark essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot asserts that tradition, properly understood, requires "a historical sense," (14) and that this "historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (14). As well as connecting a writer to an immortal pantheon, tradition, therefore, is also "what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity" (14). With its emphasis on the process by which the past loses its status as simply past and becomes a vital force in the present, Eliot's concept of tradition is particularly appropriate to a discussion of contemporary Irish poetry. To borrow a phrase from Heaney, the past exists in this discipline as a "field of force" (P 56)
which is mobilized in order to advance frequently divisive, ideologically motivated arguments about present political realities.

Norman Vance explicates this troubling aspect of many contemporary discussions of the past and tradition in his book *Irish Literature: A Social History; Tradition, Identity and Difference*. According to Vance, "unexamined notions of 'Irish literature' and the Irish literary tradition are unescapably [sic] coercive in a country notoriously lacking in consensus, where social, political, religious, and cultural dissent are rife, particularly in the six northern counties" (4). Instead of attempting to reconstruct a single tradition, Vance advocates the critically self-conscious notion of a tradition of tradition building: "There is no single literary tradition unless it is the tradition of abrasive yet often mutually parasitic interaction of different traditions" (8). Clearly, Eliot's generally positive account of the tradition as an essentially enabling force for the individual writer needs to be tempered, in the Irish context, with an appreciation of how the past can also be a problem for the present. We need only to consider the
following observation by Yeats to appreciate the difficulty that the consciousness of tradition places on the Irish writer. Reflecting, as Thomas Kinsella reminds us, on the "centuries of English Colonization" (DT 2), Yeats asserts,

> No people hate as we do in whom the past is always alive. There are moments when hatred poisons my life and I accuse myself of effeminacy because I have not given it adequate expression. It is not enough to have put it into the mouth of a rambling peasant poet. Then I remind myself that though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate. (cited in Kinsella, DT, 2).

Yeats's comments suggest a fate much more complex than anything Eliot imagines in his essay. Eliot's tradition is stripped of its political significance, and involves simply a genealogy of writers communicating across generations; for the Irish writer, according to Yeats at least, this transmission is subtended by an awareness of the contradictory messages that this tradition offers them.

Seamus Heaney seems to share the Yeatsian view of tradition, as seen in one of his most criticized poems. "Traditions," collected in Wintering Out, captures the
problematic relationship between the Irish and English literary traditions that inheres in much of Heaney's poetry. In fact, "Traditions" reads something like a position poem for Heaney's early career, as Heaney explains at length in one of his interviews with Seamus Deane: "I had a great sense of release when ["Anahorish" and "Broagh"] were being written, a joy and a devil-may-careness, and that convinced me that one could be faithful to the nature of the English language -- for in some senses these poems are erotic mouth-music by and out of the Anglo-Saxon tongue -- and, at the same time, be faithful to one's own non-English origin, for me that is County Derry" ("Unhappy" 70). The sense that Heaney could accept the English tradition conditionally seems to animate many of the most interesting poems in Wintering Out, and "Traditions" particularly.

The plural of the title denotes the sense of belonging to two distinct literary traditions, a fact which inculcates the hybrid sensibility that is related in the poem's opening stanza:

Our guttural muse
was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition,  
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten  
like the coccyx  
or a Brigid's Cross  
yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that 'most  
sovereign mistress',  
beds us down into  
the British isles. (WO 31)

Linguistic colonization, presented as the bullying or bulldozing\(^2\) of Ireland in the first stanza, becomes a banal matter of habit in the third. Whether the Irish language was defeated by violence or made obsolete by custom, however, the poem subtly suggests that it survives its obsoleteness, like the "coccyx" (31).

In its final stanzas, the poem moves from a discussion of the colonization of Ireland to the representation of the Irish in both English and Anglo-Irish writing:

MacMorris, gallivanting  
round the Globe, whinged  
to courtier and groundling  
who had heard tell of us

as going very bare  
of learning, as wild as hares,  
as anatomies of death:  
'What ish my nation?'

And sensibly, though so much later,  
the wandering Bloom
replied, 'Ireland,' said Bloom, 'I was born here. Ireland.' (WO 32)

MacMorris is the stage Irishman of Shakespeare's Henry V, and the allusion to this character provides an explicit reminder that, within English literature, there exists a tradition of offensive descriptions of the Irish. MacMorris is a buffoon in the play, as related by the low-comedy of his speech impediment, his vocabulary, and his propensity to violence. An implicit reference in this stanza to a more chilling instance of this tradition's racism is offered in the lines "as wild as hares, / as anatomies of death" (32). These lines allude to Spenser's A View of the State of Ireland, specifically to one of his most ludicrous and ideologically motivated depictions of the Irish: "Out of every corner of the woods and glynnes [the Irish] came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legges could not beare them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eate the dead carrions, happy where they could find them, yea, and one another soone after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves" (166).  

These allusions to Shakespeare and Spenser as offering malicious views of the Irish force us to reconsider the poem's earlier remark: "We are to be proud / of our Elizabethan English" (31), not only because, as Sidney Burris contends, "the assertive tone of the declaration seems forced" (77), but also because of the pun in the phrase "Elizabethan English." This phrase refers equally to a certain inherited and alien vocabulary ("varsity", "deem", "allow" are three examples given in the poem), and to the specific Elizabethan English authors, Shakespeare and Spenser, explicitly critiqued in the third section of the work. With the pun on Elizabethan words and English writers of the Elizabethan era, Heaney implicates both in the derogation of the Irish. It may seem fairly straightforward of Heaney to draw a continuum between the historical colonization of Ireland and the English authors who explicitly supported this practice, but we have to recall that Heaney sees the English literary tradition as part of his tradition as well, and the issue of identification and continuity is, therefore, problematized for Irish writers because the tradition to which they belong reveals a certain amount of derision, historically,
for the Irish. As Heaney explains in one of his essays: "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. I live off another hump as well" (P 34).

The final allusion in this stanza, and by far the most complex, is the reference to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Implicitly, this allusion confirms the vitality of Heaney's "other" tradition, the one in which, presumably, he does feel ultimately at home, as Joyce's status as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century is beyond doubt. The reference to Joyce, therefore, would seem to supplement the poem's previous explication of the value of the English tradition for Heaney's writing, since it suggests his desire to be viewed, finally, as an Irish writer. By giving the word "Ireland" the full rhetorical weight associated with closing the poem, Heaney definitively asserts that, however complicated and intractable his literary influences, there is no equivocation regarding his fundamental identification with his indigenous Irish literary tradition. It is somewhat perplexing that Heaney
would have to repeat this sentiment more directly in his poem "An Open Letter" after Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion included Heaney (and other Irish poets) in The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry.

While Heaney's reference to Joyce serves to mark an affiliation with an Irish literary tradition, the specific reference introduces a further complexity into an already complicated series of allusions. The passage Heaney cites is from the "Cyclops" chapter of Ulysses, and is taken from Leopold Bloom's confrontation with the myopic and bigoted "Citizen":

-- What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen.
-- Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.

The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet and, gob, he spat a Red band oyster out of him right in the corner. (272)

This allusion is striking, because, while it suggests a connection between Heaney and an indigenous tradition, it also criticizes a too-strident nationalism that would define "Irishness" in exclusive terms. In this respect, Heaney's Irish tradition is not simply a refuge from a destructive or racist English tradition but also risks, Heaney seems to be saying, degenerating into an insular and malicious ideology, like the Elizabethan English ideology
that is criticized in the poem. "Traditions" is, therefore, guarded about the Irish tradition, and about essentializing identity, because of the destructive element latent in such a definition of race. Ironically, however, the prevailing critical opinion of the poem is that it sounds a strident anti-British note. Sidney Burris, for example, refers to this poem on three different occasions in his book The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition, and always reduces the meaning of the poem to its opening stanzas. Burris seems unaware that such bellicose anti-English sentiment only repeats the worst tendencies of the narrow-minded nationalism of Joyce's Citizen. Although "Traditions" recognizes the worst moments of English ideological constructions of the Irish, it refuses to reciprocate with malicious stereotypes of its own.

If "Traditions" suggests that there is some room for a rapprochement between two traditions and cultures, Heaney's "The Wool Trade" provides a much more critical account of the conditions under which the two cultures were brought together. Once again, Heaney invokes Joyce as the symbol of an Irish literary tradition, this time borrowing the
poem's epigraph from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "How different are the words 'home', 'Christ', 'ale', master', on his lips and on mine" (*Portrait* 189). The poem dramatizes a fundamental disjunction between Irish as "a language of waterwheels, / A lost syntax of looms and spindles" (*WO* 37), and the English voice of the unidentified speaker of the phrase "the wool trade" (*WO* 37). That the Irish language would be described in this poem as a site of resistance to the type of exploitative presence of "merchants / Back from the Netherlands" (*WO* 37) forces us to rethink the prevailing tone of a poem like "Traditions," which seems less worried about the consequences of linguistic colonization.

The principal difference between "Traditions" and "The Wool Trade" is that the latter is more scrupulously self-reflexive, and recognizes that, while Heaney is writing as an individual, he also represents a group. If the speaker of "Traditions" can guardedly accept the English literary inheritance as his own, the speaker of "The Wool Trade" realizes that he cannot repeat this gesture of acceptance on behalf of all those who have suffered as a result of colonization. The closing stanzas of the poem carefully
situates the speaker as an outsider even in his native environment: ²⁸

O all the hamlets where
Hills and flocks and streams conspired

To a language of waterwheels,
A lost syntax of looms and spindles,

How they hang
Fading, in the gallery of the tongue!

And I must talk of tweed,
A stiff cloth with flecks of blood. (WO 37)

"The Wool Trade" mournfully marks Heaney's condition as an outsider in terms of linguistic difference: "And I must talk of tweed" (37, italics added). Clearly, "the lost syntax of looms and spindles" are no longer part of Heaney's world, or more accurately, he is no longer part of their world.

Kinsella's "Baggot Street Deserta," which evolves into a poem about literary tradition, articulates a similar crisis regarding the poet's sense of belonging to a community. However, while Heaney experiences a certain anxiety regarding the hybrid tradition with which he identifies, Kinsella's problem is one of scarcity, as Brian John notes: "For Kinsella, brought up in a working-class Catholic family in Dublin, neither the English nor the
Anglo-Irish tradition was ultimately satisfactory, because both were intrinsically alien" (Reading 5). Furthermore, Kinsella's inability to identify with a recognizable tradition manifests itself in two very important ways in his early poetry. Firstly, in terms of its content, this poetry "shows few obvious signs of distinctively Irish origins" (Reading 8). And secondly, Kinsella's sense of alienation and exile is a pervasive theme in his early poetry.

Although deriving its title from a Dublin locale, "Baggot Street Deserta" is not a poem that celebrates a distinctively Irish identity. The poem, which reads like an ars poetica of Kinsella's early career, has the poet "meditating his calling as he might consider a natural object, as something in which he of course has a stake but which is fundamentally external to himself" (Jackson 70). This poem reveals an important thematic connection with Seamus Heaney's "Digging," since Heaney adopts a similarly objective view of his poetic vocation in that poem. Furthermore, both poems articulate a certain division or distance from society that is a concomitant of this vocation.
"Baggot Street Deserta" begins with the poet turning away from poetic composition: "Lulled, at silence, the spent attack / The will to work is laid aside" (Poems 28). As Brian John notes, "what is evident is that Kinsella is again at work writing that characteristically modernist poem on the difficulty of writing a poem" (Reading 40). This difficulty is perhaps exaggerated with Kinsella's reference to "the strain of the rack" in stanza one, but a persistent theme in Kinsella's poetry from the very beginning is that the poetic process frequently involves a degree of psychological pain. Much of the pain in this poem comes from the speaker's sense of alienation from both his own society and from any recognizable Irish literary tradition.

The division between Kinsella and contemporary Dublin society is fundamental to "Baggot Street," and the poem's opening stanza ends with the persona's criticism of the "dreamers' heads" which "Lie mesmerized in Dublin's beds" (Poems 37). The word "mesmerized" suggests a kind of delusion, which the poet, who is awake (and therefore aware and on guard), can diagnose. In the next stanza, we see that one of the things that the persona is more aware of
than the mesmerized others is a sense of the past as a
record "of common loss" (Poems 37). For the speaker, the
past records two distinct types of loss: political and
literary failure. The inter-relatedness of the two is made
more explicit in the next stanza:

Looking backward, all is lost;
The Past becomes a fairy bog
Alive with fancies, double crossed
By pad of owl and hoot of dog,
Where shaven, serious-minded men
Appear with lucid theses, after
Which they don the mists again
With trackless, cotton-silly laughter.
(Poems 29)

This critical view of Irish history is extended to include
Irish literary history with the reference to the "serious-
minded men" in this stanza. The inference is that whatever
achievements there have been by Irish writers, they have
been generally sporadic and singular. That the figures in
this tradition "don the mists" and recede into obscurity
suggests the lack of a coherent, stable continuum without
which the notion of tradition is incomprehensible.

Kinsella has expressed a similar view of the Irish
literary tradition in a variety of ways in his early
writing. In his 1966 lecture on "The Irish Writer,"
Kinsella describes the history of Irish literature in what
seems to be grim detail: "I believe that silence, on the whole, is the real condition of Irish literature in the nineteenth century -- certainly of poetry. There are enough hideous anthologies to bear me out: collections in which one falls with relief on anything that shows mere competence....But there is nothing that approaches the full literary achievement of an age. It is all tentative, or displaced" (57-58). As well, Kinsella expresses the effect of this attenuated tradition on the contemporary writer in the severest of personal terms: "I can learn nothing from [this tradition] except that I am isolated" (57). In his more comprehensive look at the history of Irish writing, The Dual Tradition, Kinsella refers to the "brutal and long-suffering past, when one of that people's greatest losses was the loss of its own language" (5) as the source of a schism in the Irish literary tradition. I will take up the controversial arguments advanced in The Dual Tradition in the next chapter of this study, but suffice it to say that the discordant tone of "Baggot Street" pervades Kinsella's consciousness of tradition as it is related in his other writings.
In "Baggot Street" the isolation that the speaker feels from both society and history has a paradoxical effect on his poetry. Most obviously, the poet imagines himself toiling away in anonymity, with no useable past with which to identify and from which to draw strength. As well, the persona feels that the gulf between himself and others is too great for his efforts to be at all relevant to his society. As I have mentioned, the angst in the poem is largely a product of the persona realizing these two facts. However, it is precisely this pain and alienation which, in the end, animate and strengthen the persona's final poem. In fact, the first three stanzas show the poet experiencing a kind of negative capability$^{29}$ with respect to both his tradition and his society. Within the poem itself, the persona describes the strength of will that he develops out of his sense of alienation as "obsessed honesty" (29) -- a phrase which both apologizes for the severity of the criticism ("obsessed") while standing by its veracity ("honesty").$^{30}$

While the first three stanzas of "Baggot Street" outline the difficulties and displacements experienced by a poet in Dublin in the late 1950s, the final three stanzas
fix our gaze securely on the poet, and help us understand the variety of forces that cause the poet to endure the difficulties of writing. Brian John has remarked that the figures we come across in Another September are frequently animated by the Beckettian spirit encapsulated in the passage "you must go on, I can't go, I'll go on" (Reading 36). In the context of "Baggot Street," the first three stanzas enumerate all of the reasons why the poet cannot go on, while the final three chronicle why he does go on:

I nonetheless inflict, endure
Tedium, intracordial hurt,
The sting of memory's quick, the drear
Uprooting, burying, prising apart
Of loves a strident adolescent
Spent in doubt and vanity.
All feed a single stream, impassioned
Now with obsessed honesty,
A tugging scruple that can keep
Clear eyes staring down the mile,
The thousand fathoms, into sleep. (Poems 29)

The "single stream, impassioned/Now with obsessed honesty" contrasts the "shy/Gasp of waters in the gorse" (Poems 28) of the first stanza, and gives the impression that the poet channels all experience, whether negative or positive, into this moment of composition. In this, "Baggot Street" is the first of Kinsella's many dialectically processual poems, where experiences on one level of reality, or in a
certain context, contain an energy that forces the poet into a realm where constitutive differences, even binary opposites, are sublated in the synthesis of a higher-order consciousness. In the stanza cited above, the differences between "tedium" and "intracordial hurt," "inflicting" and "enduring," and "uprooting" and "burying," are collapsed into a momentous energy that feeds the "single stream" 
(Poems 29).

Although this stanza offers some insight into the nature of the dialectical process towards knowledge or insight, it is not until the next stanza that we fully appreciate the effect that this process has on the poet. The "single stream" impels the poet towards "constant contact with the main/ Mystery" (Poems 30) which, although it can be approached, is, nonetheless, "not to be understood" (30). In this connection with "the mystery," the poet is revealed, finally, as not only alienated from his society and his tradition, but is also alienated from himself: "the alien/ Garrison in my own blood" (Poems 30). Some facet of the poet himself evades assimilation into a single unified figure. The fundamental nature of this self-alienation is recorded near the end of the stanza:
Out where imagination arches
Chilly points of light transact
The business of the border-marches
Of the Real, and I -- fact
That may be countered or may not --
Find their privacy complete. (Poems 30)

The notion that the self can be construed as a single, knowable identity is called into crisis here: the "I" is a "fact/ that may be countered or may not" (Poems 30). In his mystical connection with the "Real" the poet-persona comes to grasp the nature of self-difference. Ironically, then, the reader is privy to an insight of which the poet may be unaware: if the mysteries of the Real retain their privacy from the poet, the reader, at least, comes to see that self-difference and self-alienation inform one of the fundamental aspects of human subjectivity. While the poet believes the Real remains beyond his understanding, we see that some of its mysteries are being exposed.

"Baggot Street" moves, then, from a sense of exile from community (stanza one) and from tradition (stanza three), to a description of alienation from the self. In this, "Baggot Street" follows a pattern that mirrors the general trajectory of the poetry of identity I have considered in this chapter. Such poetry turns away from
group-based or community-based notions of identity, recedes from the public, and turns toward more personal concerns. Furthermore, the criticism of such poetry has been slow to take up the challenging complexity of such works. David Lloyd’s critique of Heaney, for example, reduces identity solely to its group-oriented definition, and fails to consider how Heaney’s sometimes obsessive self-reflection (see “The Wool Trade”) works with and against his communal or ethnic identity. As well, critics like Declan Kiberd and Terry Eagleton are equally critical of Heaney, but for a diametrically opposed reason. For these critics, Heaney’s poetry is too private, too disconnected from a group or nationalist identity, to have anything useful to contribute to contemporary political debates. As well, Kinsella’s “A Country Walk” and “Ritual of Departure” are exemplary in the subtle interplay between history, place, and individual identity at work in these poems. Any poetry that offers a subtle rendering of identity as simultaneously communal and individual, as both intra-subjective and inter-subjective, poses problems for critics bent on grounding an unambiguous, politically strident
reading of cultural politics on a poetics that resists such simplicity.
Chapter Three

Repossessing the Past: Mythology and Translation in the Work of Kinsella and Heaney

I concluded the previous chapter by examining how the Irish literary tradition is figured in Kinsella’s and Heaney’s poetry (especially their earlier poetry) as a problem, and how a certain anxiety regarding tradition is expressed in the work of both poets. In this chapter, I want to look at how Kinsella and Heaney intervene as agents in this tradition. As both critics and translators, Heaney and Kinsella help to shape the contemporary response to the tradition that they simultaneously occupy and criticize. As well, in their poetry, both turn towards Irish mythological material in order to examine contemporary aesthetic and political questions. Furthermore, as in the previous discussion regarding the consciousness of place extant in both poetics, reading Kinsella and Heaney against each other in terms of how they work within and against
traditional and mythological material is salutary, as it demonstrates a number of important methodological and, indeed, ideological differences between the two.

Mythology as Minefield in Contemporary Irish Writing

The significance of mythological references in contemporary Irish writing is a volatile topic. Luke Gibbons, for example, has noted that a contemporary critical orthodoxy suggests that "myth (and by extension rhetoric, messianism, and other forms of 'irrationality') is the sole preserve of the physical-force tradition in Irish nationalism" (334). Heaney himself has remarked that the methods and rhetoric of the "physical force tradition" have impacted on his aesthetic choices. In his essay "The Pre-Natal Mountain," Heaney explains that the recourse to traditional themes was complicated by the violence of the "Troubles":

With the outbreak of civic violence in Belfast and Derry, Irishism was perceived to be not only a manifestation of ethnic kitsch but potentially a code that spelled loyalty to the aims and (by extension) the methods of the IRA. Hence, as the seventies advanced, it became increasingly difficult to express fidelity to the ideals of
the Irish Literary Revival, which were essentially born of a healthy desire to redress the impositions of cultural imperialism, without seeming to become allied with a terrorist campaign that justified itself by self-righteous rhetoric against British imperialism of the original, historically rejected, and politically repugnant sort. (467)

While Heaney is not discussing the use of Irish mythological material specifically, his perception that all content that could be construed as supporting an exclusive "Irishism" encoded a sympathy for the aims of the IRA would no doubt have extended to Irish mythology.

It must be added to the assertions of Gibbons and Heaney that Irish nationalism is not the only political view bolstered by a destructive mythology. T.W. Moody, one of the founders of Irish revisionist historical scholarship, noted that orangeism, as well, is "a rich and many-sided mythology" (75). Furthermore, Moody cites R.M. Sibbett's assertion that "orangeism could be traced back to the garden of Eden [and]... that all the essentials of a perfect nature and an exalted religion were to be found associated in the primal day of our race" (75). Clearly, the effectiveness of mythology to justify sectarian positions has not escaped ideologues of all persuasions.
Despite the politicization of mythology noted by Gibbons, Heaney, and Moody, it nonetheless occupies an important position in contemporary Irish poetry, and part of its rehabilitation is the result of competing paradigms in contemporary Irish historical scholarship. The distinct aims of revisionist historiography, and the countervailing nationalist response, have forced a reinscription of, among other things, the function of mythology in contemporary understandings of the past. Perhaps nowhere are the differences between these two schools of historiography more clearly illustrated than in the debate between Steven Ellis and Brendan Bradshaw conducted in the journal *Irish Historical Studies*. Although ostensibly focused on the history of the late middle ages, the debate outstrips any specific era and becomes a polemic regarding divergent historical methodologies. Ellis, a revisionist historian, stands very much in the tradition of supposed "value-free" professional history, while Bradshaw disputes both the procedures and conclusions of such history from a nationalist perspective. Since the dispute between Ellis and Bradshaw offers a reconsideration of the place of
mythology in contemporary Irish writing, I will offer an extended look at their distinct positions.

In his article "Nationalist Historiography and the English and Gaelic Worlds in the Late Middle Ages," Ellis offers both a reading of historical facts and an historical methodology which is explicitly and intentionally polemical. Embarking from the position that "the influence of modern Irish politics on the historiography of late medieval Ireland has been unfortunate" (2), Ellis offers a rejoinder to what he sees as the residue of nationalist politics in contemporary Irish history. While conceding that an ethos of professionalism and detachment have been gaining ground in the discipline, Ellis nevertheless stridently denounces the politicization of history: "The dominant interpretive framework [of contemporary Irish historiography] remains a national one: it inclines to treat the island as a political rather than a geographic entity, its history shaped by interaction between its inhabitants, and the impact of outside factors ignored or dismissed as deleterious" (3). Simply stated, Ellis blames contemporary nationalist historians for focusing on "the emergence of modern political entities" (1) and ignoring
what those who actually lived that history would have deemed important. This is the crux of the revisionist position, and while Roy Foster contends that "revisionism in scholarship is perfectly compatible with nationalism in politics" (2), there is perhaps good reason to agree with Tom Paulin's more commonly-held view that revisionism is "hostile to Irish nationalism" (43). It is important here to distinguish between nationalist historiography, which generally views Irish history as a teleological narrative "with a beginning, a middle and what appeared (up to about 1968) to be a triumphant end" (Foster 1), and political nationalism, which is a more broadly defined phenomena. Ronan Fanning, for example, distinguishes between a republican response to revisionist history and a nationalist one. For Fanning, "revisionist" is "a term of abuse for defenders of the republican ideological commitment to physical force to use about those nationalists who seek to undermine that tradition," adding "the charge of revisionism... carries, and is intended to carry, pejorative connotations which are designed to erode [the historian's] professional authority in the popular mind" (157).
It would be salutary to introduce Bradshaw’s response to Ellis’s essay here, since it is the issue of the public credibility of the historian that fuels the former’s essay. According to Bradshaw, revisionist historians are responsible for “the credibility gap which is now acknowledged by all sides to exist between the new professional history and the general public” (“Nationalism” 350). Elsewhere, Bradshaw explains that this credibility gap arises because revisionist historians either “filter out the trauma” (“Revising” 36) inflicted on the Irish, or practice a strategy of “distortion” (“Revising” 37) when considering historical realities. According to Bradshaw, these practices suggest the “unacknowledged bias” (“Nationalism” 337) of revisionist historians, adding “the danger is that the espousal of the value-free principle may simply result in practice in value-based interpretation in another guise” (“Nationalism” 337). According to Bradshaw, historians should abdicate any claim to neutrality, and approach history with both “empathy” and “imagination” (“Nationalism” 350). More specifically, Bradshaw endorses Herbert Butterfield’s notion of “Whig History”, which, he explains, was “’present-centered’, [sought] ‘to make
capital out of the past and to put the history of earlier centuries to practical use'. 'Purposeful unhistoricity' was central to such a strategy, by which is meant the development of idealisation and anachronism in order to accommodate the past to the needs of the present" ("Nationalism" 348).

It perhaps goes without saying that Bradshaw's endorsement of the notion of "purposeful unhistoricity" has alienated many otherwise sympathetic readers. The concept too readily admits of the type of ideological distortion that we expect history itself to combat. For example, Ronan Fanning reminds us that "although the aims of the constitutional politician committed to the idea that nothing can be gained by violence are diametrically opposed to the aims of the paramilitary spokesman convinced that his organisation's objectives can only be gained by physical force, both are anxious to plunder and to prostitute the past for their purposes in the present" (147). Here we see quite clearly that both the fictitious politician and the terrorist (neither of whom arouses our support) are adopting a strategy of "purposeful unhistoricity" to advance their aims. As well, G.J. Watson
offers a decidedly less pernicious, although historically grounded, instance of a similar strategy in the following brief description of the ideological procedures of Michael Davitt's Land League:

What the Land League did was to pioneer 'on a mass basis a technique destined to become indispensable in nationalist agitation, the appeal to spurious historic rights.' The myth was that the native Catholic peasantry had once owned their land in Celtic Ireland, and had been dispossessed by the (English) settlers.... The League thus asserted an 'ancient' claim, arising from the invention of the dignified, independent peasant of olden time. It was a characteristic Irish effort -- you look back to create the future you want. (22)

While there is very little argument that "purposeful unhistoricity" has proven its political and ideological efficacy, there is perhaps less consensus that such an approach to the past deserves to be called "history."

It is not, however, any easier to accept Ellis's methodological assumptions. His supposedly "value-free" and "past-centered" approach to history frequently contradicts itself, and betrays an ideological substructure that persistently surfaces in his writing. For example, Ellis criticizes nationalist historians, as I have noted earlier, for being too willing to dismiss "what appeared
important" ("Nationalist" 1) to those who lived the history they are documenting, but Ellis himself has no difficulty making loaded, present-centered remarks like the following: "The British presence [in certain colonial contexts] helped to speed the transition from tribalism to the modern state" ("Historiographical" 292). Here, of course, Ellis is adopting the same hindsight and Whig orientation that he criticizes in others, since it is impossible to accept the rationalization that the British were explicitly interested in helping any nations toward modernity by colonizing them. In fact, Ellis's reading of the rationale for colonial practices vindicates Bradshaw's criticisms, since any attempt to defend the violence of colonialism must de-emphasize the trauma experienced by those who endured this historical process (recall that Ellis purports to prioritize the experiences of those who endured historical events, and not what those events may mean to us). Ellis, it would seem, wants it both ways: he imagines that he can base his scholarship on the terra firma of what people really experienced, while persistently evading the trauma that they must have endured.
Bradshaw and Ellis, then, represent extreme positions in this debate, and while their work highlights the differences between the revisionist and nationalist approaches to history, I chose to focus on their specific articulations of these positions because of the primacy that both writers accord mythology in their considerations of the past. Indeed, while the pseudo-debate between the two may finally revolve around a host of "undebatables" -- that is, articles of faith that are unlikely to be affected by scholarly debates and criticisms -- their work does demonstrate what Ronan Fanning has called "a striking characteristic of modern Irish historiography: a continuous compulsion to confront myth and mythology" (146).

Ellis's view of mythology is subtended by the assumption that nations are essentially modern phenomena, and that any attempt to perceive in pre-modern history the rudiments of an operative national consciousness is pure ideological reconstruction. Ellis, it must be noted, has the bulk of support from many contemporary political scientists and historians: Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Jurgen Habermas,\(^{32}\) and many others all present roughly similar theories of how nations came into being as
modern social formations. According to Ellis, such nations would only have the mythologies they invent for ideological reasons, and are essentially characterized by legal, economic, and governmental institutions and practices. For example, Ellis dismisses any connection between the cultures of the past and the present in a single stroke when he asserts that "even in the Republic the law and land settlement imposed by colonists still survive and the native culture and language have been virtually obliterated, so that continuity with a Gaelic past is primarily an ideological one" (292). Aside from evincing an extreme disrespect towards those who have had their culture and language "obliterated," Ellis also reveals his empathy with Gellner's economically based theory of the nation, arguing that economic and legal institutions possess a facticity that over-rides any cultural connections with the past that members of a modern nation may feel in the present. In this, Ellis not only reveals a disquieting triumphalism, but also a blindness to how different cultural modes, including mythology, transmit history from an intractable past.
In sharp contrast, Bradshaw regards mythology as a pre- eminent concern of the historian. He asserts that among the other failings of revisionist historians is their refusal "to allow such evidence [as mythology] any explanatory power in accounting for the course of Irish political history before the modern period" ("Nationalism" 345). For Bradshaw, mythology is an integral part of the historical record. He argues that "national consciousness can be discerned as a recurring cultural phenomenon in Ireland for, perhaps, a millennium before the onset of modernity. It is reflected, for instance, in the early medieval period, in the exile theme so characteristic of early Christian spirituality and in the historical outlook reflected in the recensions of the Gaelic origin- myths" ("Nationalism" 345). Bradshaw's arguments here are very persuasive, especially as they relate to the recurring theme of exile in early Irish poetry, since exile is incomprehensible without the presupposition of a felt sense of belonging to either a group or a specific place. As we will see with the numerous mythological allusions in Kinsella's and Heaney's poetry, the theme of exile and
myths of origin offer ample evidence that a burgeoning nationalism underwrites many of these stories.

'A System of Living Images': Mythology in the Poetry of Kinsella and Heaney

In terms of his evaluation of the importance of the past for the contemporary Irish writer, Thomas Kinsella has offered self-contradicting views. In his most comprehensive treatment of the topic, offered in his book The Dual Tradition, Kinsella rehearses the essentially pessimistic arguments that he has made elsewhere, and which have come, for many of his critics, to characterize his views on Irish literary history. According to Kinsella, 'Irish literature exists as a dual entity [which] was composed in two languages' (DT 4). Kinsella examines this dual entity in three distinct phases in his book: Irish poetry up to about 1850, poetry in English since 1850, and a concluding essay on the viability of regarding Northern Irish poetry as distinct from Irish poetry. The final essay, "Politics of the Dual Tradition," while offering an interesting and original approach to Northern Irish poetry, falls beyond my present interest in Kinsella's views
regarding the relationship between early Irish material and modern Irish writing, and will, therefore, not be taken up here.

Kinsella offers an especially insightful reading of the first period of the dual tradition (poetry up to about 1850), and demonstrates that his felicity with poetry written in Irish is, perhaps, unmatched. For example, his careful reading of the poet Laoiseach Mac an Bháird demonstrates an assurance with both the poetry and its political subtexts that is unique in Irish studies.

According to Kinsella, Mac an Bháird brought the theme of 'the stranger' into Irish poetry, in a poem addressed to two sons of a Northern family, one of them staying loyal to his Irish inheritance, the other going over to the English stranger. Some effects of this, as the 'bad' son stumbles mounting a horse, aping the new ways, are meant to be ridiculous; but it is the bad son who finds his place in the Norman tower and the good son who must take to the wild. (DT 19)

What appears to be an interesting reading of a long-forgotten poet assumes an added significance when we reflect on the survival of this theme in Joyce's Ulysses, where Mulligan becomes the conciliatory "bad" son who willingly accepts the stranger, or how Brian Friel offers a much more caustic rendering of the same idea in his play
Translations, where Owen not only accepts, but is unwillingly complicit in, the plans of the English. Without Kinsella’s analysis of this compelling theme which survives from early Irish writing, a potentially seminal intertextual reference would go unconsidered. In terms of its careful reading of early works, Kinsella’s The Dual Tradition makes an important intervention in the study of Irish writing.

Not surprisingly, however, many critics of Kinsella’s work choose to concentrate on his more contentious and generally less efficacious treatment of more recent literary history. In his review of the book, the usually insightful David Krause lights on a single, relatively minor aspect of the work in order to denounce the whole of it. According to Krause, Kinsella’s brief and guarded references to Daniel Corkery amount to a wholesale return “to the extravagant chauvinism” (13) evinced in Corkery’s own writings. What Krause fails to note is that it is not Corkery’s “insular vision of a secure and certain world of Gaelic and Celtic homogeneity” (Krause 13) that Kinsella appropriates. On the contrary, Kinsella finds in Corkery a model of pessimism and uncertainty, emphasized by the
latter's often-quoted "quaking sod" metaphor for Irish national consciousness and identity, that informs Kinsella's own reading of Irish literary history. For example, Kinsella offers the following bleak depiction of an archaeology of failure operating in Irish culture since the flight of the Earls and the concomitant decline of the bardic tradition:

The aristocratic audience for formal Irish poetry, and its whole basis, had disappeared. In the following century a professional art of privilege was turned into a popular art of conscious defeat. For the defeated, a new set of associations developed: of national loyalty and defeat with the native language, of disloyalty with the use of English. (DT 20)

Quite simply, Kinsella, like Corkery, has a strongly pessimistic view of the past, and, by failing to accurately assess the place of the latter's thinking in Kinsella's work, Krause is led to many errors. For example, Krause asserts:

Ironically Kinsella realizes that [the elements of Corkery's oppressive nationalist vision] represent most of the repressive nets from which Stephen Dedalus was determined to escape.... And although Dedalus rejected Corkery's constricting ideal of Irish reality, Kinsella didn't hesitate to claim that Joyce 'is the first major Irish voice to speak for Irish reality since the death of the Irish language'.

Unmindful of this
contradiction, Kinsella seems to make Joyce consistent with Corkery. (13)

Kinsella is not unmindful of the gulf separating Joyce’s cosmopolitanism from Corkery’s “extravagant chauvinism” (13), but Krause, having already exaggerated the significance of a passing reference to a minor figure in Kinsella’s work, is unable to approach the more fundamental problems in The Dual Tradition.

A more pertinent criticism of Kinsella’s work revolves around the validity of his characterization of Irish literature as composed of two entirely discontinuous traditions. This strident view, it must be noted, is not shared by even the most nationalistic of critics. For example, according to Máire Ní Annracháin’s review of Declan Kiberd’s *Idir Dhá Chutúr*, Kiberd explicitly rejects the view that informs Kinsella’s work: “The argument underpinning many of the articles [in Kiberd’s book] is that the division between the two linguistic traditions in Ireland is meaningless, regrettable, and destructive” (15). Furthermore, Kiberd offers some very interesting readings of how these non-separable, although linguistically dissimilar, traditions intersect. According to Ní
Annracháin, Kiberd argues "that Synge should be considered a Gaelic writer and Sean O’ Riordan as Anglo-Irish" (15). In fact, Kiberd’s non-intuitive view of Irish literary history helps to reveal the signal critical failure of The Dual Tradition: Kinsella’s model of literary history fails to consider the influence that early Irish writing, both in terms of themes and poetic forms, has had on modern Irish literature.

A clear illustration of this methodological shortcoming is offered by the fact that Kinsella refuses to acknowledge how Yeats and Joyce were both influenced by early Irish exemplars. While correctly emphasizing Yeats’s use of occasional poetry at various points in his career (DT 74), Kinsella fails to see this as a Yeatsian acknowledgment of the centrality of occasional poetry in Irish literary history and life in general. Ironically, it is Kinsella himself, in another essay, who brings the importance of occasional poetry in Ireland to our attention. In "Another Country," Kinsella asserts:

Time and again in Irish poetry it is precisely the occasional poems that set the tone and are the masterpieces. This is not because the poets lacked serious concerns that might have given them great themes and great careers. On the
contrary, it is that poetry played a much more direct part in the spending of people's lives than we are accustomed to in the English or any other Western tradition. Poetry was a significant part of living, of how Gaelic culture responded to its experiences, great and small, national, parochial, and domestic. (179)

Clearly, we must remain open to the suggestion that Yeats was influenced by the pervasiveness of occasional poetry in Irish literary history, and that there is perhaps some commerce between the dual linguistic entities that compose the Irish tradition. That Kinsella seems aware of this influence, without ever making it explicit in his writing, points to a serious shortcoming in his treatment of the tradition.

As well, and perhaps even more dissatisfying, is Kinsella's treatment of Joyce, which consists of extended quotations (mainly from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man) punctuated by very brief and largely inconsequential commentary. As I have already noted, Joyce seems to be explicitly rendering both the theme of the "stranger" and the concomitant "good" versus "bad" son motif very early in Ulysses in order to emphasize both the political and psychological pressures that are exerting themselves on Stephen Dedalus. As well, a number of authors have
returned to the prevalence of early Irish mythology and literature in Joyce's work: most notably, Maria Tymoczko, in *The Irish Ulysses*. Tymoczko, unencumbered by the sense of discontinuity and failure that subtends Kinsella's perception of Ireland's literary past, draws many interesting parallels between, for example, *Ulysses* and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*\(^4\) -- parallels that Kinsella, as both a translator of the *Táin* and an avid reader of Joyce, would perhaps be more receptive to exploring were he not convinced of the unbridgeable disruption between literature in Irish and modern Irish literature written in English.

These are not simply episodic or hermetic lapses on Kinsella's part, but emerge out of his overly-pessimistic reading of the systemic discontinuity that he perceives in Irish literary history. In fact, the journalist and critic Fintan O'Toole has isolated the sense of defeat and discontinuity which pervades Kinsella's criticism as a serious failing on the part of the poet. O'Toole begins his criticism of the poet by citing the following passage from Kinsella's essay "The Divided Mind": "I recognise that I stand on one side of a great rift, and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of people and
places as well as writing -- of coming from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives."

O’Toole then offers the following historically based explanation for Kinsella’s emphasis on cultural disruption:

The source of that sense of discontinuity, in its public manifestation, is made clear in Nightwalker: it is economic change. Kinsella’s failure, however, is that he came to locate that rift in the linguistic divide between the old Gaelic poets and the later Irish poets writing in English instead of in the immediate political and social changes which he had himself recorded. (15)

There is, perhaps, a similarly specious monicausality at work in O’Toole’s essay and Kinsella’s reading of history, and it is difficult to dismiss, as O’Toole does, the history of colonization as a factor which contributes to the pessimism we find in Kinsella’s writing. Still, there is tacit support for O’Toole’s position in the fact that not all critics who focus on the linguistic disruption forced on the Irish by colonization see it in terms as resolute as Kinsella’s. Robert Welch, for example, opens his book Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing, on a tone that very much resembles Kinsella’s: “We think of Irish culture as deeply divided. There are good
reasons for this: the main one being that Irish went through a profound shift in cultural orientation in surrendering one language for another, Irish for English, in the nineteenth century” (1). For Welch, however, the historical fact of linguistic change in Ireland does not imbue this cultural history with a hopeless discontinuity. Rather, the ability of the culture to survive this language shift causes him to conclude, in obvious contrast to Kinsella, that “Irish culture is preoccupied by continuity” (5). Welch’s reading of history is not without its own methodological problems, but it does offer an instructive rejoinder to Kinsella’s exaggerated sense of the absolute truncation of one tradition and the emergence of another, discrete literature.

Kinsella is free to adopt any view of the usability of early Irish sources that he chooses, and if The Dual Tradition comprised his only consideration of that history we would have little doubt regarding its value for him. However, Kinsella evinces an entirely different response to the same tradition in many ways in his poetry. While space prevents me from considering how ancient and medieval poetic forms like the dinnseanchas and the aisling survive,
with some modification, in Kinsella’s poetry, I would like to consider how his use of Irish mythological material suggests that, to some degree, he imagines that a useable inheritance has survived the “change in vernacular” (DT 11) visited upon Irish culture by colonization. In fact, the references to mythological figures and themes in Kinsella’s poetry are too numerous to deal with in any exhaustive way, and I will be focusing on two of the more important of these references in Kinsella’s writing in order to grant these complex allusions the space they deserve.

Although, as Brian John notes, Kinsella’s early work “shows few obvious signs of distinctively Irish origins” (8), his middle and later poetry represent a concerted effort to repossess the past in a way that emphasizes its relevance to the present. As the poet himself explains: “It was late in my literary career, when things were firmly committed, that I looked seriously for the first time at Gaelic literature and at the tradition and culture that produced it,” adding, “I have been occupied with it ever since, in one way or another, making up for my former neglect. I have even developed a missionary zeal” (“Another Country” 177). Much of Kinsella’s recent poetry
views Irish history as a repository of myths, symbols, and themes that are intrinsically related to contemporary Irish experience. As well, I would add that these myths and symbols are nationalistic in that they confirm, for a specific group of people, an enabling heritage and a rich past. In fact, these poems reflect an approach to history that is common in many contemporary investigations that stress the primordial background of contemporary nations. As Anthony Smith asserts, such inquiries ground their "understanding of modern nationalism on an historical base involving considerable time-spans, to see how far its themes and forms were prefigured in earlier periods and how far a connection with earlier ethnic ties and sentiments can be established" (13). Specifically, I want to consider how ancient Irish origin myths figure in Kinsella’s poetry as tacit support for a sense of community that spans an intractable history. It is absolutely essential to remember that I am not talking about the organic development of a contemporary state from an ancient ethnic group, which is a highly controversial contemporary debate. Instead, I want to look at the "sense of imputed common ancestry and origin" (Smith 24) described by these myths.
Kinsella tells the story of Fintan in the poem "Survivor," originally published in the mythologically oriented section of Notes From the Land of the Dead called "a single drop." According to Alwyn and Brinley Rees in Celtic Heritage, Fintan was a member of the first group of invaders to conquer Ireland, and one of only three men in a party of fifty women. After the death of the other two men (Bith and Ladra), Fintan flees from the women fearing that they would sap his life. Forty days after the invaders’ landing, a flood kills the remaining members of the group except Fintan, who spent a year under water in a cave called "Fintan's Grave" (113-14). Fintan also spent long periods of time in "the shapes of a salmon, and eagle, and a hawk, and witnessing all the succeeding invasions, appears (in stories of Christian Ireland) as the supreme authority in matters of tradition" (28). (Thomas O'Rahilly's brief description of Fintan in Early Irish History and Mythology does not diverge from the Rees's description). While literally about the survival of a single individual, the merging of Fintan’s history and Irish history suggests that this myth, and Kinsella’s poem, is about the survival of a people and a heritage:
It is spoken of, always,
In terms of mystery -- our first home . . .
That there is a power holding this part of the mountain
Subtly separate from the world, in firm hands;
And this cave escaped the Deluge;
That it will play some part on the Last Day. (Poems 155)

"Our first home" marks Fintan's story an origin myth, and
this poem demonstrates a subtle awareness of the formation
and importance of the ideology of nationalism. Benedict
Anderson refers to the rise of nations and nationalism
against the backdrop of the "rationalist secularism" (11)
that follows the "ebbing of religious belief" (11) in the
modern world. Furthermore, according to Anderson,

few things were (are) better suited to [transform
fatality into continuity and contingency into
meaning] than an idea of nation. If nation-
states are widely conceded to be 'new' and
' historical, ' the nations to which they give
political expression always loom out of an
immemorial past, and, still more important, glide
into a limitless future. It is the magic of
nationalism to turn chance into destiny. (11-12)

The allusion to the "firm hands" of a benevolent figure who
allows Fintan to escape the deluge describes the operations
of a secular divinity that renders historical happenstance
as destiny. As well, the allusion to the "last day" in
Kinsella's poem further suggests the essentially spiritual
component that Anderson would say survives the demise of
religion and is reanimated in the ideology of nationalism.
Fintan’s later self-reflection in this poem serves as a cogent description of this process:

O fair beginning...

Landfall -- an entire new world floating on the ocean like a cloud, ...

-- we were all thieves. In search of a land without sin, That might go unpunished. (Poems 156)

The rhetoric of sin and punishment suffuses this poem with a religious or spiritual quality that is grafted on to the myth of the origin of the nation. The nation serves as a secular substitute for religion in decline; in fact, a possible interpretation of the phrase “a land without sin” is “a land without religion,” or a land where there is no such thing as sin because no one is empowered to adjudicate sinfulness. Although Fintan’s world later takes on qualities of desolation, there is a strong sense of determination and continuity in Fintan’s final resolution: “I must remember/ and be able some time to explain” (Poems 158). Finally, the story of Fintan serves as an important culturally nationalist myth of origin in that not only does it posit a connection between contemporary Ireland and its intractable past, but it also presents a reflection on the
function performed by a consciousness of nation in the secular world.

In a later poem, Kinsella references another mythological figure in order to elaborate more fully on the social and political importance of these myths of origin. "At the Head Table" (originally published in *Madonna*) is set at a party where the conversation has turned to argument. The poet, who is reflecting on an ornamental glass imprinted with a scene from the sea, consciously detaches himself from his surroundings and is integrated into the scene he considers. The artifact first disturbs, but ultimately rewards the poet:

This lovely cup before us,
this piece before all others,
gave me the greatest trouble
in impulse and idea

and management of material
-- in all the fine requirements
that bring the craftsman's stoop.
Yet proved the most rewarding. (CP 323)

The rhythm of these stanzas recalls the familiar cadence of many of the poems of dispossession that Kinsella has translated, and this poem offers a strong sense of continuity between ancient Irish culture and the present by virtue of this similarity. In fact, since 1991 this poem
has been published in two different versions (Kinsella is constantly revising and republishing his poetry), and the most significant change in the later version is that the stanzas have been shortened, which resembles, typographically and metrically, early Irish poetry. As Jim Dunn has noted, the seven-syllable line dominated Irish bardic verse up until the seventeenth century, when it "gave way to accentual meters" (118). By employing the familiar metrics of early bardic poetry, many fine examples of which are translated by the poet in An Duanaire, Kinsella emphasizes the continuity between ancient and contemporary culture and poetry.

These musings on the cup and its decoration become slightly more abstract as Kinsella weaves into his contemplation an awareness of the forces that, as Anderson says, turn contingency and accident into meaning and destiny:

In fact, a web of order
Each mark accommodating
The shapes of all the others
With none at fault, or false;

a system of living images
making increased response
to each increased demand
in the eye of the beholder;
with a final full response
over the whole surface
--a total theme-- presented
to a full intense regard.  (CP 324)

The phrase, a "final full response," resonates throughout
Kinsella's critical writing, and it is worth noting its
significance, if only briefly. In The Dual Tradition,
Kinsella asserts that, while a number of anthologies of
Gaelic or Anglo-Irish poetry accomplish the modest aims
that they set for themselves, "anthologies and commentaries
that attempt to deal with the total Irish literary response
are rare" (4-5; italics added). By echoing this phrase,
"At the Head Table" suggests, at least to critics familiar
with Kinsella's prose writing, that the poem prescribes an
ambitious task for itself, in that it will attempt to
render a salient aspect of Gaelic tradition in a
contemporary, and more familiar, idiom. Furthermore, that
the poem even entertains the suggestion that something like
"a full response" is possible denotes that Kinsella's views
regarding the usability of the past are becoming less
pessimistic. Specifically, in this poem, Kinsella turns to
"a system of living images" which order his experience by
overtly recalling the myth of Amairgen with the reference
"Nine waves out, a ship" (324).
Amaírgen was a poet and judge, and one of "The Sons of Mil" (Rees 96) who invaded Ireland to avenge the murder of Ith at the hands of Tuatha Dé Danann. After avenging the murder by defeating the Tuatha, the Sons journey to Tara and encounter the Kings of the Tuatha (Mac Cuill, Mac Cecht, and Mac Grene) who order that the Sons of Mil should leave the island for three days. Amaírgen sets the judgement that they should go "Just past nine waves" (Rees 96). After an unsuccessful first landing, Amaírgen recites a poem that calms the wind, and, after a successful second landing, the Sons of Mil defeat the Tuatha again to win the island (Rees 97).

The myth of Amaírgen's first judgement in Ireland is significant to Kinsella's poem for a variety of reasons. The judgement against the invaders to leave and return suggests a ritualizing of conflict and resolution that is mirrored in the arguments of the persons at the table. The same people return to the same topics with the same furious outcome every time they meet:

How often, like this evening
we have sat and watched it happen.
Discussing the same subjects
from our settled points of view,
Our cheer turning to bitterness
with one careless word;
and then the loaded silence,
staring straight ahead. (CP 323)

It is not hard to see in this description an allegory of
very recent Irish history: "the settled points of view"
suggest, among other things, the dogmatic ideological
positions that fuel sectarianism in Ireland. As well, the
word "loaded" (which resonates with suggestion of a loaded
weapon) is revised into the most recent version of the
poem, and is another allusion to sectarian violence found
in this version. In fact, I would characterize the changes
in content between versions of this poem as part of a
strategy of widening its possible range of reference; it is
much easier to read the version in *Madonna* as a poem about
recurring arguments between a group of friends, while it is
much more difficult to ignore the references to violent
political conflict in the later version. Furthermore, read
in terms of contemporary politics, "At the Head Table"
confirms Anthony Smith’s very interesting remarks on the
importance of mythology in general: "Mythology and
symbolism have always provided ‘maps’ and ‘moralities’;
today, ethnic mythologies and national symbolisms can furnish the maps and moralities of modern nations, once they have been reconstructed and reinterpreted to meet modern needs" (202). To return briefly to the debate between Ellis and Bradshaw to which I alluded earlier, Bradshaw argues for exactly this type of engaged or motivated history, because he feels that it better serves the community's needs, and also because it more closely resembles history as it informs part of the lived reality of a population. In a sense, Bradshaw claims that the alienating, scientific, and scholarly approach to history is simply useless, since it does not proffer the past in a useable form. What garners the hostility of Bradshaw's critics is that he wants this nationalistic, ideologically invested, sometimes deliberately untrue discipline to still go by the name "history." Anthony Smith skirts the debate entirely, by never insisting that his theory is, strictly speaking, historical scholarship. Finally, Kinsella is unapologetic about seeing motivated, nationalistic myths of origin as socially important moral lessons:

Oh for the simple wisdom to learn by our experience!
I know from my daily labour
it is not too much to ask. (CP 323)

"Our experience" neatly collapses the distinction between
things we may learn from our own lives and things that
accrue to us through more elaborate social structures like
mythology. Although the poem may seem to have a fairly
simple moral (and in Kinsella's defense, we must, at least,
concede that this is intentional), its implicit argument
that mythology functions as the repository of a burgeoning
nationalist consciousness infuses it with a historical
sensibility that is decidedly more contentious than the
simple wisdom it purports to advance. Finally, the poem
signals an important change in Kinsella's response to the
Gaelic and Irish traditions in its assertions regarding the
connection between early Gaelic and Irish culture and
contemporary Irish poetry.

Like Kinsella, Seamus Heaney has explored the
relevance of mythology as a context for understanding
contemporary political and social realities. Heaney's "bog
poems,"37 for example, are unequivocally engaged with the
history of Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s,
treating this history in terms of the mythological
substructure that, according to Heaney, animates it. These poems draw on the archaeological finds from a Viking settlement in Dublin (and P.V. Glob's book *The Bog People*) in order to trace the historical legacy of violence in Ireland and contextualize the "Troubles." Because of this very controversial aim, these poems have been severely attacked. In his review of *North*, the poet Ciaran Carson referred to Heaney as "the laureate of violence" (as cited in Corcoran 34) because of these poems, while Blake Morrison has been almost as caustic:

> It would be going too far to suggest that 'Punishment' in particular and the Bog poems generally offer a defence of Republicanism; but they are a form of 'explanation'. Indeed the whole procedure of *North* is such as to give sectarian killing in Ulster a historical respectability which it is not usually given in day-to-day journalism. (*British* 109-110)

While these poems do offer a historical context for the violence, it is not entirely clear how they bestow a "respectability" on sectarian murder, and it is not surprising that in a gloss on these same poems published two years later, Morrison removes any mention of the "historical respectability" that he saw as "the whole procedure" (emphasis added) of the volume.⁴⁸
There is little doubt, however, that these poems are mythological approaches to political events in Ireland, and Heaney has acknowledged the connection:

I think that out of the dark and deep centre of people's consciousness in Ireland in the last ten years [1967-1977] these violent motions have arisen. There's a kind of sectarian conflict going on. Something that was repressed and held under, but which has forced itself to the surface again, and I've tried to make a connection lately between things that came to the surface in bogs, in particular Danish bogs, and the violence that was coming to the surface in the north of Ireland. (Skoleradioen 11)

Heaney goes on to explain that "Punishment," by far the most sternly critiqued of these poems, was based on a practice adopted by both Catholics and Protestants of tarring and feathering people who were thought to have "betrayed the community in one way or another" (11). Heaney draws a trajectory between the victims of this practice and the victims of violence found in the Danish bogs:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose ring
to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
Before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful. (N 38)

While the speaker is obviously moved by the spectacle of
the punished woman, he realizes that his fundamental
loyalty to the practices of his "tribe" overrides any
sympathy for the victim:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (N 38)

As Conor Cruise O’Brien has pointed out, in perhaps the
most subtle and perspicacious reading of this poem,

It is the word 'exact' that hurts the most:
Seamus Heaney has so greatly earned the right to
use this word that to see him use it as he does
here opens up a sort of chasm. But then, of
course, that is what he is about. The word
'exact' fits the situation as it is felt to be:
and it is because it fits and because other
situations, among the rival population, turn on
similarly oiled pivots, that hope succumbs. I
have read many pessimistic analyses of 'Northern
Ireland', but none that has the bleak
conclusiveness of these poems. (26)
The pessimism that O’Brien sees operating in these poems doubtlessly derives from the credibility extended to irrational and violent politics, and many critics have, rightly or wrongly, perceived in these poems more than just sympathy for the forces of irrationalism. The poet and critic James Simmons, for example, reads the end of "Punishment" as implying that Heaney "is on the side of the torturers" (56). While this strident claim ignores much of the subtlety of the poem, it must be noted that this poem does not condemn the practices that it exposes.

I will not venture a sympathetic reading of the poem. There is perhaps an interesting connection between the powerlessness of the scapegoated victims and the powerlessness of the speaker who cannot risk a similar fate by voicing his outrage. The opening lines of the poem, for instance, suggest that the speaker identifies with the victims: "I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck" (N 37). By the end of the poem, however, the speaker's sympathy for the victim dissolves in his explicit affirmation of the practices of the group, and this confounds our attempt to redeem his position. In an essay
written some years later, Heaney offered the following extensive comments on the poet "tested by dangerous times":

What is demanded is not any great public act of confrontation or submission, but rather a certain self-censorship, an agreement to forge, in the bad sense, the uncreated conscience of a race. Their resistance to this pressure is not initially or intentionally political, but there is of course a spin-off, a ripple effect, to their deviant artistic conduct. It is the refusal by this rearguard minority which exposes to the majority the abjectness of their collapse, as they flee for security into whatever self-deceptions the party line requires of them.

(Government 39)

It is not at all certain that Heaney has his own previous poetry in mind here, but it is easy to see "Punishment" as conforming to a certain "party line," and the rationalization that the poem offers for violent retribution as a self-deception.

Heaney also approaches the violence of the "Troubles" by way of another important mythological reference in North. In "Antaeus" and "Hercules and Antaeus," Heaney again examines the roots of violence from a historical remove that allows the poet to gain some degree of distance from the political and ideological forces at work in Northern Ireland. As well, it is difficult, in light of Heaney's early, agrarian poetry, not to see Antaeus as a
mask for the poet. According to the myth, Antaeus derives his strength from contact with the Earth, and Hercules ultimately defeats him by hoisting him

into a dream of loss

and origins -- the cradling dark,
the river-veins, the secret gullies
of his strength. (N 52)

Robert Garratt notes that "the personal implications of these lines are immediately apparent. Heaney's poetic strength, not only in the bog poems but elsewhere, has come from contact with the soil" (238). However, there is also an unmistakable political point behind Heaney's employment of this myth, which offers a fairly straightforward allegory of colonization, as the poet himself explains:

The Hercules-Antaeus thing came to seem to me as the myth of colonisation almost, that Antaeus is a native, and earth-grubber, in touch with the ground, and you get this intelligent and superior interloper who debilitates the native by raising him, taking him out of his culture, his element, and leaving him without force. (as cited in Annwn 137)

However attractive this reading of the myth is for Heaney himself, there is an ominous side to both the mythology of the bog and the Antaeus-Hercules myth that he has subsequently acknowledged. Commenting specifically of the
Antaeus poems, Heaney has asserted that they were "dangerous to have written" (as cited in Garratt 238) in that they extend a legitimacy to what Garratt aptly calls "illiterate fidelities" (238).

Given the vitriolic response to Heaney's bog poems, and his own admitted discomfort regarding the Antaeus poems, it is understandable that his most recent, extended foray into myth is much less publicly and politically motivated, and more introspective and personal. In the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of Station Island, and his translation of the Buile Suibhne, Heaney has chosen a mythological character that functions as an unproblematic mask for the poet. Before discussing Heaney's translation of the Buile Suibhne, however, I would like to conclude my remarks on Heaney's use of mythological figures in his poetry by focusing on the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of Station Island, where Heaney adopts the identity of Sweeney in order to redress his earlier forays into mythology. As Heaney explains in an interview, Sweeney is "a mask for some aspects of [himself]...He's a point of view, really" (Beisch 165). After providing a brief synopsis of the story of Sweeney's exile, I will consider how Heaney uses
this point of view to address issues that are central to his aesthetic practice.

Sweeney (Suibhne), King of Dal Araidne in Northern Ireland, was one day disturbed by the bell of St. Ronan as the latter was surveying the foundations for a church in Sweeney's territory. Enraged, Sweeney rushed to confront the cleric, seizing his psalter and throwing it into a lake. Sweeney was, then, interrupted by a messenger summoning him to the battle of Mag Rath. Before this battle, St. Ronan tried to make peace with Sweeney by blessing his army, but Sweeney, fearing that he is being mocked, again assaults the cleric's party, killing one of his psalmists and almost killing St. Ronan himself (Sweeney's spear hits the holy bell around St. Ronan's neck). Ronan curses Sweeney, praying that, like the spear, he should fly skyward, and that he would die at spear point. Ronan's curse comes to pass, and Sweeney, transformed into a bird, flees the battlefield. Sweeney endures a life of exile, only infrequently returning to society, and is, indeed, killed by a spear.\(^{39}\)
It perhaps goes without saying that the image of Sweeney in flight contrasts the earth-bound Antaeus of Heaney’s earlier mythologically oriented poetry. In fact, this contrast is a significant one, in that Sweeney’s complicated exile helps to recontextualize, even to the point of unwriting, Heaney’s perceived obligations to the “illiterate fidelities” embodied in the figure of Antaeus. Conor Johnston argues persuasively that the relevant poetic context for understanding Heaney’s turn to Sweeney is found in the poem “Exposure,” where Heaney, as we have already seen, debates his various duties and responsibilities, both to his community and his poetry. According to Johnston, Heaney “began the translation of the Buile Suibhne in 1973, the year after he, like Sweeney before him, became an uneasy exile from Ulster” (72); the sense that he has fled from a battle is, therefore, not simply a figurative parallel for Heaney, with the speaker in “Exposure” literally feeling that he has “escaped from the massacre” (North 73). As well, Robert Tracy notes that the Sweeney story “is about abandoning political responsibility to become a poet” (239). Tracy also notes that although “the Saint does not say so, song goes with birdhood” (239). Few
critics, however, note the contrary impulse at work in
"Sweeney Redivivus," and although Sweeney is soaring
transcendent above the world, he is still bound to the
world over which he hovers. "In the Beech" emphasizes the
connection between the figure and his world:

I felt the tanks' advance beginning
at the cynosure of the growth rings,
then winced at their imperium refreshed
in each powdered bolt mark on the concrete.
And the pilot with his goggles back came in
so low I could see the cockpit rivets. (SI 100)

Interestingly, even while Heaney-Sweeney is literally
"above" the world of experience, the feeling of
transcendence is tempered by the fact that the airplane
soars above him. Symbolically, the world of armed conflict
reassimilates any attempt to rise above it or escape it.
As we will see shortly, while Sweeney may be exiled from
the world of experience, he remains, importantly, a citizen
of that world, and it is this divided sensibility that
Heaney explores through this figure.

The poems in "Sweeney Redivivus" emphasize the
persona's engagement with the material and social world in
other interesting ways as well. In a number of
autobiographical poems, Heaney-Sweeney contemplates his
critics, and debates the most condemnatory charges that they have leveled against his poetry:

    I was mired in attachment
    until they began to pronounce me
    a feeder off battlefields.  (SI 102)

In a later poem, the persona rebukes these critics:

    In the margin of texts of praise
    they scratched and clawed.
    They snarled if the day was dark
    or too much chalk had made the vellum bland
    or too little left it oily.

    Under the rumps of lettering
    they herded myopic angers.
    Resentment seeded in the uncurling
    fernheads of their capitals.  (SI 111)

This is among the most acerbic and frank of any of Heaney’s verse, and it may seem ironic that he makes these assertions through the distancing device of the figure of Sweeney. It must be remembered, however, that in the myth Sweeney does return from his exile in the trees on a number of occasions, and Heaney’s deployment of this figure in his own daily life is, therefore, not inconsistent with the *Buile Suibhne*.

    Sweeney exists for Heaney, then, as a poetical device that affords him a great deal of latitude. On the one hand, Sweeney is the bird-man who flies through the air and
avoids contact with the earth. Symbolically, Sweeney is able, therefore, to avoid political attachment and commitment. On the other hand, Sweeney returns to earth at will, which allows Heaney to use this identity to intervene on behalf of the poet in his own affairs. That is, while the Sweeney of the myth flees from battles, Heaney’s Sweeney is reintroduced to the battlefield, albeit the allegorical one that pits Heaney against his critics. It is precisely this desire to have things both ways, to claim at certain times that art is above politics, conflict, and divisiveness, while still reserving the right to make divisive or political statements in that poetry, that has outraged some of Heaney’s critics. In Anomalous States, David Lloyd fervently argues that Heaney’s work is driven by “an uneasy oscillation between local piety and universalist cultural claims” (4), and that this tension is at work in many of the poems in “Sweeney Redivivus.” For his part, Heaney does not deny that his poetry is fuelled by this tension. In his essay “The Frontier of Writing,” he explains:

A poem shifts the constituent parts of a world into a new co-ordination. For all the lines of force which pull it down and back, there are
equal and opposite lines which boost it up and away, and the special gift of poetry is precisely that salubrious feeling of having the best of both worlds. (7)

While such an argument would be anathema to Lloyd’s materialist critical framework, it does explain why Heaney is drawn to the figure of Sweeney. In fact, Sweeney becomes a salutary figure of the artist not simply because of his bird-like song, but in the more fundamental sense that, like poetry, he has an uneasy relationship with the society he simultaneously hovers above and is drawn back into. While Heaney is obviously drawn to the enabling transcendental or idealistic faculties which Sweeney embodies, he also explores the relationship that Sweeney has with more quotidian reality in order to emphasize the dual registers in which poetry functions. While his critics have been generally quick to emphasize the idealistic elements that accrue to Heaney’s poetry by virtue of this figure (in order to either praise or denounce it), they have been less interested in the materiality represented by this figure’s periodic return to the world. My contention is that Sweeney serves as an evocative embodiment of the poet in that he uneasily
straddles both the material and idealistic realms, and is both exiled from and unequivocally attached to the world of experience and society.

Heaney’s turn toward the myth of Sweeney seems, in many ways, similar to Kinsella’s use of Irish mythology in that both writers adapt mythological personae to confront contemporary, historical contingencies. In “Survivor,” Kinsella uses the myth of the figure of Fintan in order to stress the early, nationalist impulse that lies behind the story. Likewise, his use of Amairgen is both politically and aesthetically motivated: as a poet, Amairgen is above divisiveness and conflict, which suggests that Kinsella regards the work of art as similarly above political and ideological entanglements, even while his judgement has consequences in the real world. Contrastingly, Heaney’s earlier, less successful, use of mythological material in the bog poems and the Hercules and Antaeus poems seem “mired in attachment” (SI 102). Unlike Kinsella’s Amairgen and Heaney’s Sweeney, both of which are simultaneously worldly and also, at times, above conflict, these excursions into mythology seem, even if with some reluctance, to support divisive, ideological positions.
Heaney offers a corrective to this deployment of myth in his Sweeney poems, where the complicated, dual status of the poet as both citizen and exile is restored.

Translation and the Representation of Cultural Difference

The issue of translation in modern Ireland is, perhaps predictably, a politically volatile topic. The colonization of Ireland has increasingly been rendered as a conflict between distinct linguistic groups, a fact borne out by a number of works we have already considered in this study. Furthermore, there is an enduring interest among many writers and critics to emphasize the incompatibility, or at least incongruity, between English and Irish as a way to foreground the differences between nations. The Irish language poet Biddy Jenkinson, for example, has refused to allow her poetry to be translated into English: "I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland" (as cited in Cronin 176). As well, in her review of Declan Kiberd's *Idir Dhà Chultúr*, Máire Ní Annracháin
intimates that there has been a concerted resistance to translation of Irish texts into English:

In terms of cultural politics, experience tells us that while Gaelic writers and readers read English-language literature, English speakers have not generally been familiar with Gaelic literature, at least not until the last ten or so years when the separatism of the 'no translation into English' approach began to yield, understandably, to market pressures. (15)

In his recent study Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures, Michael Cronin also fixes the date of a new, non-separatist ethos of translation at around the same time. According to Cronin, a number of economic factors and government measures combined to spur on "the tremendous growth in translation activity from the mid 1980s onward" (168). Specifically, Cronin asserts that "the abandonment of economic protectionism and the adoption of new, export-oriented, free trade policies by the Lemass government from 1958 onwards" (158) played a prominent role in fueling what amounts to an export of Gaelic culture in English translation. This expansionist economic policy and the founding of a formal Arts Council in the Republic were seminal measures in what Cronin sees as a much more open ideology of translation. Finally, it must be noted that
Cronin's comprehensive reading of contemporary Irish translation practices within the broader material and economic context of translation in Europe ensures that this book will remain a touchstone on this subject for some time.

Cronin's criticism of contemporary Irish translations is strongly indebted to Lawrence Venuti's theory of "fluent strategies," and this notion is of particular importance to contemporary translation in Ireland, because it potentially offers a resolution to the socio-political arguments against translation and cultural separatism. A principal concern of the "no translation" side is that translation is implicitly a gesture of conciliation, as if the Irish were ransacking their literary heritage in order to accommodate an English audience. Indeed, Venuti has argued that this type of appropriation is at work in translations that adopt strategies of fluency:

A fluent strategy performs a labour of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader, providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her culture in a cultural other, enacting
an imperialism that extends the dominion of transparency with other ideological discourses over a different culture. (as cited in Cronin 177)

Cronin, however, extends Venuti’s arguments somewhat in his application of them to Irish translations. According to Cronin, most translations from the Irish fail “to foreground the act of translation” (178), with the following result:

The enormous difficulties in translating between two languages that are so strikingly different are elided. The poems read well and, for the monoglot Anglophone reader, nothing in the prefaces indicates the extent of the transformations that must be effected to arrive at a provisional rendering of the radically dissimilar syntactic, lexical and phonological structures of Irish in addition to complex questions of resonance and allusion. In this way, the genuine otherness of the source language and culture is diminished. (178)

The final assertion here, which echoes Venuti’s criticism of the fluent strategies approach to translation, is particularly polemical in the context of Irish translation, even while it suggests an approach to translation that would respect the essential difference of the original while still making that original work accessible for non-Irish speakers. Cronin suggests that translations that respect such difference -- translations that are
intentionally non-fluent -- evince the most respect for the original culture. According to Cronin, "Difference in translation is less an admission of failure than an affirmation of potential" (183). While Cronin's theory, underwritten by Venuti's views on translation, is phrased in a generally prescriptive rhetoric, it would be a mistake to regard this book as simply dictating a responsible, sophisticated, and contemporary approach to translation. On the contrary, Cronin is taking his critical cues from a number of translations that have appeared in recent years which take great pains to stress the "unsettling otherness" (182) of the original texts.

As translators, both Kinsella and Heaney have foregrounded the practice of translation in order to highlight the cultural specificity of the original works. This may not, however, always mean highlighting the linguistic differences between the original and translation. In An Duanaire, both Kinsella and Seán Ó Tuama (who edited the volume) offer numerous footnotes that contextualize the translations, and, therefore, emphasize the distinct culture from which they emerge. Similarly, Kinsella's acclaimed translation of Táin Bó Cúailnge
includes an apparatus and introduction that not only foregrounds linguistic difference, but also historicizes the poem as a way to render its essential difference, while still providing a translation that can be read by a non-Irish audience. As well, Heaney's translation of the Buile Suibhne preserves the cultural integrity of the original by stressing, in his introduction to the work, both its Irish textual history dating back to the ninth-century Book of Aicill, as well as its topographical specificity:

[Sweeney's] kingdom lay in what is now south Antrim and north County Down, and for over thirty years I lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney's places and in earshot of other.... When I began work on this version, I had just moved to Wicklow, not all that far from Sweeney's final resting ground in St. Mullins. (SA iii-iv)

Finally, I will conclude this section by looking at Heaney's translations of non-Irish works. These translations point beyond the English-Irish linguistic dyad, and suggest that another important aspect of translation is that it exposes works from other cultures to themes that have become staples of both Heaney's poetry and contemporary Irish cultural politics. In particular, Heaney's version of Sophocles's Philoctetes provides a
compelling example of the merits of translating such works into Irish literature, albeit Irish literature in English, in order to read these works against the grain. In doing so, Heaney picks up on themes that are, perhaps, latent in the originals, and explores them in the context of contemporary aesthetic debates.

As Thomas Jackson points out, translation has been an important part of Kinsella's poetics from the very beginning, and Kinsella had published translations "before his first collection of original verse came out" (22). Furthermore, Kinsella's method as a translator seems to be dominated, even from these early translations, by a desire to render both a readable English version of the original, while also offering a sense of the world from which the original emerges. In his translation of "Thirty Three Triads" this is perhaps a straightforward task, since both the idiosyncratic verse form and the clear didacticism of the original suggest a poetic practice that is foreign to a contemporary audience. Upon first reading these works, they are literally unlike anything with which most contemporary readers are familiar:
Three excellent qualities in narration:  
a good flow, depth of thought, conciseness.

Three dislikeable qualities in the same:  
stiffness, obscurity, bad delivery.

Three accomplishments well regarded in Ireland:  
a clever verse, music on the harp, the art  
of shaving faces. (PT 70)

The second of these triads is ironic, since, to a modern  
reader, they are both stiff and obscure. As well, the  
third emphasizes the distance between the world from which  
these poems emerge and the world in which they are read, as  
it is doubtful that “the art of shaving faces” is as  
esteemed now as it once was. The translation of these  
triads in their culturally encoded genre, their overt  
didacticism, and their dated content, denote a lack of  
fluency which, Venuti would say, reveal the “social  
determinants” that are “external to the translated text  
. . . [but] inscribed in its materiality” (“Translator’s”  
185).10 Kinsella’s translation strives to retain these  
markers of the society from which the text emerges, and,  
therefore, evinces a respect for the otherness of that  
world. Indeed, Kinsella confirms, if only in passing, that  
his practice as a translator and an editor strives to
respect the alterity of the cultures of the past. In his introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, Kinsella asserts that "the conservatism [of the bardic forms] should be felt even through the translations" (25). If these conservative poetic modes are sometimes cumbersome, and serve to alienate contemporary expectations regarding poetic fluency, that is precisely the point.

The strategy of intentional non-fluency seen in the briefer translations we have already considered is also extant in Kinsella’s lengthiest and most widely acclaimed translation, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. This ancient poem recounts the story of a cattle raid by Medb’s army into Cooley in order to take a prized brown bull. The theme of the poem is, as Arthur Gribben notes, “epic in scope, for the story tells of the defense of Ulster’s border territories by one man who stands alone against a whole army” (9). The plot of the poem, however, is fairly simple: after a lengthy treatment of the travails which befall Aillil’s and Medb’s army (many of them caused by Medb herself), stories of the debilitation of Conchobar’s army (who are, along with Cuchulainn, defending Cooley), and many sections that are difficult to assimilate to an
overall plot of the epic, Cuchulainn puts up a successful single-handed defence of both the bull and the territory. The plot of the tale is, however, incidental to its enjoyment. Because it was transmitted orally and survives in four different manuscripts,41 the story contains many logical inconsistencies that defy attempts to read it as a continuous and credible unfolding of historically significant events. For example, Finnabair dies after the fight at Rochad and returns at the end of the story to stay with Cuchulainn. As well, Kinsella points out the inconsistency at work even in the characterization of the hero: "Cuchulainn vows to kill Medb whenever he sees her, but forgoes his chance at the end of the Táin -- 'not being a killer of women'-- though he has just previously killed the two lamenting women sent by Medb to deceive him" (xii). In fact, a generous critical assessment of the epic would be that it makes curious, if consistent, choices that strive to render the conclusion of this vivid and frequently gruesome story pacifically anticlimactic. Our enjoyment of the Táin is, therefore, derived less from its overarching dramatic qualities and more from its treatment
of the frequently episodic, and sometimes disjunctive, stories that comprise the epic.

The efficacy of Kinsella’s translation of the Táin needs to be assessed against the backdrop of two other widely known translations of the same work: Lady Gregory’s and Cecile O’Rahilly’s. This is an important methodological point, since, as Venuti claims, “the translator’s practice of transforming the original can be seen in the translation” (Invisibility 197) only when we have either a strong grasp of both languages involved, or when we have “two translations of the same original” (197) with which to work. While space does not permit a detailed comparison of the three translations of the Táin, I will explore the most important and egregious differences between them.

Lady Gregory’s translation has been criticized for sanitizing the story, for reworking what Kinsella refers to as “the strong element” of “directness” in the saga: “the long references to seduction, copulation, urination, the picking of vermin...and so on” (Táin xiv). We can easily appreciate that, as a Victorian, Lady Gregory would have been averse to translating such material, and was probably
correct in adducing that neither the clergy nor the intended audience of the translation would have had much interest in the "coarseness" (Kinsella, Táin xiv) of the original. Writing to Yeats, who was concerned that she had modified the original stories, Lady Gregory insisted that all of her "slight Bowdlerizing [was] done ... from the peasant point of view" (as cited in Murphy 9), appealing to the necessity of satisfying what she imagined to be the demands of her audience in the production of her text. This is a fairly clear illustration of how a strategy of fluency governs Lady Gregory's translation, since she places the expectations of the audience above the imperative to represent accurately both the source document and the culture from which it emerges.

In one of the few critical works on Kinsella's translation of the epic, Joep Leersson offers a comparison of Lady Gregory's and Kinsella's translations, asserting that Lady Gregory's translation is more accomplished because it more "smoothly" (37) renders the original. While he is sometimes suspicious of Lady Gregory's "paternalism" (31), Leersson nonetheless regards fluency, and the corresponding elision of difference, as the
principal virtue of all translation. This is not only evinced in his sometimes self-contradictory praise for Lady Gregory’s translation, but in the specific denunciations he levels at Kinsella. For example, Leersson suggests that an “exoticist fascination” (40) underlies Kinsella self-defeating ethic of translation: “It is this tension between national appurtenance and exoticist fascination which, I think, underlies the one between Kinsella’s valorization of obscurity and archaism” (40-41). For Leersson, all translation destroys obscurity and archaism, and any attempt to preserve these qualities is doomed to failure. Clearly, such axiomatic positions do not admit the subtle distinctions that we have seen Venuti and Cronin explore in their treatment of fluent strategies. Kinsella’s translation of the Táin Bó Cúailnge emphasizes the uniqueness and archaic qualities of the original by not only retaining the violence and bodily directness of the Táin, but also by using old Irish place and personal names instead of their more current forms. This decision seems particularly to upset Leersson, who again points out what he sees as a conundrum in Kinsella’s “exoticist” tendencies: “there seems to be a conflict of intent here:
on the one hand we are meant to recognize the geographical
reference in the Táin, on the other hand the names
themselves are kept deliberately alien" (40). By retaining
the names of places and people in their earlier forms,
Kinsella is able to evoke the distance of that culture in
time, while still suggesting its proximity in space.

The charge that by retaining early variants of place
and proper names Kinsella is "exoticist" is defused by
recourse to Cecile O’Rahilly’s translation of the epic. In
fact, Leerssen’s failure to even briefly consider
O’Rahilly’s translation leads him to make erroneous
statements regarding Kinsella’s text. For example,
Leersson refers to Kinsella’s use of proper names as "one
of the most characteristic features" (39) of this
translation of The Táin. This is simply false, since
O’Rahilly retains the older variants of proper names as
well: both Kinsella and O’Rahilly use the name "Medb"
instead of "Maeve," and O’Rahilly prefers the older place
names in her text as well. Nobody who has even glanced at
O’Rahilly’s prosaic and dry translation would accuse her of
exoticism.
O’Rahilly’s translation is a significant work in itself, and offers much more than a way to defuse Leerssson’s somewhat ludicrous charges against Kinsella. O’Rahilly’s overly stolid translation reveals the limit-case of Venuti’s attack on fluency, by revealing the value of a translation which makes almost no concessions to a contemporary reader. Venuti’s attack on fluency and on the market pressures that demand easy access of foreign texts to monoglot English readers leads him to a kind of extremism regarding translation practices that would, despite his good intentions, conceivably render many translations unreadable. In "A Call to Action," the final chapter of his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti gives free reign to his sometimes extreme views. The following remark is typical of the tone of the concluding chapter: “Translators must force a revision of the codes -- cultural, economic, and legal -- that marginalize and exploit them” (311). What this kind of extremism fails to recognize is that if translations are overly conservative in their retention of the markers of cultural difference (found in the original document) and make little attempt to render the work’s less tangible, literary qualities, then
the translation will hold out very little interest for an actual reader (even if a translator might praise the ethics of the translation). For example, the section of *The Táin* titled "The Bloodless Fight of Rochad" recounts Finnabair's deceit of the seven kings of Munster, all of whom have been promised her hand as a reward for helping Medb. Finnabair, however, loves Rochad, and her night together with him enrages the seven kings. O'Rahilly offers the following translation of the story:

This was told to the seven kings from Munster.
One of them said:
    I was promised this girl on the surety of fifteen men, in requital for coming on this hosting.
All seven of them confessed that the same bargain had been made with each of them. So they went to take revenge for it on the sons of Ailill in Glenn Domain where they were guarding the rear of the army.
    Medb rushed to the rescue. So did the division of the Leinstermen. So too Ailill and Fergus. Seven hundred fell there in the battle of Glenn Domain. (214-215)

Kinsella's translation, although offering all the same detail, renders the event in more vivid and evocative language:

    The several kings of Munster were told that Rochad had slept with the girl. One of them said:
"That girl was promised to me. With fifteen hostages as a guarantee, to get me to join this army."

All seven confessed in turn that she had been promised to them. They came to take vengeance against Aillill's sons who were keeping watch over the armies in Glenn Domain. But Medb rose up against them, and the Galeoin troop of three thousand rose up also, and Aillil and Fergus. Seven hundred died slaughtering each other there in Glenn Domain. (215)

Kinsella's phrase "died slaughtering each other" is much more graphic than O'Rahilly's "fell there," and the retention of the violence of the original is a signal aspect of Kinsella's version of the epic. Furthermore, O'Rahilly's cumbersome phrase "in requital for coming on this hosting" is replaced by the much more fluent "to get me to join this army." The latter also has the added benefit of better relating the disappointment of the Ulster king at this manipulation. The severity of this disappointment is integral to the tale, because the kings rebel not only because they have been misled, but also because they all desire Finnabair. As well, O'Rahilly's phrase "rushed to the rescue" is replaced by Kinsella's more momentous "rose up," a phrase which better connotes the power that Medb evinces at many points in the Táin. Significantly, Kinsella's translation does not pause
syntactically between the attack on Aillil's sons and Medb's vengeance, which relates the concertedness of these two acts and the swiftness of Medb's aggression. This is consistent with many other stories in the tale, where Medb is quick to recommend what appear to be bloodthirsty answers to sometimes fairly trivial problems. The very next episode in the text, "the Humorous Fight of Ileach," also suggests significant, characterizing differences in both Kinsella's and O'Rahilly's translations. Kinsella's translation of the bawdy description of Ileach "in his nakedness, with his narrow tool and his balls hanging down through the chariot floor" (216), employs a colloquialism that is much more vivid and humorous than O'Rahilly's translation, where Iliach is "long-membered, with the clapar down through the frame of the chariot" (215). Since this tale seems placed in the story to provide a moment of "low" comic relief after the carnage of the "bloodless" battle of Rochad, Kinsella's more bawdy translation seems in keeping with the spirit, if not the exact phrasing, of the original. In all, these differences render Kinsella's translation much more readable and dramatic, while still
allowing it to retain the sense of difference that reveals a respect for the culture that produced the text.

Kinsella’s strategy of translation, then, is governed by a dual imperative to render the text readable and interesting, while still preserving its foreignness and difference. Unlike Lady Gregory’s sanitized version, written in “the dialect of the peasants of Kiltartan” (Murphy 8) in order to facilitate the easy consumption of the epic, Kinsella’s translation retains the “directness in bodily matters” (Kinsella, Táin xiv) that seems to have been a characteristic of the culture that produced the document. As well, Kinsella avoids the fluent strategies that would render the text in unproblematic English, since such a gesture would imply a disrespect for the original culture which produced the document. Finally, O’Rahilly’s much less fluent and anti-poetic translation, while retaining the markers of cultural specificity in the original (like Irish place and personal names) fails to imbue the text with the dramatic qualities that the original culture would have prized in the recitation of the work, and in so doing extrudes an essential element from the text, despite the literal efficacy of her translation.
As we will see again with Heaney's translation of the *Buile Suibhne*, the respect for the cultural difference embodied in the source document that Venuti and Cronin insist upon must be tempered by a consideration of the less tangible, poetical qualities that help to render the singularity and importance of the work being translated.

**Heaney's Sweeney and Fluent Strategies**

We have already looked at Heaney's adoption of the identity of Sweeney in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of *Station Island*, and the concomitant ease with which Heaney installs Sweeney as a figure in our world. While this is an effective poetic device in these poems, an antithetical impulse is at work in Heaney's translation of the *Buile Suibhne*, where Heaney, even in the context of a fluent translation, is able to emphasize the cultural specificity of the original document. Again, we are fortunate here to have multiple translations into English of the Sweeney myth in order to draw conclusions through comparison. In the discussion that follows, I will read Heaney's translation against John O'Keeffe's full-length version of the original
in order to compare the ethos of translation that lies behind both works.

There is a temptation, at our historical remove, to suggest that O’Keeffe’s translation was done at a time (1904) when respect for the idiosyncrasy and cultural specificity of the original was less an issue than it is for the more theoretically inclined writer of today, but the implicit condescension on which such a view rests is simply not borne up by the evidence. Douglas Hyde’s translations from the 1890s (Beside the Fire and the Love Songs of Connaught), according to Michael Cronin, are “idiomatic, unpretentious and convey energy and difference without descending into parody” (135). O’Keeffe, translating shortly after Hyde’s earliest translations, would surely have been familiar not only with the translations themselves, but also with the implicit ethos of these works. In fact, it cannot be overemphasized that when we discuss the reflection of cultural difference and intentional non-fluency in Irish translations we are not applying a critical standard of judgement discovered and articulated in the mid-1980s but one at work in Irish
culture since the mid-1890s. Criticism and theory are clearly taking their cues from practice in this field.

O'Keeffe's translation of the *Buile Suibhne* for the Irish Texts Society is, in many important ways, a work which respects the differences of the original or source culture. For example, O'Keeffe retains some sense of the old Irish proper names by translating them into their phonetic English equivalent: the Irish name "Alladhàn," for example, becomes "Ealladhen" for O'Keeffe, whereas Heaney translates the name simply as "Alan" (O'Keeffe 103; Heaney 57). Similarly, O'Keeffe retains early variants of place names, translating "ros Chomain" as "Ros Comin" (91), where Heaney renders this as the more familiar "Roscommon" (50). To the extent that Heaney's choices are clearly designed to enhance both the general readability of the work and the degree to which a contemporary reader could identify with both place and character names, his translation is a fluent one. According to Venuti, a fluent translation "is written in English that is current ('modern') instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized ('jargonisation') and that is standard instead of colloquial ('slangy')" (Invisibility 4). Such fluency,
which Venuti regards as consistent with a triumphalist linguistic ideology, is, however, consistent with Heaney’s other aims in translating the text. For Heaney, the historical or cultural specificity of the original is less important than the contemporary relevance of the document. Heaney does note that Sweeney “is not a given figure of myth or legend but an historically situated character” (SA i), but quickly moves past issues of historical specificity while emphasizing the transcendental themes in the work:

Insofar 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 creativity imagination and the constraints or religious, political, and domestic obligation. It is equally possible, in a more opportunistic spirit, to dwell upon Sweeney’s easy sense of cultural affinity with both western Scotland and southern Ireland as exemplary of all men and women in contemporary Ulster. (ii)

There is, in fact, a telling parallel between the story of Sweeney and Heaney’s ethos of translation: like Sweeney himself, who is constantly fleeing the material world of conflict and crisis, Heaney’s translation equally escapes into a realm of aesthetic transcendence from one of historical specificity and cultural difference.
If this is a serious drawback in Heaney’s work, it must finally be praised for the unparalleled translation of the original’s verse passages, and it will not surprise many that Heaney’s poetry is much more accomplished than O’Keeffe’s. Nor is this a minor matter, since in order to understand what modest benefits accrue to Sweeney as a result of his madness, it is important to see him as a capable poet. For example, O’Keeffe translates the beginning of Sweeney’s wailing farewell to Ailsa Craig as follows:

‘Gloomy this life,
to be without a soft bed,
abode of cold frost,
roughness of wind-driven snow.

Cold, icy, wind,
faint shadow of a feeble sun,
shelter of a single tree,
on the summit of a table-land. (91)

Heaney renders these same lines in a more direct and emotive tone, which stresses Sweeney’s isolation and exile:

Without bed or board
I face dark days
in frozen lairs
and wind-driven snow.

Ice scoured by winds.
Watery shadows from weak sun.
Shelter from the one tree
on a plateau. (51)

While there is much to recommend O’Keeffe’s translation of
Buile Suibhne, his difficulty with the poetry makes his
translation a difficult one to read. Heaney’s version,
however, renders the poetry much more readable, and makes a
greater effort to match Sweeney’s mood with his voice
throughout the work, even though the translation does very
little to translate the cultural specificity of the
original.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Heaney
generally fails to recognize the cultural difference of the
source texts in his translations. In his recent
translation of Antoine Raftery’s “Cill Liadáin,” Heaney
goes to great lengths to imbue his translation with a sense
of the culture from which it emerges. In this version,
appropriately titled “Raftery’s Killeadan” to draw
attention to the original, Heaney adopts the difficult
metrics of Irish poetry in his English translation.
Heaney’s translation reads, in part:

Now spring is arriving and evenings are stretching
And after the feast of St. Brigid I’ll go
For I’ve taken a notion and grown impatient
To be back in the heart of the County Mayo.  
The town of Claremorris will be my first station,  
In Ball beyond it the strong drink will flow,  
In Kiltemagh next I'll put up and be feted  
And in Ballina too, a few miles down the road.  

(9)

The metrics here suggest the world of the original and the somewhat stringent demands of bardic poetry (Raftery is generally regarded as the last bard of Irish poetry). Heaney is able to translate the experience of hearing bardic poetry to a contemporary reader by rendering the formal difficulties associated with that verse. In doing so, he connotes the historical distance of the source document in a way that emphasizes not just the greatness of the original poem but the ethos of aesthetic production from a distant culture.

Although Heaney's translations from the Irish have been roundly praised, he has made an equally important contribution to contemporary Irish writing as a translator from non-Irish originals. Seeking to move beyond the constraints of what Michael Cronin euphemistically refers to as "the charged context of the English-Irish language pair" (188), Heaney has turned to the work of European poets, and even ancient Greek dramatists, in order to
situate these works within the context of Irish culture generally, and his own life specifically, in order to draw our attention to compelling themes, latent in the original, that may go unnoticed without Heaney’s intervention as a translator. While not referring to Heaney at all, Thomas Kinsella has described the practice that I see as at work in these translations. After contemplating the sometimes difficult relationship between a writer and tradition, that is, a writer and the past, Kinsella elucidates the equally salient relationship between the writer and the present:

For any writer there is also the relationship with other literatures, with the present, with the ‘human predicament’, with the self. This last may be the most important of all, for certain gaps in ourselves can swallow up all the potentiality in the world . . . . A writer, according to his personal scope, stands in relation to what he can use of man’s total literary tradition. (New Oxford 65)

In the remainder of this chapter I will consider how Heaney’s non-Irish translations situate him with respect to this “total literary tradition.”

Perhaps the most important European influence on Heaney’s poetry comes from Dante. Heaney has translated sections of The Divine Comedy, and has also frequently employed allusions to Dante’s poetry in his own writing.
Since this aspect of Heaney's turn towards European poetry has been exhaustively dealt with elsewhere,\textsuperscript{44} I will not review it here. Of perhaps more current interest are Heaney's translations of European poets like Czeslaw Milosz\textsuperscript{45} and Marin Sorescu,\textsuperscript{46} in whose work he finds support for his own ideals of political detachment and aesthetic freedom. While these poems are interesting treatments of this important theme, I will focus, in the remainder of this chapter, on Heaney's most comprehensive consideration of the divergent demands of poetical detachment and political commitment in his work as a translator, which is found in his version of Sophocles's \textit{Philoctetes}.

Strictly speaking, Heaney's \textit{The Cure at Troy} is less a translation of Sophocles's \textit{Philoctetes} than a version of the play. Heaney has added or modified dialogue that, while perhaps altering the central themes of loyalty, justice, and commitment to community, has also coupled these themes with the imperatives of poetry in a culture dominated by divisive ideological difference. At the end of Heaney's play, for example, the chorus debates the value of poetry in a hostile political climate in a vocabulary
that is unequivocally drawn from events in Northern Ireland:

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.

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. (77)

The explicit reference to "hunger-strikers" makes plain that Northern Irish politics are being drawn into the range of themes that this play explores. As well, Heaney has also clarified that Ulster politics informs the prevailing context of his approach to characterization. According to Matthew DeForrest, Heaney has "likened Philoctetes to [the Reverend Ian] Paisley" (134) in private conversation, with DeForrest adding the clarification that such a figure "refuses to let go of his hatred, his anger and fear of his fellow countrymen whom he has come to view as his enemy" (134). It is unclear how the attributes that DeForrest isolates above apply only to extreme Unionists, however, and not to extremists on both sides of the political
divide. Furthermore, DeForrest's identification of Odysseus with the Provisional IRA because both are "willing to use deception, coercion, and violence" (134) is equally confusing, and misses the similarities between Odysseus and Philoctetes in the play. For example, Philoctetes demonstrates an obvious predilection towards violence in both his speech and action. In his first exchange with Neoptolemus, he recounts the story of his abandonment, the ensuing ten years on his own, and his desire for revenge:

   Every day has been a weeping wound  
   For ten years now. Ten years' misery and starvation --
   That's all my service ever got for me. 
   That's what I have to thank Odysseus for 
   And Menelaus and Agamemnon. 
   Gods curse them all! 
   I ask for the retribution I deserve. 
   I solemnly beseech the gods to strike 
   The sons of Atreus in retaliation. (19)

Later in the play, Philoctetes is poised to exact this revenge on Odysseus, who is intent on forcing the former to rejoin the Athenian campaign against Troy:

   Odysseus: You are under orders, Philoctetes, 
            To join the force at Troy. 
   Philoctetes: And you are in range at last. 

(He aims the bow)
Contrary to DeForrest’s claim, then, we come to associate violence and coercion with both Odysseus and Philoctetes, and, instead of seeing them as representatives of the IRA and Paisley Unionism respectively, it is more accurate to regard them as representing divergent positions within either extremist group. Philoctetes is consumed with hatred regarding his mistreatment in the past, and, therefore, represents a backward-looking ethic that would seem to preclude any progress. Odysseus, on the other hand, represents extreme and amoral expediency, and his sometimes euphemistic speech echoes with an implicit justification for political violence:

My aim has always been to get things done
By being adaptable. If I’m dealing with
Plain-spoken, honest people, they’ll find me
As honest and plain-spoken as they come.
My main concern is to keep things moving on
In the right direction. (57)

Like all ideologues, Odysseus has no doubt that “the right direction” is the one that he perceives to be best for all involved, and never considers the positions espoused by Philoctetes or Neoptolemus as having any merit.

The only character in the play who arouses any sympathy is Neoptolemus himself, who is so clearly a figure
of the artist in troubled political times that he even quotes recognizably Heaney-esque utterances at a number of points in the play. For example, when Neoptolemus contemplates the extent and consequences of his betrayal of Philoctetes mid-way through the play, he does so in language borrowed from Heaney's "Exposure":

Neoptolemus: How did I end up here? Why did I go Behind backs ever? (53)

Similarly, Neoptolemus's injunction to Philoctetes to stop obsessing over the wrongs committed against him in the past and to fix his attention on the present, anticipates the title of a future volume of Heaney's poetry: "Stop licking your wounds. Start seeing things" (74). Neoptolemus's persistent self-questioning rehearses a stance that is familiar to readers of Heaney's early and middle poetry, where the imperatives of political and social commitment clash with the demands of poetry. That Sophocles's Philoctetes can be altered slightly to reflect this theme, in fact, explains Heaney's attraction to it. Early in the play the chorus makes explicit the controlling theme of Heaney's version of this work:

For my part is the chorus, and the chorus
Is more or less a borderline between
The you and the me and the it of it.

Between
The gods' and human beings' sense of things.

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. (2)

Significantly, these lines are not in Sophocles's version
of the play, which opens with the conversation between
Odysseus and Neoptolemus. This addition to Heaney's
version serves to position poetry between material reality
and an idealistic vision of that reality. While this
aesthetic idealism threatens to leave the world of
facticity for a realm of universals, it never quite does so
in Heaney's work, since the poet inscribes the cultural
specificity of his society in the work itself. Both
Heaney's implicit and overt references to Ulster politics
ensures that this play will be read against the social
realities from which it emerges. In fact, Heaney's version
of the play is a distinctively Irish translation, although
it is written in English, precisely because it encodes
Northern Irish political and social realities into the
play. While this practice may violate a certain ethic of
translation, it enables Heaney to offer an important context for a theme that he sees as latent in the original: the place and function of poetry in emphatically politicized environments.

As a version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy* takes a number of liberties with the original that make it more readily accessible to a contemporary audience. While this commodification of the original has become a staple of the translation industry, Irish literary history is replete with numerous translations that work to emphasize the cultural difference of the original in a number of ways. Kinsella's translations have always valued the distinctiveness of the source culture, and have demonstrated this by working against an ideology of fluency. Heaney's translations, however, are driven by a different set of imperatives entirely. While not necessarily emphasizing the cultural distinctiveness of the source text, these translations show, in the case of *Sweeney Astray*, the complexity and general significance of the original. There is, perhaps, a more pressing issue than the recognition of cultural difference operating here, as one of the attributes associated with major literatures
is their production of works of universal significance. By offering a translation of the Buile Suibhne which, while recognized as unequivocally Irish, is of universal importance, Heaney de-emphasizes the local to suggest the enduring and general importance of the work. Finally, Heaney uses translation as a way to move beyond the debilitating politics of the English-Irish linguistic dyad, and looks to European and classical sources both to situate himself and his literature in a wider tradition. Specifically, Heaney’s version of Sophocles’s Philoctetes ”translates” it in the context of Northern Irish politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to fully explore what Heaney sees as a latent concern of the original: the obligation of poetry and the poet in politically demanding times.
Conclusion

Challenging the Canon: Rejoinders to Critical Nationalism in Contemporary Poetry

At various points in this study, I have alluded to critical practices and assumptions that work to narrow the canon of Irish literature. Increasingly, in fact, the critic’s answer to the question posed by Michael Longley, "What is there to talk about but difficult poems?" (Poems 1963-83 199), is an implicit "less and less," since criticism works so aggressively, at times, to delimit the scope and significance of a body of literary works that seems diverse. The problem, it seems, is that difficult poems do not necessarily lead to subtle or revelatory discussions since reductive critical apparatuses work against the polyvalent strategies that render poetry difficult. While the reification of recurring critical themes, and the formation of critical canons that ensue from this process, is perhaps inevitable, it is doubtlessly
an equally important task to step outside of this practice with a view to pointing out other equally important themes and concepts which have received little or no attention by critics. In this chapter, which stands in lieu of a formal conclusion, I would like briefly to point out a number of important themes in contemporary Irish poetry, and suggest that alternate canons can, if not displace, then at least coexist with, the ostensibly nationalist political orientation of much of the criticism of Irish writing. Here I will consider poetry that resists the reification of a nationalist critical ideology in contemporary Irish studies.

The contemporary Ulster poet who has been most often accused of turning away from political themes is Derek Mahon, and it is, therefore, beneficial to consider the validity of nationalist critical paradigms against the example offered by his poetry. In fact, the critical consensus on Mahon’s work seems to regard his ambivalent relationship with Irish politics and history as the characterizing feature of his writing. Seamus Heaney has flippantly referred to Mahon as “the Stephen Dedalus of Belfast” (“Pre-Natal” 475) in order to suggest his lack of
interest in Ulster politics, while Dillon Johnston also comments on Mahon's turning away from a history which "includes the Troubles but is larger and less defined than that ineluctable homicidal process" (Johnston 225). Lastly, Seamus Deane has asserted that Mahon's poetry is fueled by a desire "to be free from history" (Celtic Revivals 156), with the implicit impossibility of this desire hanging over his criticisms of Mahon's writing.

It must be noted, also, that Mahon himself is partly responsible for this critical reception. In interviews, he has offered the provocative and often-cited remark that he "just happened to be born in Belfast," in order to suggest that pursuing criticisms of his poetry founded on political themes is pointless. As well, in "The Last of the Fire Kings," which amounts to a kind of position-poem on his relationship to history (figured as the history of sectarian conflict) and to his critics, Mahon offers the following strident assertions regarding his aesthetic practice:

I am
Through with history --
Who lives by the sword
Dies by the sword.
Last of the fire kings, I shall
Break with tradition and
Die by my own hand
Rather than perpetuate
The barbarous cycle. (58)

By the poem's conclusion, however, the speaker is inhabited
by a sense of defeat in the face of overwhelming opposition
to his politically disengaged poetic practice:

But the fire-loving
People, rightly perhaps,
Will not countenance this,

Demanding that I inhabit,
Like them, a world of
Sirens, bin-lids
And bricked-up windows --

Not to release them
From the ancient curse
But to die their creature and be thankful.
(59)

While "the fire-loving people" refers generally to all of
those who are too steeped in political debate to imagine a
place outside of conflict, a case can be made for reading
the phrase as a reference to critics like Deane and Declan
Kiberd, who regard history, especially the history of
sectarian conflict, as the interpretive horizon of all
contemporary Irish poetry. We have already looked at
Deane's critical model that emphasizes the determinative
role played by historical conditions in the production of aesthetic objects, and noted the impossibility, according to Deane, of the artist ever liberating him or herself from history. Mahon confronts this position with the reference to "the ancient curse" in the final stanza of "The Last of the Fire Kings" (cited above). While the tone suggests that the speaker is resigned to his fate, the stanza is explicitly critical of those who are immersed in a view of history that emphasizes violence and conflict.

If "The Last of the Fire Kings" intimates that Mahon is trapped within an aesthetic institution that is governed primarily by historical and political themes, much of his poetry de-emphasizes the crisis between nationalism and unionism, and considers history less in terms of culpable parties and devastating consequences, but, as Terence Brown asserts, as a dynamic process. Contrary to the view of Mahon's poetry espoused by Deane and Johnston, who claim that Mahon is trying to escape from history, Terence Brown has remarked that "history in its political aspect is one of Mahon's central imaginative concerns" (Northern Voices 198). By "history," however, Brown alludes to a unique
understanding of process that he sees at work in Mahon’s
poetry:

History, it is important to make clear, does not
mean for Derek Mahon that complex of Irish
linguistic, ethnic, religious and geographic
truths sensed as permanencies which it is in the
poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney.
History for Mahon is no saga of land and people
but a process, ‘the elemental flux’ (‘Rocks’)
which casts one man as coloniser, another as
colonised, and man in innumerable roles. (198)

In fact, “The Last of the Fire Kings” offers compelling
support for Brown’s argument, since the poem is not about
rectifying an “incorrect” view of history, but about the
various positions or roles that critics, poets, and
audiences come to occupy relative to political and
aesthetic debates. That is, the poem is interested in the
construction of a certain perspective and the effect it has
on the reception of poetry, and not on the relative merits
of one specific political view over the other. When the
speaker suggests that “the fire-loving / People rightly
perhaps” (59, emphasis added) will not allow the poet to
leave the world of strife and conflict, he or she
recognizes the legitimacy of the view that contradicts his
or her own. This is important, since it describes
political and aesthetic debates (and, in this poem, history itself) in terms of a number of pre-scripted positions that, as part of a process by which the present unfolds, are available to those who occupy contradictory positions in any polemic. Far from endorsing this determinative view of history, as Seamus Deane does, Mahon is critical of it, and "The Last of the Fire Kings" works to demystify the process by which politics, history, and even literature are allowed to harden into pre-scripted, rote positions. Briefly stated, Mahon's poem is not about correct or incorrect notions of history, but about how all history is essentially constructed, and about the difficulties of inhabiting a space outside the ones offered by sectarian identification.

This difficulty, however, rarely deters Mahon from investigating the availability of places beyond divisive politics. Frequently in Mahon's poetry, the difficulty of avoiding the hardened identities offered within the discourse of sectarianism is coupled with the inherent pointlessness of simply occupying a delimited and limiting identity. In "Derry Morning," for example, the speaker confronts what he regards as the inherent pointlessness of
violence as a kind of engine for political change. The poem opens by essaying the material effects of political violence on the city: "The mist clears and the cavities/ Glow black in the rubbed city's/ Broken mouth" (123). While this description is presented in language that leaves little doubt about the speaker's response to the desolation of the city as a result of the "Troubles," the poem later suggests that not only is this violence horrific, but that it also fails to bring about substantive and lasting political change: "This is how the centuries work-- Two steps forward, one step back" (123).

Although "Derry Morning" is critical of the history that it briefly recounts, its closing stanza ultimately refuses to condemn the actions described earlier in the poem. In fact, the frequent turn in Mahon's poetry about history is away from condemnation and towards contextualization:

What of the change envisioned here,  
The quantum leap from fear to fire?  
Smoke from a thousand chimneys strains  
One way beneath the returning rains  
That shroud the bomb-sites, while the fog  
Of time receives the ideologue.  
A Russian freighter bound for home  
Mourns to the city in its gloom.  
(123)
The question which opens the stanza suggests that the speaker is not posing as if he has all of the answers to the complex problems facing both communities in Ulster. In fact, the subtle circuit drawn, in the next four lines, between the smoke, the rain, and "the fog of time" can be read as a recognition that a number of intractable factors create the political climate in Ulster. As well, this passage also cautions against reading history and politics with the reductive "clarity" offered by entrenched ideologies. The smoke from chimneys saturates the clouds, which then bring a rain that creates a fog which then allows the ideologue (we have clearly moved out of the meteorological metaphors now) to reinvent the past in whatever form he or she wishes. Interestingly, however, by the time we get to the terminus of this equation, it is entirely possible that we have forgotten where we started. That is, the syntax of Mahon's microcosm of historical process, with its regress from the causal point of origin (here the smoke), reminds us that the root of political strife is less a perception than an invention of the ideologue.
While poems like "Derry Morning," and "Last of the Fire Kings" work against the conscription of the past in partisan politics, Mahon moves beyond what I would call an explicitly critical or negative approach to the politicization of the past towards an affirmative response to history in what is generally regarded as his most efficacious treatment of this theme. In "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," the speaker contemplates the places outside history, politics, or divisiveness-- in a word, the places beyond "use"-- that afford some distance from the debilitating forces at work in Irish political life. The often-quoted opening line of the poem marks "A Disused Shed" as working in a less critical mode, where the speaker is not lamenting the uses to which the past is put in Irish politics, but is instead offering a sense of how to emerge from such ideologically motivated representations of history:

Even now there are places where a thought might grow--
Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
To a slow clock of condensation,
An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter
Of wild-flowers in the lift-shaft,
Indian compounds where the wind dances
And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
Lime crevices behind rippling rain-barrels,
Dog corners for bone burials;
And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford.
(Collected Poems 62)

The opening phrase "even now" stands as a response to the assumed skepticism of the implied interlocutor, connoting not only the speaker’s belief that there are "places" outside ideology where something like real thinking is possible, but also his or her perception that most people no longer believe that such places exist. Indeed, critics like Seamus Deane have argued that all positions are already contaminated by a kind of interest that precludes the subtlety and accommodation implicit in the speaker’s position.

While much has been written on this poem’s appeal to a politically disinterested aesthetic space, I would like to discuss the connection between Mahon’s view of places outside politics, capital, and ideology, and the materialist critic Walter Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism” that, I believe, has gone unexamined. In this essay, Benjamin praises the French Surrealist writer André Breton for making an “extraordinary discovery” (Reflections 181) in that Breton was the "the first to perceive the
revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded,’ in
the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings”
(181). According to Benjamin, objects which have exhausted
their usefulness as commodities stand in a privileged
relationship to politics and capital in that they offer an
implicit criticism of the systems from which they are now
detached. In fact, the conceptual space in which these
objects stand may offer the only place outside capitalism,
power, and politics from which to understand their various
processes.

Mahon’s interest in “A Disused Shed,” it must be
noted, is less with the realm of capital or commodification
(unless we conceive these terms as “intellectual” or
“cultural” capital) than it is in the dialectical
relationship that he sees in the reappraisal of “useless”
things. The central symbol of the poem, which is
introduced in the second stanza, prompts the speaker to
consider the potential for regeneration that exists outside
the political or ideological sphere:

Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel,
Among the bathtubs and the washbasins
A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star.
What should they do there but desire?
So many days beyond the rhododendrons
With the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud,
They have learnt patience and silence
Listening to the rooks querulous in the high wood.

(Selected Poems 62)

As the poem develops, the "thousand mushrooms" come to
stand in for all of those who have experienced what Peter
McDonald calls "history's destructive cruelty and
indifference" (98). It must be recalled, however, that in
Mahon's poetry we are using the term "history" in two
divergent ways: to signify politically inscribed narratives
which seek to recall and revise the events of the past, but
also all of the forgotten (because politically unimportant)
aspects of the past that nonetheless insist, at least for
Mahon, to be remembered because of the implicit critique
they offer politicized history. Interestingly, then,
Mahon's poetry searches for the relatively insignificant
events and reinvests them with a momentousness that
explicitly critiques the narrow service to which history is
put in political and ideological discourses. In "A Disused
Shed," the silent reproach of the historically forgotten is
given full voice in the final stanza:

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak on their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.
Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
(Selected Poems 63)

The final stanza confirms that Mahon’s historical poetry is not about simply forgetting history, or striving to be free of it, but is instead about remembering it on a more fundamental level than is frequently available within prescribed narratives which recall the past in order to suit the needs of the present. Earlier I referred to Brendan Bradshaw’s doctrine of “purposeful unhistoricity” which strives to make the past useful to the present despite whatever resistance the past may offer to the frequently monological or monocausal views the ideologue or historian may wish to advance. For Mahon, this narrow employment of history is rebuked by remembering the “lost people” (Selected Poems 63) for which motivated history has no use. It is not, as Tom Paulin suggests, that Mahon is searching for “a place of pure being which exists outside history” (58), but rather that history inscribes itself on a more fundamental, intractable way in Mahon’s aesthetic, and becomes detached from narrowly construed, programmatic aims.
Mahon’s "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" is part of a larger engagement with history that works itself out in a number of his poems, and it is interesting to note that even in very recent works like "Smoke" (1997) Mahon continues to search for "an a-political sphere above the weather" (120). This investigation of history and its politicization is conducted in two distinct ways in Mahon’s poetry: a negative mode which criticizes existing, generally divisive and ideologically interested, uses of the past, and a positive mode, which affirms the existence of a place beyond such divisiveness.

A similar historical sensibility, I would argue, animates Paul Muldoon’s poetry. Muldoon investigates historical process not from the standpoint of contemporary political antagonism, but rather with a comparativist ethos that looks for (or perhaps invents) similarities between diverse historical circumstances. For example, Muldoon has remarked that his interest in the plight of Native Americans derives from a "glancing correlation...between Native Americans and the Native Irish" (Gauthier 54). Specifically, Muldoon is referring to his poem "The Indians on Alcatraz," which approaches Irish history from the
seemingly divergent history of early America. The speaker in this poem remarks that “It is as if [Native Americans] accept that they are islanders at heart” (246) before completely blurring, in the penultimate stanza, the distinction between the Irish and Native Americans:

As if this island running away to sea and seed, bartered
For with bright trinkets, has forever been the far-off
destination
Of the bands of little figures on horseback returning,
returning. (246)

The repetition of “returning” suggests that the speaker, in fact, returns to the present as this word is spoken, and that the present is understood in a new way as a result of the parallels drawn between these two groups:

After the newspaper and television reports I remark
On how people can still be themselves, but each morning
Leaves me more grateful for the fact that they never attack
after dark. (246)

The last line of the poem draws a striking parallel between two violent histories, and suggests a connection between the American colonization of the Native population and the British colonization of Ireland. Interestingly, this practice is not explicitly condemned in the poem, since the speaker is not assessing the events he or she chronicles from any recognizable moral or ethical position. Instead,
history is explored, as it is by Derek Mahon, as a process which consists of a number of subject-positions that are intrinsically no more or less valid than the positions which oppose them.

In this characterization of Muldoon's poetry I do not mean to suggest that he simply ignores contemporary Irish politics in his writing, but that he does not write from the standpoint of a fixed, committed ideology that derogates opposed positions. Following Edward Said's terminology, I would call Muldoon's view of the past "contrapuntal" in that it seeks to rise above conflicting or competitive viewpoints. Said introduces the notion of a "contrapuntal analysis" of history in *Culture and Imperialism*, where he explains his methodology in the following terms:

By looking at the different experiences [of both colonizer and formerly colonized people] contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of confrontation and hostility. A more interesting type of secular interpretation can emerge, altogether more rewarding than the denunciations of the past. (18-19)
Said's scholarly methods aptly describe the procedures at work in Paul Muldoon's poetry, which, in the inflammatory context of Irish politics, risks being misread as an unwillingness to confront the most pressing issues facing the culture.

This view, however, is not supported by a reading of Muldoon's work, which does confront sectarianism and its effect on Irish life. The allusions to sectarian politics in Muldoon's poetry have been adequately documented elsewhere, so I will conclude my remarks on Muldoon's work by examining his most involved investigation of contemporary Irish politics, which is found in his verse-play *Six Honest Serving Men*.

Set variously in an I.R.A. safe house, a look-out post, and the home of Kate McInerney whose husband has recently been murdered (probably by another member of the I.R.A.), *Six Honest Serving Men* explores the various motives behind the violence in Ireland. Muldoon's title is an evocative one, especially when considered against the generally anti-sectarian ethos of his work. The cast of the play consist of seven characters: six members of an I.R.A. cell and Kate. Our first impulse, therefore, is to
regard the I.R.A. soldiers as the "six honest serving men" referred to in the title. This reading of the title, however, is complicated to the point of retraction as the play progresses. For instance, the phrase is employed ironically by Kate to refer to members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary while she is reminiscing about her recently deceased husband:

His dad heard McCormack
sing this in nineteen-thirty-nine...
There were six honest serving men
at the door the very next day
and they put the old boy away
for five years up in Crumlin Road. (13)

While not explicitly stated, it is fairly certain that Kate's father-in-law was interned as part of Britain's World War 2 policy of holding Northern Catholics who they thought might spy for the Germans against England. The reference to Crumlin Road as a symbol of imperialist policies in Belfast is also supported in the play by an immediate reference to Rudyard Kipling, who is readily associated with English colonialism in India. Kate's memories lead her to recall her husband's reading of Kipling's Just so Stories, from where the play's title is derived: "I keep six honest serving men/ (They taught me
all I knew)" (14). It is only later in the play, however, that the allusion is explored in its entirety:

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who. (42)

Interestingly, then, the title refers neither sympathetically to the I.R.A. nor ironically to the R.U.C., but to the interrogative pronouns, which confirms this play's argument on behalf of a constant questioning of ideological or political "truth."

This is not to suggest that the play advocates a simple disbelief in all political positions, or the equally hackneyed response, parodied by Seamus Heaney in "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," that "one side's as bad as the other" (N 59). The reference to Crumlin Road points to a history of oppression that is central to the play, and while it does not excuse (or even explain) the ideology of the I.R.A., it is at least implicated in the history that has led to the present violence. As well, the play explores, if obliquely, the roots of Catholic nationalist sentiment through the recording that Kate listens to ceaselessly. The song, "I'll Take You Home Again,
Kathleen," is obviously sentimental and nostalgic, but also
caters to a notion of romantic repossession that is
continuous with the ideology of the I.R.A.:

To that dear home beyond the sea,
My Kathleen shall again return,
And when thy old friends welcome thee,
Thy loving heart will cease to yearn. (10)

The irony in this play is that one of Brian McInerney's
"old friends" is probably responsible for his death,
perhaps because that friend "yearns" for Kate. As well,
Kate's compulsive replaying of the song suggests both the
repetition compulsion that Freud associated with mourning
and melancholy and the seemingly ceaseless repetition of
violence in Protestant-Catholic relations. For the viewer,
the repetition of the song functions in much the same way
as Antonio's funeral oration in Julius Caesar, where the
phrase "honourable men" ultimately condemns the
conspirators as dishonourable. In Six Honest Serving Men,
the song indulges in a nostalgia that is finally recognized
as ill-suited to complex contemporary political realities.
Furthermore, it is not even important if McInerney's death
was, indeed, the result of a betrayal: the suspicion among
the members of the I.R.A. that they can not trust each
other is much more significant than any actual infidelity. Muldoon's play cautions against reading political and historical realities in a monological way, since such a view obscures the complexity of allegiance and betrayal in contemporary Ulster politics.

This view of history is anathema in much contemporary Irish literary criticism. As I have suggested elsewhere, critics overwhelmingly read history as a history of colonial and, later, sectarian conflict, and, therefore, look at writing from the point of view of the place of aesthetic production within these political debates. Even critics like Edna Longley and Clair Wills, who deride the hegemony of nationalist politics within Irish critical discourse, themselves fall into, or are perhaps forced into, reifying nationalism as the ultimate horizon of politically oriented criticism. Other critics, however, are eager to have colonial, sectarian, and nationalist political themes govern the process of canon formation in contemporary Irish writing. We have briefly considered Declan Kiberd's introduction to the section on "Contemporary Poetry" in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing as an instance of canon formation in the strictest
sense of the term, owing to its location in the single most important (because most comprehensive) collection of Irish writing available. Kiberd, it will be recalled, derided what he referred to as the "privatization" (FDA, 3, 1316) of contemporary poetry, which he described as "the general political reticence" (FDA, 3, 1316) of contemporary poetry.

Mahon and Muldoon are hardly reticent when it comes to political and historical questions, but do not explicitly identify with the politics of either sectarian group, and, therefore their poetry would qualify as "private" by Kiberd’s standards. As I have implicitly suggested in my discussion of Mahon’s and Muldoon’s historical poetry, Kiberd’s thesis is too restrictive and narrow to offer any real insight into the diversity and subtlety of contemporary Irish writing. As well, and of perhaps even greater importance, Kiberd’s reification of nationalist themes as the only significantly "public" concern of poetry implicitly confirms Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s assertion that Irish poetry “in its ontological underpinnings...is sexist and masculinist to the core” (“Hidden” 114), in that it effaces many of the political concerns that surface in Irish feminist poetry. This poetry frequently tropes on
the private, interior world in order to ask fundamental questions regarding the problematic location of women in nationalist and religious discourses. In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss how, by explicitly abrogating any interest in the private realm, Kiberd's act of canon formation rehearses the oppression of women practiced by pervasive social codes.

In a very early response to the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Edna Longley noted that it suffered from a misogynist ideology in its exclusion of "women's politics and political women" (*Living* 34). Longley continued by stressing that Field Day's attempt to redress this shortcoming with a fourth volume devoted solely to women's writing was unsatisfactory:

To atone for the all-male directorate, and Deane's all-male editorial team, they now plan a fourth volume edited by women writers, critics, and historians. Perhaps this afterthought might be called -- from Field Day's viewpoint -- 'The mad Women in the Annex'. Nor should annexes be attached to fundamentally flawed structures. Such a volume under such auspices, however powerful its own feminist critique, would tie women to a totalising text whose patriarchal and Nationalist compulsions are not easy to disentangle. (35)
As Longley asserts, a separate volume on women's writing is an insult, since it implicitly suggests that women's writing is not an integral and integrated component of Irish writing in general, and that the criticism of this literature can safely ignore the themes, practices, and innovations at work in women's writing.

Longley's final assertion (cited above) is an insightful one. According to her, Field Day's politics are exclusively nationalist, and the group is, therefore, unable to adequately represent feminist political concerns, since those concerns are overwhelmingly directed against the narrow place afforded to women in the discourse of Irish nationalism. Clair Wills points out that in the Irish constitution women are inscribed in the register of the household (60), and that the nationalist figuration of the country as a woman points to the inadequacy of nationalism to address the political concerns of women (50). Furthermore, Longley's criticism of the Field Day group is implicitly confirmed by the fact that Declan Kiberd, in his denunciation of the private concerns of much contemporary poetry, fails to offer a clear delineation of the political and private registers (presumably because he
does not feel that he has to), and this oversight is of some consequence in his brief essay. It is not simply that these terms are ambiguously applied, but that Kiberd offers no clear sense of how the term "public" would fit between the more extreme terms "political" and "private." Early in this study I defined public poetry as work which, while engaging social and political themes, resisted the easy answers provided by entrenched sectarian ideologies. Such poetry is resolutely political, but does not take up a position relative to nationalism or unionism, which is the political issue that has eclipsed all others in contemporary Irish criticism. Similarly, Irish poetry by women represents an important corrective to the overwhelmingly nationalist bent of much of the critical writing on Irish literature both in its direct assault on the social codes that delimit the role of women in society and in its implicit desire to move beyond nationalist concerns.

In *Improprieties*, Clair Wills offers the following definition of the political and the personal that, in many ways, opens up the debate that Declan Kiberd sought to close with his derogation of the private sphere:
I mean the distinction between public and private here to suggest the most basic distinction between the arena of public affairs, civic society and the public communications of the media, and private life as it is most generally understood, i.e., those experiences and events which lie outside the knowledge and discussion of the wider community (but which, of course, is also socially constructed). (26)

What we come to see as the operative mode of much poetry by women in contemporary Ireland is that issues that might be understood naively as simply private become explicitly public concerns. This is the case not only because writing and publishing poetry invites a public reception of these issues, but also because the types of concerns that have been consigned to the private realm, and, therefore, generally ignored in the criticism, are shown to derive from public codes. A cornerstone of Wills's argument is that Catholic Irish women are positioned within the two concerted discursive paradigms of religion and nationalism, and that they become public entities as a result of this commodification. Wills argues that

Far from being contained within the confines of the home, women (the female body, sexuality, and reproduction) are at the centre of public policy and legislation. Indeed, as the figure of the motherland should alert us, in certain ways the body of the Irish woman (and her analogue in conservative nationalist discourse, the home) is
the very ground -- both figural and material -- of the national enterprise. (50)

Using Wills's arguments as a very general guide, I will consider the socially polemical nature of the poetry of Medbh McGuckian, who, in a variety of ways, uses the notion of a private realm in order to make subtle, politically interventionist statements regarding the role and status of women within the discourse of nationalism. As well, I will contextualize this strata of McGuckian's work by tracing how similar themes are developed in the work of some of McGuckian's contemporaries, particularly Eavan Boland and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill.

McGuckian's very impressionist, anti-mimetic style represents the most egregious attack on the nature of the private or personal realm extant in her poetry. Quite simply, as readers it is sometimes impossible to imagine that these poems issue from a fixed persona or recognizable speaker. Indeed, McGuckian plays with our readerly expectations when she frequently defies our attempts to reconstruct a speaking person who is somewhere anterior to the poem. In an example chosen almost at random, McGuckian's "Porcelain Bells" holds out the promise that
the speaker will identify or characterize herself, but these characterizing descriptions are only ever offered in very obscure language:

When I am all harbour, ask too much, go up like the land to points and precipices, meanwhile is my anchor. (Captain Lavender 14)

In a style that recalls the playfulness of e.e. cummings, McGuckian uses the adverb "meanwhile" as a noun. Furthermore, the word itself denotes a hesitancy, conditionality, or tentativeness that makes it an especially evocative choice as the speaker's "anchor." In fact, McGuckian's writing frequently anchors itself, and the implicit identity of the speaking subject, in tentative or hesitant language. However, McGuckian further complicates her poetry by also resisting the allure of tentative or obscure anchoring points, and is sometimes very direct and expressive. In fact, these divergent tendencies toward mastery and hesitancy have been a staple of McGuckian's poetry since her first published volume. For example, the short poem "Smoke," originally published in The Flower Master and Other Poems, takes up the issue of mastery that will pervade much of her ensuing work:
They set the whins on fire along the road.
I wonder what controls it, can the wind hold
that snake of orange motion to the hills,
away from the house?

They seem so sure of what they can do.
I am unable even
to contain myself, I run
till the fawn smoke settles on the earth.
("Smoke," Selected Poems 13)

There is an interesting contrast to be drawn here between
Heaney's artisan poems ("Thatcher," "The Diviner"), where
the mastery of the craftsman serves as an image for the
mastery of the poet, and McGuckian's early poetry, where
the issue of mastery is critiqued within a vocabulary of
self-doubt. Here, this doubt surfaces when the speaker
claims "I am unable even / to contain myself" with the
implication that such tasks (here, the setting of a
controlled fire as part of a system of agricultural
management) evince a self-assuredness that simply mystifies
the speaker. A different consciousness, however, infuses
many of the poems in McGuckian's next volume, Venus and the
Rain (1984), where the persona adopts the polyvalent image
of Venus as, among other things, a figure of control and
agency. For example, in "Venus and the Sun," the speaker
admits that, while she is subject to cosmological laws, she
nonetheless embodies a decisiveness and self-control that is alien to McGuckian's previous volume: "I am the sun's toy -- because I go against / The grain I feel the brush of my authority" (Venus 9). Part of the confusion we experience when we read McGuckian's poetry issues, I would argue, from these intentional inconsistencies around the principal issues in McGuckian's work. That is, were the issue of agency and self-confidence only secondary concerns in her early poetry, then we would only note such inconsistencies as minor matters when reading these works. Instead, the boundaries of the self, the individual's ability to change, and the confidence and self-possession that subtext the issue of self-mastery, are the signal engagements of McGuckian's poetry from this period.

McGuckian's more recent poetry thematizes the issues of control, agency, and selfhood, on the more fundamental level of language. From the collection On Ballycastle Beach (1988) to the present, McGuckian's poetry has become less expressionistic and more linguistically involuted and difficult. This is part of a concerted shift away from a poetics of identity and autobiography towards an aesthetic practice which stresses the disruptive consequences of the
social construction of femininity in contemporary Irish culture. McGuckian approaches these complex themes in the exemplary poems “Harem Trousers” and “A Dream in Three Colours.”

“Harem Trousers” opens on an autobiographical note: “Asleep on the coast I dream of the city” (Ballycastle 40). This straightforward assertion helps the reader imagine an actual person in an actual place (the geographical specificity aids our imaginary construction of a speaking subject). As well, and perhaps more importantly, the reference to the speaker’s “dream of the city” suggests the existence of an interior, private realm which will be disclosed -- in fact, is being disclosed-- by the now awake speaker. The actuality of the speaker as a being in the world (and not simply a poetic device) is connoted by the reference to geographical place and the interiority of the subject.

This individualized, embodied, singular subject is displaced by the next two lines of the poem, which problematizes poetry’s ability to render such identities. I will quote the complete stanza to relate the effect of the assertion and its implicit retraction:
Asleep on the coast I dream of the city.
A poem dreams of being written
Without the pronoun 'I'. (Ballycastle 40)

The second line uses personification to implicitly cast
into crisis the interiority suggested in the first: if
poems can 'dream' then we cannot trust the dream referenced
in the first line as a marker of psychological
individuality. The final line of the stanza extends this
critique of the personal by suggesting that the "I," the
speaking subject which lyrical poetry is fundamentally
organized around (and without which lyrical poetry is
incoherent), is in some respect anathema to the poetry
itself. This first stanza offers the very interesting
suggestion that, just once, a poem would like to be written
that does not subordinate itself to the exigencies of a
private, speaking subject. A sense of what this anti-
individual lyric might look like is given in the next two
stanzas:

The river bends lovingly
Towards this one, or that one, or a third.
The staircase resumes its never-mentioned
Ladder shape, as anything
That is being hurt overflows its innocence.

It straightens, stands, it walks
Timid and incongruous
Through roadblocks and breadlines.
It holds the hundred and first word
In its fingers and tears it apart,...
(Ballycastle 40)

The river and the staircase, though not clearly defined as symbols in this poem, suggest metaphysical, or at least psychological depth. The staircase, for example, connotes a heightened consciousness, or a position above quotidian experience, but without a human figure with which to associate this consciousness, any interpretation of these lines will be tentative at best. The “it” at the beginning of the third stanza is a more intractable entity still. While it could be the staircase, “anything / That is being hurt,” the “river,” or the disembodied lyric that is bringing itself into being, we are unable to favour any of these choices with any certainty, since the poem does not offer us a central consciousness around which to order these images.

Interestingly, however, the significance of the river is defined, at least allusively, in the penultimate stanza of the poem, where the “I” of the first line returns to serve as an ordering device for our reading:

As I run to fetch water
In my mouse-coloured sweater,
Unkempt, hysterical, from
The river that lives outside me,
The bed whose dishevelment
Does not enchant me. (Ballycastle 40)

While the abstract image of the "river outside me"
contrasts the more conventional geographical image of the
coast in the first stanza, the subsequent image of the
disheveled bed offers some assistance to the critic
determined to recuperate a social or aesthetic vision from
this poem. In fact, clarifying the significance of the
image of the disheveled bed helps us to understand both the
intractable symbol of the river, as well the overall
argument offered in this poem.

In his essay "Conversations about Dante," Osip
Mandelstam offers the following characterization of the
essence of poetry: "Where one finds commensurability with
paraphrase, there the sheets have not been rumpled; there
poetry has not, so to speak, spent the night" (3).

McGuckian is drawing on Mandelstam's description of poetry
in this poem, and because of the relation drawn between the
river and the bed, the river serves as a symbol for the
poetic tradition. In fact, On Ballycastle Beach reveals a
general engagement with the poetic tradition, and
McGuckian's place within it, by the fact that a number of
the poems collected in this volume are dedicated to, and explicitly influenced by, other poets. Indeed, "Harem Trousers" is one such poem, and is dedicated to Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill.

There appears to be an incongruity in the symbolic equation of the river with the poetic tradition, however, since for Mandelstam the disheveled bed is a symbol of poetic efficacy, while the bed "does not enchant" (40) the speaker of "Harem Trousers." In order to appreciate the significance of the speaker's rejection of not only this description of poetic achievement but the tradition from which it emerges, we need to recall, as Clair Wills reminds us,

Throughout On Ballycastle Beach McGuckian notes a gender difference in the political and poetic relationship of the writer to his or her place. She sees in this difference the sign of two diverging aesthetics, which she relates to a sociological and cultural difference between male and female. (170)

These divergent aesthetics explain the speaker's rejection of Mandelstam's description of the essence of poetry, since that description can be seen as androcentric; McGuckian sees in Mandlestam's evocative image of the "rumpled" sheets a symbol of male power and oppression. Indeed, the
word "Harem" in the title of the poem serves as a rejoinder to Mandlestam's disheveled bed, since it suggests the very limited roles that women have been permitted to occupy within the poetic tradition. As Wills notes, much of McGuckian's poetry simultaneously incorporates and critiques "the discourse of sexuality [which] is the only public language to which, as a woman writer, she has legitimate access" (161).

The poem's final stanza makes explicit the arbitrariness and violence of the "harem" that is the male-dominated poetic tradition:

Your room speaks of morning,  
A stem, a verb, a rhyme,  
From whose involuntary window one  
May be expelled at any time,  
As trying to control a dream  
Puts the just-completed light to rest.  
(Ballycastle 41)

The anxiety registered here emerges out of a sense that women only belong to this tradition when they agree to occupy certain demeaning roles within it. In fact, critiquing social expectations and the acceptable roles women are conditioned to accept is a pervasive theme in On Ballycastle Beach. McGuckian offers a visceral denunciation of the constraints placed on women in general
in the poem "Scenes from a Brothel," where a description of
girls and young women takes place in the "brothel" that is
daily life, in which women are assigned prescribed roles
based on masculine desires. In "Harem Trousers," McGuckian
extrapolates from Mandelstam's evocative, perhaps poorly-
chosen image, to suggest that women need not accept the
narrow role to which they are consigned as poets.

While sexual politics represents the most pressing
public and political theme of Or Ballycastle Beach, it is
characteristic of McGuckian not to confine herself to a
single issue, no matter how large it seems, since to do so
would be to implicitly accept the narrowly-construed
definition of what constitutes a "proper" theme for women's
poetry. That is, by confining her poetry to the theme of
gender inequity, McGuckian would be tacitly agreeing that
only certain issues fall within the province of feminist
poetry. In the next poem in this volume, "A Dream in Three
Colours," McGuckian expands the purview of her poetic
practice by approaching, albeit obliquely, the politics
which attend Irish linguistic colonization. While the
poem's title suggests, as Wills notes, the Irish tricolor
(176), its final stanza alerts us that the colours for the
dream are the colours of the Union Jack: blue, white, and red. The poem opens on a note of intrinsic or interior disarray, which, as we come to see, issues from the colonization of Ireland: "I am velvet stroked the wrong way" (42). Later, the speaker isolates the historical, political, and above all, linguistic source of this feeling of unease:

Every hour the voices of nouns
Wind me up from their scattered rooms,
Where they sit for years, unable to meet,
Like pearls that have lost their clasp,

Or boards snapped by sea-water
That slither towards the shore. (Ballycastle 42)

That the words are "scattered" and "unable to meet" implies that Irish can not replace English for the speaker since she is unable to integrate individual words into a usable language for herself. The general incoherence of the words is also suggested by the elision of any reference to the single, coherent object that is anterior to the corrupted or destroyed version of it we see in the poem. For example, the "pearls that have lost their clasp" would have once been a necklace, but the noun "necklace" does not appear in the poem. Similarly, "the boards snapped by sea-water" would have been a ship, which is also a word not
mentioned in the poem. The implication here is that the speaker can not even imagine the Irish language as an integrated, coherent phenomenon that is in decline, but rather she only sees the language as disconnected or destroyed.

"Harem Trousers" and "A Dream in Three Colours," I would argue, work very well together in this volume. While the first poem delineates the narrow parameters that have presided over the inclusion of women in the canon, the second surreptitiously recasts it by choosing a subject that guarantees the poet access to a strong tradition in Irish poetry, since the linguistic colonization of Ireland is, perhaps, the most rudimentary and recurring theme in modern Irish writing. I touched briefly on the nature of the debate over the language issue in Irish writing while discussing the polemical status of Irish-English translation. As well, the politics of this debate is central to Heaney's place poems, especially those in Wintering Out, which see in Irish place names a way around historical contingency and trauma. While these poems have been generally praised, some critics have derided the ideology of place that underwrites such poetry. Patrick
Sheeran, for example, criticizes what he refers to as "the nominal sense of place" by which he means "not only an obsessive resort to names, but also that it is sufficient to name a place in order to mark one's attachment to it" (197). Sheeran would be critical, then, of the strategy at work in Heaney's poems, where an obsession and nostalgia over the name of the place--the Irish word--threatens to efface the historically and geographically specific locale. In fact, a poem like "Anahorish" suggests, perhaps despite itself, a division between the speaker and the place being described. As Helen Vendler notes in her recent book on Heaney: "One has, of course, already moved far away from one's family if one can see them as 'those mound-dwellers'" (18).

While Heaney's place-poems implicate the Irish language in a strategy of recovery and even rebirth, it should be noted that most contemporary poets figure the loss of the language as the cause of anxiety. McGuckian's "A Dream in Three Colours," with its images of disruption and decay, rehearses the most pervasively registered response to the loss of the language. In fact, McGuckian's poem recalls John Montague's "A Lost Tradition," which
also uses the image of pearls to suggest the individual
Irish words that fail to cohere into a useable language:

All around, shards of a lost tradition:
From the Rough Field I went to school
In the Glens of the Hazels. Close by
Was the bishopric of the Golden Stone;
The cairn of Carleton’s homesick poem.

Scattered over the hills, tribal
And placenames, uncultivated pearls.
(Rough Field 34-35)

The place-names, here given in English, reveal the
intractably lost tradition of Gaelic and Irish speech. The
speaker focuses on place-names in order to suggest that the
history of colonialism has severed a kind of innocent, or
at least uncomplicated, relationship to place that is now
impossible:

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past dispossessed;
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the fingerprints of instinct.
(Rough Field 35)

The final two lines here suggest that the language, while
in decline, is nonetheless vestigially present, as it is in
McGuckian’s “A Dream of Three Colours.”
There is, however, a stronger connection between the poetry of Montague and McGuckian that warrants further attention. Montague’s “The Rough Field” concludes with “The Wild Dog Rose,” which recounts an attempted rape of an elderly woman in an isolated rural environment. This poem, placed at the end of an ostensibly political volume of poetry, relies on the equation of Ireland with a woman in order to imbue the poem with an allegorical significance (isolated Ireland is attacked by a dehumanizing invader). However, Montague’s poem elicits this comparison only to complicate it:

I go to say goodbye to the Cailleach
that terrible figure who haunted my childhood
but no longer harsh, a human being
merely, hurt by event. (Rough Field 78)

A note which accompanies the poem explains that Cailleach is “Irish and Scots Gaelic for an old woman, a hag” (78), and this figure is a staple of Irish folklore and mythology. Montague is drawn to this elderly woman because she suggests this figure (and Ireland’s traumatic colonial past) and also because she allows the poet to reflect on this history in a decidedly personal way. A central procedure of The Rough Field is to unite Montague’s reading
of Irish history with his personal and familial history, and the figure in the poem simultaneously functions in these two registers.

Commenting on The Rough Field, Anthony Bradley asserts that "if Montague's history is clearly a nationalist one, it is the intimacy of the connection between, on the one hand, personal and family history, and on the other hand, the history of Ulster, that validates the sequence imaginatively" (56). While I find Bradley's terminology contentious (under what conditions would Montague's response be deemed "invalid"?o), I agree that Montague's attempt to render a nationalist reading of history within a personal register is what makes these poems distinctive. Not all critics, however, have embraced the complex strategy at work in The Rough Field. For example, Seamus Deane, while appreciating that the volume "is a complicated mosaic in which various kinds of juxtaposition... are used for the sake, it would seem, of creating the shock of sudden perspective" ("Irish Poetry" 19), does not, like Bradley, see the strands of personal and national history as mutually sustaining forces in the volume: "Irish history does not have the same attraction for the poet as
Montague’s history. They do not synchronize as they are meant to. The politics has had exorcized from it all the ghosts of feeling save those of resignation and bitterness” (“Irish Poetry” 19).

This is, it must be noted, a curious criticism from Seamus Deane, and, because it is not based on an extended reading of the poems in the collection, risks being read as evincing a kind of territorialism around the discourse of nationalism in Irish writing. There are moments when The Rough Field seems difficult to read in terms of both personal and national history, indeed, when those two historical modes even seem incompatible, but this is not Deane’s criticism. Instead, he is concerned that Montague does not express his nationalism in the right voice, and that it is more backward than forward looking. It should hardly be surprising, however, given Montague’s interest in history, that he is looking backward into the past, and given his interest in the history of the colonization of Ireland, that there is a certain amount of bitterness in these poems. Indeed, if we recall that the speaker of these poems is attempting to forge a continuity between personal and national history, it is only appropriate that
he or she should respond to historical transgressions in a personal (i.e. resigned and bitter) way.

The difficulty of trying to document national and personal history as continuous entities is that, eventually, these two modes become incompatible. When the speaker emphasizes that the woman is "a human being/ merely" (The Rough Field 78) we find our attempt to read her as a symbol of defeated and colonized Ireland called into crisis. As well, and perhaps more fundamentally, the characterization of the woman as both the allegorical Cailleach and as a real person from the speaker's past is resisted by the very graphic language of embodiment that we find in the poem. Indeed, seeing this figure as an actual person makes it difficult to read the story of her attempted rape as a political allegory. The poem documents this attack in language as visceral and immediate as any in Montague's writing:

Late at night
a drunk came beating at her door
to break it in, the bolt snapping
from the soft wood, the thin mongrels
rushing to cut, but yelping as
he whirls with his farm boots
to crush their skulls.
In the darkness
They wrestle, two creatures crazed
with loneliness, the smell of the
decaying cottage in his nostrils
like a drug, his body heavy on hers,
the tasteless trunk of a seventy year
old virgin, which he rummages while
she battles for life. (79)

As I mentioned above, the graphic language here works
against our attempt to read this as a nationalist allegory,
since its visceral qualities insist that the register of
the physical (as opposed to figurative) body is the site of
the struggle between these two individuals. In fact, the
poem seems critical of the strategies that such an allegory
would employ; in its movement from the register of the
physical to that of the historical, the experience of the
elderly woman would be effaced, and the traumatic events
that she suffers would be removed into a more distant
realm. While the central ethic of Montague’s aesthetic
practice in this volume is that history should not be seen
as a “distant realm” at all, the immediate and violent
language in the poem effaces whatever residual significance
this figure possesses in Irish nationalist history, and
instead calls our attention to the body, and therefore the
phenomenological or experiential (as opposed to historical
or figural) register, as the site of the violence the poem documents.

While violent and disturbing depictions of sexuality are not necessarily prevalent in Montague’s poetry, it is significant that this theme has been taken up by a number of younger Irish poets in an effort to disclose the assumptions, especially assumptions about women, that subtend the ideology of nationalism. Montague’s poem, I would argue, addresses a long tradition of nationalist poetry that unproblematically regards the country as a woman, and proceeds to read her “rape” as a general metaphor for military invasion. Instead, Montague fixes our attention squarely on the experience endured by an actual woman, and in doing so draws our attention to the mythological conflation at the heart of nationalist political allegories. In fact, by resisting such a conflation Montague shares a concern that is articulated by much recent poetry. According to Clair Wills, evocative and explicit subject matter, especially depictions of transgressive or improper sexuality, is the single, characterizing feature of the newest generation of Irish
poetry. In the introduction to her book, she offers the following description of the central theme of her analysis:

Sex and sexuality will be important touchstones throughout this book....Part of my argument centres on the ways in which forms of sexuality deemed 'improper' or at the very least impolite -- maternal sexuality, prostitution, homosexuality, or simply explicit sex, sex for pleasure, and adolescent sex-- become ways of questioning the propriety of political processes, nationalist and unionist concepts of community, and the very basis of the idea of home. (3)

While Wills's book, which focuses on Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian, makes some very difficult claims about the role of "improper" sexuality in Paulin's and Muldoon's poetry, such material is certainly at the heart of McGuckian's poetic enterprise.

For McGuckian, feminine sexuality operates in a kind of liminal space between public and private spheres, and the poet endeavours to show how nationalistic and religious codes work to over-determine the place and function of women in society. Furthermore, McGuckian's depictions of transgressive, improper, and even destructive sexuality reveal the degree to which social codes that seek to discipline female sexuality actually struggle against a force that they cannot control. In a number of poems,
McGuckian shows that female sexuality will not be delimited by the roles that women are asked to serve, and that the social structures that are predicated on the disciplining of sexuality are constantly at risk. In "The Over Mother," McGuckian ties together many of the threads regarding an alienating feminine identity and sexuality that are at work in Captain Lavender, and unites them with the most heavily encoded religious and nationalistic female role:

In the sealed hotel men are handled as if they were furniture, and passion exhausts itself at the mouth. Play kisses stir the circuits of the underloved body to an ever-resurrection, a never-had tenderness that dies inside me. (64)

McGuckian opens the poem with an ambiguous reference to both the vagina and the uterus ("the sealed hotel") in order to imply a sense of intransigence in male-female relations. As well, the symbolic connotations associated with the equation of men and furniture also suggests that a feeling of disconnection and emotional emptiness inheres in her relations with men. This feeling is inscribed on the level of the body, when the woman is enticed by sexual contact, but is frustrated when it turns out to be only "play kisses," lacking legitimate passion for the obviously
dissatisfied woman ("the underloved body"). For the speaker, this persistent lack of passion and concomitant sexual frustration lead to the death of tenderness in her relations with men.

"The Over Mother" picks up on themes that surface even in McGuckian's earliest poetry, which is arguably more concerned with the figuration of the female body as ostensibly a public resource. McGuckian's early poems use her pregnancies as a trope for the social claims made against women. The title poem from Venus and the Rain is perhaps McGuckian's most accomplished exploration of this idea:

On one occasion,
For a whole month, promising their torn edges
The birth of a new ocean (as all of us
Who have hollow bodies tend to do at times)
What clues to the distance could they have,
So self-exited by my sagging sea
Widening ten times faster than it really did?
(Venus 31)

Wills offers the tentative interpretation that "'distance' here may refer to the distance between the lips of the vulva, and the distance between men and the planet or woman Venus" (164). I would argue, however, that it is more concerted with the central themes of the poem to see
"distance" here as a marker of the self-difference visited on the woman as a result of pregnancy. Those around this woman (presumably her husband and family) are too caught up in their own excitement to consider that the speaker may be anxious about how her body, now serving the needs of another, has become distant from itself. The obliviousness of those around the woman to her shifting sense of self is suggested in the image that opens the poem: "White on white, I can never be viewed / Against a heavy sky" (Venus 31). While resembling herself as much as white resembles white, the speaker is, in fact, distinct from her own body, even though this difference is imperceptible to others.

While McGuckian's intricate and anti-mimetic poetry tropes on the image of the mother and pregnancy to suggest that women are alienated from their own bodies by religious and nationalist imperatives of procreation, other contemporary female poets explore the issue of identity and sexuality in more directly confrontational ways. Eavan Boland's poem "Mother Ireland" directly critiques the way that female identity is alienated within social codes. While the title of the poem makes plain that the
experiences of the female speaker resonate with national significance, the work itself represents a transformation from unreflected, unproblematic self-presence to an awareness that female identity is a social construction:

At first
   I was land.
   I lay on my back to be fields
And when I turned
   on my side
   I was a hill
under freezing stars.
   I did not see.
   I was seen. (93)

The last two lines introduce the discussion regarding the agency of the woman who is speaking the poem, and the extent to which she survives as a product of the ideological construction of others. Later in the poem, the speaker becomes conscious of the pervasive construction of female identity in social discourses, and responds to this process: "Now I could tell my story./It was different/from the story told about me" (93). This is an interesting moment in both the poem and the redefinition of femininity it offers, as the speaker comes to consciousness regarding both her new-found agency and the tradition that has worked to suppress it.
Even though both McGuckian's "Venus and the Rain" and Boland's "Mother Ireland" critique prevailing social codes that oppress women, one could argue that by explicitly resisting these codes both writers only empower them further: instead of accepting the identity proffered by the descriptions of femininity provided by religious and nationalist discourse, women are, theoretically at least, just as indebted to these codes when they define themselves primarily by their opposition to them. In some of her most provocative poems, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill represents a feminist subjectivity that has seemingly liberated itself entirely from conventional, oppressive descriptions of women's social function. That is, Ní Dhomhnaill does not afford conventional religious or political depictions of feminine subjectivity any priority in her poetry, and she, therefore, resists the constraints proffered by these discourses more fully. For example, in her poem "The Unfaithful Wife," Ní Dhomhnaill offers a humorous but challenging depiction of female sexuality. After meeting a strange man in a liquor store, the speaker exchanges small-
talk with him, and the poem quickly reaches the description of the seemingly inevitable sexual encounter at its center:

He would ask if he could leave me home in his famous motor-car, though we hadn't gone very far down the road when he was overtaken by desire.
He pulled off in a lay-by the better to heap me with kisses.
There were plastic bags bursting with rubbish stacked against the bushes.
Even as he slipped his hand between my thighs I never let on I was married. (105)

This is the poem's second stanza, and the abruptness with which frank sexuality enters the work is concerted with the poem's theme of sexuality as a transgressive and implicitly political act. There is little seduction or affection hinted at in the poem, and the speaker makes plain that she is not interested in an emotional or tender moment, but simply in sex. Indeed, the straightforward reportage of the lines "when he was overtaken by desire," and the "plastic bags bursting with rubbish" suggest that there is very little romantic sentiment expressed between the two participants, and that the speaker is not at all troubled by this fact. Finally, the last line functions as a refrain at the end of every stanza, and imbues the poem with an especially humorous quality because its repetition
suggests that the speaker has too sophisticated a sense of
decorum to impede the enjoyment of her lover by disclosing
the fact of her marriage, and yet the poem critiques
conventional decorum. The final stanza of the poem offers
an extended and parodic treatment of the speaker’s
obsession with the etiquette surrounding extramarital sex:

As I marched up my own garden-path
I kicked up a little dust.
I burst into song and whistled a tune
and vowed not to breathe a word
to a soul about what I’d done.
And if, by chance, I run into him again
at a disco or in some shebeen
the only honourable course — the only decent thing —
would be to keep faith & not betray his trust
by letting on I was married.

Don’t you think? (107-109)

The speaker’s concern for the feelings of the stranger with
whom she has had sex offers an implicit affront to the lack
of concern that she has shown her husband by her behaviour.
As well, the use of words like “honourable,” and “decent”
connote a morality that the speaker seems unfettered by in
her conduct. In fact, the paradoxical morality evinced by
the speaker of the poem is related on the level of diction:
the speaker’s decision to “not betray” the trust of her
lover is comical since the poem so frankly documents a “betrayal” of the speaker’s husband.

While this poem does not explicitly suggest that this sexual activity is an affront to the codes that would domesticate women, and, concomitantly, feminine sexuality, it is difficult to not read it as politically interventionist because of how comprehensively female sexuality is policed by those codes. Ní Dhomhnaill draws our attention to the repressive nature of these codes by depicting a scene where they are clearly not fulfilling their function. This leaves the poem’s readers in a precarious position: we are tempted to judge (or at least assess) the actions described in the poem against the assumptions we have regarding proper female sexual conduct. Indeed, the closing line of the poem (“Don’t you think?”), with its direct address to the reader, invites us to examine our own values and assumptions regarding the transgression of conventional matrimonial values that has just been described for us. When we deem the conduct of the speaker as improper, we are bringing a standard of judgement to bear on women’s behaviour that stresses that
only sexual activity that serves social, religious, or national ends is permissible. Here, the reader becomes the locus of an alienating, oppressive code of conduct, and Ní Dhomhnaill's poem does not simply demystify a political process, but forces us to see our own complicity in that process.

In this concluding chapter I have considered the two most comprehensive challenges to the debilitating canon formed by an emphasis on nationalist political concerns. Writers like Mahon and Muldoon offer a rejoinder to the hegemonic status that issues of colonialism and nationalism have in contemporary Irish criticism. Both poets displace the prevailing view of Irish history as a colonial and, later, sectarian crisis, and instead adopt a comparativist approach to history that de-emphasizes blaming one group or the other, and views history as an ideological construction. As well, a number of representative Irish female poets offer a perhaps more comprehensive critique of the canon-forming capacity of nationalist critical concerns by questioning the two fundamental assumptions that underwrite the position espoused by nationalist critics.
Firstly, these poets reject the assumption that poetry is an ostensibly or explicitly public vehicle, and work out a seemingly private aesthetic practice in order to implicitly critique the demands that critics like Kiberd articulate regarding the proper subject-matter of poetry. As well, this poetry offers a more fundamental denunciation of the public realm in its critique of the repressive social codes on which nationalism and other social institutions are founded.

As well as explicitly challenging the principles by which nationalist critics canonize certain works or writers, however, McGuckian’s writing implicitly critiques poetry that caters to the narrow ground on which such critical practices are founded. As we have seen, McGuckian has an ambiguous relationship to contemporary poets by virtue of her tacit refusal to accept nationalist concerns as the privileged content of public poetic expression. McGuckian’s resistance to such narrow parameters issues, I contend, from a distrust of the narratives of identity that circulate throughout Irish cultural criticism, and which occupy a number of poets I have considered here.
As early as "The Writer and the Troubles" (1974) Seamus Deane argued persuasively that identity, by which he meant sectarian identity, represented a fundamental difficulty in Irish public life since it is established on a paradigm of loyalty and alienation that makes it impossible to commit to in any unequivocal way (17). Despite this reservation, however, Deane established his critical career on a seemingly straightforward commitment to a Catholic nationalist ideology that is given full voice in his scholarly writings. However, Deane's reservations about identity were taken up by a number of other writers. Most notably for my purposes here, both Seamus Heaney and Terry Eagleton offer critiques of identity that extended a privileged place to irony, as opposed to commitment, as the mode through which identity needed to be both represented and experienced. I have referred to both Heaney's "The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry," and Eagleton's Field Day pamphlet "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment" earlier in this study, but will cite Eagleton's particularly salient remarks here: "All oppositional politics ... move under the sign of irony,
knowing themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists” (7).

While there is much merit in Eagleton’s analysis of this difficult social and political category, his approach to identity is more amenable to quiet metaphysical contemplation than it is to actual political confrontation, and we are less likely to find self-effacing irony than overzealous commitment in politically-charged environments. Both Heaney’s and Kinsella’s public poetry from the late 1960s and early 1970s evinces much less irony than it does commitment when questions of ideology and identity are central poetic concerns. Heaney’s "Docker," "Punishment," and "Craig’s Dragoons" give free voice to a Catholic nationalist political sensibility, even when this view may be coupled with other important social concerns. Kinsella’s Butcher’s Dozen is regarded by many critics as a straightforward defense of the tenets of violent Republicanism. Despite the fact that the poem ends on a conciliatory note, it is difficult for many critics to look past both the disturbingly visceral descriptions of the victims and the unchallenged ideological assertions they
offer to see the poem, as Elizabeth Hale Winkler does, as offering a "far-reaching vision of a possible political future for Northern Ireland" (416). Whether we agree with Winkler regarding the overall vision of Kinsella's *aisling* or with the poem's detractors, it is certain that Kinsella's poem is immersed in the politics of sectarian identification in a manner that owes, again, less to irony than to commitment.

The work of more recent poets, and even the more recent work of Kinsella and Heaney, reveal a suspicion regarding the aesthetically limiting consequences of sectarian commitment in Irish poetry. While nationalist critics like Declan Kiberd continue to synchronize public and nationalist political concerns, many Irish poets have worked in a different political register. As I argue in chapter three, Heaney and Kinsella have turned toward translation and mythology in order to expand their aesthetic interests. Furthermore, because of Heaney's influence in this field, his aesthetic choices also help to reorient the field of Irish poetry. For instance, Heaney's often quoted concern about being "mired in attachment" (SI
102) applies equally well to Paul Muldoon, who has suggested that he has "no proper [political] allegiances except to tell it like it is" (Haffenden 137). In fact, Muldoon has been complimented for just this aspect of his writing by Edna Longley, who asserts that Muldoon's writing "gives the lie to the notion that language can operate politically in Irish poetry only by declaring firm allegiances" (Poetry in the Wars 207).

While Longley is correct that Muldoon's poetry is poised between "firm allegiances," Derek Mahon has to be regarded as the foremost Irish poet in terms of his move beyond the expression of sectarian identification in his writing. Mahon has maintained a strident individualism in his historically and politically engaged poetry, and perhaps more than any other writer is responsible for the move away from identity politics in contemporary Irish poetry. While many of Mahon's historical poems ultimately revolve around a somewhat pessimistic inability to be rid of history and politics, they nevertheless insist on the efficacy of attempting to transcend such aesthetic impediments.
Finally, while Mahon and Muldoon have explicitly worked against imbuing their poetry with the markers of sectarian identification, Ireland’s feminist poets have left the issue behind entirely. This group has redefined the nature of public and political poetry by emerging out of the sectarian impasse and its specific description of identity. While I am able to focus only on the work of Medbh McGuckian here, her poetry is part of a larger attempt to introduce a gender-oriented ecumenism into Irish writing which has previously been an overwhelmingly male-dominated pursuit. McGuckian’s reorientation of poetry around the private sphere (which becomes public by virtue of her poetic enterprise) and her oblique questioning of the space reserved for women in Irish public, political, and literary life pose difficult questions that critics of Irish writing are only beginning to address.
Notes

1 While it may seem inappropriate to dwell on this brief essay of Kiberd’s, my focus here and elsewhere in this study is on the process of canon formation. Kiberd’s introduction, which helps to explain the principle that governed his selections in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, is exemplary of the process of canon formation in the strict sense of the term.

2 An interesting consequence of eliding the difference between political realities and the representation of those realities in cultural works, as Deane does here, is that the interpreter or viewer is able to substitute the representation for the real thing. For example, John Wilson Foster notes that “the Ulster Protestant, feeling the perpetual threat of being taken over, already experiences in some sense, and exhibits the symptoms of, the condition of being colonized” (271). Clearly such a view is drawn more from Foster’s foreshortened experience of cultural works than from actual political conditions in Northern Ireland.

3 According to Andrew Ross, “the early history of Marxist criticism often referred to as orthodox, reductionist, mechanistic, economic, or ‘vulgar,’ is characterized by reflectionist theory... whereby the features of a cultural text are strictly determined by the economic and social conditions of its production and by the class status of its author” (734). Deane adheres to this somewhat antiquated, deterministic reading of culture in his writing.

4 “Craig’s Dragoons” was circulated anonymously, and published by Karl Miller in his article “Opinion” in The Review 27-28 (1971-72): 41-52. Although the poem is commonly regarded as written by Heaney, he has yet to formally acknowledge it as his own.

5 Furthermore, when Vance faults Kinsella’s poem for “alienating” (220) its audience, I can not help but reflect on how Vance’s severity alienates me as a reader of his criticism.
6 See Brian John’s *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella*, pp. 144-146.

7 The problem of deciding which versions of Kinsella’s poems to use is a difficult one, owing to the poet’s habit of rewriting and republishing his poetry. Since I wish to use the notes that accompany the Peppercanister edition of *Butcher’s Dozen*, I have decided to quote from this edition here.


9 In his notes to the poem Kinsella, in a tone reminiscent of the frustration that is inscribed in *Butcher’s Dozen*, laments that this reconsideration of deeply held ideological assumptions did not transpire: "Though [Butcher’s Dozen] was written in rage and haste at the time nothing has happened in the intervening six years that calls for serious revision (except possibly the 'happy ending')" (FD 56). More recently, the British government has opened another inquiry into the matter.

10 See Corcoran’s *Seamus Heaney* on the poem’s “prophetic second stanza” (68). Similarly, P.R. King refers to the “sad prophecy” (71) of the poem’s second stanza.

11 While “Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966” is part of the sequence *Singing School*, it can also be read as a stand alone poem. In fact, it was originally published in *The Listener* (18 January 1968) without the remainder of the sequence.

12 While there are similarities between Burger’s views and those of Pierre Bourdieu which I recounted in the introduction, the former’s are more comprehensive and therefore comprise a more useful critical matrix through which to read political poetry.

13 Burger provides a good summary of these criticisms in a post-script to the second edition of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

14 Michael Molino notes the significance of the poem’s title: “The epithet Craig’s Dragoons links the Home Minister, William Craig, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary
with the king's soldier's, dragoons, who massacred thousands of the poorly armed and trained United Irish Army during the Irish rebellion of 1798" (183).

15 Kiberd suggests, in part, contemporary poets are silent on important political matters because of the "growing rapprochement in Ireland between artists and the state, by means of bursaries, subventions and Aosdana" (FDA 3: 1316).

16 See Kiberd's Inventing Ireland, Eagleton's Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger, and Kearney's Postnationalist Ireland, all of which, to quote only from Kearney, advance the argument that "Irish and British nationalism are Siamese twins. Britain has always been obsessed by Ireland, and oblivious of it, at one and the same time" (9-10).

17 In paradigmatically ironic fashion, this essay itself is printed in a volume titled Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster.

18 Eagleton, as quoted on page 8 of this chapter.

19 Aside from the occurrence already noted above, Lloyd asserts, "This identification [of the individual with a national consciousness] becomes in Ireland, as across the whole spectrum of European nationalisms, a precondition to politics rather than a political option" (157-158).

20 The next five poems in the volume, for example, all follow this pattern.

21 As always with Kinsella, the choice of which version of the poem to cite becomes an issue. For the sake of consistency I will generally be citing from Kinsella's Poems, 1956-1973, which is perhaps the most widely available collection of his work.

22 According to Smyth's A Guide to Irish Mythology, the two are not literally related at all: Cuchulainn is Ferdia's (also known as Fer Diad) "former friend and gillie" (54).

23 Although not published until 1968, this poem recounts events in Kinsella's life from the early to mid-sixties, as Donatella Badin explains: "In 1963, [T.K.] Whitaker, who
admired Kinsella’s work...was instrumental in obtaining a government grant for Kinsella to study in the United States and work full-time on his translation [of The Táin]. Finally, in 1965, an invitation to be writer-in-residence at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale permitted him to abandon his government post and devote himself full-time to a literary career” (7). This dramatic change in Kinsella’s life forms the important biographical context of such poems as “Ritual of Departure” and “Phoenix Park.”

24 The word “bullied” also suggests the image of England (personified as John Bull), as well as the “servicing” of Ireland by England as a bull services a cow.

25 As well, MacMorris has “gone native” while serving in the English army, and threatens to kill Fluellen for even broaching the subject of his nationality:

   Fluellen: Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation --

   MacMorris: Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a basterd, and a knave, and a rascal. What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?

   (3.2.120-124)

The other important reference to Ireland in Henry V comes in Act 5 with the chorus’s “apparent reference to the Earl of Essex’s Irish expedition of 1599” (Baker 930): “As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,/ Bringing rebellion broached on his sword” (5.1.31-32). Obviously, such triumphalism would alienate an Irish audience.

26 "Bog Oak" from the same volume also refers to Spenser's essay, and the political imperative of dehumanizing the Irish in order to present colonization as a "civilizing" force:

   Perhaps I just make out
   Edmund Spenser,
   dreaming sunlight,
   encroached upon by
geniuses who creep
'out of every corner
of the woodes and glennes'
towards watercress and carrion.

(\textit{WO 15})

Spenser, in fact, is believed to have accompanied Lord Grey (as a secretary) "in the Munster campaign that ended in the death of the [Irish] earl of Desmond" (Fréchet 45) and the massacre of Catholics in 1583.

Hence the allusion to Stephen Dedalus, who feels alienated within Ireland in both \textit{Portrait} and \textit{Ulysses}.

Following M.H. Abrams, I use this term to "characterize an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved in a work of literature" (113). As well, the term seems appropriate in the context of "Baggot Street" because the persona is inspired by the absence of those things which usually inspire great poetry, and draws on what is not there to help him write.

The phrase is vaguely reminiscent of James Joyce's description of \textit{Dubliners} as written in a spirit of "scrupulous meanness."


For example, see Livesey and Murray, "Post-Colonial Theory and Modern Irish Culture": "Both [Gellner and Anderson] assert that the nation is an imagined or constructed community, and that nationality is a form of solidarity that emerged in response to the evolution of complex social relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (453). For Habermas's characterization of the nation as a modern phenomenon, see his \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, p.14, where he sees "the emergence of early finance and trade capitalism" as the precursor to "a new social order" which would become the nation.
From The Dual Tradition, page 65.

See Tymoczko, 299-301.

Welch uses the binary pair “change” and “stasis” unclearly. In fact, the two terms function as overly general catch-alls in his reading of history.

As I wish to draw attention to the revised version of this poem published, I will be citing the version published in Collected Poems rather than the original version published in Madonna.

The “bog poems” are “The Tollund Man,” (Wintering Out) “Bog Queen,” “The Grauballe Man,” and “Punishment” (all from North).

See Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.64, where he refers to the end of “Punishment” as “a courageous piece of self-analysis.”

Although rewritten mostly for the sake of brevity, this synopsis of the Sweeney story borrows heavily from Anne Clune’s “Mythologizing Sweeney,” p.50.

Venuti has published a book and an article with the same title (The Translator’s Invisibility). As I need to cite from both of these works, I will refer to his article as “Translator’s,” and his book-length study as Invisibility.

See O’Rahilly’s introduction for a careful documentation of the salient differences between these versions.

This is a so-called “bloodless battle” because it pits members of a single army against itself, and is not a battle between Medb and Cuchulainn.

See Declan Kiberd’s “The Frenzy of Christy: Synge and Buíle Shuibhne,” for a list of the numerous English translations of the story.

See Heaney’s “Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet.” For a critical discussion of this topic see Carla de Petris’s “Heaney and Dante.”
See The Government of the Tongue, 36.

See The Spirit Level, 47.


Mahon's equation of politics and the weather recalls Auden's "Ireland has its madness and its weather still."

See Tim Kendall, Paul Muldoon, p.200.

Kiberd's term offers a particularly caustic critique of contemporary poets in that it alludes to Margaret Thatcher's economic policy of the late 1980s, which saw the selling of many publicly owned corporations. Kiberd's term therefore attempts to paint contemporary poets as corporate raiders who are only interested in self-advancement despite the overwhelming detriment to the community.

While this poem does not bear the title "A Lost Tradition" in the collection A Rough Field it does in Montague's Selected Poems (108). In The Rough Field this poem is designated as section two of the sequence "A Severed Head" (34-35), but I have chosen to use the title since the poem is more commonly known now as "A Lost Tradition."

See Heaney's "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (from North).
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