In 1844, when Emerson spoke of America as “a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination,” he called on Americans to produce a poet to lend it “metres.” In 1996, in recognition of his Emersonian contribution to poetry, in large part of producing poetry which gave form to Northern Ireland’s “ample geography that dazzles the imagination,” Seamus Heaney was appointed the Emerson poet in Residence at Harvard.

When Emerson made his call to Americans, to which Walt Whitman would duly respond with *Leaves of Grass*, his reference to America’s “ample geography” was carefully chosen to include not just the simple territorial geography of America, but also, by necessity, its social, cultural, and political geography. All of this we see in Whitman’s response. Through looking at just one poem from Heaney’s collection of poetry that most directly engages the landscape of Northern Ireland—*North*—I will argue that Heaney has risen to the Emersonian definition of the poet as “the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to each one its own name and not another’s” (73).

There are many arguments that challenge the success of Heaney’s cultural reproduction in *North*. The most incisive and convincing of these comes from postcolonial and Irish Studies critic, David Lloyd, in his 1985 essay, “Pap for the dispossessed: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity.” Here Lloyd cogently
argues that Heaney’s investment in aesthetic production forecloses any ethical engagement with the contemporary political situation in Northern Ireland. He claims that Heaney’s privileging of a world of literary style over everyday reality closes off the world of Northern Ireland before he has even begun to explore it. In structural terms, for Lloyd, the sign, rather than signifying something becomes itself what is signified; language becomes the land explored. Because of this, Lloyd argues, “The actual, persisting relation between the literate and the non-literate, at times antagonistic, at times symbiotic, disappears along with such attendant problems as class or ethnic stratification in a temporal metaphor of unbroken development” (23). In effect, rather than engaging with the cultural and political fracture of Northern Ireland, Heaney is, through his aesthetic style, dis-engaging himself from the contemporary reality and conflict in Northern Ireland. This argument will lead Lloyd to argue of Heaney that “he is unable ever to address the relation between politics and writing more than superficially, in terms of thematic concerns, or superstitiously, in terms of a vision of the poet as a diviner of the hypothetical pre-political consciousness of his race” (14). This is a particularly biting critique when it comes to North: Heaney’s first major engagement with the politically tumultuous and publicly violent situation in Northern Ireland.

North (1975)

North is Heaney’s attempt to come to terms with a situation he could no longer ignore: the deteriorating political and civil conditions of life in Northern Ireland. The catalyst to the current volatile state began in the early sixties when a civil rights movement, modeling itself on the African American civil rights movement in the USA, formed to challenge inequality and discrimination in Northern Ireland (Fig. 1). By 1969, the movement’s attempts to seek redress for political, economic, and social discrimination had become so frustrated by the government of Northern Ireland and its coercive arm, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the RUC), that the tension had devolved into a series of violent conflicts between marchers, police, sectarian forces and citizens in Belfast and Derry (Fig. 2). These conflicts, often generally referred to as the “Battle of the Bogside” (after the Catholic area in Derry), destabilized social order to such an extent that they led to the deployment of British troops on the streets of Northern Ireland, and the introduction of internment without jury trial in 1971 (Fig. 3). The escalation of tension and violence on both sides would eventually culminate in the “Bloody Sunday” incident of January, 30th 1972, in which British paratroopers killed thirteen civil rights marchers in Derry. This would effectively bring about the end of both the Civil Rights Movement and
the Northern Ireland Government, with the British government imposing direct rule in March of 1972. (My apologies for the inadequacy of my historical record, but this is the very issue Heaney wishes to address in “Summer 1969”)

The escalating situation in Northern Ireland, however, was certainly not the only factor in Heaney’s decision to turn his poetic attention towards the North. Other things had fallen into place for him, which began to allow him to now, finally, be able to come to terms, in his poetry, with the breakdown of social order in his homeland. By 1972 personal circumstances had significantly changed for Heaney. Having returned from teaching as a guest lecturer at UC Berkeley, he and his family were again on the move, this time a more permanent one, to Glanmore, in the Republic of Ireland. From this point on, Heaney would begin to settle permanently in the Republic of Ireland, relinquishing his physical ties to Northern Ireland. This decisive move may have given him the physical and emotional distance he needed to begin considering more objectively the political landscape of Northern Ireland.

Also in 1972, Heaney began to focus his attention solely on his writing (at least until he would return to teaching in 1975 at the Carysfort Teacher Training College). For these crucial three years, Heaney would only work at his poetic art: attempting to translate *Buile Suibhne*—a medieval Irish romance poem about the northern king, Sweeney—while also writing his own poetry.

In 1975, Heaney’s physical separation from his birthplace and uninterrupted concentration on his poetic art would cohere to produce *North*. Exhibiting signs of thematic and structural advance on his earlier works, this collection captured his growing personal and public need to engage with the destructive world which haunted him. With the publication of *North* Heaney’s ambitions had grown both for the collective structure of his work and for its ability to understand, undertake, and intercede in the reality of everyday life.

Influenced no doubt by his translation work on *Buile Suibhne*, Heaney had begun to look to the larger sweep of epic poetry to address the historical myth of nationalism that was being endlessly played out in Northern Ireland in various guises, from the Battle of the Boyne to the current-day Civil Rights marches. While the lyric form of the earlier works still dominates in *North*, the epic influence is certainly discernible in its examination of this historical myth of nationalism to which critics have charged this collection contributes. British critics, Lloyd and Blake Morrison charge Heaney and this book of poems in particular with reconstructing, rather than deconstructing the historical myth of nationalism. Morrison, in his reading of *North* as epic, claims that “in *North*, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say, the structure of the book is its meaning: the
placing and interlocking of the poems amount to the creation of historical myth” (53). Lloyd damns *North* as “effectively reducing Irish history to myth” in its bog poems (331). And so for Lloyd and Morrison, it seems, Heaney retreats from the historical situation of Northern Ireland in order to indemnify the physical and moral suffering through mythopoesis. But, maybe not

**Myth and History**

In speaking about *North* in an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977, Heaney claimed that:

> the two halves of the book constitute two different types of utterance, each of which arose out of a necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form to two kinds of urgency—one symbolic, one explicit. (839)

The collection’s “symbolic urgency” certainly speaks to its mythic ambitions: in his discussion of the myth of the frontier in twentieth century America, *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin claims that myth is registered through the “power of symbolizing” (5).

However, Heaney’s statement also alerts us to his recognition of the uneasy relationship of myth to the language of the real—“explicit utterance”—and his interest in pursuing this. In Heaney’s statement we may have our first hint that the collection constitutes not merely another sign of historical myth, but rather a challenge to the very form itself and its easy appeal to a politicized public, be they people on the streets of Northern Ireland, journalists acting as the voice of political organs, or literary critics caught in the clutches of British classism.

That Heaney’s collection attempts to engage in two forms of urgency—“symbolic” and “explicit”—challenges Morrison’s claim of it as simply “creat[ing] historical myth”; its deployment of what Slotkin calls “suggestive” and “analytical” language speaks to its interest in considering the relationship of myth to the discourse of the real, history. Slotkin tells us that “Myths are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness” (5). Heaney may be wondering if the explicit language of history may not itself be a myth of moral consciousness.
The Poems

Part one of *North* explores the landscape of Northern Europe over the last two thousand years, and reveals its mythic focus in the very titles of its poems—“Viking Dublin,” “Bone Dreams,” “Aisling,” “Hercules and Antaeus.” This is then counterpointed by the “explicit” language of part two, and its attempt to offer a direct response to the debilitating conditions of life in Northern Ireland. In “Whatever You Say Say nothing” Heaney tells us,

I’m writing just after an encounter  
With an English journalist in search of ‘views  
On the Irish thing’, I’m back in winter  
Quarters where bad news is no longer news  
(Whatever You Say Say Nothing)

The “symbolic” urgency of the former section has been literally replaced by the “explicit” urgency of this section, in the journalist’s attempt to provoke a direct and explicit comment from the poet. And yet, seeping into this language of “explicit utterance”, we see the rhetoric of violence ‘invading’ the language of psycho-spatial relations—“encounter” and “winter quarters”—hinting at the deep symbolic register of words chosen.

Later, as Heaney repeats the journalistic clichés that have come to close off the situation in Northern Ireland—‘escalate’, / ‘Backlash’ and ‘crack-down’, ‘the provisional wing’, / ‘Polarization’ and ‘long-standing hate’—we begin to see that explicit urgency has itself become trapped in a symbolic performance that alienates the real event. To return and extend an observation by Lloyd, the literary style of journalism has it seems closed off the everyday world of Northern Ireland before it has even begun to explore it: language and not the land becomes the thing recorded. “Nothing” it seems may indeed be all that is said.

Maybe the solution lies in singing—“Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing” Heaney tells us—and so he takes to singing his own song in “Summer 1969”. Bryan Adams it ain’t.
“Summer 1969”

“Summer 1969” has Heaney contemplating the historical charge of Northern Ireland while far removed from the actual moment, but unlike the intentional, temporal, and mythic removals of the poetic voice in part one of the collection, here it seems the removal of Heaney’s poetic voice is circumstantial, spatial, and remains interned in the historical moment. During the historical events taking place on the Falls Road in Belfast (a Civil Rights march that has deteriorated into violent conflict), Heaney finds himself far away in Madrid, retreating to the cool of the Prado to escape the pressure of public criticism, not unlike that charged by Lloyd.

In the first stanza of the poem we see Heaney setting up his sense of psycho-spatial relations to the historic event taking place in Belfast: “While the Constabulary covered the mob / Firing into the Falls, I was suffering / Only the bullying sun of Madrid.” The assumed authority of the “Constabulary”, established through the capitalization of the “C”, leads to their voice authoring the historical narrative in the alliterative “covered” and the renaming of the marchers as “mob”. However this state-authorized narrative is quickly undermined in the very next line with the alliterative phrase “Firing into the Falls” and the poet’s characterization of the Madrid sun as “bullying.” Through explicit and symbolic utterance, Heaney begins to challenge the State’s right to subjugate its citizenry through both bullet and language, respectively the means of “physical and spiritual subjugation” according to N’Gugi Wa Thiongo (1130...).

Heaney goes on in this stanza to establish his own position in relation to the events taking place in Belfast. In his flat, he “sweats through” “the life of Joyce” while smelling the “stink from the fishmarket / [that] Rose like the reek off a flax-dam.” It seems that while Heaney may be physically removed from Ireland and the troubles in Northern Ireland, he is both ideologically and redolently mired in them. His choice of reading material speaks possibly to his sensing the familiar in Joyce’s predicament of writing about Irish history while in exile, and more acutely to both his and Stephen’s encounter with history, as “the nightmare from which [they are] trying to awake.” His choice of simile speaks to his psychological removal to the “flax-dams” of his native Derry, where the incidents which have culminated in this confrontation in Belfast began. The fact that he is again drawn back to this place when he sees the “patent leather of the Guardia Civil” on the streets of Madrid speaks to his memory of a life lived under the violent sign of colonial authority. Not only can he not escape the psychological conditions of this past, through a collective memory he can sympathize with the conditions which have
led the Catholic population to try to seek redress through political (and ultimately physical) action. But does that entitle him to offer explicit comment on the current situation?

His companions in Spain certainly think so, and urge him to return: “Go back,” one said, ‘try to touch the people.’” But instead, he stays and sits through “death counts and bullfight reports / On the television, celebrities / Arrived from where the real thing still happened.” The absence of a period between these three lines creates a feeling of enjambment that links these three accounts together, as all being recorded by “the television.” The ambivalence leaves a series of questions which seemingly have no answer: Are the “death counts” of the people killed in Belfast or of the bulls in the “bullfight reports”? (Does alliteration operate here to more deeply connect these two events: Belfast and bullfight?) What exactly is on “the television”: the “death counts”, the “bullfight reports”, the “celebrities”, or all three? Where is this place “where the real thing still happened”? Has television make death “real” through its reduction of it to figures and association of it with celebrities?

Faced with these imperative, irreducible and socially unwarrantable questions, Heaney “retreats” to the Prado, where he finds himself drawn to the aged, introspective and misanthropic Goya: the painter who has lost his wife, his health, and his hearing, and who has had to witness the public atrocities and petty political posturings of the French and Spanish aristocracy in the Penninsular War (1807-1814).

The first painting Heaney is drawn to is Goya’s commemoration of Spanish resistance to the French invasion, ‘The Shootings of the Third of May’ (Fig. 4). This painting depicts French reprisals for a public uprising, with Napoleon’s troops executing rounded up Spanish citizens in the early hours of the morning of May third. The rigid, almost mechanized manner of the French soldiers is starkly contrasted with the disorganized mass of bodies directly in front of them. Heaney remembers how the painting “Covered a wall.”

This painting, of course, recalls for Heaney the historical moment taking place outside the Prado, far away on the Falls Road in Belfast. We see this in the language he uses here: the repetition of “covered” from the opening stanza, and rhyming of “wall” and Falls” connects the painting to the actions of the Constabulary in Belfast. This metaphor quickly blossoms into allegory for Heaney, with the description of the French military in the following line becoming an imagined description of the character of the Constabulary: “the helmeted / And knapsacked military, the efficient / Rake of the fusillade” (Fig. 5). The “boot of the law” as
Heaney renames them in “A Constable Calls” becomes reimagined here as an efficient, if not effective, agent of state authority, the Repressive State Apparatus of government to use Althusser’s terms. With this, the questioning of the morality of the force’s actions becomes directed not at the men themselves but rather at the state they represent.

This painting is quickly left behind as he enters into “the next room” to be confronted by Goya’s “nightmares, grafted onto the palace wall—/ Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking”. Displacing the image of an “efficient” and emotionally detached military is the image of “Saturn jeweled in the blood of his children” (Fig. 6). This replaces, for the viewer, something understandable, if unconscionable, with something absolutely incomprehensible and abhorrent. While there may originally have been some reason to Saturn’s madness, and notice how Goya’s painting, in comparison to Ruben’s earlier painting of the same theme (Fig. 7), accentuates the madness of Saturn, we accept the narrative simply because it exists in the realm of the gods, which in our modern civil state we read as a sign of capricious cruelty and merciless inhumanity. Figuratively, through Heaney’s developing allegory, this displacement turns what was for the viewer a historical picture of State authority as expedient, if unemotional, into a mythological figure of reason having given way to frenzy. In Saussarian terms, we have, through a developing chain of signifiers, begun to expose the darker, deeper truth behind what the Northern Irish government wants to historically signify as rational action (Fig. 8). What critics have read as Goya’s allegory for the Spanish state’s consumption of its own children in wars and revolution becomes for Heaney, and through his reading, for us, an allegory for the colonial state’s cannibalization of its own youth (both Catholic and Protestant, rebel and officer) in order to retain its mantle of power.

The absolute apathy of the colonial state’ towards the citizens it compels to violent conflict is allegorically signified in the next painting Heaney mentions, “Gigantic Chaos turning its brute hips / Over the world” (Fig. 9). As the capriciously cruel and mercilessly inhuman primeval figure, the State’s investment is in the production of chaos, not in the consequences of its actions (Fig. 10). Eight people were killed in the August conflict, almost 750 people were injured, and 1800 people were forced out of their homes, almost all of them Catholic. In a number of significant instances, some of them recorded on camera, the Constabulary forces were seen not only failing to protect Catholics but actually joining in with loyalists in the destruction of Catholic houses. In its refusal to reprimand its constabulary forces, the State certainly appeared to turn its back on its fleeing Catholic citizens.
Finally, Heaney ends with the almost forgotten “holmgang” as he calls it: Goya’s “Fight with Cudgels” (Fig. 11). According to Francisco-Xavier de Salas, this painting may be recalling an allegory based on the Greek myth of Cadmus and the Dragon’s teeth, in Diego de Saavedra Fajardo’s emblem book *Empresas Políticos*. Under instructions from Athena, Cadmus sows the teeth of the dragon he killed into the ground, and watches while a race of armed and fierce men known as the Spartoi (“Sown”) spring up. He throws a stone amongst them, causing them to fight to the death until only five survive, and these he uses to assist him in the building of the citadel of Thebes. For Saavedra this allegory speaks to how some rulers stir up discord in the hopes of establishing peace in their kingdoms. Goya may have seen its meaning in light of the policies and politics of Ferdinand VII, a ruler who according to historian Stanley Paine, “thought only in terms of his power and security and was unmoved by the enormous sacrifices of [the] Spanish people” (428). This reading of the painting supports and extends Heaney’s allegorical critique of the historical myth of state-authored violence as rational, warranted, and with the best interests of its citizens at heart.

Heaney’s renaming of the image as a “holmgang”—a traditional Nordic practice of dueling to the death in order to settle disputes over such matters as property rights, demand of restitution or revenge, and honour—slightly reimagines Goya’s vision as a tribal practice that pre-existed and should have vanished with the founding of the modern state (Fig. 12). This deepens his allegory. Building on the three previous paintings, and developed through both Goya’s and Heaney’s readings, this image allegorically reveals two unvoiced yet imperative readings of the current conflict in Northern Ireland: (1) the specific situation has arisen out of the state’s almost godlike dissociation from and active dis-concern for its polity (particularly its Catholic citizens), and (2) this “specific historical juncture”, to use Lloyd’s terms, is deeply underwritten by the myth of feuding as the archetypical public sign of personal, familial, ethnic, and tribal honor. This exposes a deeply held belief by all parties involved in the conflict—Catholic and Protestant, Marchers and Constabulary, rebels and the state—that this historical conflict is simply another sign of the mythic conditions of life in Northern Ireland.

Heaney, it seems, wants to alert us to the intersection of myth and history happening at this moment in order to prevent us from falling victim to the myth of history that attempts to read reason, expediency, and resolution onto this moment. Reason forces us to choose. Expediency forces us to simplify. Resolution forces us to condone. All actions that ultimately valorize the state-authored historical reading.
Finally, Heaney’s coda to the poem turns out to be more pointedly a volta. Here the poet turns from reflection on the art to contemplation of the artist, and from reflection on a specific historical moment to contemplation of the strategies of the discourse of History as a metanarrative:

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.

Here Heaney reimagines Goya as the dramatic bullfighter, through his art, sidestepping the implacable onrush of history, by painting not with the manipulative digits, the tools of historical record, but rather with the brute force of his body—“his fists and elbows.” Heaney’s pun here on the “charging” of history—as tasking and attacking Goya—emphasizes the artist’s paradoxical relationship to the discourse of history: his fate and the fate of his work is inextricably tied to history no matter how much he may want to declaim that. Like the bullfighter, the artist must confront history, and hope to turn its force, and maybe, if he is both lucky and gifted, to unveil history as the beast driven to frenzy by its need to read meaning onto a series of arbitrary signs in order to effect the narrative of the real.

This finally returns us to the second stanza and its reduction of “the real thing” to arbitrary facts—“death counts”, “bullfight reports”, and “celebrities”. History’s purpose it seems is to reduce the irreducible to recognizable signs through a language of arbitrary ‘facts’ that moves events out of reality and into a discourse of the real. In Baudrillardian terms, history functions as a sign of the real that has come to stand in for and disguise the absence of the real.

Heaney’s mythopoetic art, like Whitman’s, recognizes that the poet’s job is not to speak to facts. Instead, he works through allegory to strip away the architecture of history and expose its mythical foundations. Why? Because myth challenges this history-as-real production by foregrounding the discursive act—the story-making duty—over and above the reflection of the real, and thus exposes the symbolic and suggestive nature, the story-making character, of the ‘literal language’ of history.

To return to Lloyd, yes, for Heaney, language becomes the land explored, but this is because he has come to recognize that History’s investment in aesthetics has already closed off any ethical engagement with the current situation in Northern Ireland by privileging a world of factual language over everyday reality. And so his duty as Emerson’s “Namer” is not just to name specific historical moments, but more importantly to name History “after its [absence of] essence.”
Governing His Tongue

In a 2010 essay, “Heaney’s Tollund Man Revisited”, Thomas O’Grady recalls David Lloyd’s “Pap for the Dispossessed” as “the most notorious critique of Heaney’s focus on the Glob’s image”, and remarks how even prior to its publication Heaney “had his defensive hackles up... [because of] the skepticism some critics expressed toward his engagement, in his landmark volume North (1975).” He quotes from an interview Heaney gave to James Randall: “I’m very angry with a couple of snotty remarks by people who don’t know what they are talking about and speak as if the bog images were picked up for convenience instead of being, as I’m trying to take this opportunity to say, a deeply felt part of my own life, a revelation to me.” O’Grady believes that “Heaney may have been... disappointed in the failure of certain readers to appreciate what Robert Frost refers to as the inherent ‘ulteriority’ of poetry—poetry as ‘metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another.’”

In his inaugural T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecture, delivered in the University of Kent in 1986, Heaney may finally have taken the opportunity to address more explicitly his announced disappointment with “certain readers”, his anger at “a couple of snotty remarks.” In this lecture, entitled “The Government of the Tongue”, Heaney tells his audience:

When I thought of ‘the government of the tongue’ as a general title for these lectures, what I had in mind was this aspect of poetry as its own vindicating force. In this dispensation, the tongue (representing both a poet’s personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been granted the right to govern. The poetic art is credited with its own authority.... The poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit. (92-93)

As always, Heaney is drawn to Yeats as a prefigurer of his own poetic purpose, and he quotes from Ellman’s biography to show just how Yeats anticipates his poetic belief: “He [Yeats] wishes to show how brute force may be transmogrified, how we can sacrifice ourselves...to our ‘imagined’ selves which offer higher standards than anything offered by social convention” (100-101). Following this, he states and stakes the claim that may best help us understand not just the powerful critique
of “Summer 1969”, but the drive of North: “The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political, and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event” (101).

For Heaney, it seems, poetry’s power is in its ability to reimagine the real and expose the ideological foundations of our historical reality by proffering an alternate ‘reality’ that undermines the notion of the singular, monological, simple reality to which history subjects us. And so, at the end of this lecture, Heaney, it seems, finally addresses (albeit indirectly) Auden’s challenge that “poetry makes nothing happen.” He states: “In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed” (107).

This may be why Heaney, in “Summer 1969” turns away from the figure of Lorca and, more deeply, the figure of Padraig Pearse, and the “call to action” these figures signify that can only be realized through death. And why, instead, he turns to his poets Goya, and more deeply Yeats, and decides to write for his nightmare nation, “one / Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn.”
Fig. 3

Fig. 4
Fig. 5
Fig. 6
Fig. 8
Fig. 9
Fig. 10
Works Cited


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