



## **Spatial Protest: A Critique of Assimilation Tactics in Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney**

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### **Abstract**

In a world of accusing ideologies and impugned ideals, the news of territorial union is less a joy than cultural disintegration. Yet Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney have advocated integration with Europe and the world. Does it spell a doom for the independent Irish nation? Is it facing a cultural threat? How can one assimilate even while upholding one's political and cultural distinctiveness? As states in India face threats of Americanization and witness break-up of major states into smaller units, a study of the subject of Ireland and modern-day integration ethics is pertinent.

### **Keywords**

Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, Ireland, Assimilation, Cultural Integration, 'through - other', Spatial Protest.

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“One man's imagined community is another man's political prison.”

- Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 1996.

A literature of protest, when delineated in spatial terms, may challenge the very ground of human existence, quite literally. In the present study, the

researcher considers the subject of Ireland and its story of nationhood, when nationalism itself has become a fanatic operation of the state or an outmoded patriotism. The protest is then registered against any kind of assimilation of the Irish identity, especially in a world interconnected in terms of global economics. As modern nation states demand independent status, the existence of the European Union receives a setback. Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney try to negotiate a space which is contentious and contrarian, accommodating the claims of freedom as an Irish and tentatively accruing limitations of the world citizenship. In the crucial aftermath of a patriotic revolution with romantic ethos, a poetics of hope and redemption after a period of political turmoil, and a final weariness in front of massive devastation, define the various stages in the development from denouncing claims of nationalism or tentatively upholding the claims of post-nationalism.

Ireland has always been enmeshed in conflicts of nationality and the credibility of its statehood. The Irish adaptations of *Antigone* by Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney will be considered along with their vocal tracts on the integration of Ireland into the European Union and consideration of Belfast as a world city. In the post-national context we will not only comment on the cosmopolitan state and the multi-national city, but delineate the ethics of 'in-betweenness' with regard to spaces – geographical, political and cultural. Of course this concept comes close to the idea of a 'critical regionalism' but localization is not emphasized on but the widening based on the quotidian, which has both its imaginative and existential realities, and thus a scope for inclusion which is not a full dependence on a foreign nation. The *Antigone* adaptations not only foreground a state as unstable – Thebes, but through its mythic origins define the very basis of Irish nationhood as it is steeped in the past. Irish drama scholar Steve Wilmer says, 'Greek tragedies like *Antigone* have been used by Irish poets not such much to express tragedy as to express hope - a hope that comes out of years of tragedy' (Chou section 4). The Irish nation needs not a critique of the globalization affecting it. Rather these writers ponder on directions which the future generation may adopt. It is to discuss the very nature of its 'politicization',

in relation to the current debates regarding the integration of Ireland into the European Union which is not only about fixing political boundaries but demarcating mental, especially narrative ones.

Anders Hellström writes that the Irish referendum, rather than altering the process of European integration in any significant way, has served the endeavours to fix a consolidated European space. In other words, the European space that we live in is conceived of as if it could be presupposed beyond space (Hellström 123-35). Irish adaptations of the *Antigone* continue its revival saga through politically turbulent times of Thebes, even as it tries to negotiate newer existential realities. The play thus also seeks to negotiate a spatial idealization in its inclusionary aesthetics. Creon cannot allot land for the burial of Oedipus' son, the family from which he derives his kinship claims. Thebes always tries to posit itself as the stable entity even as it fails to do so, always being forced to recount a past as strife-ridden as the present. Hence Creon envisages an all-pervasive governmental space for the maintenance of law and order, but it undermines his very rule. The burial motif in Heaney's play reiterates land as a contested space, even as burial refuses to remain a peaceful lament for the dead. It is not about professing a poetics of peace and humanistic transcendence but an acknowledgement of a path marked by frontiers of writing in an attempt to formulate a poetics of redress. Quite pertinent is Heaney's sense of the vital presence of absence, a frontier which he explains in *The Redress of Poetry* as one "that exists as a state of resolved crisis [and] which Ulster people don't quite admit as an immediate realistic expectation but don't quite deny as a deferred possibility." Any sort of idealization, of ethics or place, is a mere distortion of the ideal. Only the disappearing presence, the 'through-other' and the frontier may constitute a significant ground of aesthetic understanding. As a crucial site for new economic impositions, the threshold area will provide relevant metaphors of indeterminacy for our counter-nationalist claims. The space and place of the land may be considered an intermediate site between dwelling and displacement, and Heaney specifies it as the "through-otherness" of one by the other in all its aspects – nationalist, economic, literary, and cognitive.

In Heaney's reworking of Sophocles' tragedy in *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) the land is again a contested site of nationalist devotion. Antigone's patriotism makes a claim for the land of her dead brother while Creon claims ground for the citizens' governmental rule. However, according to the Chorus, Thebes still "Dazzle[s]" (Burial 8), even after destruction. Finally a weariness of mass-scale destruction will overtake it. When Creon blames the guard of taking bribes, the new economic issues are brought to the fore. "Mere nationalism, ignoring that economic growth is not automatic redistributive justice [just as]...Theatrical or philanthropic wholesale counter-globalism..." (Spivak 53). Economic structures will create zones for national and international appropriation (national resources being quite important in any integration document) which counter-nationalism will seek to repudiate through 'solitude' rather than a solidarity or assimilation tactics; retaining the integrity of one's resources while making it beneficial for the world at large. Spivak writes that while restructuring our mind we may produce "imaginative folk who are not only going on about cultural identity, but turning around the adverse effects of the adjustment of economic structures" (Spivak 50).

The paper is not concerned with upholding its democratic spatiality but will rather unravel ventures of democratization through modern-day assimilation tactics. The Irish Literary Revival reignited patriotisms of variety in Yeats and Maud Gonne, a kind of an intellectual and cosmopolitan nationalism along with a fervent opposition to the Free State Treaty with England in 1921, arguing for a unified Ireland tempered with a mythic consciousness, yet resulting in the provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army), who have a romantic fervor of their own (resulting in revolutionary terrorism and vehemently opposing any kind of interaction, let alone integration). Seamus Deane has commented on the inability of this literature to become culturally national and its pitfall into the old colonial dichotomy – a Gaelic country against the foreign British nation. This is what Colin Graham analyzes as the 'ultimate failure' (88). Seamus Heaney enunciates the dynamics of the subject of Ireland in an aftermath of this scenario. The violence perpetrated in the name of nationalist ideology has characterized

both the period following the Civil War and the 2006 Peace process. Tom Paulin mimics the conservative republican through the Northern dialect and Heaney's anthology *North* tries to steer clear of condemnations for upholding a poetics of violence. The Antigone adaptations by these two writers dramatize a constant inability to decolonize, remaining a participant in the colonizer-colonized ethic in the Creon-Antigone relation. Heaney's discussions of the certain insurrectionary measures relating to the legality of incarceration and mourning, underline the reality of a contentious space a person is forced to inhabit – supporting one ideology *or* the other. Alvin Jackson explains that the peace settlements in Northern Ireland may have helped to provide a scholarly breathing space within which it has been possible to appraise revolutionary nationalism without endorsing its contemporary manifestations (112). One pertinent example is the trope of poetry and violence in Heaney studies which have sought to blame the poet for nourishing or evading the Troubles for aesthetic purposes or political mileage. Thus Buckley can correctly say that a poet who would never dream of supporting the Provisional IRA is psyched into not writing his poem on vital and pressing issues (Buckley 259). An expectation for nationalist solutions in literary criticism becomes a technique of thought control, exacerbated by an education policy attuned in that way. Interestingly Buckley comments that only in his late poems Yeats is concerned about post nationalist violence. For most other Irish poets a degenerating sub-genre, that is the nearness of violence, in the schoolroom, in the streets, in the newspapers, and above all in the imagination, produces a poetry which, far from being positively nationalist, is either opposed to or evasive and ambivalent about any national aim.

Two recent articles by Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney points at the way one must travel in an era of the 'global village'. For what end do these writers write? Is it to seek a refuge in writing? Is it to rebel against the world? Is it to negotiate the boundaries? Is the future Irish State to be under or a part of the European Union? Is the way forward leading to development or regression? In what kind of an Ireland do they wish to reside?

All works of literature aim to substantiate our existential reality. Moreover, the dynamics of allegorical relations have opened up the horizon of political relations. Of course Ireland must remain rooted to the cultural presence of the past but not be constricted by it. Culture, according to Paulin, ‘can be the articulation in civil speech of citizenship, which is why the concept of the vernacular city has to allow for a more measured, more evenly paced discourse than any "gleg-tongued spunkie" would wish to offer’ (“The Vernacular City” 73). Mired in the violence of the past, a future Ireland is hard to envisage, but the irrational voices must be allowed to surface. It is a contrarian stance which one must develop.

In an interview given on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2002, Paulin’s idea of a solution residing only in a unified Ireland is explained: “You arrive at these moments of clarity if you think about history in any engaged and meaningful way, don't you?” he says, looking pained. “I originally thought that the state was capable of repealing itself. Then, I began to realise that it was not” (Paulin Interview by Sean O’Hagan). It is like a political epiphany which must be built on hybridism. It can be realized in a ‘state of emergency’, that in-between period when one order has dissolved and the other is waiting to be born – “one of those historical moments in which national cultures discover stuff that they may have forgotten or buried.” This ‘traumatic self-analysis is required’.

Frank Kermode, while reviewing Paulin’s *The Invasion Handbook* (2002) quotes a vignette of Walter Benjamin which the writer uses:

after he fled Berlin  
the Bibliothèque Nationale  
was the only place  
he allowed himself to feel at home in.  
It couldn’t be a sanctuary  
for it gave him only  
a brief passing illusion  
of safety that ended  
with the German occupation. (Kermode 9)

The writer then does not seek safety, but a site where safekeeping is possible, not a contradiction but a contrarian stance. Tom Paulin's version is more directly interventionist than Heaney's anthropological claims. Paulin wishes to face it with bravery. The power and spirit of Benjamin's storyteller is always trying to re-surface in him.

As idealism regarding the 'national' role break down, an imagined larger entity takes its place. It gives a pan-European circumstance to the writing of both Paulin and Heaney, in the former's advocating of the inclusion of Belfast into the European Capital of Culture in 2008 and the latter's advocating on the affirmative to the Lisbon treaty. The creation of the new nation-state in terms of its fictional representational skills is not uncommon. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd comments: a consciousness which liberates a national idea by means of a renovated style lives in eternal peril (Kiberd 117).

Writers like Yeats, Paulin and Heaney aim at a definitive nation-building when the definition itself is in peril. For Sophocles Thebes similarly lies in a peril, when there can be no one to lead it. Even the voice of reconciliation cannot lead the new-found republic. The Chorus at the end of Heaney's play announces:

Bear with the present; what will be will be.

The future is cloth waiting to be cut. (*Burial at Thebes* 55)

Therefore debates regarding the modern-day integration are pertinent.

Unlike Yeats who could aim at a cultural revival of the whole nation, Paulin and Heaney concentrate on a 'critical regionalism' which however goes on to increase its boundaries, challenging a different kind of border-imposition altogether. Hellström writes that the peace project associated with the integration envisages a kind of 'enlargement':

European space is conceived of as temporally and spatially given; therefore we all share a common ambition to make the lived European space congruent with the space represented by the Prodi Commission. However it does seem odd that the people of Europe do not endorse what is depicted as the essence of the European space as a whole (Hellström 128).

Paulin and Heaney want to defy this immoderate enlargement process yet integrate with the European Union and its culture, brilliantly negotiating between confident self-assertion and self-possession.

In the essay, “Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain”, Heaney tries to explain the position of W. R. Rodgers as an:

understanding of himself between London, Lough all and the Lowlands, in that three-sided map of his inner being that he provided with its three cardinal points, in all of that there is something analogous to the triple heritage of Irish, Scottish and English traditions that compound and complicate the cultural and political life of contemporary Ulster. For Rodgers, it wasn't a question of the otherness of any one part of his inheritance, more a recognition of the through-otherness of them all (Heaney 398).

Whenever an artist demands spatial (i.e. territorial) recognition, he has to provide a political solidarity and a passionate opposition to the ‘Other’. Provincial writers upholding a ‘critical regionalism’ will demand propaganda claims from the liberationist. When Heaney subscribes to the Lisbon Treaty, he is apparently becoming a servile follower of Eurocentric values. Yet he enunciates a cultural integration which must attain an independence of its own. The poetics of the ‘through-other’ is a significant contribution in this regard. It is an overcoming of the past but retaining the lessons of dislocation. Heaney explains that to try to disengage from the rural past is not to disown it. In an essay on Patrick Kavannah, this limited rural scenario itself becomes the site of spatial infinity. It is not a progressivity in development of the rural identity through a ‘techno-arcadianism’ or evolutionary biology, rather a ‘cultural and historical mix-up’ :

Through other is its history, of Celt and Dane,  
Norman and Saxon,

Who ruled the place and sounded the gamut of fame

From cow-horn to Klaxon (“Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times” 398)



The new project for integration, will then a space between dwelling and displacement for Heaney. 'District and Circle' dramatize a movement beyond the nation-state into this critical regionalism. While the late poems move onto larger dimensions the private conviction of birth and private comfort underlines a sense of 'thereness' in one's corner which is also crucial to regard in the post national phase. After the failure of the peace process, Heaney uses the trope of the human chain. The poetic speaker becomes braced again after passing the bags of meal over and against the firing of the mob: "That quick unburdening, backbreak's truest payback, / A letting go which will not come again. / Or it will, once. And for all." (*Human Chain* 18) After a narrative of separatism is the story, not of unification but an enduring linkage which may easily snap, but which we will have to continue to hold on. Hence the metaphor of the chain is pertinent in its association to link and labor.

For Paulin the space between dwelling and displacement will contain features of what Maurya, in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, calls the big world as developed by the small. Paulin's context relates to the decision as to which UK city will be appointed European Capital of Culture in 2008. Heaney says, in a video clip recorded for a weekend's launch of the New Ireland for Europe campaign:

There are many reasons for ratifying the Lisbon treaty, reasons to do with our political and economic wellbeing, but the poem ['Beacons at Bealtaine'] speaks mainly for our honour and identity as Europeans (Garton Ash, "It takes an Irish poet to remind us of the grandeur of the European project").

Post revolution, the search can only continue, defying the complacent and enduring the worse. It may be added that this poem was included in a book entitled *Together towards Inclusion* which acknowledges a 'culture and ethnicity [which] are not Irish, but turns linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity to the educational advantage of all (Yarr, "Foreword").' For Heaney it takes place on the level of language with its confrontational powers of redress. In his commentary

on 'Beacons at Bealtaine' written at Phoenix Park on May Day, 2004, he mentions:

So there is something auspicious about the fact that a new flocking together of the old European nations happens on this day of mythic arrival in Ireland; and it is even more auspicious that we celebrate it in a park named after the mythic bird that represents the possibility of ongoing renewal (Yarr, "Foreword").

The myth, as we have explained with reference to *Antigone*, claims a distinct space of its own.

The search must be cultural in nature and Paulin posits its new meaning:

To argue against Belfast winning the honour because it has no opera or ballet and has not produced a Belfast *Ulysses* is to deny the aspirations of present and future generations - culture pitches itself endlessly forward; culture is a debate, an argument ("The Vernacular City" 64).'

In arguing for Belfast as the city of culture, he recommends 'that the culture which helped to found the modern metropolis of Belfast is disinterested, critical, aesthetic and candid (Paulin 66). This disinterestedness may be significantly related to Heaney's detached aesthetics of solitude.

Interviewer Sean O'Hagan notes that Paulin has called the Good Friday Agreement "a truly radical document", but given the current state of affairs - the rancour and violence surrounding the Holy Cross School protests, the slaying of the Catholic postal worker Daniel McColgan recently - does he feel optimistic about the future?

"Well, it's hard to, isn't it? These are dangerous, uncertain times. The place is more divided than ever. It's deeply depressing, isn't it? Another young life taken like that..." He lapses into an uncharacteristically long pause. "One feels at the moment that there has been so much critical analysis of unionism that now is not really the time to be engaging in it, so ragged and distressed is the loyalist identity. In fact, in a way, though I would not want to offend the

relatives of the dead, these very powerful Bloody Sunday films are not coming out at the right point for the peace process” (Paulin Interview by Sean O’Hagan).

The future comes before the present because the former is determined by the latter. This peculiar shaping of the future may be best explained with reference to Heaney’s ‘redress’ aesthetics.

Heaney gave the Struga Address as ‘Macedonia teetered on the verge of a full-scale civil war between its Slav and Albanian populations. It was the gravest crisis since the country’s independence from Yugoslavia in 1992. Troops had mobilized throughout the country, setting up checkpoints, posting guards, and moving through the streets in a manner reminiscent of Belfast’ (“The Struga Address” 114). The poets, according to Heaney, ‘will do what poets always do: they will listen to the music of what is actually happening, but they will answer it by playing the music of what might happen’ (“The Struga Address” 115). Poetry is never about giving the best of answers but a response which may be a contradiction – unheeded and unwanted. Yet it is owed and emerges out of a poet’s good feeling.

Thus for Heaney the poet’s role lies in maintaining the efficacy of his own ‘mythos’, his own cultural and political colourings rather than to serve any particular momentary strategy (“Unhappy at Home” 62). Heaney may have joined the anti-war tradition of Yeats, but more pertinent is his sense of the vital presence of absence, that tenuous ground earlier referred to, between: “an immediate realistic expectation but don’t quite deny as [and] a deferred possibility” (“Frontiers of Writing” 190). Any sort of idealization, of ethics or place, is a mere distortion of the ideal. Only the disappearing presence, the marked absence (of silence, as pointed out in ‘Violence and Silence’ [Lunday, “Violence and Silence”]), the ‘through-other’ and the frontier may constitute a significant ground of aesthetic understanding. In this regard the theoretical apparatus of post-nationalism becomes useful. Richard Kearney in his seminal work on the Post National Ireland (Kearney 53-54) argues for a ‘Europe of the regions’, a unity for freedom informed by an idea beyond the modern alternatives of national

independence and multinational dependence. It should be a post national model of (mutual) interdependence. Kearney's post nationalism asserts that nationalism in Ireland is arrested, while in Britain a kind of permanent immaturity was chosen as a stand-in for nationalism. Post nationalism thereby cuts across by positing a concept of critical regionalism. Heaney's 'District and Circle' dramatize a movement beyond the nation-state into this critical regionalism. While the late poems move onto larger dimensions the private conviction of birth and private comfort, it also underlines a sense of 'thereness' in one's corner which is also crucial to regard in the post national phase. Newer allegorical relations posit a distinct kind of 'thereness'. Antigone, while bidding adieu to the city of Thebes compares herself to Niobe, but the Old Man emphasizes: "niobe was the child of gods and the queen of Thebes – as much as you might wish it you are neither – when this is talked about your suffering shall not be compared to hers" (McCafferty 32). We cannot explain our future by going back to the past, which yet constitutes our very being. The suffering and endurance remain as present constituents of our being. We hardly any desire to become like kings; wish for our work to last through history, but it is enough for the moment, enough work for a lifetime in order to look after those that need me." (McCafferty 39) Our interpretive saga of the Irish *Antigones* has brought us to this crucial realization. This is not the path towards the liberal democracy. This literature does not applaud the man on the streets because Creon is called by Haemon as a "mad-man ruler of the empty streets" (McCafferty 31). This world is not full of the worldly wise or the marginalized that can easily up the reigns of control. These texts do not glorify the downtrodden but bring forth the plight of people who fear to be heroic or defy others yet demand an essential dignity as their own. Politically Ireland is not completely free till date and thus its weapon of resistance/rebellion needs to maturely negotiate the oppressor-oppressed saga, like our very reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* and its Irish adaptations.

However, as far as cultural integration goes, Heaney has always applauded it. Denis O' Driscoll has noted that a Horace ode, 'Anything Can Happen' was produced after the September 11, 2001 attacks, then appeared in the Irish times,

later to be referred in a lecture to the Royal College of Surgeons, then published in Translation Ireland, to be finally included in a booklet in support of Amnesty International (O'Driscoll 2008, chapter "In a wooden O'Field Day, Oxford Professor of Poetry, Translation"). Other than an ongoing civic service it was also an indication for the retaliation that was bound to surface after the attacks. It enabled what Milosz has called 'screams' (Milosz "Dedication" 40) made in poetry, of inability, of anger, and finally of a power to gain salvation. For Heaney, it is as 'Tiresian as it was [is] topical.' It is like adhering to a prophetic claim as a search for peace in current times. Like the nation, the narration also seeks independence but in resourceful integration.

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