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Una Creedon-Carey
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“The Whole Vexed Question”: Seamus Heaney, Old English and Language Troubles

Introduction

For Seamus Heaney, the idea of the “English” language is a problem that will not settle. Heaney was a Nobel-Prize-winning poet, a visiting professor at Oxford and Harvard, a writer beloved of readers and critics. Accolades like these imply that Heaney has done much for the English language, and that the English language—his first language, his native tongue—has done much for Heaney. But it is never this simple for Heaney, who regards the problem of language in Ireland as a crucial and current issue. His writing is eminently conscious of the implications of operating in English, a language originally imposed on Ireland by an invading England and, later, by the British colonial enterprise. Heaney’s twentieth-century poetry pushes constantly at the boundaries of conventional English, testing the extent to which one can escape a language while still operating in it. Writing during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Heaney searches for an acceptable solution to the “whole vexed question—the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history, and literary tradition in Ireland” (*Beowulf* “Introduction” *xxiv*), a search that occupies him for much of his literary career.

The “vexed question” with which Heaney is occupied is itself difficult to articulate succinctly. In his own explanation of the question, cited above, the poet not so much asks “the question” as alludes to the web of complex conceptual interrelationships (“nationality, language, history, and literary tradition”) that compose it. Heaney’s poetic attempts to resolve this language issue can be understood as part of a series of similar efforts, from the late nineteenth century

revival of Irish nationalist writing and language study to Joyce's multi-lingual wordplay in *Finnegans Wake* to Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's embrace of Irish-language verse. Heaney's own approach to the question is, characteristically, an archaeological one.¹ Throughout his career, Heaney digs into the past in order to question the nature of English as a solid imperial and literary entity, to expose its historic and political stratifications. This work is most famously accomplished in the poet's 2001 translation of *Beowulf*, critically celebrated as an act of postcolonial re-appropriation, a hibernicization of a cornerstone of the English canon. Yet this interest in the subversive potential of Old English language and literature has spanned much of Heaney's career, and emerges in his original poetry in formal and thematic ways that have not yet received sufficient critical attention.

Heaney's fourth collection, *North* (1975), is a crucible for the poet's understanding of the English language, and the collection in which the poet most extensively engages with the verbal and poetic traditions of Anglo-Saxon England. It divests itself of "the natural sounds and rhythms of English poetry" (Williams 118) and affects a style replete with references to Old English and ancient Germanic cultures. *North* is a volume of poems about history, bodies, language and land, one that occupies itself with both Europe's distant Germanic past and Northern Ireland's Troubles in the late twentieth century. There are compound words and complex alliterative patterns, bog-bodies and Vikings. The collection is obsessed with the buried, stratified past, and toggles back and forth between it and Heaney's present day. The poet explores historical and literary Ireland's colonized past and uncertain present.² This ethically ambiguous volume is deeply concerned about the poet's place in a violent world. It is concerned,

¹Digging and excavation are concepts that run through all of Heaney's work. Helen Vendler identifies "archaeologies" (38) as a particular theme of the poet's fourth collection, *North* (1975).

²A postcolonial reading of Heaney is possible. Deepika Bahri and others read poems in *North* (especially "Antaeus" and "Hercules and Antaeus") through this lens.

too, about the ethics and politics of language. *North* highlights issues of identity and language-use in ways that are at times antagonistic, at times pluralistic. There is a constant interest in subverting or redirecting Modern English.

Michael Molino characterizes *Wintering Out* (1972), the volume preceding *North*, as an attempt to work through Irish language and traditions in order to develop a more pluralist “polyphonic voice” (55). Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, he identifies this shift as a “reterritorialization,” an attempt to re-claim the importance of a language that has been dispossessed.³ Heaney makes his poetic language deeply political, and *North* can be read in similar terms. Yet what individuates *North* from *Wintering Out* is that the later volume illustrates not so much Deleuze and Guattari’s “reterritorialization” as their “deterritorialization.” Heaney pushes the English language and its traditions to the extreme, and in doing so challenges the idea that English is a singular, centralized and cohesive entity at all. The poet’s focus in *North* is not on Irish influences on the English language so much as on the history of the English language itself, the processes of historic language transmission and evolution.

The poetry in *North* reaches for an English that might not be so implicated in colonial structures of power. Poems like “Strange Fruit” and “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” pose a challenge to Modern English language and literature. Iambs, extended lines and rhyme are often cast as suspicious or foreign. In December 1973, Heaney expressed his intention “to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff it has never eaten before...like all the messy, and it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North” (Heaney quoted in Morrison 55). The quote’s imagery is physical, even violent. Heaney suggests that the English lyric is perhaps not easily or

³ A reterritorialization of language, as explained by Deleuze and Guattari, occurs when a writer in the position of a linguistic minority chooses to write in the language that is culturally his or her own. In doing so, the writer works to restore the disenfranchised language to its former important literary function.

often used to tackle such “messy” subject matter. The English poetic tradition becomes a formal system that he confronts head-on.

Meanwhile, Heaney’s Old English mannerisms and his interest in etymologies make the reader conscious of the historical qualities and significances of the language he uses. *North* becomes an opportunity to showcase the word itself. Stratifications of language and literature usually accepted unquestioningly by the modern reader are revealed and examined in poems like “Belderg,” “Bone Dreams,” “North” and “Punishment.” The volume is a guided exercise in linguistic history. But this digging into the particularities of language hints, at times, at a wider—not narrower—comprehension of language. It ultimately presents the possibility of liberated language, of a borderless and shifting language unaffiliated with imperial structures of power; it is a suggestion of what Heaney would later identify in his Introduction to *Beowulf* as an “unpartitioned linguistic country” (xxv). Both these pointed formal aggressions and these more neutral attempts at linguistic borderlessness qualify as language subversion. Heaney opens up English and extracts the vocabulary and forms he needs for the task at hand. In doing so, he challenges the edifice of English itself.

This concern with language ownership and language subversion is not uncommon in the twentieth century. Historically, Heaney himself belonged to a cohort of Irish intellectuals who addressed the question of English in Ireland. Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane and others writers involved in Ireland’s Field Day project all grapple with their linguistic inheritances, analyzing the Irish tradition and its relationship to English literature and language. Heaney’s turn to Old English, though clearly informed by this context, is nonetheless a unique poetic response to these concerns. On the other hand, theorists like Jacques Derrida, Mikhail Bakhtin and the duo of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are all somehow concerned with the way official language—

national and hegemonic—can be challenged either by writing from a position of alterity or using a multi-voiced approach. Heaney’s *North* can be situated among this theory in the way the collection’s poetry works to subvert official language and disrupt the English poetic tradition. Yet Heaney’s particular efforts to resolve these tensions set him apart, in many ways, from writers and theorists asking similar questions in twentieth century Europe. What makes the poet’s resistance to official language in *North* particularly significant is his understanding of language as material, of words as things. His etymological explorations and poetic conceptualizations of language convey an enormous trust in the sign. *North* communicates the idea that the material of language—its past and present sounds and spellings, the evolutions and histories of its modern vocabulary—can be politically redemptive.

Field Day and language politics of late 20th century Ireland

Heaney can be grouped with a number of other Northern Irish intellectuals considering similar questions of language and tradition. His involvement with the Field Day Theatre Company and publishing enterprise connects him to writers such as Seamus Deane, Brian Friel, Tom Paulin and David Hammond. The Field Day group was active in the last two decades of the twentieth century. It stood for the creation and promotion of a specifically “Irish”—not “British”—literary and dramatic tradition. The organization occupied itself with questions of language and nationality, making a case for Ireland as a postcolonial entity (Pelletier 328). Among the plays the theater group staged are Brian Friel’s famous drama about language, *Translations*, and Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy*, a translation of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*. Field Day also published pamphlets from a host of outside contributors, including Edward Said and Terry Eagleton. Although there is no Field Day “party line” when it comes to the issue of operating in

English as an Irish author, Heaney's adoption of Old English is still an unusual solution to Ireland's "vexed question" given the general preoccupations of the group.

One of Heaney's best-known contributions to Field Day is "An Open Letter," a poem published in one of the group's famous pamphlets. This is an instance where Heaney's writing seems representative of the Field Day enterprise and its emphasis on a specifically Irish literature. In 1983, after being included in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, an insulted Heaney published this long, scathing poem in which he declares his Irishness, and by extension the Irishness of his poetry. The editors of the offending anthology make much of "the new spirit in British Poetry" and the Northern Irish poets who they claim to be an integral part of this (Morrison and Motion 12). Yet in "An Open Letter," Heaney responds: "British, no, the name's not right" (197). This lengthy poem is utterly unlike Heaney's usual work, adhering as it does to an absurdly constraining aabab rhyme scheme. This leads to stanzas like the memorable number 28, where "hubbub" (168) is rhymed with "Charyb" (169), "glib" (170) and "Holub" (172). The meter, too, is set; the "a" lines are in iambic quatrameter, while the "b" lines are in iambic dimeter. The poet takes the opportunity to think about his poetic identity while operating within these formal constraints. Posing the question, "How British were the Ulstermen?" (59)

Heaney answers

...as far as we are part
 Of a new commonwealth of art,
 Salute with independent heart
 And equally
 Doff and flourish in your court
 Of poesie. (61-66)

The idea of a "court" of poetry makes explicit a relationship between British literature and British politics and power. The archaic spelling of "poesie" reminds the reader that this relationship is not a new one; it connects the present-day British literary establishment to its

roots in the Renaissance English culture of poetry. Heaney worries that his association with British poetry places him within the tradition of subservient Irish entertainers for the British court. His address is to the volume's editors ("Blake and Andrew, Editors,/Contemporary British Verse,/Penguin Books, Middlesex" [1-3]), but this open letter—published in *Field Day*—is of course addressed not only to these academics, but also (if not more so) to Heaney's Irish collaborators and colleagues. With this poem, Heaney makes this issue of mistaken identity a problem of note. It is anything but subtle: "my passport's green" (82), he insists. The flippant manner in which the complaint is delivered implies either certain level of ironic detachment from the issue, or a dismissal of the terms and conditions of serious British literature.

Heaney's contemporaries often delineate sharply between British English and other dialects or languages. Tom Paulin explains his distrust of official English thusly:

Although there might be, somewhere, a platonic Unionist author who believes that good prose should always be as close as possible to Standard British English, such an aspiration must always be impossible for any Irish writer. This is because the platonic standard has an actual location—it isn't simply free and transcendental—and that location is the British House of Commons. (16)

Although the issue here is Modern English specifically, Paulin articulates an important point for the nationalist writers of that generation: English was the language of the oppressive British state, its specifics dictated by a political body. The question for Paulin is how to write in Hiberno-English, how to standardize and celebrate a particularly Irish mode of expression. As Pelletier notes, one of *Field Day*'s goals was "an active appropriation of the medium, the recognition of the specificity of the English language spoken in Ireland which would culminate in the compilation of a dictionary that would give Hiberno-English the official recognition and legitimacy it deserves" (337). But although Heaney's relationship with Hiberno-English is crucial to his career, its "specificity" is not his main linguistic interest in *North*. The Old English

mannerisms in *North* are not an Irish appropriation of the medium so much as a destabilization of the medium.

A more specific contrast here is with Seamus Deane, a figurehead of the Field Day enterprise and Heaney's contemporary, collaborator and friend.⁴ In his essay "Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English as We Write It in Ireland," Deane outlines his understanding of the history between the two languages and how Irish literature has reflected the tension produced by that history. He identifies the Irish Famine as the historical moment in which Irish—supposedly the language of a backwards and nostalgic people—was replaced by English, the language of modernity. Calling this loss a "communal catastrophe" (118), he traces the results of this event through to Yeats, Synge, Joyce and Beckett, arguing that the situation has caused "a condition in which, in Ireland's case, the language of the real, in all its rigour, is Irish—and that emerges as silence; and the language of the possible is English and that emerges as eloquence" (118). This is a binary, he argues, that has colored Irish understandings of language for hundreds of years. Traditional Irish life had been inexpressible after the traumatic language loss. The modern and accessible language became English. A recourse, for Deane, is "a country of the imagination" (119). Falsehood and fiction (of the type that Synge's Christy Mahon and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus eventually embrace) become redemptive in this scenario. This is, for Deane, "the language of freedom" (121) towards which Irish writing should strive.⁵

Despite his social and intellectual affiliations with Deane, Heaney's language philosophies differ considerably. The poet is classed as an Irish writer among other Irish writers,

⁴ Heaney's collection of essays, *Preoccupations*, is dedicated to Deane and Thomas Flanagan.

⁵ What this means in practical terms is not entirely clear. Deane does not articulate the difference between this rhetorical freedom and fiction-writing in general. Meanwhile, the historical language binary his interpretation nourishes throughout is not challenged by Deane, but rather falls by the wayside. As he concludes his argument, the matter becomes less about the particularities of language and more about this abstract "freedom." Unlike Heaney, he does not work to collapse the Irish/English binary, but simply acknowledges it is no longer desirable.

in an Irish canon; it is a classification he finds true and necessary, as demonstrated by the 1983 incident with Blake and Andrew. Following Deane's analysis of Irish literary history, then, one could argue that Heaney has inherited the whole baggage of the "Dumbness and Eloquence" struggle. And, indeed, certain poems in *North* like "Ocean's Love to Ireland" give rhetorical space to the idea of an effectively silenced Ireland subdued by an aggressively verbal Renaissance England.⁶ But although this historical binary is recognized by Heaney, it is often undermined and questioned as much as it is reinforced. In fact, Heaney's imagined return to Old English seems entirely foreign to Deane's understanding of the language struggle in Ireland. Discussing the place of the Irish language in modern Irish literature, Deane writes that the language was "audible as silence, the silence of the other language that haunts the English language, sometimes in the shape of its syntax and grammar, or of its idiom and vocabulary, sometimes merely as reference or implication" ("Dumbness and Eloquence" 119). That is, in English language texts written by Irish authors in the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th century, the Irish language's absence was a thing felt consciously or unconsciously. This absence was marked by suggestions of ghostly presence, whether in style, vocabulary or in the writing's subject matter.

The interesting thing about this citation is that Heaney discusses the presence of Old English in his work in a very similar way. In his Introduction to *Beowulf* he concludes that "Digging," the first poem in *Death of a Naturalist*, his first collection, unintentionally "conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics" (Heaney *xxiii*). The meter of Old English, according to the poet, works itself into his poetry as though it has been latent in his linguistic consciousness all along. In his own words, "part of me...had been writing Anglo-

⁶ Although, as my later analysis will discuss, "Ocean's Love to Ireland" complicates this binary by referring to the genre of the *aisling*, a particularly Irish form of poetic expression.

Saxon from the start” (*xxiii*). Heaney claims that even by operating in his own native Hiberno-English he has direct access to the English language’s distant essential beginnings. His poetry is indeed haunted by a language, if not the one Deane would expect. This rapport with Old English is a reach for linguistic freedom that moves beyond binaries and borders. An important feature of Heaney’s use of English—articulated in prose in his later career, but already clearly developing in *North*—is the proposal that the English language itself might be used in a way that denies or even undermines the imperialist power structures that have supported it for so long.

Understandings of language

In his Introduction to *Beowulf* (2001), Heaney sketches out his personal linguistic history as a narrative of progress. He explains his rejection of the binaristic thinking about language that colored his early literary development, saying that he once “tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/ands.”⁷ He does not elaborate on what a full poetic embrace of this “both/and” ideal would look like in practical terms. The poet’s process of accomplishing this elusive both/and requires finding “a loophole...away into some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one’s language would not be a simple badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or official imposition, but an entry into further language” (“Introduction” *xxv*). Here, in 2001, Heaney proposes a utopia of endless and liberated language. He is willing to sacrifice some of the cultural significances of a tongue (language’s use as a “badge of ethnicity” or its capability to represent “cultural preference”) for a freer, more fluid, more neutral understanding of verbal communication. Old English is an

⁷This sort of “either/or” mentality is exemplified in Heaney’s 1972 poem “Traditions,” in which Heaney laments that “Our guttural muse/was bulled long ago/by the alliterative tradition” (1-3).

important way to make possible the desired both/and condition.⁸ The loopholes to this both/and condition, to this “unpartitioned linguistic country,” are essentially etymological discoveries. Translating *Beowulf*, Heaney’s Old English loophole was *Polian*, the Old English verb “to suffer.” His interest here is in the term’s link to the phrase “to thole,” which was used in the Northern Irish vernacular the poet heard as a child. Individual tongues are blurred into language, the whole. Turning to the past, Heaney claims to liberate and recontextualize language in the present. It is an escape from restrictive language binaries and boundaries. This later rhetoric is very much in dialogue with the linguistic themes expressed in *North*, but this 1975 volume is rawer, more interested in aggressive language subversion.

Heaney’s poetry also develops the idea of English as not an edifice so much as a multi-layered shifting entity. Even years before the publication of *Beowulf*, his English is conceptualized as not just Modern English, but the sum of the language’s historical parts. Heaney describes this phenomenon in “Bone Dreams” (*North*) in terms of pushing through a mass of greenery:

dictions,
Elizabethian canopies.
Norman devices,

the erotic mayflowers
of Provence
and the ivied latins
of churchmen

to the scop’s
twang (22-30)

⁸This is expressed again in Heaney’s 2011 Forward to *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*. The language used is strikingly similar: “This play of language [in Anglo-Saxon poetry] is resumed by the poets who have translated the work included here, proof that the lifeline to and from this poetry has not been broken, that all language is *an entry into further language*” (XII). Emphasis mine.

The English language once investigated becomes a composite of other named languages, a forest of different tongues. Indeed, even “latins” has been uncapitalized and pluralized. At last, Heaney arrives at “the scop’s/twang,” the solid Old English destination beyond all of this plant matter.

And it is the scop’s twang, indeed, that becomes so central to this “vexed question” that Heaney dances around in his Introduction to *Beowulf*. Old English is essential to the poet’s quest for a more open linguistic worldview, as well as essential to Heaney’s conception of English, the language. According to Chris Jones, the poet considers Old English “a kind of linguistic animus, capable of making itself felt throughout literary history, seemingly regardless of the need for direct transmission. It is a kind of atavistic spirit, a force of primal energy” (193). It is a permanent fixture in English in a way that does not obey the standard rules of language transmission. It is, the way Jones describes it, essential and quasi-mystical. Indeed, the idea of Old English as a baseline or an enduring idea is one of Heaney’s favorite tropes. It crops up in “Bone Dreams,” above, where the poet can “push back” (21) through the greenery of other, later influences on the English language to arrive finally at “the iron/flash of consonants/cleaving the line” (30-32). The language here is solid, “iron.”

Similar rhetoric appears in “Feeling Into Words” (1974), an essay which proceeds “Bone Dreams” by a year and predates *Beowulf* by twenty, but discusses Old English in a remarkably similar way. Heaney describes “the pointed masonry of Anglo-Saxon verse” and how he “[learned] about the rich stratifications of the English language itself” in his undergrad years (*Preoccupations* 46). Again the old language’s solidity is emphasized; again Heaney conceptualizes English as an earthly language (that is, literally stratified like earth or rock) composed of many layers, the material remnants of temporal processes. This suggests the poet standing atop these stratifications, on the topmost layer, the layer on which the average user

operates. That he had to “learn” about these stratifications speaks to the fact that the average English user operates without full understanding of what, exactly, has historically enabled the present language on which he or she is standing. Extending the metaphor, Heaney’s interest in Old English is yet another act of digging, an excavation of the tongue he has used all his life. He is not discussing his Hiberno-English, in this citation. He has sifted through the whole of English in order to reach this archaic, linguistically ancestral language. Yet this is a pluralized, borderless English, an English of many temporalities. Its use distances Heaney from the English literary establishment he criticizes in “An Open Letter,” from the official English Paulin describes. Yet, at times, this use also gives Heaney more in common with geographically distant literary theorists than with the Field Day cohort.

This borderless language has some similarities to Jacques Derrida’s concept of “monolanguage,” which involves the same escape from official, authoritative language. This theorist’s explanation of “monolanguage” is tied up in his own experience growing up as a Jew in French-occupied Algeria. Drawing on this personal experience, he identifies a certain feeling of linguistic homelessness that is common to all language-users, but is most acute in those who have grown up speaking a language in which they cannot feel entirely at home. He—like Heaney—finds himself without a true mother tongue. He operates in language by translating every word and cultural experience into intelligible terms, but without ever having a stable point of reference (a mother tongue) from which to translate. He refers, always, to a possible language, an ultimate native tongue, one that does not quite exist for him. For Derrida, this possible language is *the* unified idea of language, an ultimate common mother tongue. It “precedes all language, summons all speech, and already belongs to each language as it does to all speech” (Derrida 67). It is a monolanguage, an “absolute idiom” (66): ideal, comprehensive and paradisiacal. It is the

possibility of true and transparent communication always hoped-for, aimed-at, in writing and speaking. But this ur-language is not a reachable ideal; language “fails, lastingly, to reach home” (69). Language is constantly promising this universality, constantly failing. Although Derrida argues that this dream of perfect language is necessary for all communication, this monolanguage is the special province of the linguistically homeless Other who is most keenly aware of its promise.

Derrida’s writing on monolanguage has several rhetorical points especially important for our purposes. First, the theorist confirms that a singular language is not a closed unit. It is, he writes, “open to the most radical grafting, open to deformations, transformations, expropriation, to a certain a-nomie [*sic*] and de-regulation” (Derrida 65). That is, the very concept of “a language” is incredibly unstable and easily deconstructed. Second, reaching for a monolanguage or ideal idiom is impossible but imperative. According to Derrida, because the language does not actually exist, it can be approached “by opening up an impossible path, leaving the road, escaping, giving myself the slip, inventing a language different enough to disallow its own *reappropriation* within the norms, the body, and the law of the given language” (66). Derrida does not provide precise instructions on how to write in this way, and arriving at this ideal, of course, is never achievable. But engaging in this sort of linguistic innovation, while operating from one’s own linguistic perspective, can bring one closer to the ideal. Third, Derrida’s monolanguage is anti-nationalist but not apolitical. Acknowledging this monolanguage is to “at once analyze the historical phenomena of appropriation and treat them *politically* by avoiding, above all, the reconstitution of what that these phantasms managed to motivate: ‘nationalist’ aggressions (which are always more or less ‘naturalist’) or monoculturalist homo-hegemony” (64). That is, recognizing a monolanguage gives one an awareness of historical linguistic

oppressions that does not go to either of the opposite extremes: nationalism (to which Derrida is thoroughly opposed) or a singular dominant culture. Yet the matter is without question political.

This sort of dissatisfaction with a singular official language is not an uncommon one in twentieth century literary and linguistic theory. For Derrida and others, this is often articulated in terms of either resistance or escape. Mikhail Bakhtin provides important general information about language and voice in his writings on the form of the novel. Bakhtin establishes the difference between standardized, unitary language and a freer heteroglossia (the countless variations, dialects and styles of a language). This heteroglossia is the actual day-to-day reality of language: "at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form" (503). Acknowledging this heteroglossia—as the form of the novel itself does—has anti-authoritarian political implications.⁹ It is a decentralized and heterogeneous method of representation. A similar sort of pluralism and anti-centralization finds expression in Deleuze and Guattari's "What is a Minor Literature?" The authors write: "how many styles or genres or literary movements, even very small ones, have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language... Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor" (26). They encourage an intentional subversive use of dominant tongues, one that is based primarily on style and tone. They advocate a "deterritorialization" (18) of dominant languages, encouraging writers to work through these

⁹ Bakhtin argues that the form of the novel uniquely allows for this linguistic subversion. But Heaney's conceptualization of a unified but borderless language (that engages with "differing epochs of the past" [Bakhtin 503]) is in fact similar to Bakhtin's theorization of this heteroglossia.

tongues to achieve a desired anti-authoritarian mode. Writing on Kafka, they emphasize the extreme sparseness of his German syntax, his disavowal of metaphor, his tendency to deny representation or accurate signification in favor of free-floating language. But this is not the only way to reach for a minor language. The essay's conclusion is written as a call to action, demanding writers "to make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment" (26-27). Heaney does not distance himself from meaning, or attempt to confuse meaning, in the way that Kafka does. His "becoming-minor" is accessible, representational. Yet through Heaney's resurrection of Old English and his etymological investigations, *North* uncovers a polylingualism that might serve as a means of escape from an authoritarian language.

Such an escape imagines an ideal of literary communication that bridges distinctions of culture and nationality. Broadly, all these theorists view writing in this way—reaching for a language other than the major, the official, the singular—as subversive, as politically anti-authoritarian. Deleuze and Guattari see certain literary utilizations of language as a way to subvert official and oppressive language. Derrida's realization is more about what lies beyond the word, what is inexpressed and inexpressible by language, but is nonetheless essential to communication. The difference, ultimately, is one of direction and aggression. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that subverting a major language to write in a minor way can be a means of pointed resistance. Derrida thinks that actively attempting to write from this monolanguage can be *read* as an attack on one's major language ("it can always allow itself to be interpreted as an impulse of love or aggression toward the body of any given language that is thus exposed" [66]),

but is more concerned with the political implications of the monolanguage as the province of the other.

Heaney's linguistic concerns in *North* fall easily into this framework. What makes this volume's treatment of these issues unique, however, is its focus on vocabulary, on etymologies, on the material history of language itself. For the poet, words themselves—their various pasts and implications—are an entry point into all possible language. Unlike Derrida's conceptual, unreachable monolanguage, Heaney's own "monolanguage" is global and concretized in signifiers. He is not reaching for a language beyond words; for him, the interconnected, solid nature of words as signs allows its own kind of resistance.

Pushback against Modern English literature and language

Heaney's language subversions in *North* are political, but this politicization pulls two ways. Some poems, such as the ones discussed immediately below, take specific issue with the English language and its literary forms; others work to break down linguistic borders. Derrida sees his monolanguage as a possibility that runs counter to language's role in perpetuating nationalism and hegemonic power. Such a monolanguage would separate language from centuries of antagonisms. But Heaney's resistance at this point in his poetic career is not this neutral. Again, as the poet explained in December 1973, he wanted "to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff it has never eaten before...like all the messy, and it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North" (Heaney quoted in Morrison 55). This declaration assumes that forcing this "incomprehensible" content onto existing (perhaps restrictive) forms would affect some sort of change on the forms themselves. The poet aims to confront the

“English” lyric, which is here specifically nationalized. There is a political, national dimension to language and to form.

This is sometimes a question of appropriation or re-appropriation in the manner of the Field Day enterprise. Throughout his early career, Heaney’s ownership of the English language’s literary forms and vocabulary is often in question. As the poet proclaims in the first section of “The Singing School” (*North*), “Ulster was British, but with no rights on/The English lyric” (62-3).¹⁰ This oft-quoted line comes late in the collection, in “Part Two” of *North*, after Heaney has already most obviously thumbed his nose at this same English lyric in “Part One.” This dissatisfaction with the English lyric is in these lines tied up in the Irish Catholic poet’s experiences growing up as a minority citizen in British Northern Ireland. The poem describes the humiliations at the hands of instructors, the police interrogations at roadblocks, connecting these experiences to language, word choice, names, pronunciation. All this disenfranchises him of the “English lyric,” at least temporarily.

But more often than not in *North*, explicit ownership of English is not the poet’s most pressing concern. It is not a matter of owning English so much as investigating English, redirecting English. “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” explores the extent to which the English lyric can be redirected or repurposed given its fraught history in Ireland. The poem provides the distant context for twentieth century language conflicts as it narrates the historical loss of Irish land and language to the invading English in the Early Modern period.¹¹ In doing so, it exposes the stakes and problems of operating in English for the Irish poet, even as it complicates any sort of concrete Irish/English duality. This poem, a response to Sir Walter Raleigh’s “Ocean’s Love to

¹⁰ This section, “The Ministry of Fear,” is dedicated to Seamus Deane.

¹¹ England had been laying claim to Ireland with varying degrees of interest and success since the twelfth century. It is the renewed English Protestant attention in the seventeenth century, and the repressive violence that accompanied it, to which Heaney refers here.

Cynthia,” is an encounter with the prototypical English lyric, the culture of poetry or “court of poesie” to which Heaney refers in “An Open Letter” (discussed above).

In “Ocean’s Love to Ireland,” Heaney emphasizes the idea of English literature and empire as one and the same. Poetics, history and real world ethics clash as Heaney places the speaker of the Renaissance poem at the visible center of “Ocean’s Love to Ireland.” This poem gives some rhetorical service to Deane’s idea of a verbal England subduing a silenced Ireland. The Irish poet names Raleigh in the very first stanza of the poem: “Speaking broad Devonshire,/Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree/As Ireland is backed to England” (1-3). There is an aspect, in this citation, of both linguistic and physical intimidation.¹² Raleigh’s linguistic assuredness, mentioned in the very first line, is a main feature in his advance. In fact, English historical and literary discourse is a powerful and negative presence throughout the poem. Hart identifies two other English writers implicated in this verbal advance: “John Aubrey, who documented Raleigh’s rape of a native maiden in his eccentric and biographically dubious *Brief Lives*; and Edmund Spenser, who spoke on behalf of Lord Grey concerning the massacre of Catholics at Smerwick” (95). By these references, Heaney suggests, as the adage goes, that history is written by the conquerors. The Irish poet is playing with a historical record that seems necessarily English.

In contrast, there is a constant emphasis throughout the poem on the voicelessness of the Irish people. There is the female victim who cannot protest coherently, the “mouthing corpses” [16] of the Catholics killed under Raleigh’s watch at the Siege of Smerwick, the Irish poets sinking in the ground as the English poets advance. But although Heaney narrates the sinking disappearance of the Irish poets, and thus the loss of the Irish (in this case, specifically male)

¹² Throughout *North*, women are often mythologized or reduced to symbols. The speaker’s equation of this female victim to the nation of Ireland is one important example of this.

lyrical voice, “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” is necessarily an *aísling*, a typically anonymous, historically Irish oral genre developed in response to colonial subjugation.¹³ To tell the story of Ireland’s defeat appropriately in the 20th century, Heaney has to shift into a more mournful and fantastic register. English voices are so clearly dominant in the text of the poem. “Ocean’s Love,” however, exists in a mode that is wholly Irish. Heaney casts Raleigh as a speaking villain and himself as necessarily the inheritor of a tradition that—paradoxically—speaks of the silencing that is undergoing. This is resistance against the English tradition that engages with ideas of English volubility and Irish silence, but ultimately complicates them.

This problem is explicitly a formal one. Heaney writes that “Iambic drums/of English beat the woods where [Ireland’s] poets/Sink like Onan” (22-24). English is regarded as both inseparable from the English colonizing mission and intrinsically iambic. That is, the English lyric is ultimately indistinguishable from English colonization. The last line of the poem concludes in perfect iambic quatrameter:

She fades from their somnolent clasp
 Into ringlet-breath and dew,
 The ground possessed and repossessed. (27)

That is, the ground is simultaneously inhabited by the ghostly, sunken Irish poets and colonized by the invaders. There is the ghostly presence of Irish loss, yes, but the trouble with subjects and verbs here makes this possession ambiguous. It is not a cut and dry situation of English possession and Irish dispossession. Meanwhile, the iambic meter of the poem’s last line, with its appealingly definitive last pronouncement, suggests how deeply modern poetry is still indebted to its early modern English inheritances. The iambic drums of the English colonizers are beating still in Heaney’s Irish twentieth-century poetry. This poem engages in a deep contradiction: the

¹³ These vision poems typically involved a female *Spéirbhean* or “sky-woman” (Kiberd 18) representing Ireland who would visit the poet to lament the country’s present state and plead for foreign help.

speaker engages with a rhetoric of binaries (Irish/English, female/male, silence/speech, possession/dispossession) but ultimately the forceful unifying act between these inheritances makes a binary mindset impossible. The speaker is distrustful of an English influence, but disavowing it is never presented as an option. There is an uneasy coexistence.

North investigates the nature of the English lyric's influence on Irish poetry, even as it works to subvert that influence. It is not a matter of reappropriation so much as resistance or redirection. Heaney does not claim the authority of English for himself; instead, he actively minorizes the language and tradition. This is not a territorialization of English (which, to toy with Deleuze and Guattari's terms, would constitute a colonization of English, an affirmation of its linguistic and cultural capital) but an unraveling of English and its poetry. As seen above, some of the volume's most antagonistic or politicized gestures involve challenging the forms and poetic practices of Early Modern England, specifically. "Strange Fruit" exemplifies how some poems in *North* resist this post-medieval "English lyric" and its demands. This fourteen-line sonnet is bog-body poem, a meditation on the preserved severed head of a girl. The subject matter alone is bizarre, considering the form's enduring reputation as a medium for expressions of love. Instead of a speaking lover and a silent beloved (as is the norm), there is the speaker, the dead object, and a host of other actors or observers: a nameless "they" (3) that prepared the head for viewing, the suggested audience at the object's "exhibition" (4) and the words of Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian. This usually private form is populated by multiple other parties. The poet blazons the girl's head, her "broken nose" (7) and "eyeholes blank as pools" (8).¹⁴ The speaker analyzes the face, and his feelings as he does so. This is as it would be in a conventional sonnet, but here the subject matter is interpreted finally as a ghastly sublime, "outstaring" (13)

¹⁴ It is, as Helen Vendler argues, not one of Heaney's most successful bog poems; it "relies too heavily on lavish but conventional adjectives" (48).

any value or description that might be placed on her. The sonnet is put to an unconventional use, and concludes with an unresolved, difficult-to-articulate concept.

Formally, this sonnet comes apart at the seams as it progresses. Although the first seven lines contain ten syllables each (though only by taking “prune-skinned” [2] as “prune-skinnèd”), their stress patterns do not easily conform to iambic pentameter. For instance, reading “They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair” (3) as “they UN/swaddLED/ the WET/ fern OF/ her HAIR” is awkward in the extreme. Around the sonnet’s volta, the syllable count begins to break down entirely. Line eight has eleven syllables; line nine has nine; line ten has eleven; line eleven has ten; line twelve has eight. There is not even the semblance of a regulated, iambic line anymore. Yet the poem’s final couplet operates in more or less iambic pentameter, giving the conclusion a satisfying metrical emphasis. Fourteen lines long, unrhymed and with an uncertain, inconsistent meter, “Strange Fruit” acknowledges the conventions of the sonnet while refusing to meet them. This is not a particularly remarkable formal innovation in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet the collection’s general interest in the politics of form, as well as Heaney’s articulated distrust of the English lyric, involves this sort of resistance in the project of minorization that *North* proposes.

***North* and unified language**

Although some of the language resistance in *North* works in this pointedly anti-English manner, other incidences of resistance work in a more general way to subvert common understandings of language. This, too, is political. The poems challenge the possibility of a singular language such as “English” or “Irish” (which can be a vehicle of oppression or the

extremes of nationalism), instead asking the reader to think about language as a shifting and borderless entity.

North's preoccupation with Old English or ancient Germanic themes and traditions may seem initially to run counter to this possibility of linguistic subversion or escape. Yet this specificity is exactly what ultimately makes this bid for freedom possible. Although an interest in Old English and a Germanic past runs throughout Heaney's work, *North* is the volume where Heaney engages most explicitly and most often with these themes. It is here the poet "most fully felt and conjured the medieval world of Northern literature—from Gunnar of Hildarend from *Njal's Saga* calling for revenge from within his burial cairn at one end, to the beckoning of the Anglo-Saxon scop's word-hoard at the other" (McGowan 27). It is a collection of varied literary and cultural references from a distant Scandinavian history.¹⁵ *North* is replete with images of earth, bog bodies, bone-houses, longships and water.

Heaney's formal and linguistic choices too make reference to Old English vocabulary and poetics. By integrating these allusions to Old English poetic practices into his Modern English poetry, Heaney suggests that Old English is a language or mode capable (perhaps uniquely) of expressing something of the nature of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. He opens up English in an almost surgical way to extract the vocabulary he needs to represent this condition. In doing so, he brings about a temporal indistinction that destabilizes the idea of a cohesive modern English. It is a poetic choice that illustrates Deleuze and Guattari's dictum "to make use of the polylingualism of one's own language" (26), even if this polylingualism is made possible by what is perhaps essentially a conservative looking-back to words and techniques forgotten in what Heaney calls "the tongue's/old dungeons" ("Bone Dreams" 20). These language issues are

¹⁵ References that are carefully traced by McGowan in his article "Heaney, Caedmon, *Beowulf*."

treated most extensively in “Part One” of *North*, and this is the section on which much of the coming analysis will focus.

Critically, the most pressing question asked of *North* is an issue of ethics in representation. David Lloyd, Edna Longley, Ciaran Carson and others have criticized Heaney for the way in which he writes on the Troubles. Lloyd’s famous analysis of *North* is deeply negative. It claims that the poet

posits a psychic continuity between the sacrificial practices of an Iron Age people and the ‘psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing’ (*Preoccupations*, p. 57). This is effectively to reduce history to myth, furnishing an aesthetic resolution to conflicts constituted in quite specific historical junctures by rendering disparate events as symbolic moments expressive of an underlying continuity of identity. (“Pap for the Dispossessed” 27)

That is, *North* provides an “aesthetic resolution” to the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, a conflict that was in reality horrific in its own singular and specific way. According to Lloyd, comparing the violence of the Irish Troubles to the violence in prehistoric Europe is in some sense too simplistic, too satisfying an answer. It is aesthetically pleasurable. It reduces history to little more than a cycle of violence, and collapses the specific tragedy of the violence in Northern Ireland into just another episode in this cycle. Contesting Lloyd’s full accusations are beyond the scope of this paper. And, indeed, his argument is not unfounded; this tendency towards universalization can be read into Heaney’s language philosophies as well. Yet the poems in *North* are eminently aware of the incredibly high ethical stakes that come with writing on the Troubles. Furthermore, there are many formal aesthetic features in *North* that do serve an overlooked yet legitimate political purpose.

Heaney's philosophy of language is most explicitly posited in "Belderg," a poem early on in *North* that offers a sample language loophole key to interpreting the rest of the volume.¹⁶ This poem narrates the speaker's visit to a man who had discovered Neolithic quern-stones in the bogs of Belderrig.¹⁷ After a discussion on the material remainders of history buried in the earth, the conversation turns to the etymology of Mossbawn, the speaker's "old home" (28). This becomes an epiphany on the nature of language. The speaker had previously imagined the word as having a "forked root" (33), a dual history of usage. "Bawn," he points out, can be considered either a word of Irish origin ("persistent if outworn" [38]) or a word for an "English fort,/A planter's walled-in mound" (34-5). This is a question, essentially, of word-ownership and association, of Irishness or Englishness. But the other party in the conversation calls the speaker's attention to the Norse origins of "moss." This sparks a realization, and the poet is allowed to see beyond the English/Irish language binary, if only briefly.

Henry Hart imagines this as a "painful, cosmic revelation...in which Heaney envisions himself as no longer possessing an identity, but ground and mixed up in the warring factions of all history" (397). But collapsing this revelation into a question of simple "identity" ignores the poem's explicit focus on language and language history. Describing this epiphany, the speaker of the poem concludes:

I passed through the eye of the quern,

Grist to an ancient mill,
And in my mind's eye saw
A world-tree of balanced stones,
Querns piled like vertebrae,
The marrow crushed to grounds. (40-5)

¹⁶ "Loophole" is not a term Heaney would likely have used in 1975. Nonetheless, this incident fits Heaney's 2001 description of the phenomenon well.

¹⁷ These quern-stones, or mill stones, were used to grind grains and other materials in the Neolithic era. Hart identifies the man who describes these stones as Seamus Caulfield (397).

This visionary moment enables him to consider the entirety of language as a stable “world-tree” that is “balanced” and able to be visualized. Individual tongues (“querns piled like vertebrae”) are indistinguishable. The particulate matter of each language—the words or “marrow”—is indiscriminate “grounds.” This is a stunning visualization of a totalization of world language, a monolanguage based not on a nonexistent ideal of communication but a unified collection of undifferentiated tongues. The smallest units of language have been dissolved; the speaker, too, is “grist” that has been dissolved “an ancient mill.” This is not the poet’s reconciliation of his “divided inheritance” (398), as Hart claims, but rather the realization that his inheritance has never been divided as he had once imagined.

The speaker’s experience in “Belderg,” the second poem in Part One, provides an example of how to read the rest of *North*. Here, a single word can provoke a mindset-altering epiphany. The dissection of “Mossbawn” into “moss” and “bawn” literally hits home for the poet. The key is in the material makeup of the word. The histories of the signifiers “moss,” “bawn” and “Mossbawn,” these particular arrangements of letters or sounds, reveal something freeing about the history of the named place itself. Indications of linguistic openness, possibility, freedom can be found in words themselves. Heaney breaks down the binary Deane would later propose by the simple act of looking more closely at the language he uses.

“Belderg” primes the reader to think critically about vocabulary and word-origins. Other poems in the volume are not quite so direct in the way they approach the concept of linguistic openness. Rather, the Germanic mode in which they operate serves to disrupt standard Modern English poetic vocabularies and conventions. By revisiting Old English forms and concepts, Heaney brings the past to bear on the present in a way that confuses the idea of a standard, official English. In order to identify later exactly how and why the poems in *North* engage with

this tradition, a short explanation of Old English meter is helpful here. Thomas Bredehoft breaks down the poetry into three well-known essential (but not inflexible) principles. The first is the alliteration of stressed syllables, which connects the two halves of a traditional line of Old English poetry. The second is the bipartite composition of the line itself, constituting of two half-lines or feet. The third is that each line's meter consists of arrangements of stressed and unstressed syllables (22).

Heaney does not, of course, entirely replicate this form in *North*. Chris Jones identifies Heaney's Germanic mode as a "Saxonese translatoresque" (219). Using Bredehoft's principles as guidelines, there are a few immediately identifiable Anglo-Saxonisms in the poet's body of work. First comes Heaney's extensive use of alliteration over line breaks. In "The Grauballe Man," for instance, there is the petrified body found in the bog whose "instep has *shrunk*/cold as a *swan*'s foot/or a wet *swamp* root" (10-12). Addressing anatomical drawings in "The Digging Skeleton," the poet describes "Your *skinned* muscles like plaited *sedge*/And your *spines* hooped towards the *sunk* edge/of the *spade*" (14-16) (all emphases mine). These alliterations across lines can act to cohere a stanza instead of or in conjunction with rhyme.¹⁸ The second significant distinctively Old English stylistic feature the poet's reliance on hyphenated compound words. This corresponds to the profusion of kennings and other compound words in Old English. In "Kinship" the bog is an "earth-pantry, bone-vault,/sun-bank" (37-8); Hercules in "Hercules and Antaeus" is "sky-born and royal,/snake-choker, dung-heaver" (1-2). These hyphenations cement together existing words in unusual patterns or associations. Thirdly, of the eighteen poems in Part One of the volume, eleven are in the short four-line stanzas characteristic of early Heaney

¹⁸ Edna Longley claims that these alliterations are reminiscent of the Old English "alliterative tradition," while Jones believes that they are often "opportunistic and accidental" (Jones 214). Proving they are an "accidental" textual feature, however, is a difficult task that Jones does not offer to undertake.

but pervasive in this volume. These evoke the numerical evenness of Old English lines of verse, which are written in sets of two feet. Lastly, the poet's engagement with a Germanic vocabulary in several poems reveals historic stratifications or divides in the English language itself.¹⁹

“Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” is in many ways a model of how these formal and stylistic features crop up in *North*, and how these features can be used to destabilize modern English. In this six-part poem Heaney discusses the Scandinavian peoples who founded Dublin, dwelling on their historical acts of violence and the material remains of their settlements. References to Old English—a tongue incredibly close to the Scandinavian language of the Vikings—abound. Throughout the poem, there is an unusual number of compounded words, even for Heaney.²⁰ “Viking Dublin,” like many of the poems in *North*, consists of short lines (at most five or six words) arranged four to a stanza. As mentioned above, this sort of cleaving or division suggests the naturally divided line characteristic of Old English meter. Any stanza cleaves at the line breaks, necessarily, but Heaney's particularly short lines emphasize this division. This is illustrated the citation below, which is a listing of Viking characteristics:

neighbourly, scoretaking

¹⁹ The matter of Old English stress patterns in Heaney's poetry, however, is up for debate. In his Introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney gestures to his poem “Digging” as an example of an unconscious Anglo-Saxon metrical sensibility in his own work:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down (3-5)

According to the poet, his simplified Modern English version of the meter involves two sets of divided stresses (with punctuation marking a caesura), and some sort of alliteration across the divide (“Introduction” xxiii). Chris Jones, on the other hand, delves into the exact stress requirements of standard Anglo-Saxon verse lines and finds that the poem comes up short. Yet perhaps what is important here is not so much the accuracy or effectiveness of the meter's appearance in Modern English. It is, rather, this alliterative phenomenon's presence at all. In Heaney's poem “Bone Dreams,” the most salient aspect of the Old English is “the iron/flash of consonants/cleaving the line” (30-32). In this case, the poet's emphasis is on sound and space, not metrics in a strict sense. When this type of cleaving and alliteration crops up in works like “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” “North” and the bog-body poems, it is a modern evocation or loose translation—not a strict reproduction—of an older tradition. These features are repurposed for use in twentieth century poetry.

²⁰ Including “jaw-bone” (1), “scale-pans” (32), “clinker-built” (38), “mother-wet” (44), “skull-handler” (55), “gombeen-men” (71), and “skull-capped” (96).

killers, hagggers
 and hagglers, gombeen-men,
 hoarders of grudges and gain (69-72)

This cleaving is most noticeable in the gap between line 70 and 71, where the phrase “hagggers and hagglers” is enjambed. The stanza contains a continuous stream of thought, but also admits significant space, pause.

What is also evident in this same stanza is the poet’s attention to alliteration and consonance. These lines are a tight web of “h” and “g” sounds, bearing a certain conceptual resemblance to interlace patterns described earlier in the poem. The first half of the stanza is linked over the enjambment by the alliteration of “hagggers/and hagglers”; this connection is reinforced by the third “h” sound in “hoarders” a line below. The last two lines are further linked by “g” sounds, in “gombeen-men” and “grudges and gain.” Significantly, this stanza also avoids Latinate words almost entirely. “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” is not a re-creation of an Anglo-Saxon poetic form, but an evocation of some of its most salient aspects.²¹ The form that Heaney posits is foreign to the world of iambs and rhymes of modern English poetry. At the same time, this stanza reads easily as a commentary on twentieth century Northern Ireland, with its “neighbourly, scoretaking/killers” (69-70) and “hoarders of grudges and gain” (72). Modern English Old-Englishified becomes not only as the best way to represent a Scandinavian past, but also to comment allusively on an Irish present.

This is culture confusion; this is an explicitly subversive language gesture. It is not simply a “reterritorialization” (24) of language such as Deleuze and Guattari discuss, where a once-authoritative language is restored to its former use. Instead, English has been

²¹ These references are not exclusively formal. For example, the boat in “Viking Dublin” described as “swanning” (12) up the river Liffey is likely a reference to line 218 of *Beowulf* that compares the hero’s ship to a bird (Jones 205).

detemporalized. The Modern English lyric has been made to “eat” not only the Troubles in Northern Ireland but also “eat” now-foreign formal features from its own distant literary past. This is not to say that Heaney’s corpus does not participate in the reclamation of the poetic use of Irish, a national literary project still ongoing in Ireland. Irish is, of course, of great value to Heaney; Molino, after all, argues that *Wintering Out* (1972) is a bid to reterritorialize an Irish English. But the Irish language is not as central to *North*. It is Old English, rather, that plays the part of what Deane calls “the other language” (119). In this way, Heaney’s writing in *North* reaches for “deterritorialization” (24), using his Northern Irish home’s official, major language to “take flight along creative lines of escape” (26).²² In using Old English mannerisms to help describe his violent present, Heaney destabilizes the vocabulary and traditional forms of modern poetic English. He forces the language to confuse itself, bringing an archaic English style to bear on the nearly incomprehensible violence of Irish current events. This creates a heterogeneous mix of subjects, vocabularies and histories. English itself is no longer grounded so firmly in time and place, in the structures of power (such as the British state) that traditionally upheld it.

“Bone Dreams” showcases the explicitly lexical nature of Heaney’s linguistic explorations. Here the speaker leads the reader through the poem’s six dream-like sections, ruminating on nationality, bodies and language. The poem begins with the discovery of a bone on a presumably Irish field. This bone is compared to “a small ship-burial” (7), which suggests the distant Germanic past that both England and Ireland shared (ship burials—Viking or Anglo-Saxon—have been unearthed in both countries). The speaker then “[winds] it in//the sling of mind/to pitch it at England” (12-14). Positing himself as the Irish David to England’s Goliath,

²² This rhetoric bears a close resemblance to the prose in Heaney’s Introduction to *Beowulf*, where the poet discusses how words can function as a “loophole” or “escape route” (xxv) from a binary comprehension of language.

the act becomes an assault on “England” that seems unprovoked by any event in the preceding stanzas.²³ The slingshot bone emphasizes the present divide between Irish land and “strange” (16) English fields. The speaker establishes a present duality, but also the idea of a more fluid past.

In sections II and III of the poem Heaney shifts his attention from the found bone to a “found” (36) Old English word—“*ban-hus*” (36), meaning “bone-house” (17) or “body”—which he has discovered “in the coffered/riches of grammar/and declensions” (33-5). He moves from description of the signified (“the rough, porous/language of touch//and its yellowing, ribbed/impression in the grass” [3-2]) to analysis of the signifier and its place in a larger lexicon. His earlier assault on England quickly becomes something else. The speaker hunts or excavates, traveling through various layers of the English language and literary history to reach “the tongue’s/old dungeons” (19-20) where the lost vocabulary of this ancient language apparently resides. The speaker comes to retrieve this word—a term he has found himself through his own study of “grammar/and declensions” (III.2-3)—a term he then goes on to re-animate with great care. *Ban-hus* is a kenning: a compound word combining the literal (“bone”) and the figurative (“house”). The poet begins a blazon-like exploration of the term’s signification, combining the figurative and literal aspects of the kenning into the description of a body-house. He describes some aspects of a presumably Anglo-Saxon home (“fire, benches,/wattle and rafters” [37-38]) while also linking some physical features with household items (identifying a “small crock” [42] and so on). He attempts to flesh out the ancient understanding of the word, what precisely is or was signified by this signifier. This reveals an enormous faith in this old hidden treasure of a

²³ The poet self-consciously acknowledges this David and Goliath comparison again in “Exposure” from “Singing School,” the last poem in the same volume: “Imagining a hero...his gift like a slingstone/whirled for the desperate” (13-16).

word, in the ability of the language to still communicate as it once did. At the end of section III Heaney produces three new and similar compound words himself: “love-den, blood-holt,/dream-bower” (47-48), flaunting and imitating his linguistic discovery.²⁴ He accomplishes a linguistic evolution or production; he has created these new and unique word-combinations that now act as signifying units.

Deleuze and Guattari identify syntax as the source of Kafka’s becoming-minor. According to them, “the lexical matters little” (26). But they discuss prose; it is possible the lexical matters in a different way in the poetics of *North*. In fact, what makes Heaney’s form of politicized language resistance in *North* unique is that his methods are formal and lexical. In “Bone Dreams,” he imagines language as a searchable store of old and new vocabulary, vocabulary to which any writer can lay claim. Language becomes an evolving system. This destabilizes a current official English, the English that is, in Paulin’s terms, located in the British House of Commons. Deleuze and Guattari write that a minor literature will “oppose the oppressed quality of [language] to its oppressive quality” (27) As Jones points out, Old English was in its original use a deeply aristocratic language. But in his prose writings Heaney understands it as capable of “animating a kind of perennial demotic vernacular” (Jones 193). Opposing and intermingling Englishes old and modern, then, works to dismantle an official language from within, and points towards a freer, less authoritarian idea of language.

The poet’s intense scrutiny of the etymology of sample words like “Mossbawn” and “*ban-hus*” opens up the entire vocabulary of *North* to the same sort of attention. The eclectic and

²⁴ These stanzas where Heaney explicitly identifies these compounds as Old English are key to this reading of Anglo-Saxonisms in *North*. This identification suggests that such sequences of kennings (in “Strange Fruit,” “Kinship” or “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces”) throughout the collection have some of the same significance. They read as Old English because they have been identified as Old English by the poet himself.

varied vocabulary of the volume calls attention to the English language's various linguistic acquisitions over the course of its history. There is, for example, the highly Latinate diction of "Freedman," terms like the Irish "pampooties" [96] in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," the specific catchphrases of the Irish Troubles littered throughout "Whatever You Say Say Nothing." All this is an invitation to read any word with an interest in its verbal and sociological past.

"North" is another encounter with a Scandinavian past, and an important envisioning of an idealized, material lexicon. The speaker's vision-like experience along Ireland's western coastline is a type of spiritual visitation providing artistic guidance in a troubled world. Heaney confronts a "secular" (3) bleakness and plucks from it an encouraging, epiphanic message from the past. This poem operates in the familiar short four-line stanzas. There are lines, too, that recall the alliterative frenzies in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,": "the *solid*/belly of *stone ships*" (13-14), "*Thor's* hammer swung/*to* geography and *trade*,/*thick*-witted couplings and revenges" (22-24) (emphases mine). The Viking voices that address the speaker within the poem instruct him to

'lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray,
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of an icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.' (29-40)²⁵

²⁵ Confusingly, it is grammatically "the longship's swimming tongue" [20] that is said to speak these lines.

These stanzas suffused with northern imagery constitute a complex poetic directive. *Wordhord* is a compound word of Old English origin, one that even appears in *Beowulf*.²⁶ Elaborating on this term, Heaney presents an entire conceptualization of language. Language becomes a store; the verbal becomes material, “nubbed treasure.”

In these stanzas, the writer’s personal knowledge of language becomes the foundation for his poetic vocabulary. This can be taken two ways. The voices instruct the poet to turn inwards, to delve into his own consciousness, vocabulary and experiences, to “burrow/the coil and gleam/of [his] furrowed brain” (30-2). This mandate to delve inwards might communicate a certain insularity. But these stanzas instead suggest great freedom from traditional linguistic affiliations. The “nubbed treasure” that the poet handles now has passed through many other hands. Yet whatever the poet’s “hands have known” (40), whatever is within “the coil and gleam/of [his] furrowed brain” (31-32), is now his own. These stanzas can also be read, then, as a triumph of a varied personal lexicon. After all, Heaney’s past language study certainly brought the term “word-hoard” into his own vocabulary. Heaney establishes himself as the patient, clear-eyed poet who turns inwards to language, a language that includes terms like “word-hoard” and “bleb,” “aurora borealis” and “clear.” These are words of differing origins—Germanic, Latinate or otherwise—that are all his, for now, to treasure. The poet proposes a word-hoard as a polylingual resource, a personal, heterogeneous lexicon.

This lexicon is imagined in an explicitly material way. The word-hoard analogy suggests a language composed of discrete objects. It is a collection of valued items. One is directed to

²⁶In *Beowulf*, the term is used in a formal but not poetic context. As the Geats are challenged by the Danes on the shore, the narrator explains that “Him se yldesta andswarode,/werodes wīsa wordhord onlēac” (258-9). That is, roughly, “The oldest—the leader of the troop—answered him, unlocked his word-hoard.” Or, if you’re Heaney, “The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;/the distinguished one delivered this answer” (*Beowulf* 258-9). There is a demand for eloquence and right speech here, in this context, but not necessarily beautiful speech; word-hoard is used nonetheless.

“trust the feel” (39) of these word-objects, which have a reliable tactility and sensibility that allows them to communicate. This treasure can literally be manipulated, and this handling leaves visible traces on the objects. This puts forth a theory of language as a reliable system of material signs, each sign with its own “feel” and history. Words are thought of as things. In fact, this is a general theme often observed by critics of Heaney’s work. Terry Eagleton observes that Heaney’s vocabulary is often credited with a materiality that suggests an intrinsic correspondence between the words he uses and their meaning. Although this relationship is essentially fictive, the impression it creates is of an evocative poetry that adheres closely to what is signified. Joseph McGowan, comparing Heaney to the legendary Old English poet Caedmon, writes that “for Caedmon and Heaney the labor [of poetry] is still physical and material” (38). Words, in a sense, are “things” in their own right, objects with history that can be used like reliable tools. As the above reading of “North” suggests, this materiality is an important part of Heaney’s language escape. While Derrida’s monolanguage is non-material (and non-existent), Heaney’s reliance on the “feel” and the history of words allows him to meet his own standards of linguistic borderlessness.

Heaney’s “Punishment,” with which I will conclude my essay, is an important example of how the etymological reading strategies suggested by poems like “Belderg,” “Bone Dreams” and “North” can be applied to other poems in *North* in order to think about the word-hoard and language history. This poem is exemplary in three regards: its formal qualities, its etymological features and its focus on the speech act itself. It features the familiar hyphenation, alliteration-

patterning and cleaving four-line stanzas of Heaney's Old English mode.²⁷ The subject of "Punishment" is a bog-body, a prehistoric woman who was ritually executed on accusations of adultery. Heaney's version of this bog body matches P.V. Glob's description of "The Windeby Girl," a young female corpse found in a cauldron-bog in Schleswig.²⁸ The poem takes place in two temporalities, first narrating the ritual killing of this young woman and then comparing this "adulteress" (27) to her "betraying sisters" (42), the Catholic women in Heaney's day accused of associating with British soldiers in Northern Ireland. Yet the poem is as much about the poet's personal relationship to these events as it is about the actual atrocities. The speaker begins as a sympathetic observer referring to the young woman in the third person, insistent that he can "feel" (1) and "see" (9) the events leading up to her death. He then moves to address the girl directly, confessing his unease in his position as implicated observer.

The poem's temporal back-and-forth between prehistoric Europe and present-day Northern Ireland is exactly the sort of devaluing comparison to which David Lloyd is so adamantly opposed. His fear is, again, that Heaney is aestheticizing and mythologizing present violence by comparing the atrocities of his time to the atrocities of the distant past. If nothing else, though, Heaney is cognizant that what he says and how he says it has great import. In "Punishment," the speaker's conscience is tortured by the idea of speaking out. When Heaney forces himself to consider the hypothetical chance to intervene with the ancient woman's ritual execution, he admits "[I] would have cast, I know/the stones of silence" (34-5). This admission of guilt serves two opposite purposes. First, it makes the speaker culpable, and delivers up this

²⁷ The first few stanzas of this poem are thickets of alliteration across cleaved lines ("nape" [2], "neck" [3], "naked" [4], for example). And the poem is rife with hyphenation: "oak-bone, brain-firkin" (20), "flaxen-haired" (29) and "tar-black" (31).

²⁸ The detailed descriptions and black-and-white images of prehistoric bodies in Glob's *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* lay behind many of Heaney's bog bodies, giving these poems an ekphrastic element.

culpability to the reader's analysis. But it rings at least a little false, necessarily, when it is placed in a poem that next does move to criticize—however haltingly and obliquely—the obscene cruelties taking place in Northern Ireland (the women “cauled in tar,/[weeping] by the railings” [43-4]). Heaney is not silent, though his speech act *is* delayed. The speaker is “I who have stood dumb” (41); that is, he was “dumb,” but now is not. The question of utterance is so clearly fraught, here, that it ends up giving a certain extra weight to the particular way in which the poem's content is eventually articulated.

Much of this question of articulation is a question of philology. “Punishment” is etymologically complicated. The poem contains only one word that is Irish in origin, but that word is central: “bog” (10). Much of the poem's vocabulary, nouns especially, is of Old English or Germanic origin. There is “neck” (3) “wind” (3), “beads” (6), “ribs” (8), “stone” (11), “bone” (20), “oak” (20), “ring” (24), “love” (26) and “dumb” (41); the list goes on. In this case, Germanic language is used to narrate the prehistoric Germanic past. The Latinate vocabulary is sparse at first, but it increases as the poem goes on (“amber” [6], “adulteress” [27], “voyeur” [36], “muscles” [39]). The two traditions begin to commingle. The last two stanzas are a confession in a deeply Latinate mode:

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 (45-8)

The imagistic language of the previous stanzas is simple, Germanic and stark. In the poem's conclusion, though, Heaney lays out his moral struggle in more conceptual terms, and his

language becomes inexplicably tied to Old French, Anglo-Norman, Latin: “connive,” “civilized,” “outrage,” “tribal,” “intimate” and “revenge.” Still, the sentence hinges around the entirely Anglo-Saxon “yet understand” (from the Old English words *ȝet* and *understandan*). The choice of “understand” and its more visceral, Germanic connotations over the more conceptual, Latinate “comprehend” underscores the speaker’s deep, feeling-based knowledge of these violent acts and impulses.

These concluding lines of the poem rely on old distinctions that reveal the stratified nature of the English language itself. This division between Germanic and Latinate has its origins in the eleventh century Norman Conquest of England. The Germanic Old English of the conquered and the Latinate French of the new ruling class eventually evolved together into the English we know today.²⁹ In the words of Otto Jespersen, a word of Old English origin in Modern English “has the strongest associations with everything primitive, fundamental, popular, while the French word is often more formal, more polite, more refined and has a less strong hold on the emotional side of life” (Jespersen 91-2). Even in Heaney’s twentieth century poem, Latinate and Germanic tongues retain something of their stereotypical historical associations, the Latin with the conceptual, the Germanic with the earthy and physical. This could be read as a drawback to lexical resistance, at least in the English language. Old power structures are still noticeably at play in the way words connote, suggest, make meaning. The English language itself is today deeply and largely unconsciously partitioned. But the interplay between these two registers, such as demonstrated in the last stanza of “Punishment,” is far more complex than a simple established binary. The parts of speech in one register cannot help but act on parts of speech in a different register. The speaker can emotionally and viscerally “understand” this

²⁹ The English language, of course, cannot be reduced to this sort of binary system. But these two linguistic influences certainly have played the most significant role in the formation of Modern English as we know it.

revenge, though it can only be described by a fully Latinate sequence of adjectives (“exact,” “tribal” and “intimate”). Communication of this specific feeling in English requires a complicated interdependence between the Latinate and the Germanic.

Conclusion

Michael Molino argues that *Wintering Out* is an opportunity for Heaney to “[unleash] the linguistic diversity of the Irish English language in his poems” (83). *North* is also concerned with “linguistic diversity,” but its specific focus on disrupting or redirecting the English language and its traditions creates very different results. The reterritorialization in *Wintering Out* becomes deterritorialization in *North*. The latter collection’s attempts at subversion can be classed loosely in two groups. Poems like “Strange Fruit” and “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” are politically pointed in the way they interrogate modern English poetic conventions. Poems like “Belderg” and “North” work differently, but equally subversively, in the way that they detemporalize modern English, break down the Irish/English binary, and conceptualize a borderless language. Doing this sets Heaney apart from his contemporaries, who are often more focused on language appropriation than decentralization.

When Heaney’s poems do point to a borderless language, they do so working within English itself. This is akin to “opening up an impossible path, leaving the road, escaping, giving [himself] the slip” (66), as Derrida suggests. It is an attempt at a “becoming-minor” (Deleuze and Guattari 26). It is an attempt to work within a given language, but to turn it away from itself or turn it against itself.³⁰ Heaney operates in English while revealing the complexities of the language, showcasing its disunity and stratifications. It is an expression of dissatisfaction with

³⁰ Derrida emphasizes the former, Deleuze and Guattari the latter.

major language, language's role in oppressive power structures, that is not uncommon in the twentieth century.

However, *North's* particular solution to the problem of official language and English poetics is unusual. Deleuze and Guattari declare that the lexical is of little importance. Derrida's monolanguage, meanwhile, has no words at all; it is beyond them, or behind them. Heaney's monolanguage, on the other hand, is nothing but words. The poet posits a functional, open language that relies on the materiality of language itself. This is in some sense a modest claim. His poetic language subverts English not to reach an abstract and ultimately unachievable language ideal, but to conceptualize world language, a world lexicon, as a type of monolanguage in and of itself. This is a "word-hoard" ("North" 34), a "world-tree of balanced stones" ("Belderg" 43). It is discoverable through profound meditation on word, sound, letter-combinations, definitions and origins. It is a way to treat English not as an edifice or a language of power, but as an unstable, decentralized entity that is connected to all other language.

North sees Heaney at an important juncture in his poetic career, as both the poet and his critics have signaled. David-Antoine Williams remarks that after this volume the poet develops a "connective, incorporative, allusive style," a style less spare and insular, a poetry more aware of and interested in global culture (118). Although writing a narrative of Heaney's career is a complicated venture, I argue that this "connective, incorporative" later style does have its roots in *North*. The work accomplished in this volume allows for this later linguistic, formal and thematic freedom. Of the language resistance indicated in this analysis, then, it is the less pointedly aggressive interest in linguistic openness and borderlessness that becomes the primary means of expression in Heaney's later poetry.

Heaney's *North* is a series of theorizations on and explorations of language and poetic tradition. It grapples with problems of literary language in Ireland, and employs Old English as a means to resolve some of these problems. In doing so, it foregrounds the word as a historical and material object, and proposes the idea of an open language that is decentralized and less connected to structures of power. Heaney involves the reader in this process by demonstrating reading strategies that can be employed to think about questions of linguistic inheritance. *North* directs the reader to "lie down/in the word-hoard" ("North" 29-30), to delve into vocabulary, delve into the past, and return with a freer understanding of language and history than before.

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