

SEAMUS HEANEY AND JOHN MONTAGUE: PLACE AND IDENTITY IN IRISH POETRY

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Abstract This present article is an account of the sense of place in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and John Montague. Each poet is approached through poems representative of a rural imaginary of boglands, potato drills, and bodies of water. The line of argument is sensitive to the numinous meanings Heaney and Montague imbue their natural worlds with, and the analysis focuses upon their rootedness and reliance on place for poetic inspiration. In Heaney's account, this is demonstrated with a nuanced and deliberative approach to poems that excavate the historical layerings of the bog while also tying this back to agricultural labor. This yields the source of Heaney's craft of writing, just as Montague constructs a sort of *ars poetica* through images of water. This is a brief and comprehensive analysis of both poets and the importance of regionalism in late twentieth-century Irish or Northern Irish poetry.

Keywords Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Irish poetry, place, identity.

Motto: "I never bade you go
To Moscow or to Rome,
Renounce that drudgery,
Call the Muses home."

(W. B. Yeats, "Those Images")
[on or before August 1937] 1938¹

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¹ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, Daniel Albright (ed.) (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1992), 366.

Places in Irish poetry have always been intertwined alongside the debate between nature and nurture, namely between the great force of nature or its hardships and the scene of life and livelihood. This is exceptionally striking throughout the history of Irish literature, where the same place can have positive and negative connotations.

In the following article, I will analyze the relationship between place and identity in some of the poems by Seamus Heaney and John Montague, whether they use it as a symbol for Ireland or their struggles as artists.

A poet that encompasses the definition of a national poet is Seamus Heaney, although he problematizes more the struggles of the North. Coming from Northern Ireland, Heaney endows this place with great depth and relevance for Heaney. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the title of one of his lectures from the 1970s is 'The Sense of Place'². In his volume *North* (1975), Heaney divides this region into two parts: one is related to the ancient civilizations of the north, with their distinct rituals, sacrifices, and language, and one that is more personal and intertextual, all described while employing a very rational, calculated and explicit language. *Wintering Out* (1972) includes bog poems where suffering predominates, elegiac poems celebrating identity, and references to the history of Belfast. *Door into the Dark* (1969) dabbles with the concept of home, which can mean different things, especially in adult relationships.

When defining the Irish landscape, Patrick Rafroidi admits that it "is limited horizontally on the surface, but not vertically in depth, for there is the bog, another of Heaney's obsessions, he tells us in an interview with James Randall."³ The poem that closes the volume *North* (1975) is entitled *Bogland* and is dedicated to the painter T. P. Flanagan. Instead of the American prairie that symbolizes violence, here we have the humble Irish land. The metaphors abound: the lakes are compared with a 'cyclops' eye,' there is close attention paid to the past, to 'the onced,' and the black butter that originated from the old ages is put in containers alongside animal skins. The idea behind such a powerfully descriptive scene is that the setting defined millions of years ago has the same history bearing ground: it will be with us forever, from immemorial times. In a way, it is also a way to connect with the more extensive historical events that took place in Europe, as Patrick Rafroidi puts it:

*"Bogland, in other words, not only brings depth into Seamus Heaney's landscape. It also adds to its width: North, as the collection of the name showed, ceased to be Northern Ireland alone to include Scandinavia as well, there are several ways of joining the European Community."*⁴

² Held at the Ulster Museum in January 1977. See: Patrick Rafroidi, *The sense of place in Seamus Heaney's poetry* (1987): <https://books.openedition.org/puc/201> (accessed on 20 January 2020).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Closely linked to the same theme, *Digging* from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) is about trying to discover the hidden, the roots, and the ancestry, making use of concrete imagery of objects that references the identity of the poet closely linked to that of the ground: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.” This also resembles Henrik Ibsen’s *The Miner* with the same imagery of looking into oneself to achieve greatness. Searching for the roots is synonymous with the poet’s task.

Another poem that touches upon this is *At a Potato Digging*, also from *Death of a Naturalist*. At the time, childhood memories and farming life were worth writing about. The Irish still relied on potatoes, one of the few vegetables that grew in Ireland. The first two stanzas are about the hardships of digging. The first one is an announcement of what happens every year, some introduction, familiarizing us with unwritten pagan mythology, where Mother Goddess – the black mother or the telluric goddess – is associated with nourishment. The second stanza surprises us by using the word ‘drills’ as a military word when describing a healthy crop in healthy colors. Potatoes are seen as ‘inflated pebbles’ and resemble human heads: ‘*Good smells exude from crumbled earth. / The rough bark of humus erupts / knots of potatoes (a clean birth).*’

The third stanza moves away from the healthy illustration of the harvest into an unsuccessful portrayal that can lead to death: the fingers go cold, and a morbid image is constructed into our minds. It looks like a season of harvest built on the suffering of many to keep others alive, as the line ‘Centuries / Of fear and homage to the famine God’ points out. The potatoes are seen as ‘live skulls’ (skeletons), ‘blind-eyed,’ and ‘blighted’ (the disease that kills potatoes), while the words ‘forty-five’ refer to the year of famine 1845. This type of hunger is from *illo tempore*, almost like a curse from the beginning of time (‘beaks of famine snipped at guts’). Even hope has died in this environment: ‘Hope rotted like a marrow,’ while the stinking smell is ever present: ‘and where potato diggers are / you still smell the running sore.’

The last stanza is optimistic about the modern times when you can eat while you harvest and no longer die from undernourishment. It also mocks the everyday people associated with ignorance, the phrase ‘faithless ground’ suggesting, as in the first part, that the worshippers of the ground are no longer faithful – it is simply about having good crops or not. In a circle, we return where we started.

John Montague is an impeccable writer who deals with the place of the Irish poet in society. Montague’s work belongs to the tradition of Irish poetry centered on locality, and he described this as a tradition rooted in the “agrarian problem.”

Having to outlive The Great Depression and live in his mother’s absence, John Montague found an escape in the landscape, especially in “[...] the drumlins, glens, and moorland of Tyrone.”⁵ His status as an immigrant became the subject of his first total volume of poetry, *Poisoned Lands* (1961).

⁵ Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P., 1985), 181.

John Montague emphasizes the link between living in a small country or culture and the sense of periphery: “To be always at the periphery of incident / Gave my childhood its Irish dimension; the drama of unevent,’ Montague observed in his 1993 sequence *Time in Armagh*.”⁶ Or, as Stan Smith admits, “[...] Montague found language itself a barely crossable frontier, the real periphery of the incident [...]”⁷

In the poem *The Water Carrier* from the volume *Poisoned Lands*, Montague plays with the theme of water and its mythology. He borrowed from Yates, especially in what regards the spring as a muse or the search for inspiration. The poem starts with the idea of habitude (“Twice daily I carried water from the spring, / Morning before leaving for school, and evening; [...]”) and underlines that the action of carrying water is repeatedly done, more like an automatism. The river’s path is a symbol for the memory used as matter. In his boyhood task of fetching water for the household and farm, the once little man uses two buckets for two types of water. The river and the pool are a place of abundance, as shown by the “heavy greenness fostered by water” and in the multitude of fish from the collection (“Minute fish flickered”). The image “Circling to fill” shows a circuit formed and shaped by water in nature and follows man’s journey searching for the gift of life.

The poem illustrates the route and the struggle of arriving at the two water sources. The quality of the first type of water is described as ‘rust-tinged’ and coming from “a broken drain pipe.” This corroded water evokes desacralization in the sense that corrosion has obtruded the purity of life and is no longer fecund, as the poet (the “One”) suggests in the “unpicked berries.” The second type of water is “spring water” and is taken up in a particular enamel bucket: “It ran so pure and cold, it fell / Like menacles of ice on the wrists.” The menacles are a motif for the power of nature and how natural phenomena, such as the coldness of the water, can be mesmerizing.

In the next scene, the poet hopes to stylize the scenery and, in this way, he distances himself from nature. The location is then compared to “the portrait of an Egyptian water-carrier” in describing a somewhat Parnassian style that praises objects in high spheres. Still, he returns to the ground of “memoried life” because the past is not a window for (re)creating monuments. As Dillon Johnston puts it, “the lyrics imply their own reluctance to stand as moments’ monuments.”⁸

Even more, Cave links Dinnseanchas, the lore of the place, a theme common both for modern and ancient Irish poetry, and what is honored in *The Water Carrier*: a journey into the self so one may weigh in the toll of the past and reconsider his relationship with the present while also granting value to the place of his childhood. The lore of the site is always present at the level of the psyche: “Evoking a sense of place often in Montague’s poems sets going a process of placing that has far-reaching ramifications about himself as man and poet, about

⁶ Stan Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland between Fantasy and History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, 191.

the Northern Irish sensibility, about being Irish and colonized with a culture and heritage known only through ruins and shards, about the workings of the imagination.”⁹

The relationship between place and identity in Irish poetry is deeply rooted in history and tradition, yet it can also be understood as a means to communicate the innermost difficulties an artist can go through.

⁹ Richard Allen Cave, “John Montague: Poetry of the Depersonalised Self,” in Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), 218.