

The Crisis of Identity

Floyd Collins, *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003)

The present volume is a direct outcome of the increasing attention paid to the notion of identity which is, at best, difficult to define. Seamus Heaney noted the problematic issue of Irish identity in a 1974 review of P. V. Glob's *The Mound People*: "In Ireland our sense of the past, our sense of the land and even our sense of identity are inextricably interwoven."¹ For the poet, a number of elements of identity are inseparable. His literary identity is bound up with his family's heritage of agricultural labour, his Catholic upbringing, and his cultural ancestry, including centuries of conflict with England, as well as decades of strife between Protestant and Catholic citizens.

Floyd Collins argues that, for a modern writer, the crisis of identity involves a continual struggle to find his own place within the community of the world and within the literary canon. That is why the study is based on the matter of identity, which is especially troublesome for Irish citizens, who must confront a cultural and historical legacy that includes both their relationship with England and the reality of political and sectarian strife in their homeland.

In interpreting the cultural crisis in twentieth-century Ireland, Collins argues that "it was often experienced as a conflict between the claims of tradition and modernity. It is not surprising, then, that identity has traditionally been a concern for Irish writers. Heaney cast himself as "an inner émigré" (18) in "Singing School," and whose speaker in "The Tollund Man" paradoxically finds himself as "lost, / Unhappy and at home" in Denmark as in Ireland. Like all contemporary Irish writers, Heaney must resolve for himself the competing claims of tradition and modernity, but he must also face the spectre of self-imposed exile, a repudiation of his own identity and the community to which he belongs.

The author uses very interesting examples in his analysis of the works of contemporary Irish poets to show how they confront a difficult literary ancestry as they explore the extremes of Yeats's Romanticism and Joyce's Modernism, Yeats's myth-making and Joyce's exile and repatriation, while simultaneously questioning themselves about identity.

This is a brilliant and well-researched study of Seamus Heaney's identity, which may not have been as profoundly influenced by experience. His poetry and prose express what may at best be termed a "sense of dividedness" (19). Like many postcolonial writers, he notes the presence of conflicting influences or origins: "the voice of my education," he

explains, “pulls in two directions, back through the political and cultural traumas of Ireland, and out towards the urgencies and experience of the world beyond it.”²

The author distinguishes Heaney’s encounter with Kavanagh’s work, which in one respect reinforced his identity, as the poet describes in an essay on Patrick Kavanagh, about the startling yet intimate experience of encountering his poems for the first time: “I was excited to find details of a life which I knew intimately – but which I had always considered to be below or beyond books – being presented in a book. . . . Potatoes with rime on them, guttery gaps, iced-over puddles being crunched, cows being milked, a child nicking the doorpost with a pen-knife, and so on. What was being experienced was not some hygienic and self-aware pleasure of the text but a primitive delight in finding world become word.”³

This experience marks the beginning of his own poetic identity: “I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading.”⁴ The obvious delight with which Heaney culls, rehearses, and savours the rich sensory detail of his verse is a sure indication of how indelibly the penknife re-inscribes his own experience. He suddenly apprehends the emblems of life through an abrupt nick that cuts to the roots of consciousness.

Seamus Heaney’s designation of Kavanagh as “an immediate literary

forebear, one whose example would facilitate or resolve his own crisis of identity” (20), is especially significant. Heaney credits Kavanagh with discovering “a new vein of consciousness in Irish poetry” (25). Both put aside the spade for the pen, but in doing so he refused the bucolic affectations: “Kavanagh’s proper idiom is free from intonations typical of the Revival poets. His imagination has not been tutored to ‘sweeten Ireland’s wrong,’ his ear has not been programmed to retrieve in English the lost music of verse in Irish. The ‘matter of Ireland,’ mythic, historical or literary, forms no significant part of his material. . . . Kavanagh forged not so much a conscience as a consciousness for the great majority of his countrymen, crossing the pieties of a rural Catholic sensibility with the *non serviam* of his original personality, raising the inhibited energies of a subculture to the power of a cultural resource.”⁵

In this way, the first three chapters focus on showing Heaney as the most famous Irish poet of his generation, with at least one volume, *North* (1975), selling well into the tens of thousands, his basic conception of the artist’s role contrasting sharply with the stern equestrian profile Yeats loved to project. This essay examines how the differences run far deeper, since Heaney “reproves Yeats for deliberately forging a pantheon of Anglo-Irish writers in which he conveniently includes himself” (26). The connection is

both specious and self-aggrandising, the epitome of the equestrian posture struck in the epitaph that Yeats composed a few years before his death: “Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by.” But Heaney’s most ardent censure is reserved for Yeats’s occult vision of history: “Why do we listen to this gullible aesthete rehearsing the delusions of an illiterate peasantry, this snobbish hanger-on in country houses mystifying the feudal facts of the class system, this charlatan patterning history and predicting the future by a mumbo-jumbo of geometry and Ptolemaic astronomy?”⁶

According to Collins, Heaney’s fundamental objection to Yeats stems from the latter’s Neo-Platonism. Kavanagh’s example validated Heaney’s profound sense of connectedness to the soil. However, the essay aims at examining the Ulster poet’s desire for an all-encompassing vision that went deeper than his agrarian roots.

In “Feeling into Words,” Heaney extracts a passage from Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to clarify his longing for a poetry “with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city.”⁷ But here Heaney deceives himself when he draws on Wordsworth: his motive and cue for “poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants” actually derives from James Joyce, according to Collins. As an extraordinarily

talented writer of middle-class origins and Catholic background, Joyce “provided a strong alternative to Yeats for two generations of Irish poets” (28). Although Joyce led an expatriate’s life in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris, he declared a year before the publication of *Ulysses* that he always wrote about Dublin, because if he could get to the heart of Dublin, he could get to the heart of all the cities of the world. Joyce believed that “he could achieve the requisite objectivity of the artist only by complete detachment from the life of the community: his “*non serviam*,” like Stephen Dedalus’s, included the ties of family, church, and state” (31). On the contrary, family life proves an integral part of Seamus Heaney’s early writing: nor is he prone to reject Catholicism or nationality outright. Born and raised in Derry, one of the six Unionist and predominantly Protestant countries in Northern Ireland, Heaney was obliged from the beginning to face a more complex milieu than his Dublin predecessor.

The conflict of origins occurs early in Heaney’s history, embodied in his family’s farm, located between Castledawson and Toome: “Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter’s house on the bog. Yet in spite of his Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and *bán* is the

Gaelic word for white. . . . In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster.”⁸

Heaney thus describes himself as “symbolically placed between the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experience, between ‘the demesne’ and ‘the bog,’ ”⁹ while he strives to assimilate his various influences – Kavanagh, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Hughes – even as he shapes an aesthetic identity uniquely his own. All this makes Collins come to the interesting conclusion that, indeed, more than most poets, Heaney’s poems “reflect a search for a personal and cultural identity” (32), an attempt to come to terms with his spiritual, historical and literary heritage, since “to acquire a singular identity through an achieved voice is the ultimate goal of every serious poet” (34). The author also suggests by drawing mainly on the most accomplished poems in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, that they “focus on the poet’s quest for identity in terms of personal, familial, and cultural experience” (42). Then, he reflects on the different conceptions of Heaney’s struggles in his early career to develop his own identity, seeking to understand and reconcile a number of conflicts both personal and cultural: “his own divergence from his family’s tradition or rural labor, the sense of dividedness between English and native influences in his own environment, divisiveness between Irish Protestants

and Catholics, and his reluctance to emulate without qualification the literary predecessors of his native land” (54).

In short, I found this book enriching, since it manages to unveil the complexity in Heaney’s ‘inability’ on a personal level to follow in his ancestors’ path as a rural labourer, which occasioned him certain feelings of guilt and discomfort about writing, as he acknowledged in 1981: “There is indeed some part of me that is entirely unimpressed by the activity, that doesn’t dislike it, but it’s the generations, I suppose, of rural ancestors – not illiterate, but not literary. They in me, or I through them, don’t give a damn.”¹⁰

Maria Antonia Alvarez

Notes

1. Seamus Heaney, “Land-Locked” (Review of *The Mound People* by P. V. Glob), *Irish Press* (1 June 1974), p. 6.
2. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1980), p. 35.
3. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1989), pp. 7–8.
4. *Preoccupations*, p. 37.
5. *Preoccupations*, pp. 115–6.
6. *Preoccupations*, p. 101.
7. *Preoccupations*, p. 41.
8. *Preoccupations*, p. 35.
9. *Preoccupations*, p. 35.
10. Seamus Heaney, “Interview by John Haffenden,” *Viewpoints* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 63.