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“The ground possessed and repossessed”: The Trope of the Feminized Land in Seamus
Heaney’s *North*

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Prague, 16 August 2021

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

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Abstract

The depiction of land as feminine is the fundamental concept of the trope of the feminized land. The trope has its origin in the female image of sovereignty which entered the Irish literary tradition as early as the medieval period and is tightly connected with the concept of sacral kingship. Since then, the female figure has been altered and adjusted, and appears in many forms – she is the old hag that transforms into a beautiful woman in the Uí Néill propaganda tract “Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin” (“The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón”), the vision in Aodhagán Ó Rathaille’s “Gile na Gile” (“The Glamoured”), and the sorrowful mother lamenting being abandoned by her children in Patrick Pearse’s “Mise Éire” (“Ireland”). This thesis focuses on how the trope of the feminized land has manifested itself in more recent Irish poetry.

Firstly, the historical development of the trope is delineated while paying attention to different modifications of the trope and how it mirrors changes in the political context. The second part of the thesis focuses on Seamus Heaney’s poetry collection *North* (1975), which has received wide critical attention mainly for its engagement with the Troubles. An analysis of the poems in which the feminized trope can be spotted is offered, which also illuminates the relationship between Heaney’s poetry and the politics and history of Ireland. The aim of this thesis is to offer a new perspective on Heaney’s poems by examining the parallels between the trope’s form in older texts and *North*, and importantly, by observing Heaney’s innovations and modifications of the trope. In three parts, Heaney’s complex metaphors are analyzed: “Antaeus”, “Hercules and Antaeus” and “Bone Dreams” are explored in the first subchapter, followed by a series of bog poems – “Come to the Bower”, “Bog Queen”, “Punishment”, and “Kinship”, which offer us the trope in its most archetypal form. The last subchapter focuses on the group of poems that feature mainly the traditional depiction of Ireland

as a ruined maid, fallen victim to rapacious England – “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, “Aisling”, “Act of Union” and “The Betrothal of Cavehill”.

In the third part, the thesis touches upon the feminist critique of Heaney’s poems, as the usage of the trope of the feminized land became a focus of many critics’ work, including Eavan Boland, Patricia Coughlan, or Edna Longley. The discussion of the feminist critique is accompanied by an overview of the various ways in which the trope is depicted in the works of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Bidy Jenkinson, and Eavan Boland.

Abstrakt

Zobrazení země jako ženské postavy je podstatou tropu feminizované země. Tento trop má kořeny v obrazu suverenity, který se v irské literární tradici objevil již ve středověku a úzce souvisí s posvátnou hodností krále. Od té doby byl tento trop upravován a přizpůsobován, a lze ho nalézt v mnoha různých formách. V propagandistickém traktu dynastie Uí Néill „Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin“ se nachází v podobě staré čarodějnice, která se promění v krásnou ženu, v básni Aodhagána Ó Rathaila „Gile na Gile“ se básníkovi žena zjevuje jako vize a v „Mise Éire“ od Patricka Pearse na sebe trop bere podobu smutné naříkající matky, kterou opustily její děti. Tato práce se zaměřuje na trop zobrazení země jako ženy v nedávné irské poezii.

Jako první se práce zabývá historickým vývojem tropu, ukazuje jeho různé modifikace a zkoumá, jakým způsobem tyto modifikace reflektují politické změny. Druhá část této práce se zaměřuje na sbírku poezie *North* (1975) od Seamuse Heaneyho, která se dočkala četné pozornosti kritiků zejména díky reflexi konfliktu v Severním Irsku. Dále se práce zabývá analýzou básní obsahujících trop zobrazení země jako ženy, a tím osvětluje vztah mezi Heaneyho poezií, politikou a historií Irska. Cílem této práce je nabídnout nový pohled na Heaneyho básně tím, že prozkoumává vztahy mezi formou tropu ve starších textech a sbírkou *North* a zejména pozoruje Heaneyho vlastní inovace a modifikace tropu. Heaneyho složité metafory jsou analyzovány ve třech oddílech: básně „Antaeus“, „Hercules and Antaeus“ a „Bone Dreams“ jsou zkoumány v první podkapitole, poté následuje série básní věnovaných tělům z bažin – „Come to the Bower“, „Bog Queen“, „Punishment“ a „Kinship“ – které ukazují Heaneyho charakteristické zpracování tropu. Jako poslední je představena skupina básní zabývajících se především tradičním zobrazením Irska jako zruinované panny, která se stala obětí Anglie coby násilníka – jedná se o básně „Ocean’s Love to Ireland“, „Aisling“, „Act of Union“ a „The Betrothal of Cavehill“.

Třetí část práce se dotýká feministické kritiky Heaneyho básní, jelikož na užití tropu zobrazení země jako ženy v irské literatuře se zaměřuje mnoho kritiků a kritiček, včetně Eavan Boland, Patricia Coughlan, či Edny Longley. Diskuze o feministické kritice je doprovázena přehledem různých způsobů jakým je trop zobrazen v básních Nualy Ní Dhomhnaill, Bidy Jenkinson, a Eavan Boland.

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction	8
2. The Historical Development of the Trope of the Feminized Land	10
2.1. From Sacredness to Moral Reprehensibility: Aspects of the Female Image of Sovereignty	10
2.2. Imagining the Land: The <i>Spéirbhean</i> of the Aisling Genre	17
2.3. Embodying the Sufferings of the Nation: The Trope of the Feminized Land in Irish Nationalist Rhetoric	22
3. Seamus Heaney’s <i>North</i>: An Analysis	27
3.1. Merging the Feminine and the Geographical: The Trope of the Feminized Land in “Antaeus”, “Hercules and Antaeus”, and “Bone Dreams”	27
3.2. The Dark-bowered Queen: Seamus Heaney’s Bog Poems	31
3.3. “As Ireland is backed to England”: The trope of the Feminized Land as a Ruined Maid	41
4. “Man’s Vision of Ireland”: <i>North</i> and the Trope of the Feminized Land in Feminist Discourse	47
5. Conclusion	56
6. Bibliography	59

1. Introduction

Seamus Heaney, born on 13 April 1939 at Mossabawn farm, was a Northern Irish poet, Nobel laureate, and one of the most acclaimed poets of his generation. Heaney's contribution to the canon of Irish literature is not limited to his own poems, but also encompasses translation. His translations of medieval poetry form a valuable body of work that extends through much of his career.¹ He was awarded the Whitbread Prize for the translation of the Old English poem "Beowulf", and continued to make "translations from classical material, from eastern European poetry, and from post-medieval poetry in Irish and Scots Gaelic".² Interestingly, his translations include works of the *aisling* genre, analyzed in this thesis – Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's "Gile na Gile" ("The Glamoured") and Brian Merriman's *Cúirt An Mheon-oíche* (*The Midnight Court*). His engagement with these works shows that he was acquainted with traditional themes in Irish literature, which he implemented in his own poetry.

Heaney's poetry collection *North* (1975) is divided into two halves which constitute, in Heaney's words, "two different types of utterance [...] – one symbolic, one explicit", and it is the symbolic part this thesis focuses on.³ Composed during an open conflict in Northern Ireland, *North* reflects the turbulent times as Heaney ventures into myth and history of violence to verbalize his own sense of the physical actuality around him, while using the trope of the feminized land. The trope appears in the majority of the poems of Part I and constitutes a fundamental element of Heaney's argument.

The symbolic part of *North* can be seen as a continuation of the work Heaney began in his third collection *Wintering Out* (1972), in which the influence of P. V. Glob's archaeological book *The Bog People* (1969) is already present, notably in "The Tollund Man" and "Nerthus".⁴ Heaney said that reading Glob's book was like opening a gate, and behind this

¹ Conor McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 1.

² McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry*, 1.

³ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), 54.

⁴ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 54.

gate, Heaney found his tool for comprehending contemporary violence and its cyclic nature.⁵ Importantly, Heaney's tendency to see land as feminine is obvious already in an earlier poetry collection *Door into the Dark* (1969), namely in "Rite of Spring" ("It cooled, we lifted her latch, / Her entrance was wet, and she came").⁶ There is a sexual element projected onto agricultural practices, which, as we will see, can also be found in *North*.⁷

This thesis thus begins with a chapter concerned with the historical development of the trope of the feminized land, and in doing so shows how Heaney uses various Irish topoi in *North*. The third chapter is focused on selected poems and contributes to a critical discourse of Heaney's poems by examining how Heaney forms his own trope of the feminized land, stressing his modifications and innovations. Finally, *North* is revisited through the prism of feminist critique in the fourth chapter, accompanied by a presentation of the different ways female Irish poets modified the trope of the feminized land themselves.

⁵ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2008), 157.

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 23.

⁷ Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 52.

2. The Historical Development of the Trope of the Feminized Land

2.1. From Sacredness to Moral Reprehensibility: Aspects of the Female Image of Sovereignty

In his essay “Feeling Into Words”, Seamus Heaney writes about “an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelar of the whole island” that can be called interchangeably as “Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman,[or] the Shan Van Vocht”.¹ But before she became the symbol of nationalistic rhetoric, she was the territorial goddess, the hag, or the transmogrified beautiful maiden bestowing sovereignty on future kings of the land, in all cases representing land or specifically Ireland. It has to be acknowledged at the beginning that the trope of the feminized land is not limited in its occurrence only to Irish literature, and can be found even in such significant works as Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale” in *Canterbury Tales*.² What is specific for early Irish writers is their “almost obsessive concern [...] with kingship”,³ and as Proinsias Mac Cana explains, it was especially in Ireland where the “divine image of sovereignty [was] visualised so clearly”.⁴ In Ireland, the intimate relationship between a female figure and land dates to pre-Christian times when the concept of kingship was already the prime societal institution in the land.⁵ What can be observed is how the deity of the feminized land continued to be used in Irish literary tradition and allegorically employed from the medieval period onwards.⁶

An aspect which appears in many tales dealing with the personified sovereignty is the transformation from an ugly/deranged woman into a sane beautiful one (the *cailleach*-

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 1978* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1984), 57.

² Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology: Tales of Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 246.

³ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, “The literature of medieval Ireland, 800–1200: from the Vikings to the Normans,” in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Volume I.*, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.), 48.

⁴ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1973), 94.

⁵ Máirín Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300–1900,” in *The Field Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. IV: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 251.

⁶ Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics,” 273.

spéirbhean transformation), which was possible only after engaging in a sexual act, and the subsequent bestowment of sovereignty onto a king. Hence to “gain possession of [the female] was to gain possession of the kingship”.⁷ As the examples in this subchapter show, writings dealing with the personified sovereignty are not wholly homogeneous as they omit and include different aspects, but are nevertheless based on the same theme. It has to be noted that the examples mentioned here are far from being exhaustive, but they do serve as a representation of the persistence of the trope of the feminized land, present the different modifications of the theme, and show links not only to Heaney’s poems but also to female Irish poets and their critique.

As it was already suggested, the personified sovereignty bestowed on a king after a conjugal act is a fundamental element in many tales as a great deal of Irish political writings utilize this theme. Because of the woman’s intimate connection with the land, the union secured the land’s prosperity, and sovereignty could be then bestowed upon the king. This sexual-political topography appears in the twelfth-century Uí Néill propaganda tract “Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin” (“The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón”) which promotes the right of the Uí Néill dynasty to rule Ireland. When looking for water, Niall Noígiallach encounters an ugly hag, *cailleach*, with “sickle of green teeth” and “nose crooked and hollow” who guards the well and will permit him to drink from it only after being given a kiss.⁸ After his brothers refuse to do so, Niall proclaims he will not only kiss her but also sleep with her. After the kiss, the hag is transformed into a *spéirbhean* (sky woman), a maiden more beautiful than any other. By their union, Niall is granted the water from the well and “the kingship and the dominion” which will “for ever abide” with him and his children.⁹ By following the pre-

⁷ Proinsias Mac Cana, “Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature,” *Etudes Celtiques* 7, no. 1 (1955): 76, https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1955_num_7_1_1274.

⁸ “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedóin,” *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903): 197, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltique24pari/page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁹ “The Adventures,” 201.

established pattern of personified sovereignty, “Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin” intends to set out the hierarchy of various Connacht royal lines with the Uí Néill kings being at its top.¹⁰

We can find other tales that preserve some of the aspects of the sovereignty myth, which attests to the deep-rootedness of the theme. Moreover, the two examples that will be mentioned partake in the *dinnseanchas* (“lore of places”) tradition, which explains in what way is the nature of the female figures inherently connected to the land. Heaney, in his essay “The Sense of Place”, says that the *dinnseanchas* genre is characterized by “poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology”, and this will be evident in the following texts.¹¹

In the first example, the ninth-century Old Irish text “Aided Cuanach meic Ailchini” (“The death of Cuanu mac Ailchini”) from the *Book of Leinster*, Mór’s identification with the land is hinted by the connection of her name to *Tigh Mhóire* (“the house of Mór”) located in Dunquin, Kerry.¹² Mór is presented in a state of “great derangement” which “was put upon her, so that she bound over the mound of the liss, so that it was not known to what place she went”.¹³ Similarly as in “Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin”, the sexual element plays an essential role in the narrative – she returns to sanity only after having intercourse with Fíngen mac Aeda, king of Cashel. This transition from mad woman to sane one is a modification of the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation. Furthermore, after the death of her husband, Mór goes to Cathal mac Finguine, king of Glendomain, and if Mór is accepted as a representation of the goddess “identified with Munster, [it] gives a true reflection of the succession to the southern kingship

¹⁰ Ni Mhaonaigh, “The literature of medieval Ireland,” 47.

¹¹ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 131.

¹² Cary A. Shay, *Of Mermaids and Others: An Introduction to the Poetry of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 131.

¹³ Mac Cana, “Aspects,” 78.

in the period which it depicts”.¹⁴ This evidently shows that the female figure does not have to be necessarily identified with Ireland, but can also represent a specific province.¹⁵

Later, the element of initial frenzy and the woman’s return to sanity is present in the eighteenth-century story of Mis, the daughter of Dáire Dóidgheal (or in other sources Dáire Mór), and king Feidhlimé’s harper Dubh Ruis, which appears in the form of poems and tales with alterations. The topographical origin of Mis’ name is explained by T. F. O’Rahilly followingly:

According to the Dindshenchas, the mountain-range Sliabh Mis, ‘Slieve Mis’, near Tralee, Co. Kerry, got its name from a fabulous Mis, who is described as daughter of Mairid mac Caireda [...]. In modern times we find allusion to other traditions concerning this lady Mis, in which, however, she is described as daughter, not of Mairid, but of Dáire¹⁶

By her connection to the mountain *Sliabh Mis* (“mountain of Mis”) Mis’ identification with the land is emphasized in the same manner as Mór’s.

Mis, after drinking the blood of her dead father, turned into an ill-looking woman and grew hair “so long that it used to sweep the ground behind her, and the nails of her fingernails and toes grew so much that she used to tear every human being or animal whom she would meet”.¹⁷ It is only after the coition with Dubh Ruis and his subsequent care Mis can begin to restore her reason, a narrative detail immediately reminiscent of “Aided Cuanach meic Ailchini”. More importantly, Brian Ó Cuív attests that the episode of the sexual intercourse is “especially noteworthy” and “presumably part of the early tradition”, that is the tradition of the sexual-political topography.¹⁸ Because of its psychological aspects, the tale is retold by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in her essay “Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of Psychic Transformation”. Ní Dhomhnaill has also alluded to the tale in her poetry, which will be explored in the fourth

¹⁴ Mac Cana, “Aspects,” 84.

¹⁵ Mac Cana, “Aspects,” 112.

¹⁶ T. F. O’Rahilly, “Lost Legends of Mis and Dubh Ruis,” *Celtica* 2 (1954): 382.

¹⁷ Brian Ó Cuív, “The romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis,” *Celtica* 2 (1954): 333.

¹⁸ Ó Cuív, “The romance,” 327.

chapter along with the poetic reworking of the tale by another Irish-language poet, Bidy Jenkinson.

Hitherto, the sexuality of the female figure representing land has been treated only within the limits of sovereignty, meaning that her sexual engagements were seen solely as the result of her symbolic status. It is therefore interesting to see that the plurality of her husbands and suitors, which is a logical consequence of the identification of the female with land, is in some cases treated as promiscuity and she suddenly becomes morally reprehensible. This reflects the struggle between Reformation and counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century. The “newly adopted political stance” of the Counter-Reformation writers

drew its sustenance from narrow intolerance, from an unrealistic expectation that the recent political losses of the Catholic Irish were about to be redressed, and from a belief that the forces that governed secular affairs were metaphysical and hence not governed by human calculation.¹⁹

Therefore, in Dáibhí Ó Bruadair’s “A bhéith na lúb” (“A Lady of the Plaited Hair”) the political dislocation is directly attributed to the personified Ireland.²⁰ He criticizes the “blue-eyed matron” for abandoning her native lovers – “son of Cumhall, / Fionn, the Fenian chief, along with Cú and Cairbre, / Youthful Féidhlim, Leaghaire, Conn the hundred-fighter”, for foreign men.²¹ The poet further scorns her promiscuity as he is hurt to “see her fertile, sloping mantle, / Trodden, trampled down by droves of fluffy Saxons”, clearly associating her with the land:

While trains of music sounded in the cloudy mansions,
Her grassy meadows fair, adorned with branching thickets,
Without defect or flaw beside the river-harbours;
Therefore is my tear constrained to flow, O stately darling,
Culm and condescending, yet so false and fickle.²²

She is still the personification of sovereignty, but she is judged for it.

¹⁹ Nicolas Canny, “The Formation of the Irish Mind: Politics and Gaelic Irish Literature, 1580–1750,” in *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, ed. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68.

²⁰ Canny, “The Formation,” 71.

²¹ David Ó Bruadair, “A bhéith na lúb,” in *Duanaire Dáibid Uí Bruadair: The poems of David Ó Bruadair*, ed. John C. MacErlean (Dublin: Ponsonby and Gibbs, 1910), 69.

²² Ó Bruadair, “A bhéith na lúb,” 69.

Returning once more to the *dinnseanchas* tales, it is important to mark that the initial association of a woman with the natural world is a result of her punishment for breaking a rule or performing a certain act. The exact date of the tales' composition is not known – they were possibly written in the 11th century, the first half of the 12th century, or in the 14th or 15th century.²³ In “Sinann”, a young woman, Sinann from the Tuatha Dé Danann, is pursuing “the mystical power of knowledge or poetic inspiration”.²⁴ But because such wisdom is reserved only for male poets, she is “overwhelmed” by the river and drowned.²⁵ Hence, the present day Shannon River is named after her. Similarly, Boánd, wife of Nechtán, goes to test a magic well's powers, a well that could be visited only by her husband and his three cupbearers, declaring that “it had no secret force which could shatter her form”.²⁶ In the same manner as Sinann, she breaks a certain rule and coalesces with the landscape.

There are many tales that follow this narrative pattern, but feature women punished for different reasons. For example, in “Duibhind”, druid and a poetess Dub, daughter of Rodub, grows jealous of her former husband's new wife Áide, daughter of Ochenn, so she chants “a sea-spell so that Áide [is drowned] with all her family”.²⁷ For this act she is “shattered” and falls into a pool, which is named after her: “whence *Dub-lind* is said”.²⁸ In “Loch Gile”, Gile, daughter of king Romra, rejects her suitor's proposal, and when he follows her to a well, he sees her having a bath and she dies “of shame and [finds] death in the well”.²⁹ After that, lough named after her is formed. Similar causality between shame and punishment occurs in Heaney's “Punishment”. Furthermore, Heaney's identification of women with the land is inseparable

²³ “The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindsenchas,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1870): 272, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltiqu15pari/page/272/mode/2up>.

²⁴ Sharon Paice Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion: A Study of Traditional Belief* (USA: McFarland & Company, 2012), 53, Kindle.

²⁵ “Sinann,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1870): 457, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltiqu15pari/page/456/mode/2up>.

²⁶ “Boánd,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1870): 315, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltiqu15pari/page/314/mode/2up>.

²⁷ “Duibhind,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1870): 326, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltiqu15pari/page/326/mode/2up>.

²⁸ “Duibhind,” 327.

²⁹ “Loch Gile,” *Revue Celtique* 16 (1870): 146, <https://archive.org/details/revueceltiqu16pari/page/146/mode/2up>.

from images of violence and death, mainly in his bog poems, and death is the means by which women become part of the landscape in the *dinnseanchas* tales mentioned above.

The trope of the feminized land has proved to be an essential element in Irish writings dealing with the concept of kingship. What can be concluded already at this point is that from the first instances, the trope is highly politicized and sexualized, and these two characteristics often reoccur in the subsequent forms of the trope, and also in *North*. In Heaney's poetry collection, the reader does not encounter any obsessiveness with kingship – instead, Heaney borrows several topoi from the medieval tradition and modifies the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation in “Bog Queen” and “Kinship”, and depicts the personified Ireland as morally reprehensible in “Punishment”. The sexual topography is then sustained by most of the poems analyzed in the third chapter. Additionally, there are similarities to the *dinnseanchas* tales.

2.2. Imagining the Land: The *Spéirbhean* of the Aisling Genre

One of the most popular poetry forms in the eighteenth century was the aisling or vision poem. When being questioned about “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, Seamus Heaney marks that the representation of England as an aggressive male and of Ireland as a passive female has a long Irish history “from the aisling to Yeats’s Cathleen”.³⁰ It is indeed true that the aisling genre altered the trope of the feminized land introducing the aforementioned concept of female Ireland and male England, followed by an even bigger politicization of the trope as it proved to be a useful tool for Irish nationalists: an element onto which political yearning could be projected.³¹ In the eighteenth-century, the trope of the feminized land started to be used in service to the Jacobite cause. Accordingly, the poems in question express the disagreement with the exile of the Stuart king and show loyalty to the Old or Young pretender, depending on the date of their composition. Therefore, the rightful spouse of personified Ireland was no longer an Irish lord, but a Stuart pretender.

The conquered land in the aisling genre “appeared under one of the Celtic appellations of Ireland, such as Éire, Éiru, Banba or Fódla”, and in the Jacobite folksong of the eighteenth century, Ireland was referred by vernacular names, such as Rosaleen or Róisín Dubh, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir, Síle Ní Ghadhra, or the Sean-Bhean Bhocht.³² Daniel Corkery in *The Hidden Ireland* describes in detail the pervasiveness of the genre with its center in Munster:

This new genre, the Aisling, or Vision poem, is the distinctive contribution of the period to the book of Irish literature.[...] There is no reckoning the number of aisling poems written in that century. I dare to say that if we had the complete works of every Munster poet who lived at any time from the middle of the century to its close, we would find that every one of them wrote at least one such poem.³³

³⁰ Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2008), 170.

³¹ Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics,” 273.

³² Daniela Theinová, “‘Letting in the Light of Laughter’: Traditional Iconic Images of the Feminized Land in the Hands of Contemporary Poets,” in *The Politics of Irish Writing*, ed. Kateřina Jenčová et al (Prague: Centre for Irish Studies, 2010), 178.

³³ Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1924), 126-128.

The works of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille should satisfactorily represent the genre and allow us to explore the typical features of aisling poems.

The turbulent times of Hanoverian Ireland are opposed by the hopeful stanzas calling for Stuart restoration, with Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's aisling poems observing in proximity the "changing political realities of the times".³⁴ In the early eighteenth-century poem "Gile na Gile" ("The Glamoured"), the *spéirbhean* (sky-woman) appears in the poet's dream in a form of a vision and bewails the Stuart prince, her rightful spouse. The physical features of the woman are accentuated, and instead of a hag who will be transformed after having coitus with the future king, Ó Rathaille offers a woman who is "beautiful everyway, in every feature [...]. Her hair is golden, pearly, gentle-tressed, and flows in wreathed, trembling layers to the ground".³⁵ Importantly, she is again morally reprehensible for lying with the "thick-witted boor" and "defiled", when she should be awaiting the "prince of her blood", the exiled Stuart.³⁶ The land is not only possessed, but also blamed for engaging with the colonizers and for that, portrayed as shameful and licentious:

Next thing I was taken and cruelly shackled in fetters
As the breasts of the maiden were groped by a thick-witted boor.

I tried then as hard as I could to make her hear truth.
How wrong she was to be linked to that Lazarus swine
When the pride of the pure Scottish stock, a prince of her blood,
Was ardent and eager to wed her and make her his bride.³⁷

The combination of praise and condemnation suggests an ambivalence of the poet towards the trope, but that is avoided in another Ó Rathaille's poem, "Mac an Cheannaí" ("The Redeemer's Son"), where the female figure has a firmly established role.

³⁴ Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage* (Ireland: Cork University Press, 1995), 60.

³⁵ Seamus Heaney, "The Glamoured," *Index on Censorship: A Voice for the Persecuted*, published August 30, 2013, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/08/seamus-heaney-1939-2013/>.

³⁶ Heaney, "The Glamoured".

³⁷ Heaney, "The Glamoured".

The flexibility of the trope allows it to be adjusted in accordance with the writers' argument, which in the case of the *aisling* genre is composed in a covert mode. In "Mac an Cheannaí", the title translates as the redeemer's son which quietly refers to the Stuart Pretender.³⁸ Ireland is positioned as a "maiden whose name was Éire" and presented as a martyr whose death reflects the Jacobites' disappointment with the lost hope for Spanish aid (allusion to the lost Spanish hope appears in Heaney's "Ocean's Love to Ireland" as well).³⁹ Using the feminized trope to delineate the struggles of the land allows Ó Rathaille to emphasize the desolate state through the description on a physical level – "Her face, her countenance, is dead/in weariness declining", with the ultimate resolution: her demise.⁴⁰ As the final lines of all the stanzas, except for the last one, repeat – Ireland will be saved only after the Stuart Pretender returns, but since the hope for Spanish aid disappeared, personified Ireland dies: "her body shook; she shrieked; / her soul departed in a leap. / Alas, that woman lifeless".⁴¹

The number of poems dedicated to the Stuarts composed in the eighteenth century provoked reactions in the form of poems ironizing the Jacobite pieties, the best known example being the opening passage of Brian Merriman's *Cúirt An Mheon-oíche* ("The Midnight Court"). Such overt parody of the *aisling* genre is principally the critique of the "inability to abandon Stuart hopes" as the Munster poets insisted in positioning Ireland into the role of a weeping woman awaiting the Stuart king, which was viewed by some as a "poetic disconnection from reality".⁴² That is to say that even after it was apparent that there was no hope for the Stuarts to regain their power after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, some of the Munster poets insisted otherwise in their poetry. What connects Heaney to these forms of *aisling* poems is that he does

³⁸ Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1981), 155.

³⁹ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, 155–157.

⁴⁰ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, 157.

⁴¹ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, 161.

⁴² William Mahon, "Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin's *Aisling* Parody: An Phis," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, ed. Mícheál Ó Flaithearta (Stockholm: Uppsala University Library, 2007), 127–128.

not imagine Ireland as being saved. Nevertheless, he does not ironicize the trope of the feminized land. Furthermore, he refers to Merriman's *Cúirt An Mheon-oíche* in "Aisling" and also in his debate about the feminist critique of male Irish poets for their treatment of femininity, which, together with Ní Dhomhnaill's and Jenkinson's satirical take on the aisling genre, will be further discussed.

Merriman's *Cúirt An Mheon-oíche* (1780) twists the aisling genre, and the dichotomy between the classical aisling and Brian Merriman's version lies in the reversal of its central aspect – instead of falling asleep and envisioning the eternally beautiful woman, the poet is having a nightmare where the woman is substituted by a "hefty menacing dangerwoman, / Bony and huge, a terrible hallion".⁴³ The central argument for restoring the prosperity of the land bypasses the traditional lament for the exiled Stuart and places the responsibility in the hands of the people, and this shift reflects the lost hope for Stuart restoration.⁴⁴ He further moves away from politics and talks about a fictional population crisis due to men's unwillingness to marry.

The identification of the land with a female figure in the aisling genre results not only from the trope's historically established position in political writings but also from the need for a covert mode of political writing, which was forced onto the writers by the circumstances of the time.⁴⁵ As already stressed in the first subchapter, the sexualization of the land is a formative element and is present in most of the trope's variations, but the hyper-politicization of the trope by the aisling genre is the result of its role as a medium carrying a political message for the people.⁴⁶ Even if different in their narrative details, the works demonstrate the main aspects of the aisling genre, which maintains the underlying tradition of female Ireland and adjusts it to

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, *The Midnight Verdict* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1993), 19.

⁴⁴ Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The Vision of Liberation in *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*," in *Folia Gadelica: Essays Presented to R. A. Breathnach*, ed. Pádraig de Brún et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 1983), 99.

⁴⁵ Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics," 273.

⁴⁶ Breandán Ó Buachalla, "An Aisling," interview by Antaine Ó Donnaille, *BBC Northern Ireland*, May 24, 2010, video, 2:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzA-VK9wpTg>.

contemporary context. We will encounter a number of these aspects in Heaney's "Ocean's Love to Ireland", "Aisling", "Act of Union", and "The Betrothal of Cavehill".

2.3. Embodying the Sufferings of the Nation: The Trope of the Feminized Land in Irish Nationalist Rhetoric

As evident from the preceding subchapters, the frequent use of the trope of the feminized land in Irish political discourse is undeniable. From the Gaelic *aisling* onwards, the trope was utilized by “almost every subsequent national movement of significance”,⁴⁷ and the period of Celtic revival saw a shift from the covert political message of the *aisling* genre to its overt and emphasized form using “myths, folklore, and symbols of long-suppressed Gaelic heritage” to express political views.⁴⁸ At this point, the identification of the female figure with the land is managed more abstractly: in nationalist rhetoric, she represents not only Ireland but the Irish nation as well. This junction of woman and nation appears highly problematic to Eavan Boland, and the female figures of nationalist rhetoric are further criticized in the feminist discourse. The trope continued to be used as “the chief agitprop of the nationalist rhetoric” and the intrinsic link between the trope and the awareness of national identity caused that one could not be imagined without the other.⁴⁹ The anti-British sentiment of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth-century literature shapes the trope of the feminized land, which results in the emergence of the “bereft girl pining for her exiled Stuart prince” under the new conditions of Irish nationalism.⁵⁰

Very frequently, in nationalist rhetoric, we can encounter the trope under the name *Róisín Dubh*, as she appears in different translations and reworkings of the eponymous sixteenth-century Irish-language song. The original love-lyric was primarily dedicated to the poet’s beloved and only in the later versions was *Róisín* modified into a representation of Ireland.⁵¹ One of the very striking translations of the lyric is James Clarence Mangan’s version

⁴⁷ Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics,” 275.

⁴⁸ Patricia L. Hagen, “‘We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime’: Eavan Boland’s Repossession of History,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 443, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/441657>.

⁴⁹ Theinová, “‘Letting in the Light of Laughter’,” 179.

⁵⁰ Matthew Campbell, “Poetry in English, 1830–1890: from Catholic emancipation to the fall of Parnell,” in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Volume I.*, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 525.

⁵¹ Ó Tuama, and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, 309.

with Róisín's anglicized name "Dark Rosaleen". By stressing the fragility of Rosaleen and presenting her as virginal Mangan makes clear that she is a victim and who the oppressor of the "flower of flowers" is, emphasizing the viciousness of the British.⁵² In a strong patriotic tone, Rosaleen is promised to reign again, and importantly, to reign alone – free of the British rule. The function of the urgent tone is to prompt the revival of the nationalist consensus after the death of Thomas Davis,⁵³ to mobilize the nation to save the delicate "virgin flower".⁵⁴ Rosaleen thus becomes the site of nationalistic dedications.

Whereas the image of Róisín Dubh is not that much different from the aisling beauty, the trope's form popularized during the Celtic revival shows more distinct features. No longer the hag or a beautiful sky-woman, the nationalist writers found a more fitting role for Ireland: that of a mother, poor old woman, and/or keening woman. Kathryn Conrad explains how "the image [...] became an iconic and 'authentic' representation of the suffering of Ireland to be comforted by the devotion of patriotic men".⁵⁵ As an introductory example of this kind of incarnation of the trope, it is desirable to explore Patrick Pearse's works. Prominently, he utilizes the junction of a motherly figure and a keening woman in his poem "Mise Éire". Not only is *Éire* Ireland in English translation, but it is the name of the Earth-mother identified with Ireland.⁵⁶ The woman is lamenting being abandoned by her children, her "own kin", and being left "in chains" of the British rule.⁵⁷ More than evidently, the modification of the trope is governed by anti-British sentiment, and depicting Ireland as a keening mother elicits action from the Irish. Identically in "An Bhean Chaointe" ("The Keening Woman"), Pearse presents the reinforced trope of the feminized land to express the urgency for Ireland to be saved by the

⁵² James Clarence Mangan, "Dark Rosaleen," in *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, ed. Patrick Crotty (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), 484.

⁵³ Campbell, "Poetry in English," 525.

⁵⁴ Mangan, "Dark Rosaleen," 484.

⁵⁵ Kathryn Conrad, "Keening the Nation: The Bean Chaointe, the Sean Bhean Bhocht and Women's Lament in Irish Nationalist Narrative," in *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspective*, ed. Patricia Coughlan (Dublin: Carysoft Press, 2008), 44.

⁵⁶ Mac Cana, "Aspects," 77.

⁵⁷ Louis de Paor, *Leabhar na hAthghabhála: Poems of Repossession* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2016), 35.

“next generation of politically active Irishmen”.⁵⁸ At this point, we can very well see how these writers view the distress caused by England as momentary. They are locating themselves in a transitional period which will lead to freedom, to better times. What Heaney suggests in *North* is the exact opposite, and he creates an almost claustrophobic atmosphere of never-ending, repetitive violence and suffering.

The trope of the feminized land appears across different genres, and drama is no exception. A pivotal play not only of the revival but also in terms of the representation of the trope in nationalist rhetoric is W. B. Yeats’ and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1903). Despite the small amount of textual traces within the Gaelic tradition of the name, the immortalized Caitlín Ní Uallacháin is one of the most recognizable among the symbols of Irish nationalism (which is also why we can encounter her persona in female Irish poets’ works).⁵⁹ Interestingly, in the play, two very familiar narrative details are echoed: firstly, the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation, and secondly, the depiction of Ireland as a promiscuous woman. Despite some scholars claiming that Cathleen embodies “mother/nation”, Conrad points out that the play neither explicitly nor implicitly indicates that she is a mother in any sense of the word, only that she “is a lover”.⁶⁰ Evoking the patriotic tone, Cathleen is said to be “an old woman [who] will once again walk like a ravishing young queen if only the young men are willing to die for her”.⁶¹ In other words, Ireland will prosper again only if saved by the young Irishmen. And so when Michael decides to abandon his soon-to-be wife, showing his dedication to the nationalist cause, the old woman is transmogrified: “Did you see an old woman going down the path [...] I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen”.⁶²

⁵⁸ Conrad, “Keening the Nation,” 49.

⁵⁹ Máirín Nic Eoin, “Secrets and Disguises? Caitlín Ní Uallacháin and Other Female Personages in Eighteenth Century Irish Political Poetry,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 11 (1996): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30070591>.

⁶⁰ Conrad, “Keening the Nation,” 45.

⁶¹ Declan Kiberd, “Literature and Politics,” in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Volume II.*, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15.

⁶² W. B. Yeats, “Cathleen ni Houlihan,” in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2010), 170.

Before Cathleen's transformation it can be noticed that even if not as explicitly as in previous examples the depiction of Ireland as a morally reprehensible woman echoes in the play, shown by the passage below. Conrad argues that Cathleen's portrayal as a seductive figure suggests that she might be blamed for Ireland being colonized, which places the trope in a different position: it is not only the poor old woman suffering on the account of the British, but a woman who is held accountable for it.⁶³ Therefore, when the British are criticized for taking the land and being the "strangers in the house", their presence is at the same time attributed to Cathleen's licentious behavior.⁶⁴ The following excerpt shows the list of the men who "died for love of [her]" and the basis on which she is accused of the aforementioned behavior:

There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow.⁶⁵

The reversal of the typical image of Ireland as a guiltless victim was already utilized by other writers and constructs yet another form of the trope. Heaney works with a similar concept in "Punishment" when he forms analogies to Catholic girls punished for associating with British soldiers. Still, Yeats' play is dominated by the patriotic tone as Cathleen calls for the young men of Ireland who "must give [her] all", and those that will sacrifice "shall be remembered for ever", which only affirms the trope's intended role as the catalyst of a change.⁶⁶

The symbolic power of the trope of the feminized land fluctuates throughout the centuries as different political agendas are projected onto it. Its perseverance demonstrates the attractiveness of the trope mainly in Irish political discourse, which perhaps can be attributed to the possibility of modifying the trope in accordance with different arguments in different stages of history. It is evident that there is not one sample variation of the trope, instead, it is

⁶³ Conrad, "Keening the Nation," 46.

⁶⁴ Yeats, "Cathleen," 162.

⁶⁵ Yeats, "Cathleen," 159–162.

⁶⁶ Yeats, "Cathleen," 167.

accustomed by writers, which makes the different forms idiosyncratic and, at the same time, interconnected by the basic concept of representation of land as a female figure. It can be seen how in *North*, Seamus Heaney leans against a tradition with a strongly asserted place in Irish literary history, and borrows parts of the different modifications of the trope and adjusts it to fit his argument.

3. Seamus Heaney's *North*: An Analysis

3.1. Merging the Feminine and the Geographical: The Trope of the Feminized Land in "Antaeus", "Hercules and Antaeus", and "Bone Dreams"

Since its publication in 1975, Seamus Heaney's poetry collection *North* has received wide critical attention. It is mainly Part I that sparked the discussion about Heaney's stance towards the Troubles, the validity of mythicizing past events as he persistently elaborates on the political through allusions and analogies to myths and European history, but also about the female body used as poetic material. Whereas some of the oldest forms of the trope of the feminized land had kings literally marrying the queen of sovereignty, Heaney's metaphor of personified land is often not as easily penetrable. The reader is at times presented only with subtle hints of the intrinsic relation between the land and a female figure, or even with the land described in feminine terms without its personification into a human being fully realized. Through elaborate syntax and diction Heaney carefully crafts what Dillon Johnston in some cases calls "porno-cartography" as the relationship between the poet and the trope grows more intimate, especially in bog poems.¹ The form of the trope in *North* is not unanimous, instead, it varies in its degree of transparency and the nature of its representation. That is to say, that the female figure does not always represent Ireland, or Northern Ireland, but also England, or simply the ground, but it always preserves the underlying tradition of female land.

The Antaeus myth opens and closes Part I of *North*. The first poem, "Antaeus", is structured as a monologue of Antaeus, a Greek mythological figure, whose strength is provided by his mother – the ground. Therefore, he can be defeated only if lifted off the ground and prevented from making contact with it.² The identification of land as a mother in "Antaeus" is carefully delineated by describing the ground in feminine terms: it "wombed" and "nurtured"

¹ Dillon Johnston, "Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 118.

² Seamus Deane, "Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold," in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 70.

him, which signals the maternal role of the ground.³ In the second poem, “Hercules and Antaeus”, a reversal occurs – it is not Antaeus but Hercules who is “feeding off the territory”.⁴

The political allegory in “Hercules and Antaeus” is built through references to mythological figures and Sitting Bull. The sixth stanza mentions Balor, who is an Irish mythological figure eventually defeated by invaders of Ireland.⁵ Furthermore, the poem is complicated by the introduction of Byrthnoth, an Anglo-Saxon mythological figure defeated by the Vikings, and Sitting Bull, “emblem of the American Indians”, who perished at the hands of white colonizers.⁶ This shows that the poem is concerned with the process of colonization in general rather than focusing only on Ireland being colonized. By grouping Antaeus with Balor, Byrthnoth, and Sitting Bull, the poem foreshadows Antaeus’ demise in the following stanza. The land has been destroyed by foreign presence – “the river-veins, the secret gullies / of [Antaeus’] strength / the hatching ground” can now be remembered only by elegists.⁷ The poem continues, telling us how Antaeus is lifted “out of his element”, that is from the ground, “into a dream of loss”.⁸ Hercules “lifts his arms / [...] lifts and banks Antaeus” leaving the dead land and “pap for the dispossessed” behind.⁹

The next poem that also associates land with a female figure is “Bone Dreams”. In it, Heaney returns to the roots of the English invasion of Ireland and elaborates not only on political or cultural consequences but also linguistic ones. The poem may remind the reader of Old English poetry by its sound and form, allusions to Bede¹⁰ or by the frequent use of kennings such as love-nest, dream-bower, or bone-house, which later in the text appears also in the original Old English form *ban-hus*, suggesting the invisible, intangible connection with the past

³ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 12.

⁴ Heaney, *North*, 52.

⁵ Henry Hart, “History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney’s ‘North’,” *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 409, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208411?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁶ Hart, “History, Myth and Apocalypse,” 409.

⁷ Heaney, *North*, 52–53.

⁸ Heaney, *North*, 52.

⁹ Heaney, *North*, 53.

¹⁰ Conor McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 4.

via language.¹¹ Part IV of the poem changes its direction and the poet does not succumb only “to the seductive pleasures of the invaders’ language” but also the landscape of the invader’s country and invites the reader to

Come back past
philology and kennings,
re-enter memory¹²

which separates the poet’s imagining of the language from the geographical images that follow, leaving “philology and kennings” behind.¹³

As the title suggests, the poet dreams of a body, with the dream slowly transitioning to an elaborate description of a sexual engagement. The poem is narrated through the poet “gazing on, and responding to, female victims”, which is sustained mainly by the following bog poems.¹⁴ The visual description of the woman’s body oscillates between topographical and bodily description hinting at how inseparable the feminine and the geographical in the poem is:

her knuckles’ paving,
the turning stiles

of the elbows,
the vallum of her brow
and the long wicket
of collar-bone,

subsequently moving to pace “the Hadrian’s Wall / of her shoulder, dreaming / of Maiden Castle”.¹⁵ As the locations indicate, Heaney reverses the familiar binary pattern and the personified land in “Bone Dreams” is not Ireland, but England. The topographic and anatomic descriptions come together when he describes himself as “scree” and the female body as “escarpment” imagining a sexual act which leads to his “hands, on the sunken / fosse of her

¹¹ Heather O’Donoghue, “Heaney, Beowulf and the Medieval Literature of the North,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 200.

¹² Heaney, *North*, 29.

¹³ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 133.

¹⁴ Neil Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide to Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 112.

¹⁵ Heaney, *North*, 30.

spine” moving towards the intimate parts of the female (“towards the passes”).¹⁶ The process of gazing upon the “bone”, “a skeleton”, and chiefly the engagement of the female in a sexual act with the male poet results in a hyper-sexualized depiction of the land. The “bone’s lair / is a love-nest / in the grass” where the poet continues to gaze upon the body.¹⁷ The view causes him to “ossify” himself, the phallic connotation of the word “ossify” heightening the erotic tone of the poem, and the poet turns into a “chalk giant”.¹⁸

“Bone Dreams” imagines consensual sex and shows a level of tenderness as the lovers “end up / cradling each other”, but this changes in the last part, when Heaney reworks his metaphor for England one more time.¹⁹ Finding himself in Devon, he finds “a dead mole”, who, he thought, would be “big-boned coulter” but instead it is “small and cold / as the thick of a chisel”.²⁰ This indicates a shift from a romantic relationship – at this point, Heaney imagines England defeated, figuratively turning into a dead animal. It is very clear that what dominates in “Bone Dreams” is Heaney’s approach to the political through sexual allusions. In addition, he reverses the traditional form of the trope by presenting England, not Ireland, as a woman. The representation of land as a woman’s body allows for visual descriptions and in the following bog poems, the tendency to describe the political in sexual terms is even more obvious.

¹⁶ Heaney, *North*, 29.

¹⁷ Heaney, *North*, 29.

¹⁸ Heaney, *North*, 29.

¹⁹ Heaney, *North*, 29.

²⁰ Heaney, *North*, 30.

3.2. The Dark-bowered Queen: Seamus Heaney's Bog Poems

An influential source of inspiration for *North* was undoubtedly Peter Glob's *The Bog People* (1969). Seeing pictures of the pitiful excavated bodies of men and women in the bogs of Jutland "blended in [Heaney's] mind with the atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles".²¹ In the bog poems, there is a prevailing effect of both obsessiveness and intimacy which results from the identification of the land with the female bodies.²² Heaney sees parallels between Irish republicanism and Iron Age society in the figure of "a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland".²³ Therefore, when trying to verbalize the violence of his times, Heaney uses the trope of the feminized land and the sexual topography hinted at in "Bone Dreams" is then fully realized. Blake Morrison interprets this as a manifestation of Heaney's "pure fascination" with the bog people and terms it "impure, sexual, necrophiliac".²⁴ Indeed, Heaney digs to the ground to find the female corpses, and the poet, lover, and the archaeologist amalgamate into one.

The first of the bog poems sequence has a suggestive title "Come to the Bower" which proposes an exploration of its twofold meaning. Firstly, the bower refers to the arbor of the goddess of fertility Nerthus, Mother Earth, to whom bodies of men were sacrificed, and who is directly connected to Cathleen ni Houlihan.²⁵ In Heaney's essay "Feeling into Words" he explains how a number of the bog bodies were "ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground" and when taken "in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan" he sees an identical "archetypal pattern".²⁶

²¹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 1978* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1984), 57-58.

²² Corcoran, *A Student's Guide*, 106.

²³ Karen Marguerite Moloney, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 3.

²⁴ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), 62.

²⁵ Peter Vilhelm Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* (USA: Cornell University Press, 1969), 78.

²⁶ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 57.

That is the pattern of bloody sacrifices that both the myth of Nerthus and “Irish political martyrdom” claimed.²⁷ Therefore, any victims of the Iron Age violence are immediately connected with those of the Troubles.

In “Come to the Bower” the female body is not only looked at as in “Bone Dreams”, but the medium that inspects it is the poet’s hands that forge “To where the dark-bowered queen, / Whom I unpin / Is waiting”, making the poem more intimate.²⁸ The queen’s “mark of a gorget in the flesh / Of her throat” emphasizes the violence with which the body was treated and is perhaps the same one that appears in another bog poem – “Punishment”.²⁹ The following stanzas foreshadow the sexual charge which will increase in the following bog poems, meaning that the poem functions more as an opening act delicately setting the mood. Still, the last stanza reveals the poet’s effort “to consummate his loving intercourse with the past, the land, Ireland”:³⁰

I reach past
The riverbed’s washed
Dream of gold to the bullion
Of her Venus bone.³¹

Similarly as the “spring water / Starts to rise around” the dark-bowered queen, which Neil Corcoran interprets as the stirring of revolution, the Easter Rising, “Come to the Bower” stirs the reader’s imagination and invites him to indulge in Heaney’s carefully crafted elaboration on the parallels between the past ritual violence and contemporary sectarian violence through the metaphor of personified land.³²

The bog body found on the Moira estate south of Belfast in 1781 offers, due to its similarity to Jutland bog bodies, a historical, rather than merely imaginative, connection

²⁷ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 113.

²⁸ Heaney, *North*, 31.

²⁹ Heaney, *North*, 31.

³⁰ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All The Realms of Whisper* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1988), 87.

³¹ Heaney, *North*, 31.

³² Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 113.

between Ireland and Jutland for “Bog Queen”.³³ The poem is also unique in its form: it is a monologue told from the perspective of personified Ireland, describing the woman’s stay in a bog and her gradual decay, until she rises “from the dark” in the last stanza, which is reminiscent of the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation. The queen tells the reader:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone.³⁴

She surrendered to the process, now waiting patiently like the queen in “Come to the Bower”, but as she proclaims, she was only hibernating, indicating her resurrection.

From the description of her surroundings, Heaney progresses with a graphic account of her body which “was braille / for the creeping influences”, suggesting it being touched, and with the sexual connotations of words like “groped” the familiar pattern of sexualizing the personified land appears. When Heaney attributes earthy qualities to the female body he does so in an especially elaborate manner: he uses geographical diction to describe it; she subdues to organic processes such as fermenting or growing carious. But the queen is also described in anatomical terms: “crock of the pelvis”, “my breasts”, “my thighs”, “my hair”. The figurative meaning is understandably of greater importance and that causes her to become “a geologic rather than a human phenomenon”.³⁵ The identification of the body with Ireland is also reinforced by her telling that she was “despoiled by the ‘peer’s wife’”.³⁶ Here Heaney introduces another reversal – instead of a male colonizer the poem presents a female figure. When the queen is reborn in the last stanza we can see it as an allusion to the emergence of the Irish Free State.³⁷ Heaney thus creates a complex metaphor combining, as per usual, the

³³ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 113.

³⁴ Heaney, *North*, 32.

³⁵ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana Press, 1998), 61.

³⁶ Daniel Xerri, *Seamus Heaney’s Early Work: Poetic Responsibility and the Troubles* (USA: Maunsel&Company, 2010) 62.

³⁷ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 86.

sexualizing woman's body, history, politics, and geography. As Neil Corcoran says: "'Bog Queen' is a kind of Kathleen ni Houlihan, a kind of Mother Ireland... a symbol for disaffected native resentment, biding its time underground".³⁸

In the context of *North*, it can be deduced that the force disrupting Ireland is that of England. The following lines, however, hold the Irish responsible as well. Ireland was "barbered / and stripped / by a turfcutter's spade" signaling that it was not only external forces that harmed Ireland, but also the Irish nation that veiled the queen's body before putting it in the bog afresh. The lamenting tone, however, shifts to a nearly violent one as the queen says

[...] I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank³⁹

suggesting that she "will rise triumphantly, or is finally born into the world to exact her vengeance", which bears a dark resemblance to the situation in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.⁴⁰

There are critics who liken "Bog Queen" to the aisling poems (Helen Vendler talks about "the reduced state of the vision in this renovation of the aisling poem",⁴¹ Edna Longley about a renewal of "that well-worn genre the aisling"⁴²), but the main difference between "Bog Queen" and traditional aisling poems is the nature of what Johnston calls "emotional center": there is no promise of "a radiant Ireland"⁴³ after the return of its rightful king.⁴⁴ Even though the trope bears similarities to its preceding forms, Heaney deconstructs and rebuilds it according to his own rules as his focus is to depict the violence of his times. As we will see later, Heaney does transform the aisling genre further, but in other poems.

³⁸ Johnston, "Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," 120.

³⁹ Heaney, *North*, 34.

⁴⁰ Xerri, *Seamus Heaney's Early Work*, 62.

⁴¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 63.

⁴² Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1986), 155.

⁴³ Johnston, "Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," 120.

⁴⁴ Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1924), 142.

One of the most controversial and provocative poems of *North* – “Punishment”, offers a highly explicit account of a wretched body found in Windeby. In this poem, the poet does not refer to the atrocities in Northern Ireland in general but instead creates an analogy to specific act: the punishing of Catholic girls in Northern Ireland by the IRA for socializing with British soldiers. The parallel between the Catholic girls who were publicly humiliated by having their head shaved and being tarred and feathered, and the “drowned body / in the bog” found in Windeby is not based on perceiving both punishments as fundamentally moral or political acts but as “ritual sacrifices demanded by the indigenous territorial numen”.⁴⁵ In the Iron Age, the tribal practice was of the adulterous woman having her “hair cut off in the presence of her relatives” and being “scourged out of the village” which Heaney views as part of that archetypal pattern of violence, and the analogy allows Heaney to bring the past to the present, a method consistent through the first part of *North*.⁴⁶ But before creating the link between the Iron Age cruelty and the violence in Northern Ireland, Heaney first needs a medium onto which the metaphors could be projected, and for this purpose, he uses the trope of the feminized land.

The girl in “Punishment” is killed, the reader learns, for committing adultery and is made a sister to those Catholic girls of Northern Ireland. She is a “Little adulteress”, and therefore morally reprehensible, which prompts the image of the women in Ó Rathaille’s and Ó Bruadair’s poems.⁴⁷ At the same time, Blake Morrison explains that the poem “involves an element of courtship”, which raises the question of whether the condemnation of the girl in the bog is the stance of the poet or a reflection of the consensus regarding the Catholic girls.⁴⁸ The bodily descriptions introduced at the very beginning dominate the whole poem and very quickly display the sexual charge of bog poems in general. The tone is sympathetic as the observer can feel “the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck”; watches how the wind “blows her

⁴⁵ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 70.

⁴⁶ Glob, *The Bog People*, 153.

⁴⁷ Heaney, *North*, 38.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 63.

nipples”.⁴⁹ The identification of the girl as land is not based merely on analogy to the preceding bog poems, but Heaney affirms her topographic status directly by simile: after having her head shaved she is “like a stubble of black corn”.⁵⁰ This connection between punishment, shame, and woman merging with the land is of similar nature as the one we saw in the *dinnseanchas* tales mentioned in chapter two. At this point, the images of a bog body, a Catholic girl, and land merge, and the poem embraces the body in sexual terms with the poet becoming “the artful voyeur”, which once more confirms the sexual tone so often criticized in feminist interpretations.⁵¹ He scans her body, watching how her nipples transform to “amber beads”, observing her “frail rigging / of her ribs”,⁵² and he finds “the ‘beautiful’ features [...] attractive”, which affirms the courtship element Morrison talks about.⁵³

The poem is interrupted by a change of the addressee of the poet when the eighth stanza refers to the girl in the second person saying the poet “almost love[s]” her, which attests to the “impure, sexual, necrophiliac” fascination with the personified bog bodies.⁵⁴ This is, however, immediately outweighed by his self-accusation: he would cast “the stones of silence”, being a mere onlooker to the events.⁵⁵ As already mentioned, by positioning the trope in a morally reprehensible position, the poem gives space for it to be interpreted in terms of Heaney’s ambiguous stance toward the atrocities in Northern Ireland. Heaney’s ambivalence lies in the fact that on the one hand, he feels for the victims, but on the other, he understands the “motives for judicial punishment”.⁵⁶ Heaney puts himself in a role of a bystander who observes the atrocities committed against the “betraying sisters”.⁵⁷ Patrick Crotty marks that the working

⁴⁹ Heaney, *North*, 37.

⁵⁰ Heaney, *North*, 37.

⁵¹ Heaney, *North*, 38.

⁵² Heaney, *North*, 37.

⁵³ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 63.

⁵⁴ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 63.

⁵⁵ Heaney, *North*, 38.

⁵⁶ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 64.

⁵⁷ Heaney, *North*, 38.

title “Shame” could be used to imply that the Catholic community should feel exactly that.⁵⁸ However, the final version of the title is much more intimate: it is the poet who admits to not only being a bystander of the violence but also to understand the punishment Catholic girls received for fraternizing with British soldiers.

Similar metaphorical complexity of linking the present with the past appears in the next bog poem “Kinship”. There is again the connection of the Troubles and the ritual murders of Iron Age Jutland, but a third element is added – the practices of Viking invaders.⁵⁹ The likeness of the past with contemporary sectarian atrocities in Northern Ireland is not expressed as clearly as in “Punishment”, instead, Heaney takes a detour to Glob’s thesis which states that bog bodies were “sacrificial victims, ritually executed as an offering to an ancient *Terra Mater*”. In the first-century AD *Germania* (to which “Kinship” frequently alludes), the Roman historian Tacitus identifies this goddess as Nerthus, the same Nerthus that Heaney resurrects in his poem “Come to the Bower”.⁶⁰

Similarly as in “Punishment”, the poet is observing a bog body and marks a connection between him and “the strangled victim”.⁶¹ There are the sexual allusions of “soft lips”, “love-nest” (as in “Bone Dreams”), “bearded cairn”, or the phallic “shaft wettish” that digs deeper into the ground in metaphors that imagine farming as coitus.⁶² There is also the implication of one taking off his clothing: “ground that will strip / its dark side”, further continuing to explore the sexual topography of preceding poems while clearly identifying the body as land.⁶³ The poet again expresses his fondness of “insatiable bride” who “lie in waiting for an awakening kiss”,⁶⁴ and Parker explains the imaginative coition between the poet and his land as an effort

⁵⁸ Patrick Crotty, “The Context of Heaney’s Reception,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 106.

⁶⁰ O’Donoghue, “*Heaney, Beowulf and the Medieval*,” 196.

⁶¹ Heaney, *North*, 40.

⁶² Heaney, *North*, 40–42.

⁶³ Fran Brearton, “Heaney and the Feminine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 85.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 62.

to “bring about the political and cultural repossession of Ireland after centuries of English occupation”.⁶⁵ After the episode describing the sexual engagement, the ground is transmogrified and the poet is “facing a goddess”.⁶⁶ Such change in appearance is again reminiscent of the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation.

In the sixth part, Tacitus is directly addressed and invited to observe the victims of twentieth-century violence, their “mother ground” which is covered in the blood of those who protected the land, and see how they “shave the heads / of the notorious” revisiting the Catholic girls of “Punishment”.⁶⁷ He is invited to

Come back to this
‘island of the ocean’
where nothing will suffice.
Read the inhumed faces

of casualty of victim;
report us fairly,
how we slaughter
for the common good⁶⁸

The third stanza alludes to “Easter 1916” and Heaney responds to the question posed by Yeats – “O when may it suffice?”⁶⁹ grimly “nothing will suffice”⁷⁰ and this “nothing” includes the slaughter carried on in Northern Ireland.⁷¹ Heaney imagines Northern Ireland as a place where violence is cyclic and atavistic. As treats the violence via myths, he is according to critics like Ciaran Carson or David Lloyd guilty “of mystifying violence, of replacing history with mythology and of positing a view that bloodshed and sacrifice are part of the order of things, and thus understandable”.⁷² But perhaps it should be acknowledged that turning to myth is a way how to verbalize the violence in Northern Ireland, a strategy which Eugene O’Brien sees

⁶⁵ Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 139.

⁶⁶ Heaney, *North*, 42.

⁶⁷ Heaney, *North*, 45.

⁶⁸ Heaney, *North*, 45.

⁶⁹ Xerri, *Seamus Heaney’s Early Work*, 67.

⁷⁰ Heaney, *North*, 45.

⁷¹ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 119.

⁷² Xerri, *Seamus Heaney’s Early Work*, 67.

as a “multiperspectival voicing of what motivates people to kill each other in Northern Ireland”.⁷³ And in cases like this, it is necessary to look at *North* as a whole: Heaney sees it as imperative not to replace the past but to “define and interpret the present by bringing it into a significant relationship with the past”, which is the role assigned to Part I. of *North*.⁷⁴ It is an intersection of the mythical, the sexual, historical, and the political, which allows the poet to comment on the Troubles at a distance. He then traverses to Part II and makes several political statements in proximity.

What triggered a further discussion about Heaney being an apologist for the atrocities of Northern Ireland is the last two stanzas:

how we slaughter
for the common good

and shave the heads
of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror.⁷⁵

The ambivalence towards paramilitary activities we witnessed in “Punishment” is now again present and Morrison accounts that “at such moments, like it or not, [Heaney’s] poetry grants sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability [...]: precedent becomes, if not justification, then at least ‘explanation’”, and he does not see any “civilized irony” in it”.⁷⁶ Corcoran, on the other hand, sees the irony (that Morrison dismissed) in the perception of violence as repetitive: to present Northern Ireland, “ideal of civility, the *res publica*” as the place of continuous barbarity, of slaughter, is indeed ironic.⁷⁷ Furthermore, to “slaughter / for the common good” is in itself ironic.⁷⁸

⁷³ Eugene O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney: Searches for Answers* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 189.

⁷⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 60.

⁷⁵ Heaney, *North*, 45.

⁷⁶ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 68.

⁷⁷ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 119.

⁷⁸ Heaney, *North*, 45.

As Heaney proclaims in the first poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests, snug as a gun ... / I’ll dig with it” he quite literally does so in the bog poems: he digs into the bog, into history, and brings past to the present.⁷⁹ The bog symbolizes the nexus of sexuality and carnality, of present and past which needs to be reinscribed to avoid fossilization.⁸⁰ As Vendler points out: “something of the past is always preserved, and is always ready to be rediscovered”.⁸¹ The process of rediscovering the past and linking it to the atrocities of the Troubles brought “the sense of terror, oppression, suffering into images” and these images often merge with those of female bodies.⁸² The trope of the feminized land allows Heaney to verbalize the violence of Northern Ireland as well as create powerful images that help to form an argument that lies hidden beneath them ready to be dug out. The feminine aspect is an inseparable part of Heaney’s poetic vision. These poems also exemplify the archetypal form of the trope – Heaney’s personified land is not only characterized by its geological status, but also by the link to Iron Age society which serves to interpret contemporary sectarian violence through past ritual violence. It is also marked by its detailed description of the female body resulting in a necrophiliac obsession, as noted by critics.

⁷⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 4.

⁸⁰ Xerri, *Seamus Heaney’s Early Work*, 23.

⁸¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 64).

⁸² Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 125,

3.3. “As Ireland is backed to England”: The trope of the Feminized Land as a Ruined Maid

The most obvious identification of land with a female figure appears in *North* when Heaney comments on Anglo-Irish relations and specifically, on the colonization of Ireland. The trope of the feminized land allows Heaney to present his argument from a different perspective and to fit the complex political situations into a single metaphor, that of rape. Borrowing the concept of the *aisling* genre, Heaney situates female Ireland into the role of the oppressed and male England to that of the oppressor. However, unlike the *aisling* poems, neither “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” or “Act of Union” strive to convey a secret political message, they rather very openly express the anti-British sentiment, and there is no “rightful spouse”, no Stuart Pretender, whom the female Ireland awaits. Heaney approaches the “possessed and repossessed” land once more, combining the sexual, the political, and the geographical to articulate his thesis.⁸³

The title alluding to Walter Raleigh’s “Ocean’s Love to Cynthia” – “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” instantly evokes “an intricate nexus of politics, literature and sexuality” and is the first of *North* poems that directly revisits the typical paradigm of *aisling* poems of Ireland as a maid enthralled by England:⁸⁴

Speaking broad Devonshire,
Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree
As Ireland is backed to England⁸⁵

Despite the word ‘love’ in the poem’s title, it does not introduce any lyrical love affair and the lovers won’t “end up / cradling each other” as in “Bone Dreams”.⁸⁶ Instead, the poet equals colonialism to rape and further describes the political conquest in sexual terms. Despite the sexual driving “inland” to Ireland, Raleigh’s allegiance belongs to Elizabeth I, to England, with

⁸³ Heaney, *North*, 47.

⁸⁴ Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800 – 2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 133.

⁸⁵ Heaney, *North*, 46.

⁸⁶ Heaney, *North*, 29.

the loyalty being described in phallic terms: “Yet his superb crest inclines to Cynthia”.⁸⁷ The poem culminates when it returns to the events of the Smerwick massacre in Co. Kerry in 1580 and to comment on the terror of the event the poem uses a quotation from Lord Grey’s account of the event:

Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses
Of six hundred papists, ‘as gallant and good
Personages as ever where beheld’.⁸⁸

After this defeat, the poet imagines the feminized land as the “ruined maid” who “complains in Irish” because the “Ocean has scattered her dream of fleets”.⁸⁹ Her hopelessness is emphasized by the reference to the *aisling* as a genre and specifically to Ó Rathaille’s “Mac an Cheannaí” that imagines the maiden’s death as a symbol of lost hope for the Spanish help.

The fact that England is represented by “Sweesir” Walter Raleigh does not only reflect his involvement in the colonization of Ireland, but given his occupation as a writer, it suggests that Ireland is overrun not only by English occupying forces but by iambic pentameters as well.⁹⁰ Therefore, besides creating an allegory of the land’s possession, Heaney explores the linguistic and literary conquest, revisiting the “cultural and linguistic violence” of “Bone Dreams”.⁹¹

According to Justin Quinn, the following poem, “Aisling”, serves to “bolster the tired political and gender identifications of ‘Ocean’s Love [to Ireland]’”.⁹² The poem is very brief, and yet, it offers a number of interpretations. With its reference to the Munster genre, “Aisling” is predetermined to evoke the binary pattern of the *aisling* poems. It should be therefore assumed that the male Actaeon is personified England, and Ireland once again takes the role of a woman – Diana. Actaeon’s courting “With a decadent sweet art” can be seen as a poet’s wooing

⁸⁷ Heaney, *North*, 46.

⁸⁸ Heaney, *North*, 47.

⁸⁹ Heaney, *North*, 47.

⁹⁰ Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 133.

⁹¹ Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 133

⁹² Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 133.

the *spéirbhean*.⁹³ However, the brief account of the myth proposes a question of the validity of these associations:

‘Are you Diana...?’
And was he Actaeon,
His high lament
The stag’s exhausted belling?⁹⁴

It suggests that England awaits the same fate as Actaeon, who upon enraging the goddess of the hunt Diana (also identified as Artemis) was punished by being transformed into a stag and killed. Therefore, the poem reveals the possibility of Ireland being England’s demise without confirming it for certain. It is also possible to see a similarity to Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt An Mheon-oíche*: in *Cúirt*, the poet is about to be tortured by the menacing woman, escaping only by waking up from his nightmare, hence avoiding Actaeon’s fate.

The metaphor of rape introduced by “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” is further extended by “Act of Union”, where the poet moves to a different period in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. The title of the poem refers to England’s response to the 1798 rebellion – The Act of Union of 1800, which joined together the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.⁹⁵ The poem originally appeared in a form of four sonnets named “A New Life”, but was subsequently cut short and changed its focus to the “destructiveness of the union”.⁹⁶ In this poem, Heaney introduces two merged voices: one of a husband talking to his pregnant wife and of England – the union being not only the one between a man and a woman but also a political congress.⁹⁷

Further employing the sexual-political topography of the preceding poems, “Act of Union” is the most explicit in both the bodily description of woman/Ireland and the political message of the trope. The beginning of the narrative is reminiscent of those bog poems with its “bog-burst” and “ferny bed”, but as it progresses, the reader is made aware of its

⁹³ Heaney, *North*, 48.

⁹⁴ Heaney, *North*, 48.

⁹⁵ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 121.

⁹⁶ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 66.

⁹⁷ Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 133.

interconnectedness with “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” because it is concerned with England’s occupation. The poem speaks directly to Ireland admiring its body, combining anatomic and geographic description:

Your back is a firm line of eastern coast
And arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills[...]⁹⁸

It extends the imagined rape of the “ruined maid” of the preceding poem to articulate the consequences of the assault. It is interesting to witness the poem speaking through the voice of the oppressor while maintaining the condemnable stance towards England. That is achieved by its confessional tone when the poem describes the wrongdoings Ireland faced. England is “the tall kingdom” emphasizing its dominance, it is “imperially / Male” leaving Ireland

[...] with pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.⁹⁹

Moreover, impregnating the female Ireland England leaves its body “raw, like opened ground” explicitly linking the female figure to land by a simile.¹⁰⁰ Heaney fully exploits the trope of the feminized land by allowing it to be capable of reproduction and introduces another element – the birth of a child: out of England’s oppression “sprouted an obstinate fifth column”.¹⁰¹ The critical debate that formed around the nature of “the fifth column” had not resulted in unanimous interpretation, with the larger number of critics tending towards it being a reference to Protestant paramilitaries, which was later substantiated by Heaney when he said that the product of the union is “wee ‘no surrender’ Ulster”.¹⁰² What is indisputable is that the poem sees the Act of Union as the initiating force which lead to the Troubles,¹⁰³ and as Parker summarizes:

⁹⁸ Heaney, *North*, 49.

⁹⁹ Heaney, *North*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Heaney, *North*, 50.

¹⁰¹ Heaney, *North*, 49.

¹⁰² Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2008), 169.

¹⁰³ Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide*, 121.

“the wounds created by the Act of Union will always remain ‘raw’ in the Irish consciousness”.¹⁰⁴

In “The Betrothal of Cavehill”, Heaney utilizes the feminine aspect of the land once more and returns to those subtle nuances to only hint at the metaphor. The poet is driving “Among [his] love’s hideouts, her pods and broom”, him being the bridegroom, gently ascribing earthy adjectives to his love. But there is a new element that disturbs the femininity of the land. The “profiled basalt”, part of the land, is “proud, protestant and northern, and male / Adam untouched”¹⁰⁵ which represents “the culturally masculine intransigence of northern Protestantism”.¹⁰⁶ Further, Patricia Coughlan proposes two more possible identifications of the bridegroom: “an IRA man on the run and living rough in the countryside, or as the rock itself ‘marrying’ the prone land it surveys so dominantly”.¹⁰⁷ By extension, it can also be the male sacrifice for the mother ground returning to the Nerthus myth. Without further elaborations, the poem’s brief account encloses with a fire from the phallic “ritual gun” emphasizing the male presence.¹⁰⁸ The poem does not offer a definite denouement, and so Coughlan satirically proposes a Utopian ending when “all (males) may merge their differences in a general bedding down in the (female) land”.¹⁰⁹ “The Betrothal of Cavehill” does not sustain the pervasive force of the trope of the feminized land as the preceding poems, it only echoes its essence.

It is not surprising that during such tumultuous times the metaphor of rape offered an attractive poetic material for returning to the past and stressing the rapacity of Britain as the colonizer. It has been shown that the predominant effect of the trope of the feminized land is not merely ornamental, but it often functions as a focal point of the poems, and especially in

¹⁰⁴ Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 144.

¹⁰⁵ Heaney, *North*, 51.

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Coughlan, “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 199.

¹⁰⁷ Coughlan, “Bog Queens,” 199.

¹⁰⁸ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 102.

¹⁰⁹ Coughlan, “Bog Queens,” 199.

“Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, “Aisling”, and “Act of Union” the trope functions as a cohesive tie. The poems’ erotic charge resulting from the sexualization of the land is the most obvious link to works discussed in the previous chapter, but it can also be seen how *North* reflects the older texts by incorporating the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation; the aisling genre with its binary paradigm of raped Ireland and rapturous England; the *dinnseanchas* tales as Heaney’s women are victims who coalesce with the landscape; the nationalistic rhetoric by Heaney’s preoccupation with Anglo-Irish relations with the personified land taking on herself the sufferings of the Irish nation.

4. “Man’s Vision of Ireland”: *North* and the Trope of the Feminized Land in Feminist Discourse

In Irish literary studies, the feminist approach to literature forced “reconsiderations of gender representation in the work of established Irish writers” including Seamus Heaney.¹ In a 2002 interview, Heaney talks about these kinds of reconsiderations and further debates feminist critique and its impact on Irish literature. When discussing Brian Merriman’s “The Midnight Court”, which has received positive feedback for its depiction of femininity, Heaney says that Merriman “was surely something of a progressive when it came to the representation of women”, therefore he should be spared “the common feminist castigation of Irish men poets for representing women (and Ireland) in the passive, submissive roles of maiden and mother”.² It is interesting to see that Heaney views Merriman’s poem as progressive and yet, in his own work, he returns to the old ways of depicting femininity – as observed in the previous chapter, the poems “Bone Dreams”, “Bog Queen”, “Come to the Bower”, “Punishment”, “Kinship”, “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, and “Act of Union” are all characterized by sexual topography. Despite the trope not being exclusive to Heaney’s poetry in the 20th century, his work and the representation of women’s bodies in it draw the attention of many critics, which is accompanied by his own commentary on the issue. As Patricia Boyle Haberstroh says upon reading Heaney’s *Field Work* (1976), the collection conveys “man’s vision of Ireland”, a vision that reverberates in *North*.³ The depiction of women’s bodies was not only reconsidered within critical essays, but also within poetic works which follow the line of subversion of the trope but are different in their deliberate focus on the role of female figures. One of the reasons of the rising prominence of female Irish poets in the last three decades of the twentieth century was the

¹ Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800 – 2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 161.

² Patricia Coughlan, “‘The Whole Strange Growth’: Heaney, Orpheus and women,” *The Irish Review*, no. 35 (Summer 2007): 32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29736318>.

³ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996), 1.

deconstruction of the figuration of the land as a woman – they felt that they needed “to take a stance on the [...] trope as they attempted to form a poetic identity”.⁴ The methods used to dismantle the trope of the feminized land are exemplified in this chapter by works of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Bidy Jenkinson. In many cases, the analysis is limited by the necessity of dealing with their poems in English translation or secondary sources. However, these poems merit to be included for their contrast to Heaney’s poetry. For a complete study of contemporary female Irish poets and their work, Daniela Theinová’s recent book *Limits and Languages in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry* (2020), or Haberstroh’s *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (1996) should be consulted.

The oldest forms of the trope of the feminized land are challenged by several female Irish poets. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s first poetry collection published in 1981 *An Dealg Droighin* (*The Spine of the Blackthorn*) is concerned with the legend of Mis. In “Dúil” (“Desire”) she is playing with the tale and focuses on the sexual desire of Mis as she is observing a man saying that he “with his hamper / makes [her] hungry”.⁵ The hunger reminds of Mis’ initial frenzy during which she would eat anything in sight (including men) in the original tale, but in Ní Dhomhnaill’s version the hunger is strictly of sexual nature, eventually satisfied by seeing the man’s “fresh fruits” and her climaxing.⁶ Ní Dhomhnaill thus demonstrates “dimensions of female sexuality that have been rejected, misunderstood, subdued, and projected onto the land and nature”, allowing Mis to “retain her autonomy”.⁷

The tale is also modified by Bidy Jenkinson in her book-length poem “Mis” in which Jenkinson chooses an opposing strategy. Unlike Ní Dhomhnaill, Jenkinson “de-emphasizes the

⁴ Daniela Theinová, *Limits and Languages in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 41, Kindle.

⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*, trans. Michael Hartnett (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1985), 31.

⁶ Cary A. Shay, *Of Mermaids and Others: An Introduction to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 138.

⁷ Shay, *Of Mermaids*, 138–140.

sexual charge” when Mis is facing Dubh Ruis’ naked body by not making the body the focal point.⁸ Instead, Jenkinson leads the reader inside Mis’ mind which is preoccupied with the inevitability of death.⁹ She remembers her father’s death and fears that the same fate awaits Dubh Ruis, she is thus observing his body not for sexual pleasure but to look for wounds – the love Mis feels for Dub Ruis brings her both happiness and suffering and by this, Jenkinson acknowledges “the private suffering of a woman”.¹⁰ Both Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson are playing with the tradition of Mis, and while their techniques are different, they both subvert the role of Mis as a literary trope merely representing land – and while doing so, they transform her into an autonomous being. Heaney, on the other hand, does not allude to the tale, but only borrows the element of highly sexualized land.

Very frequently, twentieth-century nationalist rhetoric comes under criticism in the discussion about the role of female bodies in Irish literature. Eavan Boland in her autobiographical prose work *Object Lessons* comments on how the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman, causing her to become “the passive projection of a national idea”.¹¹ She further undermines the trope of the feminized land by challenging the gender politics of male Irish poets’ work:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture.¹²

Subsequently, she herself takes the task of subverting such depiction of femininity in her poem “Mise Eire” from the collection *The Journey* (1987), exemplifying the mutually reflecting

⁸ Edyta Lehmann, “‘I Am a Clean Whirlwind from the Far Seas’: Biddy Jenkinson’s Conversation with the ‘Romance of Mis and Dubh Rois,’” *New Hibernia Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24624291>.

⁹ Edyta Lehmann, “I Am a Clean Whirlwind,” 68.

¹⁰ Lehmann, “I Am a Clean Whirlwind,” 68-69.

¹¹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 143.

¹² Boland, *Object Lessons*, 154.

relationship of criticism and poetry. She directly deconstructs Patrick Pearse's "Mise Éire" by destabilizing the silent and passive image of an abandoned mother with her technique of giving voice to three women: a garrison prostitute, an emigrant mother, and women poet, hence stripping them of their emblematic status.¹³ This may be understood as a challenge to Heaney as well, in whose "Antaeus" and "Hercules and Antaeus" the passivity and the emblematic status of the motherland trope is even more striking as the mother never speaks and serves only as a source of strength. Moreover, the passivity of female figures that Boland criticizes dominates most of Heaney's poems analyzed in the preceding chapter, very often accompanied by the sexual element of observing, touching, or engaging in a sexual act with the woman.

In Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's essay "Mis nad Dubh Ruis", she further talks about the surreality of the theme which continued to be used by Yeats, Pearse, and other nationalist writers:

To a visitor from another planet, or even from another island on this one, it must seem inconceivable that a whole generation of otherwise seemingly rational beings would shed blood and be prepared to lay down their own lives for what is after all at one level just an image in a poem or a play. But they did. And they do, and will continue to do so while the underlying mythic drama is kept conscious evaluating and so fated, instead, to literal reenactment.¹⁴

In a similarly ironic tone, Ní Dhomhnaill ridicules the patriotic tradition in her poem "Caitlín" ("Cathleen") from *Feis* ("Sexual Union") published in 1991. She firstly alludes to Ó Rathaille's "Gile na Gile" to "set the satirical context": "how they saw her naked in Connacht, she the beauty of beauty, / and traveling the roads of Munster, she the brightest of the bright", only to continue to mock the nationalist yearnings.¹⁵ She tells of the many instances of the trope in aisling poems: how "every slubberdegullion once had a dream-vision / in which she appeared as his own true lover", and progresses to warn the reader that the days the aisling vision together

¹³ Jody Allen Randolph, *Contemporary Irish Writers: Eavan Boland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 83.

¹⁴ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* (Dublin: New Island, 2005), 83.

¹⁵ Theinová, "Letting in the Light of Laughter," 181.

with Pears', Yeats', and others' variations of Cathleen are "truly over".¹⁶ An even more satirical poem – "An tSeanbhean Bhocht" ("The Poor Old Woman"), imagines the nationalist figure commenting on her own emblematic status used by Irish writers for centuries. Her eyes were once "radiant with youth and blue fire" and she calls those who "caught a glimpse" of her "the poor unfortunates".¹⁷ She is now an old woman fully aware of the persistent mistreatment which "gets worse with every generation" wanting the trope of the feminized land, the "old cliché", "to shut the fuck up".¹⁸ Such autonomy of the woman is not present in Heaney's poems and when he turns to the *aisling* genre, even though his poems differ in form and feature various inversions, he follows the same stereotypical depiction of femininity that Ní Dhomhnaill's poor old woman criticizes.

In "Oileán" ("Island"), Ní Dhomhnaill reverses the trope of the feminized land in presenting the land as a male body. The gazing upon woman's body we witness in Heaney's poems is destabilized in the poem by having a male body imagined as a nude object:

Your nude body is an island
 asprawl on the ocean bed. How
 beautiful your limbs, spread-
 eagled under seagull's wings!¹⁹

In addition, the body is described as *iathghlas* ("emerald"), which creates a link to the seventeenth-century bardic and twentieth-century nationalist poetry in which the adjective was commonly used to describe Ireland.²⁰ Importantly, Ní Dhomhnaill also revisits Heaney's poetry and refers to "Punishment" in her poem "Gaineamh Shúraic" ("Quicksand"). The speaker of the poem is asking her lover to not let her "fall into the dark cave", fearing the "eager hollows in the water / places with bogholes underground" since there lies Heaney's "drowned girl, / a

¹⁶ Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, 194.

¹⁷ Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, 188.

¹⁸ Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, 188.

¹⁹ Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, 186.

²⁰ Theinová, *Limits and Languages*, 75.

noose around her neck”.²¹ Presumably, it is the fate of becoming a sexualized object that the speaker fears. As said in the previous chapter, “Punishment” is overall one of the most controversial poems, and this also applies to its status in feminist discourse, which shall be further discussed.

The irony and satiric scorn of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems is the most frequent and effective method to subvert the trope and when contrasted with Heaney’s serious tone the different approach of female poets to the trope is even more noticeable.²² In his own reworkings of the *aisling* genre, Heaney typically imagines the woman as a ruined maid, and such depiction is undermined by Bidy Jenkinson when she rewrites the *aisling* tradition in “Mo Scéal Féin – Á Insint ag Aisling” (Telling an Aisling – My Version of the Story) by making the otherwise beautiful *spéirbhean* a “nymphomaniac ghost”.²³ Positioning the woman as the speaker of the poem permits her to use her own voice to record her own experience, and that is, according to Theinová, the most progressive aspect as it individualizes the trope.²⁴ Despite Heaney also allowing the woman to use her own voice in “Bog Queen”, the erotic charge of the poem cancels out any progressiveness. It becomes evident that in the works of these female poets one will not encounter the reduction of women’s lived experience for the sake of poetic images which is what can be found in *North*. This reduction is further analyzed by Patricia Coughlan in her essay “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney” in which she condemns the representation of femininity in Heaney’s poems.

Coughlan’s investigation disapproves of Heaney’s “invocation of magna mater figure” which is, according to her, celebrated by readers as “empowerment of women” – such reading

²¹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Quicksand,” in *All Through the Night: Night Poems and Lullabies*, ed. Marie Heaney (Dublin: Poetry Ireland, 2016), 97.

²² Theinová, *Limits and Languages*, 41

²³ Theinová, “Letting in the Light of Laughter,” 183

²⁴ Theinová, *Limits and Languages*, 54.

of *North* is effortlessly dismantled even at a very basic level of analysis.²⁵ In Heaney's poems, the most strikingly disempowering element is the eroticization of the woman-land when observing or directly engaging in a sexual act with her. While Boland argues that the most problematic element of *North* is the passivity of the feminine and the conjoining of women and nation, this is exceeded, according to Coughlan, by the highly sexualized images of woman-land, which often cause the objectivization of female figures in the poems. Therefore, even if "Bog Queen" partly breaks the woman's passivity by her being the speaker, she is still "a geologic rather than a human phenomenon".²⁶ It needs to be mentioned that *North* is not gendered consistently as the feminine does not always equal the raped, the defeated, the lesser power – for Coughlan, this is an "apparently unconscious equivocation".²⁷ However, rather than the inconsistent gendering being purposeless and unplanned, the oscillation of male versus female seems deliberate in order to form an argument – the speaker of the poems is "deeply aware of his implication in being 'imperial male'", meaning that the reversal of the gender power dynamics is intentional.²⁸

It can be seen how in "Punishment" the most troublesome feature is the poet's involvement in the sexualization of the punished woman. Coughlan argues that the initial sympathetic tone ("I can feel the tug"²⁹) is outweighed by "the fascinated details of the description which composes the girl as passive and observed object".³⁰ Moreover, the compassion with the girl is questioned because of the "half-sympathy with the punishers" – this ambiguity has already been addressed in the previous chapter, but it should be added that Coughlan views not only the equivocality but also the speaker's excitement ("can we not

²⁵ Patricia Coughlan, "Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 42.

²⁶ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana Press, 1998), 61.

²⁷ Coughlan, "Bog Queens," 58.

²⁸ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2008), 170.

²⁹ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 37.

³⁰ Coughlan, "Bog Queens," 55.

identify it as specifically sexual?” she asks) as “the girl’s utter disempowerment”.³¹ Because of such objectification, “Come to the Bower” is also discussed by Coughlan. According to her, in the poem, the cause of disempowerment is again not the fundamental junction of nation and woman *per se*, but “the unpinning and marking” which fixes “her role as an erotic object”.³² Moreover, when the sexualization of the female is accompanied by violence, she is fully reduced to a poetic image. Heaney justifies the violence he depicts in his poems by granting them historical validity:

Patricia Coughlan did an article on the passive woman figure in the representation of Ireland. But, in fact, English armies did come in and do all that depredation and the Irish poets of the eighteenth century were remembering Elizabethan scorched earth and Cromwellian massacre and took that image of violation and rape pretty seriously because, I mean, these were not just literary tropes.³³

However, feminist critics do not question the historical existence of violence against women, they criticize the representation of such violence and subsequent objectification of women in writing.³⁴ It is a fact that in *North* the poems do not strive to depict the experience of women – the female figures are poetic devices and the representation of land as a woman indeed became “just” a literary trope. But considering Heaney’s poetic mission of linking the present with the past while leaning against a literary tradition with an age-long history in Ireland, the formulation of the feminine in his poems does not appear to be a subjective conception of gender roles and neither is his approach towards women antagonistic.

The feminist revisionism, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was commented on by Heaney and his views on feminist critique at the beginning were both positive and negative. Even though he considered some of the comments made against his poetry as fair ones, he also saw feminist critique as a threat to the “poetrynnes of poetry” by eschewing it “in order to get at its thematic and its submerged political implication”, not seeing that discussing

³¹ Coughlan, “Bog Queens,” 55.

³² Coughlan, “Bog Queens,” 55.

³³ Coughlan, “The Whole Strange Growth,” 37.

³⁴ Coughlan, “The Whole Strange Growth,” 38.

the problematic depiction of femininity does not necessarily mean stripping poems of their formal qualities.³⁵ According to him, poetry is not only thematic content, it is “the musical intonation” and feminist criticism does not include “any sense of the modulation, the intonation, the way the spirit moves in a cadence”.³⁶ At the same time, he acknowledged that feminist criticism is “a critical language” and it was imperative to interrogate “those inherited tropes”.³⁷ This inconsistency seems to be resolved in his interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, in which Heaney exhibits a shift in his own thinking when he admits that he would not employ the representation of England as an aggressive male and Ireland as a passive and ruined maid again as “the state of affairs pertaining between men and women has [...] shifted”.³⁸ This very much shows the influence of feminism not only on the way literature is read but also on the poet’s own thinking.

In *North*, Heaney manages to capture the problematic Anglo-Irish relations as well as the repetitive nature of violence in the land, which perhaps reflects the hopelessness felt by many during the tumultuous times of the Troubles. To decipher the poems requires the reader to get through layers of metaphors, allusions, and complicated syntax. Such complexity, both in terms of form and content, received much praise. However, in the light of the arguments made by feminist critics, it is apparent that as much as one would like to simply appreciate *North*, it should not be read without being aware of its stereotypical depiction of femininity. No excellence of poetic language nor established position as an Irish poet can shield Heaney’s poetry from an interrogation that challenges the feminine aspect in *North*.

³⁵ Coughlan, “The Whole Strange Growth,” 30.

³⁶ Coughlan, “The Whole Strange Growth,” 30.

³⁷ Coughlan, “The Whole Strange Growth,” 30.

³⁸ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 170.

5. Conclusion

Seamus Heaney's preoccupation with the trope of the feminized land formed the basis of this thesis. *North* is intertwined by Heaney's proclivity for describing the land in sexual terms, which later became a point of feminist critique. After analyzing the selected poems, we can see that the poetry we find in *North* is characterized by its concern with history, violence, and myth, and the trope of the feminized land is a fundamental element in verbalizing these concerns. Importantly, this thesis has shown how there are not only parallels to historical forms of the trope in *North*, but Heaney introduces the trope in distinctive forms.

Heaney's tendency to objectify, hyper-sexualize and politicize the personified land is the most evident similarity to the historical forms of the trope. There are also other specific analogies to topoi from Irish literary tradition, such as *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation, the *dinnseanchas* tales, the personified land being morally reprehensible, the aisling genre (as the poems often include the binary paradigm of raped female Ireland and rapturous male England), and the woman/land taking on herself the sufferings of the Irish nation. However, in "Bone Dreams", Heaney reverses the traditional pattern of female Ireland and male England, and similar reversal occurs in "Bog Queen" – the colonizer is not male but female. Overall, the series of bog poems constitute the most distinctive manifestation of the trope. Heaney links Iron Age violence with contemporary Northern Ireland atrocities, and the female bodies he resurrects from bogs are observed, touched, and hyper-sexualized. The trope is thus used as a meeting point between the past and the present.

The influence of the aisling genre is undoubtable, but Heaney modifies it by openly criticizing British presence, and not including a spouse who would save the enthralled Ireland, without ironicizing the trope. Additionally, in "Ocean's Love to Ireland", he explores linguistic and literary conquest as well; "Aisling" questions the gender roles as depicted in aisling poems and presents a more complicated metaphor with reference to Actaeon and Diana; "Act of

Union” introduces a child conceived during rape and again references bog bodies; in “The Betrothal of Cavehill”, the bridegroom is part of the land and represents either Protestantism or an IRA man. Lastly, the symbolic status of the trope – symbolizing the suffering of the nation discussed in the second chapter, is transformed by Heaney as the tone of his poems is much more grim and violent. While the nationalist writers are calling for a change, Heaney is an observer who does not propose any way out. He thus creates complex and often ambiguous metaphors using some of the aspects of the historical forms of the trope, but includes his own modifications and innovations.

Because of the noticeability of the feminine aspect, it seemed imperative to examine *North* from a feminist point of view, as well as Heaney’s position towards such criticism. Exploring the correlation between poetry and criticism showed the reflective nature of such relationship. Both Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Eavan Boland are transforming their critical argument into poetic works, and together with Bidy Jenkinson, they demonstrate different techniques of subverting the stereotypical depiction of femininity in Irish literature. What distinguishes the treatment of the trope in their works from *North* is the fact that Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland, and Jenkinson embrace the trope to empower the woman, to erase her emblematic status, and transform her into an autonomous being. She is not a literary trope in their poems, but a protagonist. Contrastingly, Heaney exploits the trope while preserving the underlying stereotypical depiction of femininity.

That said, *North* can still be regarded as an important contribution to the Irish literary canon. It offers an insight into a mind caught between an open conflict in Northern Ireland, it is an elaborate, urgent, mythical, historic, and valuable poetry collection, which the third chapter strived to show. The reason for incorporating the feminist view on *North* was to point out that despite all of that, the stereotypical portrayal of femininity should not be ignored and

readers should be attentive to its presence in *North*, perhaps feeling encouraged to explore works of female Irish poets in greater depth.

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