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The Northern Irish Poet and the Search for a “Placeless Heaven”

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“Under the steel sheet of a teal blue sky” (Gillis 11)

The rural poetics of Seamus Heaney, the urban template of Ciaran Carson and the twenty-first century peripatetic urban poetry of Alan Gillis collectively portray the individual's de-territorialisation of 'home', in a movement away from the rooted pastoral settings of the past to a modern, fluctuating space that is somehow in-between. In the context of a Northern Ireland which has been fragmented by fixed sectarian division, home becomes indefinable, only revived through the embodiment and embracing of that very in-betweenness. Although Heaney is typically regarded to advocate for the individual's rootedness to the land, his poems like 'The Tollund Man' and 'Digging' suggest a precursory recognition of the necessary shift towards a modern, "placeless heaven" which contradicts the continuity of rooted tradition (Heaney, *Massachusetts* 372). The Belfast-based, "writerly idlers" Carson and Gillis evoke an emergent urban mode which emphasises the changing nature of the modern landscape, similarly highlighting the need for an acceptance of the modern changing condition through their evasive flaneur figures (Theinova 131). All three poets ultimately suggest that a sense of place is found not in the land itself, but in the collective consciousness of people, as revealed by the poetic mode of place.

Although Heaney concludes in 'The Sense of Place' that "we must look for continuity" in the "stable element", that is, "the land itself", much of his poetry that deals with place suggests that this "sense of place" in fact extends beyond the land (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 149). This thought is evident in his later essay, 'Another Look at Kavanagh', in which, rather than looking to a specific, land-based "heavenly place" for poetic inspiration, he imagines a realm devoid of claimed land completely, a "placeless heaven" (Heaney, *Massachusetts* 372). Nevertheless, in the former essay, he already inadvertently identifies the need for detachment from the land through the distinction between the two ways in which place is known; "One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious", highlighting a sprouting advocacy for the in

betweenness of place and its fluctuating existence between the realms of reality and spirituality in the poet's mind (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 131). Whilst 'Digging' is often read as Heaney's assertion that he will, as Maurice Harmon puts it, "proudly carry on the tradition of skilled work", the tension in the speaker's voice implies a transformation, rather than a continuation, of tradition (Harmon, 67). He observes the "straining rump" of his father "stooping in rhythm", evoking something stifling, mundane, and fatiguing about the cyclical nature of past traditions through the alliterative and rhythmic qualities of these lines (Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* 13). The simile that describes his squat pen, "snug as a gun", alludes to his hesitancy in joining the "digging" tradition and highlights the metaphorical violent potential of poetry itself, situating the act of writing as one of resistance in a sectarian society (Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* 13). The speaker appears to turn to his mind, rather than the land, for writing impetus, highlighted in the more metaphorical "living roots" which "awaken in [his] head" (Heaney, *Naturalist* 13). His pen lies importantly "Between [his] finger and [his] thumb", suggesting a shift in mode from grounded to spiritual and that the poet's place lies somewhere "between" the two (Heaney, *Naturalist* 13). Whilst the rural scene Heaney observes may be the *omphalos* – the "stone that marked the centre of the world" as Heaney defines in 'Mossbawn' – for his poetic inspiration, his later readings of Kavanaugh highlight that these rural, traditional roots are just the birthing point, "the initial point of reference", as Eugene O'Brien states, from which a subsequent transformation occurs (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 17, O'Brien 122).

As O'Brien argues, Heaney's process of "transforming location into locution" is one of "continuous adjudication" in aid of a "decentring of place" due to the inescapable tribalism that is inherently associated with the naming of Northern Irish places (O'Brien 124, 123). Indeed, he exemplifies the difference between calling it Derry, which is "to enunciate a nationalist ideological position", versus Londonderry, which asserts the "unionist ideological

position” (O’Brien 112-13). Thus, looking abroad for less politicised places, Heaney’s ‘The Tollund Man’ describes a disintegrated corpse preserved in a bog in Denmark, which recalls the bodies found in the Northern Irish bogs as a way of hiding evidence of murder (Heaney *Wintering Out* 36). He describes this commonality as reflective of an “archetypal pattern”, a recurrent history of violence that is connected to people, not place (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 57-8). The idea that the speaker is “Out here in Jutland” highlights distance and isolation from other places, whilst the concluding lines evokes a contrasting, increasing proximity to the people involved – both victim and killer – in the “man-killing parishes” (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 36). He is invariably “lost, / Unhappy and at home”, implying that “home” is separate from nation, and that universality is not found in the place we are from but in humanity itself – rather, it is ‘placeless’ (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 36). As Neil Corcoran notes, the connection made is not between Ireland and Jutland, but “between the Tollund Man and the poet himself” (Corcoran 35-6). The Tollund Man is victim to the “Trove of the turfcutters’ Honeycombed workings” just as Heaney is subject to the tribalist, land-dividing, “turfcutting” sectarianism that prevailed during the Troubles (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 36). In this bodily comparison, Heaney evokes the “stable element” of the land that he is looking for, not in the Ulster land but at a “microcosmic level”, in the words of O’Brien; the grotesque image of a corpse preserved by bog “juices” reflects the tribalist mindset of the preservation of personal identity through connection to land, and highlights a cynical universality of the “archetypal pattern” of “old man-killing parishes” (O’Brien 124, Heaney, *Wintering Out* 36). Thus, Heaney undergoes the same journey that he observes Kavanaugh to make as we realise that in fact “the country he visits” in the poem is inside himself” (Heaney, *Massachusetts* 373). On this imagined trip to Aarhus, place becomes internalised, transformed into a symbolic imagery which connotes universal meanings whilst evading an external and cultural definition to which they would be rooted. As Heaney discerns, this spiritual conception of

place may be an “earthly spot”, but it must remain “an imagined realm” to which we look for that “stable element” (Heaney, *Massachusetts* 371-2).

Whilst Heaney’s bog poems such as ‘Tollund Man’ represent his “occult journeyings” in “dark labyrinths” through which he “digs” to find the past origins of this imagined place, as Kennedy-Andrews notes, Carson’s urban labyrinthine mode beholds a modern landscape that is changing constantly, portrayed through the voyeuristic vehicle of the flaneur’s present perspective (Kennedy-Andrews, *Critical Essays* 252). Carson reflects the “flux and change” of post-Troubles Belfast, where “Urban development is both liberating and estranging” for the individual and highlights the need for a mode of poetry that encapsulates the ever-changing nature of modern life (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 203). In ‘33333’, he evokes the severing of the bodily connection to the land in a contemporary context, as the speaker takes a taxi through Belfast, which he claims to know “like the back of [his] hand except / [His] hand is cut off at the wrist” (Carson 39). The familiarity of the preceding idiom contrasted with the subsequent grotesque, unfamiliar image of a hand being chopped off emphasises the contradictory perceptions of Belfast as both comforting and familiar to its citizens, yet also as dangerous and unstable and a place where the individual can easily lose themselves. Likewise, the flaneur figure in ‘Smithfield Market’ finds himself “lost in shadowed aisles and inlets” in this “labyrinth” where there are “no entrances, no exits”, highlighting a maze-like quality to the city, which has the power to trap and disorientate the individual (Carson 37). This further evokes the idea that the individual is not connected to their land, as “Losing one’s way results in a de-territorialisation of knowledge”; a displacement through misplacement (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 208). Instead of being a national hero, the contemporary flaneur becomes the urban hero of this metropolitan odyssey, evading but aware that “something many-toothed, elaborate, [stirs] briefly in the labyrinth” (Carson 37). Carson’s monstrous depiction evokes the possibility for adventure in

the city for the individual, which is pillared by danger and anticipation surrounding the existence of the perceived, strange ‘other’. In this mythical allusion, Carson replicates the urban hero of Walter Benjamin’s ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, who penetrates the “minotaur’s chamber” of Berlin through the mere “art of straying” (Benjamin 9). These urban adventurers are not heroic through any courageous act of confrontation with the beast that lies in the labyrinth, but through their exploration of the dark realities of the cities themselves. Indeed, as Kennedy-Andrews notes, this dangerous journey in which the speaker “loses oneself” is a “chosen surrender to otherness”, evoking an acceptance of the presence of strangers in this mysterious urban realm (Kennedy-Andrews, *Critical Essays* 227).

As Kennedy-Andrews describes, Belfast’s nature as “an unstable physical space” – both politically, due to the sectarian conflict, and geographically, due to the unstable sloop that constitutes the land the city is built upon – is mirrored in the form of Carson’s “gapped elliptical poems” (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 203). The fragmented urban snapshots of the “obliterated streets” and the city’s “unstitched, unravelled” state in ‘Smithfield Market’ is re-emphasised in ‘Patchwork’, in which Carson compares “the map of Belfast”, as viewed from above, to a patchwork quilt (Carson, 37 and 59). The speaker’s awareness of the stated fact, “you can never make a perfect job on tears like that”, which will mean a continuous, eternal act of “stitching” – a recurring act throughout the poem – allegorises the need for the continuous repair of post-ceasefire Belfast (Carson 59). By the end of the poem, the speaker remains in an uncertain and anticipatory state as, he does not “exactly... know” which family member has the quilt now, portraying the uncertainty of the time (Carson 59). Despite the global insistence of this being a time of repair and rebuilding in Northern Ireland, the idea of progress feels all the more difficult when in this isolating, urban place where no one is connected and where everyone is a stranger. Moreover, the flaneur’s weaving movements reflect the attempted “stitching” of the quilt, whilst his subjective “readings of the semiotic

city”, which are “inevitably momentary and fragmentary”, are the patches themselves (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 208).

Kennedy-Andrews’s application of Roland Barthes’s urban semiology highlights how Carson’s fragmented but fluid subjective poetic mapping contrasts and resists the rigid confinements of cartography, which Barthes views as an “obliteration, a censorship objectivity has imposed upon signification” (Barthes 192). Instead, as Barthes argues, mapping place must rely on a “symbolism” which is “defined essentially as the world of signifiers... [and] which can never be imprisoned in a full signification”, as reflected in the constantly flowing movement of Carson’s poetic figures through ever-changing scenes (Barthes 198). The wandering city-dweller becomes Carson’s vehicle of resistance, evoking the “process of dislocation and appropriation through which meanings are assembled and contested”, as Neal Alexander describes (Alexander 62). Carson depicts the fragmented signifiers of Belfast which cannot be stitched together by imperialist cartography but must be continuously and eternally connected and re-connected by the individual, subjective mind. Thus, similarly to Heaney’s “imagined realm”, Carson’s concept of place fluctuates between reality and the individual’s subjective perception of that reality.

Alan Gillis’s urban poetry applies Carson’s urban template of peripatetic movement and fluctuation of place to twenty-first century Belfast. Rather than resisting the change that he critiques, however, Gillis ultimately accepts the imperfection of place through a modernist disconnection or indifference to the place one is from. One aspect of modernity he seeks to critique in his poetry is consumerism and its corrupting influence over the natural. In ‘The Mournes’, the pastoral imagery is disturbed by its replacement with modern-day products (Gillis, *Hawks and Doves* 11). Whilst on a walk, the speaker and his companion look at their “BlackBerries”, their phones, rather than actual blackberries, as they are ironically “Under the steel sheet of a teal blue sky”, suggesting the industrial backdrop of twenty-first century

Belfast (Gillis, *Hawks* 11). Kennedy-Andrews notes that this poem is, in fact, a “mourning” for a “lost ‘authenticity’”, as the speaker lists the normalised consumerist attitudes around him, despite being surrounded by nature (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 278). In ‘Laganside’, Gillis’s flaneur figure strolls along the banks of the river Lagan which runs through Belfast, observing the daily lives of those who live there, surrounded by looming construction sites (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). Significantly, ‘Laganside’ is both the natural riverbank of the Lagan and the name of the British-led corporation whose aim was the development of the areas around the river. The speaker’s sardonic tone reflects his real feelings towards the change he witnesses; the buildings are “fighting for space”, whilst “tall cranes [are] stalking everywhere... policing thin streets”, and “terraced doors keep their mouths shut”, highlighting a claustrophobic, stifling atmosphere to the city-in-progress, and suggesting that it is under the watchful eye of corrupt corporate forces, there to heroically ‘fix’ the city (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). The image of the “dead / wood reeked by weather’s spring cleaned” highlights the superficiality of this reconstructive effort through the paradoxical idea of ‘spring cleaning’ something natural (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). This cynical voice is also adopted in ‘Progress’, where the transient and illusory image of “one hundred thousand particles of glass [that]/ will create impossible patterns in the air” connotes the lack of real, authentic, tangible change, compared to the “progress” that “They say” has come about in Belfast (Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere* 55). Indeed, as Daniela Theinova describes, Gillis critiques the “rhetorical gloss” surrounding Belfast’s restoration following the Troubles, perhaps referring to the imposition of international powers involved in the peace process (Theinova 140). Moreover, through his sardonic, cynical tone, executed through “hyperbole and inflated buffoonery”, Gillis’s “undiluted form” suggests that Belfast’s post-Troubles commercialisation is a sanitised, superficial way of forgetting its violent past (Theinova 137).

Nevertheless, there is a note of impartiality erring on optimism in Gillis's poems which highlights a simultaneous acceptance of the inherent imperfection and in-betweenness of place. From the perspective of the transitory flaneur in 'Laganside' who, "moving onward", brings us through and forward to the rest of the poem, Gillis evokes a tone that is equal parts sardonic and defiantly unemotional, highlighting the speaker's detachment from the modern city around him – despite his natal connection, he is merely passing through (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). As Miriam Gamble acutely observes, "Purgatorial or in-between states figure frequently" in Gillis's poetry, such as that of the speaker in 'Lagan Weir', who declares himself "between two minds", with "a dove in one ear saying look the other way, a hawk in the other braying self-righteous fury" (Gillis, *Hawks* 60). As Kennedy-Andrews identifies, Gillis alludes to the "dichotomisation of politics" that has prevailed in the American political landscape in the twenty-first century, working to "place the Ulster situation within a larger geopolitical context" (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 271). Thus, Gillis's in-between figure offers an open and globally conscious perspective on the internal political division of both nation and individual, one that, through this avian metaphor, is isolated from the land itself.

Furthermore, this "purgatorial" state does not incapacitate him, as the starlings "swoosh and swirl their fractals", and "make their dark way /homeward, never slowing, not knowing /the way things are going" (Gillis, *Hawks* 60). Whilst the "fractals" connote something broken and fragmented, the continuous movement of the starlings' flight path evokes a sense of hope and determination, emphasised through the rhythmic cadence created by the rhyming "slowing", "knowing", and "going". Despite the speaker's uncertainty about the future of his nation, and the world in general, he finds reassurance that he and his country will find a sense of belonging, as the starlings mirror his transitory state of being "homeward". This assured but indeterminable conclusion is echoed in the final lines of

‘Laganside, in which the speaker leaves “knowing / I’ll never leave here, or come back again”, suggesting how place can stay with us even we leave, and that it is perhaps thus an imagined thing; Heaney’s “imagined realm” is once more recalled (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). The speaker’s preceding realisation, “No wonder I’m astray, a little bit this way and that way”, reiterates the transitory nature of the individual’s relationship to place, as their homeplace stays with them but does not stay the same itself (Gillis, *Hawks* 73). Moreover, the speaker’s acceptance of the city as being “a little bit this way and that way” highlights that it is “a city at peace with its own heterogeneity” in its “condition of imperfectability and partial vision”, as Gamble notes (Gamble 373). Both Belfast and the wanderer that Gillis depict are in some way accepting of their in-between status, as fluctuation and change become inescapable in the modern world. In Gillis’s Belfast, there is “no other place to be” but the imagined, yet existent, in-between (Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 280).

Heaney, Carson and Gillis make the distinction between the fluctuating but real place, and the individual’s transitory and subjective perception of a place, suggesting that the individual’s true sense of home lies somewhere in-between. Moreover, they evoke a sense of comfort to be found in the idea that being disconnected or away from a place means being perpetually “homeward” bound. Heaney’s search for stability in an “imagined realm”, Carson’s sense of simultaneous possibility and risk in the urban labyrinth, and Gillis’s acceptance of the “imperfectability” of Belfast post-ceasefire collectively convey the idea that place is fluctuating in nature, only conceivable in a fluid, literary mapping which accommodates for its in betweenness (Gamble, 373). As Barthes suggests, “human space... has always been a signifying space”; it is never signified for good and remains endlessly and perhaps hopefully ‘placeless’ (Barthes 191). Thus, the poetry of Heaney, Carson and Gillis can be read as a poetic and individual resistance to the tribalist binaries of sectarian Northern

Ireland and to the rigid oppression of imperialism, through their meandering poetic undertakings where the mind feels “strangely at home” (Hewitt 20).

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