

Seamus Heaney and his Inheritance and Innovation in Irish Poetry

Dr. Nagendra Singh Gangola

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages,
Uttarakhand Open University

Abstract

Ireland's history has long been marked by political instability, colonial intervention, and competing national visions, all of which have profoundly shaped its literary imagination. From early conflicts such as the Battle of Kinsale (1601) and the 1798 Rebellion to the Act of Union (1800), the Home Rule movement, and the eventual partition following the Irish War of Independence, the nation's past has produced a persistent crisis of identity. The tension between Catholic nationalism and unionist allegiance generated deep cultural and ideological divisions, fostering chronic anxieties around ethnicity, belonging, and nationhood. These historical pressures significantly inform Irish literary production, particularly in Northern Ireland, where writers often respond to inherited violence and contested memory. Within this tradition, Seamus Heaney emerges as a defining poetic voice who articulates the emotional and psychological burden borne by his community. His work reflects both personal and collective trauma while engaging with the broader question of what it means to be Irish in a fractured political landscape. At the same time, Heaney demonstrates the phenomenon often described as the "anxiety of influence," negotiating his relationship with both English and Irish literary predecessors. By assimilating diverse poetic traditions and transforming them into an original expressive mode, he establishes an individualized voice capable of representing modern uncertainty. Thus, Irish literary tradition reveals a pattern of interdependence across generations, united by recurring concerns with identity and Irishness. Heaney's poetry exemplifies how historical inheritance, linguistic tradition, and political tension converge to shape a distinctive poetic consciousness.

Keywords: Irish identity, colonial legacy, nationalism, Northern Ireland, Irish poetic tradition, cultural memory.

1. Introduction

Ireland was haunted by a kind of Political uncertainty which seems to be at the same position even after centuries of political struggles. The question of nationalistic sense of identity is still posed with the same intensity. Some advocated a complete Catholic nation while others were in favour of amalgamated version of nationalities. This fragmented notion of identity seems to be rooted in British Colonialism in Ireland since the twelfth century. Incidents like partition of Ireland after Irish war of independence added fuel to the fire and the rival groups "Nationalist" and "Unionist" appeared as the sworn enemies yielding to Chronic animosity in the history of Ireland. Therefore a developed nation like Ireland still seems to struggle with important questions like 'Identity' 'ethnicity' and 'community' etc.

“Modern Ireland provides us with the classic case of an impressive literature brought to birth by Politics” (Luke Gibbons)

This statement narrates the socio-cultural adjustment made by community as well as the writer in order to acclimatize to the long standing Political Volatility. The Irish seems to bear “a deep reverence for their past” and this goes to the level of an obsession with their history. The same is conspicuous in the work of great Irish poet Thomas Davis.

This Country of ours is no sand-bank, thrown up by some recent caprice of earth. It is an ancient land, honoured in the archives of civilization, traceable into antiquity by its piety, its valor, at its suffering. (David Llyod: “Ireland After History”, pp.379)

Hence, the poets in Ireland were striving to answer the million dollar question whether they should incorporate the social suffering reality in their song or they should choose a way of separating ‘song’ and ‘suffering’. There was a way out maintaining delicate balances between poet’s commitment to the artifice of his or her own creation and his responsibility to contemporary scenario of political, historical and social world. How did historical situation and art intermingle? In view of the all Seamus Heaney’s remark seems to be apt.

I think that the drama and interior of the self may be the real subject, but in this country, the self is closely involved with the society that produces it, and it’s bonded into a communal life. (*Ibid.*, p 380)

2. Role of Irish History

Ireland’s history is also connected with Colonialism. Ireland never formed a part of the British nation despite being a part of the British Isle. The difference of religion, culture, history and social and economic developments have always kept two people distinct.

It was Henry VIII who in 1557 under a plan sent British settlers to Ireland with an aim to anglicanize Irish Natives. All efforts of Britishers and British authority went in vain. Northern Ireland suffered a lot and was declared as ‘The Illegitimate Child’ of the union between England and Ireland. Ireland was seen as the model of Colonial unrest.

The imperial authority of British people ignored the native Irish Gaelic tradition. Consequently, aggressive protest and incidences of violence continued. English Heroes like Cromwell, Spencer, and Walter Raleigh exploited the Ireland with their full power. This bitterness of English imperial rule can be felt in the Irish writing of postmodern period.

Ireland is shaped through various incidences that took place politically. The Battle of Kinsale (1601) where Irish were defeated. The Act of Union (1800), Armed Revolution (1798), Catholics movement against Act of Union, Home rule movement and finally the Independence struggle till the formation of Northern Ireland; all seem to be the major cause of anxiety in the works of Irish Authors. Later the demand of Catholic Nationalist against the splitting of nation coloured the Nation into violence. It is due

to this reason that the poetry of Northern Ireland is prone to the demands that this troubled history impose over its writers. Seamus Heaney's poetry particularly seems to express the agony and tumult of his community – The Catholics of Northern Ireland.

3. The Question of De- homogenization of Imperial Construct

The other question which seems to take birth is the re-construction of Nation and Culture following the Colonization. This required a de- homogenization of Imperial construct of Irish Nation at every level G.J. Watson remarks:

The culture clash between Ireland England has been so enduring because it has expressed itself mainly through opposing imagesand images, as well as being the raw material for the artist, are always more powerful than rational arguments. (*Irish Identity and the Literary Revival*, pg.16)

The English have always tried to project the change of Irish in a very unattractive way and Irish writers are always challenged and countered this notion since ages. In one of his statements Spenser says that Gaels must be redeemed from their wilderness, they must cut their “Glibs of overhanging air, they must convert their mantles into convectional cloaks and above all they must speak the English tongue”.

This statement is conspicuously showing an aim of a complete erasure of Irish culture. The question of Irish identity is noticed in the character of Shakespeare particularly in Henry V through the character Macmorris. This quest of national identity is seen in Heaney's poem 'Traditions' where he juxtaposes, Macmorris, himself and James Joyce together. This challenges the typical stereotype English outlook about Irish people.

The major reason of the suppression and destruction of indigenous Gaelic culture was the act of Union 1800-01, that united Great Britain and Ireland as into one United Kingdom. This contributed in growing British Political, linguistic and cultural hegemony and a kind of cultural 'erasure' for Ireland. The writers of Irish literary Revival then attempted rejuvenation of Ireland's Celtic past. The entire reconstruction of the Irish culture was chiefly done by literary artist and their focus was towards deliberately creating a national literature that will foster a spiritual identity for Ireland rather than being anti colonial particularly.

Ireland's artistic community undertook the task of generating literature in resistance to the empirical traditions wholeheartedly. The 'Field day Anthology of Irish writing' in 1990 proved to be a milestone in this direction. It clearly presents the entire relation of the Chaos present in Irish Political scenarios with the artistic creation very strongly.

A brief survey and analysis of some famous critical terms and theories present a clearer image of this. The term 'Imagined Communities' by Benedict Anderson and the idea of Kiberd's 'Inventing Ireland' add the role of language in achieving a powerful colonial status into it. James Joyce and Seamus Heaney worked aggressively to take their own language out of the trap of Colonial English language. Irish writers strived to inculcate a commitment to work for Gaelic language in a war like scenario. The famous Irish Critic Helen Vandler describes that all writers were committed to a form of writing that

was born out of the “Conviction that the person who owns the language owns the story and that he who wishes to change the story must first change the language”.

4. The Development of Dual Irish Culture

Irish literary tradition developed a ‘dual’ nature in the course of time after Norman Conquest. Since the time English was introduced to Ireland and colonies and settlement spread throughout the Ireland; a series of gradual, natural and violent changes occurred in the Society. It leads to the beginning of a counter tradition in the Country. One language was abandoned for another by people that somehow either added new element or lost its native element in vernacular thereby developing a duality in Irish literary tradition. Consequently, Irish writers were oscillating between two points of language; on one hand they were Gaelic Culturally, Psychologically and linguistically on other hand they were surrounded and lured by English writing. Kinsella describes it

Within a hundred years, English was the language of the spreading colony, and the area of settlement had increased dramatically. This was the beginning of a counter - tradition in the country, and a series of changes, some gradual and natural seeming, others violent - which was to have an extraordinary long term effect. This lead to an abandonment of one language for another by virtually an entire population. It is this change in vernacular, with the elements of gain and loss involved, which gives the Irish literary tradition its dual nature. (*The Dual Tradition*)

Therefore, according to him Modern Irish writers work in ‘Dual tradition’. They have necessarily a “divided mind”. This is diametrically opposite to the British or French conventional writers who are monolingual and remains unaltered and unaffected by any form of Colonization including linguistics.

If we talk of the major poets like W.B. Yeats who represents Ireland, the opinion of Jahan Ramazani seem to be worth discussion. He places Yeats among the post colonial poets too. At the same time he presents two distinct form of poetry of the same. The early or pre-independence poems of Yeats are explicitly nationalistic while the post independence poets seem politically skeptical and the poem like ‘Easter 1916’ prepares a platform for the emerging Irish nation state. Ramazani but prefers the term anti colonial to post-colonial in case of Yeats as because his efforts to vanish to post-colonial tracts can go to any extent in terms of intensity.

In his anti-colonial denunciations of Britain’s efforts to exterminate the Irish and to obliterate its indigenous culture, to quash heroic resistance and to lay to waste Ireland churches and houses, Yeats is no less “postcolonial” than Achebe or Kamau Braithwaite, who chronicle the survival of African gods in the new world despite colonial efforts to wipe them out. (*Is Yeats a Post Colonial Poet? p.795*)

Yeats can be regarded an Irish Whiteman as Declan Kiberd also declares that he is the key person behind recreation and reinvention of Ireland. The writer and Society seem to be highly converted and this relation is expressed as:

We call certain minds creative because they are among the moulders of their nation and not made upon its mould.

(Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation, p.120)

Hence Irish literature puts forth a vast scope of constant reconstruction of literary forms and the new evolving styles gives it a fresh flavour. In this way Irish literature poses a challenge to both the reader and writer

Declan Kiberd:

“Whenever Yeats raised the question of style, it was as if he saw in it the promise of an antidote to Anglicization style before became an enabling technique to Yeats, the surest basis for intelligent self-scrutiny.(p.123)

The fascination with style remains a common matter of concern to Joyce, Yeats and later Seamus Heaney too. The style has to do with the expression of much more demanding and expansion than the usual process of drawing inferences from a word. Irish writers predominantly used style to lift any material to a flight of a new world or new horizon of meaning. This sort of model is absent in any other English poetic tradition.

In the sense of nation making Yeats is a strong Postcolonial writer and nationalist. But in case of the representation of majoritarian views he can be regarded as less creditable nationalist. The same is in case of supporting the state. Yeats sensibility seems to oscillate upon many ideas and is unable to uphold a single generalizing idea in his poem. We may take the remark of Declan Kiberd:

[Easter 1916] enacts the quarrel within his own mind between his public, textual duty...and his more personal urge. The poem speaks correspondingly with two voices, and sometimes exacts in single phrases (*terrible beauty*) their contestation.(p.123)

This characteristic of ambiguity or self-doubt is a key area of focus in Irish Poetry. To define artistic autonomy in his expressions was the prime focus of Yeats. He was keeping away from nationalism for a personal version of Irish Identity. This Yeatsian model inspires Seamus Heaney and he was able to justify a blending of the communal and individual, refining it through the means of linguistic innovation. For Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats both, Irish nationalism is signified or expressed through a dialectical approach or interplay between cultural and historical for us. This is conspicuous because only these two forces together have played a key role in determining the history of nation. The dialogic nature of identity in the post-colonial Irish context can be best expressed in his views:

All literature in every country is derived from models, and as often as not these are foreign models, and it is the presence of a personal element alone that can give it nationality in a fine sense, the nationality of its maker. It is only before personality has been attained that a race struggling towards self-consciousness is the better for having, as in primitive times, nothing but native models, for before this has been attained. It can neither assimilate nor reject. It was precisely at this passive moment, attainment approaching but not yet come, that the Irish heart and mind surrendered to England; and Irish patriotism, content that the names and opinions should be

Irish was deceived and satisfied. It is always necessary to affirm and reaffirm that nationality is in the things that escape analysis. (p.164)

Critics regarded this strong paragraph as one of the first Irish Articulations of the dialectic of postcolonial liberation.

James Joyce is among those writers who bypass the Standard English and uses dialect and Irish language. In his 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' he shows a sense of unease with the Colonial English Language. He puts forth this view more prominently in *Ulysses* and finally in 'Finnegan's Wake' and English Language is constantly undermined by exposing the writing to numerous other languages.

The most common tendency of revivalist like W.B Yeats was to create a highly idealized version of the Irish pastoral. These tendencies of revivalist were challenged by the historians who were interested to revise the over idealizing notion of Irish nationality. They brought out pluralities of issues highlighting the narrative as gender based approach. They declared that among other issues Ireland was being treated as a suffering female and England as the male oppressor.

Patrick Kavanagh is the most prominent figure who is responsible for opposing this over idealism tendency of Nation among Irish authors. He fiercely opposed the tendency of presenting pastoral vision of rural Ireland and choosing the themes out of the occupations of rural life. His poem 'The Great Hunger' is an excellent example of this idea. He not only provided strong poetic impetus to other Irish poet but also influenced the poet Seamus Heaney to a great extent.

The concept of 'Provincial' and 'Parochial' given by Kavanagh helped Seamus Heaney assume how the Irish poetry was going to be in coming years if it had to be authentic. Kavanagh writes, A Provincial, "is always trying to live by other people's lives, but a Parochial is self-sufficient".

A Parochial according to him is very different from provincial mindset as provincial is defined thoroughly in relation to 'The Metropolis'

The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism-Greek, Israelite, English. In recent times we have had two great Irish parishioners-James Joyce and George Moore.

(A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry, p.352)

Hence a Parochial is more universal as it always writes of fundamentals. Heaney expresses the place and importance of Kavanagh:

If *The Great Hunger* did not exist, a greater hunger would, the hunger of a culture for its own image and expression. It is a poem of its own place & time, transposing the griefs of the past...into the distress of the present, as significant in the Irish context as Hardy's novels were in the English...

(Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978, p126.)

In view of above discussion we can clearly understand how Irish literary tradition got itself established in the horizons of Irish literature. The most important fact which seems to linger almost in every generation is the echo of each other and interdependence among writers, which can be formed as a tradition. Hence, the question of identity and nature of Irishness are two most obsessive themes for each of these literary artists.

5. Seamus Heaney and Irish Poetic Tradition

Seamus Heaney is recognized as a major representative voice in Irish poetic tradition in the second half of the twentieth century.

Seamus Deane keeps Heaney in the line of succession in Irish literature:

... Heaney is very much in the Irish tradition in that he has learned, more successfully, than most, to conceive of his personal experience in terms of his country's history.....”

(Seamus Heaney in conversation with Karl Miller, p.104)

In this way Heaney emerges as a great poet who works as a rejuvenator and transmitter of native tradition. At the same time he justifies the tradition of his predecessors by remarkable culmination of their effort. His writing justify modern as well as post modern scenario in this respect. Hence his contribution to Irish poetry seems to be colossal.

Heaney initially tried to express his memories and the landscape of Northern Ireland. These poems enter into the vicinity of social unrest and political violence of Northern Ireland, the moment he enters into the world of his childhood. Irish culture and history marks his poem in a great way, he describes in his noble lecture.

“Poetry can create an order which is at once true to the impact of eternal reality and sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being”.

Seamus Heaney is not supposed to be a political poet by many critics and it is understood that the bad situation in Northern Ireland makes his language political. He reveals in an interview with Donnelly, in 1977, that it was the conflict of Northern Ireland that stress the poet to “Reveal the roots of the conflict and to speak for their own side (Donnelly. 3)

The colonization of Ireland by Britain intensified the issue of Irish Identity and gradually with religious identity turns to the most crucial question of social and cultural identity. These issues take a form of more centralized issue of political violence. Catholic strived to define themselves as Irish and Protestant as British. Hence the history of conflicts of Northern Ireland made Seamus Heaney inclined toward the search of Irishness through the volumes of his poems.

Heaney uses his poems ‘Bogland’ ‘Tollund Man’, ‘Punishment’, ‘Kinship’, ‘Bog Queen’, ‘Grabualle Man’ and ‘Strange Fruit’ as a metaphor to Irishness. These poems are part of his collections like ‘North’, ‘Death of a Naturalist’, ‘Wintering Out’ and ‘Door into the Dark’. The Bog bodies found in Bogland of

Denmark, kept in Museum are used as a vehicle to represent the sacrifice of Catholics in Northern Ireland. He uses his poem dexterously to convey the Irishness and impact of British imperialism which directly connects him with the Irish tradition so far already discussed in the first part of this Head. Seamus Heaney and his Irish poetic tradition can be better understood through some major relation.

In continuation to the previous discussion the question of imperialism and Irish identity linger through the Irish tradition. Heaney has also moulded himself stepping into the same premises. The process of establishing identity has always been an unending process for Ireland. Anthony D Smith says that - “National identity involves some sense of political community which implies; at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the member of community”.

The Nationalist who were essentially Irish Catholic focused on Irish culture, art, language and identity. The unionists on other hand were Protestants who were patronized by Britishers and they expressed their loyalty to British Crown. The idea of loyalty is seen as bounded up with identity by John Barry.

“The relations that constitute one’s loyalty to particular institution, places and people are constitutive of one’s identity and membership of the valued community that shares that loyalty”
(Barry)

Further he expresses that Britishers did not recompensed the sense of Britishness to the unionist which made them feel insecure

Unionist culture and collective identity are problematic to the extent that their sense of ‘Britishness’ required some recognition and acknowledgement of this form the British people and the British state. But since this recognition and affirmation is not forth coming, the leaves the Ulster unionist identity unstable and unsure. (Mc. Evoy, 2008, p.11).

The question of literary tradition of Seamus Heaney interests every reader of him. Heaney declares himself that he had inherited Gaelic tradition of Ireland and the literary tradition of England. He calls it a “Two humped” tradition. The poetry of Heaney clearly shows the expression of William Wordsworth, James Joyce and W.B. Yeats. Seamus Heaney says that these poets compose two types of poetry.

“the poetry of chance and trance as against the poetry of resistance and perseverance; the poetry of 'sinking' or the poetry of 'coming up against'; the instinctual or the rational; the feminine or the masculine; the 'artisan' or the 'architectonic'; the epiphanic or the crafted; the 'ooze' of poetry or its 'spur of flame'; the 'lived, illiterate and unconscious' or the 'learned, literate and conscious'; the takers (Wordsworth, D.H. Lawrence, Keats, Patrick Kavanagh) and the makers (Yeats, Hopkins, Jonson, Lowell, John Montague, John Hewitt); poets who sense, surrender, dive, divine, receive and coax, or poets who command, plot, assert, labour and force.

Poet’s unconscious and his experiences prepare ground for this division. In his essay on G.M. Hopkins, Heaney describes these two divisions as “the Masculine Mode” and “The Feminine Mode”.

“In the masculine mode, the language functions as a form of address, of assertion or command, and the poetic effort has to do with conscious quelling and control of the materials, a labour of

shaping; words are not music before they are anything else, nor are they drowsy from their slumber in the unconscious, but athletic, capable, displaying the muscle of sense. Whereas in the feminine mode the language functions more as location than as address, and the poetic effort is not so much a labour of design as it is an act of divination and revelation; words in the feminine mode behave with the lover's come-hither instead of the athlete's display, they constitute a poetry that is delicious as texture before it is recognized as architectonic.

Further in his essay 'The Making of Music' Heaney expresses two modes of poet and seems to be influenced by Wordsworth and James Joyce with regard to it. In Wordsworth Heaney gives respect to the trance like state in his poetry and further add that the beats in Wordsworth's lines keep the reader suspended like meditation. "The Ruined Cottage" by Wordsworth is an example of this. Trusting the validity of his experience and then finding an expression to articulate it, is the biggest strength and originality of Wordsworth. Poems like 'The Hiding Places' and 'Glenmore Sonnets' is inspired by Wordsworth

The hiding places of my power
Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all, and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration.

The line "The hiding places of my poem" alludes to "The Prelude's "the hiding place of power". A vice like grip in nature and the hidden places of one's inner self is the major characteristic of both the poets. Romanticism of Heaney is expressed by Anne Stevenson

I assume we can agree without prejudice that Heaney... could not and would not have written quite as he has, had it not been for the example of Wordsworth (and only *after* Wordsworth, Yeats, Joyce and Patrick Kavanagh). For in Wordsworth we have the first instance in Britain of a poet in retreat from a corrupting society and a doubtful religion, digging in and fortifying the bastions of his own psyche. The poet as hero appears Romantically, of course, in Goethe and Byron; yet it is in Wordsworth that his *retreat* is most in evidence, his withdrawal from the world into a sacred area of personal sensitivity; opposing to the world not only Nature... but *in* Nature, a subjective, unrational self. (5)

Sonnet III, VIII and IX of Heaney in Glenmore's sonnet show a strong indebtedness to Wordsworth, Terry Gifford expresses:

"Heaney has built upon Wordsworth's allegorical pastoral poetry to develop a poetry that thinks through images of nature as a means to explore, love, politics and his role as a writer".(7)

And Heaney always liked a fact in Wordsworth that he “Was the first man to articulate the nature that becomes available to the feeling through dwelling in one dear perpetual place?”(8)

We can see Heaney in the light of two literary traditions. He seems to be influenced by the philosophy and sensibility of Joyce and Patrick mKavanagh. They advocate the belief in local and familiar and opine that real poetic strength emerges from the same and upon the ability of how an individual draw from simple details of life. In an interview Heaney give hint to this tendency “whatever success I’ve had has come from staying within the realm of my own imaginative country and my own voice” At the same time he seems to follow a detachment from this in favour of intellectual poetry and in search of a poetic persons; and thus tradition indicates a Yeatsian belief clearly.

Seamus Heaney seems to be clearly a follower of Kavangah’s Joycean practice as an Ulster poet. Heaney’s treatment of Northern Ireland in his early poetry in a way presents the Kavangah’s treatment of Parochial and life as a celebration. In his critical work he clearly projects Kavanagh as an important theorist and regards his poems as the document to understand the intricacies of poetic composition—

What we have in these poems are matter-of-fact landscapes,
Literally presented, but contemplated from such a point of
View and with such an intensity that they become "a prospect
Of the mind" ... Their concern is, indeed, the growth of a poet’s mind. (Neil Corcoran, op. cit,
p.243)

Heaney does not however dismiss the concept of Yeatsian poetry in addition to his initial belief in Kavanagh. Heaney draws his conceptual framework of poetry from the distinction between rhetoric and poetry suggested by Yeats. “You have to be true to your own sensibility, for the faking of feelings is a sin against the imagination. Poetry is out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is Rhetoric”. He believes that Yeats is a poet who is true to his artistic sensibilities.

I think Yeast’s example as a man who held to a single vision is
Tremendously ennobling – he kept the elements of his imagery
and his own western landscape, the mythological images, and he
used those and Coole park, he used those as a way of coping with
contemporary reality. I think that what he learned there was that you
deal with public crisis not by accepting the terms of the public's
crisis, but by making your own imagery and your own terrain take
the colour of it, take the impression of it.

Heaney is in search of a point of ease where the tension of one’s emerging self and a need to be faithful to collective historical experience get balanced. His stress of Yeatsian philosophy in this regard seems to be relieved to a great extent in the book ‘Station Island’. Where Joyace appears as a ghost and advises him to become free of the poetry written for public as a responsibility.

The main thing is to write
for the joy of it...
...And don't be so earnest,
so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget.
...Keep at a tangent
...it's time to swim
out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements...
(*New Selected Poems*, p. 192-193.)

The master indirectly seems to indicate him that using tradition to only inform his work will help him in finding his own form, rather than finding himself bound by tradition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a representative voice in this tradition has been that of Seamus Heaney (b.1939) – a contemporary voice which grapples with the continuities and discontinuities that invigorate and define his poetic development. Heaney insistently draws on this impressive lineage, not simply as a matter of self-consciousness but more importantly, with a view towards an artistic self-definition and the need to carve out poetry's destiny in an increasingly volatile world. Seamus Deane places Heaney in this direct line of succession in Irish literature: "... Heaney is very much in the Irish tradition in that he has learned, more successfully than most, to conceive of his personal experience in terms of his country's history"

5. Conclusion

Thus, to have a recognizable set of paradigms is an enabling tool for a poet, but can easily fall into stereotyping themes and preoccupations. The peculiar contribution of Heaney lies in the way he manages to write a poetry whereby he becomes not merely the transmitter and re-invigorator of his native tradition but almost provides a remarkable culmination to the efforts of his literary predecessors, writing as he does in the modern or even postmodern world. In this respect, Heaney's contribution to Irish poetry is colossal. What makes Heaney's status in Irish poetry monumental is the way that he has constantly renewed his thematic concerns throughout his poetic career. His prose writings or criticism poses fundamental questions about the nature and role of poetry, the function of the poet and the precarious balance between politics and poetry, the aesthetic and the ethical, art and life, fundamental queries the answers to which his serious artistic endeavors constantly demand. His prose writings have been much acclaimed which form a kind of manifesto or declaration of poetic technique and poetic intent and at the same time have a force and brilliance of their own when read apart from the poetry.

Heaney's work also testifies to the continuity of the pastoral tradition in poetry. Re-viewing *The Penguin Books of English Pastoral Verse (1975)*, whose editors, John Barrell and John Bull, maintain that "the Pastoral, occasional twitches notwithstanding, is a life-less form,"³⁸ Heaney argues that this poetic form, whether it deals with "the potent dreaming of a Golden Age or the counter-cultural celebration of simpler life-styles or the nostalgic projection of the garden on childhood"³⁹ still figures largely in

modern poetry. Heaney enumerates poems such as Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Harry Ploughman," Edward Thomas' "Lob," Edwin Muir's "The Horses," Synge's "Aran Islands," Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger," and John Montague's "Rough Field" as instances in which the pastoral tradition is still alive.

That Heaney's interest in the pastoral mode has not waned is evidenced by his revisitation to Glenmore, to natural or rural experience, in his most recent collection of poems, *Electric Light*, written under the influence of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Heaney is of the conviction – his poetry is evidence of this - that the pastoral is still a viable mode, even in the twentieth century, even in the most devastating conditions.

It is evident then, in conclusion, that Heaney, like every poet who suffers from "the anxiety of influence," who struggles under the burden of his poetic heritage, has successfully emerged from the shadow of his predecessors as a poet in his own right. His assimilation and use of the various strands of both the English and Irish literary traditions, as well as his literary talent, has given Heaney a highly individualized poetic voice, in which he is able to articulate all the doubts, tensions and uncertainties of the modern poet and his predicament.

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