

Landscape or Mindscape? Seamus Heaney's Bogs

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ABSTRACT

In the tradition of Literary Geography, Seamus Heaney's poetical descriptions of bogs are examined in terms of how closely his imagery fits the physical reality of the landscape itself. While studies in vegetational succession and geomorphology may help to explain the origin and development of bogs, both in Ireland and worldwide, humanistic geography also considers place-creation to be subjective, based on landscape perceptions which take into account cultural responses as well as purely environmental factors. Poetic license may stretch description of a regional landscape beyond the confines of measurable reality, bringing to light a stronger objectivity, inclusive not only of the physical environment, but also of the social, psychological, and the historical climate.

Key Index Words: Literary Geography, environmental perception, bogs.

Geographies of the Mind

To use a metaphor from remote sensing, high resolution (accuracy) is not always useful. Sometimes the accuracy of high resolution can conceal rather than reveal patterns and processes. For this reason, geographical research can be greatly aided by fictional accounts such as novels, myths, and poetry, which are concerned with both internal and external phenomena. Fictive works of the imagination are not just the products of perception but are perception. In this way, imagination itself is a source of knowledge of the environment and is, in that sense, 'true':

*Quagmire, swampland, morass:
the slime kingdoms,
domains of the cold-blooded,
of mud pads and dirtied eggs.*

*But bog
meaning soft,
the fall of windless rain,
pupil of amber.*

(Heaney, 1975)

Irish poet Seamus Heaney won the 1995 Nobel Prize in literature for poems "of lyrical beauty and ethical depth" (Nobel Foundation, 1995). With over sixteen volumes of published poetry selling by the tens of thousands, both in the original and in translation, Heaney is arguably the most popular contemporary poet writing in English. He began his writing career in 1963, publishing under the pseudonym *Incertus* in university magazines. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), his first volume of poetry under his own name, garnered four awards and prizes. Overriding images in Heaney's work concern attachments to the soil and the ambiguity of vocabulary used to describe soil and the earth. In particular, Heaney has chosen bog landscape as a metaphor for the Irish psyche.

Literary geography (as opposed to literary criticism) would examine these poetical descriptions of bogs in comparison to how closely the imagery fits the empirical reality of the landscape, offering alternative approaches to geographical understanding. While objective studies in geomorphology and Irish Geography, Volume 32(2), 1999, 126-134.

ecological succession may help to explain the origin and development of bogs, literary geography considers place-creation to be also subjective, based on landscape perceptions which take into account humanistic responses as well as purely environmental factors. Landscapes and territories can be appropriated as living entities, creating 'geographies of the mind' which are then reflected in the structuring of space (Knight, 1982). Thus, territorial identity can be based on symbolic links to a landscape or a past in which meaning is obtained rather than intrinsic.

Literary Geography

A humanistic approach to the study of geography acknowledges both the world within and the world without. In particular, literary geography considers environmental definitions to be subjective, based on a writer's relationship to the land as well as the land itself. Poetic license may stretch description of a regional landscape beyond the confines of objective reality, bringing to light a stronger objectivity which is inclusive not only of the physical environment, but also of the social, psychological, and the historical climate. In this sense, 'false' or fictive geographies may in fact reveal central themes of the environment, beyond those articulated by purely scientific investigation, providing in this way "the basis for a deeper, 'cleansed' perception" (Pocock, 1981: 15).

Noble and Dhussa (1990: 49) describe literary geography as a "recognisable research specialisation" in the discipline which studies literary works as "interpretations of landscapes or other geographical phenomena". Meanings and attitudes which are unavailable for scientific analysis can be an important (and often untapped) source of data, revealing space through an author's interpretation. Landscapes, like regions, are tied to environmental perception of place. The idea of region can be approached from either the microscale or macroscale, but it is more often localised when using the tools of literary geography. It is broadly understood that regions are subjective devices (Hart, 1982) which only begin with the physical surfaces of the earth but extend to space being symbolically appropriated in "shared metaphor or communal understanding" (Gilbert, 1988: 210). These symbolic links, or "geographies of the mind" then structure space through territorial identity (Knight, 1982: 517).

Language itself plays an important yet often overlooked part in environmental perception, weaving visible environmental components into the less visible (or invisible) features of the landscape, strengthening regional identity through bonding of the two (Tuan, 1991). In general, human behaviour which is related to visible aspects of the land is frequently determined by values which transcend the landscape itself, and this is often effectively revealed through myth (including culture autobiography), novels, poems, and other fictive works of the imagination.

Heaney and His Bogs

Heaney calls the bog a sort of Jungian as well as a geological memory-bank, a "dark casket where we have found many of the clues to our past and to our cultural identity" (Broadbridge, 1977: 40). He sees the bog as a symbol of the Irish psyche, as contrasted to the American psyche which, in its pioneering spirit, looks "outwards and upwards, to fulfilment through movement, advance, exploration and openness" (Corcoran, 1986: 62). The Irish bog was the "answering myth" to the frontier myth of the American consciousness (Heaney, 1980b: 55).

Why did Heaney choose bogs as a landscape icon for Ireland? Certainly bogs do not conjure up the romanticised tourist vision of an Ireland with rolling green hills, rippling brooks and lush vegetation. Heaney began to arrive at the metaphorical significance of bog landscape in company with landscape artist T.P. Flanagan, in their bonding of artistic impulses in the bogs near Donegal. They spent many hours together gathering ideas for writing and painting and in doing so, discovered their affinity for the bog. Flanagan romantically described the bog as "the fundamental Irish landscape" which had "primeval connection" with a pagan past. His perceptions were of "the moistness, the softness of the bog, its

fecundity, its femininity..." (Parker 1993, 87). Heaney dedicated his first bog poem to his friend and fellow bog-lover, Flanagan:

BOGLAND

For T.P. Flanagan

*We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening -
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,*

*Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.*

*They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.*

*Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter*

*Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,*

*Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,*

*Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage,
The wet centre is bottomless.*

(Heaney, 1969: 55-56)

Literary critics have commented on Heaney's fascination with the earth, metaphors for the earth, and descriptions of activities involving the earth, which merge noun and verb. Deane (1996) notes Heaney's rich vocabulary for earth terms which include mud, mould, silt, slime, slicks, etc., all of which may be tied to different kinds of landscapes such as fens and bogs as well as to singular weather events and how they transform the earth's surface. *Bogland* (1969) is considered Heaney's 'watershed' poem in which he discovered an image for the unconscious past of Ireland through a natural feature of the landscape where history reposed and was revealed (King, 1986; Foster, 1989).

According to Heaney, the bog poems were also influenced by archaeologist P.V. Glob's writings about the well-preserved "bog bodies," including Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, found in Denmark (Glob, 1969). The normal process of bodily decay after death is arrested due to anaerobic and acidic conditions present in bogs. Bog bodies recovered from peat are fairly widespread throughout Northern Europe, especially in Denmark and Germany. Over 80 bog bodies have been discovered in Ireland alone. Iron-Age victims (murder or sacrifice) have been found blackened, but almost completely preserved, including their fingerprints, hair, caps, tunics, skirts, and often blindfolds and nooses around their necks. Heaney makes poetical allusion to these preservative qualities:

*As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself.* (Heaney, 1975: 35)

While many of the bog bodies were accidental victims, murder victims, or sentenced criminals, Heaney makes sensuous reference in his poem, *The Tollund Man*, to the speculation that at least some were probably bridegroom sacrifices to the pre-Christian Germanic Earth Goddess, *Nerthus*:

*In the flat country nearby
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,*

*Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,*

*She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body...* (Heaney, 1980a:78)

His last gruel of winter seeds refers to the contents found in the stomachs of both the Tollund Man and the Grauballe Man of dried herbs and various seeds. The Grauballe Man's last meal consisted of at least sixty-three varieties of grain and herbs including clover, rye-grass, buttercup, lady's mantle, black nightshade, yarrow, and other plants not necessarily ingested for nutritional value, but perhaps for some religious significance. No summer fruits or fresh greens were included, lending weight to the speculation that these were human sacrifices connected to mid-winter solstice celebrations to bring the coming spring (Glob 1969). Interestingly, some of the sacrificial victims had very smooth hands that gave no indication of manual labour, indicating that perhaps they were either of elevated status or else prepared from birth for sacrificial honour. A sense of this ancient ritualism is echoed in Heaney's own boyhood experience as he describes the boglands next to Mossbawn, where he grew up:

"It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the whit and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes...somehow initiated". (Heaney, 1980b: 19)

Bog bodies have been recorded as early as 1450, when a group of German peasants came upon a perfectly preserved body in the peat. The local priest advised against giving the body a Christian burial because bogs were inhabited by elves, so the dead body must have met harm by supernatural means (Coles and Coles, 1989). It is likely that many other bog bodies were found in former times but destroyed, abandoned or left out in the open air and rotted away. Superstition and fear may have caused many of these finds to be "hastily covered up and treated as if never found" (Coles and Coles, 1989; 177). Glob's work presented considerable scientific data on carbon dating for time reconstruction and pollen analysis for vegetational reconstruction. Since that time, much more work has been done by archaeologists using even more modern methodology (Coles and Lawson, 1987; Purdy, 1988; Coles and Coles, 1989).

Heaney also saw in the ancient sacrificial violence of the bog bodies an analog to the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. In a radio interview he said, "*I've tried to make a connection lately between things that came to the surface in bogs, in particular in Danish bogs, and the violence that was coming to the surface in the north of Ireland*" (Broadbridge, 1977: 10). He felt an intense emotion of mythical reverence for sacrificial victims of the past, combined with and compounded by the more recent horror of violence (Parker, 1993).

Seamus Deane sees Heaney as bringing the Viking dead alive through an "act of ventriloquism" making them speak for contemporary victims in Northern Ireland (Deane, 1996: 28), as in this excerpt from *The Grauballe Man*:

*in a photograph,
a head and shoulder
out of the peat,
bruised like a forceps baby,*

*but now he lies
perfected in my memory,
down to the red horn
of his nails,*

*hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed*

*on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.*

(Heaney, 1975: 36)

As Heaney contemplated the investigations of the bog as historical repositories, he concluded that they were bottomless. As one digs back into history - or down in the case of bogs - the past merges with the present so that as each layer is stripped, it seems already camped on. Therefore, digging back into origins both uncovers and creates a sense of place:

*Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.*

(Heaney, 1969: 56)

The sense of place never stands on its own but is part of individual consciousness, “inseparable from biography formation and the becoming of place” (Pred, 1984). When Heaney was a child, there was a bog behind his house which he was told never to go near; such bogs were “rushy and treacherous, no place for children” (Broadbridge, 1977: 17). He remembers being quite young when he was told that under the moss and grass, the bog was bottomless:

They said it so often I firmly believed it, and in a different way I believe it still. As a child I used to imagine my helpless body whistling down a black shaft forever and ever; now I imagine the imagination itself sinking endlessly down and under that heathery expanse. (Broadbridge, 1977: 39)

In the case of bogs, one might wonder how accurate Heaney’s images are, in particular the image of the bogs as bottomless and ancient. Although subjective reality does not in itself require either justification or validation, a comparison between the objective and subjective geography may reveal a stronger reality, structured somewhere in the borderlands between the two.

‘Mutation of Weather and Seasons’

Fifty centuries ago, great expanses of forest covered the island of Ireland as a result of a stable continental climate with fewer Atlantic storms (Evans, 1996). Around 11,000 years ago, Ice Age glaciers retreated from Ireland and through analysis of pollen grains found in peatbogs and lake mud, the succession of recolonising vegetation is revealed. Trees - birch, then pine and hazel - and other plant species migrated across the landbridges between the Ireland, Britain, and mainland continental Europe.

Humans first appeared in Ireland around 9000 years ago, with evidence of settlement on the high bluffs of north-east Ireland, near Coleraine. These early settlers were not agriculturalists but hunted wild pigs, various birds and fish and gathered hazelnuts and water-lily seeds (Mitchell and Ryan, 1993). Then, around 8000 years ago, the land connection to the continent closed due to warmer interglacial conditions, reduction of the icecaps, and rise in sea level. This altered the water circulation in the North Sea, bringing about warmer and moister conditions (Feehan and O’Donovan, 1996). Around 7000 years ago the forests were at their greatest extent in Ireland, with oak dominant (Alexander, 1989). The climax forest in Ireland was meanwhile engendering and protecting a humus-rich soil which was later uncovered by early agricultural land-clearing and exposed to erosion and leaching (Evans, 1996). Heaney describes this sequencing of bog landscape formation fairly accurately in this excerpt from his poem, *Kinship*:

*This centre holds
and spreads,
sump and seedbed,
a bag of waters*

*and a melting grave.
The mothers of autumn
sour and sink,
ferments of husk and leaf*

*deepened their ochres.
Mosses come to a head,
heather unseeds,
brackens deposit*

*their bronze.
This is the vowel of earth*

*dreaming its root
in flowers and snow,*

*mutation of weathers
and seasons,
a windfall composing
the floor it rots into.*

(Heaney, 1975: 43)

The first Neolithic farmers began to reach Ireland around 6000 years ago, as indicated by a drop in the pollen values of elm trees (Mitchell and Evans, 1993). With the wetter climate that developed around the same time as agricultural clearing, deep bogs grew around the stumps of the forest. This contributed to land sinkage and bad drainage. There followed a thousand years of drier conditions in which the forests reached extensive development again, with rainfall half its current amount and weak westerly winds (Evans, 1945). Following this drier period, the storms again returned and the climate became cooler and wetter once again. Extensive bogs developed from about 2500 to 2000 years ago. This was a time of great peat formation, with "layer upon layer of spongy vegetation, cotton grass, bog rush, and sphagnum" (Evans, 1945: 25). Once peat becomes well established and conditions remain favourable to its continuance, no drainage takes place (Moriarty, 1971). From this very broad overview of bog development, it can be seen that Heaney's mutation of weathers/ and seasons described above in *Kinship* was both poetical and accurate.

Perceptual Deep Time and Space

In his poem *Bogland*, Heaney writes, "Our unfenced country/ Is bog that keeps crusting/ Between the sights of the sun" (Heaney, 1969: 55). However, he also refers to the bog as "Melting and opening underfoot,/ Missing its last definition/ By millions of years" (Heaney, 1969: 55). "Millions of years" is clearly a case of poetic license. The bogs are not really very ancient; in fact they are a "relatively recent arrival on the European (and Irish) scene" (Feehan and O'Donovan, 1966) and were colonised by plant species from much older habitats such as the marshes, mountains, fens and heaths. Today the bogs are perceived of as one of the last Irish wilderness areas but in fact, when humans first colonised Ireland, there was very little bog. The first farmers cleared woodland, not bogland. This woodland clearance is believed to be one of the chief causes for the development of bogs, along with the change in climate from drier to wetter conditions. As the bogs expanded, farming was forced to retreat. The bog had free rein to become wild, uninhabitable land.

Although the bogs are not millions of years old, Heaney can still "step through origins" (Heaney, 1975: 40) into a bog which is "Missing its last definition/By millions of years" (Heaney, 1969: 55). In a metaphorical sense, this may refer to a lack of closure which leaves the land in a "state of transformation or definition, never reaching its ultimate or absolute state" (Molino, 1994: 47). Perhaps the constancy of redefinition implies a sense of the eternal, with all of its 'ancient' implications. Heaney's landscape artist friend, T.P. Flanagan, saw in the bogs a "connectedness with a pre-Christian primeval past" (Parker, 1993: 87). While the pre-Christian era is fairly easy to locate, the definition of 'primeval' is elusive and open to interpretation. In his novel, *The Green Fool*, Patrick Kavanagh writes that bogs are "a history of the world from the time of Noah" (Kavanagh, 1939: 77). But when was that? If he was referring to the Bishop Ussher's origins of the earth timeline based on the chronological order of biblical events, perhaps he was somewhat closer to the mark than either Heaney or Flanagan. However, if the world really was created in 4004 BC, Noah's ark would have touched down on Mt Ararat in 1491 BC - somewhat later than the first appearance of bogs in Ireland or elsewhere (Craig and Jones, 1982). In this sense, the primeval bogs of Heaney, Flanagan, and Kavanagh may be so ancient that they even precede origins.

Heaney steps through these origins in the bog in his poem *Kinship*, referring to the bog as:

*Ruminant ground,
digestion of mollusc
and seed-pod,
deep pollen bin.*

(Heaney, 1975: 41)

Ruminant ground can imply both swallowing and bringing up, referring to the bogs as archives of history (Foster, 1989). Heaney was influenced by the great geographer E. Estyn Evans and his book *Irish Folkways* which chronicled the “sequences of landscape and human culture going back several thousand years” (Morrison, 1982: 45). Perhaps Heaney is referring here to the pollen record of layers of vegetation building up in the bog from the ancient to the present, while the digestion of mollusc may well refer in the geographical mindscape to a connection between Ireland’s bogs to the ocean itself: “The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage/ The wet centre is bottomless” (Heaney, 1969: 56). While stepping back into origins, Heaney seems still aware of the bottomless centre which makes the bog a “repository of history” (Foster, 1990: 28).

*Conclusion
Earth-pantry, bone-vault,
sun-bank, embalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.*

*Insatiable bride.
Sword-swallower,
casket, midden,
floe of history.*

(Heaney, 1975: 41)

Whether yielding up bodies, butter, Iron Age swords, the skeleton of an extinct Irish elk, roadways, or buildings, the environmental perception of bogs is presented by Heaney as a bottomless cache of artefacts, revealing ancient origins, magically preserved through the mysteries of physical and chemical interactions in nature. In this way, the landscape seems to transform itself into ‘mindscape’ (Parker, 1993: 139), as imagination ruminates over origins and histories, real or fictive. Literary geography can effectively display the full range of regional or environmental perception by digesting (ruminating) objective phenomena and adding to them the richness of intuitive, symbolic representation. For Heaney, the presence of the bog is nesting ground, outback of my mind (Heaney, 1975: 42). This mindscape provides Heaney with an effective metaphor to communicate the sense of a living landscape, continually in process, responding to topography, changing climate, and human influence. In the final analysis, it is:

“...this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a share oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both; it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation”.

(Heaney, 1980: 132)

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