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The Poetics of History and Irish Historical Poetry

Par un autre exemple de méthode synthétique, les œuvres de deux poètes irlandais contemporains, Seamus Heaney et daran Carson, sont ici comparées pour ce qui est de la façon dont ils traitent de l'histoire. Au delà du contexte irlandais post-colonial où la littérature se trouve aux prises avec l'histoire et l'historiographie, cette étude se poursuit par une réflexion plus générale sur les rapports qu'entretient la poésie moderne avec l'idéologie.

History is one of the dominant topics of contemporary Irish poetry due to the prevalence of the past in Irish culture and politics and the prominence of Irish poets as bardic spokesmen for their people. Readers often pay more attention to the politics of historical poetry than to the aesthetics of these poems. A case in point is Ciaran Carson's attack on Seamus Heaney as an advocate of political violence due to his wrong mythical and cyclical version of history that would legitimise terrorism (Carson, "Escaped" 183-184). It seems that Carson does not adequately separate the poetics of history from its politics, and historical poetry from its political (ab)use. At first, I will discuss the relationship between the poetics of history and that of poetry in order to define relevant criteria for the analysis of historical poetry. Secondly, I will apply insights from my theoretical considerations to an analysis of Heaney's and Carson's historical poems and the politics implied in them.

Hayden White is less concerned with explicit statements of an epistemological, aesthetic or moral nature in narrative history but with the linguistic deep structure that prefigures the historical field (x). According to White, historiography is based on poetics and its "tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche and Irony as the basic types of linguistic préfiguration" (426). White uses rather loose

definitions of these tropes but I am less interested in the logics of his system than in its use as an analytical tool. He defines

- metaphor as a representational analogy,
- metonymy as an extrinsic reduction in terms of cause and effect, of agent and act or of a part as an aspect or function of the whole,
- synecdoche as an intrinsic and integrating relationship of shared qualities (micro-, macrocosm), and
- irony as a sceptical, relativizing negation of representational metaphors (White 34-37). According to White, historians deploy argument, emplotment, and ideological implication as explanatory strategies. Arguments take the form of
- Formism (the enumeration and classification of particulars),
- Mechanism (the reduction of data to functions of laws),
- Organidsm (the integration of parts in a synthetic and teleological whole), and
- Contextualism (the establishment of functional relationships between parts and the whole).

Emplotments of history follow the archetypes of Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire, and ideological implications are derived from Conservatism, Liberalism, Radicalism, and Anarchism (White 11- 24).

If Hayden White suggests that history is structured by poetics, why not simply apply his theory to the analysis of historical poetry? White's concepts are useful but not sufficient for the analysis of poetic representations of history because of the structural differences between poetry and historiography (Longley, *Poetry* 284). Historical poetry usually does not presuppose the transparency of signs often entailed in scientific historiography, which tends to aim at an objective representation of the past because poetry

- is both "arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of the word" (Heaney, *Redress* 5) as a form of representation and an aesthetic space,
- reveals the mutual implication and construction of subject and object, present and past in opposition to the historiographic tendency towards the segregation of the subject level and the object level,
- explores potential perspectives on history rather than one most probable and authoritative version of the past in historiography, and
- foregrounds poiesis rather than mimesis, language as the opaque material of constructing representation rather than a transparent sign system in historiography.

Whereas narrative historiography may elicit illusions of history due to the correlation between its representation and our cognitive mapping of reality, poetry rather denies this fallacy. What are the consequences of these considerations for our readings of Irish historical poetry? In "a country gripped by historiographical mania" (Longley, *Poetry* 286), historical poetry does not represent history per se but negotiates history in a field of numerous cultural representations. We have to contextualize and historicize poetic constructions of history in order to see whether and how they challenge conventional conceptions of the past. In order to perform the task, we have to combine Hayden White's tools for the macro-analysis of historiography with instruments for the micro-analysis of poetry.

Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney stated that the Troubles initiated his combination of ethical and political considerations and his search for artistic accomplishment in writing poetry (*Preoccupations* 56). However, he confessed that he was torn between his responsibility for politics and his commitment to art (*Redress* 191-193), and he seems to have been uncertain about the exact nature of his political stance. In an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977, Heaney acknowledged his affiliation with the Catholic nationalist community: "my own poetry is a kind of slow obstinate papish bum, emanating from the ground I was brought up on" ("Unhappy" 62). On the other hand, he maintained that, as a bard, he felt compelled to serve his community as a spokesman but unable to provide heroic kitsch that might support Catholic nationalist myths and play into the hands of the IRA (Heaney, *Place* 37-8). He tried to find "a balanced representation of the Troubles beyond the liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or [...] public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity [... and] to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity in the wake of colonialism [...]" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 56-57).

Heaney wanted to consciously address the more general psychological, historical and mythical aspects of the Troubles to the detriment of economical issues and topical politics (*Preoccupations* 57). He was less interested in the specific religious sectarian origin of the Troubles than in the general analogy of the Irish cult of territory and the English/royalist cult of imperial power to religion (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 57). However, his religious idiom in order to convey authenticity

and find "befitting emblems of adversity" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 57) risks the being contaminated by "the bankrupt psychology and mythologies implicit in the terms Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 57). The question is, whether his historical poems display distance from those positions which he discursively criticizes in his essays. I will concentrate on but not limit my examples to Heaney's *North*, since that collection of poems elicited the most controversial reactions concerning Heaney's aesthetics and politics of history.

The last poem of *North*, "Exposure," reflects on Heaney's situation as a voluntary exile, who moved from Ulster to Eire in order to live distanced from the Troubles. The persona of an inner émigré refutes the roles of a hero, victim or traitor in the trying political circumstances. He likens himself to a peasant soldier, who "Escaped from the massacre, /Taking protective colouring / From bole and bark, feeling / Every wind that blows" (*North* 73). Sensitive and thoughtful, he meditates upon his "responsible tristia" (*North* 73), an allusion to Mandelstam's volume of poems written in inner exile in Russia, which responded to the oppressive and chaotic reality primarily as an art that is dedicated to language and does not merely serve as "a diagram of political attitudes" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 219). Thus, Heaney warns us not to read his poetry as a downright political statement.

Heaney understands his poetry as archaeology. He establishes the metaphor of "Digging" in the bog (*Death of a Naturalist* 1966) for his writing in analogy to and unlike his ancestors, who used to dig turf with spades in "soggy peat." The bog where Heaney digs encompasses more than the mere geographical feature of Ireland. The bog embodies the literal and metaphorical archive of history, which the poet explores in (the bog of) his own mind and by means of (the bog of) language. The key metaphor of the bog is ambiguous because "The wet centre is bottomless" (Heaney, *Door* 56), contains but hides remnants of the past, preserves their shapes but discolours them, symbolizes memory and forgetting, yields objects but not their meaning, as words contain traces of the past that require exploration and interpretation: in other words, the bog represents the obscure presence of past, which is waiting to be unearthed and understood. Heaney conceives his "poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants" (*Preoccupations* 41). Here, Heaney suggests that poetry transforms findings

into synechdoches because they grow into and become an integral part of a quasi-organic whole, a plant.

David Lloyd accuses Heaney of establishing a facile and self- asserting concept of history, which constructs the past it purports to discover and thereby establishes the self as knowing authority: "'Digging' holds out the prospect of a return to origins and the consolatory myth of a knowledge which is innocent and without disruptive effect [...] the subject poses his objects (perceived or produced) as synecdoches of continuity" (qtd. in Kennedy-Andrews 43). According to this view, the circular self-assertion replaces an adequate dialectical relationship of the past and the present. David Lloyd's argument neglects that Heaney is very well aware of the fact that imagination is needed to construct the past, and that its truth is questionable. The past resists lucid comprehension in "North" (North 19-20). The dead become warning voices in his imagination, the past a "swimming tongue [...] buoyant with hindsight" (North 19-20), which invites him to delve into the "word-hoard" (North 20) but merely promises transitory glimmerings of insight rather than empowering enlightenment because the voices say: "Compose in darkness. / Expect aurora borealis / in the long foray / but no cascade of light" (North 20). Heaney's "poetymologies" (Hart 204) of words are less assured in North than in the previous volume of poems, Wintering Out, since he no longer searches for an Edenic language but discovers the "split roots of current words" (Hart 220). The construction of an etymology of his farm's name, Mossbawn, seems to be as tentative as its mutable foundation: "I could [my emphasis] derive / A forked root from that ground / And make bawn an English fort, / A planter's walled-in mound, / / Or else find sanctuary / And think of it as Irish" (North 14).

Historical objects are more palpable than words but their meaning is not necessarily more accessible. Obscure lines on historical trial pieces, preliminary bone carvings, form spaces "to conjure in" since the signs are a "mystery" (North 21) to its present reader / writer, whose interpretations of the past are informed by the conflicts of the pre- sent, a process that results in undecided, ambiguous statements that may not be of much importance anyway (Kennedy-Andrews 118): "I am Hamlet the Dane, / skull-handler, parablist, / smeller of rot / / in the state, infused / with its poisons, / pinioned by ghosts / and affections, murders and pieties, coming to consciousness by jumping in graves, / dithering, blathering" (North 23). Heaney's ironic self-image as the mad Dane undermines his authority and the validity of his insight into history because he likens himself "merely" to the fictional Northern character from the quasi-historical tragedy and because his digging in the ground of history merely generates indecisive poetic

discourses, which may not even be true. The mocking reference to the tragedy reveals a distance, which, at least, yields an insight into his own ambivalent position at the fringe of politics, being aware of but contaminated by violence, and not, as Conor Cruise O'Brien maintains, fixed in the pre-ordained destiny of the historical tragedy (28). After all, the poetic "Trial Pieces" (North 21-24) are modelled upon the bone carvings that triggered them and project possible versions of invented history rather than probable truths.

Many critics pay less attention to Heaney's ironic subversion of his discourse than to the cyclical structure of his mythical history. According to Kennedy-Andrews (80-98), there was no shortage of unfavourable critical reactions to North, which daimed that Heaney had a wrong view of history (and politics) because his mythological view reduced history to a determinist and tragical repetition of the past without any viable solution to the contemporary conundrum: nationalist Catholics maintained that he was bogged down in a past that had no relevance to the present, Protestant critics argued that he endorsed the nationalist Catholic aesthetics of martyrdom and terror. Others diagnosed a failure of his aesthetics because his well-made poems aestheticized violence without sufficient regard to ethics, which was rather boggy. Those critics who found fault with the nationalist ideology they believe to have found in North neglected that the sequence of historical poems is framed by two texts, "Antaeus" (North 12) and "Hercules and Antaeus" (North 52-53), which qualify the sequence as a whole (Molino 96-97; Goodby 158).

These two poems use the epic myth of Hercules and Antaeus as an allegorical metaphor for the colonial expropriation of the Irish by the English. In the initial poem, Antaeus presents himself as a nearly invincible hero, since in wrestling with enemies every fall invigorates him due to his symbiotic relationship with the soil as a nurturing mother. In the concluding poem, Hercules defeats Antaeus by lifting him off the ground. Heaney rewrites the classical myth because he transforms Antaeus' death into sleep, and thereby alludes to the mythical romance of the "sleeping giant" (North 53) that will lead the Irish to freedom (Corcoran, Poetry 57). This far, Heaney's version of history as romance is compatible with the nationalist Catholic myth of the close bond with the territory, the loss of their origins, the cyclical fall and resurrection by the death of martyrs, who resuscitate Irish resistance. But Heaney ends with the "sleeping giant," who dreams "of loss and origins" (North 52), and omits the awakening and liberation of the colonial victims. Heaney also replaced the conventional sexual union of the Irish hero and the feminized Irish soil, which he alluded to in some of his poems within the sequence, with the

relationship of a mother and her baby, an image that belittles the heroic representation of Ireland. What is more, Heaney undercuts the potential appeal of the romance of the sleeping giant, which he calls "pap for the dispossessed" (North 53). Daniel Tobin fails to see the ambiguity of the phrase when he maintains that the pap triggers new circles of violence (109). The denigration of that myth as entertaining representation of no value undermines its nurturing quality. As Antaeus's cyclical model of recovery from his fall was disrupted, so the nationalist hope for strength from the retrospective on loss and origins may turn out to be an illusion. The very last line of the historical part of North, the "pap for the dispossessed," may refer to all of the previous historical poems, and ridicules the pragmatic fallacy of their political (ab)use. In addition, Heaney's division of the classical myth into two poems forms an implicit ironic comment on the historical poems because the first poem anticipates the strengthening of nationalist Catholic cause from the cyclical myth of loss and recovery, which is alluded to in some parts of the sequence, but the concluding poem disappoints these hopes and denies univocal ideological interpretations. Thus, the vision of history in North does not merely reiterate myths but interrogates myths (Molino 87; Tobin 106, 111).

The poem "Punishment" (North 37-8) provoked most controversial reactions among readers. It refers to a revengeful public shaming ritual among Catholics, who tarred and feathered young women who had relationships with English troops. The poem establishes a parallel between that incident and the ancient punishment of an adulteress in prehistoric Jutland. The past serves as a synecdoche for the present since the analogy subsumes the archaic and the contemporary scenes of history under one archetype, that of illegitimate love and death, the transgression of rules and the violent punishment by tribal laws. According to Charles L. O'Neill, Heaney's view that violence is inherent in human nature and at the heart of sacred rituals is correct because it corresponds to anthropological findings (94, 100). David Lloyd criticises the construction of a psychic continuity between the Iron Age people and contemporary Irishmen for being ahistorical: "This is effectively to reduce history to myth, furnishing an aesthetic resolution to conflicts that are constituted in quite specific historical junctures by rendering disparate events as symbolic moments expressive of an underlying continuity of identity [...] which [...] doubles the aesthetic politics of nationalism" (qtd. in Kennedy- Andrews 47). Heaney's historical analogy certainly is reductive, but the question is whether Heaney conceives history as a mere repetition without any difference and whether the persona whole-

heartedly supports the law of tribal revenge or displays some sympathy for the transgressive love and the victim.

The persona identifies with four parties, with the female victim and the male adulterer, a fact that is revealed in his own erotic gaze at the victim's female body, with the vengeful punishers and the liberals, who are shocked at the violence. Thus, history is repetition with a difference because the liberal shock at the tribal revenge is certainly not a part of the archetype but presents a contemporary counter-position, which is, however, not dominant. The choice of concepts implies some distance towards archaic ethics: "My poor scapegoat, / I almost love you / but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence" (North 38). The address of the young woman as "My poor scapegoat" suggests pity instead of reverence for the chosen sacrifice for the guilt and the regeneration of the tribe. The "stones of silence" allude to the Biblical injunction: "He that is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her" (St. John 8.7; Corcoran, Poetry 73). The persona seems guilty because he is erotically attracted to the young woman and because he does not intervene in spite of his motives, attraction and pity. Moral compunctions are certainly beyond sectarian revengers (Hufstader 43). The last lines of the poem provoked most protests: "I [...] would connive / in civilized outrage / yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge" (North 38). The choice of "connive" seems to signify moral distance to the liberal critique of violence but can be explained as the Catholic community's refusal to comply with "civilized" norms. His disturbing understanding of the "intimate revenge" may be taken as a confession of complicity in tribal violence. The speaker initially sides with the victim and finally with the revengers, and thus the resulting impression is one of a polyphony of irreconcilable perspectives rather than the unilateral support of sectarian violence (Longley, "Inner Émigré," 45; Stanfield 101-102).

Heaney addresses the problem of an aesthetics of violence when the persona refers to himself as the "artful voyeur" (North 38), an expression which asserts and questions both the roles of the writer and the reader of violence as entertainment: Heaney assumes a contradictory position in the poem because he admits guilt but nevertheless indulges in an aesthetics of sex and violence (Corcoran, Poetry 74). Heaney seems to be more on the safe side when he uses the metaphor of sexual violation for the English colonization of Ireland in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (North 46-47) and Act of Union (North 49- 50). Of course, rape is implicitly condemned in these poems, but, like "Punishment," they presuppose the Irish male right to "possess" Irish women and Irish soil. Readers could accuse Heaney rather of a one-

sided approach to gender than of a one-sided support or excuse of sectarian violence by a mythical model of atavistic history because they should realize the difference in the repetition of history, and the ambiguity of the shifting perspectives and moral positions of the poem "Punishment."

In "Funeral Rites" (N 15-18), a poem on the burial of a relative, the reference to and deviation from the historical saga is highlighted. Heaney rewrites the Icelandic Njal's Saga and interrupts its cycle of killing and retribution. He confirms the need for rituals but imagines that the dead victim would be "disposed like Gunnar / who lay beautiful / inside his burial mound, / though dead by violence / and unavenged" (North 17-18) in opposition to the revenge taken in the legend (O'Neill 102).

Heaney's versions of history based on the integrating synecdoche and the metaphorical analogy to a cyclical myth suggest a conservative approach to historical and political issues. But contradictions, ambiguities, reversals of perspectives, and ironic rewritings of myths reveal that Heaney may come close to but in the last moment steers away from Catholic nationalist models of history as romance or cyclical tragedy.

Ciaran Carson

In opposition to Heaney's vertical digging in the bog as the metaphor for Ids poetry, which promises depth of historical continuity and meaning, Ciaran Carson proposes horizontal mapping as the key metaphor for representation, which reduces the three-dimensional and dynamic reality to two-dimensional written symbols. Carson stresses that maps are notoriously unreliable representations of reality because they "avoid the moment" ("Question Time," Belfast Confetti 58; Goodby 293) and neither exactly represent reality as it is now nor as it ever was. What is more, Carson's maps resemble labyrinths rather than streetmaps (McCracken 356). The poem "Turn Again" summarizes the deviations from reality: "There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built. / A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed. [...] Today's plan is already yesterday's—the streets that were there are gone. / And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons" (Belfast 11). In spite of his scepticism concerning any form of representation, Carson relies on phenomena in order to prove that representations fall short of reality. The ideal map, Carson maintains, "which shows the city as it is [... would include] someone walking his dog when the facade of Gass's Bicycle shop erupts in an avalanche of

glass and metal forks" (Belfast 58), may only be recorded by a movie camera from a helicopter that circles the city, but even those pictures frame reality. Thus, there is no adequate map of the city or rather, "the city is a map of the city" (Belfast 69). All in all, maps (re)present and obliterate the real in rather unpredictable ways.

Carson understands cognitive representations of reality as mental mappings with similar deficiencies as real maps because even questions for directions or regarding the location of a residence make the addressee hesitate and recollect mappings that were established in the more or less distant past. These mental mappings are unreliable since memory and imagination overlap (Belfast 54), and memory is impaired by oblivion (Belfast 67): "It's so hard to remember, and so easy to forget the casualty list—/ Like the names on a school desk, carved into one another till they're indecipherable. It's that frottage effect again [...] With so many foldings and unfoldings, whole segments of the map have fallen off" (Belfast 35). New impressions or rather cognitive constructions form layer upon layer of mental maps, a palimpsest, parts which become illegible from rewriting or amply drop out of memory. The problem of representation is compounded by the fact that Belfast, which Carson is mostly interested in, shows such a sheer mass of objects and fast changes that in quantity and quality, the cityscape seems to exceed any representation because it leads to disorientation and outruns any attempt to fix it by human beings that change as well (Matthews 186-187). As a result, Carson resorts to the accumulations of nouns as well as continual revisions of these lists in order to map, however inadequately, both the multitude and the process of reality in order to save them from oblivion (Corcoran, "One Step" 224-225) by an identification of particulars that do not add up to a coherent whole. In White's terms, Carson uses a Formist mode of argument which disperses rather than integrates parts. Edna Longley is certainly right when she argues that an Anarchist ideological implication goes along with Carson's Formism (Poetry 314), but his attitude towards the anarchic chaos seems to waver between despair and enjoyment. In addition to the uncertainty of the subject and the volatile quality of the world, the linguistic material of representation itself is unreliable (Matthews 186-187). Whereas Heaney's explorations of etymology tend to yield definite origins of words in well-defined historical stages, which add up to a meaningful tradition, Carson's inquiries into words result in the proliferation of signifiers, which rather confuse and disperse meanings by a potentially endless deferral of meaning. Carson "does not find meaning in a bog but discovers a swamp in philology" (Kerrigan 159). Carson's inquiry into the ground of Belfast, the "muck" (Belfast 72) its bricks are made from, leads him into

the mud of language, a heap of associations and "The inevitable declension: Brick./Brack/Brock" (Belfast 75), which, Kathleen McCracken maintains, "corresponds to the city's devolution from something definite and solid into a heap of broken refuse" (365). It is ironic that Carson's poems assert the inability of language to represent reality in content but convey the chaos and deconstruction of the city by some- thing like the mimesis of its form.

Carson presents history as a series of mappings that form a multi-layered palimpsest, which originates in the semiosis of language itself or in subjective stories. These stories are digressive, achronic, discontinuous, overlapping, and reveal that subjects are neither in control of their discourses nor of their actions in the stories (Goodby 291). The diachronic palimpsest adds to the complexity of the synchronic labyrinth of the mappings.

Heaney's Dublin is Carson's Belfast, but whereas Heaney digs for the Viking past in language and in museums, Carson begins with his childhood memory or imagination of "the dark exhausted water" (Belfast 47), whose name "Farset" he will find only years later, with- out, however, being able to discover its origin or precise meaning: "In all this watery confusion one thing seems certain: that Belfast is a corruption of the Irish Béal Feirste" (Belfast 48). The search for an explanation of "feirste," however, generates more and more hypotheses that are recorded in one definition after another, so that finally, the speaker decides that, "by a conspiracy of history and accident and geography, the river Farset, this hidden stream, is all these things" (Belfast 49). Whereas Heaney stresses that his imagination, triggered by etymology and historical artefacts, leads the way to the meaning of the past, Carson foregrounds the semiotic process of différance as the generating principle of multiple but dispersed meanings.

Carson's poem "Dresden" (The Irish for No, 11-16) establishes peculiar relationships between the grand history of World War II and the petty history of an Irishman who owned a kitsch figurine made from Dresden porcelain. The poem reveals that objective history is taught at school but that it is of no importance to the pupils in opposition to the subjective stories of the past, which are told and retold forever. These partial stories exist only in parts, like fragments of maps, due to the tellers' associative digressions, sudden turns and stops. The end of history is in no way meaningful or teleological but determined by the narrator's turn towards another story or simply his stopping to continue, so that endings become more or less arbitrary and do not render the meaning of the whole in retrospect. The

narrating time arbitrarily limits the narrated time, and the fragmented discourse cannot present coherent stories.

Contingency and unintentional irony rule the performance of subjects both in discourse and in story. When the first-person narrator of "Dresden" talks about hunger, he does not refer to the Great Hunger in the mid-nineteenth century as an important scene of colonial history but tells us how someone performed a second-hand story about hunger in County Donegal before the Troubles. The farcical performance on eating ridicules the serious topic of hunger and subordinates the story to the discourse, which is interrupted by somebody's arrival:

> men were known to eat their dinner from a drawer.
> Which they'd slide shut the minute you'd walk in.
> He'd demonstrate this at the kitchen table, hunched and furtive, squinting
> Out the window—past the teetering minarets of rust, down the hedge-dark
> [aisle—
> To where a stranger might appear, a passer-by, or what was maybe worse.
> Someone he knew. Someone who wanted something. Someone who was
> [hungry.
> Of course, who should come tottering up the lane that instant but his
> [brother [...]
> (Carson, Irish 14).

This performance can be seen as an implicit comment on historiographic representation since hunger, the absence of food, is represented by food, the promise of presence, which, of course, can only be inferred from the gesture of an empty hand, which points the absence of presence.

On the level of the discourse as well as the story, Carson's version of history in "Dresden" turns the illusions of romance into a farcical satire since both unreliable narrators and characters succumb to dreams of heroism. The telling of a heroic tale unintentionally turns mock-heroic as Flynn, who smuggled gelignite into Derry, was arrested due to a combination of stupidity and chance encounters. Flynn was not motivated to act by his love for Irish culture and soil since he only began to learn Irish in prison and remembered the barrenness of his "whole bloody parish [...] the grate / And scrape as the spade struck home, for it reminded him of broken bones: / Digging a graveyard, maybe—or better still, trying to dig a reclaimed tip / Of broken delph and crockery ware" (Irish 13). Digging does not retrieve valuable traces of the past as in Heaney's sensuous bog but only produces dissonant noise from a resistant ground (Corcoran, "One Step" 221).

Even more than Flynn, the Irish Catholic Boyle turns from a would-be hero to a victim of history without any reflection on his role in the violent war (Hufstader 223). Boyle joined the British RAF on impulse and not in order to fight the fascists. The bombing of Dresden, which he literally saw beneath him like a map, did not move him because of the havoc wreaked on the people or the architecture but his association of the destruction with the breaking of china. As a child, he had owned the figurine of a milkmaid, which absorbed his erotic phantasy during family prayers, "Offering him, eternally, her pitcher of milk, her mouth of rose and cream" (Irish 15). The clumsy boy accidentally broke the milkmaid and was only able to save its creamy hand with the pitcher of milk, which he, as an adult, keeps among pencils, snuff tobacco, war medals, and a broken rosary in a biscuit tin. Neither religion, nor politics or (inter)national history is of real importance to Boyle, but petty emotions attached to broken kitsch. The remaining fragment of the hand symbolizes loss and disillusionment, the segregation of agent and action, and stands as a reductive metonymy for history, which is no more than a heap of broken shards and images in random subjective (re)collections.

Whereas Carson retains an ironic distance from all the farcical narrators and characters in "Dresden," he explores the involvement in violence in a more direct way mother poems. In "Bloody Hand," the persona gets instructions about the man he should kill, a man with a conspicuous stiff knee, which indicates that he was already warned before not to do "what / He's not supposed to" ("The Knee," Belfast 71). The killing seems to be "child's play" (Belfast 51), which is performed after inconclusive reflections on historical, political or religious motives:

> I snuffed out the candle between finger and thumb. Was it the left hand
> Hacked off at the wrist and thrown to the shores of Ulster? Did Ulster
> Exist? Or the Right Hand of God, saying Stop to this and No to that?
> My thumb is the hammer of a gun. The thumb goes up. The thumb goes
> [down. {Belfast 51)

The unanswered questions suggest that the reasons for the killings are arbitrary. The first question refers to the legend of O'Neill, who cut off his hand and threw it to the shore of what became Ulster in order to touch it before a rival and thus possess it according to a prophecy, and to the clan of O'Neill's resistance against English rule. The historical argument for violence by self-mutilation seems to legitimize intra-sectarian murders, but the next question undermines the goal of the violence, the possession of the territory, a dubious construction in itself. The justification of the murder as an act of divine vengeance sounds presumptuous. The metaphor of "child's

play" is set off against but also colours serious moral considerations and the killing itself. Carson assumes the voice of a killer, who feels no compunctions, but he may convey some distance from the persona by the exposure of arbitrary arguments. Carson's display of the arbitrary banality of violence is as shocking as Heaney's description of the inherent passion of violence. Carson not only portrays the agents of violence but also its (potential) victims, for example in "Question Time" (Belfast 57-63), where the persona almost becomes the victim of his own people, who manhandle and interrogate the cyclist who crossed the sectarian lines for the sake of memories.—Carson does not propose a viable solution to the situation in Ulster but evokes divine vengeance to make an end to terror. The speaker of the poem "Slate Street School" (Irish 46) imagines himself to be the "avenging Archangel [..., who] will bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow" (Irish 46): "These are the countless souls of purgatory, whose numbers constantly diminish / And increase; each flake as it brushes to the ground is yet another soul released" (Irish 46). Apparently, the speaker imagines himself to be distanced and superior to the troubled city, which he would like to drown under the souls of the dead. The poem expresses the desire to escape the trap of the burning labyrinth of the purgatorial city (Corcoran, "One Step" 222-225). Hufstader argues that Carson works through the problem of the artist in a society torn by civil strife, and recognizes "that this violence emerges from within that society and even from within the minds of its inhabitants, including himself' (252). In that respect, his insight compares with Heaney's. Both artists explore the multiple perspectives of violators, victims, and more or less involved bystanders in a way that reveals understanding for and distance from sectarian violence and its legitimization by history.

Heaney's and Carson's historical and metahistorical poems do not pretend to represent objective history but negotiate ways of seeing history. These poems display an aesthetic distance from models of history and even if they are not free from politics, they preclude pragmatic political conclusions. Seamus Heaney's mythical versions of history tend to have conservative ideological implications, albeit qualified by irony. In several poems, he disrupts the emplotment of history as romance and constructs history as a tragic repetition of the past. His integrative trope of synecdoche interprets shards and words as parts of a rather coherent history, a vision which is adequately presented in aesthetically controlled poems. However, he leaves no doubt about the fact that history is an imaginative construct and not a pre-given entity. In general, Heaney's historical poems tend to imply their reflection on representation, which surfaces more frequently in Carson's (meta)historical poems. Ciaran Carson's dis-

continuous versions of history reject Heaney's myths (Matthews 187) and regard parts as reductive metonymic fragments of a chaotic whole, which can never be adequately mapped. His formist enumeration of items in random collections struggles against oblivion but is a rather futile attempt to cope with reality and history in an anarchistic world that is falling apart. Satire dominates both discourse and story since neither the narrators nor the actors are in control of their scripts. History is generated in radically subjective, oral discourse, which the poems mimic with humour. In spite of all the differences and Carson's attack on Heaney, there are more parallels in their view of history than he would like to admit because Carson's satire and Heaney's tragedy both assume "the eternal return of the Same in the Different" (White 11), a pattern that does not provide for an individual escape from the troubles or a political resolution of the historical conflict. Finally, the analysis of the poetic personas and their perspectives revealed that poetic constructions of history do not necessarily entail the authors' definite moral or political statements regarding contemporary conclusions and consequences.

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