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THE TREACHERY OF WETNESS

Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the politics of parturition¹

Moynagh Sullivan

A number of prominent critics have observed that Irish Studies is a practice configured by a sense of crisis. In *Irish Classics* Declan Kiberd notes that 'Irish Studies, for all its hopes of academic objectivity, remains a crisis-driven discipline',² and asserts that these crises are politically driven. Certainly, the political crisis that drove the Irish Studies movements of the 1970s and 1980s was at least partially 'the Troubles', and in 'Theorising Ireland' Claire Connolly attributes the phenomenon of 'crisis talk' in Irish criticism to the search for a solution to violence in the North of Ireland:

The seeming unavailability of any answer to the protracted violence in the North propelled many critics into a search for new kinds of question; and towards the discovery that, in cultural theory, the shibboleths of the Irish debate were being held up for analysis, read as strategically deployed terms and discussed as constructs rather than truths. Equally, however, this sense of present urgency is to blame for a tendency to 'crisis talk' in Irish Criticism. John Wilson Foster has remarked on the 'shared etymology of "crisis" and "critic"', and this linkage undoubtedly underwrites much of what has gone on since the 1980s.³

More explicitly, Colin Graham attributes the prevailing sense of crisis in the language of Irish Studies to an underlying faith in the nascent nation. In *Deconstructing Ireland*, Graham suggests that 'the undelivered future of the nation induces a continual sense of "crisis" in Irish Criticism'.⁴ 'Crisis-talk' tends to be focused exclusively on the failure to resolve the Northern Irish conflict, but when in the 1980s the Irish state experienced a crisis of its own definition, 'crisis-talk' was revealed to be less about the ongoing violence as a problem in itself and more about its failure to deliver the nation. With the advent of the united nation increasingly unlikely, a conservative and Catholic 'Irish Ireland' tried instead to guarantee the arrival of the unborn child in the abortion referendum of 1983.⁵ The 'undelivered future of the nation' found expression in the Irish state's political hysteria and anxiety about women's reproductive bodies and the safety of the unborn child, and in this essay I wish to look at how, in the 1980s, these discourses converged in the body of criticism that established Seamus Heaney as Ireland's de facto national poet.

The very notion of a national poet in Ireland initiates a crisis because it involves a denial of the boundary that separates the island. Questions of nation and representivity have to be managed in such a way as to avoid an articulation of the border, for such an articulation entails disassembly of the precariously balanced, peculiar provisos in which the words National and Poet can share phrasal contingency. In Patricia Coughlan's 1991 essay "'Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus

Heaney' an important argument was opened up about the gendered construction of a national poetry and subject. Coughlan's essay contributed to an already burgeoning body of Heaney criticism that was concerned to establish him as a national voice, but her insights have not been taken on board in any way that has significantly complicated the national subject she deconstructed. Instead, as Margaret Kelleher has recently noted, Coughlan's concerns have been sidelined:

Coughlan's critique of Heaney would trouble a number of later essays on his work but invariably the discussion occupied the footnotes rather than the main text. The placing of this engagement might be seen as further 'evidence' of Coughlan's argument; certainly one of its effects was to suggest that a distinction could be maintained between political and formalist readings, a distinction which has been countered in Heaney criticism elsewhere, and which elided the careful detail of Coughlan's readings.⁶

As Kelleher points out, despite Coughlan's sophisticated interlinking of politics and formalism, a rather spurious distinction between political readings concerned with ideology and formalist readings concerned with aesthetic values has subsequently been emphasised. Feminist readings of Heaney, as *political* readings, have been understood in the main body of Irish Studies, if not as bad form and somehow anti-Irish, certainly as missing the point and as quite unrelated to the proper business of reading Heaney as a *poet*.⁷ The complicated questions of gendered ambivalence raised in Coughlan's pioneering essay have since been largely ignored and instead commuted into quietist considerations of perplexed and interlinked Irish and poetic identity, mediated in formalist terms. Heaney's desire that his work avoid becoming a 'slingstone, / whirled for the desperate',⁸ has become more than a pirouette on the thin green line which intellectuals and artists trod between representivity and 'responsible *tristia*'⁹ in Irish culture during the years surrounding the Anglo-Irish Agreement and in the wake of the worst atrocities of the 1970s. It has instead been established as a crisis of parturition, when confrontation of political partition is sublimated in a critical fixation with the 'undelivered' state of Heaney's full poetic maturity.

Heaney's reluctance to be born as a national voice was firmly established as a critical orthodoxy in Heaney criticism in the mid-1980s by the orienteering collection *Modern Critical Views: Seamus Heaney*. This collection was produced before feminist criticism had had any noticeable impact on critical etiquette and as such the essays embrace gendered metaphors and dynamics with unselfconscious gusto; this lack of politically correct caution means that the toxic conflation of nascency and nation, which is so often cunningly disguised in critical practice today, can be very clearly identified within its poetics. Produced during the 1980s, just after the abortion referendum and against the continuing backdrop of terror in the North of Ireland, the essays demonstrate how the pathologising of feminine reproduction is fundamental to the production of the national body. Edited by Harold Bloom in 1986, it gathered a group of international critics who aided Heaney in his journey to be, in Helen Vendler's words, 'self-born'.¹⁰ Discussion of the 'primal scene' of Heaney's birth as a poet structures the essays in the collection, and the same anxiety about the reliability of woman in charge of the child in her womb that underwrote the 1983 referendum is echoed here.

Terence Brown's essay is concerned that because Heaney's work 'reads a scene as if it were governed by feminine, sexual principles',¹¹ his full poetic development is in jeopardy. Therefore, the task that faces his critics is to 'read the scene' differently, so that government

of his gestation and birth by masculine forces can be stressed instead.¹² Across the collection, Heaney's poetic coming is heralded by repeated images of dilation and contraction. Jay Parini writes that 'he has drawn ever widening concentric rings around the first few themes he circles',¹³ and notes that the last poems of *Wintering Out* have 'a looser syntax, a widening of subject matter',¹⁴ whilst D. E. S. Maxwell observes 'a noticeable widening of his poetic landscape'.¹⁵ And, although the poems Brown considers gravid are encumbered by their own weight, they are at least beginning to contract. He writes that 'the rhythmic and linguistic density of Heaney's early work suggests [a powerful organic presence] as poems of thick clotted verbal texture achieve, despite their weight, an ebb and flow movement, an ongoing fertility'.¹⁶

However, Heaney's birth is far from complete; as Bloom observes, Heaney only 'approaches the cunning stance of the strong poet',¹⁷ rather than achieves it. Heaney appears arrested in the act of self-birthing, and seems to be resisting the full *naissance* of his own poetic maturity, which prompts Brown to comment that 'there is evidence in Heaney's work that such knowledge of the poetic self has not yet been achieved'.¹⁸ This observation is echoed throughout the volume, where Heaney is described repeatedly as *nearly* born into his own national maturity, as 'poised upon the verge of becoming a poet of the Northern Irish troubles',¹⁹ and on the brink of acquiring 'the authentic authority of becoming the voice of his people'.²⁰ Heaney is read as having only, in his own words, 'broken the skin on the pool of [him]self',²¹ which means he is in danger of only being an *epigone*, one of those whom, as Bloom warns us 'drown too soon'.²² He must thus be rescued and the fluid from his 'bag of waters' (understood simultaneously as 'a melting grave'²³) converted into seminal works.²⁴ To prevent Heaney drowning with the *epigones*, his work must be read so that it can be shown to fulfil the criteria of poetic birth, if he is to become the *ephebe* he has been chosen to be.

How best to intervene in this seized birth? When elsewhere Bloom asserts that 'true poets' are born through the 'primal catastrophe of poetic incarnation',²⁵ he implies that the poetic birth is the primary birth, when in fact it is an Oedipal rebirth. This rebirth involves precise procedures that guarantee the authenticity of the poet being born unto himself: specifically the transcendence of the matter/mater so that the textual father/son can be established as the locus of meaning.²⁶ According to this, the birth of a poet is a primary event, but in psychoanalytical terms is actually a rebirth in which the originary body is replaced by language, which is thereafter understood as the seat and origin of being. In part, this comes from what the philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray discerns in the cultural imaginary; she argues that Western history is structured according to an underlying belief that if the 'father did not sever this over-intimate bond with the primal womb, there might be the danger of fusion, of death, of the sleep of death'.²⁷ This belief becomes ideologically expressed and practised when 'the father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother'²⁸ by 'putting the matrix of language' in the place of the originary womb.²⁹ In poetics, this unconscious collective fantasy is manifested specifically in the necessity for a poet to create his own imaginative matrix, from which he must patroclinously emerge. This profound political segue is performed by the most supposedly politically innocent of criticisms; formalist textual practice is here revealed to be itself an ideology despite claims that aesthetic modes of reading are objective. New critical, modernist and Bloomian models, although promoted with many self-advertised differences between each approach, unquestionably consider the poem to be the feminised matter, the matrix out of which the poet heroically struggles into his own maturity.³⁰

The Matter/*Mater* of Ireland

The body of the poem is also, specifically in the case of Heaney, simultaneously the body, the matter/*mater* of Ireland. Parini observes that the poems in *Wintering Out* 'are made of gristle and bone, of rock and water; they are redolent of Irish soil'.³¹ This is a connection that Heaney himself encouraged, as Coughlan notes: 'in this personified ground, a centre, which unlike that of Yeats, actually "holds" . . . the poet himself identifies himself as having grown out of this bog'.³² She goes on to observe how

the wresting of a speaking ego from the *magna mater* which is the land is interestingly complicated by specifically political Irish/English stereotyping: the (necessarily, if self-expressing) male poet (phallically) digging and ploughing like his ancestors becomes the culturally female voice of the subjugated Irish, about to inundate the 'masculine' hardness of the planters boundaries with 'feminine' vowel-floods.³³

What Coughlan sees as an 'interesting complication', *Modern Critical Views* reads instead as a worrying attachment to mummy, as, for instance, when Bloom in his 'Editor's Note' summarises Douglas Dunn's argument 'that the poet remains distracted by the matter of Ireland, which thus interferes with his full development'.³⁴ This centre not only holds, it spreads, threatening to expel the poet, and if Heaney were indeed to leave the constitutionally dangerous womb, and push himself out from what Parini calls the 'philological soil',³⁵ he would unavoidably do so at the expense of the national, through severing the 'syntactical connective tissue'³⁶ with Ireland. Moreover, if he were to do so, he would re-inscribe the border by separating mother and son. The modernist and formalist demand for radical disassociation with the mother's body seems to be at odds with the inherent nascency of the ideology of the nation-yet-to-be, but, in fact, it powerfully colludes with it. This complicity is revealed by looking at how Heaney conducts his agon with W. B. Yeats, whom Bloom nominates as the 'the precursor proper'³⁷ for Heaney, with whom the 'agon of the strong Irish poet must be fought'.³⁸

The agon that Heaney performs with Yeats is enacted not in terms of fatherhood but in terms of motherhood. In his meditations on Yeats's tower, which he treats as a phallic symbol, as did Yeats himself, Heaney subtly redefines the tower to form a womb for the creation of a national poetry. Heaney shifts the emphasis from the tower's exterior power as a symbol to a symbolic interiority when he describes it as 'a Homeric chamber'³⁹ that 'marks an original space where utterance and being are synonymous'.⁴⁰ Yeats's 'place of writing',⁴¹ is constructed as nothing less than a foundational stone womb, synonymous with Yeats's mind, from which the 'founder'⁴² of Irish poetry incubated himself to create a national poetry when Heaney writes:

Ballylee was a sacramental site, an outward sign of an inner grace. The grace here was poetry and the lonely tower was the poet's sign. Within it he was 'within his own mind'.⁴³

The tower as the place of writing is then replaced in Yeats's symbology, Heaney argues, by 'the stanza form itself, that strong arched-room of eight iambic pentameters rhyming *abababcc* which serves as a redoubt for the resurgent spirit'.⁴⁴ Heaney writes that 'The obduracy of Yeats's tower' got

translated into an enabling strain in his poetic voice, topographical place could become written place; how the felicitous conceit of a stanza being a room got verified on poetry

whose syntactic and metrical vaulting was the equivalent of that 'chamber arched with stone' in which Yeats composed the syntax and metre of his own stanzas.⁴⁵

Heaney coverts Yeats's tower from a specular symbol of nation into the stony womb of Yeats's mind, the chamber arched with stone which becomes poetry itself, which is in turn rewritten as 'the matter of Ireland', when Heaney subtly dislodges Yeats's cerebral womb with his own earthier version. Heaney seeks to displace Yeats's phallic and rational mothering of the state with his own corporeal and instinctive, and by extension in the language of all things natural, rightful, gestation of the nation.⁴⁶

Not only does Heaney have a more righteous womb than Yeats, he is also a more natural mother, an opposition orchestrated by implicitly contrasting his own natural methods of birthing a poem with Yeats's preference for 'inductive procedures'.⁴⁷ Heaney's fluid oeuvre is opposed to what Yeats himself termed the 'bony structure',⁴⁸ when Heaney notes that Yeats's 'thoughts do not ooze out and into one another, they are hammered into unity'.⁴⁹ Where Heaney sinks into the rhythms of the land, he emphasises that Yeats understood all reality coming to him as 'as the reward of labour'.⁵⁰ Yeats's cataclysmic visions of the founding of the state are set in opposition to Heaney's effortless birthing of the Irish nation. This reveals an aspect of Oedipal conflict often overlooked. Although the Oedipal conflict is commonly understood as the son's competitive desire to take the father's place, Irigaray argues that it more profoundly signifies 'a desire to do away with the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds, especially the female world'.⁵¹ When Heaney competes with Yeats for the creative power of the mother, he replaces the state with the nation, when he opposes the authenticating trope of the national body to Yeats's mind. Although Brown reads Heaney's resistance to 'make and remake himself, determining through hard intellectual labour what self his poetry will embody'⁵² as a mark of his poetic immaturity, it is Heaney's very defiance of the 'hard intellectual labour' of Yeats that means he can represent the national body. Heaney's smooth birthwork approximates what Pound denigrated as 'emotional slither' and undermines Bloom's dictum that a struggle of catastrophic rupture is 'the central element in poetic incarnation, in the fearsome process by which a person is re-born as a poet'.⁵³

By declining to catastrophically separate from the matter as a mode of poetic incarnation, Heaney is reborn as a national poet, but not in the commemorative role that was Yeats's eventual legacy. Instead, he resurrects another powerful function of the national poet.⁵⁴ In *Anomalous States*, David Lloyd argues that in the tradition of cultural nationalism:

The national artist not only deploys symbols, but is a symbol, participating organically in what he represents, that is, the spiritual identity of the nation-yet-to-be. It is this function which seems to be erased by the Easter Rising of 1916, the poet losing his projective or prefigurative role to one which is merely commemorative.⁵⁵

Heaney's cultural transvestism as the prefigurative 'mother' means he is shaped as a national poet who can be connected in a direct line to Padraic Pearse and the spiritual nation-yet-to-be.⁵⁶ Heaney's refusal to be born in terror, to the rupture of a violent birth, returns to a point before the state began and before blood sacrifice made nationalist martyrs of faithful sons by permanently separating them from their mothers. It revives the national artist as a national symbol of peri-natal promise, his embodiment of the nascent

nation a reinstatement of a mythologised 'origin' that existed before the establishment of the border. As a national symbol, he *must* fail to deliver, for to deliver is to bring the border into existence. He must himself be, to paraphrase Bedford, 'a pregnantly satisfactory image' of his 'own sense of failure'.⁵⁷ Heaney's assumption of the pregnant figure is what Marjorie Garber calls 'unmarked transvestism' and it is 'fundamentally related to other kinds of boundary crossing'.⁵⁸ Heaney's own construction of himself as the mother of Irish identity means he can be understood as simultaneously mother and son, existing on both sides of the membranous divide, speaking from both sides of the border.

Transvestism is understood as a performance, an act of gender, designed to disguise the lack of a phallus (for as the Lacanian analyst Eugenie Lemione-Luccione explains, 'if the penis was the phallus, men would have no need of feathers or ties or medal'⁵⁹). When Heaney suggests that lack can be 'redressed and whole-ness restored through the intervention of the act of poetry itself'⁶⁰ he not only cites the transvestism involved in such an act through the 'redress' of poetry but also signals how a divided Ireland can be restored to a state of wholeness through fetishisation of what in psychoanalytical terms is known as the maternal phallus. Garber describes the maternal phallus as the 'the impossible and imagined phallus which would represent originary wholeness'.⁶¹ By making explicit the womb within the tower, Heaney exposes it for what it was—a maternal phallus, but one that represented the Irish state, not the nation. The implication in this reading is that Yeats was deficient in his mothering because he was, after all, only a drag queen, a Protestant foster-mother to the state. This lack is redressed when Heaney displaces him as the Catholic mother of the nation with an embedded *Irish* womb ('the poems have more come up like bodies out of the bog of [Heaney's] own imagination'⁶²) as, effectively, 'the real thing'. And in turn, Heaney's seeming lack, his failure to give and be birthed, is rehabilitated to success through the 'act of poetry' in *Modern Critical Views*, which not only provides the theatre in which this crisis can be staged, allegedly to deliver Heaney from his peri-natal reluctance to be 'exposed',⁶³ but becomes, quite avowedly, an act of display in itself. For if the critics were to deliver Heaney successfully then the ideology of the undivided nation would be stillborn. Garber's elaboration of the psychoanalytical understanding of 'transvestism as a mechanism that functions *by displacement* and *through fantasy* to enact a scenario of desire'⁶⁴ suggests that the important aspect of such display is the *enactment* of the desire, and not its fulfilment. The desire for delivery is thus only ostensible, and the act of critical labour is itself the end, and not the means. This 'act of poetry' is not a cathartic performance but an 'acting out' in which powerfully disturbing somatic memories of the mother's body are transformed and fantasised in the replaying of the same primal scene in which deliverance is always foreclosed. The nascency of the nation-yet-to-be is not undone by formalist attempts to rescue the unborn, but is instead strongly confirmed by this interventionist act.

Coughlan sharply noted that since Heaney had not 'take[n] up the challenge to the notion of a unitary self offered by the "high" modernists',⁶⁵ unification must then come from what she calls 'that familiar covenant between reader and poet which tacitly agrees the immediacy and authority of such experience'.⁶⁶ The repeated symbolisation of the co-presence of the womb mother subtly disrupts the implicit covenant between poet and reader within an Oedipally configured poetics, and a critical intervention is needed to perform the unification that affirms the autonomous and self-creating subject of high modernism. Heaney's exploration of the semiotic, and his understanding of his own creative processes as taking place in an imaginative matrix, do not in themselves constitute

either an ideology or any sort of desire to discriminate against and assimilate the creative power of women by hiding the traces of the physical womb.⁶⁷ On the contrary, in 'Poem', Heaney makes a clear distinction between the imaginative womb in which he will 'perfect' the poem child, and his wife's physical womb. However, when the invocation of womb experience as an authenticating creative subtext is done within a culture that depends on the prohibition of the womb, then personal experience can be exploited by such a cultural dominant, and by means of critical practice it can be powerfully deployed to establish the maternal phallus as an ideological origin. The point of this critical act, therefore, is not the delivery of the poet but the replacing of the displaced womb. Heaney's critics must in turn replace Heaney's too perilously wet womb with a dried-up version of itself, so that he can assimilate the cerebral and rational aspect represented by Yeats in Heaney's criticism. In this way, what Heaney constructs as Yeats's Protestantism can be integrated into Heaney's nation, as Heaney's voice comes to supposedly represent all the peoples of the nation. However, the highly masculinised and rationalised version of Protestantism that Yeats comes to represent in Heaney's readings takes account neither of all the dissenting churches of Irish Protestantism north and south of the border, nor political unionism. Thus, although the fetishised national body appears to incorporate difference, the dissident is effectively left outside the national body, along with what Julia Kristeva calls the 'form of dissidence' represented by the sexual difference of woman.⁶⁸

The 'Chamber Arched with Stone'

In *Modern Critical Views* this fetishisation is facilitated by tracking how the wet earthy womb of Heaney's first collection is replaced with the stone or bone wombs of his later collections, as Helen Vendler's delineation of Heaney's journey from a young artist to a mature vision testifies.⁶⁹ Vendler writes that this journey will lead him eventually to the 'strange realm' of 'the space of writing'. Here he can 'observ[e] the first, human testimony to the power and strength of form—a form that takes its own inspiration from the contours of its rock matrix'.⁷⁰ In order that the cradle of the womb becomes the bedrock of being, the fluids of the mother's body must be dried, and *Field Work* elicits Vendler's approval because it 'is a poetry aiming not at liquidity but at the solidity of the mason's courses'.⁷¹ The anxiety about fluid is coupled with a disgust of weight and fat, specifically revulsion at the pregnant body. The weight of the first womb necessarily results in the poet's failure, as William Bedford attests in his analysis of 'Exposure':

The poem never actually makes clear what this 'pulsing rose' could have been. But that is not essential to our understanding. The metaphor must carry the weight of meaning, as so often in Heaney's work we are left with a *pregnantly* [my emphasis] satisfactory image of the poet's own sense of failure.⁷²

In this collection, the appearance of hardness and lack of fat and flesh epitomise excellence in a poem: Parini writes 'not an ounce of fat detracts from the poem's swift statement and hard/clear edges. It is a minor classic.'⁷³ This is unambiguously a disassociation from the pregnant body, as is clear when Parini praises Heaney because he '*pushes* [my emphasis] his style towards a spareness, an absence of rhetoric and normal syntactical connective tissue, which culminates in the granite style of *Wintering Out*'.⁷⁴ Bedford observes that in 'The Grauballe Man' 'the language is reduced to an essential metaphorical description out of which the body arises with its immediate meaning',⁷⁵ and *Wintering Out* receives his praise

because 'the language was pared down to a skeletal minimum, and thus enabled to carry its metaphorical meanings with a more assured, authoritative clarity'.⁷⁶

Brown chooses a cavernous poem to isolate the moment of the birth of authentic poetry from Heaney's ensemble, in which the flesh womb is, once again, replaced with one of rock. Brown finds that Heaney's lines:

Yesterday rocks sang when we tapped
Stalactites in the cave's old, dripping dark—
Our love calls tiny as a tuning fork⁷⁷

represent 'no corpse from the bog, no gift for the dark goddess passively accepted by a craft-conscious artist'.⁷⁸ An ostensible reproductive consummation, a penetrative tapping of stalactites into the cave's old dripping dark, can issue forth his 'full poetic powers' in a begetting of a tiny 'voice' of poetry, the tuning fork reminiscent of the over-determined divining rod of Heaney's first collection.⁷⁹ These lines are thus cited as evidence that Heaney 'is entering into his full poetic powers and that he may become a poet of the first rank'. Parini's analysis also stages Heaney's moment of mastery in similar terms, when he identifies 'Bogland' as a 'watershed' poem because it converts the literal wetness of the land into an abstraction, when the bog is finally translated into a *symbolic* womb:

The suggestive possibilities of bogland seem unbounded, and Heaney knows this; but he refuses to go much beyond a literal representation until the last line: 'the wet centre is bottomless'. As a symbol of the unconscious past, which must be unfolded, layer by layer, the bog image will prove indispensable. For this reason, 'Bogland' is a watershed poem in the Heaney corpus.⁸⁰

These masterpieces demonstrate not only what Coughlan has observed as 'rehears[ing] the construction of an individuated masculine self'⁸¹ but also show the construction of the individuated national subject. The watershed moment in which wet is converted to dry constitutes the motherland as the 'original place where utterance and being are synonymous', as the maternal phallus. The emphasis on the motherland as the originary space displaces the actual original space where being and utterance really are synonymous. Thus a double displacement is enacted in the critical act where the woman's supposedly problematic body upon which the boundaries of state are anxiously reiterated, and which betray the nascent nation, is kept out of symbolisation by the powerful substitution of the motherland which Heaney himself comes to embody surreptitiously. In other words, the actual womb, which represents the border between aquatic and dry-land life, is transformed twice in this act of poetry, first into the motherland, which still proves too wet and evocative of its border state, and then into the abstracted or dry womb, which much more successfully displaces the original womb.

However, despite this conversion, the traces of the original womb are not fully displaced because by metonymically borrowing female physiology to create the illusion of original wholeness, Heaney's work, although it resists naming the mother's body, as itself, through the redress of the maternal body as the maternal phallus, brings the mother powerfully into representation. By evoking the mother so compellingly, Heaney's work does not perfectly perform a watertight incarnation of the body into the word. 'Digging', often promoted as Heaney's manifesto poem, would seem to reconstitute matter/*mater* as father/text adequately enough, but the powerfully repeated watery imagery throughout this and other poems keeps the desired dry paternity of the pen treacherously wet.

In 'Anahorish', the 'first hill in the world', is, like the water there, a clear reference to the hill of a woman's pregnant body:

My 'place of clear water'
 the first hill in the world
 where springs washed into
 the shiny grass

Although the poem presents the originary body as an originary landscape, by providing a topography of sound ostensibly from the speech rhythms, accents and sounds and shapes of the townland in which Heaney grew up, the early experience of the semiotic with the mother is powerfully described. A powerful effect of this aura of the semiotic, although rewritten as a semiotic of land, is that legitimising force is borrowed from somatic authenticity of the earliest experiences of language. By describing the landscape in terms of the curves and inner passages of the mother, a compound of land and language as an authentic source of national identity is suggested, forming what Adrian Frazier calls, in a recent essay, the 'sacred *omphalos*'⁸² or navel scar of Heaney's poetry:

and darkened cobbles
 in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
 of consonant, vowel meadow⁸³

Heaney's considerable conviction as a poet is derived in part from the fact that his work countersigns the metaphoric voice of formalist poetic birth with the authenticating quality of a leaking maternal body, and Heaney has written about working in two registers, one a symbolic and metaphoric voice, the other a 'literal voice'. 'Personal Helicon' sets up the maternal phallus as the source of wholeness when the metaphoric and literal are joined in the 'dragged out' long umbilical roots that are pried into as poetry is established as the adult way to finger slime:

Now to pry into roots, to finger slime
 To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
 Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
 To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.⁸⁴

The attraction of and to the womb in Heaney's work also constitutes the attraction pole on the swing of the Oedipal compulsion to 'attraction-repulsion', and this is further revealed in critical practice and language. For even if Heaney and his critics construct the material basis of his voice as the land, experience of the mother's body, true to the form of repressed contents, not only haunts Heaney's own work but also bothers responses to his work, and unconscious connections made by his critics attest to this. For instance, in his reading of 'Exposure', although Bedford writes that 'the poem never actually makes clear what this "pulsing rose" could have been',⁸⁵ he senses that it is a weighty metaphor and is prompted to use the word pregnant in the next sentence. This 'pulsing rose' is the entrance to the contracting birth canal, an imperative reminder of the material origins of the speaking subject. However, this always-leaking knowledge of the corporeality of the semiotic is an underlying threat to the symbolic, and, in the case of Heaney, a threat to an Irish national symbolic that depends on prefiguration—and it needs to be carefully managed. For were the experience of the mother's body to be named as itself in this instance, it would

represent an older and deeper origin as an intricate compound of matter and language, of tongue and talk, and the national poet-hero would be undone. The myth of the lost origin of the experience of the mother's body would become part of the subject's history, and the loss that the mother's body currently signifies would be transformed from lack to presence, taking with it the basis of the melancholic nationalist subject—which is identified intimately with the trope of loss. For, if the canonical national poet hero needs to eradicate the matter in order to self-incarnate, the reverse logic means that the traces of the mother's body erase the poet (as) national hero. The repetitive staging of separation rituals in formalist, modernist and new critical dynamics, in readings in which the individuated poet-hero can be seen to dispose of the womb mother,⁸⁶ represents the 'repulsion' pole of the Oedipal 'attraction-repulsion' complementarity.⁸⁷ These traces of the womb mother are disposed of through fantastical abjection of the womb as a liminal space, which is then culturally mistaken as the sum of femaleness.

The Abject of Desire

This horrible fantasy is carried by the bodies of women and does not attach with the same significance to the bodies of female impersonators, because they do not have a womb.⁸⁸ There is a persuasive tendency in aspects of Queer Studies and so-called post-feminist discourses to assert that because the signifiers of gender are arbitrary, culturally constructed and transferable across bodies, then no difference exists between woman and the mimicry of womanliness. However, the most potent disgust in our culture is at the womb, and not at the outward signifiers of femininity such as those exemplified in camp. Whether or not a womb is used to give birth, it distinguishes a woman's body from the performance of woman, and it is most powerfully the mark of her discrimination in everything from legislation governing reproduction to the adequate provision of child care. Irigaray argues that the culture-wide prohibition of the representation of the experience of the womb, and inter-uterine and early pre-Oedipal relating, *as itself*, causes the almost universal disgust and fear of women's bodies and characteristics associated with it, which marks Western culture. This would be demonstrated, for instance, by the slight 'ugh' or 'icky' factor the reader is likely to have registered in response to the title of this article. Although not everyone carries a womb, everyone has been carried by a womb, and this is the only experience shared universally by human beings: it is indeed the only universal that can be asserted, and is the very one that Western rationalism sought to deny. In *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, one of the foundational texts of Enlightenment-led modernity, William Godwin faced up to the possibility that pre-natal memory undermined his humanist injunction that all men were born equal and that external circumstances alone dictated character. Godwin wrote: 'if the early impressions of our childhood may be as it were obliterated almost as soon as made, how much less can the confused and unpronounced impressions of the womb be expected to resist the multiplicity of ideas that successively contribute to wear out their traces?'⁸⁹ The essays in *Modern Critical Views* eloquently, if unwittingly, express this collective obliterating fantasy of the experience of the mother's body, both pre- and post-natally, which results from (and in) its displacement from the symbolic. The same essays unproblematically assume that the awful characteristics that mark this fantasy are *inherently* feminine, when they are in fact fantastical projections onto the bodies of women, and represent the fear of the unsymbolised rather than the reality

of female materiality. Without proper representation of the experience of the womb, there are, according to Irigaray, 'no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words'.⁹⁰

Whilst the language of criticism does not use the violent language often used about women's bodies in graffiti and popular culture, it demonstrates what Irigaray calls its 'corresponding affects', which are 'anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration'.⁹¹ For example, when Brown reads Heaney as in service to the dark goddess, love for whom 'induces dark fantasy and nightmare, [...] deeds of desperation',⁹² his analysis expresses the 'fear of castration' that haunts the culture that has banished the mother. In transvestism, the 'act' is one of iterated 'virility' that comes to appear feminine.⁹³ Heaney's definition of a poem as 'a completely successful love act between the craft and the gift'⁹⁴ is a display of this virility, which then becomes, as we have already seen, feminine. As a result, Brown reads Heaney's own 'love act' as fruitless, and describes the resultant poems of this impotent act as lacking life, as 'emotionally ambiguous to the point where feeling itself drains from the poems'.⁹⁵ Although Brown's own essay is not consciously concerned to establish Heaney as a 'national' poet, but rather sees him as a 'northern voice', he still describes the stillbirth of the nation when left to feminine principles. And when he writes that Heaney's description of 'fully formed bodies [...] impl[ies] the existence of a self already formed before the poet turns to it for his subject matter, just as nature and history are permanent forms to which he may also return',⁹⁶ his analysis refers to the ways in which Heaney's work reconnects with the transvestual national body already present in Irish history. By not doing anything with these bodies, Heaney is read as 'curious[ly] passive' and as not rewriting the national body, in order, for example, to find a way to include the differences of Unionism. However, Brown's critique of the exclusion of non-'Irish' voices in the national body of history to which Heaney attaches is, despite its sensitivity about the importance of difference, still carried out in gendered terms that continue to inscribe exclusion in the most fundamental of ways.

In Brown's terms Heaney also fails to meet Pound's powerfully influential modernist directive to 'treat an already existing body'⁹⁷ and make it new. In Oedipal terms the symbolic disposal of the maternal body involves 'making it new' by dividing it into oral, anal and phallic drives and phases, an act of poetry successfully achieved by *The Waste Land*, the prototypical modernist poem, so successfully birthed by Pound's Caesarean intervention.⁹⁸ This separating of the mother is yet another way of defending against the symbolisation of the original separation from her, and managing the original experience, by reconstituting her as the parts from which another subject can be catastrophically self-born, made new. Irigaray observes that 'the womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies is fantasised by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best re-productive'.⁹⁹ The critics must also intervene here on this point. Brown's analysis draws attention to the fantasy of the maternal body as urethral and anal outfall when he writes that 'ooze, ripe fullness, rot, the squelch and splash of a waterlogged landscape are embodied in poems that relish words rich on the tongue, almost to the point of satiation, the glut before decay'.¹⁰⁰ The fantasy of the mother's body as a devouring mouth with an all-too-relishing tongue also haunts Bloom's essay on Heaney where from amongst Heaney's diverse poems that narrate a variety of postures and relationships with the earth goddess Bloom chooses 'The Harvest Bow'¹⁰¹ as Heaney's 'perfect lyric', a poem in which the earth goddess is sacrificed instead of the corn king. Irigaray notes that 'the openness of the mother, the opening onto the mother appear to be threats of contagion, contamination, engulfment in illness, madness and death',¹⁰²

and as a protection against this openness 'the fertility of the earth' 'is sacrificed to delineate the cultural horizon of the father tongue'.¹⁰³ Bloom's choice of poem as evidence that Heaney is to become a strong poet not only incorporates a line from Yeats but also marks the transition of a goddess's power of fertility, through sacrifice, into the hands of the male poet; one where he can be constituted as harvester and not as harvested, and the devouring vowel of the earth is prevented from closing around Heaney, saving the unborn from the government of the mother's tongue.¹⁰⁴

This has repercussions for a woman as a citizen and as a writer, for the work of women writers cannot find a home within such a cultural dominant, as the politics of Irish anthologising have shown, any more easily than women can participate as full citizens in the national body. A recurring observation in Irigaray's work is that 'the fundamental ontological category for man is *habiter*' whether he lives in 'grottoes, huts, women, towns, language, concepts, theories',¹⁰⁵ and that 'the house of language [...] for men even constitutes a substitute for his home in a body [...] a woman is used to construct it, but it is not available to her'.¹⁰⁶ The linguistically constructed motherland embodies a home for the Irish nation, but because it is both an impersonation of and a substitute for the primary home in the mother, it is not available to express a women's real difference from the transvestite, her womb. The female figures that have represented the nation from Cathleen Ní Houlihan to Éire represent not the maternal body but the maternal phallus, the projected sum of desire for wholeness. And, most especially since the establishment of the state, a woman cannot be the national body because the traces of the womb, the liminal space of the border, cannot be obliterated in her as they are in the bodies of her impersonators. Contrary, then, to popular understandings of Ireland as a woman, the body of an actual woman with its traces of the womb, its 'tracked / And stretchmarked body',¹⁰⁷ represents not the Irish nation but its *failure*, the Irish state. Women must and do carry the mark of this failure when the state fails them in the ways in which a woman's body is abjected outside the symbolic nation and governed within the state. It is no coincidence that the state has been represented for three terms by a woman president, and that since the 'Troubles' the most interesting and famous poets from the 'state' have been women, whilst the most notable in Northern Ireland have been men. (Medbh McGuckian is the troubling and interesting exception to this.)

Since the publication of *Modern Critical Views*, critical vigilance has been maintained at the 'opened ground',¹⁰⁸ as the continued marginalisation of Coughlan's and other feminist essays demonstrates. As a result, the nation can continue to be nurtured, the unborn within the opened ground safeguarded against it closing over him into a 'kind of scar', that would admit of and mark the border. But the rescinding of the Republic's right to the six counties in the referendum of 1998 has precipitated yet another crisis of national definition—the citizenship referendum of June 2004. As Ireland has increasingly moved into Europe the issue of difference has been articulated less in terms of internal religious and imaginative differences and more in terms of visible racial markers such as skin colour. And women's bodies—the womb as a liminal space, a place of entrance and exit—continue to be symbolic (dis)contents that are a danger to the 'integrity' and 'wholeness' of the nation. The referendum was, of course, in response to the supposed crisis of what has been presented as a veritable tidal wave of pregnant women, largely Eastern European Romany Gypsies and African women, seeking Irish citizenship via their unborn child. The unborn child so vehemently protected in 1983 now finds itself in 2004 without the same champions, whose concerns are revealed as more about the quarantining of the National

Body, than about the inherent value of all life. The mother who could not be trusted to deliver her child in 1983 is now under suspicion because she is *all too likely* to deliver her child and in doing so obstruct the safe delivery of a pre-1916 Irish Nation unmodified by difference.

This populist desire for national integrity and wholeness is a desire still intimately involved with British nationalism and imperialism. In 'Landscapes of Desire: Women and Ireland on Film', Gerardine Meaney argues that the Irish cultural imaginary of the twentieth century, in its deployment of a female embodiment of sovereignty, derives from representations of British national sovereignty, and that this relationship is obscured not only in Irish nationalism but also in its critiques.¹⁰⁹ Critically, the Irish national body is still stuck in the colonial binary from which the nation was symbiotically nurtured, and continues to nourish the British national body as the oppositional incubating space from which Ireland can finally be born. However, being thus fostered by and dependent on this union, such a national ideal is arrested in its own progress towards social maturity; an arrest reflected in Irish Studies, which in its birthing of the Irish nation in the twenty-first century is increasingly returned to the disputed conception of Irish nationalism in 1798, and gripped by the peri-natal confinement of the Revival. Today, Irish Studies remains largely indifferent to feminist interventions in this protracted nativity. For it appears that, like the women of 1983, feminism is deemed likely to discursively abort the pre-natal nation. In common with the women of 2004, feminism is all too likely to treacherously deliver a nation unrecognisable as it was first conceived: a nation gestated by the recent history of the state and modified by the differences of non-nationals and women alike. Until the critical absence of the historicisation and symbolisation of the experience of the maternal body is itself treated as a crisis, and the actual lost origin of the material womb is 'un-earthed' in Irish nationalist discourse, no woman in Ireland, regardless of her colour, religion or race, can be a fully recognised citizen of the Irish state. Instead, woman will continue to haunt the nation as she who cannot matter, just as feminism finds it cannot *actually* matter to the body of Irish Studies.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Selina Guinness, Gerardine Meaney and Clíona Ó Gallchoir for their careful reading of this article and for their many insights.
2. Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, 620.
3. Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', 301.
4. Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, x.
5. See Conrad, 'Fetal Ireland', 153–74, for a persuasive argument regarding the expression and assertion of Irish nationalism and the management of female reproduction in the Irish Republic and in Northern Ireland.
6. Kelleher, 'The Field Day Anthology and Irish Women's Literary Studies', 84.
7. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's essay on Seamus Heaney is a notable exception to this, and brings together questions of nation and gender in the same space. See Butler Cullingford, 'Seamus and Sinead', 43–62. See also Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others*.
8. Heaney, 'Exposure', 143–44.
9. *Ibid.*, 143–44.
10. Vendler, 'Echo Soundings', 173.

11. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 25–39.
12. The one essay that deals with the abundance of feminine imagery positively, Green's 'The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry', 143–53, treats the feminine principle as an unpoliticised archetype, and resists unpacking the gendering of body and voice in such mythopoeia.
13. Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 97.
14. *Ibid.*, 111.
15. Maxwell, 'Heaney's Poetic Landscape', 19.
16. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 26.
17. Bloom, 'Introduction', 9–10.
18. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 27.
19. Bloom, 'Introduction', 2.
20. *Ibid.*, 4.
21. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 47.
22. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 16.
23. Heaney, *North*, 43.
24. In his acceptance speech for the Man Booker Prize 2003, the author D. B. C. Pierre compared himself to the alpha 'sperm' that has beaten all the other sperms in the race to the egg. This speech seemed odd and sat awkwardly with the audience, but taken in the context of the metaphors of creative conversion that dominate literary theory it was indeed perfectly fitting.
25. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 10.
26. See chapter 21, 'Fathers and Sons', 380–95, in Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* for a detailed analysis of self-fathering in the modern nation.
27. Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 39.
28. *Ibid.*, 39.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. For instance, William Bedford writes that 'the language [is] almost physically struggling to assert a mastery of form and metaphor over experience'. Bedford, 'To Set the Darkness Echoing', 11.
31. Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 109.
32. *Ibid.*, 105.
33. *Ibid.*, 90.
34. Bloom, 'Editors Note', in Bloom, *Modern Critical Views*, viii.
35. Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 119.
36. *Ibid.*, 103.
37. Bloom, 'Introduction', 2.
38. *Ibid.*, 2.
39. Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, 23.
40. *Ibid.*, 30.
41. *Ibid.*, 24.
42. *Ibid.*, 47.
43. *Ibid.*, 24.
44. *Ibid.*, 29.
45. *Ibid.*, 36.
46. *Ibid.*, 29.
47. Butler Cullingford, 'The Unknown Thought of W. B. Yeats', 228.

48. W. B. Yeats as quoted in Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 74.
49. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 75.
50. W. B. Yeats as quoted in Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 75.
51. Irigaray, *Reader*, 41–42.
52. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 4.
53. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 10.
54. Christopher Bollas describes 'the Sophoclean tragic vision' as a 'violent action that breaks things up, followed then by reflection, seeing and sizing up what's occurred. This Sophoclean vision, cast in Oedipal terms, is of devastation, and involves the realisation of the unwitting dimensions of the devastation.' Christopher Bollas in interview with Anthony Molino, *Freely Associated*, 13.
55. Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, 69–70.
56. Padraic Pearse's 'Mise Eire' and 'Mathair na Piarasigh' explicitly express this desire to 'mother' the nation. My thanks to Gerardine Meaney for alerting me to Ruth Dudley Edwards' relaying of Pearse's transvestism.
57. Bedford, 'Darkness Echoing', 16.
58. Garber, 'Cross-dressing, Gender and Representation', 165.
59. Cited in Marjorie Garber, 'Cross-dressing', 167.
60. Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, 51.
61. Garber, 'Cross-dressing', 172.
62. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 33.
63. Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 143–44.
64. Garber, 'Cross-dressing', 172.
65. Coughlan, 'Bog Queens', 91.
66. *Ibid.*, 91.
67. Moreover, various psychoanalytical accounts of creative experiences and processes suggest that some sort of experiential return to the womb forms an important part of creativity. The problem is not with this semiotic understanding of creativity but rather with how such experience is cut off from physical source, made mystical and dehistoricised, which means that women have to be de-authenticated as creative subjects, and their work kept out of the historical body of creative works. See, for example, Ehrenzweig, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*; Bollas, *Being a Character*; and Bollas, *Cracking Up*. See also Coquillant, 'A Male Poetics', 223–38, for a detailed discussion of the way in which Rousseau's deployment of self-birthing practice and its powerful cultural legacy discriminates against women as cultural creators.
68. Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual', 296.
69. Helen Vendler writes that 'these poems ['Sweeney Redivivus' from *Station Island*] form a dry and almost peremptory autobiography, stunningly different from the warm-fleshed account given in Heaney's early books'. Vendler, 'Echo Soundings', 176.
70. *Ibid.*, 173.
71. *Ibid.*, 171.
72. Bedford, 'Darkness Echoing', 16.
73. Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 101.
74. *Ibid.*, 103.
75. Bedford, 'Darkness Echoing', 16.
76. *Ibid.*, 12.
77. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 37.

78. *Ibid.*, 37.
79. The 'act' is successful for it meets the requirements of artistic creation set out by Rousseau, when 'one part of him [the creative artist] impregnates the other and the result is a work of art'. Coquillant, 'A Male Poetics', 236.
80. Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 106.
81. Coughlan, 'Bog Queens', 100.
82. Frazier, 'Anger and Nostalgia', 19.
83. Heaney, 'Anahorish', 21.
84. Heaney, 'Personal Helicon', 9.
85. Bedford, 'Darkness Echoing', 16.
86. Irigaray's description of the unthought corresponds to Christopher Bollas's description of 'the unthought known', that which he also calls the 'maternal aesthetic', in which 'the knowledge derived from the dialectic of the infant's true self and the subtle syllogism of maternal and paternal presence and care constitutes part of what will later be known but not thought'. Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 52.
87. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, for a discussion of the abjection of the female body as a liminal space.
88. The sensory presence of the pre-Oedipal father, whom Bollas calls the 'textural father', is also lost to representation. Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 52.
89. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 109. My thanks to Clíona Ó Gallchoir and Graham Allen for bringing this to my attention.
90. Irigaray, *Reader*, 41.
91. *Ibid.*, 40.
92. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 27–28.
93. Garber, 'Cross-dressing', 166.
94. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 34.
95. *Ibid.*, 35.
96. *Ibid.*, 33.
97. Durant, *Ezra Pound, Identity in Crisis*, 23.
98. Ezra Pound wrote the following poem to describe the appearance of *The Waste Land* and it very specifically situates Eliot as the mother of the poem that Pound himself delivers, making Eliot the mother of poetic high modernism, and Pound his midwife:

These are the poems of Eliot
 By the Uranian Muse begot;
 A Man their Mother was,
 A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
 From Nuptials thus doubly Difficult?
 If you must needs enquire
 Know Diligent reader
 That on each Occasion
 Ezra performed the Caesarean Operation . . .

Pound quoted in Docherty, *After Theory*, 162.

99. Irigaray, *Reader*, 41.
100. Brown, 'A Northern Voice', 26.
101. Bloom, 'Introduction', 9–10.
102. Irigaray, *Reader*, 40.
103. *Ibid.*, 41.
104. Bloom, 'Introduction', 9.
105. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 81.
106. *Ibid.*, 81.
107. Heaney, 'Act of Union', in *North*, 43–44.
108. *Ibid.*, 44.
109. Meaney, 'Landscapes of Desire', 238–51.

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