

# Narrating Irish Identity: Retrieving 'Irishness' in the Works of William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney

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**Abstract**—Irish identity continues to be discussed in various fields including social science, culture, literary humanities as well as political debates. In this context, Irishness had been usurped for a long time by the hegemonic power of the British Empire. That is why, Irish writers, in general, and Seamus Heaney along with William Butler Yeats, in particular, endeavored to retrieve this lost identity by shedding light on Irish history, folklore, communal traditions, landscape, indigenous people, language as well as culture. In this context, we may speak of a decolonizing attempt that allowed these writers to represent the autonomous Irish subjectivity by establishing an ethical relationship based on an extraordinary approach to the represented alterity. This article, indeed, places itself within the arena of postmodern, postcolonial discussions of the issue of identity and, particularly, of Irishness.

**Keywords**—Identity, Irishness, narration, postcolonialism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, one of the four protagonists, the Irish captain Mac Morris enquires: "what ish my nation?" [1, p. 124]. In this particular discussion Shakespeare insinuates to 'discourse', in general, and literature or narration, specifically, as the only way to 're-right' Irish identity. It is, in this respect, that several figures, who epitomized Irish poetry, endeavored to answer this existential question about what nation or what identity they belonged to. Indeed, Irish literature since the nineteenth century has obstinately focused on the themes of tradition and identity. This article aims at shedding light on the way William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney aestheticized Irish identity in the frame of an attempt to retrieve 'Irishness' per se. As a matter of fact, the sense of an ongoing process of foregrounding the identificatory discourse of Irishness, the sense of an 'imagined Ireland' is an important 'point de repère' between the work of Yeats and that of Heaney [2, p.36]. Essentially, Irish Identity had been usurped for a long time by the hegemonic-homogenizing power of the British Empire; that is why many scholars in the realm of cultural studies speak about 'the Irish colonial identity'. In return, a movement of Irish poets, among which Yeats and Heaney, engaged themselves in a national project that aimed at reclaiming the true Irish identity. This paper, by placing itself within the framework of a postcolonial/postmodern approach to Irish identity, will utilize the Derridean concepts of 'post-national' and 'post-subject' as well as the Deleuzian dichotomy of 'self/'alterity' along with the notion of 'deterritorialization' in order to highlight the

resilient, 'rhizomatic' aspect of Irishness. As a matter of fact, Irish identity will be studied from the angle of the decolonizer, i.e. the context of resistance and postcolonial literature, instead of the canonical colonizer's perspective. This theoretical framework will be supported by a corpus taken from Yeats and Heaney's versatile as well as prosaic enunciation of Irish identity. As Irish poets, they used their works to reflect upon the political and social troubles that had plagued their country for a long time. Their main concern was to aestheticize their nation through presenting and representing, among others, Irish people, traditions, folk culture, history and language.

## II. THE IRISH AS VICTIM OF HISTORY

Most critical studies focus on the post 1800 Irish Literature because it was written by dint of the colonial tongue, namely English. It is a transition from the authentic, pre 1800, Irish literature to the, 'post' 1800, Anglo-Irish hybrid literature. Here we may project this literary transition on the Irish subject, who was transformed by the agencies of English colonialism from being an indigenous subject, merely Irish, to a 'post-subject', i.e. Anglo-Irish. This colonial outcome stands for a hyphenated being that is neither-nor or hybrid. In fact, as a part of the British empire Ireland and its people were affected, like other post-colonial countries, by the colonial culture and, especially, by the colonial representation. In this respect, Kathleen Noonan argues that for Edmund Spenser, Sir John Davies and Henry Jones the "Irish are characterized as victims of history" [3, p.156]. As an instance, the Irish were often re-presented as 'savage' and 'barbarous' as far back as the travels of Fynes Moryson and his *Itinerary of 1617* [3, p.10]. These colonial, canonical mis-representations led to the creation of numerous stereotypical views about the Irish subjects. Hence, what emerges is that the Irish colonial identity had been molded by the English colonial representations of the Irish as a subsidiary subject. Otherwise, Anglo-Irish identity had been a mere colonial construction that is detached from the real identity of Irish people. As expressed by Lori Rogers in his seminal book *Feminine Nation*: "Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language; it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation and usually of being mauled by it" [4]. What emerges here is that Irishness, or the idea of an Irish nation, is totally different from the western-molded modern 'nation state' with its historical and cultural foundations. We should emphasize, in fact, the liminal, 'rhizomatic', image of the Irish nation which is formed by an amalgamation of different signifiers. As put by Homi Bhabha "[n]ations like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their

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horizon in the mind's eye" [5]. Such an image echoes the modern nation's ambivalent emergence which is a translation of a narrated, 'imagined community'. As such, the Irish, as both a concept and identity, is overwhelmed by ambiguity and ambivalence and that fact obviously makes him an outstanding victim of history. To sum up, the Irish colonial identity epitomizes the long history of colonization in Ireland which affected much the political and cultural assumptions of and about the Irish people. Indeed, Irishness has become a worldwide postcolonial issue that is widely discussed within the cultural and literary circles.

### III. IRISHNESS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Speaking about Irishness entails locating it in the age of globalization and the theories of 'identities in movement'. As a matter of fact, Irishness cannot escape the power of linguistic dissemination and neologism that delineates the postmodern, post-structural era. As affirmed by Brian McCormack, in the light of globalization, postcolonialism involves a multiplicity of theoretical considerations where it is subject to the power of naming [6, p.100]. Similarly, 'Irishness', like postcolonialism, may be considered as a coinage that came out from the context of identity construction and maintenance. In other words, it is a naming that alludes to 'a double injection' a la Derrida—Irish/ness which signifies literally the quality or the condition of being Irish. Derrida explains that this double injection "is at work in every proper name" [6, p.100]. Otherwise, all names including Irishness are always already unstable eluding any kind of fixed definitions. This condition of instability inhabiting the word goads us to consider Irishness as a catachresis par excellence. This literary trope had been often used in baroque and surrealist literature to express extreme alienation. That is why, it can be said that Irishness as a catachresis not only stands for the alienation of the word itself since it is an object of contestation, but also for the alienation of the Irish subject since it is living within a contestable and dubious condition of identity. Then, referring to both Derrida and Gayatri Spivak, Irishness as a catachresis is one of the 'master words' which denotes an improper noun. Accordingly, it has an arbitrary and incomplete connection to its meaning that refers to a group of people—i.e. the Irish people as a whole. It may be interpreted that this referential agency of the word can be considered as an imposed representation of the Irish people. It also indicates that Irishness is a part and parcel of the constructed and debated issues related to postcolonialism and globalization. In this respect, W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney are among the relevant poets as far as the issue of Irish identity is at stake.

### IV. HEANEY'S DEAL WITH IDENTITY

As an Irish poet, Seamus Heaney used his work to dig up for an Irish identity that derives from the Irish politics, society, communal memory and Irish landscape. The poet's main target was to break with the homogenization of the Irish with Anglo-Saxon or Scottish Britain and to retrieve the lost native identity. His treatment of the issue of lost identity cannot be

detached from the poet's reflection upon the political and social troubles that marked his country's history. The eruption of troubles in the poet's native land prompted Heaney to defend his Irish identity and his people. This was best expressed in his volume *North* where he was obsessed with "shards and bodies found in bogs" [7, p.38]. Such a fact intrigued the poet's nationalist emotions to expose his people's bitter reality. To take an instance, in "escaped from the massacre" the poet discloses the dark, gloomy atmosphere in Ireland during the 'troubles' period:

It is December in Wicklow:  
Alders Dripping, birches  
Inheriting the last light  
The ash tree cold to look at.

It is so clear in these lines that the place is witnessing sad events which deeply affected the poet's psyche. Actually, the situation is so dark that it is "inheriting the last light". It can be also interpreted that the poet did not totally escape the massacre because he is poetically there describing the bloody events and defending the rights of his people. Henceforth, Heaney is often described as the 'public spokesman' of his people by many critics. The Irish history of social unrest encouraged him to utter loudly his people's unvoiced identity and foreground Irishness as a tool of resistance against the British colonialism. To explain further, the poet attempts to repeat the 'troubles' events in his poetic way in order to represent the preoccupations of the Irish people. Such representation which is marked by 'difference' led to a 'reterritorialization' of the Irish identity. As Deleuze argues in his book *Difference and Repetition* the first repetition is a repetition of the same, explained by the identity of the represented concept [8, p.119]. Nevertheless, Heaney does not only reterritorialize the Irish identity, repeating the same existing situation, but he also 'deterritorializes' it with an act of representation with difference [8]. For example, in his poem "Act of Union" the poet interprets the British interference policy in the Irish issue, with all its official treaties, as an inescapable union between the 'imperial male' British empire and the supposedly female 'opened ground' of Ireland'. In this poem the subject and the object are described as one inseparable body. Therefore, for Heaney the alterity which is represented in his poems is considered as a grafted part in the self. Irishness, or Irish identity, is not shaped by one factor, but it is the amalgamation of various and, sometimes, opposite factors. Otherwise, Irishness, from a postmodern perspective, is never a singularity, but rather a plurality of identity that is constituted and constructed by such factors including saga, myth, politics, traditions, the British Empire, ethnic communities, spiritual beliefs and languages.

Heaney's treatment of the issue of identity also stems from the Irish past history and communal memory. In fact, several instances from his verse attest that he is tremendously interested in digging up for an Irish memory and, especially, for an Irish autonomous identity. Heaney once remarks that "in Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past" [9, p.60].

Hence, it may be said that the Irish present identity is somehow spotted with the Irish past memory. Accordingly, Heaney's contemporary critic Seamus Deane admits that Irish writing constantly broaches "the question of how the individual subject can be envisaged in relation to its community, its past history, and a possible future" [10, p.4]. More specifically, in the digging poems Heaney foregrounds the uniqueness of the Irish people and Irish landscape. The bog poems are, factually, an audacious endeavor to present Irish history and represent the Irish independent identity. In his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, a myriad of poems including "Follower", "The Diviner" and "Digging" exemplify the notion of excavation, that is, the excavation for both history and identity. More precisely, in his salient poem "digging" the poet identifies himself with his father and grandfather who were farmers:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pin rest; snug as a gun.  
Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down.

What emerges is that the poet is so proud of his ancestors that he relegates himself to a secondary position. He portrays them as farmers struggling in the potato fields in bog lands and assigns power and strength to them. In parallel, he identifies himself with them as struggling with his "squat pin" which is "snug as a gun" to convey the idea that he is using the writing faculty as a tool of resistance against the colonial power in order to defend his own culture and retrieve his own identity. Later in the poem he manifests "But I have no spade to follow men like them" and repeating the refrain that he has only "a squat pen" which may be used for digging. It is really clear in these lines that the analogy of spade and pen echoes Heaney's preoccupation with digging down deeply in the Irish roots for asserting an autonomous Irish identity. It may be, further, interpreted that the poet is persistently concerned with the problem of an Irish subjectivity which is independent from British colonial hegemony and subjugation. In this context, Irish subjectivity does not mean a mere representation of the other as a separate entity vis-à-vis the self. Rather than that, the poet is standing ethically responsible for the represented subject in such a way that there is no apparent subject/object split. In this respect, Emmanuel Lévinas clarifies that "it is impossible to arrive to an authentic thought of the other (and thus an ethics of the relation to the other) from the despotism of the same, which is incapable of recognizing this other" [11, p.15]. Subsequently, we may say that the represented alterity is always already within the mentioned self or poetic persona. The subjectivity or selfhood that is embedded in Heaney's poetry can be interpreted, consequently, as an ethical representation of the other's identity. Otherwise, Irishness is expressed and understood through the memory as well as the narration of the poetic persona where the self and the alterity are living harmonically in integrity or union.

Another important strategy that was used by Heaney to foreground the Irish, independent identity is the employment of Irish language. Language carries within its linguistic rules

and components the identity of the people who use it. Thus, the poet relied on a polyphonic voice—using Irish, English and even other languages—in order to address the political and social troubles of his people and his country. Amidst the social and political troubles that plagued his country, Heaney needed to find a kind of creative dialogue that would stand for an emancipating discourse for the Irish people represented in his verse. In this respect, Michael R. Molino argues that "between 1968 and 1972 Heaney developed a polyphonic voice that displaced the political and cultural resentments abundant in his country and relocated them in a realm of reflexive, historical linguistics" [12, p.181]. In fact, the poet chose to address the political dilemma that haunted his people using the very tongue they use every day and, thus, subverting the imperial, colonial language. In other words, he indirectly reterritorialized English language a la Deleuze and Guattari. In "What is a Minor Literature?" they argue that:

"The three fundamental features of a 'minor literature' are: first, its desire to deterritorialize the dominant language by recodifying and remodifying it. The second feature is its experience and representation of the world as totally politicized. The last reason is its tendency to articulate the collective consciousness [13, p. 296]."

What may be interpreted is that politics is a part and parcel of minor literatures and that the way to infuse it in literature is via the deterritorialization of the dominant language, namely English. To take only some instances, Heaney's intertwined language is apparent through the use of several Irish words in his poems including 'lough' for lake (in "Honey-moon Flight"); 'currach' for coracle (in "Shoreline") and 'rath' for blooming early and for an earthwork fort (in "A New Song"). So, what is at stake here is that Heaney, through using his mother tongue, inscribes an Irish identity in his verse. Reading some of his polyphonic poems, one feels that the poet wants to feel at home; or rather to feel his Irishness. In one of the interviews, Heaney asserts that:

"Not to learn Irish is to miss the opportunity of understanding what life in this country has meant and could mean in a better future. It is to cut oneself off from ways of being at home. If we regard self-understanding, mutual understanding, imaginative enhancement, cultural diversity and a tolerant political atmosphere as desirable attainments, we should remember that knowledge of the Irish language is an essential element in their realization." [14]

Seamus Heaney, henceforth, sheds light on the importance of Gaelic (i.e. Irish) language in the achievement of a stable social and political atmosphere. More than that, he is proud of his mother tongue and his mother land. That is why, he associates the use of Gaelic with asserting one's own identity, which should be independent from the colonial, canonical language.

#### V. YEATS AND IDENTITY

In the same scope of Heaney, W.B. Yeats is another outstanding figure in the Northern Irish poetry who calls for aestheticizing Irish politics, culture and traditions. As a matter

of fact, Yeats anchors the Irish identity in its local sphere where various agents are complicit such as history, folklore, politics, spirituality and communal traditions. Poetics, then, is politicized; it is reterritorialized within the context of Irish geo-politics where it becomes an act of cultural resistance or a de-colonizing project à la Edward Said [15, p.3]. It is through writing poetry that the poet may retrieve his independent, lost identity. Accordingly, he wrote numerous poems that are politically committed including “Two Titans, a Political Poem”, “September 1913”, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “A Meditation Time of War”. In his letters of 1890 Yeats points out that “all poetry should have a local habitation” [15, p.3]. This alludes to the fact that the poet was much occupied in his poetry in narrating the ‘myth of the Irish’-- i.e. the Irish as an autonomous subjectivity possessing its own identity and history. To illustrate this idea, in his poem “September 1913” the poet narrates the history of a “Romantic Ireland” that is “dead and gone”. In short, to have a present and the possibility of a future, Ireland must be given a past or a history which is a fundamental condition to claim Irishness and the independence from the British Empire. In this political poem Yeats expresses his dissatisfaction with the violence that blurred the peaceful memory of ‘Romantic Ireland’:

You have dried the marrow from the bone;  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.

It can be interpreted that in this poem Yeats is lambasting the corruption that caused troubles and violence in his country. He sarcastically and metaphorically attacks the colonizer-who “dried [it] from the bone”- as the true reason behind the weakness of his country [16]. He also urges his people to save Ireland and defend it following the exemplary sacrifice of John O’Leary, the founder of Young Republic Brotherhood. To recapitulate, Yeats endeavors, through narrating Irish history, to pave the way for a determinate recognition of an Irish nation. In his verse, he uses politics and communal memory to establish the Irish identity as an independent, decolonized subjectivity.

Not only does Yeats narrate political, communal and social issues, he also narrates the Irish folk tales which is best exemplified in *The Celtic Twilight*. The telling of tales, really, represents an intermediary way to tell and narrate Irishness. If we consider narratology as postmodern strategy of cultural resistance, we may consider the Irish subject as ‘post-subject’ and post-colonial [17]. Then, this postmodern, resilient identity allows the Irish subject to re-right his independence from the long history of colonial homogenization and subjugation. To illustrate that, the naming agency in *The Celtic Twilight* stands for a bold quest for identity through re-possessing the subjectivity with the use of suggestive and imperative proper nouns. In fact, the title *The Celtic Twilight* itself does not only refer to the collection but also to a literary movement of the 1890s that was interested in impressionism and wavering rhythms [18, p.136]. The inclusion of Celtic beliefs, names and traditions in this collection is utilized to convey the notion of an independent, recognized Irish nation.

The described distinctive features of the Irish people would form, in reality, a cultural identity which is visible despite the metaphorical ‘twilight’ and darkness it suffered from. In this case, what is at stake is the aroused self-consciousness of a nation with its autonomous history and identity. The poet’s assertion that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” sheds light to a nation’s passage from a colonial, romantic history to a modern, independent history. The use of a merely Irish character in *The Celtic Twilight* proves that the poet attempted to highlight the autonomous, distinctive features of his identity. In the preface of this collection he reiterates this idea saying:

“I have desired, like every artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant and significant things of this marred and clumsy world, and to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who would look where I bid them. [19]”

What can be inferred is that Yeats endeavors to show the true “face of Ireland”; the rooted saga, myths, characters and historical moments that shape the independent Irish identity. This idea is also reiterated in his poem “Sailing to Byzantium” where the poet refers to his native Ireland using historical facts and allegorical techniques through which he portrays the beauty and uniqueness of his nation. In short, Yeats asserts the recognition of an autonomous Irish subjectivity by narrating the true identity of his people which is transparent through folkloric telling and communal traditions. For him, the Celtic ‘twi-light’ resides in retrieving the lost Irish identity through writing and narrating the Irish tradition and history in such a way to maintain its permanent state. In this sense, narration is a resistance tool whereby the writer can counter the hegemonic power of the colonizer via writing back to it.

## VI.CONCLUSION

As a final word, it may be said that both Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats are engaged in a committed quest for an independent Irish identity. Both writers endeavor to instill complex and inclusive definitions of Irishness through an inclusive and transformative language. Through Heaney’s digging poems we can discover that the poet turns towards his land and his history to cherish a lost identity that was usurped by British colonialism. He explored place, names, traditions and myth along with a subtle amalgamation of the past and the present as well as subject and object in order to confirm his Irishness. Similarly, Yeats used narration as an intermediary strategy that allowed him to transcend the colonial, canonical boundaries and foreground his true Irish identity that is independent and autonomous. In *The Celtic Twilight* he alludes to a beautiful, outstanding Ireland through telling past history, using Irish names and communal memories. In the end, it may be concluded that Irishness has been retrieved by the process of writing/narration that was utilized by Irish writers during the modern era. Yet, this Irishness may be considered as still living a ‘liminal’ situation that is neither-nor or to borrow Derrida’s word in a state of ‘difference’. It is ‘imagined’ à la Anderson and, henceforth, cannot live without and outside the agency of writing; its true existence resides in

the realm of critical writings on Irish culture that comprises multiple theoretical trends such as globalization, post colonialism, postmodernism and resistance literature.

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