

A Sixth Sense

In 1992 a project headed by Professor Torkel Opsahl listened in to what people living in Northern Ireland had to say about the conflict which had been in progress there for well over twenty years. The report of this independent commission (Initiative '92) was published in 1993, the result of a series of public hearings and written and oral submissions from over 3,000 contributors. One section of the report, 'Culture and Identity', opens with the following paragraph:

Few would question the idea that, central to our problems in Northern Ireland is a conflict, even a confusion, of identity. The 'troubles' and attendant political developments have shattered old certainties. Nationalism and unionism are no longer the monoliths they once were. The IRA's brand of republicanism has alienated many from the nationalist cause, and the Commission found little confirmation among ordinary nationalists—whatever about their political leaders—of the Protestant perception of nationalists as 'winning'. Nor was there much foundation for some nationalists' belief that unionists seek only to continue their ascendancy. Although we are still forced to use the language of stereotypes for analysis, the stereotypes no longer apply. This is the reason for the withdrawal into private life and apparent apathy of so many Northern Irish people—the fragmentation of the old identities, the abuses to which this has given rise, but the inability to arrive at anything new which carries the same clarity.¹

Given its timing, a year before the conditionally permanent 'cease-fires' of the Provisional IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries in 1994, the Opsahl report might be read as a last—and the most detailed—attempt to record political opinion in Northern Ireland in one long and dreadful phase of the province's history. Certainly, it seems proper to hope that eventually it will be read as a document of primarily historical interest in the context of a political climate changed for the better. Nevertheless, the consensus that

¹ Andy Pollak (ed.), *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press for Initiative '92, 1993), 95.

'the stereotypes no longer apply' (together with its concession that 'we are still forced to use the language of stereotypes for analysis') is a conclusion which will continue to be of pressing relevance to all kinds of discussion of what is going on in Northern Ireland, or what has gone on there. 'The fragmentation of the old identities', along with the recognition that 'old certainties' have been 'shattered' is hardly news to the people of Northern Ireland; it remains, however, largely unwelcome information for many of the kinds of analysis that surround the Troubles. The idea of 'a conflict, even a confusion, of identity' as the cause of the Troubles has grown into a commonplace starting-point for analysis (even the Opsahl Commission's analysis); its validity is, as the report recognizes, bound up with the fact that 'identities', like the 'old certainties', continue to be lethal even when they have been outgrown. 'Identities' seem the cause of the problem; old notions of identity have been 'shattered'; and yet the problem continues to be discussed as one resolvable through identity. The report delivers what is arguably a fundamental insight (important both for its perceptiveness and its sense of paradox) in one sentence, which bears repeating: 'Although we are still forced to use the language of stereotypes for analysis, the stereotypes no longer apply.'

Political analysis (like actual politics) cannot take the possibilities of identity in Northern Ireland very far, since any conclusions are fated to come down to a 'new' offer of identity. As long as the problems of Northern Ireland are framed as problems of identity, solutions will always end up as identity-prescriptions of one kind or another; and these, by offering a fresh sense of identity, will not displace but tend further to entrench the identities already in place. When the Opsahl report senses change in the air, and hints that this change might undermine 'old certainties', it fails to understand the dangerous centrality of identity-thinking not just to the problem (which is clear enough), but to the whole spectrum of proposed solutions. Thus, a few pages after the important paragraph quoted above, Catholics are urged to 'help Protestants to feel more at ease by recognizing Protestant culture as part of an Irish identity', and the conclusion is reached that 'There should be a progressive depoliticizing of cultural beliefs, with attempts to find new Northern Irish symbols and emblems with which both traditions can identify.'²

² Pollak, *A Citizen's Inquiry*, 100.

This remains the language of stereotypes, and its retreat into the vagueness of cultural identity-talk is matched elsewhere by the explicitly political analogue which John Hume provides in the SDLP's submission:

If our strategy for dealing with this problem were to be reduced to its most essential core, it would be the need to create new arrangements in this island to accommodate those two sets of legitimate rights: the right of nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life.

No solution is available to us through victory for either of these identities. So long as the legitimate rights of both unionists and nationalists are not accommodated together in new arrangements acceptable to both, that situation will continue to give rise to conflict and instability.³

If *both* 'traditions' are indeed to have 'effective political . . . expression[s] of their identity', it is certainly hard to see exactly how either identity can achieve a 'victory'. But Hume's solution is not the logical one, that both 'traditions' must, effectively, come to an end in terms of their perceived aspirations and demands; rather, he envisages 'new arrangements acceptable to both'—the abstract thing (like a new identity) which can be prescribed easily enough in abstract terms, but not so easily made real, when actual constitutional arrangements have to be made. The prescriptive element of all this is covert, but nevertheless important: Hume means that 'new arrangements' must be 'acceptable to both' traditions, but this denies the exercise of that 'effective political . . . expression of their identity' to any 'tradition' which refuses to accept the 'new arrangements' in their concrete form. In a similar way, the notion that Protestants might be able 'to feel more at ease' for having their culture recognized as 'part of an Irish identity' is an almost purely theoretical proposition, and could be applied only in conditions where 'Protestant identity' and 'Irish identity' were perceived as compatible—and it is a politically awkward feature of 'Protestant identity' in Northern Ireland, as generally experienced and expressed, that this is not likely soon (or ever) to be the case. The inflexibility here is inherent in the conditions of the category of identity itself, for identities are made out of perceptions of hostile difference as well as passive distinctiveness, and they exist by virtue

³ Ibid. 368.

of their interest in maintaining these differences. But 'identity', as a rhetorical term in cultural or political discourse, once liberated from the unwelcome tests of application in the sphere of actual political existence, can set its sights almost anywhere: one day, for instance, in some liberal and nationalist models, the Protestants of Northern Ireland will discover the truth of their Irish identity (and once this happens, in fact, the 'two traditions' will be able to find something with which they can both identify). Wishes like these are not without their own traces of identity-agendas, and what the Opsahl report calls 'a progressive depoliticizing of cultural beliefs' (with its assumption that culture necessarily finds expression in 'beliefs', as though its business were to provide these) betrays an assumption that identity-problems need identity-solutions. Thinking about real problems, however, can often mean thinking around those problems, and finding the language which, rather than plaintively declaring its inability to escape from stereotypes, challenges fundamentally the terms in which the problems have been expressed.

In this sense (though the parallel has to be maintained with some caution), thinking about literature can help in thinking about politics. But thinking about literature is a very difficult process; though easier than actually producing literature, it is still a rare (and necessarily a rarefied) activity. Where literature from Ireland is concerned, it is much easier not to think at all, and much literary criticism exists comfortably on the basis of taking on trust the assumptions of others. With the writing produced in, or out of, the Northern Irish Troubles, a crossover between not thinking about politics and not thinking about literature is especially easy. The following remarks, taken from a study by an American critic Robert F. Garratt, are in no way unusual, and the things they take for granted are indeed common currency in the study of Irish writing; Garratt speaks here from a consensus which he takes to be uncontentious:

Modern poetry in general is haunted by the divided mind, as we sense in Rilke, Eliot, and Stevens, poets who portray man cut off from his past, confused about meaning, and involved in an attempt to reconcile himself to his isolation. In the Irish literary tradition, that reconciliation is defined in cultural and national terms, that is, the struggle for reconciliation becomes embroiled in the question of identity.⁴

⁴ *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 101-2.

The fatuousness of the first sentence here is not irrelevant to the quality of the second sentence's analysis; Irish politics blends gracefully into the syllabus of modern literature, and its search for identity continues the project of those poets 'haunted by the divided mind'. It is an elementary (but necessary) objection to the literary analysis here that the three poets (in any case unlikely companions) were not, in any primary or accessible sense, attempting to reconcile themselves to isolation—or not, at any rate, in their writings: they wrote poems, and a lot of different poems. But Garratt is, one presumes, much more interested in 'modern man' and 'isolation' than he is in anything so unforthcoming as poetry; by the same token, his concern for 'the Irish literary tradition' leads to 'the question of identity' as that literature's inevitable and essential subject. When Garratt says that 'The difficulty, then, for Irish poets at mid-century came in the search for continuity, finding something that would suffice to provide cultural identity and also to admit the modern world',⁵ he accepts an agenda far removed from what poets actually do (for better or worse, they write poems, which are themselves better or worse). Of course, poems are hard to write about, while cultural identity is very easy to discuss: so easy, in fact, that it tends often to write its own way through the kinds of critical discourse that accept it as their subject. In literary studies as in political analysis, it is always easier not to think than to think, and it is quite possible not to think in academically profitable ways: whole schools of not-thinking about literature have established solid institutional presences by finding new ways to ignore the difficulties and perplexities of literary analysis and evaluation. Inevitably, the crossover between contemporary literary criticism and contemporary political or cultural discussion of Northern Ireland is both easy and rewarding. Nevertheless, such a crossover has a price.

The recognition that identity has become a commonplace, or in some ways a cliché, in cultural and political discussion (even if it is, as the Opsahl report wearily and self-defeatingly claims, an unavoidable term) is seldom made in Irish literary criticism. Here, identity often remains the goal of Irish writing, and the foundation of real literary achievement; a certain amount of bad contemporary writing, especially in the Irish Republic, takes the critical agenda of

⁵ Ibid. 168.

identity entirely seriously, and often comes down to no more than a series of roots proclaimed, allegiances declared, and set gestures rehearsed. It is hardly surprising that some of this writing finds its advocates among critics to whose preconceptions it is already in thrall. In Northern Ireland, fewer writers have been willing to make the (potentially lucrative) investment in identity which provides criticism with the correct answers to the pre-set questions. This may be owing to the degree to which the costs of identity-thinking have been all too visible in Northern Ireland, and the caution of writers in this respect (often, from the point of view of political discussion, a trivial or irresponsible caution) has paid longer-term dividends in terms of literary achievement. In arguing for this evaluation, one is arguing for the significance and value of poems as discrete achievements within larger bodies of work, as things which possess, so to speak, identities of their own. Such an argument is almost completely at odds with most of the assumptions of a good deal of contemporary critical theory, for which poetry is always and inescapably a mode of discourse, and therefore not to be separated from other elements of that discourse. These assumptions might be of literary and critical use if they arose from an awareness of the specific charges and liabilities which words in literature carry from other areas of discourse; but they tend more commonly to constitute a dogmatic rejection of the close scrutiny of words in their formal literary contexts, with a consequent rejection of the specific in the interests of larger propositions. Effectively, the answers of the critical discourse take priority over the questions posed by the details of its ostensible subjects; the agenda is set outside the poem, and the poem has to conform to what the agenda requires. It is only a poem, after all.

Such matters are finally, in the pejorative sense, academic ones, and have no direct bearing on the situation in Northern Ireland. This is not to say, however, that this situation can have no bearing on those academic questions, or that it cannot test their adequacy in fundamental ways. In any case, the matter of interpretation, and the grounds of interpretation, are by no means confined to the mandarin circles of professional academic discourse. It might well be argued that the situation of individuals in Northern Ireland is compromised in the political and cultural discourses which set out to take them into account. An act of violence, in this discourse, is more than just a violent act, since its meaning and conditioning are

foregrounded in the political or historical interpretations that can deal with it; effectively, these patterns of interpretation take priority over the act itself, so that a man who murders (for example) can be defined and understood as a political offender—in this sense, he *is* his interpretation, and lives within a defining public identity. It is, if not a tragic, at least an appalling fact that many individuals in Northern Ireland over the past quarter of a century have killed, and died, in abject obedience to their interpretations. By the same token, patterns of interpretation have been imposed consciously at the cost of others' lives: the meaning of the victim and the meaning of the killer coexist within the same realm of discourse. One death cannot disrupt or divert the discourse by which it is interpreted. It is only one death, after all. In such a dreadful context, the innocent world of literature and its criticism assumes, perhaps, its proper proportions; nevertheless, the flirtation with identity-politics in which some of the literary intelligentsia (most commonly, academics and commentators from outside Northern Ireland itself) are able to indulge themselves is not entirely without its legitimating influence on those modes of discourse which have provided, especially in the USA, one kind of Irish identity with its lethal interpretative force. Again, it is always easier not to think than to think, and the reasons and excuses for not thinking are always abundant: fighting for a free Ireland, like fighting for God and Ulster, can put interpretation handily in the way of reality, and help the process of not thinking in which the facts of murder are soon and easily forgotten. There remains, however, a responsibility to resist the pervasiveness of such a discourse rather than accept its conclusions as inevitable.

There is a paradox in the contemporary use of 'identity' (a use going far beyond Ireland) which helps to explain why the term is especially problematic in relation to literature. A sense of identity might seem to point up the sheer individuality of experience, its unrepeatable particularity; in fact, the idea of identity is employed almost always to emphasize the *common* nature of experiences, and to provide these experiences with a significance and meaning already mapped out in cultural or historical terms. Thus John Hume's demand for both traditions to have 'effective... expression of their identity' understands identity as something shared which transcends the individual. It is a short step from this to see the individual's responsibility as one of realizing

his identity, and finding its expression; and, luckily for him, the identity is there already, waiting to be realized. The unease often felt by writers about interpretation is similar to the unease of an individual who is being told where his identity (his and many others') is waiting to be discovered, and Northern Irish writers have been especially reluctant to align themselves with critics' projections of their significance over the years. Any celebration of literature in terms of identity is finally prescriptive in nature, because it can only recognize things within strictly limited ranges, and cannot afford to put itself at the mercy of literature's actual unpredictability and variousness. In an excellent formulation (to which he has not always adhered in his own work), Seamus Deane has written of how 'Identity is here and now, not elsewhere and at another time';⁶ similarly, poems are to be distinguished from their interpretations, and constitute the complex 'here and now' of literary attention, which remains more important and valuable than the assorted elsewhere of theoretical categories, just as literature is more important than the critical enterprise which may surround it. It is vital that this importance should continue to be measured outside the world of professional academe.

However, 'identity' is not a term which floats free in contemporary criticism, and the more recent academic engagements with the concept declare their attraction to it as part of a vocabulary of post-colonial interpretation. As far as the situation of Ireland is concerned, this particular interpretation (which is almost imperially ambitious in its geographical range) has been applied with rigour and determination. The English literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, has usefully digested the dogmas of post-colonial identity for the benefit of the Irish:

Nobody can live in perpetual deferment of their sense of selfhood, or free themselves from bondage without a strongly affirmative consciousness of who they are. Without such self-consciousness, one would not even know what one lacked; and a subject which thinks itself complete feels no need to revolt. In this sense, the 'negativity' of an oppressed people—its sense of itself as dislocated and depleted—already implies a more positive style of being. The true triumph of alienation would be not to know that one was alienated at all.⁷

⁶ 'Remembering the Irish Future', *The Crane Bag*, 8/1 (1984), 91.

⁷ *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* (Londonderry: Field Day, 1988), 16.

For the Irish, it seems, a 'sense of selfhood' is inevitably a recognition of the 'bondage' they have suffered, and suffer; to deny the oppression is either to have failed to achieve an 'affirmative consciousness' of who one is, or to have been hoodwinked into believing that one has not been hoodwinked. There are no answers to arguments like these, since they are themselves already a series of answers which will brook no questions. However, as such arguments filter into actual critical dealings with Irish literature, and particularly Northern Irish literature, they set agendas for creative writing which good poetry has difficulty in following. In this sense, the theorist David Lloyd is entirely logical (if doomed to failure) in his dismissal of Seamus Heaney as 'a minor Irish poet' who has been elevated 'to a touchstone of contemporary taste within a discourse whose most canonical proponent [Matthew Arnold] argued for the study of Celtic literature as a means of the integration of Ireland with Anglo-Saxon industrial civilisation'.⁸

Lloyd's sophistication allows him to acknowledge the problems inherent in identity-discourses, but also to blame these on the English imperial discourses which they were fated to emulate: he writes of 'the specific relation of an "Irish identity" to the English literary—and political—establishment', and accuses that establishment of providing 'not only the language, but the very terms within which the question of identity is posed and resolved, the terms for which it is *the* question to be posed and resolved'.⁹ It may be that Lloyd is correct to see in some of Heaney's work a 'chosen basis' in 'the concept of identity', and to be alert to the ways in which this can be a liability for some poems; but Lloyd, like other post-colonial theorists, is more concerned with what he calls 'The real basis of the present struggle in the economic and social conditions of a post-colonial state'¹⁰ than with the different 'here and now' of poems. It is also important in such an argument that support for 'the present struggle' should legitimize the adverse criticism of a popular poet; the critique of identity-discourse offered by Lloyd and others must be at all costs (and at any cost) a radical one.

Radicalism like this has only to be declared loudly in order to be proven. In a report on a conference entitled Gender and

⁸ *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 37.

⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 19.

Colonialism, held in Galway in 1992, *Feminist Review* noted that 'There were 300 attenders, mainly from academic institutions in the British Isles, with some also from Canada and the US', and concluded rightly that this provides 'a strong indication of the growing popularity of colonial and postcolonial studies'. In keeping with this, it would seem that an insistent radicalism, or perhaps an indiscriminate radicalism, was also much in favour:

There were four plenary sessions. The opening lecture was given by Barbara Harlow (University of Texas, author of *Resistance Literature*, 1987). The 'occupied territories' of her title were Ireland, Palestine, Texas—she drew on prison and insurgent writings from the Sinn Fein Women's Department, the PLO and Chicano writers in the US. Her political support for these movements was refreshingly direct—no fashionable suspicion of 'grand narratives' here. For example, she attacked the recent wave of Irish 'revisionist' (or anti-nationalist) historians in a memorable phrase as 'the strip-searchers of academia'. This set the note for the majority of at least the Irish contributors to the conference—a clear pro-republican stance, opposed equally to the 'bourgeois nationalism' of the Irish state, and to the 'liberal revisionists'.¹¹

One assumes that the Irish and British bourgeois states were not entirely unforthcoming in their subsidies for the not-very-oppressed academic contributors who made the journey to Galway, and enjoyed the 'remarkable hospitality of the conference organizers', along with 'the unexpected brilliance of the weather'. Perhaps the contributors, no doubt healthily refreshed by Harlow's directness, found further theoretical nuances for the expression of 'a clear pro-republican stance', and were confirmed in their belief that they were, indeed, up to something entirely novel and ground-breaking. But scepticism from beyond the academic fold seems in this case entirely reasonable; had the delegates ventured further north, they might have enquired profitably of people in Northern Ireland about the real differences between revisionist history and strip-searching. Other distinctions commonly made in the world of post-colonial theory are perhaps more difficult to grasp; for many of Northern Ireland's dead, the difference between being interpreted in the light of 'a clear pro-republican stance' or of a 'bourgeois nationalism' is indeed, in the narrowest sense, an academic one. Observations like

¹¹ Clara Connolly, 'Culture or Citizenship? Notes from the "Gender and Colonialism" Conference, Galway, Ireland, May 1992', *Feminist Review*, 44 (Summer 1993), 104-5.

this might well, on the other hand, spoil the fun; and the very act of making them within the context of academic discourse might seem to be in bad taste, if only because it breaks the conventions by which some of that discourse keeps itself safely and profitably at arm's length from the radicalism which it commends.

In contexts like these, disavowals of identity-discourse ring hollow: Lloyd's critique of Heaney, in the light of this, can be seen to amount to little more than a theoretically dense series of allegations that the poet, read in the totalizing discourse of cultural politics, fails to be republican enough. Arguably, it is greatly to Heaney's credit that someone of Lloyd's convictions so dislikes his poetry; but more commonly Heaney has found his work assimilated to vaguely nationalist cultural agendas, in which the privileging of identity allows recognition and praise of the poet's apparent validation of rootedness and origin. The extent of Heaney's critical and popular success has been significantly dependent on the acceptability of ideas of Irish identity in critical and journalistic currency, and the Northern Irish Troubles have added a *frisson* to this by seeming to present a drama of confused and tragically conflicting identities to which an art like Heaney's might minister. Yet (perhaps as a result of this) critical discussion of Heaney has been, with a few notable exceptions, largely passive and undistinguished.¹² Some poets spawn weak imitators, who publish poems in which they try to sound like their master; in Heaney's case, the imitators would seem to include many of his critics, and their prose restagings of his poetic habits and procedures are as weak and derivative as the outpourings of any poetaster. Maurice Harmon, for example, has written of Heaney's poems as 'chords [*sic*] of attachment binding him to the landscape' and 'mating calls by which the land rises to delight the poet', adding that 'what is verifiably real is drawn into metaphor, intimately mated in the act of poetic speech'.¹³ Critical arousals like these are not rare, and they are capable of being adapted to suit even theoretical agendas, as when Henry Hart

¹² Notable exceptions include Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986); Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994); and Tony Curtis (ed.), *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 3rd edn. 1994).

¹³ "We pine for ceremony": Ritual and Reality in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 1965-75', in Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 73, 74.

remarks on how 'For a postcolonial poet who feels that the religious, political, and linguistic hierarchies imposed on his country by a foreign empire still watermark his psyche, deconstruction is as much a gut response as a well-thought-out strategy of exposure and demolition.'¹⁴ Heaney's poetic identity, which is often to be a repository and purveyor of Irish identity, is laid down in a great deal of the criticism which sings his praises. That he is in fact a much more complex figure than this, whose work relates to notions of identity in various and variously questioning ways, is something less likely to be noticed, and much less likely to be welcomed, by many of his warmest admirers.

The Heaney of the 1980s and after does not inhabit the discourses of identity in any very comfortable way, and a good deal of his writing is possessed by the consequent discomfort involved in finding ways around the positions which those discourses prescribe. While a case might be made for the literary unsatisfactoriness of some of the poetry in which Heaney most strenuously attempts such relocations, the artistic necessity of the effort need not be in question. In the long (and only intermittently successful) 'Station Island' (1984), Heaney begins tentatively to assess the risks involved in abandoning a poetry of solidity, roots, and firm location for one bereft of the certainties of cultural identity, in which the figure of the poet might be exposed and at large. In section IX Heaney confronts his own image:

'I hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming,
I mouthed at my half-composed face
In the shaving mirror, like somebody
Drunk in the bathroom during a party,
Lulled and repelled by his own reflection.'¹⁵

This instant of confrontation seems at first entirely futile, like a moment of bad temper that will pass. But the rejection of the self's ready acceptance of typecasting, or the foreordained tracks of a secure identity, even as it seems to acknowledge its own futility, starts to build up a counter-momentum:

¹⁴ *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 7.

¹⁵ *Station Island* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 86.

As if the cairnstone could defy the cairn.
 As if the eddy could reform the pool.
 As if a stone swirled under a cascade,
 Eroded and eroding in its bed,
 Could grind itself down to a different core.

The insistence of 'As if...' is starting to get somewhere in these lines, and Heaney begins effectively to push towards the 'different core' of unpredicted strangeness on the other side of a given sense of identity. Although the passage is marred by the whimsy of the final two lines which follow ('Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail / For they keep dancing till they sight the deer'), Heaney's determination can be felt to work its purpose here. The familiar metaphorical life of the idea of identity often involves cores, essences, and centres; for Heaney, whose work in the 1970s had so frequently explored the metaphorical possibilities of unearthing and delving, the 'core' laid bare by imagination in Northern Ireland had taken a mythic, historical, or archaeological form—the sense of identity being dug up, explored, by a volume like *North*, is increasingly impersonal and perhaps forbidding in its fossilized remoteness. The frustrations of 'Station Island', on the other hand, are those of an authorial self impatient with the given possibilities of its identity, and the poem goes around in circles (or, more exactly, in circuits) in its protracted consideration of the likelihood of finding 'a different core'.

It may be, however, that even metaphorical cores have their limitations. In an interesting poem from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Heaney speaks for 'The Stone Grinder', a figure who prepares lithographic plates by repeatedly erasing what has been engraved there ('Me, I ground the same stones for fifty years / and what I undid was never the thing I had done'¹⁶). The core of this enterprise is (literally) erasure, and the stone grinder's profession centres him on absence:

For them it was a new start and a clean slate
 every time. For me, it was coming full circle
 like the ripple perfected in stillness.

Heaney's growing interest in things having vanished, in absences and gaps, allows him to speak for the stone grinder (who is himself,

¹⁶ *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 8.

of course, a vanished figure) in terms that risk incompleteness rather than the completeness of a knowable identity:

So. To commemorate me. Imagine the faces
stripped off the face of a quarry. Practise
coitus interruptus on a pile of old lithographs.

The voice's commands to posterity do not allow for the satisfactions of secure identification, for they emphasize the persistence of the unfinished (and the unstarted) in a future of absences as well as presences. The stone of this poem is all surface, and no core; it may be, indeed, that the core turns out to be all surface. In a perceptive aside on this poem, the critic Michael Allen has asked, 'I wonder if what [Heaney] is representing here is the tension between popular and aesthetic commitment in the writer, writing poetry for "the ear" or for "the people" in the terms of "Exposure"'.¹⁷ Certainly Heaney's popularity does not always sit easily alongside the terms in which he sometimes expresses his 'aesthetic commitment', and his increasingly complex (or increasingly mystical) sense of identity as a core which is known by its absence, 'a space / Utterly empty, utterly a source' in the terms given in 'Clearances',¹⁸ seems to have led the poet away from the earthed certainties in which his own popular appeal was founded. The metaphorical tendency of Heaney's writing has shifted from the earthy to the ethereal, and his volume *Seeing Things* (1991) represents the poet's most sustained attempt to achieve imaginative lift-off into a kind of poetry less constrained by identities (Irish or otherwise) and more openly metaphysical in its concerns. Undoubtedly, the enterprise is a risky one, and Paul Muldoon's gentle satire in *The Prince of the Quotidian* is not without its point:

the great physician of the earth
is waxing metaphysical, has taken to 'walking on air';
as Goethe termed it, *Surf und Turf*.¹⁹

Heaney's 'walking on air', whatever the artistic merit of *Seeing Things*, is not without a point of its own, since the poet has found himself occupying the unmistakably solid ground of popularity and

¹⁷ "'Holding Course": *The Haw Lantern* and its Place in Heaney's Development', in Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 197.

¹⁸ 'Clearances', 8, *The Haw Lantern*, 32.

¹⁹ *The Prince of the Quotidian* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), 14.

critical authority to an increasing extent, and his artistic reflexes have directed him away from this, towards something altogether more difficult to express, or to stand firmly upon. Bernard O'Donoghue's explanation that 'The secular mysticism of the book is a celebration of the ordinary, sometimes in its transcendent form, and ordinary language can be drawn on in representing it'²⁰ is perhaps too confident of Heaney's abilities, but it accurately describes the volume's ambitions. Despite possible liabilities of style, however, Heaney's poetry seems determined to concentrate on the things inherent in absence, leaving behind the stony determinisms of the core for something less constrained and more open:

Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
 Convert to things foreknown;
 And how what's come upon is manifest

 Only in light of what has been gone through.
 Seventh heaven may be
 The whole truth of a sixth sense come to pass.²¹

Heaney's 'sixth sense' has assumed a major place in his poetic imagination, and it is more at odds with the assumptions of his early writing (and perhaps with the foundations of his popular success) than his admirers will admit.

In terms of the identity-discourses and the cultural politics with which Heaney's reputation (especially in Northern Ireland) has been entwined, 'what has been gone through', along with 'things in the offing', may assume a particular prominence. The effort made in the poet's final lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford to exercise a 'sixth sense' in relation to Ireland results in a complex presentation of a cultural and historical map of the island, drawn according to the intuitions and revelations of the literary imagination. What Heaney calls (after Sir Thomas Browne) his 'quincunx' is a figure connecting 'five towers', the first (and central) one being 'the tower of prior Irelandness, the round tower of original insular dwelling', but the others belonging to Edmund Spenser, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Louis MacNeice.²² The figure is ingenious as well as elegant, and might be seen as providing a satisfying instance of literature imperiously exercising its own imaginative capacities on

²⁰ *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, 128.

²¹ 'Squarings', xlvi, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 108.

²² *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 199.

a map to which the narrowest of politics had previously laid claim. Yet Heaney's imaginative instincts are perhaps reduced in scope as soon as he translates them into the language of politics and culture, where the available vocabulary sends the writer back to precisely those terms and definitions from which poetry repeatedly manages to escape. The language in which good intentions find expression tends to be compromised despite the best of those intentions:

Those who want to share [an Irish] name and identity in Britain's Ireland should not be penalized or resented or suspected of a sinister motive because they draw cultural and psychic sustenance from an elsewhere supplementary to the one across the water. Unresented, they could more easily stop resenting. For they, in turn, must not penalize or resist the at-homeness of their neighbours who cherish the primacy of the British link. The Unionists' refusal to be 'outcast on the world', in Hewitt's poetic formulation, expresses itself politically as a refusal to be included in an integral Ireland. And that refusal has to be imaginatively comprehended as well as constitutionally respected.²³

Heaney's use of 'identity' drags down the imaginative buoyancy of his argument, and he is forced (like John Hume) to hope that incompatible identities can be reconciled through finding untrammelled expression. The constitutional respect urged by Heaney for a unionist 'refusal to be included in an integral Ireland' begs precise political questions, and allows a degree of vagueness to enter an issue where prosaic clarity is essential. It does not take Heaney long to urge the unionists to 'start to conceive of themselves within—rather than beyond—the Irish element', and 'make their imagination press back against the pressure of reality and re-enter the whole country of Ireland imaginatively, if not constitutionally, through the northern point of the quincunx'.²⁴ By now, Heaney's prose is fanciful rather than imaginative, deaf to the contradictions of its terminology, and (at least) mistaken in its estimate of literature's hold over the business of living (and living with the business of dying) in Northern Ireland. Heaney finds himself betrayed into the arrogance which is the flip-side of his sense of literature's authority; the betrayal comes, as usual, from the fixed agendas inherent in the discourse of identity, which write themselves into the prose just as surely here as in a speech by a politician or an academic analysis by a cultural theorist. Perhaps, after all, the

²³ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, 201–2.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 202.

imaginative confinement of Louis MacNeice in Carrickfergus Castle signals an underlying weakness in Heaney's 'quincunx'.

Heaney's integrity is not unique in its capacity to be compromised even at its most honourable; to varying extents, all writers from Northern Ireland have come into contact with the problematic dynamics of language and political interpretation during the Troubles. From the point of a view of a literary critic, this may be precisely the thing that makes the achievements of Northern Irish poetry most engaging and revealing; poetry's integrity here makes apparent its difference from other kinds of integrity in political or cultural discourses, not by rejecting them (it may well, at some levels, accept them), but by maintaining and insisting upon the privileges and proprieties of its own existence. It is worth repeating the truism that good intentions cannot of themselves write a good poem; a critical culture distrustful of evaluation (though it may be silently efficient in enforcing its own evaluations and canonical judgements) is able to ignore such a truism, but poets themselves have found it less easy to forget. An active and alert kind of literary criticism is engaged unavoidably in the business of evaluation, however tentative it may be in making its conclusions, and it cannot afford to make judgements on the basis of ideas or allegiances that are to be validated outside a poem. Thus, to praise a poem, or the works of a poet, in terms of a perceived fidelity to some notion of shared identity is really to recruit the writing itself to a project in which the identity in question is propagated and strengthened. In Northern Ireland, such an activity is no contribution to 'progress' (to employ a term already sullied by various vested interests), but part of the deeper, obstinately rooted problem.

The ambitions of the present book are, in one way, limited: it brings together a series of essays which, although interrelated, are intended also to stand independently as studies of particular poets and poems, and the contextual situations in which they are involved. In another sense, it is more ambitiously angled, attempting as it does to discard as far as possible the agendas of identity-discourse; since the book addresses only Northern Irish poetry, this attempt is likely to be read by those discourses as politically conditioned or even politically engaged. To some extent, any attempt at argument on this matter is bound to be in vain: at any rate, the book accepts Northern Ireland as (over the last quarter-century at least) a place very different *de facto* from the Irish Republic, and its

literature as sufficiently distinct from that of the South to require in this case separate treatment. A second 'political' dimension can be readily acknowledged: that is, the author of *Mistaken Identities* is no more free than any other writer from the pressures of identity discourses, and his own origins (as a Belfast-born Presbyterian) are visible plainly enough in the book's style and in certain emphases of its polemic. Yet the assumptions central to the essays in this book, and the implications of the space which it tries to open for literary criticism in Northern Irish poetry, are not necessarily friendly to any specifically 'political' application. Certainly, the criticism of identity-discourses here is willing to accommodate the caveat issued about such suspicion by the historian Gearòid O Tuathaigh:

Those who are suspicious of or hostile to the Irish-Ireland idea, who continue to warn against monochrome definitions of cultural identity, must themselves guard against intolerant dismissal of what they do not know but yet fear. There is a form of intolerance also in seeking to deny that there is any point or purpose (indeed, in hinting that it may be dangerous and socially divisive) in calling on Irish people to cherish and cultivate those particular marks of Irishness which have a long historical continuity in Ireland and which other peoples acknowledge as being distinctively Irish.²⁵

Intolerance is, indeed, the reflex which both 'traditions' in Northern Ireland need to unlearn, however painful such a process will prove. But the language of essence and distinctiveness is not unconnected to that intolerance, and it is one of the things which will have to be forgotten also if the darker side of Ireland's 'historical continuity' is to be defeated.

Yet such admissions are in a sense incidental, for the primary business of this book is with poetry and not with political identity, and its arguments and interpretations are to be judged against the evidence of the Northern Irish poetry which it discusses. It is important, however, that the subject-matter of the essays is not understood as narrowly contemporary: the book does not see recent poetry in historical isolation or as some freak cultural growth, and, besides material on John Hewitt and W. R. Rodgers, the significance of Louis MacNeice is a recurring theme. In the final

²⁵ 'The Irish-Ireland Idea: Rationale and Relevance', in Edna Longley (ed.), *Culture in Ireland—Division or Diversity*, proceedings of the Cultures of Ireland Group conference, 27–8 September 1991 (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991), 68.

chapter, the degree to which Northern Irish poetry is lodged in contemporary English literary concerns enlarges on another theme present throughout the essays. As regards contemporary Northern Irish writing itself, the selection of poets and poems is not made with an intention of providing an adequate survey or guide, still less any definitive series of canonical rankings, and readers will doubtless be well aware of the excellence and distinctiveness of a number of poets who are not discussed in the present book—amongst whom Medbh McGuckian, Frank Ormsby, Robert Johnstone, James Simmons, and Gerald Dawe are likely to be numbered. Even a modestly adequate critical survey of Northern Irish poetry since the 1960s would make a hefty volume, and this in itself raises a number of important issues.

The quality of much writing from Northern Ireland offers critics an especially complex challenge, since it brings to the surface problems and areas of awkwardness more often forgotten or ignored. One such area is, clearly, that of the relation between political contention and the literary imagination; but there are other (arguably more fundamental) matters at stake as well: what, for example, is poetry's distinctiveness as a mode of discourse? And how might a critical language be found to account for this distinctiveness which is not itself compromised by the insistent crises and demands of its cultural and political context? Is criticism able to imagine a liberation from 'identity' which will move into the spaces opened up by different kinds of poetic achievement? Perhaps a kind of criticism responsive to questions like these might make the transformation of culture into 'cultural beliefs' less easy, and have applications beyond Northern Ireland. In any case, the essays in this book make an effort to take poetry seriously as (to use Heaney's term) Northern Ireland's 'sixth sense'; this is something less, or more, than a 'cultural belief', and something in which the present author is content to put his trust.