



Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism

Volume 11
Issue 2 Fall 2018

Article 7

December 2018

Our Day Will Come

Heidi Moe Graviet

Brigham Young University - Provo, byucriterion@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Graviet, Heidi Moe (2018) "Our Day Will Come," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol11/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

"our day will come"

Echoes of Nationalism in Seamus Heaney's "Bogland"

Moe Graviet

On 5 October 1968, a civil rights march ended in bloodshed in the streets of Londonderry. This event sparked the beginning of the Irish "Troubles"—a civil conflict between Protestants loyal to British reign and nationalist Catholics that would span nearly thirty years. Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet living through the turbulent period, saw many parallels between the disturbing violence of the "Troubles" and the tribal violence of the Iron Age, exploring many of these tensions in his poetry. Poems such as "Tollund Man" and "Punishment" still seem to catch attention for their graphic—verging on obsessive—rendering of tribal violence and exploration of age-old, controversial questions concerning civility and barbarism. Poetry became Heaney's literary outlet for frustration as he struggled to come to terms with the plight of his nation. As Heaney recalled later, "The problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (*Preoccupations* 56). Accordingly, the majority of scholars agree that Heaney's poetry during this time manifests strong political context, with scholarly conversation typically centering around poems included in his collections *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), written and published during the "Troubles." Scholars have examined these and other collections repeatedly for political parallels, including exploration

of questions that seemed to take form from the disturbing ways the nation was brought to confront violence, nationalism, and identity politics.

Curiously, one poem has escaped such attention. Despite the fact that “Bogland” was published one year after the Londonderry riots in 1969, scholars have failed to fully examine its weighty political undertones. The absence of this poem in this critical conversation seems strangely inconsistent with scholarly analysis of the chronology of Heaney’s political writings. Tim Hancock, a critic who has explored politics in the bog poems perhaps most extensively, argues that Heaney was an actively political poet who fully stepped into this role in 1969. However, he centers his analysis upon Heaney’s later collections instead of the poetry that was published during that year. He writes of Heaney’s work, “Death was to leave the more significant mark on his poetry after 1969, as increasing levels of violence in the province made issues of allegiance and identity more pressing. A ‘political’ writer was born during the summer of that year” (Hancock 112). Though *Door into the Dark*, the collection that features “Bogland,” was published during this period in which Hancock claims Heaney’s transformation into a political poet took place, he makes no further reference to it. As the critical conversation surrounding bog poetry and politics has taken shape, Hancock’s claim still emerges as representative of the body of Heaney scholarship in which “Bogland” remains a shadow despite its publication during the year of his supposed political birth.

As Hancock’s analysis exemplifies, a variety of scholars similarly seem to subtly dismiss the possibility of political undertones in *Door into the Dark*, taking their analyses in various directions. The main line of inquiry examines this poetry as the sacred embodiment of Heaney’s exploration process, positing that “Bogland” in particular manifests Heaney’s psychological journey to identify himself and to establish a congruence between self and country. One proponent of this claim, Magdalena Kay, argues that the bog poems embody a psychological excavation through which Heaney addresses his deepest fears and the endless search for national identity, citing “Bogland” as exemplary of Heaney’s efforts to achieve access to the Irish center. Edna Longley evaluates “Bogland” in a similar vein of psychological exploration, further establishing its role as a process poem that Heaney wrote *prior* to his political poetry. In doing so, she takes particular care to establish “Bogland” as a preparatory inner searching that preceded Heaney’s main political commentaries on Ireland’s struggle to find identity under English oppression,

seen in *Wintering Out* and *North*. Longley asserts, “1969 thus coincided with Heaney’s readiness to pioneer the frontiers of Irish consciousness,” offering this poem as evidence of the transformation period before Seamus Heaney took a public stance in the world (35). Both Kay and Longley seem to touch upon the political context of the piece, picking up on the nuances in the search for identity as echoing the political sphere and acknowledging “Bogland” as a poem that forecasts Heaney’s political role. However, with such labels as “pre-political” and “process poem,” they also seem to neutralize the potency of the poem as they fail to go deep enough. Both Kay and Longley appear to dismiss the possibility that by this point, as Hancock’s chronology implies, Heaney was already political and delivering valid, potent, and openly political messages—even in “process” pieces such as “Bogland.”

In response to this seeming lack of exploration, the context and content of the poem reveals “Bogland’s” compelling nationalistic echoes. Its background indicates that “Bogland” contains clear political context and even a deliberate political agenda. Furthermore, the poem itself reveals several compelling allusions to Irish nationalism through its use of nationalistic symbols and political metaphors of Ireland as a united world power. Such evidence suggests that contrary to previous scholarship, “Bogland” constitutes an embodiment of Heaney’s openly political stance in favor of Irish nationalism and a promotion of national Irish identity as a call for the people of Ireland to end civil strife and become a united, independent, nationalist power.

In several of his writings and interviews, Heaney offers a number of hints as to deliberate political complexity in “Bogland” and the existence of nationalistic undertones. In his interview with Scott O’Driscoll, Heaney says of “Bogland” and “Requiem for Croppies,” “Obviously the vantage point from which they were written was that of a Northern Irish Catholic with a nationalist background” (O’Driscoll 90). In suggesting that the poem was written with a nationalist mindset and intention, Heaney also implies that politics play an important role in the formation and unfolding of the poem. In *Preoccupations*, Heaney continues to explore the background and intent of his poetry; he explains, “I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after ‘We have no prairies’—but we have bogs” (54–55). Heaney here expressly asserts that “Bogland” was written to bridge the landscape of Ireland and the national

consciousness; through the poem, he aligns the two concepts and thereby promotes nationalism in connecting with this consciousness.

On a textual level, Heaney's call for nationalism echoes throughout his poem, commencing as he calls for the Irish to take pride in their country by designating a national landscape. The bold voice of national pride echoes with incredible gravity in the very first line of the poem, "We have no prairies" (1). Previous to writing "Bogland," Heaney had read extensively about the great American plains and the frontier as "an important myth in the American consciousness" (*Preoccupations* 54). Recognizing the ways in which the plains helped to promote the enviable American spirit of national pride and unity, Heaney realized the value in establishing a defining national landscape and proclaimed bogland as Ireland's own "great open plains." He declares, "I set up—or rather, laid down—the bog as an answering Irish myth" (54). While Magadalena Kay notes that Heaney uses this line to begin the poem defensively, Heaney actually seems to go beyond the defensive, designating a mythic landscape that can "answer" or be equal to that of others in a competitive way (24). With this definition of bogland as Ireland's national mythic landscape, Heaney begins to relay a vision of nationalism that includes building up Ireland's legacy to be equal to those of other powerful countries and thus produce similar effects. Through these first lines, Heaney lays claim to the bogland as an embodiment of Ireland's own expression of nationalistic freedom.

Having established a unifying landscape, Heaney designates a national Irish symbol when he resurrects the long-buried skeleton of the Great Irish Elk, drawing upon the power of ancient Irish prosperity and majesty in order to encourage national unity. In the following passage, Heaney recounts an event from his school years when his neighbors famously discovered a massive elk skeleton that had been preserved for thousands of years in a nearby bog. He writes,

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air. (9–12)

With the imagery of pulling the skeleton "Out of the peat," and then making efforts to "set it up / An astounding crate full of air," Heaney designates the elk as a national symbol around which the Irish can rally. The elk becomes a

symbol of the past, of ancient Irish majesty, referring to a time before English colonialism and Irish inner warfare when Ireland claimed independence and self-sufficiency. In describing the “crate” (possibly referring to the rib cavity where the lungs are housed) as being “full of air,” Heaney conveys a picture of the elk skeleton filling itself with air, or taking a breath. The imagery of an elk skeleton recovered, set up, and breathing implies a resurrection of the old, of what was majestic and great that has been forgotten—but that can be rediscovered. Heaney seems to insinuate that despite Ireland’s forlorn circumstances as a war-torn nation subject to the rule of foreign countries, the Irish can recover the strength they have lost by rallying around a national symbol of what they once were. Though one could consider the air associated with a long-buried skeleton to be empty and lifeless, perhaps insinuating that the Irish can dig forever and find only emptiness and dead promises, the fact that the skeleton is pulled out of the *bog* is notable. Bogs preserve their inhabitants almost perfectly, maintaining even color and texture for thousands of years. Maintaining these semblances of life, the skeleton is preserved in such a way as to almost exactly conserve the state in which it entered the bog. Thus, in such context, the bog prevents the skeleton from losing all of its life in death—it does not completely moulder and disintegrate, but instead only waits; it comes out not lifeless and empty, but breathing. Lastly, in employing the word *astounding* to describe the skeleton after it is set up and recovered (12), Heaney hints that the Irish will be in awe of what they will find if they will endeavor to resurrect what they once were.

Alongside the symbol of the Elk, Heaney further attempts to form a national identity through his presentation of bog butter. By portraying the miraculous recovery of butter that has been perfectly preserved—in form, color, and salt quality—for thousands of years in the bog, Heaney encourages hope as he re-affirms Ireland’s chosenness. With this reference, he also implies that Ireland can recover the pure identity that it has lost. He writes, “Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years / was recovered salty and white” (13–15). As butter was difficult to make and very valuable in the Iron Age, communities used bogs to act as preservers (with their high acidity and cool temperatures), keeping it fresh and safe from thieves. Heaney claims that the butter was recovered “salty and white”; in this instance, the biblical allusion to salt which has “not lost its savor” illuminates elements of chosenness and inherent value (Matt. 5.13). The Irish, in this case, though oppressed and exiled in many ways, are still the chosen people. The white quality

further suggests purity and innocence, insinuating that though Ireland has been oppressed, she has not become morally corrupt. With these connotations, Heaney suggests that the identity or essence of Ireland is still undefiled as the landscape has protected it, as it has the butter. And just as the bog has perfectly saved this remnant of history for discovery, the Irish can recover their identity in its pure form. As this second ancient artifact of a time before English oppression and Irish civil strife is retrieved from the bog, Heaney implies that the Irish can pull the free, independent, and improved Ireland out of the bog as well—preserved, and undefiled.

Moving from bog butter to the Irish ground in the last line of this same stanza, Heaney deepens his appeal for national unity by establishing a poignant familial relationship between the Irish and their landscape through elements of the feminine and maternal. He writes, “The ground itself is kind, black butter” (16). The word *kind* is derived from the word *kin*, meaning family or relatives. By reverently revealing the ground as “kind, black butter,” he establishes Irish ground—the Irish landscape itself—as family. In establishing ties of kinship, Heaney erases the barriers that alienate one from a barren, bog-ridden Irish landscape, revealing instead a soft, kind, life-giving land that has long sustained its people. This combination of “kind” and “kin” also seems to insinuate the land as a motherly figure. Heaney appears to invoke a feminine power within his poem as he acknowledges the ground as female in its nourishing aspects, calling to mind some semblance of the soul of Ireland, perhaps even Kathleen ni Houlihan. This wild, rural, motherly figure was traditionally believed to embody the soul of Ireland and was considered the maternal personification of Ireland, associated strongly with Irish nationalism as she was traditionally depicted as an elderly woman who needed young Irish men to defend her from colonial rule. In drawing upon such connotations, Heaney awakens the defensiveness that comes with the connection to mother, an age-old instinct to protect the being who has given one life. With the implementation of this familial concept and its accompanying connotations, Heaney strengthens his argument that Irishmen have a special duty to unite and support their country as they would unite and support their mother.

Heaney’s call for the Irish to act on this familial duty expands to defending the motherland and ending the English control of Northern Ireland as he addresses issues of colonial plunder and economic dominance. At the time “Bogland” was written, many Irishmen still relied on traditional bog peat

for fuel—an adequate source of fuel, but nowhere near as efficient as coal. Across the sea, Britain largely symbolized commercial and impersonal life in contrast to the rustic and communally produced peat as the motherland of coal (with mass mining in Wales) and leader of the Industrial Revolution. In light of this context, Heaney pens the famous fighting words, “They’ll never dig coal here,” in what seems to be a direct reference to this disparity and the ways in which Britain had wrongly oppressed Ireland by plundering her economic goods in the past (20). With this line, Heaney essentially writes that Great Britain will never dig coal in Ireland, or exploit and commercialize his native land. As he pronounces a common enemy “they,” Heaney subtly unites the Irish under an implicit, implied “we.” Thus, through delicate yet deliberate pronoun usage, Heaney strongly others England and foreign forces that might attempt to colonize Ireland and unites the Irish in common defense by default. He seeks to inspire his countrymen to throw off the chains of English colonialism as this line calls all Irishmen to take a stand against English invasion by defending Ireland and everything that she represents, beginning with the fuel that she provides.

After addressing the outward conflict in this manner, Heaney turns to the devastating conflict of the inner state as he deepens his plea for fealty to the nation, begging his countrymen to stop the civil strife in implying that such conflict keeps the nation stuck in the past. He writes, “Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards” (23–24). While Edna Longley uses these lines as evidence of psychological fusing of poet and nation and efforts to excavation (34), it seems that Heaney might offer a different message concerning the result of such digging. With this line, Heaney seems to mourn the meaninglessness of Ireland’s inner strife and suggests that as the inner fighting continues, so too does the nation’s digression. Contrasting with the traditional “upwards and outwards,” Heaney responds with “inwards and downward,” warning his countrymen that if they persist in disintegrating inwardly, they will continue regressing downwards rather than progressing upwards. Up to this point in the poem, historical artifacts have been brought out of the bog and into the light. In this case, departing from these previous instances in the poem in which he indicates digging as a way to recover Irish identity, Heaney seems to suggest that a return to old ways of tribal warfare by spiraling deeper into past feuds will yield nothing as the pioneers keep “striking” and finding nothing (23). In these ways, he complicates previous methods of recovery, seeming to suggest that while the past may often be recovered for good, some

elements are dangerous to recover and are better left behind. Heaney increases the potency of his claim as he writes, “Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before” (25–26). Here, the layers of peat in a bog symbolize the history of Ireland, unfolding ever deeper into what has been buried before. Kay notes that this stanza offers digging into the bog as a “vertical dig into history,” but with fear and voyeuristic intent to uncover as its implicit and guiding motivation (24). Heaney seems to also call upon a different motivation, warning that if the Irish continue to go the way that they are going, history will only repeat itself, with ruin and failure as its result.

Setting his sights on the future, Heaney uses strong circular imagery in order to paint the possibility of an independent, united nation of Ireland, thereby illustrating what progress and moving upwards and outwards could lead to. Throughout “Bogland,” we find ubiquitous circular imagery in the traditionally circular sun, tarn, cyclops’ eye, bog butter container, and bogholes. The “big sun” providing light, the bog butter providing food, and the bogholes producing these treasures insinuate circularity as representative of wholeness and abundance throughout the poem, which wholeness Heaney seems to suggest as the future of Ireland. In a more sinister vein, the imagery relayed in the lines, “Is wooed into the cyclops’ eye / Of a tarn” seem to depart from this wholeness and abundance as they take on a much darker tone, suggesting the image of one being drawn into, or swallowed by the eye of Ireland that takes form in the traditional Irish “tarn”—a small, brackish bog lake laden with bog matter and sediment that can appear black (5–6). With this picture in mind, and as the bog is described on the last wavering, hungry word of the poem as “bottomless,” insinuating elements of voracity and insatiability, the circular imagery here becomes symbolic of a black hole (28). Thus, Heaney uses circular imagery to not only promote wholeness and abundance, but to depict Ireland as a black hole that will become the center of the world—creating a compelling paradox of Ireland as a nation that will take as much as it will give. And in associating the concept of the black hole with Ireland, Heaney draws upon the inevitability associated with the black hole to insinuate the inevitability of Ireland’s rise to both wholeness and power.

Heaney’s call for nationalism echoes throughout time in the last, endless line in which the term “bottomless” seems to adopt a two-fold meaning, expanding beyond its previous connotations of voracity and consumption to depict Ireland’s influence as eternal and world-reaching. Heaney writes, “the wet centre is bottomless” (28). In this context, ‘bottomless’ adopts a

ringing effect as it reverberates outward, designating Ireland's "wet centre," or essence, as one that will become vast and unending in its reach and influence on the world. Though Kay argues that the 'bottomless' bog manifests Heaney's childhood fear of being swallowed by the bogs, Heaney describes the center of Ireland itself, manifested as the center of the bog, as being bottomless, seeming to go beyond such fears as he does not describe the bog swallowing in upon itself, but unfolding and spreading outwards (25). Heaney also precludes the metaphor with the line, "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage" (27). Here, Heaney seems to imply that the bogs of Ireland are so deep that they are seeping out into the ocean itself, touching every shore. With these lines in conjunction, 'bottomless' seems to imply that the call for nationalism will penetrate everywhere; it will sound in every ear and never end as it echoes throughout the world and beyond (25). These lines evoke elements of destiny in their vision of a powerful, undaunted, dominant Ireland—a direct reversal to the Ireland in which Heaney wrote, but one that may have echoed what Ireland once was and consequently had the potential to become.

Ultimately, while the argument for "Bogland" as a process poem constitutes what seems to be a valid and substantiated designation, the role of the poem is in fact more complex than it originally appears. "Bogland" is not just a process poem, but a manifestation of political intent and nationalist agenda. It does not simply preclude Heaney's political poetry, but begins it, forming the foundation on which Heaney's later political writings find bearing and forging a path to bridge the Irish to their national consciousness and to close the chasm that sectarian violence had ripped into Irish unity.

On a larger scale, we might consider that "Bogland" is not a political poem just about Ireland. It does not simply apply to Irish politics; it is not only commentary on the "Troubles." "Bogland" seems to transcend time and space in its remarks to the politics of the world. It addresses universal principles of oppression and need for identity and nationhood. In its scope, the poem seems to reach out to the plight of downtrodden and victimized peoples, teaching them how to move forward through unification under their own national signs, symbols, and legacy—their shared history. Through "Bogland," Heaney openly declares to Ireland and to oppressed nations and peoples, "Our day will come."

Works Cited

- Hancock, T. "'Daring to Make Free': Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics, 1968–1979." *English: The Journal of the English Association*, vol. 47, no. 188, 1998, pp. 111–126.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Bogland." *Door into the Dark*, Faber and Faber, 1972.
- . *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978*. Faber and Faber, 1980.
- Kay, M. "Belonging as Mastery: Selfhood and Otherness in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney." *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua: A Quarterly Record of Irish Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, pp. 78–95.
- Longley, E. "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'? Seamus Heaney's North." In *Seamus Heaney*, ed. M. Allen, St. Martins, 1997, pp. 30–63.
- O'Driscoll, Dennis. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. Farrar, 2008.
- The Bible. *Authorized King James Version*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2008