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Derrida, Heaney, Yeats and the Hauntological Redefinition of Irishness

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Abstract

This essay begins by deconstructing the logo of the Centre for Migration studies as a way of outlining a differential perspective on Irish identity. Eschewing the traditional view of identity as sameness, this article posits an Irish identity which focuses on difference. The essay makes use of works by Joyce and Heaney.

In his recent book, *The Other Heading*, Jacques Derrida spoke about the hybridity that is central to our notion of European identity. He stressed the difference between the Europe of today and ‘a Europe that does not exist.’ In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses what he terms *hauntology*, in answer to his question: ‘[w]hat is a ghost?’ (Derrida 1994, 10). In this book, he discusses the spectrality of many areas of meaning, seeing ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. One might compare his *hauntology* to the paradigmatic chains which hover over (haunt) the linearity of the syntagmatic chain.

But Derrida makes one important distinction, in that he sees spectrality and time as closely connected. He makes the point, speaking both of the ghost in *Hamlet*, and the ghost that haunts Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (where the first noun is 'specter'), that: '[a]t bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back' (Derrida 1994, 39). In this sense, Derrida's notion of spectrality has a lot to do with a sense of engagement with modernity, and with the relationship between that modernity and the historical context which led up to it, and the future which it precedes. In a specifically Irish context, literature has been that Janus-like discourse wherein notions of modernity have been both eschewed and embraced. In this paper, I will compare the writings of William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney in terms of how they articulate a transformed notion of Irish modernity through the *hauntological* invocation of the cultural context of Europe.

In much of Yeats's mythological writing the ghostly voices of different Irish traditions hover *hauntologically* over any monological strand of essentialism. Much of his sensibility has been shaped in the English literary tradition. He lived in London for much of his life. As he puts it himself, his soul has been nurtured by Shakespeare, Spenser, Blake, and perhaps William Morris, and by:

the English language in which I think, speak, and write...everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate. I am like the Tibetan monk who dreams at his initiation that he is eaten by a wild beast and learns on waking that he himself is eater and eaten. (Yeats 1980, 263)

In this sense, Yeats attests to the 'presence' of the face of the other (Levinas 1969, 188), and exemplifies the dialectical criticism advocated by Adorno in that he is part of the culture of Ireland, but he is also apart from that culture, separated by a sense of Englishness. In short, he is attempting to provide some form of redefinition of the centres of Irish identity which will allow for an productive engagement with modernity, by including the Protestant tradition, as well as by facing outward towards European culture

which will provide a point of transcendence from which Irishness can be further, negatively, defined. This definition will be negative, and will be open to the alterity of the 'English' other.

Perhaps the most overt example of this attempt to define Ireland in European terms is to be found in a poem which was written as Yeats's most telling contribution to the Hugh Lane gallery controversy, in which a collection of neo-impressionist paintings was offered to the people of Ireland if they would finance a gallery to house them. This controversy bespoke a refusal on behalf of much nationalist and bourgeois opinion to proffer any openness to alterity, in the form of the Anglo-Irish Lane, the French impressionist paintings, or the Bridge Gallery, designed by the English architect, Edwin Lutyens. Yeats embraced this project, seeing it as emblematic of a modern notion of Irishness which would be at home with its European and Anglo-Irish contexts. He deliberately chose to invoke Renaissance images to undercut the insularity which he saw as rife in Dublin at that time in his poem, bearing the title *To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures*. This poem, which appeared on the letters page of the *Irish Times*, on January 13th 1913, contains allusions to: Duke Ercole de l'Este of Ferrara who had five plays by Plautus produced during the wedding of his son Alphonso in 1502 (Jeffares 1968, 127); Guidobaldo di Montafeltro, Duke of Urbino, who built a palace known for its art treasures, especially books bound in gold and silver, and Cosimo di Medici who commissioned the architect Michelozzo to draw up plans for the Library of Saint Mark's in Florence. All were Renaissance patrons of the arts, and all were undeniably foreign (an allusion to Lane's preferred architect, Lutyens, being English). Clearly, their presence in the poem offers a critique of narrowness and insularity posited in terms of temporal, spatial and cultural images of alterity. They are *hauntological* presences underlining the pluralist and European paradigm of modern identity which Yeats was attempting to set out.

Clearly for Yeats, identity was a far more complex issue than the mere Irish-English binarism which had been so much a defining factor for nationalist politics:

For the last hundred years Irish nationalism has had to fight against England, and that fight has helped fanaticism, for we had to welcome everything that gave Ireland emotional energy, and had little use for intelligence so far as the mass of the people were concerned, for we had to hurl them against an alien power. The basis of Irish nationalism has now shifted, and much that once helped us is now injurious, for we can no longer do anything by fighting, we must persuade, and to persuade we must become a modern, tolerant, liberal nation. I want everything discussed, I want to get rid of the old exaggerated tact and caution. As a people we are superficial, our Press provincial and trivial, because as yet we have not considered any of those great political and religious questions which raise some fundamental issue and have disturbed Europe for generations. (Yeats 1970, 1, 522)

Here he argues for an expansion of identity in terms of an openness to the other. Speaking of the dangers of fanaticism or essentialism, he cautions against remaining locked in the dialectic of an anti-British essentialism. It is through such a process, as Jean François Lyotard has noted in *The Differend*, that the ‘*Volk* shuts itself up in the *Heim* and identifies itself through narratives attached to names’ (Lyotard 1988, 218). By invoking traditions that have been validated in a European context, he is suggesting a *hauntological* permeation of Irishness within a broader, modernist, European perspective. As Derrida has put it, it is important for a community to ‘know its limit – and for its limit to be its *opening*’ (Derrida 1995, 355).

Such a notion of opening to the other implies the *hauntological* presence of alterity in the midst of any construction of selfhood, and it is the exposure to such notions of otherness that is present in Seamus Heaney’s poem of the same name, ‘Exposure’, and I quote:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired

And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows. (Heaney 1975, 73)

Heaney is very much aware of the centripetal pull back to tribal, ethnic and essentialist origins, what he terms ‘the appetites of gravity’ (Heaney 1975, 43), and his further awareness that such essentialism – ‘the tight gag of place (Heaney 1975, 59) – delimits debate and discussion and silences the voice of the other. Faced with these atavistic associations of home and home-place, Heaney attempts to achieve a broader perspective through his notion of being an ‘inner émigré,’ who is open to different strands of identity.

The notion of ‘inner émigration’ further destabilizes the essentialism of identity in that it foregrounds the hybrid and multi-cultural identities that are a fact of modern culture and society. That one can be exiled within what is one’s home has been a topos of modernist experience and Heaney is well aware of this as he uses the term ‘inner émigré.’ The notion of identity as a Heideggerian *Versammlung* (gathering), focused around central transcendental signifieds has been consigned to the past, and instead, the interactions of different identities, alternate notions of Irishness, alternate Irelands, has been ushered into being. In Derrida’s terms, this notion participates in one of literature’s primary responsibilities, namely that its ‘concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise’ (Derrida 1992b, 38).

The effect of such different notions of identity on the individual is an important *leitmotif* in all of Heaney’s work. Such a perspective informs statements which see the poet as being ‘displaced from a

confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable' (Heaney 1985a, 8), a phrase which is the prose correlative of the already quoted lines from 'Exposure': 'feeling every wind that blows,' the condition of being an inner émigré, an essential aspect of any serious engagement with a pluralistic modernity.

Physically, of course, Heaney moved from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland in November 1976, and has spent time at Berkeley, Oxford and Harvard. He has often been viewed as not sufficiently committed to the Catholic, nationalist position, and this provided the context of his notions of 'exposure' to the demands that he speak for his own group – a demand graphically highlighted in a later poem 'Flight Path' in *The Spirit Level*, a title itself redolent of *hauntology*, where he is asked by an interlocutor: 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us'. Heaney's answer is significant: 'If I do write something / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself' (Heaney 1996, 25).

The fact that Heaney is disposed to be 'affected by all positions' means that his notion of identity, of an 'us' is gradually opened and broadened so as to include the voices and identities of alterity. Emigration, as the dissemination of the bond between a people and a place, is a deconstructive lever inserted into this bond. It does not destroy this identificatory bond, but serves to loosen those tribal roots, and the physical journey away from the centre of essentialist identity can become a paradigm of an intellectual transformation of that position of fixity. It is through being an 'inner émigré' that Heaney is able to achieve this epistemological broadness of perspective, and a Derridean sense of an opening to other aspects of identity. It is also of interest that he uses a metaphor of displacement when he speaks about being affected by all positions: '*displaced* from a confidence in a single position' [*my italics*]. This displacement allows space for other positions and for a modern economy of identity wherein different positions inform each other. This is a central aspect of modernity, in terms of acknowledging the

fissuring of any sense of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, as economic and cultural imperatives decree that difference as opposed to sameness becomes the defining factor in societal structures. Writing, instead of harking back to the old certainties, can better engage with this trend by embracing the complexities and displacements that now constitute cultural identity.

Such notions of displacement and emigration also figure in Derrida's idea of selfhood. He, too, could be seen as a type of 'inner émigré,' living as he did in Algeria, but speaking French, and, as the following passage will indicate, this constitutes a further connection between the thought of both of these writers. In *Points*, Derrida speaks of similar notions of being pulled in two directions, namely those of place and those of culture. While living in the midst of an Arabic culture, Derrida was raised in a monolingual (French) *milieu*. Hence, French was his only language. However, in the 'culture of the French in Algeria and in the Jewish community of the French in Algeria' he points out that 'France was not Algeria...the authority of the French language was elsewhere.' He goes on:

And in a certain manner, confusedly, we learned it. I learned it as the language of the other—even though I could only refer to one language as being mine, you see! And this is why I say that it is not a question of language, but of culture, literature, history, history of French literature, what I was learning at school. I was totally immersed, I had no other reference, I had no other culture, but at the same time I sensed clearly that all of this came from a history and a milieu that were not in a simple and primitive way mine. (Derrida 1995, 120)

The similarity with Heaney's earlier comments about being part of a culture, and yet at the same time experiencing a sense of alienation, are marked. Derrida's notions of *différance*, and his breaking down of seeming unities and totalities, has much in common with Heaney's view of poetry as the articulation of different forces within some form of structure which can reveal more aspects of the self to the self. In the passage just cited, Derrida tells of how, despite speaking French, and being immersed in French

literature and culture, ‘the Frenchman of France was an other’ (Derrida 1995, 204). Much of his writing stresses this feeling of being at home, and yet not at home, in French culture. In *The Other Heading*, he speaks of himself as someone ‘not quite European by birth’ who now considers himself to be ‘a sort of over-aculturated, over-colonized European hybrid’ (Derrida 1992b, 7). He sees his cultural identity as ‘not only European, it is not identical to itself’ (Derrida 1992b, 82-83).

In a passage that is remarkably similar, Heaney too speaks of feelings of strangeness and alienation in connection with place and language. Writing in *Preoccupations* he points out that he has maintained a notion of himself ‘as Irish in a province that insists it is British’ (Heaney 1980, 35), and goes on to further underscore his sense of difference in the following statement:

I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspectives of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home. I live off another hump as well. (Heaney 1980, 34)

For both, notions of ‘home’ are neither simple nor clearly defined: their identificatory bond with a particular place is complex and plural: their notions of spatial identity are better imaged by an oscillation between places than by a fixed bond with a single home. Both see some form of haunting by otherness as central to any real definition of identity. For Heaney’s notion of Irishness, of ‘*us*’ has spread in order to include ‘*them*.’ As he puts it in ‘Tollund’:

...we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe,

More scouts than strangers, ghosts who’d walked abroad
Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning. (Heaney 1996, 69)

Here, the centralities of essentialist identity and home are transcended as alternate, more modern notions of identity, associated with travel, notions of emigration, and traces of Derrida's *hauntology*, are posited.

Heaney, discussing his *Station Island* sequence, has made the point, in 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', that Dante's *Purgatorio* has been an immense influence on his work, specifically in terms of the nature of the relationship between poetry and politics. What Dante demonstrated to Heaney was the way 'Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent' (Heaney 1985b, 18). The mode of pilgrimage allowed Dante to use the journey metaphor to catalogue changes and developments in himself; for Heaney, this would prove to be a potent symbolic avenue through which he could explore the 'typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country....to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self' (Heaney 1985b, 18-19). In formal terms, Heaney has made the point about Section VII that he liked the 'muted rhyming, the slightly Dantesque formality of the verse' (Miller 2001, 25), and, as Dominic Manganiello has put it: 'When modern poets turn to the great masters of the past, they do so in order to fill their own imaginative needs' (Manganiello 2000, 101).

He is thus able to create the ghosts to act as mirror images or refractions of aspects of his own personality. His first ghost, Simon Sweeney exemplifies this qualified assent to the demands of pilgrimage. He is 'an old Sabbath-breaker' (Heaney 1984, 61), who adjures Heaney to 'stay clear of all processions' (Heaney 1984, 63). The second ghost was William Carleton, who had written *The Lough Derg Pilgrim* in 1828. He had converted to Protestantism, and this book was intended to serve 'as a piece of anti-Papist propaganda' (Parker 1993, 183). Heaney, in Section I, has Carleton call himself a 'traitor', and give the advice that 'it is a road you travel on your own' (Heaney 1984, 65), terms which illustrate

the guilt associated with leaving a communal religious identity. Carleton's advice to the poet is to 'remember everything and keep your head' (Heaney 1984, 66). Patrick Kavanagh, a poet who had exerted a strong early influence on Heaney, and who also wrote about Lough Derg, appears in Section V. His comment is similarly scathing: 'Forty-two years on / and you've got no farther' (Heaney 1984, 73), and all three figures voice Heaney's frustration that parts of his psyche have not yet outgrown the societal and religious givens of his culture.

His next meeting is with the shade of a 'young priest, glossy as a blackbird'. This was Terry Keenen, whom Heaney knew as a clerical student (Corcoran 1998, 117). However, the priest describes his time in the missions, an experience that was far from enabling: 'Everything wasted. / I rotted like a pear. I sweated masses' (Heaney 1984, 69). It is a vision of the priest which Heaney had never imagined, seeing him as 'some sort of holy mascot' who 'gave too much relief' and 'raised a siege' among those whom he visited: 'doing the decent thing' (Heaney 1984, 70). However, the response of the shade is sharp and in keeping with those of Carleton and Kavanagh: 'What are you doing, going through these motions?', he asks, and goes on to supply a possible answer: 'Unless you are here taking the last look' (Heaney 1984, 71). The young priest, on being seen by Heaney as 'doomed to the decent thing', responds in kind:

I at least was young and unaware

That what I thought was chosen was convention.

But all this you were clear of you walked into

Over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn.' (Heaney 1984, 70)

Here, Heaney asks himself, through the *persona* of the priest, the difficult question of why he is still in search of this group identification. He is able to see the flaws in the role of the priest, 'doomed to do the decent thing' but is repeating such a path himself. He is positing a situation where religion is in decline but as yet, there is no intellectual structures set up to replace it. There is an emotional attachment to the

ritual even as there is an intellectual recognition that such rituals are fast becoming outmoded in a newer vision of Ireland. It is yet another imaging of the difficulty involved in outgrowing the conventions and ideological positions that are part of our inheritance if more modern forms of identity are to be embraced.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this sequence is that it allows Heaney to speak through the personalities of others: through these encounters with different ghosts he is able to give voice to doubts and uncertainties using these personalities as sounding boards to enunciate different perspectives. Behind all of these voices is the developing voice of Heaney himself, furthering the process of questioning that we saw initiated in 'Exposure' and developed through the elegies in *Field Work*, particularly in the person of Louis O'Neill in 'Casualty'. These different figures allow him to question aspects of unconscious filiation to the religious, the cultural and the domestic that have lain, dormant and unquestioned until this point in his adult life. In a very real way, this pilgrimage is to the island of the developing unconscious within his own mind: he is in search of himself as opposed to anything else, and specifically in search of the answerability between his art and his culture.

In terms of the political entanglements that have been part of his heritage, 'Station Island' also provides opportunities for questions. Sidney Burris sees these poems as based on an investigation of the relationship between the 'artistic imperative and the political conscience' (Burris 1990, 146), and while this is true, I would argue that what is actually at stake here is a process of redefinition of this relationship. In Section VII, he mentions William Strathearn who was killed by being 'called down to the shop door in the middle of the night' and shot (Miller 2001, 25). Strathearn tells the story of his death, of being awoken, called downstairs to open the shop to get 'pills / or a powder or something in a bottle' for two men 'I knew them both' (Heaney 1984, 78). Telling the story, he makes much of the fact that the

men were ‘barefaced as they would be in the day // shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all’ (Heaney 1984, 79). The matter-of-fact tone highlights the finality of death, a death of one of the victims that were so easily consigned to historical processes in ‘Kinship’, in *North*. Heaney asks this shade to ‘Forgive the way I have lived, indifferent – / forgive my timid, circumspect involvement’ (Heaney 1984, 80). Here we see the pull of the political appetites of gravity, as Heaney feels that as a nationalist with a public profile, as ‘Seamus Heaney’, the name in inverted commas, he could have done more to voice his own people’s cause:

You confused evasion with artistic tact
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you (Heaney 1984, 83)

Here, the *hauntology* of otherness can function as a questioning of the self in matters political and ethical.

For Yeats, too, the hauntings of different strands of Irish identity can be constituent in terms of developing that identity. In these *Introductory Rhymes*, Yeats accepts a number of responsibilities which he sees as a necessary part of his aesthetic project, and by extension, of the cultural politics inherent in that project. He begins, not in the world of embroidered mythology (demonstrating that the argument of *A Coat* has already been accepted), but in the history of his own family, with Jervis Yeats a Dublin linen merchant ‘free of the ten and four’, which meant that he had been exempted by the Irish parliament of certain customs duties; and his great grandfather, John Yeats (1774-1846) rector of Drumcliffe, in Sligo, and a friend of Robert Emmet – the leader of a failed rebellion in 1803 (Jeffares 1968, 118-119). Perhaps the most significant lines of this poem, in the context of the present discussion, are to be found in the military associations of the Yeats family:

Soldiers that gave, whatever die was cast:

A Butler or an Armstrong that withstood

Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne

James and his Irish when the Dutchman crossed. [italics original] (Yeats 1979, 113)

Here, the poet is facing the responsibility of affirming his personal loyalty to members of his family who fought for the Protestant King William, against the Catholic King James, in the Battle of the Boyne, in 1690. This battle, won by King William, has ever since been celebrated by unionists as the crucial point in maintaining and sustaining the union between Britain and Northern Ireland. The important point to note here is that Yeats is overtly staking a claim to Irishness for his ancestors who, as part of the other tradition, made their choice to fight for William against James.

Traditionally, in the iconography of Irish nationalism, the Jacobites are seen as the forces of good, whereas the Williamites are viewed as the army of the invader, with the attendant signifiers of Catholicism and Protestantism, and selfhood and otherness, serving to underline these associations. In Yeats's lines, these ancestors of his are also part of his definition of Irishness, a point which implies that the said definition is a transforming one, widening the definitive aspects of the core of the *Zentrum* of Irishness so as to include those of the Protestant and Williamite persuasions – the other. Here, the narrow definitions of nationalist Ireland, predicated on a mythology which valorizes the ancient Celtic traits of Ireland, which see the role of the 'sympathetic Palesman' as being behind 'the Gael, the matrix of the Irish...until he becomes absorbed' (*Leader* 1901, January 5th), are deconstructed by a centrifugal definition of Irishness which must come to terms with all aspects of its cultural history. As Yeats put it in a letter to Alice Milligan, on request for a copy of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, his experience of Ireland had brought him to the view that the work of an Irish man of letters must be 'not so much to awaken or quicken or preserve the national idea among the mass of the people but to convert the educated classes to it on the one hand' and, more importantly 'to fight for moderation, dignity, and the rights of the intellect

among his fellow nationalists' (Yeats 1955, 399). It is this moderation in terms of the given categories of Irish identity that is being accepted as a responsibility of the poet in this poem. This moderation can be seen as an ethical notion in terms of the role of the other. The language of responsibility is the language of *Responsibilities*, a 'saying' that is an 'ethical openness to the other' (Levinas 1981, 194), and to the dignity and rights of the intellect. Such a programme is very much a part of Yeats's negative view of Irishness.

This becomes even more obvious when we take into account the original lines that were in the poem instead of those quoted. Apparently, according to Jeffares, Yeats originally thought that his ancestors had fought on the Jacobite side in the Battle of the Boyne, and consequently lines 9 to 12 of *Introductory Rhymes* originally read as follows:

Pardon, and you that did not weigh the cost,
Old Butlers when you took to horse and stood
Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne,
Till your bad master blenched and all was lost. (Jeffares 1968, 119)

Here, the vicissitudes of history are seen as part of the negative positing of Irish identity in terms of a decentring of seemingly logocentric certitudes. Yeats was originally quite happy to glorify the role of Jacobite ancestors; by doing the same for his Williamite ancestors, his family history can be seen to broaden the category of Irishness in its diffuse political allegiances. Just as Ferguson and Standish O'Grady provided the translations for much of nationalist mythology, which was in turn reified into the foundation of a green essentialism, so Yeats's own ancestors, Williamites, and friends of Robert Emmet, embody the same protreptic imperative, and the responsibility of enunciating this is accepted in the title of the book. Here there is a full and complex engagement with a pluralist modern notion of Irishness wherein the different historical strands are interwoven into a transformative skein.

The use of his family as a personal iconography assists his project in another way. John S. Kelly, writing about Yeats's political thought, makes the highly astute point that in these *Introductory Rhymes*, Yeats sets out a series of casuistries wherein he desynonymizes the 'wholesale and retail trade' as 'merchants are distinguished from hucksters because they espouse the wasteful virtues.' More significantly, he goes on to note that, through the '*sprezzatura*', they are 'in history but transcend history through a joyful self-assured nonchalance' (Kelly 1989, 156). Hence, in terms of Adorno's edicts on the necessity of cultural criticism to be of, and yet distant from, a particular culture, Yeats's family provide a *brisure* which opens up different aspects of Irishness, and locates these aspects, not in the world of mythology, but in history, the very area which much of the Celtic revival sought to avoid, given the dissensions and conflicts which were seen as its Irish legacy. The song-as-coat motif of *A Coat* refers to the embroidered decorations as a way of covering the body of the song, perhaps as a source of decorative protection from the rough winds of history. As Yeats put it elsewhere: 'I too have woven my garment like another, but I shall try to keep warm in it, and shall be well content if it do not unbecome me' (Yeats 1981, 32). Having achieved what Eliot calls 'freedom of speech', keeping warm is no longer a priority, and he instead looks to 'the rights of the intellect' to define what Irishness actually is. The movement from the warmth and assuaging a-historicity of myth into the cold light of modernity is perhaps the greatest responsibility undertaken by Yeats, and his aim now, as already remarked, was to help Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland to unite so that 'neither shall shed its pride' (Yeats 1962, 337). Such a unification would be something as yet unthought or unsymbolized except in the negative dialectics of Yeats's political and poetic constitution of identity, an identity which recognizes the alterity of the other. As Derrida puts it, '[d]issociation, separation, is the condition of my relation to the other' (Derrida 1997, 14), and indeed, of the identity of a culture, person, nation, and language. In all cases, he sees such identity as self-differentiating, as having a gap or opening within it (Derrida 1992b, 9-11). For Derrida then, as for Yeats, it follows that

this gap in personal identity allows the address and speech towards the other; such identificatory tensions allow a space for alterity, and so, far from being ‘a way of avoiding responsibility....it is the only way to...take responsibility and to make decisions’ (Derrida 1997, 14).

Hence, both Yeats and Heaney are attempting to further a process of serious engagement with a modern, and even postmodern, sense of Irishness that, while taking account of its past, refuses to be bound by that past. In this sense, both writers participate in what Derrida has recently termed the project of the humanities, or rather, of a ‘new humanities’ which would attempt to find ‘best access to a new public space transformed by new techniques of communication, information, archivization and knowledge production’ (Derrida 2001, 25). They also participate in that most central of activities, the questioning of the givens of the past in order to carve out a space that is both aware of that past but at the same time focused on the modern and beyond. Through the presence of spectral alternatives, of *hauntological* aspects of the different traditions that have been inherited from the past, both writers attempt to redefine Irishness in terms productive of an engagement with notions of modernity.

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