

*'More than a language ... no more of a Language': Merriman, Heaney  
and the Metamorphoses of Translation*

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**Abstract**

This essay examines transformative force of translation, by reading Merriman through the refractive lens of Seamus Heaney's *The Midnight Verdict*, the juxtaposition of Merriman's text with that of classical tragedy, itself read in translation, allows *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche* to take on a polyvalent range of meanings. Hence, through translation, it functions as a synecdoche of a metamorphosis of Irish culture through a comparative interaction with the culture of classical Europe. It also gestures towards a pluralistic postcolonial paradigm wherein Connolly's demand for a new theorisation of Irishness can be enunciated.

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It is impossible, says the French literary theorist Jacques Derrida, to give a brief synopsis of the meaning of deconstruction, but in a manner typical of such assertions, this statement is immediately followed by exactly such a description. Writing in *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, Derrida made the following connection between deconstruction and translation. Deconstruction, he says, consists:

only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages. If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and

economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of *a* language.<sup>1</sup>

In an Irish context, this definition of deconstruction would seem to be particularly apt, given its positing of a liminal area of linguistic signification. It posits deconstruction as demarcating a broad contextual framework wherein issues of language and identity can be enunciated. Instead of looking at language as hermetically sealed within a mono-cultural context, there is a need to broaden the parameters of analysis. In the context of Irish studies, Gerry Smyth has flagged this by pointing to a degree of ‘self-obsession’ which he sees as characterising discussions about Irishness. He has gone on to diagnose this epistemological introspection as symptomatic of a postcolonial refusal to submit to broad comparative analyses, something which he terms a protracted colonial concussion. Smyth sees such a perspective as continuing ‘to limit the possibilities of Irish identity decades after the onset of the postcolonial era’.<sup>2</sup> Colin Graham makes a parallel point, stressing the ‘tenacious grip which the “national” has on critical discourse in Irish literary studies’.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the English and Irish languages, as metonymic of that between English and Irish ideologies, is one which continues to exercise the minds of theorists involved in identitarian political and cultural discourse. Theoretically, what has often occurred is a series of reverse binarisms, stemming from the nationalistic investment that preceded, and succeeded, the War of Independence, through a reassessment of nationalism in the light of the situation in Northern Ireland, to an almost reversal of the Irish-British binarism, as outlined by Peadar Kirby:

Many of today’s ‘revisionist’ scholars of Irish history claim to be providing a more rounded and multifaceted, and therefore more accurate and scientific, version of Irish history. But, as Kiberd has pointed out, the hostility of historians like Roy Foster and

1. Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, translated by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp.14-15.
2. Gerry Smyth, *Novel and Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 176.
3. Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*. Tendencies: Identities, Texts, Cultures series (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.54

F.S.L. Lyons to Irish nationalism, and their benign attitude to British colonial rule serves merely to replace an Anglophobic version of Irish history with an Anglocentric one.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, such Anglophilia is not an uncommon reaction from within the postcolonial paradigm. In Vikram Seth's epic postcolonial novel, *A Suitable Boy*, the home-grown, or *desi*, shoemaker hero, Haresh, is attempting to impress the heroine's Anglophile brother, Arun Mehra, who has just been eulogising Hamely's toy shop, which he describes in detail as 'on Regent Street, not far from Jaeger's'. However, on Haresh's enquiry, we discover that the Mehrahs have never actually been to London, and are even more appreciative of the irony in his remark, 'but of course we're going in a few months time'.<sup>5</sup> Here, the identification of the colonised with the coloniser is almost total, and involves a parallel disowning of an autochthonous culture to that which Kirby's remarks trace in terms of the swings of allegiance in the writing of Irish history. It also perpetuates the static binary opposition of Britishness versus Indianness, albeit from the perspective of identification as opposed to opposition.

On the other hand, Terence Brown has made the point that the 'concern to establish that Ireland is a postcolonial society' has meant Britain has tended to be written 'out of the equation'.<sup>6</sup> Seamus Deane exemplifies this point when he discusses the relationship between language and identity in an interview with the Boston Phoenix. Deane says:

Yes, but not as fluently or as perfectly as I would like. I learned Irish in school, and then I went to an Irish-speaking area in Donegal to learn it.

I think the knowledge of Irish is important especially if you're going to, as I do, write essays about Irish literature, even Irish literature in English. There's a thousand years of Irish literature in the Irish language as well.

4. Peadar Kirby, 'Contested Pedegrees of the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, edited by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.27.
5. Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), p.422.
6. Terence Brown, Response to Questionnaire on 'Celtic Nationality and Postcoloniality', *Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, 41 (1995), 17-20, p.18.

It's amazing how much knowledge of Irish has been lost. A language and a literature are not facts of nature, but facts of culture. Many people can't speak Irish because they never had the opportunity. My own parents didn't know any Irish, but then they had very little schooling. They came from families that had once been Irish-speaking. That a language can be killed is something that feeds into a lot of Irish writing. Almost every Irish author has done translations from the Irish. They have to pay some homage to it. It's an almost lost language and something the Irish themselves played a role in destroying.<sup>7</sup>

Deane's point is well taken, but it is on the issue of translation that this discussion will focus as it has the potential to break down the binary oppositional relationship between the discourse of the colonises and that of the coloniser.

This view of 'English' as a postcolonial linguistic imposition and as an othering of any essential sense of Irishness or selfhood, with the attendant Anglophobic or Anglophilic responses, is to avow a particular view of language, a view which has hindered developments in the area of Irish Studies. Writing in the *Irish Studies Review*, Claire Connolly makes the cogent point that what is required in the whole area of Irish Studies is a 'reappraisal of past and present cultural forms, North and South, in theory and in practice'.<sup>8</sup> This theoretical perspective, I would argue, is capable of being provided by a deconstructive reading of these issues.

In terms of the binary oppositions of which we have been speaking, deconstruction offers a more nuanced possibility of taking into account their ongoing interaction, as opposed to seeing Irishness and Englishness as reified into different fortified camps. The different ideologically motivated reversals that we have been examining merely perpetuate the opposition from different perspectives. This reversal of

7. Seamus Deane, 'Different Strokes: Politically Charged Fiction from Northern Ireland', interview with Nicholas Patterson in *The Boston Phoenix* (June 8, 1998)  
[http://weeklywire.com/ww/06-08-98/boston\\_books\\_1.html](http://weeklywire.com/ww/06-08-98/boston_books_1.html).
8. Claire Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 9, 3 (December, 2001), 301-315, p.312.

prevailing hierarchical binary oppositions is a necessary step in a deconstructive reading. As Derrida himself notes: ‘to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment’.<sup>9</sup> However, this reversal is only the first step in the deconstructive project. Making the point that an opposition of metaphysical concepts is never the face-to-face opposition of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination, Derrida goes on to say that deconstruction ‘does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated’.<sup>10</sup> It is this sense of displacement of the static oppositional criteria that is important in the context of the present discussion.

Deconstruction, as is clear from Derrida’s opening quote, sees language as very much part of the epistemological construction of selfhood and identity as opposed to merely reflecting it. Seamus Deane’s view, for example, that language has been a postcolonial imposition can be seen as expressivistic, as defined by Derrida: ‘expressivism<sup>11</sup> is never simply surpassable, because it is impossible to reduce the couple inside/outside as a simple structure of opposition... [it] is in fact always already surpassed, whether one wishes it or not, whether one knows it or not’.<sup>12</sup>

To see language as a simplistic reflection of a predefined sense of Englishness is to ignore the hybrid and interactional nature of language, and to repeat the Manichean stance of Babington Macaulay’s infamous minute of 1835 regarding the introduction of English education in colonial India:

9. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.41.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.329.
11. This is the view of language as composed of signifiers that simply translate their signifieds into words. It presupposes a static relationship between signifier and signified, word and concept, with language as the almost transparent medium of communicating this relationship.
12. Derrida, *Positions*, p.33.

It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England.<sup>13</sup>

This is a perspective which has bedevilled the whole postcolonial paradigm since its beginnings: whether the colonised would write in the language of the coloniser and thereby lose qualia of identity associated with the lost native language. Seth, paralleling the points made by Deane, again, has made this clear as he wonders about taking his place, willingly, beside the ‘meridian names’ of the English poets ‘Jonson, Wordsworth’, in the face of Macaulay’s dictum: ‘one taste / Of Western wisdom “surpasses / All the books of the East”’.<sup>14</sup> Raja Rao, in his seminal *Kanthapura*, echoes this expressivist view of language, as he describes the epistemological difficulty of narrating rural India through an English idiom: ‘one has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language’.<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning that Ngugi resolved a similar discrepancy between the English language and African realities through a decisive political commitment to only write in his native Gikuyu.<sup>16</sup>

If one is to allow theoretical progress to be stalled at this particular binary linguistic fence, then further progress may be difficult to plot. However, deconstruction allows for a strategy that will take cognisance of the separateness of different linguistic identities but which will also allow for the creation of new contexts wherein these can be reconfigured: to quote from Heaney ‘whatever is given / can always be reimagined’.<sup>17</sup> If we return to McCauley’s ‘Minute on Education’, and his comment on the relative worthlessness of Sanskrit with respect to English, we can begin to see how a deconstructive

13. Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983), p.12
14. Vikram Seth, *Mappings*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), p.65.
15. Rao R. 1971, *Kanthapura*, 2nd edn (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1971), p.i-ii.
16. Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1998), p.151.
17. Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p.29.

reconfiguration of this linguistic paradigm might be initiated, and it is through the idiom of translation that this can be brought about. Interestingly, Derrida, too, has mentioned of Sanskrit in one of his essays.

In ‘Signature Event Context’, Derrida is discussing his particular notion of writing, a notion that is very much at odds with the expressivistic ones we have seen. For Macauley and Deane, the presence of one language necessitates the disempowerment of the other. For Macauley, English will displace Sanskrit from the perspective of a seemingly meritocratic value system; for Deane, English has supplanted Irish from an ideologically-driven value system. In both cases, there is a hierarchical either/or binarism at work in the operation of language as a cultural signifier. Derrida, however, sees writing as far more plural and inclusive an activity, which must function in both the presence and absence of an addressee:

My ‘written communication’ must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute appearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible. It must be repeatable – iterable – in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees. This iterability (*iter*, once again, comes from *itara*, *other* in Sanskrit, and everything that follows may be read as the exploitation of the logic which links repetition to alterity), structures the mark of writing itself, and does so moreover for no matter what type of writing (pictographic, hieroglyphic, ideographic, phonetic, alphabetic, to use the old categories). A writing that was not structurally legible – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting point here is that the very iterability of writing suggests that a language will always be shot through with the trace of the other, and the use of Sanskrit to underpin this point is an indication of how deconstruction can dismantle the binaries that have placed much criticism in an

18. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.315

either/or, coloniser/colonised linguistic straightjacket and instead, allow for a more inclusive context which will leave space for development: in other words, for more than a language and no more of a language. Because the context of language is given such precedence, and the etymology of almost any sequence of words in English can demonstrate the presence of other languages in the roots of English words. As Christopher Norris writes in his commentary on Derrida: ‘Writing is that which exceeds – and has the power to dismantle – the whole traditional edifice of Western attitudes to thought and language,’<sup>19</sup> and in translation as genre, this deconstructive force is at its clearest.

As we have seen, postcolonial studies of expressions of Irishness are often locked in the binary oppositional context of one discourse being more symptomatic of Irishness than the other, and it is in this context that I would like to focus on Seamus Heaney’s discussion of Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche*, a discussion which I see as underlining its transformative quality, both at the level of the text, and at the broader level of the cultural context. The text itself is indicative of a pluralising drive, and Heaney’s nuanced reading of it, as well as his carefully wrought recontextualisation of this piece of writing underscores at a connotative level, the complexity of such issues of language and identity, a complexity that inheres today as much as it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

In looking at the text in translation, I hope to demonstrate that it is these very qualities of transference and translation that have made this text paradigmatic of a pluralisation of the twin cultures of 18<sup>th</sup> Century in Ireland, namely those of Ireland and England. The only way in which some sort of *rapprochement* can be reached between both cultures is through some form of translation. In a further instance of the transformative force of translation, by reading Merriman through the refractive lens of Seamus Heaney’s *The Midnight Verdict*, the juxtaposition of Merriman’s text with that of classical

19. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.29.



tragedy, itself read in translation, allows *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche* to take on a polyvalent range of meanings. Hence, through translation, it functions as a synecdoche of a metamorphosis of Irish culture through a comparative interaction with the culture of classical Europe. It also gestures towards a pluralistic postcolonial paradigm wherein Connolly's demand for a new theorisation of Irishness can be enunciated.

This translation, by making the Irish language speak the language of the other, and at the same time, by making English literature accommodate a text engendered within the Gaelic order of 18<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, forces notions of complexity and transformation on readers, notions that, I would argue, are to be found in Merriman's original text. In this sense, Heaney's notion of translation is similar to that of Peggy Kamuf, who has noted the movement of the *trans*, 'translation, transference, transport, transformation' which always differs/defers the movement of thought from point of origin to point of arrival.<sup>20</sup> It is this process of transformation and transference that is ethically creative in Heaney's work, as it 'complicates' notions of identity, through the juxtaposition of Irish, English and Greek cultures and languages.

In the context of this view of translation, and of Heaney's ongoing involvement with the Field Day project, the critic Seamus Deane has made the interesting point that Field Day's *raison d'être* has been an involvement with 'a particular experience of what we may call translation.' However, Deane's notion of translation as predicated by a 'traumatic political and cultural crisis' which causes 'individuals and groups' to 'forge for themselves a new speech,' seems narrower than that of Heaney. Deane seems to see translation as confined to tribal or communal speech; it is the new dialect of the tribe talking to the tribe. It operates in a worldview which sees self and other in terms of a 'a clash of loyalties which is analysable

but irresolvable'.<sup>21</sup> It is a worldview which sees the communities in Northern Ireland, for example, as condemned to 'rehearse positions from which there is no exit'.<sup>22</sup> Heaney's aim, on the other hand, would seem to be a restructuration of language so that the tribe can talk to the other through an acknowledgement of the essential hybridity, or 'in-betweenness' of language itself. For Heaney, to translate is metonymic of the ethical imperative: it is the quintessential form of dialogue with the other.

John Wilson Foster has pointed out that for Heaney translation is a seminal aspect of his vision of the world, and consequently of his writing. Describing Heaney's reaction to the political situation in Northern Ireland, he says that if Heaney did not speak *out* about issues: 'he spoke *in*, which is what a poet in his truest office does. Events are absorbed and internalised, re-issued and sometimes recognizable in their translation only by our disciplined reading'.<sup>23</sup> This transforming and re-issuing aspect of translation has to do with an expressed desire of Heaney's in dealing with political material. In an interview with Barry White, he made the point that writers of his generation attempted to transcend their Catholicism and Protestantism: 'I would prefer not to talk in those terms because they are terms I deplore.' He went on to say that the desire on the part of writers of his generation was 'to get through the thicket, not to represent it'.<sup>24</sup> Crucially here, he is prescribing a political and ethical imperative to writing, in that the role of the writer is to transform perceptions in order to find some way out of the thicket of internecine sectarian violence.

This transformative perceptual process is enunciated in *The Midnight Verdict*, in which translations from Brian Merriman's satire *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* are juxtaposed with some translations from Ovid's

20. Peggy Kamuf (ed.) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.242.
21. Seamus Deane, Introduction to *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p.14.
22. *Ibid.*, p.15.
23. John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1995), p.3.
24. Barry White, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 June 1989), p.9.

*Metamorphoses*. It is a further example of the drive towards complexity of response that has been the focus of much of Heaney's discussion of the epistemological structure of translation in terms of a restoration and transformation of our riven cultural experience. He explains the genesis of this juxtaposition of Merriman with Ovid in the introduction to *The Midnight Verdict*:

The three translations included here were all part of a single impulse. 'Orpheus and Eurydice' was done in June 1993, just before I began to prepare a lecture on *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (1780) for the Merriman Summer School. Then, in order to get to closer grips with the original, I started to put bits of the Irish into couplets and, in doing so, gradually came to think of the Merriman poem in relation to the story of Orpheus, and in particular the story of his death as related by Ovid. The end of *The Midnight Court* took on a new resonance when read within the acoustic of the classical myth, and this gave me the idea of juxtaposing the Irish poem (however drastically abridged) with the relevant passages from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>25</sup>

It is this placing of the voice of the self within the ambit of the voice of the other in order to set up an intertextual, intercultural and intersubjective structure which defines the selfhood of the Irish writer in terms of the alterity of the Greek one. The web of interconnections between Merriman, the Irish-speaking poet translated by Heaney, Heaney the Irish poet who writes in English, and the classical Ovid, whose works come to us from Greek only through translation, is an essentially deconstructive one, recalling our initial quote from Derrida: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language.

*The Midnight Court* itself deals with the dream vision of the poet, Brian Merriman, who is accused, as a representative of Irish manhood, by the women of Ireland. At the Midnight Court, which is ruled entirely by women, itself a transformation of the male hegemonic position in society, Aoibheall [the fairy

25. Seamus Heaney, *The Midnight Verdict* (Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Press, 2000), p.11.

queen of Munster] outlines the problem: men are reluctant to marry, the population is falling, and the fairy host has mandated her to set up a court in place of the English ones, and to propose a solution.<sup>26</sup>

The poem features an anguished debate between a young woman and an old man. She is angry at being sexually neglected: 'I'm scorched and tossed, a sorry case / Of nerves and drives and neediness', who goes on to describe herself as a 'throbbing ache' and a 'numb discord', with her final solution to the problem being expressed in the couplet: 'For if things go on like this, then fuck it! / The men will have to be abducted!'<sup>27</sup>

After this speech, the old man explains how he was tricked into marrying a young woman who was already pregnant. The young woman responds in kind, asking why the clergy cannot marry, and all wait for Aoibheall's verdict, which is delivered at the end of the poem, with the figure of Merriman serving as synecdoche for the men of Ireland:

But it's you and your spunkless generation.  
You're a source blocked off that won't refill.  
You have failed your women, one and all.<sup>28</sup>

The poet, as representative of men, comes under particular attack, as an average 'Passable male – no paragon / But nothing a woman wouldn't take on'. He is seen as spending his life on pleasure: 'Playing his tunes, on sprees and batters / With his intellectual and social betters'.<sup>29</sup>

Heaney's notion of the importance of this poem can be gleaned from an essay in *The Redress of Poetry* entitled, revealingly: 'Orpheus in Ireland: On Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court*', wherein he outlines the value of this poem as 'part of the Irish past' and of the 'literary conventions of medieval

26. Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.187.

27. Heaney, *Midnight Verdict*, p.26.

28. *Ibid.*, p.26.

29. *Ibid.*, p.32.

Europe’ while at the same time noting that it is capable of being read as ‘a tremor of the future’.<sup>30</sup> He also notes that the poem’s original audience would have seen it as a parody of the traditional *aisling* poetic form, a form in which a poet sees a beautiful woman in a dream, who ‘drives him to diction and description’, and who is an allegory of Ireland. She generally tells of her ill-treatment by the English before consoling ‘herself and the poet by prophesying that her release will be affected by a young prince from overseas’. For Heaney, the poem is, among other things, ‘a blast of surrealistic ridicule directed against such a fantasy’,<sup>31</sup> and given his own far less overt attempts at prising open nationalist tropes and images, we can see how this dimension of the poem would be attractive to him. It is a way of gesturing towards a cultural transformation by using farce and surrealism:

*Cúirt an Mhéan-Oíche* was important because it sponsored a libertarian and adversarial stance against the repressive conditions which prevailed during those years in Irish life, public and private.<sup>32</sup>

The role of the poet in this court of appeal is also central. Merriman himself figures in the poem as a narrative voice and witness to the debate, though near the end of the poem, he becomes the scapegoat for the crimes of the men of Ireland. He figures as the artist ‘Playing his tunes’,<sup>33</sup> and is called by his ‘nickname “merry man”’, as well as being seen as ‘the virgin merry, going grey’, and finally being referred to as ‘Mr Brian’.<sup>34</sup> The deprecating tone is reminiscent of many of Heaney’s own comments about his early self: in *Station Island*: ‘I hate how quick I was to know my place’<sup>35</sup> or in *North*: ‘while I sit here with a pestering / Drouth for words’.<sup>36</sup> However, the learning in the poem makes it clear that Merriman too was attempting to redefine an Irish poetic trope within a broader cultural context, a point stressed by Declan Kiberd:

- 30. Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), p.39.
- 31. *Ibid.*, p.48
- 32. *Ibid.*, p.53.
- 33. *Ibid.*, p.32.
- 34. *Ibid.*, p.33.

Merriman wrote in rhyming couplets, which varied the rhyme the rhyme from couplet to couplet in a manner never attempted by his predecessors in Irish. This fact alone has led admirers to suggest the influence of Goldsmith, Swift and Pope....Merriman infused older Gaelic forms with the techniques of Augustan writing.<sup>37</sup>

For Kiberd, correctly in my view, the poem itself, in its original Irish language formation, is already a translation and transformation of 18<sup>th</sup> century literary Irish in its acknowledgement of the presence of ‘*plus d’une langue*’ – of more than one language – in the literary enculturation of the period. Kiberd notes that Merriman’s learning as part of the Royal Dublin Society would have placed him within the ambit of such Augustan influences, and goes on to probe how Merriman, in the original poem, transformed and translated the Augustan conventions into the rhyme and rhythm of the Irish language. Indeed, Kiberd sees the poem’s stylised opening as a parody of the mannered Augustan forms:

Ba ghnáth mé ar siúl le ciumhais na habhann  
Ar bháinseach úr is an drúcht go trom,  
In aice na gcoillte i gcoim an tsléibhe  
Gan mhairg gan mhoill ar shoilseadh an lae.  
Do ghealadh mo chroí nuair chínn Loch Gréine,  
An talamh, an tír, is íor na spéire  
Ba thaitneamhach aoibhinn suíomh na sléibhte  
Ag bagairt a gcinn thar dhroim a chéile.  
Twas my custom to stroll with the river in view  
Through the fresh meadows covered with dew,  
By the edge of the woods on the wild mountain-side  
At the dawn of the day I’d cheerfully stride.  
My heart would brighten Loch Graney to spy,  
And the country around it, to the edge of the sky.  
The serried mountains were a delight to the beholder

35. Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p.85.

36. Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p.59.

37. Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p.184.

Thrusting their heads over each other's shoulder.<sup>38</sup>

Kiberd sees these lines as a deliberate almost pastiche of the Augustan rhyming couplet, adding that Merriman's scheme within the poem is to pit 'the genteel conventions of Augustan poetry against the more authentic Gaelic modes to follow'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the poem is achieving a form of transformation of traditional modes of writing by infusing the conventions of the Augustan discourse.

He sees this poem as a syncretism of Gaelic and English modes, both in terms of verse form, and verse pace, and goes on to make the point that the whole of the poem's opening is written in the continuous past tense (*aimsir ghnáthchaite*). Possibly this signifies that a single cultural enunciation for someone of Merriman's time is a thing of the past, and that if there is to be any form of cultural progress, then the decorum of the Augustan pictorial imagination must be shattered by the irruption of the fairy queen, Aoibheall into the discourse. Conversely, the fairy folk-culture, traditionally accorded low status in Irish lore, is fused with the higher generic standards of the *aisling* and the received high cultural index of the Augustan rhyming couplet. As Kiberd puts it:

By fusing this low-level vernacular fairy lore with the exalted *aisling* and Augustan landscape traditions, Merriman is enabled to subject the jaded higher forms to redemption from below.<sup>40</sup>

And, I would suggest, the reverse is also true, as so-called lower literary forms achieve increased cultural capital and complexity through their association with the higher forms. Thus, the original poem itself is a translating and transformative work, a point which demonstrates Merriman's quite complex sense of Irishness. It is this broader aspect of the poem, parodying Irish traditional genres, while experimenting with innovative rhyme schemes in the Irish language by looking outwards towards the English poetic tradition, that interests Heaney, and that brought this remarkable edition of this translation into being.

38. Translation by J. Noel Fahy: <http://www.uhb.fr/Langues/Cei/midcrt.htm>.

39. Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p.184.

40. *Ibid.*, p.186.

As we have seen, Heaney tells us that, as he translated these lines from Merriman, he began to see elements of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* reflected in them, specifically the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. He goes on to quote from the conclusion of the opening part of Book X, telling how, after Eurydice had 'died again', Orpheus was 'Disconsolate, beyond himself, dumbfounded' and the result was a transformation: 'and Orpheus / Withdrew and turned away from loving women'.<sup>41</sup> The only bride for Orpheus would now be 'a boy' and Heaney detected a distant parallel between:

the situation of this classical poet figure, desired by those he has spurned, and the eighteenth-century Irish poet as he appears at the end of *Cúirt an Mhéan-Oíche*, arraigned for still being a virgin when the country is full of women who'd be only too glad to ease him of his virtue.<sup>42</sup>

Both texts place the artist in some form of trial, and here we are in the familiar ground of Heaney's own constant interrogations in *Field Work*, where he writes in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday and the killing of a friend, Louis O'Neill, by a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA as he violated a republican-imposed curfew, about whether his role is to be one of the 'brothers bound in a ring',<sup>43</sup> or else to be somewhere 'well out, beyond',<sup>44</sup> attempting to 'fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency'.<sup>45</sup>

The Irish poem, Heaney maintains, can be read as another manifestation of the story of Orpheus, 'master poet of the lyre, the patron, and sponsor of music and song',<sup>46</sup> and the different conclusions of both poems depict the different cultures involved. Orpheus, singing in the woods, is spied by a band of 'crazed Ciconian women' who call him 'Orpheus the misogynist' and attack him: the 'furies were

41 Heaney, *Midnight Verdict*, p.18

42. Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, p.58.

43. Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), p.22.

44. *Ibid.*, p.24.

45. Heaney, *Station Island*, pp.93-4.

46. Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, p.58.



unleashed’,<sup>47</sup> and they turned to ‘rend the bard’.<sup>48</sup> The Irish parallel has a tamer ending. As the women decide to ‘Flay him alive’ and to ‘Cut deep. No mercy. Make him squeal / Leave him in strips from head to heel’,<sup>49</sup> the poet wakes up: ‘Then my dreaming ceased / And I started up, awake, released’.<sup>50</sup> Heaney tends to read one ending in the light of the other, yet another of those transformative crossings of self and other, as Ovid is read through Merriman and Merriman through Ovid.

The resulting structure is a triptych which features Ovid’s account of the death of Eurydice and Orpheus’s subsequent descent into the underworld, followed by two sections of the Merriman piece, and culminating in the death of Orpheus. Perhaps more than any other, this translation enacts the imperative towards viewing Ireland within a classical and European perspective. The three sections are all in English, but spring from two very different source languages. The very act of reading this piece is to submerge oneself in the cultural hybridity that has become contemporary Ireland, as the Irish, Greek and English languages interact and intersect in a structure which is sufficiently fluid to accommodate them all. All three poems deal with some form of transformation, so they are keenly connected with the other concerns of his translations. Indeed, the creative juxtaposition within this triptych, I would argue, has a lot to do with Heaney’s assertion that *The Midnight Court* has a ‘role to play in the construction of a desirable civilization’.<sup>51</sup> This role, I would maintain is to be seen in the transgressive function which the poem exerts in terms of the power-relations of the time. In a country which came under the British judicial system, Merriman sets up an Irish court which takes no account of British law. In a society which was, in terms of power and property rights, patriarchal, he sets up a court in which the power positions of judge and prosecutor are filled by women. In a society where the twin cultures of Irishness

47. Heaney, *Midnight Verdict*, p.39.

48. *Ibid.*, p.40.

49. *Ibid.*, p.33.

50. *Ibid.*, p.34.

51. Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, p.57.

and Englishness were existing in parallel rather than in any form of intersection, Merriman sets up interfusing poetic and linguistic codes which are transformative of the linguistic and cultural *status quo*.

Merriman's poem, then, is a translation and transformation of the hegemonic structures of his language and culture. When juxtaposed with the selections from Ovid, a further range of meanings is released as each poem is now read within the acoustic of the other. At a further level, both poems also feature intersections between humanity and humanity's 'other' – the other world, the land of death, the fairy kingdom. In both, humanity is seen struggling with what is both the non-human – fairies and death – and, paradoxically, with what can be seen as almost the defining factors of humanity, namely the aesthetic and narrative imperatives: stories of beings created out of human imagination, which act as metaphors of condensation and displacement in terms of issues which lurked within the social subconscious of the time.

That two such disparate cultures can share such narrative structures is a further complication of the context of each, and the disparate conclusions, death and an awakening from a dream, paradoxically strengthen the connection. As Heaney puts it, there is a lingering sense that the 'nightmare scenario' of Merriman's bring flayed alive was 'truer to the psychic realities than the daylight world to which the poet is returned'.<sup>52</sup> By locating Merriman's poem within the 'force-field of an archetype', Heaney can see the 'phallogentrism of its surface discourse' the fear of 'suppressed female power, both sexual and political', in the light of the Ovid myth, and he can also view the weakness of the conclusion as the price that the 'eighteenth-century mind was prepared to pay in order to keep the psycho-sexual demons of the unconscious at bay for a while longer.'<sup>53</sup>

52. Ibid., p.60.

In terms of the value of translation within his poetic development, a final image from *The Cure at Troy* will underline the point. Writing of entrenched communities, be they Greek and Trojan or unionist and nationalist, he notes that they are:

People so deep into  
Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up.  
People so staunch and true, they're fixated,  
Shining with self-regard like polished stones.<sup>54</sup> (CT, 1)

In *The Haw Lantern*, he writes of a diametrically opposite image of stone in 'The Stone Grinder', where stone is seen as grinding away present images so as to prepare for new messages and signifiers: 'I ground the same stones for fifty years / and what I undid was never the thing I had done'.<sup>55</sup> Instead of the presence and fixation of the 'polished stones', here it is the process of grinding stones in order to prepare for the new that is valued: 'For them it was a new start and a clean slate / every time'.<sup>56</sup> Translation allows him to wipe the slate of fixation clean, and to dislocate and revision Irishness through the crossing over (an etymologically valid meaning of translation), into other cultures and languages.

The picture of Irishness that can be drawn from *The Midnight Verdict* is, I would maintain, a coherent development from the original. As we have seen, Merriman himself was fully cognisant of the plurality of the cultural task which he was undertaking, and any translation of that work is, by definition, adding layers onto that plurality. Just as Merriman juxtaposes the *aisling*, fairy lore and the Irish and English poetic traditions, so Heaney adds a transformative translation into English and the added dimension from classical Greece. For Heaney, the notion of the poem as having a 'role to play in the construction of a desirable civilization' is very possibly to be found in this transformative metamorphosis of language and culture (and in the present context I hope I can be excused any special pleading when I highlight the title

53. Ibid., pp.61-2.

54. Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber, 1990), p.1.

55. Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p.8.

56. Ibid., p.8.

of the work which frames the Merriman translations in *The Midnight Verdict* – the *Metamorphoses*). By changing the frame of reference through which people are enculturated into their literary and linguistic *milieu*, Merriman, and by extension Heaney, are engaged in a deconstruction of any cultural or linguistic separatist fundamentalism and instead, are attempting to focus on a future where there will be a more inclusive attitude to narratives, and where, by extension, issues of identificatory politics will be seen as similarly culturally diverse as the poems in *The Midnight Verdict*.

Both *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche* and *The Midnight Verdict* enunciate what Jacques Derrida would describe as such a ‘responsibility toward the *future*, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear’ and can hence ‘come to transform what we know or think we know’.<sup>57</sup> We have already discussed the cross-fertilization of language and culture that Heaney’s translation of Merriman has brought into being, a cross-fertilization that was very much at the core of the original enterprise of Merriman himself. In his metrical transposition of the technique of the Augustan rhyming couplet into Irish language poetry, he opened that poetic discourse to transformative cultural and linguistic influence. However, this transferential process has a chiasmatic dimension as it also demonstrates the ability of the Irish language to influence English poetic and political developments: the court in question here is an Irish one, and despite its comic dimension, there is a sense of an alternative paradigm of law and appeal being set out in this poem. That the court is of the other world connects with Derrida’s notion of *hauntology*. The hauntings of otherness, of difference, can destabilise political and cultural polarisation, and literature, the genre where it is possible to say almost anything, is the perfect vehicle to enunciate such alternative notions of law and society, albeit under a comic mask.

57. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p.5.

Perhaps this is the reason why Heaney uses the title *The Midnight Verdict* as opposed to *The Midnight Court*: he is offering a verdict on the cultural value of the original Merriman poem in terms of its transformative potential, and also situating this within a broader contextual framework which allows that work to achieve cultural and linguistic resonances with the European tradition. In this way, Merriman, and by extension Heaney, are attempting to define Irish culture in a manner which is against the grain in terms of hegemonic linguistic, cultural and gender practices.

In Heaney's translation, as Ovid is read through Merriman so Merriman is read through Ovid. The resulting structure is a triptych which enacts the imperative towards viewing Ireland within a classical and European perspective. The three sections are all in English, but spring from two very different source languages. The very act of reading this piece is to submerge oneself in the cultural hybridity that has become contemporary Ireland, as the Irish, Greek and English languages interact and intersect in a structure which is sufficiently fluid to accommodate them all. All three poems deal with some form of transformation, so they are keenly connected with the other concerns of his translations, and the creative juxtaposition within this triptych, I would argue, has a lot to do with Heaney's assertion that *The Midnight Court* has a 'role to play in the construction of a desirable civilization.'