

# *Archetypal, Identical, Similar? Seamus Heaney's "Punishment" Revisited*

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**Abstract:** *"Punishment" by Seamus Heaney reflects upon the relationship between a prehistoric girl killed in a ritual and two modern Irish girls punished as a consequence of political strife. My point is that Heaney's poem cannot be taken as a one-sided approach to identity, to stereotypes or archetypes. The introduction of a Christian hypotext works in such a way that no element in any of the sequences can be taken as a univocal "archetype" of the other two. Notions such as "archetype", "repetition" and "rite" are critically discussed. The poet interrogates the painful reality of Irish contemporary events and his own reactions, rather than acquiescing to a conclusive pattern of revenge.*

The poem "Punishment", which belongs to the first part of *North* (1975), is connected to reactions concerning the Irish Troubles and has been largely discussed from the ethical point of view. Briefly stated, my point is that Heaney's poem cannot be taken as a restrictive or simply dualistic approach to matters such as violence, personal and national identity, stereotypes and archetypes.

"Punishment" exemplifies contrasting critical stances, which can be strongly biased by ideologies. Because of the bold connection between the bog girl depicted by the poet and the victims of modern violence in Northern Ireland, I think that critical detachment and emotional balance were difficult to achieve in the past decades. It is worth noticing that in the case of "Punishment" the poet is not contemplating an actual corpse or archaeological vestige, but only a photograph — a book written by P.V. Glob, *The Bog People*, motivated many poems of *North*, "Punishment" among them. The daring link between the victimized girl and the modern Irish girls reveals that Heaney's concern with Irish identity is always present and permeates his work.

The type of revenge put into practice in both punishments is the tribal one: the victim is not an enemy but an "enemy's friend" instead; the act involves insiders, not outsiders. However, the so-called similarities and identifications are not to be pressed too far. For example, we know that the Irish girls were punished because of their friendship with British soldiers, but we only guess why the bog girl was punished, we do not even know if she was really an "adulteress", as the poet calls her.<sup>1</sup>

It is my contention against too quick an identification between the bog victim and the Irish girls that the Bible, particularly the Gospels, functions as an intertext. There is a clear allusion to the passage of an adulteress brought before Christ (*John* 8, 1-11) in the last line of the following passage: "I almost loved you / But would have cast, I know / The stones of silence". The Christian element is also present in the ninth stanza, where the poet imagines himself seeing the girl's body: "And all your numbered bones" ("I can count all My bones", *Psalms* 23, 17). Finally, in stanza 7 she is "my poor scapegoat": because of her sufferings, her very bones can be counted. The Biblical passages link the two cases referred to in the poem. The explicit introduction of the Christian element makes things complex, a sort of *mise en abîme* in which no element in any of the sequences can be taken as a clear "archetype" of the other two sequences.

At the beginning of the poem, the poet's feeling is of sympathy, even tenderness: he himself feels the rope around his neck as if he were the victim. But all this tenderness is severely put at stake when he refers to himself as the "artful voyeur" (of the girl's naked body), suggesting the idea of morbid curiosity, even sexual attraction, derived from the image he invents out of the contemplation of the ruined corpse.

Let us concentrate on the three Biblical hypotexts. It must be remembered that according to the Gospels Jesus says: "he who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." The poet classifies himself within the group that wanted to punish the woman, hence among the sinners. On the other hand, he calls her "My poor scapegoat." In *Leviticus* 16, the rites for atonement are described: Aaron must offer a scapegoat, which "shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonements upon it." Somebody or something must be chosen to expiate for everybody's sins, assuming that everybody is guilty of sinning or must serve as a propitiatory offering. The victim is not more guilty than the other members of the community. This is consistent with the passage of the adulteress, because Jesus makes the punishers admit that they are not less guilty than the adulterous woman. In the third place we have these "numbered bones" in a complex textual relation to the poem, because the passage of the Psalm is considered to anticipate Christ's suffering. This is an amazing, though almost imperceptible, step. Now the victim is assimilated to Christ, who is thought of as absolutely innocent, thus a scapegoat. There is a process of justification and transformation ending in the idealization of the victim.

I want to reexamine the biblical episode of the adulterous woman following St Augustine's *Tratados sobre el Evangelio de San Juan* (XIV: 667 ff.). In the 33<sup>rd</sup> treatise, Augustine focuses his attention on the issue of temptation included in the episode. The Gospel narrator says that the woman was brought before Jesus because the Scribes and Pharisees wanted to test Him, "that they might have something to accuse him." Augustine comments on this test saying that Jesus, having the reputation of a mild man, could not tell the accusers to stone the woman. However, if Jesus had set the woman free the act would have been against the Law and against Moses, in which case Jesus would have had to be stoned together with the woman. Christ's answer is neither "stone her" nor "don't stone her" but "he who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first". Augustine's comment includes the word "*calumnia*" ("slander"): "They did not

do anything but slander the rest without any self-examination.”<sup>2</sup> Being themselves trespassers on the law, they wanted the law to be enforced: “This out of cunning, not according to the truth, which would have been to condemn adultery in the name of chastity”.<sup>3</sup> Augustine’s comment does not underrate the woman’s sin but stresses the fact that those who wanted to stone her to death were ill doers. The word “slander” is fundamental here, not because the accusers wanted to spoil the woman’s reputation telling lies about her, but because their behaviour was not better than the woman’s. The Gospel hypotext makes “Punishment” polysemous. The revengers’ attitude changes from one of violence into one of injustice. Since Heaney chooses to introduce the Biblical case, we can ask which is his place in the scenes he is watching. Can we assimilate the poet to Christ? At first sight, there is no justification for this: because he speaks of casting stones, it seems that he is placing himself among the punishers. Bearing in mind Augustine’s comment we can say that in a way the poet reproduces Christ’s puzzle, *i.e.*, the impossibility of setting the woman free or of condemning her. This is reflected in the conditional verbs he uses to imagine his reaction witnessing the episode.<sup>4</sup>

We can assume that the bog girl is an adulteress and we know that the Irish ones are called “betrayers”. Are the prehistoric punishers slanderers? The answer is guesswork. We might say that “all men are sinners”, but it is evident that we can apply neither the Hebrew concept of Law nor that of Christian forgiveness to the prehistoric case. Paradigms, patterns and archetypes are not trustworthy; therefore, the attractive idea of repetition, reenactment or reproduction becomes blurred, hence dangerous. We can speak of fatalism, *i.e.*, of iterative patterns of punishment exacted by guilty people, those who are not sufficiently pure to condemn the others. In this case, we cannot restrict the pattern to the case of Irish political struggles. The idea of archetype would imply that the poet denounces this extreme fatalism as a characteristic of mankind. Benedict Anderson states that there is a fatalistic halo in the origin and definition of national identities, but he remarks that this fatality is integrated into history. (202)

One of the controversial issues appears in the one-but-last stanza. The poet makes an enormous historical leap: “our betraying sisters” become now the bog girl’s sisters, indirectly the biblical adulteress’ sisters, eventually Christ’s sisters. Does the coupling of the “little adulteress” with the (contemporary) betraying sisters imply that the prehistoric behaviour works as an archetype of the troubling situation in Ireland? If the two realities coalesce, then the poet is a sort of indifferent witness admitting that he “[would] understand the exact / And tribal, intimate revenge”. Henry Hart considers this poem as an example of self-inflicted punishment,

in which he [Heaney] attacks himself for not standing up to and actively resisting the abhorrent reprisals of his Catholic tribe against those who, like himself, have abandoned its religious and revolutionary principles. (92)

Similarly, Neil Corcoran mentions the desperate irony of these allusions in that they both judge this act of tribal revenge by the more merciful ethic enshrined in the

biblical religion and also implicate that religion is precisely those sacrificial rituals which join Jutland and Irish Republicanism. (73-4)

The following is what Heaney says about these ancient practices:

You have a society in the iron age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time. They are observed with amazement and a kind of civilised tut-tut in the first century AD and by leader-writers in the *Daily Telegraph* in the twentieth century. (qtd.in Morrison 63)

Moreover, in *Preoccupations* Heaney refers to the barbarous rite as "an archetypal pattern" in relation to what he calls "the tradition of Irish political martyrdom" (57). The implied fatalism arouses stern reactions. In his well-known "'Pap for the Dispossess'd': Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity", David Lloyd deplores the idea of violence as "symbolic of a fundamental identity of the Irish race" (174). In his opinion, the ideology of identity is simplistic and eventually a manifestation of Eurocentrism. The "well-made poem" cannot justify this dangerous identification between rite and history. In the same vein, Ciaran Carson shows a diffident disagreement with Heaney's stance: "Being killed for adultery (for example) is one thing; being tarred and feathered is another, and the comparison sometimes leads Heaney to some rather odd historical and emotional conclusions" (qtd. in Andrews 85). As this kind of fatalism seems to restrict the "feminine principle" to a transhistorical role, Patricia Coughlan describes these poems as "a very equivocal result". According to Coughlan the persona "constructs Northern Irish Catholics as, like Celts in the ancient Romans, a rare, mysterious, barbarous; inarticulate, lacking in civility" (qtd. in Andrews 129). It is worth noticing that Coughlan mentions a *persona*, which in a way distances these statements from Heaney himself. Now, the idea of defining your own identity in relation to the Other is attractive and would fit Heaney's supposed attempts to define Irish identity by opposing it to the British one.

What I object to in such pieces of criticism is an overly rigorous reading of Heaney's declaration about "archetypal pattern". "Archetype" does not mean absolute identification of the model and the event happening after it. An archetype presupposes a sequence in which differences are bound to appear. In other words, the bog girl considered as an archetype is not enough ground for identifying her with the Irish girls. It is because of the distance that separates them from us that the poet can contemplate these differences. Too much attention has been laid on the "voyeur" element without emphasizing the adjective, *i.e.*, "artful", which describes a complex cultural situation in

which nothing can be taken at first value.<sup>5</sup> In the poem, this word can be taken as self-referential: it draws attention to the devices used by the poet in phrasing the poem.

Whereas Arthur McGuinness emphasizes Heaney's sense of guilt in the ambiguous attitude of witnessing the revenge and at the same time understanding it (36), Tony Curtis comments that "irrationality can only be answered through the imaginative leap of metaphor" (100). I agree: transforming something into poetry is an assertive fact in itself, even if it tells atrocities. Bernard O'Donoghue refers to "the writer's self as an example of the experiencing observer. So the judgment in the poem is not a moral or political one: it is an artistic one" (74). This "salvation through word" had been stated by Blake Morrison, who appreciated Heaney's effort "to discover a myth helping to understand the Irish problem" (69).

In my view, O'Donoghue's and Morrison's approaches point out the risk of oversimplification in the process of analysing repetitions within an archetype. On the contrary, any tribal archetype of punishment must be studied and discussed in each occurrence: "archetype" cannot mean sameness. Repetition becomes a fallacy if considered in the sense of cloning an experience. If archetypes can be mentioned at all, this is because there are differences in the "repeated" things. Among the many present in the poem the main one is, as Carson notices, that the bog girl is killed, whereas the Irish girls are only stigmatized, tarred, in fact. The Biblical allusions, especially the Christian ones, overlap the two cases. Nevertheless, Heaney's use of Christian allusions is rich and shifting.

The fallacy involved in the utter simplification of the two punishment sequences can be answered turning to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. Using Greimas's terminology, Rimmon-Kenan states: "Repetition of the sign... still occurs when one *actant* is always associated with one character, a repetition of the signified when the same *actant* is realized in different characters, and a repetition of the signifier when one character functions as different *actants*" (152). I find difficulties trying to fit Heaney's "characters" in this taxonomy. Apparently the right one is the second: in this case we should consider that there is a character, let us call it "the victim", who is punished as a bog girl, and the same character(s), now in a twofold version, who are punished as Irish betrayers. Is this the position of the Gospel adulteress, whom Heaney uses as a linking figure?

This question corresponds to Rimmon-Kenan's first paradox: "Repetition is present everywhere and nowhere" (151). After discussing some definitions of repetition, he concludes that "there is no repetition without difference and no difference without repetition, and each can only be discussed in terms of the other" (153, my emphasis). In the poem "Punishment", "repetition" covers all the three cases, *i.e.*, the bog girl, the Biblical girl, the Irish girl(s), so that each one can be considered a hypotext of the other two.

The second paradox reads as follows: "Constructive repetition emphasizes difference, destructive repetition emphasizes sameness" (153). This seems to be a firm ground for Lloyd's and Carson's objection: Heaney is producing a destructive repetition in coupling the prehistoric girl with the modern one(s). However, Carson's contention

is precisely that there are differences between the two cases; on the other hand, Heaney uses distancing metaphors. For example, casting the stones [of silence] applies to no case except the Gospel's adulterous woman. It can be added that the stones that are to be thrown at her are not, strictly speaking, "of silence". Differences are always there. The first person in "Punishment" would have been active in casting stones but "silence" means passivity, lack of aggression: it reveals cowardice rather than indifference. Yet, the poet qualifies "outrage" as "civilized", an oxymoron, and introduces contrastive clauses as though finding that no path is easy or smooth. Rimmon-Kenan says: "The danger is that of over-sameness, of a repetition that repeats itself without variation" (154). I would add that the danger in reading "Punishment" consists in failing to perceive the differences that separate the two sequences because the transitions are subtle.

The third paradox reads: "The first time is already a repetition, and repetition is the very first time" (155). Things become very complex in literature, because reading itself consists of repeating, *i.e.*, decoding what has previously been encoded. Mentioning Borges and Kierkegaard, Rimmon Kenan stresses the fact that "although repetition can only exist in time it also destroys the notion of time". This would account for Heaney's powerful synthesis. Although the three cases (not just two) start a *mise en abîme* instead of coalescing, it must be recognized that (Christian) time has elapsed, thus making modern violence more unacceptable.

The concept of "archetype" mentioned by Heaney in the quoted passage must be reconsidered. Firstly, Heaney is very much aware of some archetypes: the principal one is the image of a center, which he terms *omphalos* using the Greek word. It is difficult to ascertain whether Heaney is using this symbol according to the archaic ontology, meaning the sacred center where the Deity had manifested or founded the cosmos. *Omphalos* is certainly an archetype of creation or rather of communication between earth and heaven, *Axis mundi*. Following Mircea Eliade, any human action is a repetition of a mythic or supernatural archetype (15). Human beings, their products, even nature, become meaningful or obtain their identity through their participation in a transcendent reality. In a way, everything, even geography, has a celestial model. The function of any rite is to transform chaos into cosmos, to shape it into a significant reality. We can therefore say that every rite corresponds to an archetype. The punishment of the girl in Jutland is not evidently an archetype but a variation within an archetype. Again, Eliade says: "Cada vez que el conflicto se repite, hay imitación de un modelo arquetípico". This implies that there is no meaningless suffering (35).<sup>6</sup> Eliade emphasizes that the archaic mentality works differently from the modern one: in the former, individual events are dismissed in favor of categories and archetypes. Hence, we can consider that the concept of "punishment" of the bog girl in Heaney's poem is a probable transfer of a modern concept. That is to say that Heaney is, partially at least, "reading" the punishment of the Irish girls into the prehistoric one. I am not highlighting this fact to soften the brutal image of a stone hanging from the girl's neck, but to show that the modern idea of punishment might not accurately describe the Jutland case.<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, I do not think that Heaney, in spite of his mentioning of *omphalos*, is using the word “archetype” in the archaic sense or in the sense supported by Eliade. He is rather using it with the meaning of a historical anticipation or prefiguring of the modern event (or, perhaps, as I suggest, *analepsis* instead of *prolepsis*). Critics who take the idea of archetype for granted might be misled. On the other hand, it is noticeable that Heaney is fond of etymologies, which are referred to both in his poems (the *dinnseanchas*) and in his essays. Besides the “accepted” meaning, the word “exact”, in the last line of the poem, can also mean “what is demanded” (from *exigere*). Consequently the community, notwithstanding the fairness or unfairness of the act, demands revenge. Likewise, the word “intimate”, which is at first sight associated with something pleasant happening in a small community, can also mean something that happens in the girl’s body, thus forming an oxymoron with “revenge”.<sup>8</sup> Hence, I would like to refer to Eugene O’Brien’s approach to Heaney’s work. O’Brien highlights a sense of multiplicity within the same self, a sort of polyphony that becomes remarkable when we think that the so-called archetype belongs to prehistoric Denmark. This, according to O’Brien, implies *différance* in the Derridean sense: “Rather than voicing the language of the tribe, Heaney is translating and transforming that language in a manner calculated to open the tribe’s consciousness to other perspectives” (86). If Heaney is deconstructing essential identities, the controversial stanzas in which the observer pities the victim and understands the punishment can be taken as multiple voices, which interrogate selfhood and sameness. Perplexity, guilt and interrogation define an attitude that cannot be deterministic.

Arthur McGuinness gives an amazing account of the genesis of “Punishment”: the fourth title chosen by Heaney was “Shame” (183). Furthermore, it is visible in McGuinness’s account that the Christian symbols and allusions disappeared almost wholly.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that Heaney was guided by a pattern of sinning and forgiving through successive drafts but then the pattern became transformed into that of a tribal custom. Similarly, the first person plural became the singular “I”, thus showing that the poet undertakes his personal responsibility. Finally, he transformed the idea of “righteousness” into that of “a painful understanding”: this entails a personal commitment in the tribal revenge and an awareness of his failure in adopting a clear attitude as regards atrocities.

I suggest reading the poem both ways, *i.e.*, from the bog girl into the Irish ones and vice versa. This double way is justified in the very poem. The poet says: “I almost love you” in the present tense, when he addresses the bog girl, but he uses the present perfect to refer to the event he is presently witnessing, *i.e.*, that of the Irish girls.

I find Fernando Lázaro Carreter’s statements particularly relevant to reveal my point of view as regards the first person in “Punishment”. Carreter quotes Samuel Levin, who in 1976 suggested that all poems depend on an implicit sentence: “I (the poet) imagine and invite you (the reader) to imagine a world in which...” [“Yo (el poeta) imagino, e invito a Ud. (lector) a imaginar un mundo en el cual...”] (34) Carreter insists

on the fact that the pair author-poet is not a dissociation but rather something that the writer delegated to the poet. Quoting many sources, among them, significantly, Wayne Booth, Lázaro Carreter highlights the idea of an *alter ego*: every poet is a *persona* masking the author's face.<sup>10</sup> He states that from the artistic point of view it is indifferent if what is said in the poem is true or false:

Ese yo fictivo puede encarnarse en un muerto, en una nube, en un cíclope, en una estatua: ninguna proeza transformista le resulta imposible al poeta. (45)

El poeta, en cuanto figura delegada del autor, puede llegar a distanciarse tanto de éste y goza de tan plena autonomía, que es capaz de transformarse a su vez en otro ser distinto. (94)

Instead of referring to "the poet" or "Heaney" let us refer to the first person in "Punishment": this person becomes a character because it is a creature in the poem. The first person in "Punishment" defines himself as an "artful voyeur". He builds up a character that travels from Jutland to Ireland, from Prehistory to contemporary events, from Archaeology to the Troubles.

When discussing *North* Daniel Tobin says that in "Bone Dreams", "Come to the Bower", "Kinship" and "Punishment", Heaney's "I" "almost merges with the murdered dead" (114). After examining different ways of viewing identity in these poems, he quotes from Heaney's essay "Place and Displacement": "The 'I' of the poem is at the eye of the storm within the 'I' of the poet". This accounts for a fierce consciousness, which tries to organize chaos through the poetic word. The concept of identity, if it is to be taken as a frozen category, melts and is demythologized only to reappear in a complex, almost ungraspable, way.

Heaney's fondness for etymologies justifies a brief discussion of the title. He chooses "Punishment", which goes back to Latin *poena*, a borrowing from Greek *poíná*, "compensation versée pour une faute ou pour un crime, rançon". Perhaps he might have turned to "Chastisement", an old-fashioned word that would be consistent with the "archetypal" case of the bog girl. We can trace the word back to Latin *castus*, *qui se conforme aux règles ou aux rites*. However, Ernout-Maillet hypothesizes that *castus* might have coalesced with another adjective *castus* (from *careo*) meaning *exempt de, pur de*, this being the habitual meaning in modern languages.

Etymologies may take us very far: at first sight "punishment" refers to pain or suffering exacted in order to compensate for a crime; whereas "chastisement" would have implied concentrating on the aspect of purification or chastening, thus showing the type of crime committed by the bog girl. I think that "punishment" emphasizes the predominant aspect of pain and suffering and understates the element of restoring or purification. This, obviously, indicates something even more unacceptable in the revenge act.<sup>11</sup>

My general conclusion is twofold. Firstly, I am aware that a single poem cannot be considered enough ground on which to build up an image of a nation, let alone the

notion of Irish identity. It is necessary to bear in mind that iteration is always relative. Relativization of an otherwise automatic concept of archetype should prevent us from attributing a fatalistic nature to Heaney's poem. Anyway, it is evident that the continuity of violence during a long period, particularly the Troubles, urges the poet to interrogate a type of iterative pattern, as if this community were bound to exert violence. Secondly, this "as if" clause must be always borne in mind: the poet interrogates the painful reality of Irish contemporary events and his own reactions, rather than acquiescing to a conclusive pattern of revenge. The subtlety of his phrasing and of the Biblical allusions attests to this fact.

### **Punishment**

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging  
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned  
body in the bog,  
the weighing stone,  
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first  
she was a barked sapling  
that is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head  
like a stubble of black corn,  
her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
her noose a ring

to store  
the memories of love.  
Little adulteress,  
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,  
undernourished, and your  
tar-black face was beautiful.  
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you  
but would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,

who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

## Notes

- 1 Thomas Froncek normally uses hypothetical formulae to refer to the victims: "Estas tres víctimas podían haber sido culpables de un delito contra las normas tribales. Pero también podían haber formado parte de un rito religioso... No hay medio de saber ciertamente en qué categoría se clasifican los cadáveres de Borremose." (II. 142) He refers to Tacitus as a skeptic when the Roman historian says that the goddess herself (*i.e.* Nerthus) was purified in a remote lake. He quotes Tacitus to explain why these sacrifices were sacred: "Así el misterio engendra terror y una piadosa aversión a preguntar qué puede ser aquello que solo es observado por los hombres destinados a morir". (II. 144). But in a previous passage Froncek says that undoubtedly some victims were prisoners of war or criminals, and others were women accused of adultery. (I. 52) A recent article by Karen E. Lange stresses the fact that many mistakes have been made in the research on the bog mummies and that Tacitus's report is not reliable. She refers to the examination of the Windeby girl carried out by Heather Gill-Robinson: the girl is probably a boy, and the body of "her" hypothetical lover, buried very near, belongs to somebody who lived three centuries before. (6-8)
- 2 "*Foris enim calumniabantur, seipsos intrinsecus non perscrutabantur.*" (My translation from Latin)

- 3 “... *et hoc calumniando, non vere tanquam adulteria castitate damnando*”. (My translation from Latin)
- 4 On the other hand, the Biblical passage has another “poetic” attraction: it is the only episode in which Jesus is said to have been writing on the sand. There are numerous comments on this action. St Augustine, for example, contrasts the rigid Law of the Old Testament, written on stone, with Jesus’s “mild” writing on earth. We may consider the ambiguity found by Derrida when he considers the problem of writing in Plato’s “pharmakon”, which is not only “poison” but also “cure”. The paradox is intensified in the case of the Gospel, because Jesus writes, but nobody can read what he wrote. Furthermore, all this information is known through writings (*i.e.* the Gospels) and Heaney does write a poem: Derridean “*différance*” in writing relies on the transformation of another text (18). Commenting on Derrida’s contribution to translation theory, Anthony Pym says: “The source text may thus be seen, not as a set of obligatory orders, nor an entirely annulled monarch, but as a phantom, an image that organises without determining the range of translational variants” (38). Applying the old “paradigms” of the bog girl and of the Gospel to the repressive episode in modern Ireland can be considered a genuine case of translation.
- 5 Under the entry “artful”, the *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* enlists “skilful in adapting means to ends”.
- 6 Eliade gives the example of a just, innocent god being humiliated, beaten and left in a well. Then he is comforted by a goddess or messenger until he comes again to life. (95)
- 7 I am not considering the Jungian concept of archetype. However, if we think in terms of recurring ground structures on individual beings, the impending fatalism in the poem would be almost absolute.
- 8 I evoke “El íntimo cuchillo en la garganta”, in Borges’s “Poema Conjetural”.
- 9 McGuinness mentions only “the stones of silence” (183). But “number my bones” also remains.
- 10 According to these scholars, what Ciaran Carson remarks about Heaney’s *persona* in “Punishment” should be extended to every poetic “I”.
- 11 Heaney’s main concerns, particularly the origin of words and the phenomenon of violence, go well into the twenty-first century: in his recent book, *District and Circle* (2006) there is a poem, “Out of shot”, which includes recollections “of the distant Viking *vik*” and of “*scriptorium*”. On the other hand it evokes “no attack... thinking shock / Out of the blue or blackout”. Meditating upon words and having the impression of bombs and violence seem to be some of Heaney’s “obsessions” in the Borgesian sense.

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