Poetry and Politics: Irish Revolutionary Literature

Wendy R. Ward

University of Redlands

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Poetry and Politics: Irish Revolutionary Literature

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Program.

by

Wendy R. Ward

Committee in Charge:

Dr. Kathy Ogren, Director
Dr. Gordon LLoyd
Dr. Judith Tschann

1996
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Introduction

"Few relations are more complicated and delicate than that of a poet and society."¹

Throughout the history of western thought the debate over the writer’s role in a political world has been a perennial question. Behind our debates there always seems to be an underlying belief that literature or poetry is somehow a less serious, more subversive mode of transmitting ideas than actual political participation. Consider the example of Nero, Roman Emperor made infamous for “fiddling while Rome burned.”² In Roman times as well as modern ones, we see Nero’s act of singing his poem from the Tower of Maecenas-- while the city below him burned--as irresponsible and frivolous. The fact that he was a political ruler makes his act even more contemptible. B.H. Warmington states “The image of a ruler ‘fiddling while Rome burned’ is far too potent, and useful, ever to be discarded from popular imagination.³

It has therefore survived both in the linguistic cliché as well as in the political philosophy of our culture. It reinforces our separation of the realm of art from that of the everyday world of politics and society. However an overlap still exists between the two worlds, where the line between art and reality cannot easily be drawn. It is this hazy area which I wish to examine.

One of the reasons it is difficult to completely separate literature from politics


² this example is used by Seamus Heaney in The Government of the Tongue.

is the fact that both enterprises share the same medium of language in their quest to express ideas or feelings. From Plato to modern times, a tension appears between the poet and the statesman, as if the two were in conflict for the allegiance and love of the people. It is because of this apparent conflict that Plato initially excluded poets from his conception of an ideal state. He recognized a certain subversive quality in the poet's storytelling, wit, and sarcasm, which was seen as dangerous, or downright irresponsible, with no place in the world of serious, organized politics. Although this view has been maintained for many centuries in many different forms, it is interesting to note that in Athens it was Socrates, not Homer, who was expelled.

In contrast and complement to this philosophical mistrust of the poets, the real political world has had a similarly uneasy time with the writers. Poets have played a central and crucial role in politics as we know it. Revolutionary writers have been the catalyst for political action and change. In my belief this is where the "overlap" between art and politics occurs, in the emotional revolutionary spirit of changing times. For this reason I have chosen to look at the politics and literature of Ireland to examine the complex relationship between a writer and the political world they inhabit.

Ireland has an interesting combination of cultural factors which play upon its modern writers. In addition to the social uneasiness with poets that seems to be universal, there remains a unique tradition of the bard, an official teller of tales whose political status was one of blame casting, praising, and cursing the kings. As the bardic order was displaced, another unique cultural factor came into play; many of the displaced bards took on an unofficial position that was on the very fringes of political life. The writers I will examine often take on many of the characteristics which their culture has assigned to poets, and they further complicate the relationship the writer holds to the world of his listeners.
In light of the works of several modern writers, including William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney, the “complicated and delicate” relationship of the poet and the political world becomes even more murky and interesting. Although Yeats’ romantic idealism can often be confused as blatant political rhetoric, Seamus Heaney is even more difficult to pin down in terms of his politics. Although he repeatedly insists that his poetry is not political and that his and all poetry should be taken “for it’s own sake” and interpreted by its own standards, every move Heaney makes seems to be seen in a political context. When awarded the Nobel prize in 1995 the Nobel Committee praised Heaney for his “analysis of violence in Northern Ireland”\(^4\) and cited his “works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.”\(^5\) Heaney cannot escape the fact that he is read, and awarded, for the political scope of his poetry. When Heaney moved from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland in 1972 it was seen, from all sides, as a political statement. Neil Corcoran writes:

> It [his move to the Republic] had an ‘emblematic’ significance. It was read as a decisively political alignment: literally read, since Ian Paisley’s paper, *The Protestant Telegraph*, bade farewell to the ‘well-known papish propagandist’ at his return to ‘his spiritual home in the popish republic.”\(^6\)

At every turn Heaney resists this categorization of his work. He attempts to redeem his poetry from being merely political by showing how poetry, indeed

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\(^6\) Neil Corcoran *Seamus Heaney* (Faber and Faber: London, 1986.) p. 27.
language, is more human than political. In The Redress of Poetry, Heaney’s most recent work of prose, his thesis is “that poetry of the highest order shouldn’t be fettered to political crusades.” Heaney stated to Jonathan Bing of Publishers Weekly that “through it’s ‘fine excess’, it’s power to outstrip the circumstances it observes and broaden the horizons of its readers, great poetry redresses the profounder spiritual imbalances of its age.”

Heaney makes the case for poetry, and therefore the poet, as a mediator between the world of the actual and the world of the ideal. It is something which is political; poetry is wrapped up in politics because politics is what we as humans experience, and yet poetry has the unique ability to transcend, through the use of language, the boundaries of the political world. Heaney writes in The Redress of Poetry that writing must “be a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony” and that it must “be true to the negative nature of the evidence and at the same time show an affirming flame, the need to be both socially responsible and creatively free.” This tension between responsibility and creativity is central to his work. Even as he proclaims the independence of poetry from politics he struggles with his own responsibility to his people and to their political cause. When he was criticized for moving to the Republic he often expressed this uncertainty with his convictions. Neil Corcoran observes that “the move nevertheless occasioned anxieties- about missing a major historical moment; about being thought, in some

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7 Jonathan Bing Publishers Weekly page 43.
8 Jonathan Bing, p. 43.
way, to have abandoned a responsibility." 10

We therefore have a social discomfort with the poet because, as a critic, he is
dangerous to organized politics, all within the context of a political world which is
anything but orderly or harmonious. What role does the poet now play? What
responsibilities, if any, does he have? In studying the literature of Ireland I will
bring out some of the ironies of this difficult question.

Socrates was executed for the very thing he accused the poets of: corrupting
the young and causing discord within the city. While the Greek philosopher would
have had no place for the poet in an Ideal state we must realize that such a utopia
does not exist. Could it be that, as the polis is not perfect, that the poet has a very
important and necessary role to play as it’s rival? Is it not a role similar to that
which Socrates occupied— one of critic, thinker, and writer? When philosophy or
poetry must take on a position of critique of an imperfect world, the two occupy
competing claims to truth.

Modern political science has discovered this link between political
philosophy and poetry. In 1995 an Organized Section of the American Political
Science Association was established for the Study of “Literature and Politics.” 11 This
analysis of Irish revolutionary writing justifies such an inquiry. This paper
examines some of the issues which contextualize the questions I have posed and, in
the end, identifies a relationship both “complicated and delicate” which exists
between a writer and the political society in which they exist.

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10 Corcoran, p. 32.

11 Catherine Zuckert, "Why Political Scientists Want to Study Literature" PS: Political Science and Politics
XXVIII (June 1995): 189.
Cultural Traditions Which Shaped The Irish Environment: 
The Intellectual and Artistic Traditions of Poetry

One of the unique things about Ireland's poetry are the many intellectual and cultural traditions that shaped the view of poetry which exists there, in a historical as well as a theoretical context. The bardic tradition, the classical philosophical tradition, and the effect of the "diaspora" of the bards on poetry in Ireland, are significant factors. There are, of course, other important influences which I will touch on. The following sections will explore the history of these influences, and show the cultural foundations for Irish poetry.

a. Classical philosophy

We can look to the political philosophy of the Greeks in an attempt to establish the origin of the division and conflict between politics and literature. In The Republic Plato discusses the education of the guardians, which includes gymnastics for the body and music for the soul. In this discussion of the artistic education, he determines that poetry can be more dangerous and more powerful than other forms of art because it can alter opinions of the children who are meant to be educated by it. Plato states: "Then shall we so easily let the children hear just any tales fashioned by just anyone and take into their souls opinions for the most part opposite to those we'll suppose they must have. . .?" Mortimer Adler concludes that "Music includes all the arts whose patrons are the muses, and among these, literature or poetry is distinguished because, employing words, it can

12 Plato's Republic, Book II 376e. Translated and with an introduction by Allan Bloom (Harper Collins, 1968.)

13 The Republic. Book II 377b
express ideas.” 14

Plato goes on to analyze the dangers of an art form which expresses such ideas. If it is to have a position in the education of philosopher kings, it must then express or teach correct ideas, which contribute to the goodness of man and state. When put to this test, Plato does not find the poets altogether worthy of a place in the ideal state. Perhaps he was influenced by his own feelings for the poets of ancient Greece when he found that poets slander the gods, and portray men lamenting the dead and entertaining themselves with excess of food, drink, and sex. Plato states:

Because I suppose we’ll say that what both poets and prose writers say concerning the most important things about human beings is bad— that many happy men are unjust, and many wretched ones just, and that doing injustice is profitable if one gets away with it, but justice is someone else’s good and someone else’s loss. We’ll forbid them to say such things and order them to sing and tell tales about the opposites of these things.15

Plato’s initial solution is to use the poet’s power to teach lessons to assist in the service of the state. But he soon realizes that the nature of artistic expression makes the words of a poet difficult to control, and he begins to see the poet as a rival. The poets tell lies which rival the objective truth that the teachers must impart to the guardians. Not only do the stories of the poet rival goodness and truth, but they also arouse the passions, making them more entertaining and thus more appealing.


Mortimer Adler states: "the ignorant multitude applauds them, and the philosopher, who should be its preceptor, goes unheard. . . and what they learn from the poets makes it more difficult or almost impossible for the philosophers to teach them properly." Furthermore, Plato states that if anyone must tell lies to the citizens, it is the statesmen, who are versed in the public good, and committed to promoting it. The poets challenge all of the duties and rights of the politician, from educating and entertaining, to the very dissemination of facts and ideas which, truthful or not, is the exclusive privilege of the politician. It is in this light, where the poet is seen as a rival to good politics, that poetry becomes characterized as adverse to political life in general: something to be separated from the study of and participation in government. Our Platonic legacy creates this uneasiness with the writers when they enter the sphere of politics. Adler claims:

The poet is a rival teacher; he teaches by means of pleasure and persuasion. It is no wonder, then, that the politician fears and distrusts him. In a state in which free political debate is either not encouraged or not permitted, it would be an inconsistent policy not to silence the poet. . .

Plato, however, does not justify his eventual exclusion of the poets with this argument. He simply shows how the poets can be a negative influence on the young, and then challenges the poets to disprove him. He asks the poets to prove their usefulness in the state, and claims that if they might justify their own existence by proving themselves useful and worthy, that they might be included. The task of defending the poets is subsequently left up to Plato's student, Aristotle.

Aristotle goes about showing the many ways in which poetry can be

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16 Adler, Poetry and Politics 6-7.
17 Adler, Poetry and Politics 11.
politically useful, even necessary. He bases his arguments on two premises. The first is that art, being different in nature from other enterprise, must be judged by its own intrinsic standards. Secondly he posits that men are not created equal, and that Plato’s view which presupposes a capacity in all men to become philosopher kings, ignores a vast portion of real society to whom Plato’s design does not apply. Aristotle is concerned with classifying and understanding the world as it is, rather than devising an “ideal.”

The purpose of poetry for Aristotle can be found in the very fact that it is imitative of real life, or as Plato would say, that it tells lies. Because it imitates life and life’s tragedies and joys, it has the effect of purging the passions of it’s audience. Adler defines: “To purge, in its bluntest sense means ‘to get rid of’...art purges the passions by deceiving them.”18 For Plato’s philosopher kings, who are in complete control of their appetites and passions, purgation is not necessary, nor is entertainment. But for the average man, “relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in life.”19 Because poetry can provide men with artificial anger, fear, loneliness, and joy, it keeps them content and happy, which is always a social and moral good. This, claims Aristotle, is the primary political use for literature:

Artificial purgation thus brings order into the soul and cures the disorder which the latent passions always threaten to create... What the laws fail to do negatively by restraints, the arts may be able to do positively by catharsis: that is, aid reason in it’s unequal struggle with the passions, that is their basic utility.20

18 Adler, Poetry and Politics 43.
20 Adler, Poetry and Politics 45.
Aristotle thus answers Plato's call for poetry to declare its utility in a well-ordered state. He claims that it helps the citizens who do not possess the capacity to be philosophers in their quest for betterment.

While Aristotle defends poetry in light of an actual political situation, Plato discusses it in terms of an Ideal republic—one that was never to be actualized. The poets of ancient Athens were never, in spite of the convincing arguments against them, expelled. And the philosophers were never to rule as kings. Socrates, in fact, was the dangerous rival to the true statesmen of Athens. And so it seems the politician has two rivals: the poet and the philosopher, both of whom will criticize the world in light of ideals and romantic conceptions of nature and man. The poet and the philosopher are thus allied, as critics, and turned against one another as rivals. Werner Dannhauser recognizes this dilemma, but excuses himself from it by declaring that "the quarrel between philosophy and poetry is so ancient that even the ancient Socrates declared it ancient,"21 But I believe there is more to examine when looking at this complex relationship between what the writers, both philosophical and poetic, say should be, and the political world that actually exists. As a figure who has been feared, not only in Ireland, for his ability to curse and criticize, the poet cannot easily be classified, nor can his role be simplified. In many countries of Celtic Europe, including Ireland, an interesting figure arose who occupied many positions. This figure was the bard: a poet, a statesman, a shaman, and a philosopher. The bardic tradition plays a significant role in the Irish literary tradition, because it was maintained in Ireland much longer than in mainland Europe.

21 Werner Dannhauser, "Poetry vs, Philosophy" PS: Political Science and Politics (XXVIII #2, June 1995) page 192.
b. The Bardic Tradition in Ancient Ireland

The Irish bard, or *fili*, was more than a poet as we might understand a poet to be. The Irish bard was a professional, an official of the tribal king, and a public political figure. The verse they composed was highly structured and of public significance. Some sources indicate that a bard’s status was often considered second only to that of the king, higher even than the druids. (Although there is evidence that the *fili* often were the druids.). The Irish word *fili* (plural *filid*) seems to connote much more than the translated English word “bard. Williams and Ford state: “The word *fili*, it appears, comes from the same root as the Welsh *gweled* ‘see’, and this suggests that in the beginning it was a name for a kind of seer.”22 The Irish bard was very much a political fortune teller, for it was the bard who sang the praises and curses for the aristocratic families and the kings of Ireland. According to Terrence Des Pres “In tribal Ireland, one’s good name was one’s pride and source of power.”23 Poetry in Ireland was designed around this particular political purpose. The bards went to professional schools for more than seven years. They underwent a long and rigorous period of training in which they learned the standard forms of the verse, the literary dialect of old Irish, and the ritualistic and magical traditions involved in composing a poem, (which involved lying on their back in the dark for several hours before beginning to compose) In addition to the conventions of poetry, they learned history, genealogy, and politics. This formalized and intensive education made the bards some of the most powerful figures in Irish society. The relationship of the poets to the patrons is mostly understood through the poems of


the late medieval period, in which poets praise, criticize, satirize, and mourn their patrons.\footnote{Liam Breathnach, Professor of Irish Literature in a lecture at trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. 10-26-94.} The poet was present at all courtly and public functions, and was paid for each poem he would recite. Wealthy kings served as patrons to the poets. The position of the king (also known as the "chief" or "lord") was somewhat hereditary, but military might and a good reputation were often more important than genealogy. They relied on the poets to establish their reputation for generosity and goodness, and the poets had little trouble doing so, as it was the generosity of the patrons that supported them. The poet Muireadhach ó Dálaigh warns in his poem "An Irritable Genius" that "Whatever exploit one may do, no one is famous without generosity." \footnote{Osborn Bergin \textit{Irish Bardic Poetry} (Dublin: Dublin Institute for advanced Studies, 1970.) p. 254.} This generosity to the poets was ensured because with a talented bard, a king would be praised honorably to his subjects, a sure sign of legitimate and benevolent rule. The poets also praised their patrons for their military might, or their good looks: anything which would establish them as a fine leader. In his poem "On Cathal Redhand," O Dálaigh describes the attributes of his patron.

\begin{quote}
Good on horseback, excellent on foot is the shooting of Cathal
A blue eye he has with dark lashes, smooth long fingered hands.
One third of his fame I do not tell!\footnote{Bergin, p. 260.}
\end{quote}

The poets did not hold back when praising a patron, however, they were not bound to a single patron, and they possessed the power to satirize as well as praise. Satire, in fact, is what they are known best for. The poets kept the rulers in
line. If a chieftain was not brave or if he ruled illegitimately, he could count on the poets to expose his folly, and ensure his downfall. The function of the bards was to act as an agent of check and balance on the political and social arena. The poem that follows criticizes the adoption of Latin and Catholicism, to the endangerment of the old language and system of beliefs.

The saints of Éire long ago
Wrought miracles this truth to show;
Tis evil done to leave their ways
For Latin speech in these last days.

For every school will soon, I vow,
Be following Latin learning now;
Old wisdom now they scorn and song,
And babble Latin all day long.27

In addition to describing the event taking place, this poem warns of what the future will hold (Latin taking over in all the bardic schools), shows why it is bad (old wisdom is scorned), and calls upon the power of the old traditions to curse, predict, cast blame, and bless. The ability to call upon druidic magic, or the magical power of poetry, to reinforce their ideas, was a technique often used by the bards.

This power of the filid was backed by a certain fear of the power of words and the magical talents of the poets which was held very deeply by the Irish people. It appears that in the professional bardic schools the students were also instructed in the arts of divination and magic: "When we remember that the filid were capable, according to popular belief, of causing sickness and even death, we can imagine how dangerous it was to oppose any request of theirs."28 The supernatural associations of

27 This poem is attributed to Columcille by Robin Flower in The Irish Tradition.
the poets went unquestioned until the Christianization of Ireland.

With this authority on political figures and events, the poets were some of the most important political figures of ancient Ireland. Moreover, before the arrival of Christianity, they were the guardians and teachers of the language, and all oral and written history comes from them.

Osborn Bergin describes the bards as such:

He was, in fact, a professor of literature and a man of letters, highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of his training, his learning, his knowledge of history and traditions of his country and his clan. . . He was often a public official, a chronicler, a political essayist, a keen and satirical observer of his fellow countrymen. At an earlier period he had been regarded as a dealer in magic, a weaver of spells and incantations, who could blast his enemies with the venom of his verse. . .

The type of poetry found in Ireland is very different from the poetry found in Greece or Rome. It’s purpose, very unlike the one Aristotle found for poetry, was not mere entertainment and purgation of emotion. Williams and Ford write that: “The great bulk of the poetry is impersonal in the sense that there is little or no place in it for the poet’s personality as part of the poetic process.” The early bardic poetry is not emotional or personal, it uses satire or praise to perform a public function. In ancient Ireland the Poet was very much the rival of the Statesman; that

29 Osborn Bergin

30 Williams and Ford, 5.
was the socially designated role for the writer. And rather than being cast out, he was publicly celebrated and accepted because of his powers, both in literary arts and in magic.

Eventually the bardic order disappeared. When the chieftains and ruling families were either killed in war, or exiled during the “Flight of the Earls” the poets found themselves without employment. Terrence Des Pres states: “The bards found themselves adrift, lacking patronage or courtly function.” They took to wandering the countryside accepting handouts from local farmers in exchange for a tale or a poem. But even as the official political role of the bard has disappeared their seems to remain a certain bardic spirit in Ireland’s poets. They seem to have sung praises and curses for the country and its leaders, and serve a function which is both public and personal; emotional and political.

C. The Spirit of a Fallen Order

It is important to note that although the chiefs of ancient Ireland were dispossessed, and many fled to the continent to gain support from the Catholic monarchs, most of the bards remained in Ireland. Those that remained forged a new type of bardic culture— one of the pastoral traveling poet. They kept the Irish language and literary tradition alive, in spite of their lack of patronage. There still was a deep sense of respect for the poets in Ireland, and the residents of rural Ireland

31 The “Flight of the Earls” refers to the exile of most of the Irish chiefs to the Continent of Europe.

32 Des Pres, 40.
would provide food and lodging in exchange for a story or a song.\textsuperscript{33} Much of the early poetry of the disempowered poets consisted of lamentations for their lost lords and their dying tradition. One poem which expresses the feelings of the Irish people during this period is attributed to Eoghan Mac an Bhaird:

\begin{verbatim}
O'Donnell goes. In that stern strait
sore-stricken Ulster mourns her fate
And all the northern shore makes moan
To hear that Aodh of Annagh's gone.

Men smile at childhood's play no more
Music and song, their day is o'er;
At wine, at Mass the kingdom's heirs
Are seen no more; changed hearts are theirs.

They feast no more, they gamble not,
All goodly pastime is forgot;
They barter not, they race no steeds,
They take no joy in stirring deeds.

No praise in builded song expressed
They hear no tales before they rest;
None care for books, and none take glee
To hear the long traced pedigree.

The packs are silent, there's no sound
Of the old strain on Bregian ground.
A foreign flood holds all the shore,
And the great wolf-dog barks no more.

Woe to the Gael in this sore plight!
Henceforth they shall know no delight.
No tidings now their woe relieves,
Too close a knawing sorrow cleaves.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{33} This tradition has lasted in Ireland; to this day writers and artists are not taxed on their incomes because the Irish government wants to protect what they consider to be special, valuable members of the society.

\textsuperscript{34} Translation by Robin Flower, Poems and Translations (London, 1931) pp. 169-70.
The somber tone of this poem was typical for the period after the Battle of Kinsale (December 1601) when several centuries of resistance were ended by the defeat of the ruling families of O Domhnaill and O Néill. According to Williams and Ford "That was the beginning of a century that saw the overthrow of Irish society."35

One might think that with the flight of the chiefs and the end of the bardic profession as it had been known, that the poetry of Ireland would suffer and decline. But Williams and Ford claim that this did not occur:

The Irish people continued to live, and the more misfortune overtook them the greater was their need for expression. The only means of expression left to them -- as to every nation that has been conquered and deprived of its resources -- was poetry and music.36

The misfortune of which they speak-- the taking of the lands and resources, the introduction of the penal laws and transplanted local law enforcement personnel, and the financial and political oppression of the Irish people, gave rise to new genres of poetry.

The aisling poetry (meaning 'dream' or 'vision') was made popular by the poet Aodhagán O Rathaille. This genre always made use of the same image. Williams and Ford describe it as such:

As the poet is alone, meditating, a beautiful girl approaches him, a maiden whose absolute beauty dazzles him. The poet asks her which of the comely ones of the world she is: Helen of Troy? Deirdre? The beauty then reveals herself to be none other

35 Williams and Ford, p. 195.
than Éire, that is, Ireland herself, distressed and sorrowed by her great tribulations.”

The *aisling* poetry resembles the bardic poetry in structure, with a twist on the content. The following sections are from the poem, “The Brightest of the Bright” by O Rathaille:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The Brightest of the Bright met me on my path so lonely;} \\
\text{The Crystal of all Crystals was her flashing dark-blue eye;} \\
\text{Melodious more than music was her spoken language only;} \\
\text{And glorious were her cheeks, of a brilliant crimson dye. . .} \\
\text{She chanted me a chant, a beautiful and grand hymn,} \\
\text{Of him who should be shortly Éire’s reigning King--} \\
\text{She prophesied the fall of the wretches who banned him;} \\
\text{And somewhat else she told me which I dare not sing . . .} \\
\text{O’er mountain, moor and marsh, by greenwood, lough and hollow,} \\
\text{I tracked her distant footsteps with a throbbing heart;} \\
\text{Through many an hour and day did I follow on and follow,} \\
\text{Till I reached the magic place reared of old by Druid art.}\]
\]

The imagery of Ireland as a beautiful weeping woman, and the idea of a return to Ireland’s heroic past to overcome the troubles of the present, would find their way into the revolutionary rhetoric of the twentieth century. The fact that these traditions remained proved that the bardic spirit did not die with the bardic order. Rather, a new sort of bard emerged-- one who remained loyal to the political interests of the Irish people in spite of the fact that their new “lords” were not Irish. This poetry remained political, but it’s representation of politics became more symbolic. Metaphor was once widely used to describe people, now it was used to represent the plight of the Irish as a whole. The poets of Ireland continued to praise,

37 Williams and Ford, p. 217.
curse, and comment upon politics, but they did so from the fringes of society, as opposed to their previous privileged position. They worked their verbal magic against the established state. These are the poets Plato would have had no place for in his Ideal Republic, that occupied a similar role to the philosophers of Greece. It was the students of these outcast poets or "rat-rhymers" who became the political voices of modern Ireland.
Modern Irish Poets

a. William Butler Yeats

The Irish bardic tradition survived, in spite of the official governmental opposition to it, and perhaps gained all the more power for their condemnation. Therefore, in the late nineteenth century when cultural revival movements began to take shape in Ireland, the leaders did not have to reach far into Ireland's past to discover a medium of power and cultural significance. Terrence Des Pres states: "Imagination had been transformed by political circumstances into a nationalistic force with enormous potential. The bardic past, with its capacity to empower, lay repressed but alive." The Gaelic League was established to revive the language and literary tradition of Eire's past. This artistic revival was part of a larger nationalistic political movement which culminated in the the Revolution of 1916 and the formation of the Irish Free State. It's leaders were, in addition to the political leaders and orators, the leaders of the literary revival movement, including the co-founder of Dublin's Abbey Theatre, William Butler Yeats.

Yeats's involvement in the cultural revival was profound. Not only did he work for the revival of a national literature and theater, but he embraced a certain spirituality, (he was an original member of the Order of the Golden Dawn), that was reminiscent of the magic and myth of ancient Europe. States Des Pres:

He avowed that magic and the supernatural were real, and saw himself as the receptacle of tribal wisdom, a mystical lore he called the animae mundi... Most poets are atavistic in degree, but in Yeats the tendency was nearly total, so much that his politics as well as his poetics could be summed up in this

once-and future way: What Ireland had been it should be. 40

Yeats therefore made extensive use of Irish myth and universal archetypal symbols in his early poetry. This poetry, though often not deliberately political, takes on a political tone. For example Yeats's collection entitled The Rose which was published in 1893, made extensive use of the symbol of a rose. In "To The Rose Upon The Rood of Time" Yeats sings lyrically this seemingly whimsical remembrance of Ireland's mythic past:

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:
Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;
The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,
Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;
And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old
In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,
Sing in their high and lonely melody. . .41

A closer inspection of the capitalized "Rose" reveals a significance which cannot be found simply within the poem. A. Norman Jeffares, one of the foremost authorities on Yeats' work, writes: "Yeats used roses decoratively in very early poems, but by 1891 he had begun to use the rose as an increasingly complex symbol."42 In the works of many Irish poems the Rose had stood as a symbol for Ireland. For example in Irish patriotic period of relatively the same era, the young


woman, Róisín Dubh, personified Ireland. (Róisín being the Irish for Rose.) In another poem by De Vere Ireland is referred in the line “The little black rose shall be red at last.” Jeffares also states that the rose took on a spiritual meaning in the context of Yeats’ membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn, a society which sought to bring together the imagery and spiritual symbolism of Christianity, Cabalism, and Egyptian mythology to form a 20th Century spiritual order which would unite people, intellectual pursuits, and spirituality, into what was is referred to as the spiritus mundi; the spirit of the world. Yeats believed that such a magical unity existed in the universe, and the Rose symbolized for him “spiritual and eternal beauty.” Another project Yeats had in mind was the formation of a philosophy which was uniquely Irish which he described in an autobiographical passage as “a philosophy which would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary associations into holy symbols.” This order was to be called The Order of Celtic Mysteries. When seen in this light, the Rose becomes a symbol not only for Ireland, and for the spiritual beauty of which Yeats speaks, but also of a decidedly political project which resides quietly in his outward project of celebrating ancient Irish culture. Des Pres claims that “To take Yeats as a man of his time, living his age through his art, is to take for granted that politics is central to his work. This does not mean poetic practice at the cost of political conformity or reductiveness but, exactly as Yeats says, responding to events through poetry.” The end of “To The Rose Upon The Rood of Time” takes on additional meaning when we understand the “Rood of Time” to be essentially

43 Jeffares, p. 22.
44 Jeffares, p. 23.
45 Jeffares, p. 24.
46 Des Pres, p. 33.
political and revolutionary.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lest I no more hear common things that crave; } \\
\text{The weak worm hiding down in its small cave, } \\
\text{The field mouse running by me in the grass, } \\
\text{And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass; } \\
\text{But seek alone to hear the strange things said } \\
\text{By God to the bright hearts of those long dead, } \\
\text{And learn to chant a tongue men do not know. } \\
\text{Come near; I would, before my time to go, } \\
\text{Sing of old Éire and the ancient ways: } \\
\text{Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.}
\end{align*}
\]

When he “seeks alone to hear the strange things said/By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,” he speaks of the animae mundi, the spirit world, and the power it holds for the empowerment of the Irish people. We must also ask whether or not the “tongue men do not know” refers to the language of spiritual symbolism, or to the dying Irish language, or to both?

The political philosopher Leo Strauss speaks of a certain kind of esoteric writing that occurs under a repressive political environment. He states in his essay “Persecution and The Art of Writing”:

For the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique which we have in mind when speaking of reading between the lines. This expression is clearly metaphoric. . . That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only.47

For Yeats those trustworthy readers were other members of the nationalistic movement in literature and politics, especially Maud Gonne. The metaphor which

he uses in his poems almost always serves a political end. Certainly in studying the Irish literary tradition he found a tendency to use metaphor to convey political messages. Yeats was, after all, a member of that outcast race of bards who spoke for the Irish people, and not for the English government. In the *aisling* we see this metaphor in the personification of Ireland as a woman or as a mother. Yeats takes this up in several poems as well as his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) The most typical metaphor for Ireland is either as a young damsel in distress, or a frail old woman needing the aid of her children. It is the latter which is present in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. The old woman Ireland seeks the help of her sons in what she claims is “The hope of getting my four beautiful fields back; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house.” The four beautiful fields are a metaphorical reference to the four provinces of Ireland: Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. It is a symbol still in use today when speaking of the partitioned nation. Cathleen Ni Houlihan is a wandering woman, begging for help. But the help she needs is not physical or financial, it is the spiritual. The character pleads “If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all.” The poor old woman is such a sight, and her promises of immortality are so compelling, that Michael, one of her ‘sons’, is mesmerized. Though he is about to be married and start his life, he forgets all of his plans to follow her. Cathleen informs them that death may await. “It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red cheeked now will be pale cheeked... many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name.” As Michael leaves his family to follow her rallying


49 Yeats, “Cathleen Ni Houlihan” p. 84.

50 Yeats, “Cathleen Ni Houlihan” p. 86.
call, Cathleen is no longer an old woman but "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen." His blood sacrifice revives and rejuvenates her. This play is clearly and undisputedly one of a revolutionary calling. In what Strauss would call esoteric writing, Yeats uses literature and metaphor to apparently reduce the radicalism of a revolutionary political message. The symbols of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, or of a "Mother Ireland" in general, were powerful literary symbols which took on a violently political significance as the revolutionary fervor progressed.

Later on, Yeats becomes more overtly political in his poetic themes. According to Des Pres he "... takes up the role of the Irish bard, the kind of poet known from Ireland's well-documented tradition of bardic schools and tribal poetry—the kind of poet whose professional calling was to praise, curse, bless, and cast blame." One of the most well known of his poems, "Easter 1916," takes on a familiar bardic tone. Yeats did not foresee the uprising of 1916, or the subsequent executions of its leaders, and was very deeply moved by it. Des Pres states that "... in May of 1916 Yeats feared involving his art in issues directly political. But politics had intruded profoundly..." It was this 'intrusion' of politics into his everyday thoughts and ideas which marked the turn from esoteric, symbolic writing, to the "Praises and Dispraises" of which Des Pres speaks. Although Des Pres feels that this writing is more in line with the bardic practice of poetry, it seems to also become more of a marginalized, less official verse. It takes on the voice of the nation in a way which is more characteristic of the dispossessed bards of the later period.

According to Seamus Deane "His sense of crisis allowed him to see the archetypal patterns of history emerging out of the complexities of contemporary

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51 Yeats, "Cathleen Ni Houlihan" p. 88.
52 Des Pres, p.35.
politics. . ."54 Thus, he was able to address more directly the events of contemporary politics in a context which seemed to be both historical and spiritual. In the first stanza of "Easter 1916" Yeats announces the characters of the uprising, whom he will praise in the poem, a bardic poetic obligation.

I have met them at the close of the day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or gibe
To please a companion
around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

He presents them as a group of people whose faces he knew when he saw them about Dublin: but they were companions who he believed lived with him "where motley is worn." He has discovered through the events which have transpired, not only the people but the event as well. In the last stanza he names these people, in praise of their heroism.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?

54 Seamus Deane Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980. (Faber and Faber: London and Boston, 1985.)
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
as a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know that they dreamed and are dead;
And what is excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in verse -
MacDonough and MacBride
And Conolley and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The insistent chant throughout the poem that “All is changed, changed
utterly / A terrible beauty is born” is a type of bardic praise and lamentation as well.
The tone of the poem, and the contrast of “terrible” and “beauty” suggest that Yeats
is not only lamenting this transformation, but praising it as well. The uprising,
though unsuccessful, changed every aspect of Irish life permanently. It symbolized
the revival of a heroic idealism which Yeats had found in Ireland’s past, which he
had proclaimed “dead and gone” in an earlier poem,55 and which up until that
point had been the subject of his writing and his philosophical ideas. Yeats’ heroic
idealism is present in “Easter 1916”, especially in lines such as this one: “We know

55 “September 1914”
their dream; enough/To know that they dreamed and are dead.” These ideals, as shown in Cathleen Ni Houlihan, are both beautiful in that the heroic and passionate love of mother Ireland is rejuvenating and life giving, but also terrible in the violence and death that inevitably accompany them. According the Des Pres “What saves this event (the uprising) in Yeats view, is that the resolve of sacrifice remained wholly ideal. The uprising was not undertaken in a spirit of practical politics. Knowing they were outflanked and outgunned, the rebels could not hope for an actual seizing of power.”56 His insistence that “too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart,” however, suggests that the unending devotion to revolutionary ideals can be blinding as well. Yeats’ vision is one of romanticism transcending the realm of politics; politics acted out in the spirit of heroism, not in the political devotion to a particular cause. This politics, the politics of idealism and revolution, was the politics not of the ancient bards, but of the dispossessed poets of the bardic tradition. Their duty, still to praise and curse, was not one of official service to the king, but rather one of allegiance to certain ideals and passions which they attached to their displaced heritage. Des Pres claims that “Yeats’ ‘Easter 1916’ is a praise-poem and its deeper theme is the splendor of the poetic idea as it transforms political action.”57

So where does Yeats leave us with regard to the poet’s role in politics? It appears that a division had been made between practical politics and ideal politics. Are the poets of Ireland the voice for what ought to be, as opposed to what is, or what can be attained realistically? Perhaps while the politician speaks for what is practical and what is good for the state, the poet (like the philosopher) sings of ideals

56 Des Pres, p. 56.

57 Des Pres, p. 57.
and of beauty, and ultimately what is good and just for individuals with an
emotional life as well as a political one. This evidence would seem to place poets in
much closer relation to Plato. The poet and the philosopher seem to have, in at least
their praise of Ideal forms, something important in common.
b. Seamus Heaney

There is a difficulty in pinning down Seamus Heaney's philosophy regarding the relationship of the poet and politics, and the very elusiveness of this concept makes it a central tension in his work. In both his poetry and his prose Heaney struggles with the conflicts of being a writer in a political climate: how to remain apolitical and discuss the political world, how to separate idealism from practical politics, and how to deal with the problem of responsibility and lack of political action, and still remain true to the cause which inspires the poetry. In certain respects Heaney plays the role of the Irish bard very well, he serves as a social and political commentator for the Irish people without ever having to venture 'politically' into the dangerous world of the Northern Irish "Troubles." In spite of his position as a poet, it is still clear that he represents the nationalist Irish position. Blake Morrison writes:

Heaney has written poems directly about the Troubles as well as elegies for friends and acquaintances who have died in them; he has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest; and he has taken on the mantle of public spokesman, someone looked to for comment and guidance.58

But as clearly as Heaney assumes the role of the bard, he also demands not to be perceived as a political poet or satirist. He does not want his poetry to be taken as praise poetry, or as blame poetry, but simply as a poetry that reflects the experience of the Irish people in Northern Ireland, as a life which is worthy of the celebration and of the release which the composition of a poem provides. Heaney writes in The Government of the Tongue "The achievement of a poem, after all, is an experience

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of release.‖59 He wishes his poetry not to be read as political, but as an entity which is poetical and therefore free from the confines of politics. The tension between what he characterizes as “Art” and Life,‖60 is a theme which runs throughout his work. On the political/bardic role which Heaney sometimes assumes, Morrison continues:

Yet he also shows signs of deeply resenting this role, defending the rights of poets to be private and apolitical, and questioning the extent to which poetry, however ‘committed,’ can influence the course of history.61

In order to understand this conflict in Heaney, it helps to look at his early days of writing and how his poetry relates to his actual political experience. In the late 1960’s Heaney was politically active in Northern Ireland. He wrote for nationalist newspapers in Belfast, and belonged to the Civil Rights movement. When the “Troubles” began in Derry City in 1968, Heaney was still writing many overtly political poems about the violence. One such poem, “Craig’s Dragoons,”62 was written in response to an unprovoked attack on peaceful demonstrators protesting gerrymandering and discriminatory housing allocations in Derry. Eighty-eight of the protesters were seriously injured when police charged them with batons. Heaney’s overtly political poem is meant to be sung to the Loyalist tune ‘Dolly’s Brae’:


60 Heaney, The Government of the Tongue p. xii.

61 Morrison, p. 15.

62 William Craig was the Home Affairs Minister responsible for the vote rigging and other acts which they were protesting against.
Come all ye Ulster loyalists and in full chorus join,  
Think on the deeds of Craig’s Dragoons who strike below  
the groin,  
And drink a toast to the truncheon and the armoured  
water-hose  
That mowed a swathe through Civil rights and spat on  
Papish clothes.

This satirical poem/song is in the vein of a bardic curse in that it sends its very  
serious political message in a package of a sing-song satire. The attack in Derry was  
televised and led to widespread outrage and violence, including rioting in Derry’s  
Catholic Bogside neighborhood. As the violence escalated, Heaney’s poetry became  
less and less blatant in its political messages. Neil Corcoran states:

Heaney has only once since written such a directly  
political song -- a lamentation for the dead of Bloody  
Sunday, 30 January 1972, when thirteen civilians were  
killed by the British Army in Derry... it has unfortunately  
ever seen the light of day.63

At this point Heaney’s writing begins to become more poetic, and his politics  
takes on the feeling described by Leo Strauss as ‘writing between the lines.’ His use of  
symbol and metaphor increases as he attempts to develop a poetry which is adequate  
to represent the experience of his people. Heaney writes about this turn in the  
“Feeling Into Words” section of his book of essays Preoccupations:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved  
from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory  
verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols  
adequate to our predicament... I mean that I felt it  
imperative to discover a field of force in which, without

63 Neil Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, (Faber and Faber: London, 1986) p. 27
abandoning fidelity to the processes and experiences of poetry... it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.\textsuperscript{64}

He found one of his most widely used symbols in the “Bogland” of Ireland’s landscape. He wrote symbolically of the bogs in “Bogland,” a poem in the collection \textit{Door into the Dark} published in 1969. He begins:

\begin{quote}
We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening --
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon... \\
This stanza sets up the meaning of the “we” as the Irish people. It is a poem about the Irish identity. The American national consciousness is bound to an image: the prairie is wide open; it is freedom. Heaney seems to be asking if Ireland has a feature of landscape or other characteristic which is adequate to stand as a symbol for a national consciousness. The poem continues:
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
They’ve taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64} Seamus Heaney “Feeling Into Words” in \textit{Preoccupations} (Faber and Faber: London and Boston, 1980.)
Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years...

The outstanding feature of the Irish landscape, the soft black bog, also holds some secrets of Ireland’s past it seems. Artifacts are brought out, preserved, in much the same way as the Irish identity has been preserved for so long under the murky “bog” of a foreign government. Heaney continues:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,
Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.

“Our” pioneers are the Irish who must dig deep within the nation’s past to find that national identity, which exists in history and in myth. With the “Bog Poems” Heaney begins to set up a symbol through which he begins to express his political beliefs, and perhaps more importantly, his beliefs about his art. In “Feeling Into Words” he describes the discovery of a very influential book by P.V. Glob entitled The Bog People. It is an account of the preserved bodies which were taken from bogs in the Netherlands. Heaney writes:

The author, P.V. Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these... were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring.65

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65 Heaney, “Feeling Into Words” in Preoccupations, p. 57.
This image of a sacrifice to the mother, which results in rejuvenation and renewal, is reminiscent of Yeats imagery in *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. Heaney continues:

> Taken in the relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is a an archetypal pattern.66

One of the first poems Heaney wrote in response to P.V. Glob’s book was “The Tollund Man.” At the close of this poem he unites this archetypal pattern to the politics of his day and age. He writes:

> Something of his sad freedom  
> As he rode the tumbril  
> Should come to me, driving,  
> Saying the names

> Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,  
> Watching the pointing hands  
> Of country people,  
> Not knowing their tongue.

> Out there in Jutland  
> In the old man-killing parishes  
> I will feel lost,  
> Unhappy and at home.

The paradox of feeling a “sad freedom” as he goes to his death, is yet another example of the “beauty” which resides in an idealistic and nationalist vision. It is sad because it is violent death and sacrifice. But it is a freedom, a release, because of it’s idealistic poetry. He will die for the goddess, which will bring renewal and joy to

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66 “Feeling Into Words” p. 57
his people. When Heaney reads the names of the “Bog People” it echoes Yeats’ reading of the names of the sacrificial victims of 1916. Heaney brings together his native Northern Ireland, with the “old man-killing parishes” in a way that is essentially apolitical; it is in a hypothetical, personal emotion. Neil Corcoran states “although the analogy it suggests clearly provides the poem with its structure and its rationale, the connection which actually supplies it’s emotional sustenance is not that between Ireland and Jutland, but between the Tollund man and Heaney himself.” 67 He states that when he goes, eventually, to see those victims of sacrifice, he will feel lost and unhappy, and “at home,” implying a certain comfort in the ideal which is characterized by the unhappiness. It is a state of mixed emotion: it dramatizes the tension between poetry and action; and between the human need to preserve life, and the political need to preserve, above all else, the sense of national consciousness and pride.

In another Bog Poem “Punishment” this theme becomes even clearer. This poem tells of another bog body; a young woman whom Glob had proposed had been punished for adultery.

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.

67 Corcoran, p. 79.
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 I would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed 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,\(^\text{68}\)

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

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\(^\text{68}\) This stanza refers to an incident which occurred in Belfast, where three young Irish women were tarred and feathered for dating British soldiers. (from a lecture by Brendan Kennelley, Trinity College Dublin, 1995.)
In this poem Heaney identifies almost completely with the bog girl, whom he calls "my little scapegoat." He characterizes her as a victim of the political and religious needs of the tribe. And even as he identifies with her so strongly that he "can feel the tug/ of the halter at the nape/ of her neck," he can still identify with the other side. He understands "the exact/ and tribal, intimate revenge." Could it be that this conflict is the "terrible beauty" of which Yeats spoke? It is this essential conflict which cause him to have "stood dumb/ when your betraying sisters, cauled in tar, wept by the railings." He unites the adultery of the bog woman with the metaphorical adultery committed by the Irish girls, who, in going around with British soldiers betrayed their tribe, and it's idealistic nationalism. The guilt with which Heaney announces that he "stood dumb" highlights his very uneasiness with composing poetry in place of political action. He claims to be an "Artful voyeur," a poet who takes some sort of pleasure, or experiences a release, in his observation of tragedy. His equation of symbolic verse with silence or voyeurism raises a question of the poet's responsibility to his people. And what should one do, when such conflicting emotions are present? What becomes more important—the ideal and the national awareness to be upheld, or the universal sense that death cannot be anything but "terrible"? How can a poet reconcile a terror that is beautiful, or a freedom that is sad?

For Heaney it seems that these conflicts cannot be solved. Henry Hart states:

For Heaney poetry and rhetoric, art and politics, are entangled rather than distinct; merging and emerging as rhythmically as the uncertainty that underlies them... He realizes that his agenda may be utopian and that his personal renunciation of overt political action may be taken as a cop-out... and yet... few other poets today articulate as self consciously and judiciously the difficult
issues of language and silence, and especially how they relate to poetic expression and political repression.69

His symbolism certainly dramatizes the tension between a poet and society, though it does not define that relationship, or even attempt to. Heaney, like Yeats, is a member of that outcast tradition of bards. They belong to a profession which is political in that they serve the Irish nation as a political seer. And yet they also represent the outcast poet who is expelled and marginalized—beyond politics—by virtue of their forsaken position of power in Irish society. They are revolutionary poets. They are not the statesmen, but the rivals of the statesmen, who tell of a different political life which is not simple and clearly defined, but one that is complicated and delicate: their world is on the fringes of organized political activity. And yet poets must always respond to that perennial question of Plato’s: of what use are the poets to politics? Heaney understands this problem and addresses it in The Redress of Poetry. He writes:

Professors of poetry, apologists for it, practitioners of it... all sooner or later are tempted to show how poetry’s existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society—how it is ‘of present use.’ Behind such defenses and justifications, at any number of removes, stands Plato, calling into question whatever special prerogatives or useful influences poetry would claim for itself within the polis.70

As in the poetry of both Yeats and Heaney, however, the politics which is found in poetry is often concerned with the ideals of romantic thought and visions of the ‘real’ world— the world of political action— which are contradictory to that


ideal, whether the ideal is heroism, or justice, or beauty. ‘Terrible beauty’ and ‘sad freedom’ characterize twentieth century political life. And yet there is still that notion of the ‘Ideal’—of the Good or the Just, which we, as individuals, believe in. The poets seem to be guided by these forms. The irony of this is expressed by Heaney:

Yet Plato’s world of ideal forms also provides the court of appeal through which poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions.71

What Plato set up as a fundamental problem of control in the Ideal republic—the attitudes and poetic sensibilities of the writers—may well turn out to be the solution for the ills of the inadequate state.

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71 Heaney The Redress Of Poetry p. 1.
Conclusion

In both Yeats and Heaney what we find is defense of the world as it ought to be. In Yeats that argument takes on the symbols of a romantic past which upheld the ideals of heroism and spiritual beauty. Heaney not only stands up for the political ideals of peace and freedom, but also for the creative ideals of individuality and autonomy from the practical world. According to Henry Hart "Heaney realizes his agenda may be utopian and that his personal renunciation of overt political action may be taken as a cop out."72 But in the twentieth century an alternative approach to politics is needed, one which makes value judgments in a humane way. A poet is needed who can serve as a seer or a bard. Modern political science has found that "value-free" politics is incapable of grasping many of the major themes in modern politics. Catherine Zuckert of Carlton College writes "Chief among the issues that escape the positivist paradigm and attract political scientists to the study of literature have been the moral dimension of politics.73

Perhaps now, so many centuries after Plato posed the question of 'what value do poets have to the polis?', political scientists have finally found an answer which is more profound than that which Aristotle suggested. Werner Dannhauser of Michigan State claims this value of literature: "It teaches us about justice, mostly perhaps by educating in us a loathing of patent injustice."74 If we have come to an answer to Plato’s question, which shows that poets are valuable in the same way that philosophers make good kings, then we must ask another question. If literature can offer information which is fundamentally different from the information

72 Hart, p. 2.
73 Zuckert, "Why do Political Scientists Want to Study Literature?" p. 189.
74 Werner Dannhauser, "Poetry vs. Philosophy" PS: Political Science and Politics (XXVIII #2, June 1995.)
which is gleaned from social science, what special qualities does literature have which makes this so? Heaney suggests that there is a dignity about poetry which makes it, even in its most political moments, essentially apolitical, personal, and magical. He resists completely any attempt to reduce it’s capabilities to politics only, but rather seeks to expand the boundaries of the meaning of poetry. He says in an interview with Jonathan Bing “The idea that anything that amplifies the spirit can be tied down with a dainty, politically correct label-- it’s damning, it’s deadly. Rapture is its own good.”

This celebratory and enlightening characteristic of poetry is perhaps what Heaney meant when he described it as a “release.” It is a release from the world of real politics into the domain of the Ideal. It is almost a mystical crossing. Heaney continues:

...whatever the possibilities of achieving harmony at an institutional level, I wanted to affirm that within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing.

Heaney has redeemed that ancient and magical quality of verse which the ancient bards perfected. It is this spiritual power which gives poetry its political force, a force which social science texts could never hope to possess. Moreover, it has the power to be political, and the dignity to remain apolitical, at the same time. This is the “frontier of writing” as Heaney sees it, “a line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those

75 Jonathan Bing, Publishers Weekly, p. 43.
76 Heaney, The Redress Of Poetry, p. 203
conditions in literature, and divides also the world of social speech from the world of poetic language. This is a line which is not easy to locate or to define, but which separates the world of reality from that of a higher order of thought and speech which can be found in poetry or philosophy. Writing opens up possibilities of meaning and understanding. Heaney states:

I think literature is there to open the spaces, not to erect tariff barriers. The notion of balance, of one form of life redressing another, of the imagined redressing the endured, that is just a central trope. But it also seems observably true that the sense of proportion, the sense of joy, the sense of irony, depends upon a certain amphibiousness between what we can conceive of and what we have to put up with.

He takes a delight in the messiness of the complicated relationship he has with the world and his readers. It is a central subject of his poetry, and it expands the very ideas which are found in the political context of his writing. The relationship of the poet to politics transcends politics; it has political meaning as well as a dimension which goes beyond the political circumstances we find ourselves in to a celebration of life, indeed political life, itself.

77 Heaney, The Redress Of Poetry, p.xvi.

78 as quoted by Jonathan Bing Publishers Weekly.
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