

The Politics of Silence: Navigating Violence and the Nation in Seamus

Heaney's *North* and Roberto Bolaño's *By Night in Chile*

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Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975), a collection of mytho-political poems centred around the Northern Irish conflict (1968-1998), and Roberto Bolaño's *By Night in Chile* (2000), a novella about a Chilean priest living under the Pinochet regime (1973-1990), may at first seem to have very little in common. Yet, as works responding to and representing their respective nations as places of violence and political unrest, they in fact share many similar preoccupations. In writing of recent and/or ongoing violence, Heaney and Bolaño were both confronted by the spectre of 'national literature': a literature to define their countries during uncertain times. For both authors, this duty, or expectation, that they speak with the voice of their respective nations is balanced against, or even placed in opposition to their aesthetic obligation as writers to produce art. The fundamental question behind this tension: in representing times of violence, do artists have a duty to be political? By considering these two writers alongside each other, this essay examines the role of literature in responding to national violence, and interrogates the concepts of national literature and national consciousness as they appear within these individual works. Central to these discussions is the role of silence, which, whether framed as a weapon, as a source of shame, as a dereliction of duty, or as a call for reflection amid the chaos, is a palpable presence in both works. I argue that literature, particularly literature which navigates themes of violence and the nation, is inherently political. Heaney and Bolaño recognise this power and the attendant responsibilities it confers on the author, and they respond to it differently—Heaney with reserve, Bolano with zeal—based on their individual contexts. Evidently there is no one correct way to represent recent/contemporary national violence responsibly as a writer beyond recognising the power of narrative in shaping the parameters of national discourse.

Heaney and Bolaño both approach their shared themes of speech versus silence through the medium of the first-person confessional. In this narrative mode they are able to interrogate the role of

the witness, and the role of the writer-as-witness. The tension between the will to confess and the will to repress reveals the challenges which surround the production of art in contexts of political violence. In this battle between poetry and politics, Heaney and Bolaño, while touching on similar themes, ultimately reach different conclusions. In *North*, Heaney's speaker chooses to withdraw from the political, to the extent that such is possible, while in *By Night in Chile* Bolaño underlines the importance of speaking out. These contrasting positions reflect the contextual differences between the hidden state-ordained violence of the Pinochet regime, and the much more public street-level violence and terrorism that marked the Troubles, as well as the differences between writing from within a situation of ongoing violence, such as that faced by Heaney, and reflecting on a violent past, as Bolaño does.

First published in 1975 in the midst of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney's violent and uneasy collection, *North*, presents the mind of a conflicted poet in a divided country. Underlining this sense of division, the collection is structured into two distinct parts. The first of these relies heavily on mythology and history, raising the voices of the past, while the second concentrates on more contemporary autobiographical experience. Across that temporal divide both sections deal with violence and responses to that violence, focusing particularly on the responsibilities of the poet. Throughout *North*, Heaney discusses two distinct primary subjects in relation to this issue: Northern Ireland, and poetry itself. The tension between these two subjects underscores a more fundamental tension between the idea of a national literature, and of poetry as a purely creative force. This idea is voiced most clearly through the poem 'Kinship,' which is an exploration of the bog—a recurring subject for Heaney in this collection—as both a living, creating force, and as a kind of storehouse for layers of history. The creative aspect of the bog is explored as a metaphor for poetry and the process of writing poetry:

This is the vowel of earth
dreaming its root
in flowers and snow,

mutation of weathers
and seasons,
a windfall composing
the floor it rots into.¹

Like the bog, rotting into itself, poetry is a self-involved process drawn up from earthly matter. The ‘vowel’ of earth is the basic building block of the poem, a pre-language sound that ‘dreaming its root’ feeds its own creation in the imagination of the poet. From this perspective, poetry is a purely creative endeavour tied to processes of growth and decay in the natural world rather than to any reified aesthetic sphere. This representation is challenged by the political aspect of the same bog, which emerges as a receptacle of the nation’s history:

Earth-pantry, bone-vault,
sun-bank, enbalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.

[...]
casket, midden,
floe of history.²

As a repository for the nation’s dead, whether in glorious burial or in a pauper’s grave, the bog becomes a symbol of the hidden history of Ireland, waiting to be unearthed. As Heaney writes in his prose essay ‘Feeling into Words,’ there is ‘a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness’.³ Using the bog as a metaphor, Heaney encapsulates the tension between poetry and politics in his writing. Is the bog a compost of ideas and language ‘composing the floor it rots into’ or a graveyard of the nation’s dead, of its history, to be excavated for poetic material? In the first part of his collection, Heaney uses the bog for both of these ends, before seeking more direct modes of expression in Part II.

The second part of *North* leaves the bog poems and much of the history and the mythology of the first part behind to focus more explicitly on current affairs and autobiography. The distinction between the two halves adds another layer to the overriding sense of conflict and tension that permeates the collection. The final poem, ‘Exposure,’ marks the culmination of this back and forth between creative and political responsibility. In it, the speaker divests himself of any heroism as a poet, reverting to a pastoral role and absenting himself from any responsibility towards the Northern Irish conflict.

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark⁴

The speaker retreats. He is old, he has missed his time, and he is reduced to ‘blowing up these sparks/
For their meagre heat’.⁵ As Tim Hancock observes, it is important to distinguish between the speaker
and the writer in this poem:

The poet portrayed in ‘Exposure’ has missed the transcendent sign; the portrayer *knows* he has
missed this sign, hinting that we might expect a change of focus in the future.⁶

The weariness at the end of this volume, then, signals a self-conscious detachment from the overtly
political within the poetic, but one that is temporary, and based on contextual conditions.

Roberto Bolaño’s novella—which, to date, has enjoyed much less critical attention than
Heaney’s collection—pulls in the opposite direction. The character of Sebastian Urrutia Lacroix is a
writer and a critic as well as a priest. Throughout the narrative, his ideas on what it means to write or to
critique are ridiculed through narrative distancing. Early in the book, he decides to create a persona, ‘H.
Ibacache’ as a pseudonym for his work as a critic, ‘so that I could retain my real name for my poetical
efforts’.⁷ The implication of this double-naming is not limited to Sebastian’s apparent belief that he
cannot be both writer and critic under the same name. It also signals a psychological bifurcation that
has significance for the character as an unreliable narrator. Moreover, the distance Sebastian creates
between these two selves demonstrates the character’s firmly held belief in the distinction between poet
and critic:

Urrutia Lacroix was preparing a body of poetic work for posterity, an oeuvre of canonical
ambition, which would take shape gradually as the years went by, in a metre that nobody was
using in Chile any more, what am I saying, a metre that nobody had ever used in Chile, while
Ibacache read other people’s books and explained them to the public, just as Farewell had done
before him.⁸

According to Sebastian, the critic is derivative. It is their job to explain books. A job that is unworthy
of Sebastian’s name. The poet, on the other hand, seeks the new and the original, and therefore deserves
both immediate recognition and eternal remembrance. Sebastian’s aggrandisement of the role of the
poet, and in particular his conception of his own gifts as a poet, is rendered ridiculous as ‘little by little
the reputation of H. Ibacache outstripped that of Sebastian Urrutia Lacroix’.⁹ The common factor
between writer and critic in Sebastian’s conception of them is their privileged position in relation to

everyone else. To Sebastian, the critic is in an academic bubble, and the writer or poet exists on a separate (higher) plane of creative experimentation and aesthetic appreciation. Bolaño himself does not hold this view. In his novella, writers and critics, and in particular Sebastian himself, are criticised for their distance from what is presented as a necessary political engagement. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the uncovering of the torture chamber in Maria Canales's basement. The image of writers and intellectuals, drinking and conversing merrily at a cultured soiree in the house above while people are being tortured a matter of feet below them is a damning indictment of their failed obligations to their fellow countrymen. The separation of the artistic from the political that Sebastian seeks to uphold is extremely difficult if not impossible to maintain in such circumstances. In the context of a 'national literature'—which in many ways *By Night in Chile* is, and strives to be—this separation is also undesirable.

Underlying the label of 'national literature' is the complex concept of the 'nation'. As early as 1822, the idea of the nation as a stable unity of people based on specific cultural and geographical boundaries was being challenged. French historian Ernest Renan's lecture 'What is a Nation?' delivered at the Sorbonne on 11 March that year, begins by reminding the audience that nations in this form 'are something rather new in history';¹⁰ that they are a Western concept emerging from the growth of capitalism and industrialisation. This observation causes Renan to re-conceive the nation outside of these limitations as a form of social and moral community:

Man is a slave neither of his race, his language, his religion, the course of his rivers, nor the direction of his mountain ranges. A great aggregation of men, in sane mind and warm heart, created a moral conscience that calls itself a nation.¹¹

For Renan, the concept of the nation can be detached from geographic and linguistic ties to become a shared ideal or collective experience. This sense of nationhood as—at least in part—a community of shared values over and above a historically dictated boundary is one that underpins much contemporary discussion on the topic.

A century after Renan, Ernest Gellner described nations 'fundamentally as fabrications'¹² narrated through group consent. It was this idea of a nation, as a form of narration, that was famously advanced by Homi K. Bhabha, first in *Nation and Narration* (1990), and then in *The Location of Culture*

(1994). Bhabha's views on nationhood proceed from a standpoint which recognises the inherent duality of the concept. As Timothy Brennan explains, the nation refers 'both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous—the 'nation'—a local community, domicile, family' based on the condition of 'belonging'.¹³ Within these parameters, Bhabha perceives two competing modes of representation, one pedagogical and one performative. The first of these modes refers to the nation as a narrative shaped by a 'continuist, accumulative temporality'¹⁴ which gives the impression of a linear progression of a nation's history based on fixity and set values: the nation-state. The performative disrupts this sense of stability, bringing difference and the individual into the homogeneity of pedagogic narratives. By virtue of the inner conflict Bhabha describes between the pedagogic and the performative, the nation as Bhabha conceives it can never become a fixed entity through which its people can be captured. It remains forever in process. This idea of nationhood has real implications for all writers, including Heaney and Bolaño. For if the idea of a nation is shaped and maintained in a continual process of 'becoming' through these competing narratives, the ability to influence those narratives becomes extremely powerful. Within this conception of a nation, the stories that we tell about ourselves through our literature, our art, and other modes continually challenge and reframe the picture of the nation as it is formed in the political sphere. For a writer like Bolaño, the opportunity to recast the years of the Pinochet regime through literature is seized with the zeal of revolution.

Bolaño and Heaney both contend with the complexities of the 'national' in their respective works, but while Heaney has difficulty reconciling himself to the expectations of national literature, Bolaño is more readily amenable to writing the nation as he sees it. Indeed, Bolaño's novella can be read as an example of what Fredric Jameson termed 'national allegory' wherein 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society'.¹⁵ Bolaño's main character, Sebastian Urrutia Lacroix is, like Chile itself, struggling to come to terms with a difficult history during the Pinochet regime. His difficulty in discussing honestly the true extent of his involvement in the regime echoes the official narratives of the country; the suspected burying of evidence, the names kept from the public eye, the accounts of atrocities nobody in power wants to hear. In a reading of the text as a national allegory, the character or figment of the 'wizened

youth' that haunts the priest in his final days, comes to represent the younger generation of Chile's people, questioning their elders on the realities of Chile's past and pressing them for the truths that remained in large part unforthcoming. In a national situation like that of Chile, rebuilding in the aftermath of a dictatorship, narrating the nation through the voice of its people becomes an imperative.

Heaney's comparative reticence,

to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet¹⁶

speaks not only to Heaney's humble caution, but to the particularities of the Northern Irish situation.

Heaney's relationship with national literature is, in some ways, more complex. It is difficult to define Heaney as a poet of the nation, especially in *North*. While Ireland as a subject is ever-present, Heaney himself is reluctant to sustain any sense of his poetry as actively speaking for his country. Some parts of this collection, particularly those in the first half, court an idea of a national consciousness—specifically through the bog bodies, which represent a collection of voices coming together and resonating across time with contemporary voices. But in later poems, such as 'Freedman,' poetry actually provides a way of escaping the limitations and expectations of nationhood:

I was under that thumb too like all my caste.
...
Then poetry arrived in that city—
I would abjure all cant and self-pity—
And poetry wiped my brow and sped me.
Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me.¹⁷

As Neil Corcoran argues, in 'Freedman', poetry provides 'the means of release from the most defining marks of tribe and caste'.¹⁸ In escaping those 'defining marks', though, Heaney is conscious of the criticism he might face for transcending the national: 'Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me'. Behind these words, the reader feels the weight of expectation: that as an Irish poet, Heaney should be a poet of Ireland, speaking for the nation. But while the ghost of a national consciousness seems to permeate *North*, Heaney withdraws from speaking with the 'voice of Ireland' in any unified sense.

Heaney's ambivalence towards the national is perhaps explained by the context of the conflict he was writing within. The Troubles was a period of conflict that split Northern Ireland itself, setting

neighbour against neighbour in outbursts of violence that played out in streets and in the communities. The historic poems in *North* unify Ireland as a whole against external threats, whether from Viking invasion or from the English. In this context, a national Irish poetry in the sense of a poetry speaking for ‘the people’, is more easily achieved. But amidst the Troubles, the idea of ‘the people’ was divided and stained by violence in a way that complicated any claims toward a unified national consciousness. The concepts of ‘community’ and ‘belonging’ that are so central to the idea of nationhood were the very things that were ruptured during the Troubles. This uncertainty around the issue of nationhood renders the job of a national poet fraught with difficulty. Heaney’s acknowledgement of the sensitivity of the situation in his poetry and his commentary around these issues has prompted a number of nuanced responses from critics grappling with the approach to the ‘nation’ in his writings. Those such as Eugene O’Brien focus on Heaney’s struggle, observing that, ‘[t]his sense of a social or tribal duty has been baggage which Heaney has carried for some time during his career’,¹⁹ while others, such as Neil Corcoran²⁰ and Richard Rankin Russell²¹ focus on his success, asserting that ‘Heaney has managed to oppose the Northern Irish state oppression of Catholics while simultaneously rejecting nationalism’s allure’.²² The idea of the ‘national’ in Heaney’s collection, then, is presented in a manner which recognises and even emphasises the challenges faced by the poet working in a context of national violence. Heaney walks this tightrope by negotiating political themes while also maintaining a sense of distance from inflammatory discourse.

If the idea of the ‘nation’ and of a ‘national literature’ stalks the fringes of Heaney’s collection, so too does a reading of his work as an example of ‘minor literature’ in the sense outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Their conception of minor literature echoes Homi K. Bhabha’s thinking on the nation as a phenomenon that is not fixed but is always in process. By viewing the idea of the nation in this way, the turmoil of the Troubles can be framed as part of the narrative of Northern Ireland, and Heaney’s poems—as an example of minor literature—can be viewed as part of that narrative. Thus, despite Heaney’s overriding concern with the problematic dimensions of Northern Irish nationhood at this time of division, his works still, inevitably, speak to that very idea. Deleuze and Guattari describe the phenomenon of minor literature as follows:

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective arrangement of utterance. Which amounts to this: that ‘minor’ no longer characterizes certain literatures, but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established).²³

Minor literature echoes Frederic Jameson’s idea of national allegory in its ‘connection of the individual to a political immediacy’, while also extending beyond the geographical confines of ‘third-world literature’ to include even canonical works. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari use Herman Melville’s short story ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ as their case study. As an Irish writer writing in English, Seamus Heaney’s poems exist, like the works of Joyce and Beckett, ‘in the affirmative conditions of a minor literature’.²⁴ In spite of his fame, then, Heaney’s can be viewed as a minority voice. Even outside of this framework, Richard Rankin Russell has gone so far as to label Heaney’s position as a Catholic in Protestant dominated Northern Ireland as ‘a minority culture, sometimes treated as ‘black’.’²⁵

From his position as a minority writer, Heaney’s use of language can be read as a form of linguistic challenge to the majority:

To use the polylingualism of your own tongue, to make a minor or extensive use of it, set the oppressed character of this tongue against its oppressive character, find its points of non-culture and underdevelopment, the zones of linguistic third-worlds through which a tongue escapes, an animal is grafted, an arrangement is connected.²⁶

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, any language can be used as a minor language when it is re-characterised through singular usage. Heaney’s specific use of monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon words within the collection is one example of how English can be ‘minorised’. The overabundance of compound words; ‘broad-lapped’,²⁷ ‘skull-capped’,²⁸ ‘blood-holt’,²⁹ ‘brain-firkin’,³⁰ ‘Sky-born’,³¹ ‘media-men’,³² ‘mud-splasher’³³ can also be read as an attempt to make strange the language of the poem, either by bringing it closer to the fjords and diadems of the Viking past: ‘blood-holt’, ‘Sky-born’, or by gently attacking establishment voices with terms like ‘media-men’. Thus, Heaney’s poems present many of the characteristics of a minor literature, while also displaying a reluctance to embrace the ‘revolutionary conditions’ of such literature. This retreat from the revolutionary acknowledges the idea that ‘the literary machine functions as the relay for a future revolutionary machine’,³⁴ and as such, I argue that it is not a rejection of the national, or of ‘the people’—however intangible those concepts

might be during such a divisive period—or even of the political, but a reaction to the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland at the time.

Conversations on the idea of the ‘national’ occur within an undercurrent of violence that runs through both *By Night in Chile* and *North*. In Bolaño’s novella, this violence is insidious. In Heaney, it is as overt as the acts of terrorism and public retributions that came to define the Troubles. *North* is prefaced by two dedicatory poems. The homeliness and pastoral quality of the ‘Mossbawn’ poems is seemingly at odds with the rest of the collection, yet both poems contain undertones of the violence that will be prevalent throughout the rest of the collection, from the ‘reddening stove’ with its ‘plaque of heat’ in ‘Sunlight’³⁵ to the ‘sharp knife’ in ‘The Seed Cutters’.³⁶ These easily overlooked images present the difficult idea that Ireland is a nation cut through with violence: ‘at the centre, a dark watermark’.³⁷ This sense of a historic continuum of violence is carried through into the main body of Heaney’s collection. The poem ‘Belderg’ describes how the excavation of a bog reveals layered evidence of the past; ‘growth rings of iron, flint and bronze’.³⁸ Three historical ages have been compacted down into its layers. This compacted or collapsed history is also apparent in ‘Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces’, wherein ‘an old Dane maybe, was drowned in the Flood’.³⁹ The conflation of the Biblical Flood with the Viking invasion places history in a series of parallel lines to be read alongside each other. This allows Heaney to draw connections between the violent deaths of the bog bodies and the Viking invaders, and the violence being enacted in contemporary Ireland.

Heaney takes as his subject the bodies of women unearthed from the bogs of Northern Europe in the poems ‘Punishment’, ‘Strange Fruit’ and ‘Bog Queen’. The tone in all three of these poems is voyeuristic and sexualised. They pale, however, in comparison to the suggestively entitled ‘Come to the Bower’, a poem describing the uncovering of another female bog body:

...the dark-bowered queen,
Whom I unpin,
Is waiting.
...
I reach past
The riverbed’s washed
Dream of gold to the bullion
Of her Venus bone.⁴⁰

The sexual, intimate framing of these poems jars against the violent death of the young girl described in 'Punishment':

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

to store
the memories of love.⁴¹

Through Heaney's juxtaposition of artistic voyeurism and pastoral imagery with the brutal violence of this execution, the death of the girl in 'Punishment' becomes strangely idealised. It is poetic, beautiful, and uncomfortable to read. Her penalty for adultery is connected to the suffering of contemporary Irish women found to have been intimate with the enemy, who were often tarred and feathered. Through association with the earlier adulteress, the fate of these contemporary women is shrouded in a similar sense of discomfort consistent with Heaney's own inner conflict as a poet:

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.⁴²

In this poem, Heaney is caught between understanding the instinct for revenge, and an ineffectual 'civilized outrage' that stands by as these women are punished. As an Irishman and as a poet, Heaney feels the weight of responsibility in casting 'the stones of silence',⁴³ but pulls back from speaking out.

As Neil Corcoran and others have pointed out, Heaney's ambiguity towards the violent acts in this 'almost-love poem' has 'given rise to critical debate about what the position in relation to IRA violence the poem is assuming'.⁴⁴ The question emerges: does his aestheticising and sexualising of these images of violence somehow condone its use, as suggested by Heaney's identification with these acts of tribal revenge? It is my contention, however, that Heaney's position is one of de-escalation in the context of such overt and growing violence on both sides. Even while feeling the pull of revenge, and

in many ways doubting and castigating himself for the course of silence, it is nevertheless the course that the poem's speaker, and by extension, Heaney himself, chooses. Furthermore, to say that these poems are irredeemably voyeuristic examples of the male gaze would be unfair. The girl in Heaney's final bog poem 'Strange Fruit', for example, will not subject herself to exhibition:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.⁴⁵

The 'outstaring' eyes of this nameless girl challenge the gaze of the poet and of the reader. They remain defiant in the face of execution and counter any suggestion of glory in outstaring 'what had begun to feel like reverence'. The eyes Heaney describes will not stand for further acts of violent revenge committed in their name.

Violence in Bolaño's *By Night in Chile* is much less overt. It is deeply connected to the narrative as one of psychological repression: both repression of the country's violent history, and of the communal and individual guilt associated with it. Sebastian is haunted throughout the book by a 'wizened youth' who seems determined to undermine his narration. This youth can be interpreted variously as the voice of a younger generation of Chileans in search of the truth about their country's history (as posited earlier in the context of a national allegory), a figment of Sebastian's fevered imagination, a real person with secret knowledge of Sebastian's affairs, or perhaps most convincingly, an embodiment of Sebastian's own repressed moral conscience. Sebastian's narration struggles against the surfacing of repressed elements that hold the truth to his story. While his ties to General Pinochet are made explicit, the circumstances behind his engagement as an instructor to senior members of the regime are presented through a carefully constructed framing, which suggests there had been no choice. What undermines this representation is the attack of conscience Sebastian describes as having occurred at the time. According to his telling of events, he spoke out when forbidden to do so, telling his companion Farewell about these lessons with the General. Yet his narrative betrays itself: 'I shrugged my shoulders, as people do in novels, but never in real life',⁴⁶ and later, 'I shrugged my shoulders again'.⁴⁷ It is possible that while Sebastian felt an attack of conscience, he never actually acted upon it.

The discussion with Farewell is likely to be a fiction, one that is alluded to in these shrugs that only happen in novels.

In addition to the perpetual presence of the wizened youth and the self-betraying narration, Sebastian's story struggles through his various failures of memory. Early in the novella, Sebastian strips any sense of his own agency from the suggestion of a homosexual encounter. He describes his companion Farewell's actions and the banal conversation between them, but leaves out certain moments; moments that we must suspect implicate him in encouraging Farewell or at least in being aware of the direction the interaction will eventually take: 'he said something I didn't understand or something my memory has not retained'.⁴⁸ Sebastian's memory likewise fades when he is describing how he came to stop attending the literary soirees of Maria Canales. He tells the story of how one night, a guest roaming the house found himself in the basement, where he discovered a room set up for interrogation and torture. It is not clear who this guest was, but the evasions and gaps in the narrative point to Sebastian as the discoverer. As a result, his words, 'I was not afraid. I would have been able to speak out, but I didn't know anything until it was too late'⁴⁹ ring with the desperation of a guilty falsehood.

The idea that something is hidden beneath the surface, waiting to be told is likewise the main theme of Heaney's poem 'Bog Queen'. A noble lady lies waiting to escape from 'the illiterate roots' in order to tell her story through the 'braille' of her body.⁵⁰ The suggestion made by this poem is that history will speak for itself, and will bring the truth to bear no matter how grizzly or diminished the conduit may appear:

The plait of my hair,
a slimy birth-cord
of bog, had been cut

and I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank.⁵¹

The 'small gleams' of the exhumed body gesture towards the truth that can now be communicated. Unearthed, the bog queen may speak, if only through Heaney's poem. In many respects all of Heaney's

bog poems share this sense of the repressed memories of a nation being dug up. The bodies are, like Bolaño's Sebastian, confessors, sharing their secrets through Heaney's poetic voice.

Through the difficulties surrounding violence and the repression of memories of violence in Heaney's and Bolaño's works, there emerges a tension between speaking and silence, and a tortured sense of responsibility about which path to take. For Bolaño, the ethics are clear: to fail to speak is to do wrong. As Cynthia Tompkins states, '[f]rom an ethical standpoint, the novel may be read as a critique of the huge social cost incurred by forgetting the victims of the coup'.⁵² The importance of this is seen in the opening pages of the novel wherein Sebastian insists that, 'I am responsible in every way. My silences are immaculate'.⁵³ The significance given to silences is explained on the same page: 'One has a moral obligation to take responsibility for one's actions, and that includes one's silences, yes, one's silences, because silences rise to heaven too'.⁵⁴ Sebastian's obsession with his 'immaculate silences' is borne of the guilt he feels precisely for their not being immaculate. Just as his descriptions of himself as guiltless during his homoerotic encounter with Farewell, his assertions about his immaculate silences are also not to be believed. The narrative focus on repressed guilt relating to his relationship with General Pinochet and his knowledge of, or discovery of, the torture chamber in Maria Canales's house completely undermine his integrity. These instances foreground the idea that the silences used to cover atrocities are just as unethical as the atrocities themselves.

For Heaney, the relationship between speech and silence is much more complicated. With power to provoke and distort, words can incite violence. As Patrick Grant states,

Words do not protect us finally against violence, though they might prevent it. The words may also incite violence, or contribute to its continuance, by perpetrating the lie of propaganda and the illusions of ideology on which violence feeds.⁵⁵

While much of Heaney's collection is dedicated to digging up the voices of the past and using poetry as both a conduit and a voice in itself, Heaney's collection ends in a kind of silence—the silence of weariness. Rather than saying something new and adding more words to the conflict, Heaney ends his collection by repeating what he has said before: the final poem is one taken from one of his earlier publications, *Wintering Out*. This gesture is elucidated in another of the later poems in the collection,

‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, which takes the wearing down of moderate views as its theme: ‘the “voice of sanity” is getting hoarse’,⁵⁶ Heaney declares, and, ‘Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared to us’.⁵⁷ This poem pleads for silence, for a moment of peace wherein reason can have a say amidst the frenzy of media propaganda, and heightened rhetoric.

The silence in Heaney’s collection is not the unethical silence rallied against by Bolaño, but one in which ‘a form of connection is posited’.⁵⁸ It is a silence that Jacques Derrida figures as a form of ‘hiatus, that is, a mouth opened to speak and eat, but a mouth that is still silent’.⁵⁹ During this silence, opposing sides are given room to communicate openly. In theorising a distinction between an open ‘saying’ and a fixed ‘said,’ Emmanuel Levinas describes how:

Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said.⁶⁰

While Levinas’s idea of ‘saying’ is not a form of silence, it is a form of open communication betraying an ‘ethical sincerity [...] an ethical openness to the other’.⁶¹ This openness is perhaps what Heaney is gesturing towards in the latter half of *North*. ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ demonstrates that the closed nature of much speech surrounding the troubles in Northern Ireland, ‘Backlash’ and ‘crack down’,⁶² forestalls any movement towards reconciliation. The poem’s entreaty to step away from these kinds of ‘diamond absolutes’⁶³ signals the necessity for a change in the discourse of conflict to one that creates a space for open communication. As Richard Rankin Russell comments, ‘“North” features Heaney in the poetic stance he has always given most credence to—listening not speaking’.⁶⁴

Bolaño’s and Heaney’s works both attempt to respond to national violence through literature, but they come to different conclusions about the relationship between literature and politics, and where the line between the two should fall. Both writers make use of psychological narratives, exploring repressed aspects of national history through individual voices, yet where Bolaño’s unreliable narrator brings the past to the surface, Heaney relies on the authenticity of his poetic voice to describe the experience of the bog bodies. The relationship between speech and silence is a particular point of contrast between Bolaño and Heaney, with Bolaño focussing on the need to speak about the history of

his country as an ethical imperative, and Heaney interrogating the value of both speech and silence as ethical responses to his national situation. The key differences between the suppressed history of state violence of the Pinochet regime and the public violence of the Troubles, and of the temporal proximity to the contextual violence, ultimately lead to very different conclusions about the relationship between literature and politics. For Bolaño, literature has a duty to be political. Through the narrative's criticism of Sebastian, Bolaño shows that to be silent is to be complicit and that any reification of the arts under such conditions is absurd. Heaney, in contrast, faces current and ongoing violence playing out on the streets of Ireland. Under these conditions, words hold the power to inflame an already devastating conflict. For Heaney, literature is inescapably political, and in the end, silence is the only responsible action. In both works, literature is shown to be a powerful political force, but circumstances must dictate how to use that power responsibly.

Endnotes

¹ Seamus Heaney, *North* (1975), London: Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 48.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-78*, London: Faber, 1980, pp. 54-55.

⁴ Heaney, *North*, p. 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Tim Hancock, 'Seamus Heaney: Poet of Tension or Poet of Conviction?', *Irish University Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1999, pp. 458-375, p. 368.

⁷ Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile* (2003), London: Vintage, 2009, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on 11 March 1882,' in *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, London: Blackwell, 1983, p. 49.

¹³ Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1990, pp. 44-70, p. 45.

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1994, p. 145.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text*, vol. 15, 1986, pp. 65-88, p. 69.

¹⁶ Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', 60.

¹⁷ Heaney, *North*, p. 61.

¹⁸ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, London: Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 80.

¹⁹ Eugene O'Brien, *Searches for Answers*, London: Pluto Press, 2003, p. 82.

²⁰ Corcoran, *Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 80.

²¹ Richard Rankin Russell, *Poetry and Peace*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010, p. 23

²² *Ibid.*

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- ²³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 18.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ²⁵ Richard Rankin Russell, 'The Black and Green Atlantic: Violence, History, and Memory in Natasha Trethewey's 'South' and Seamus Heaney's 'North'', *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2014, pp. 155-172, p. 158.
- ²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', p. 27.
- ²⁷ Heaney, *North*, p. 8.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', p. 17.
- ³⁵ Heaney, *North*, p. 8.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Corcoran, *Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 72.
- ⁴⁵ Heaney, *North*, p. 39.
- ⁴⁶ Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*, pp. 96-97.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ⁵⁰ Heaney, *North*, p. 32.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ⁵² Cynthia Tompkins, 'Review', *World Literature Today*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2002, p. 217.
- ⁵³ Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*, p. 1.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Patrick Grant, *Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland, 1968-98* Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001, p. 14.
- ⁵⁶ Heaney, *North*, p. 58.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ⁵⁸ O'Brien, *Searches for Answers*, p. 87.
- ⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford: Stanford U.P, 1999, pp. 113-114.
- ⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, p. 46.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.
- ⁶² Heaney, *North*, p. 57.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ⁶⁴ Russell, *Poetry and Peace*, p. 229.