Annotated Bibliography--Seamus Heaney and Violence


In this article, Cullingford discusses the works of the three Irish authors listed in the title. She observes that these writers (among others) have used the relationship between ancient Rome and Carthage (defeated by the Romans) as a metaphor for the relationship between England and Ireland. For Heaney and Friel, this metaphor is employed to establish what she calls an “oppositional identity for the colonized Irish” (222). She talks about Heaney’s representation of British soldiers as Roman legionnaires in some of his poetry, and gives a detailed discussion of this metaphor in the poem “Kinship” (228). Her focus isn’t really on violence, but it is implicit in the metaphor she draws out, and I think it will be helpful to me as I write about the different ways that Heaney explores violence.


Inglebien contends that Heaney’s “myths of Irishness” (627) derive from philological misreadings of Ted Hughes’s poetry. Like Stallworthy, Inglebien also finds Heaney’s poetry to have an archeological quality to it (634). He observes that for Heaney, the alliterative mode (associated most with consonants) is masculine and British (636). He offers brief commentary on “Tollund Man,” suggesting that the poem makes a connection between Irish Catholicism and ancient religions (640). He also gives short attention to “Punishment,” noting the correlation of ancient violence with modern, and he also mentions “Act of Union.” I think there may be some things I can use from this article, such as his discussion of the correlation of Catholicism with the ancient religions; however, this critic is mostly concerned with showing how Heaney’s poetry is indebted to Hughes’s poetry with a a particular focus on the philological element, and that’s not really something I intend to discuss.


In this article, Johnson looks at several of Heaney’s collections of poetry and considers how violence is represented in them. Johnson observes that much has been made of the violence in Heaney’s poetry, particularly in connection to the Troubles and after the publication of *North*. 
However, he also points out that there is a particular violence expressed in the poetry that predates the Troubles as well. He notes that Heaney’s approach to violence in his poetry is “exploratory, tentative, and dialectic” (118), or in other words, that his poetry is conflicted when it comes to violence. Johnson sees this as wrapped up in Heaney’s attempts to understand his role as a poet and public figure and how art relates to life. I think that this article will be useful to me because he does talk about that sense of conflictedness, and he also talks specifically about “Punishment,” “Tollund Man,” and to a very small extent “Casualty.” I’ll be able to use it to back up my own ideas about Heaney’s conflicted attitude.


In this book, Kiberd looks at a lot of literature from the Twentieth Century. For my paper, I’m only interested in Chapter 32, which is all about poets between 1960 and 1990, which includes Seamus Heaney. This is a very long chapter in which Kiberd writes about many poets, so I’m going to focus on his section about Heaney. Kiberd writes specifically about how Heaney’s poetry deals with violence. He sees it as a way for Heaney to poetically seek out the roots of the violence and express it in such a way that shows not only the outward conflict but also the personal, internal conflict felt by many Irish people. I can use this when talking about the potential value of such violent poems.


Lloyd offers a lengthy discussion of the political climate in Northern Ireland as it relates to Seamus Heaney, but not with a focus that relates to my topic of violence. He then goes on to discuss Heaney’s poetry as seeing the land as a source of continuity. He argues that the association of present Ireland with the ancient past is really about establishing a sense of continuity and, through that, identity (331). He goes on to suggest that Heaney’s poetry demonstrates an “aestheticization of violence” (334) that is “symbolic to a fundamental identity of the Irish race” (334-5). This article also features readings of “Punishment,” “Casualty,” and “Tollund Man.” I think it will be useful to me as I think about how violence functions in relation to identity and nationalism.


Stallworthy examines some of the similarities and differences between Heaney and Yeats. He connects both to earlier poetic traditions; however, while Yeats is connected to English poetic traditions, Heaney is more connected to Irish traditions. He considers how both poets function as a sort of “archeologist” of Irish poetic tradition, using Heaney’s own metaphor of poetry-writing as digging. What’s useful to me, though, is the discussion of the poetic speakers’ feelings of guilt and compassion, and his focus on the victims rather than the victorious defeated. In other words, his poetry compassionately strips away all of the sense of glory of death for the purpose
of Ireland. This will be useful to me when I discuss the reasons for Heaney’s depiction of violence in his poetry.