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The Celtic Other in the Regionalist Poems of John Hewitt

J.R. Sackett

Abstract

Towards the end of his life and career, the poet John Hewitt (1907-1987) had become a celebrated elder statesman of literature and art in Northern Ireland. Alongside that of his contemporary, John Montague, his work was recognised as an important conduit for the later poetic flowering that occurred in Northern Ireland in the wake of the outbreak of the Troubles, as represented by such writers as Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, among others. Perhaps best remembered for his advocacy of Ulster regionalism, Hewitt urged for the embrace and expression of an identity rooted in the province of Ulster (which spans counties in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic) that could bridge the sectarian divide between Catholic and Protestant communities. While certain aspects of his regionalist project gained currency, within his own poetry, a fully realised sense of achievement for his Regionalist goals fails to resonate. This paper intends to analyse one of the most significant reasons as to why that is, the poet's conception and depiction of the Catholic community, or the Celtic other. Through careful examination of some of Hewitt's poems that engage with or portray Irish Catholics, it will be shown that a sense of difference and distance could not be overcome and contributed to an inability to successfully integrate Protestant Planter and Catholic Gael identities in an Ulster regionalist ideal.

Keywords: Past and present, Timeless Humanities, Boethius, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Path through Life, Relevance of Literature, Philosophy.

Introduction

John Hewitt's regionalist principles insisted that a writer "must be a *rooted* man, must carry the native tang of his idiom like the dust on sleeve [...] he ought to feel that he belongs to a recognizable focus in place and time" (Hewitt, 1987, pp. 115-116). That place for the poet was Ulster, one of the four provinces of Ireland, the nine counties of which are split between Northern Ireland (6) and the Republic of Ireland (3). A sense of Ulster's uniqueness predates the political partition of the island, as its cultural and economic development from the 17th century onwards, spurred by migration from the British mainland, changed its character in distinctive ways. The arrival of waves of Protestant settlers in Ireland's northeast in a colonial project known as Plantations set the province on a different historical course, the results of which are still resolving themselves in the modern day. It is from the arrival of the Protestant Planters that Hewitt locates the provenance of his time, and his assertion of a claim to his 'native place' is rooted in the tenure acquired since the arrival of his ancestors.

Yet the colonial settlement of Ulster has historically made it Ireland's most violent province; notable events include massacres during the Irish Rebellion of 1641, interethnic

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conflict during the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and sectarian violence throughout the 20th century, from the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) to the more recent Troubles of the 1960s-90s. It is partially from a desire to bridge a sectarian divide that Hewitt proposed an Ulster regional identity as an alternative to strictly British/Protestant and Irish/Catholic modes of identification. Yet, another motivation for regionalism may have been to negotiate the legitimacy of Hewitt's Planter ancestry. Barry Sloan (2000) deems the poet's regionalism to be "the unsatisfied quest to discover practical and productive ways of grafting the communities in the province on to one another and of giving Hewitt himself an uncompromised sense of belonging" (p. 16). Hewitt's poems that assert a place for the Protestant community in Ireland oscillates between confidence and self-consciousness. For many nationalists, the Planter legacy represented cultural and religious disruption, and it was questionable whether those who identified too closely with it truly 'belonged' in Ireland. As John Wilson Foster (1989) points out, "The specialty of Ulster has been recognised by inhabitants of the rest of Ireland partly by their withholding of full status Irishness from those of settler stock in the north-east" (p. 2). Hewitt's ideal proposed a mutual identity for both Protestants and Catholics grounded in the region, transcendent of the cultural, political and religious differences that separated the two communities.

Paradoxically, it is the portrayal of the Catholic community in Hewitt's poetry which registers the dubious prospect for regionalism's unifying aims. While regionalism may have advocated a common identity irrespective of religious background, Hewitt's conception of those backgrounds reinforces a binary that arguably echoes Irish nationalist interpretations of Irishness and British unionist stereotypes of the Irish themselves. The dichotomy to which much of the poetry's cultural concerns attend, between Planter and Gael, Alien and Native, Coloniser and Colonised, maintains separation at the same time that it attempts to bridge division. A sense of irreconcilable difference and distance persists. The Catholic Gael and native Irish appear as a mysterious Celtic other. It is important to note that the othering which can be discerned in the poetry is unlike typical colonialist/imperialist othering, which entails the need to subjugate and oppress or discriminate and disenfranchise (Bhugra et al., 2023). Rather, Hewitt's sense of the other touches on gentler notes of incomprehension and incompatibility. Furthermore, unlike conventional othering's intention to personify outgroups as alien and subversive (Bhugra et al., 2023), the poet's notion of the alien is often self-directed to himself and other Planter descendants. The analysis that follows will closely examine some of Hewitt's poems that depict the province's community of Irish Catholics, its Celtic other, and offer an explication as to why the Ulster regional identity could not succeed in its intention to serve a galvanising purpose.

It has been noted that despite the regional identity's goal of being representative of all nine counties of Ulster, "Hewitt himself conceded in later years," as Frank Ormsby notes in the introduction to Hewitt's *Collected Poems*, "his region was not so much Ulster as the north-east corner of it [Counties Antrim and Down] along with Belfast and parts of County Armagh" (Hewitt, 1991, p. lix). These boundaries restrict Ulster to the most Protestant-populated areas of Northern Ireland. As Foster (1975) notes, the places in Hewitt's regionalist poems "are largely Protestant locales, lying on a clear day in view of the mainland that peopled them," the tamed landscape of Planter localities (pp. 23-25). Yet County Antrim is also home to moors and glens inhabited by Catholic communities, offering "opportunities for the Planter poet to ascend into the older native culture" (Foster, 1975, p. 23). While elsewhere in Hewitt's work, the Ulsterman assumes the stereotypical characteristics of the Protestant Planter, poems depicting the 'other' community of Catholic Gaels imbue them with a mystique of authentic Irishness. In terms of faith, Hewitt "stood outside the creeds" (Hewitt, 1991, p. 276) and was a declared atheist. Yet as Claire Mitchell (2005) points out:

[...] categories of liberty versus slavery have clear religious roots in Protestant teaching of freedom of thought and the authoritarianism of the Catholic church. Yet people with no active religious involvement or commitment use these categories to understand social relationships. This is not a position argued theologically, but from Protestants' observations of the ways in which Catholics seem different from them. In their strong form, there is a clear relationship between religious ideology and politics, where Catholics are seen as unfree and politically duped. (p. 13)

Hewitt's "nonconformist upbringing made him unsympathetic to the Roman Catholic faith" (Hewitt, 1981, p. 7). In "The Lonely Heart" section of a long autobiographical poem, *Freehold* (1946), the poet recalls visiting a Catholic church:

Not this my fathers' faith: their walls are bare;
 their comfort's all within, if anywhere.
 I had gone there a vacant hour to pass
 to see the sculpture and admire the glass,
 but left as I had come, a protestant. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 378)

A lower-case "protestant," Hewitt nonetheless typically associates upper-case Protestantism with values of individual liberty and freedom of conscience. Catholicism estranges the Planter from the Gael, yet also acts as the invigorating factor of his Irishness.

Consider the different modes of representation and self-representation that Hewitt employs in his work. In "The Lonely Heart," Hewitt writes of his grandfather, "He gave me much: he made me know my race." In describing "my race," he touches upon the paradoxes and complexities of the Planter tradition in Ulster (Hewitt, 1991, p. lvi):

These were his people, so he made them mine
 by laying-on of hands, by word and sign;
 a stubborn Irishry that would recall
 the famine's curse, the farm that was too small,
 yet with a faith protestant that denied
 the hope of mercy to the papist side,
 tongue-loose with stories of the Ninety-Eight,
 yet proud the British Empire is so great,
 despising royal pomp and rites of Rome
 but loving sashes, banners, fife and drum,
 so tethered to antinomies it cocks
 in seesaw straddle of a paradox. (Hewitt, 1991, pp. 376-377)

Now compare this to "A Country Walk in May" in which the poem describes Irish Catholics:

[...] we other three
 are Irish of the Planter's polity;
 not black-browed, moody Gaels, addicted much
 to the soft answer and the easy touch,
 the spume of spangled words, the sidelong glance
 that masks the peasant's eye to the main chance,
 the ready oath, the blessing on the lip,
 the fingered cards, the signalled fellowship,
 the patriot's passion, the malicious jest
 which cuts the deepest what is loved the best;

though generations of that earth and air
have predicated that we too must share
the best and worst alike, for till we die,
will it or not, we're of the Irishry. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 518)

It is evident that the poet is not just given to stereotypes. His poems often reinforce an identity binary between national and colonial cultures. The poetry's racial essentialism is a further impediment to its regionalist project. Yet the Protestant sense of difference, the sense of being defined in and against another culture, has its political origins in the nationalist drive for Home Rule. As Gerry Smyth (1998) points out, "The national imperative, in as much as it came to be identified with certain religious, familial and cultural ideologies, dominated individual experience and produced a national identity founded on racial exclusivity, individual repression and fear of difference" (p. 83). Hence, the tone of "will it or not" remains sceptical. The very fact that membership of the Irishry must be willed speaks to a self-conscious sense of exclusion.

Tom Clyde (1991) posits that regionalism was conceived by Northern writers in response to an awareness of their identity as distinct from others, and of what it is that makes them different (p. 251). These differences are reinforced throughout Hewitt's poems despite claims to a shared conception of Irishness. As Seamus Heaney notes, "This poet senses himself [...] as co-inhabitant but not as kin with the natives" (Heaney, 1980a, p. 1). In "O Country People" the speaker acknowledges:

We are not held to you by the mesh of kin
[...]
I recognize the limits I can stretch:
even a lifetime among you should leave me strange,
for I could not change enough, and you will not change;
there'd still be levels neither'd ever reach. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 72)

Yet "kinship" is not the critical issue that separates Planter from Gael in Hewitt's work. The poet cannot come to terms with the Catholicism of the native community; this may be attributed to his non-conformist background and atheism, but it also has to do with a politically-charged understanding of cultural and ethnic Irishness. The narrator of "The Colony" summarily voices the poet's feelings about the religion of "that other tribe":

I think these natives human, think their code,
though strange to us, and farther from the truth,
only a little so – to be redeemed
if they themselves rise up against the spells
and fears their celibates surround them with. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 76)

Hewitt's speaker is a Roman corollary to the modern-day Ulster Protestant who expresses trepidation about the natives that surround his waning colony. Sloan (2000) observes, "Here, as in other poems, Hewitt not only feels separated from the native Irish because of their Catholicism, but also shows a deep-seated Protestant distrust of the oppressive authoritarianism of that church" (p. 159). Edna Longley (2000) adds, "Poetic spells turn into lies or superstition or black magic at some points where Celt and Catholic merge in this Protestant imagination" (p. 68). For Hewitt, rejection of Catholic authority is an assertion of freedom to define his own identity; an affirmation of a freedom of conscience. Yet there is also some tension in, and reluctance about, doing so, because the poet has internalised a construct, drawn from nationalism, which marks Catholicism as a signifier of native

Irishness.

In an autobiographical poem, “The Dilemma,” Hewitt (1991) writes, “by my father taught / the stubborn habit of unfettered thought... my logic steered me well outside / that ailing church which claims dominion / over the questing spirit” (p. 132). In “The Glens,” the speaker notes of the area’s Catholics, “Not these my people, of a vainer faith / and a more violent lineage.” He expounds:

I fear their creed as we have always feared
the lifted hand against unfettered thought.
I know their savage history of wrong
and would at moments lend an eager voice,
if voice avail, to set that tally straight. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 310)

Catholicism can be seen here as the main barrier that keeps a Protestant from being able to fully commune with his neighbour. In addition, an implied nationalist tradition is suggested to be the more violent of lineages. The poem’s allusion to the Catholic Church had originally been “the lifted hand between mind and truth.” Hewitt altered the line, stating in an interview, “When I wrote that it seemed true to me [...] But I found that I was giving offence to kindly and gentle Catholics” (Hewitt and Casey, 1980-1981, pp. 1-14). Yet Catholic “savagery” is also a marker of primordialism and vitality. From “Sunset Over Glennan”:

[...] beyond the heather and moss
that only lonely roads and shepherds cross,
lie the fat valleys of another folk
who swarmed and settled when the clansmen broke
and limped defeated to the woody glens.

Hewitt’s Planter landscapes have been “tamed” by generations of cultivation and the imposition of modernity:

These inland Planter folk are skilled in toil,
their days, their holdings, so well husbanded,
economy has drilled the very soil
into a dulled prosperity that year
by reckoned year continues so [...] (Hewitt, 1991, pp. 112-113)

It is a clichéd dichotomy between a wild Irish landscape and a cultivated Protestant one but an enduring dichotomy nonetheless. Hewitt’s contemporary, the Catholic writer John Montague, was said to have sought in his work, a mythic landscape of beauty and plenitude predating Protestant arrival in Ireland (Foster, 1975, p. 21). As for the descendants of the Catholic “clansmen” in Hewitt’s poem, they “take life easier on their hillside farms.” The speaker ponders his attraction to their lifestyle in the glens, wondering if “the unchristened heart of man / still hankers for the little friendly clan / that lives as native as the lark or hare.” He self-consciously questions whether his community does in fact live in a way that is not “native” to the country.

Yet the clearest indication that the poet has internalised the “otherness” of Catholicism as a marker of Irishness is “The Hill-Farm.” The speaker of the poem recalls spying on a Catholic family worshipping inside their home:

The door was shut, but curtained light

thrust muffled challenge to the night.
Then at the porch I stopped and stood
to muster courage to intrude,
for, as I paused, I overheard
the rise and fall of rhythmic word,
a voice, the mother's giving clear
the rosary, the evening prayer,
and mumbling on a lower key,
the voices of the family
responding and repeating, each
with adult or with childish speech,
the invocations running on,
with, now and then, a smothered yawn.

At each Hail Mary, Full of Grace,
I pictured every friendly face,
clenched in devotion of a kind
alien to my breed and mind,
easy as breathing, natural
as birds that fly, as leaves that fall;
yet with a sense that I stood
far from that faith-based certitude,
here in the vast enclosing night,
outside its little ring of light. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 124)

The speaker is excluded, not just from Catholicism, but from the more certain sense of Irishness to which it infuses its adherents. The poem's associating of Catholicism with Irishness registers a "nativist ethos" that insists on "a strenuous defence of the virtues of native culture, characterized as rich, pure and authentic" (Boehmer, 2005, p. 96). The speaker feels intrinsically separated from the family and their customs, yet there is a "natural" quality to their "devotion" that he finds curious and seductive. While Hewitt had written of Catholicism in another poem from the same volume, "May Altar," as "that faith and haven I salute / but sheer away from" (Hewitt, 1991, p. 115), "The Hill-Farm" witnesses its narrator being drawn towards it because of its seemingly natural, and naturalising, Irish elements. Seamus Heaney's poem, "The Other Side," responds to "The Hill-Farm"; in it, a Catholic narrator psychically shadows Hewitt's Protestant neighbour in the poem's third section:

Should I slip away, I wonder,
or go up and touch his shoulder
and talk about the weather
or the price of grass-seed? (Heaney, 1998, p. 60)

Longley (1994) asserts that Heaney's poem "plays with the notion of a language that might heal the psycho-cultural splits, but implies that any talk about 'the price of grass-seed' will involve hard territorial bargaining" (p. 59). The Catholic speaker of "The Other Side" debates bringing the Protestant neighbour into the "little ring of light" that the neighbour was excluded from in "The Hill-Farm." While Hewitt's narrator was positioned "far from" the Catholic family he observes, Heaney's narrator is close enough to touch his Protestant neighbour. This might seem like a hopeful indication. However, Heaney has said of "The Other Side": "[...] even if it showed Protestant and Catholic in harmony, it was not fundamentally intended as a contribution to better community relations [...] it was about a moment of achieved grace between people with different allegiances [...] it was not

presuming to be anything more than a momentary stay against confusion” (Heaney, 1980b, p. 194). Perhaps there can be no respite for the Planter’s “alien breed and mind.” However, in characterising the Catholic family of “The Hill-Farm” in such a way, it can be discerned that despite the truculent insistence of belonging in certain other poems of Hewitt’s oeuvre, the poetry’s conception of authentic Irishness has largely adhered to a nationalist construct from the start. As Jacob Golomb states:

[...] only one who has deeply experienced the conflict between authentic and inauthentic patterns of life and has frequently struggled to decide between them can become conscious of the importance of being authentic. Only such a person will recognize the vital significance of authentic identity and strive to make it an operative value in his life. (Golomb, 1995, p. 34)

When considering this observation alongside Hewitt’s poetry, we see the poet’s regionalism in a much different light that has yet to be taken under serious consideration in critical discourse. Hewitt’s Planter does not lay claim to rights to land and country because he feels himself native; he does so because he feels himself alien. The poetry internalises an assumption of Catholic Gaelic primacy, and the regionalist impulse is to procure for the Planter descendant a more secure sense of authentic Irish identity.

It is evident in other poems that Hewitt is self-conscious of Catholic Gael claims to a primacy of Irishness. The defiant posturing in claiming country and defending birthright has its roots in nervousness about Ireland’s Celtic forerunners. As Longley (2000) observes, Hewitt “merges Celt into Catholic as auto-exotic Other [...] the Catholic-Celt haunts his psyche as a return of both the repressed and oppressed” (p. 66). The speaker in “Rite, Lubitavish, Glенаan” declares:

for I am of the Irishry
by nurture and by birth.
So let no patriot decry
or Kelt dispute my claim. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 83)

Hewitt’s poetry constantly senses itself under threat from nationalist objections to its claims. Nearly every assertion of Irishness is made with an eye out for possible protest. Norman Vance (1990) views this proclamation as “his obstinate, truculent response to the old-fashioned racial exclusiveness of unreconstructed Celtic nationalism” (p. 237). Regionalism advocates for cross-communal understanding, but the dynamic within the poetry is one reflective of siege mentality, a mirror of Ulster unionist wariness of the assumptions of Irish nationalism.

“Ulsterman” offers an alternative, espousing “a doctrine of synthesis” akin to the one advocated by the Revival poet AE, “in which no ethnic group is predominant, no culture the assimilative one” (Brown, 1981, p. 110). The speaker claims an inheritance from the numerous cultures that have impacted Ireland throughout the country’s history:

Far back the shouting Briton in foray,
the sullen Roman with his tramping host,
the fair beard plaited in the Saxon way,
[...]
then the dark chaunting Kelt with cup and cross,
the red Scot flying from a brother slain,
the English trooper plowing whin and moss,

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the gaunt Scot praying in the thin grey rain.

These stir and mingle, leaping in my blood,
and what I am is only what they were,
if good in much, in that where they were good –
a truculent and irritable heir. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 489)

As an “Ulsterman,” the speaker feels himself “truculent” and “irritable,” recalling stereotypes about Northern Protestants. He claims an equal share from each group of people, yet as “Rite, Lubitavish, Glanaan” showed, there are those who would object to an inheritance from the Britons, Romans, Saxons, English or Scots; all groups whose contact with Ireland originated from a base in Britain. The Celts that migrated from mainland Europe are thought to have made a substantially larger influence on the makeup of the people who are typically regarded as the native Irish. Yet even the strategy within the poem recalls a nationalist trope; Young Irelander Thomas Davis’ poem “Saxons and Celts” also stressed multiethnic Irishness. Yet how different is Hewitt’s Ulsterman from Daniel Defoe’s “True Born Englishman”: “Britton, Scot, Saxon, Dane, Roman, Mongrel half-bred Race” (Anderson, 2006, p. 5)? The poet’s self-consciousness about Celtic claims to primacy occasions his spelling of Celt as “Kelt,” from the Greek *Keltoi*. It is a peculiar but consistent aspect in his poetry, “Kelt, Briton, Roman, Dane, and Scot, / time and this island tied a crazy knot” (Hewitt, 1991, p. 489). He may be differentiating Ireland’s Q-Celtic-speaking Gaels (Irish, Scottish, Manx) from the P-Celtic speaking groups (Welsh, Cornish, Breton) to whom “the shouting Briton” happens to belong, thereby undermining the nationalist cultural construct that mythologises a Celtic Irish self-image and identity (English, 2006, p. 27).

Hewitt more explicitly attempts to deconstruct a nationalist notion of Irishness in the aptly titled “Ireland.” The speaker of the poem states, “We Irish pride ourselves as patriots... We Irish, vainer than tense Lucifer... we are fools, I say, are ignorant fools” (Hewitt, 1991, p. 58). Ormsby explains:

The speaker in the poem is a descendant of the Celts who bemoans the complacent insularity of the Irish and sees them as the bitter remnant of a wandering, conquering people, their patriotism is dismissed as ingrown and misguided, their self-congratulatory attachment to a rainy, sterile place as a refusal of more vital impulses. (Hewitt, 1991, p. xlvi).

The poem challenges a notion of historic Celtic rootedness in Ireland:

We are not native here or anywhere.
We were the Keltic wave that broke over Europe,
and ran up this bleak beach among these stones:
but when the tide ebbed, were left stranded here
in crevices, and ledge protected pools
that have grown salter with the drying up
of the great common flow that kept us sweet
with fresh cold draughts from deep down in the ocean. (Hewitt, 1991, p. 58)

According to Vance (1990), “Hewitt proposes [...] the Celt metonymically stands for the whole Irish population only because he too is an immigrant and settler [...] marooned on an island with which he has no intimate connection at least to being with” (p. 234). In attempting to equalise the legitimacy of Planter and Gael rights of belonging, the poem dispenses with a right through tenure that is crucial elsewhere in Hewitt’s work in justifying a place for the

Planter descendant in Ireland. By the poem's standards, Hewitt's Planter ancestors are as native to Ireland as the Celts because both groups have an origin elsewhere. "Ireland" proposes "a version of unity based on a mutual lack of belonging" (Sloan, 2000, p. 160). This notion is not without historical precedent. As J.C. Beckett observes, "Ireland, after all, has no aboriginal inhabitants. All Irishmen, in every part of the country, are descended from invaders, conquerors and settlers; and no layer of settlement has any exclusive claim to be regarded as 'the Irish people'" (Beckett, 1976, p. 148).

However, it is misguided to dispossess one community's secure notion of belonging in order to validate another's. This points to the frustration felt by an Ulsterman, as embodied by Hewitt, with having to constantly legitimate his presence in the only country to which he feels himself "native" "by nurture and by birth" (Hewitt, 1991, p. 83). Many of the contradictions, tensions and anxieties to be found within the poetry have to do with an obsessive, near paranoid, need to contest the recognised authority of a politicised framework for defining an authentically Irish cultural and historical identity. While the rights of the Planter descendant are seldom found to be explicitly challenged, Hewitt appears vigilant in facing such challenges should they be encountered. "Ireland" shows that one strategy to combat claims of Protestant illegitimacy is to stress the Celtic other's likewise migrant origins.

Conclusion

Hewitt's regionalism may be considered admirable given its intended goal of offering a unifying identity that members of both the Catholic and Protestant communities in the North could adopt and celebrate. Regionalism's ideal uses "would provide Protestants with a buffer between them and the Republic while satisfying their desire for Irishness" and "would offer to Catholics a real piece of their country to feel loyal to instead of merely a gerrymandered portion of Britain" (Foster, 1989, p. 10). As an artistic project, Hewitt used regionalism to work through some of his own doubts and insecurities about Irish identity as a descendant of Ireland's Protestant colonisers. While the claim of an Ulster identity made him unambiguously Irish, the deliberately Protestant character of his work contradictorily undermined the poetry's sense of indisputable Irishness. A typically Protestant conception of Catholics as Celtic other recognised the native claims of the colonised and put the poet on the defensive. A politicised linkage of Catholicism with a notion of authentic Irishness further distanced the poet from a secure sense of the Planter's place in Ireland. Though the distance between Protestant and Catholic could not be fully bridged in his poetry, Hewitt's regionalist poems remain an important testament articulating the peculiar position of the "Ulsterman" in Ireland's literary tradition.

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