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**Robert Frost's New Hampshire, Philip Larkin's England, and
Seamus Heaney's Ireland: Non-Urban Place and Democratic
Poetry**

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ROBERT FROST'S NEW HAMPSHIRE, PHILIP LARKIN'S ENGLAND, AND
SEAMUS HEANEY'S IRELAND: NON-URBAN PLACE AND
DEMOCRATIC POETRY

by

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ABSTARCT

ROBERT FROST'S NEW HAMPSHIRE, PHILIP LARKIN'S ENGLAND, AND SEAMUS HEANEY'S IRELAND: NON-URBAN-PLACE AND DEMOCRATIC POETRY

by Faisal Ibrahim Rawashdeh

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In Anglo-American Modernist poetry, place is reduced to an analogue for the cultural degradation brought forth by the disruptive experience of modernity. This demotion stands in sharp contrast to the representation of place as a center of value in the poetry of Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, and Seamus Heaney. In this dissertation, I shall explain this value in terms of its connection to a particular cultural substance which Frost, Larkin, and Heaney deem foundational for their non-ideological terms of belonging to place. Frost embraces New England vernacularism first as the basis for his egalitarianism and second as the core substance for his democratic poetics. Larkin evades the nationalist rhetoric of Englishness in the postwar era and attends instead to a sense of place rooted in a rural English tradition. Heaney as well dismisses radical notions of allegiance to place and promotes through his localism a universal message of inclusiveness and tolerance. Frost's New England Derry, Larkin's Hull, and Heaney's Derry are shaped by the political/cultural ruptures and transitions of the twentieth-century. Instead of reducing these three American, English, and Irish places to symbols of modern decline and fragmentation, Frost, Larkin, and Heaney, I argue, represent them as loci of substantial experience and of enduring vernacular, rural, and local virtues.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I discuss Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, and Seamus Heaney in terms of place. My understanding of place is informed by Yi-Fu Tuan's definition in "Place: An Experiential Perspective."¹ According to Tuan, "place is a center of meaning constructed by experience" (152). This experience can be both sensory and emotional, and by emotional he means the cultivated sense of "rootedness" and "commitment" (152). To him, when a "specific location has special meaning" to the individual, it can aptly be described as a place (153). To Tuan, there are plenty of locations that can be "centers of meaning to individuals and groups": these range from "fireplaces" and "rocking chairs" to "neighborhoods," "towns," "cities," "distinctive regions," and "nations" (153). Tuan's definition of place as a center of meaning pertains to the way Frost, Larkin, and Heaney view their American, English, and Irish regions: identifying culture as the center of meaning and value in their regions, the three poets considered here, I argue, attend to a *cultural*, rather than to a *political or ideological*, association with place.

This distinction matters because Frost, Larkin, and Heaney each lived during the emergence of ideological politics of place which defined national places across lines of racial purities and sectarian allegiances: Nazism and Fascism in Germany and Italy, exclusivist nationalism in England, and violent political partisanship in Northern Ireland.

¹Yi-Fu Tuan has been quite influential in contributing to the field of Humanistic Geography since the 1970s. I am only referencing his concept of place here since it is relevant in principle to my interpretation of what place specifically means to these three poets. For a thorough introduction to theories of place and space, see Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin's *Key Thinkers of Space and Place*.

In their poetry, speeches, and interviews, these three poets instead define place according to non-ideological and fundamentally cultural categories: vernacular, rural, and the local. As I shall show, the vernacular does not only mean the American idiom but also the culture of New England which was starting to vanish with the emergence of capitalism. While the rural in Larkin, as I define it, is basically the opposite of the urban consumerist ways of life in postwar England, the local to Heaney represents his personal experience in his locale Derry in Northern Ireland. I will explain in more detail what these three terms mean and how Frost, Larkin, and Heaney represent them. My goal here is to outline the major argument (s) of the dissertation and of each subsequent chapter as well.

Besides the political context of place and twentieth-century radical politics of allegiance, there are two other major contexts to these poet's engagement with place as culture: Anglo-American Modernism and modernity. Because Frost, Larkin, and Heaney pay attention to the non-urban cultural qualities of place, they go against the Anglo-American Modernist treatment of place as solely an urban phenomenon and as an analogue for cultural degradation. While in Anglo-American Modernism modernity is critiqued through its impact on twentieth-century life in urban places, aka, the city, the poets considered here represent the radical shift of twentieth-century life—as introduced by modernity—in non-urban places. Instead of representing place as lacking in agency and importance during moments of transition, Frost, Larkin, and Heaney depict place as a conduit of valuable culture and collective experience. To these poets, place does not become solely a reflection of deterioration; rather, place acquires a more thorough meaning than one can see in Anglo-American Modernism, where the city and its symbolic embodiment of modern alienation are the major focus. By being mindful of the

value and meaning of place as culture in the sense that I am defining that term, Frost, Larkin, and Heaney provide a more expansive understanding of what place can mean and can evoke. The idea of place as culture allows one to consider the non-urban to be as *equally important* in the study of modernity as the urban. Not only the urban but also the non-urban was affected by the shifts engendered by modernity. Even today, criticism of Anglo-American Modernism continues to privilege and even assign aesthetic value to the distinction between the urban and the non-urban. In my dissertation, however, following from Tuan, I reject that dichotomy as having particular aesthetic or even thematic value. Instead, I adopt Tuan's more expansive idea of place and, in so doing, read Frost, Larkin, and Heaney's relationship with their places, New England, Hull, and Derry, as part and parcel of each poet's engagement with the larger problems of modernity, a term which constitutes the third context to my discussion of place as culture.

The third context—modernity—is relevant since Frost, Larkin, and Heaney engage with, and respond to, the cultural decline brought forth by the shift to new economic and political orders in The United States, England, and Northern Ireland. Since the literature on modernity is wide-ranging and complex,² in this dissertation I am only using the term modernity in reference to (first) the shift from a rural to a capitalist economy in the U.S. and (second) to the expansive spread of urbanism in the postwar era in the English and Irish countryside. In all its various manifestations—urbanization, industrialization,

²See, for instance: Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Especially relevant to my understanding of notions of space/place and their association with modernity is David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. For a detailed clarification of modernity and its sisters modernization, modernism, and modern, see Friedman 493-513.

modernization, technological progress, secularization—modernity brought about a radical break with a feudal past where communities thrived according to cultural values directly derived from their collective sense of belonging to the non-urban localities in which they lived. Starting as early as the seventeenth-century—with the inception of capitalism as the modern mode of production—modernity “unfolded” throughout the following centuries “in the form of industrial capitalism and today has become postmodern consumer capitalism” (Vitkus 156). By and large, the quality of life which rural communities enjoyed in their collective attachment to their locales as the center of a valuable human experience was overshadowed with the commercial values of quantity and consumption associated with modernity. In Chapters III, IV, and V, I explain in detail how Frost, Larkin, Heaney—during the early 1920s and during the postwar era of the fifties and sixties—treated modernity in terms of an urban-non-urban divide exacerbated by capitalism. What I am basically demonstrating here is that these poets write about places such as rural America, England, and Northern Ireland in the context of the cultural/political ruptures of modernity. In their poetic treatment of New England, Hull, and Derry, each poet views their place as having been shaped by the forces of modernity and as the locus of important experience on the personal and collective level.

In his *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey, following the terms of George Simmel’s argument in his “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” discusses modernity as “the representation of a connection between the urban experience and modernist thought and practice” (26). As a cultural movement, modernism (especially in the 1920s and 1930s) “was very much an urban phenomenon that it existed in a restless but intricate relationship with the experience of explosive urban growth,” and that was

characterized by “strong rural-to-urban migration, industrialization, mechanization, massive orderings of built environments, and politically based urban environments” (Harvey 25). In such cities as Vienna, Paris, New York, Chicago, Moscow, and Berlin, rapid urbanization led to “psychological, sociological, technical, organizational, and political problems,” which “confirms how important the urban experience was in shaping the cultural dynamics of diverse modernist movements” (Harvey 25). It was, after all, Harvey argues, “in response to the profound crisis of urban organization, impoverishment, and congestion that a whole wing of modernist practice and thinking was directly shaped” (Harvey 25). In short, modernism was informed by the urban experience, the metropolis being one important focus for the modernists—poets, architects, writers, and thinkers. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane point out, “modernism was ‘an art of the cities’ and evidently found ‘its natural habitat in cities” (Harvey 25). Modernism then was intimately associated with modernity. In this dissertation, however, I am not discussing modernism as such, but I am highlighting how the issue of place already dominates the literature we know as modernism. In other words, the experience of urban places was shaped by the crisis of rapid urbanization in many cities across the globe and informs much of the literature we know as modernism.

Therefore, place already matters to modernism insofar as it concerns the city and its relation to modernity. The variety of literature associated with the place of the city, however, has led one scholar, Peter Nicholls, in the second edition of his *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (2009), to argue in favor of “modernisms” instead of one monolithic modernism. Scanning the richness of different, experimental, and radical styles in different capitals of the world, Nicholls explores a medley of particular literary

modernisms in such cities as Vienna, Paris, London, Dublin, Moscow, and Harlem, to mention only a few. Having discussed that, he traces in depth various literary modernisms as responses to, and representations of, modernity. From French Decadents, Impressionists, and Symbolists in Paris, through Russian and Italian Futurists in Moscow and Venice, and from Expressionists in Germany to Anglo-American Modernists³ in London, Dublin, and Harlem, Nicholls depicts a panoply of urban-based literary modernisms that each represent the cultural crises of modernity.

In Nicholls and other scholars' treatment of Anglo-American Modernism, the focus is on urban places. A group of important Anglo-American modernist poets, the Imagists, for instance, depicts the disorienting social space of the city, such as in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." There and in similar Imagist poetry, rapid encounters with the homogenous urban crowd on the streets of London and inside its underground train tubes lead to disorientation and alienation. All in all, the Imagists defied the monotonous uniformity of city life as an unwholesome experience. As a cure to such alienation, their poetry demonstrates that both individualism and difference from urban homogeneity can be attained through the unique use of language, through stylistic experimentation with English verse.⁴

³In this study, I am only referencing the canonical Anglo-American Modernists, such as T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, and William Carlos Williams. This Anglo-American Modernism of the twentieth-century was one in a long line of other modernist European movements in the preceding century.

⁴My understanding of the Imagist poets and their engagement with the urban environment is informed by Andrew Thacker's discussion of the subject in the third chapter—"Imagist Travel"—of his book *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (2009). Thacker's book contributes to the conversation on Anglo-American Modernism and its association with place and space. It also contributes a great deal to the research on modernity and geography. The literature on the subject has been growing, especially after the spatial turn in the studies of modernity in the late sixties and in the early seventies. With the surge of global capitalism and the onslaught of massive urbanization, social scientists and theorists were made keen of the significance of studying the lived urban experience in the modern city, in the

Turning to Frost, Larkin, and Heaney, one finds the non-urban rather than the urban. For the Anglo-American Modernists, however, the city was the place where the engagement with modernity could be best represented. In Frost, Heaney, and Larkin, one finds that same engagement only it takes place in the partly non-urban areas of New England, Hull, and Derry/Londonderry. These non-urban areas are also a locus of engagement with modernity and deal too with such phenomena of modernity as urbanization, industrialization, and political violence. Where Anglo-American Modernism tends to vilify its primary place, the city, this is not the case with the more non-urban places represented by Larkin, Frost, and Heaney. For them, each place resonates on a profoundly personal and cultural level.

Rather than adopt a cosmopolitan or universalist stance, these three poets remain committed to, as the case may be, Americanness, Englishness, and Irishness. Such identification stands in sharp contrast to the Anglo-American Modernists' commitment to cosmopolitan values said to lie beyond their places of origin. In their attempt to conquer feelings of disorientation and alienation in the modern world, the Anglo-American Modernists looked for values beyond their own culture. Reacting against modernity, Anglo-American Modernists conceived of their "cultural renovation" as a "return to the values of a previous age" (Nicholls 165). Unlike them, Frost, Larkin, and Heaney remain

metropolis, and in the global capitals of the world. Literary criticism as well has been influenced by this surge of spatial studies, especially when it comes to Anglo-American Modernism, which was partly a response to the urban experience of modernity. For references on these topics see Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Margaret Dickie's *Stein, Bishop, & Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, and Place*, Ann Douglas' *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, Nicholas Entrikin's *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*, Robert Tally's *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, and Alex Davis' *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*.

attached to what is near at hand, demonstrating in their poetry the importance of the cultures of their own places. In Frost, Larkin, and Heaney, place resonates on a profoundly personal and cultural level. The difference with regard to the treatment of place in Anglo-American Modernism and in the poetics of Frost, Larkin, and Heaney constitutes the basis for the major argument of this dissertation.

I shall explore this difference in Chapter II of this dissertation, where I argue that the three poet's engagement with, and departure from, Anglo-American Modernism is based upon the value which place offers to their poetry and to them as American, English, and Irish natives. I shall explain this value in terms of its connection to a particular *cultural definition* of place, which I define as the vernacular, the rural, and the local. For instance, Frost "never ceased to find value in his surroundings" (Paton 132), making the vernacular culture of New England the substance of his poetry. In this way, he also uncovers the entry of rural New England into modernity. Far from sparking profound alienation, however, Frost's poetry shows that such modernity, expressed through his New England vernacularism, belongs to an ongoing democratic American poetry. Frost expresses the new modernity by introducing the lowbrow tones of New England speech to his poetry. In so doing, Frost not only acknowledges the worth of a vanishing American culture but also democratizes the English language by departing from English aestheticism which valued upper-class language at the expense of the common man's idiom. Nor is this simply an unexamined democracy. I also contend that Frost's vernacularism embodies a specific cultural pluralism. To Frost, all cultures of New England are equally important and represent the cultural diversity of America.

In the same chapter, I also explain that Larkin's recourse to the English native idiom, which for him embodies Englishness and the English values, is meant to assert the persistence of virtues that, as a result of modernity, are vanishing. In a postwar era of consumerism and rapid urbanization, Larkin uses the native English idiom of Hull to preserve an indigenous culture in danger of annihilation. Larkin evokes the English place either to celebrate its enduring rural appeal amidst an encroaching urbanization or to commemorate its declining customs in an alienating urban environment. In Chapter II, to make this case for Larkin, I contrast his poetry to that of T.S. Eliot to show his point of departure from Eliot, whose London loses distinctiveness by virtue of its being the *means* by which he depicts alienation and urban hallucination of the whole modernist period.

Chapter II also discusses Heaney's engagement with, and departure from, Anglo-American modernism. Unlike his Modernist predecessor William Butler Yeats who celebrated Irish place in terms of a Nationalist-Eden myth, Heaney focused instead on cultivating a sense of place severed from nationalist ethos and racial purities. Like Frost, he depicts a place more inclusive of national and cultural differences. Heaney also focuses in his poetry on the particularities of his lived experience in his locale Derry. That being so, he, I contend, avoids the nationalism and cultural purity that Yeats opposed to a foreign and alien Englishness. Through his close attention to the particular, Heaney paradoxically promotes through his local poetry a universal message of inclusiveness and difference.

In the chapters that follow, I will further explore these three poets' American, English, and Irish places as centers of value which is derived from a cultural meaning of place. In Chapter III, for instance, I argue that through his use of the New England

vernacular, Frost mobilizes cultural pluralism which I refer to as an aesthetic of egalitarianism based on his belief that all people—from different social ranks—are equal. Inherent in this appreciation for the American vernacular culture is a democratization of the American lyric, which Frost accomplishes through his utilization of an American regional dialect. In his poetry, Frost wrote about the various cultures of New England using their vernacular idioms as a gesture to acknowledge their worth and value to American poetry. Inherent in this acknowledgement is a recognition of the tensions that result from the onset of modernity. While farmers and other people in the rural parts of New England valued social communication, neighborly relations, cooperation, and strong social and emotional ties, generally modernity created unprecedented tensions. Frost renders the impact of modernity on the quality of these human connections, the disruption precipitated by a new economic order, which is particularly represented in his *North of Boston*. In those poems, Frost represents fear, insecurity, and through his use of the idioms of his vernacular culture he gives nuance to the transition from a rural-based, to a capitalistic, way of life. Also, the cultural stability of the vernacular culture in New England was declining with this transition, and Frost shows his readers the impact of this transformation on the community. Ultimately, I contend that for Frost, a pluralistic New England vernacular culture was the foundation for a stable sense of community rooted in place. Frost's poetry suggests that Modernity put that culture in danger.

In Chapter IV, I discuss Larkin's treatment of the English place in postwar England. In his poetry of Hull, for instance, I argue that Larkin makes out of *rural isolation* which places like Hull *could still offer* in an urbanized England a significant English virtue. I contend that Larkin deems such virtues associated with rural places like

Hull as foundational. In my discussion of Larkin, I situate his preference for solitude within a larger English cultural narrative of industrial capitalism. As early as the nineteenth-century, poets, writers, and critics expressed concerns over what industrialization and its offshoot urbanization had done to the pre-industrial quality of a rural English life. From the nineteenth-century onwards (until the postwar era in the 1950s and 1960s), the English community was still debating the degree to which industrial capitalism had negatively contributed to the decline of an ‘Old Rural England.’ The emphasis of quantity of production over the quality of life, the decline of spirituality, the urbanization of the English countryside, the stress of urban centers as opposed to the tranquility and solitude of English villages—these all, amongst many other points of criticism—constituted the foundation for the national discourse on industrial capitalism and consequently sparked the debate on authentic England and Englishness.

Amidst this national conversation, it became imperative to define what constitutes England and Englishness. To Larkin, Englishness and England could not be made synonymous with capitalist consumerism and consumption. The question as to where the English cultural values lie—in contrast to the predominant economic values of capitalism—was thoroughly debated on all fronts. The overwhelming sense of alienation engendered by the disconnection from a pre-industrial rural England was the consistently one common thread to this national debate, which stressed the fact that the English character and place were tainted by a modern, consumerist culture alien to their nature. Larkin’s poetry and his career as a whole are definitively situated within the highly politicized climate of the fifties, when questions of what constitutes England and Englishness assumed an essentially political guise, especially after the decline of England

as an Empire and the resurgence of nationalist politics of place. In expressing alienation in postwar England and in attaching value to rural isolation as a vanishing English virtue, Larkin, I contend, is in tune more with the *cultural* debate on industrial capitalism than with the *politics* of his postwar era.

The debate on industrial capitalism in postwar England and its impact on English towns and English identity was a continuation of this centuries-old narrative, but in postwar England the conversation took on a specifically political shape. In this debate, then, Larkin attempted to eschew the political implications that emerged when English people opposed consumerist capitalism as alien to England and Englishness. Instead, in his poetry and interviews, Larkin expresses his discomfort with what England the country has become—more urbanized and out of touch with its rural past—and feels more connected to what it once was. In short, Larkin expresses the poetics of alienation that modernity created, but he does not, for all that, make a political argument as a result. Instead of politically and directly engaging with this alienation, he resorts to the detached persona of a train traveler.

In my discussion of Larkin's train poems, I argue that train travelling is his strategy for engaging with the alienating environment of modern England while at the same time avoiding the need to draw political conclusions. While some critics tend to see Larkin's detachment from the English crowd as a sign of condescension and contempt on his part, I argue that his detachment is not based on superiority but rather on a lack of intimacy with, and kinship to, a modern English crowd immersed in consumerist and commodified modes of living. As a train traveler, then, he watches the English crowd from a distance and notes their shopping habits in the city. Against that alien experience,

he makes clear his own preference for rural solitude (particularly in Hull). His non-participatory attitude as a train passenger, I contend, speaks to his experience of alienation from a postwar commodified and urbanized England but it also avoids direct political statements or implications.

In Chapter V, I also discuss the local as Heaney's center of value. In my discussion of Heaney's experience of place in Catholic Derry, I argue that, like Larkin, his attachment is to the experientially local culture of Derry rather than to the political implications contingent upon such attachment. In his poetry, Heaney writes about his formative experience living in Derry, where a sense of community meant a great deal to the Irish people there. Central to my discussion is Heaney's defining his terms of local belonging. As a member of a Catholic community in Derry, where violence has already created a rift between Protestants and Catholics, Heaney understands his relationship to all Irish communities in the larger context of a shared history and shared heritage.

Heaney's Derry is no different from Frost's New Hampshire Derry or Larkin's Hull when it comes to the cultural transitions brought forth by modernity. If anything, the arrival of modernity in Heaney's Derry gave rise to actual violence, which, besides urbanization projects, transformed the physical landscape and destroyed many of its Catholic neighborhoods, the very places that had once been proof of a lived reality based on solidarity, harmony, and a deep sense of attachment. In his poetry, conferences, and essays, Heaney refers to his formative years in Derry to celebrate local place as a repository of values and as the basis for a collective community experience, an experience that precedes the cultural and political transition now referred to as modernity. Paradoxically, the more Heaney depicts his experience of community life in a Catholic

rural parish, the more that local place comes to have a universal resonance and relevance to all people. In his poetry and essays, Heaney resorts to local objects, local stories, and personal and local experiences at the parish and on the farm. He thus reminds his readers that the local has always had value to both Catholic and Protestant communities, and he shows that definition of the local existed well before the onset of modernity and its cultural and political ruptures. If there is a politics in Heaney's view of the local, it is one of reconciliation and unity. In his speeches and poetry, Heaney seeks to found a common ground between the two communities, Catholic and Protestant, a ground that stretches out beyond their political and religious identifications.

CHAPTER II
THREE NON-URBAN POETS: ROBERT FROST, PHILIP LARKIN,
AND SEAMUS HEANEY

In this chapter, I argue that the Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, and Seamus Heaney's engagement with, and departure from, Anglo-American Modernism is based upon the value which place offers to their poetry and to them as American, English, and Irish natives. I shall generally explain this value in terms of its connection to a particular *cultural definition* of place, which I define as the vernacular, the rural, and the local. Their focus being the non-urban, Frost, Larkin, and Heaney eschew the Anglo-American Modernists' urban elitism and commit instead to a non-urban cultural definition of place derived from a community-based life. To Frost, the non-urban particularly incorporates the *vernacular* culture of New England; to Larkin, it refers to bygone *rural* community English life and customs, which I will explain in more detail in the fourth chapter; to Heaney, the non-urban manifests itself in the *local* aspects of the Irish place. My only concern here is to introduce the three poet's sense of place in general terms and to highlight the context of each poet's aesthetic and cultural/political milieu.

Robert Frost

Unlike the typical Anglo-American Modernist poets who use place not for its intrinsic value but rather for its symbolic power, Frost, a contemporary of the Anglo-American Modernists, insists on the intrinsic value and power of a specific place. And unlike his Anglo-American Modernist peers, he avoids stylistic experimentations. He is a formalist poet who chose to respond to modern irrationality by evoking (with sustained poetic treatment) the particularities of the American place. His place is assigned a value

in and of itself through the employment of a unique poetic form that trusts meter and rhythm not only as measuring units but also as specific modes of articulation and speech said to be indigenous to the place he depicts. Instead of using stylistic Modernist innovations, Frost expresses his chosen place through its specific colloquial idiom. His recourse is not to mythology and classical tradition; rather, he resorts to a place-based colloquialism, eschewing the radically experimental style of the Anglo-American Modernists.

This is not to say that Frost does not experiment. As a non-urban poet, Frost experiments with regional American speech, particularly with the New England vernacular. He did not, however, experiment with free verse. In *North of Boston*, Frost was “rejecting an estheticism largely English and upper-class in favor of a poetry that would speak to Americans, and for them, in a language that Americans spoke” (Sanders 27). As Lawrence Thompson comments, during his stay at Derry, Frost “had gradually modified his way of talking [and] deliberately imitated the manner in which his neighbors unconsciously slurred words, dropped endings, and clipped their sentences”(371). Frost was “perfecting the art of talking like a farmer” by the time he reached Plymouth (Thompson 371).

Through invoking their speech, Frost as well announces a commitment to the people of New England—people who are not city dwellers and who are somehow excluded from the industrial life of the neighboring cities. In *North of Boston*, the vernacular is brought into a high degree of prominence, thereby assigning it a cultural validity which, Frost seems to imply, should not be less important than the literary one. Frost admired the people of New England and expressed his admiration through his

replication of the texture of their vernacular language. In his “Poetry and Poverty,” he called them “my people” and “the ordinary people I belong to” (*Collected Poems* 759).⁵ He even felt the need to defend them when he saw how condescending the audience and actors were in a play about Frost’s people. His vernacular speech also assigns legitimacy and validity to the place, Derry, New Hampshire. Any place is rooted in a culture of its own, and Frost brings to the fore the importance of this culture by invoking a language that is free from the pretentiousness of the privileged class.

As David Sanders maintains, despite the representations of these poems of “failed and failing farms,” the reader notices that these people’s lives “take definition and value in opposition to the urban wealth and power to which it loses ground each year” (103). Sanders shows how these poems represent a “culture of independent farmers pushed toward extinction by an expanding, capital-driven economy” (102). What Frost does in these poems is “save in imagination . . . a culture that might seem dead but which remains alive in [his] poems, and through them, in us” (Sanders 104). Frost thus idealizes the people and stresses the value of such culture that had to face the encroaching power of industrial capitalism.

In fact, Frost’s rejection of English aestheticism and its appeal to a highly stylized literary diction is also a rejection of an English cultural superiority that assigns value to an upper-class language at the expense of a speech used by people who are considered socially inferior. That conservative aestheticism Frost dismisses in favor of an aestheticism of inclusion; he welcomes into serious poetry the regional language varieties which are rooted in his American place and in this way contributes to the fashioning of an

⁵ Hereafter referred to as *CP*.

American idiom. To fashion this vernacular utterance, Frost combines all the literary voices of the past (their tropes, images, themes, rhythmic structure of verse) and “democratizes” them in a distinct poetic form that speaks to the American nation (Poirier 50).

When Frost incorporates the metrical tradition into his work, he accommodates the poetic consciousness of major writers like Henry David Thoreau, William Wordsworth, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Ralph Emerson to a vernacular American diction grounded in the regional. This act of democratization is indicative of Frost’s larger vision for a poetic form that assigns equal value and important place to Derry speech in his own verse. Frost himself mentioned how his attraction to the intonations of his neighbors at Derry had later on turned into a consideration of the worthiness of Derry people who use this regional tongue:

It would seem absurd to say it (and you must not quote me as saying it) but I suppose... that my conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense... There came a day about ten years ago when I...made the discovery in doing *The Death of the Hired Man* that I was interested in neighbors far more than merely their tones of speech—and always had been.
(qtd. in Sanders 73)

As Sanders argues, Frost “may have felt less compelled to prove himself as an artist and freer to claim the democracy of spirit central to his vision” (73). This vision gives high regard, Sanders adds, to the “basic, the significant, and the human,” (74) thus locating worth and value in Derry as a place which is equal in importance to Boston and other

urban centers. The farmers and the workers of Derry, their language, habits, customs, and their vernacular, acquire value and significance through poetic representations that highlight specific trial and tribulations, mostly those that concern the impact of a capital-driven economy on their ways of life. The ordeals of these simple farmers, Frost seems to imply, are as worthy of listening to and writing about as the ordeals of a modern transcultural globe.

Frost makes his readers literally listen to these ordeals through his experiments with the vernacular which he calls the “sound of sense.” By combining measured verse with natural speech, Frost makes his *North of Boston* poems (mostly written in the form of dialogues) acquire a high degree of credibility since they are written in the authentic vernacular tones of the people at Derry. In an interview with W.S Braithwaite, Frost explains his poetic principle:

What we get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underline the words....Let us take the example of two people who are talking to each other on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning had a particular sound-posture, or, to put it in another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with. (qtd. in Barry 153)

Experimenting with his sound-posturing theory in *North of Boston*, Frost chooses the vernacular of New England to bring his theoretical principles into realization. The conversations and dialogues in most of the poems (“The Death of the Hired Man,”

“Home Burial,” “The Mountain,” “A Hundred Collars,” among many others) are written in a measured verse that reproduces the tones of New England vernacular. For Frost, a sentence is “a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung” (qtd. in Poirier 73), by which he likely meant to refer to the distinct tones of voice. According to Frost, these sentence-sounds, or tones of voice, are “very definite entities” that can be “apprehended by the ear” (qtd. in Poirier 73). They are as definite as words themselves and can be “gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books” (qtd. in Poirier 73). The sounds of these sentences, the tone of someone’s voice, Frost contends, are as familiar to us as words. In his sentences, then, he represents distinct vocal intonations associated with specific human emotional occasions, such as fear, happiness, thrill, remembrances, and altercations. By positing the view that sentences are themselves tonal sounds and that as such they can express meaning, Frost is suggesting that we as readers can identify the speakers’ “state of mind” through their “intonations” (Kern 11).

Residing in New England, Frost *gathered by ear* the vernacular tones of his farmer neighbors and reproduced them in measured metrical lines. His neighbors’ rhythm of speech and tones all found a place in his verse, their predicaments and emotional struggles brought to the reader’s attention through a colloquial poetry that best reflects their attitudes and their ways of speaking and thinking. It is interesting how Frost’s interest in the technicalities of New England’s regional idiom had later on developed into sympathy with the rural community that resided there. As I mentioned earlier, Frost expressed his concern with the neighbors as people embittered by modern economic predicaments. As a place, New England was first a site of technical experimentation with

its individual American idiom, but later on this experimentation evolved into an emotional attachment to, and respect for, the human part of the place and what it stands for.

Frost's vernacular-oriented poetics developed by virtue of his direct association with New England and its idiom. For Frost, colloquialism is not only a mode of speech; rather, it is part of what defines the American individual as a member of an American nation that includes a variety of cultures and origins. His inscription in a copy of *North of Boston* emphasizes the relationship between the colloquial and the poetic and asserts the value of locality to the individual: "I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am that the national is the root of all thought and art....One half of individuality is locality: and I was about venturing to say the other half was colloquiality" (qtd. in Paton 113). Here, we see that Frost also meant to render the poetic lyric genre itself into a specifically American context.

According to Frank Lentricchia, modern American poets (including Frost and in response to the calls for a truly national American verse grounded in the actualities of the social and cultural modern American life) were expanding the experimental territories of the American lyric in an attempt to make the lyric an "expressive medium of the collage of cultures America was fast becoming" (186). These endeavors of nationalizing the lyric were also meant as a "resistance to the cultural melting pot, and as a representation of the "radical spirit of the American social experiment" (Lentricchia 186). Frost's investment in the regional (with all that it represents) is his response to the revolutionary cries for a modern American verse that best reflects the cultural heterogeneity of the American society at the early years of the twentieth-century. This also reflects his readiness to set

the American lyric “free from servility to British aesthetic rule” and to make it “rooted in the common places, and therefore, worthy of the American social experiment”

(Lentricchia 180).

A staunch proponent of the modern American lyric and an advocate of a national poetry responsive to the cultural diversity of America, Louis Untermeyer defends Frost’s poetic achievement and celebrates the latter’s reaching “down through his people to their roots and striking the soil from which they grow” (21). Untermeyer commends Frost’s *North of Boston* for being a “book of people, of the folk of New England, of New England itself with its hard hills and harder certainties, its repressions, its cold humor and inverted tenderness” (20). For Untermeyer, poetry becomes democratic when it is made “out of the rude and raucous tumble of life” (17), and for him, Frost stands as an “unsurpassed” poetic example of the American national poet whose rhythms of common speech and “folk-flavored idioms” were able to “transform the whole countryside” and to infuse it with value and significance (15-26). In Frost, the countryside does not function only as an “effective background” (Untermeyer 21), nor are the narrated events that take place within its borders used for “decorative embroidery” (Untermeyer 15). Frost’s is a poetry that reveals to the reader “the dignity of our idiom” and the important connection between the “soil” and the “soul” (Untermeyer 7).

Making the Lyric Genre and the American Poetic Genre

When placed in context, Robert Frost’s sound of sense, his democratic modernism, takes part in a larger conversation about culture and democracy then occurring. Focused on the problem of defining America at a time when immigration reached its peak from 1880-1920, philosophers such as Horace Kallen (1882–1974) and

Randolph Bourne (1886–1918) defended propositions for a culturally pluralist American nation, when ethnic and racial groups sought to assert their cultural heritage against calls for cultural uniformity. In his seminal “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” Kallen argues that the classical American liberal tradition had always proposed that “men are men merely, as like as marbles and destined under uniformity of conditions to uniformity of spirit” (193).

The marginalization of difference as being essentially a major component of the American identity Kallen argues against and proposes instead a pluralist American society, “a democracy of nationalities cooperating voluntarily and autonomously through common institutions in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind” (124). English should be the language adopted in this pluralist nation, but “each nationality,” Kallen contends, “would have for its emotional and involuntary life its own peculiar dialect or speech, its own individual and inevitable esthetic and intellectual forms” (124). From this perspective, the United States as a place would gradually become “a federal state not merely as union of geographical and administrative unities, but also as a cooperation of cultural diversities, as a federation or commonwealth of national cultures” (116). Under this conception of democracy, all racial and ethnic varieties acquire significance and are acknowledged as being equally vital in the enterprise of national self-definition. For Kallen, “democracy is an essential prerequisite to culture, [and] that culture can be and sometimes is a fine flowering of democracy” (1).

These sentiments were echoed in a theory of American poetry championed by Untermeyer who argued that democratic poetry can rebuild bridges between art and the

common man. For his part, Untermeyer champions the American idiom and makes it his main focus to support the democratic poetics of a group of poets (including Frost, Carl Sandburg, Walt Whitman, Amy Lowell, etc.) who chose the national soil to write a poetry that is inclusive of all cultural diversities and susceptible to the ears and taste of the common reader. With Whitman and with those who followed his suit, poetry, Untermeyer contends,

has swung back to actuality, to heartiness, and lustihood. Latterly the most aristocratic of arts, appreciated and fostered only by little salons and erudite groups, poetry has suddenly torn away from its self-imposed strictures and is expressing itself once more in the terms of democracy. It is no longer composed chiefly by scholars for scholars. It is democratic in the sense that a great part of it is written of the people, for the people, and by the people. (7-8)

By democratizing their language, Frost and his fellow national poets were able to disseminate poetry among the American people, who appreciated having their different regions represented in a verse that speaks to and about them. The use of a variety of low registers tears down barriers between art and the common people, thus making art equally available to all.

In “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and the Poetic Form,” Patrick Redding explains that Untermeyer implies that poets “who object to the rough and rugged diction of contemporary poetry are merely dressing up their conservative political beliefs in the language of aesthetic discrimination” (685). “The democratic task of contemporary poetry,” Redding explains, opposes “the affectation of idiom and twisted lines of aesthetes like Pound, who has led his contemporaries down a ‘literary blind-alley’ (685).

Redding contends that for Untermeyer, “modernism stood, above all, for the aspiration to democratize *language*,” and modern poets such as Frost, Sandburg, and many others who reflected the diversity of American culture, sought the vernacular and the rustic language to represent such a democratic sensibility of the period (Redding 682). Untermeyer, Redding contends,

hopes that poetry will overturn the hierarchies of grammar and vocabulary that reproduce, on the linguistic level, hierarchies of social class. Untermeyer’s modernism will be a genuinely egalitarian literary movement not just because it aims to reach a mass audience, but also because it will employ the rhythms and vocabularies spoken by the masses themselves. (682)

With Whitman pioneering a democratic verse that is inclusive of all cultural diversities, poets such as Frost, Lowell, and Sandburg, among others, gave voice, Untermeyer argues, “to an immense and unassembled medley of races” and thus “reflected the flux and diversity” of the American masses (9-10).

Frost might have been thinking along similar lines when he talked about the relationship between the immigrant and the American lyric:

The alien who comes here for something different, something ideal, something that is not England, and not France and not Germany and finds it, knows this to be America. When he becomes articulate and raises his voice in an outburst of a song, he is singing an American lyric. He is an American. His poetry is American. He could not have sung the same song in the place from where he hails; he could not have sung it in any other country to which he might have emigrated. Be

grateful to the individual note he contributes and adopt it for your own as he has adopted the country. (qtd. in Senst 6)

Frost acknowledges the immigrant's *note* in the formation of the American national lyric. This recognition assigns importance to the role which the immigrant can play in the enterprise of national self-making. As Frost seems to imply, the distinctness of the American tone the immigrant is willing to adopt as his own by virtue of his belonging to the American place, a place with distinct democratic principles which allow for the accommodation of the immigrant and of his/her cultural heritage. This is, I think, what Frost meant when he asked his fellow American people to "be grateful to the individual note" which the immigrant "contributes" to the American nation, note standing for the cultural background of all the immigrants who expressed their willingness to embrace the ideals of the American nation and to be part of the enterprise towards a democracy of nationalities. Frost encourages the accommodation of alien notes into the American nation, thus showing his readiness to endorse cultural difference because the alien had already embraced as his own the principles upon which America was established as an independent nation. This accommodation was not act of graciousness and American hospitality as Frost's remarks seem to suggest; rather, it is an assertion of the belief that the path to democracy (and the path to democratic American poetics as well) is first and foremost through exploring difference and apprising its fundamental contribution to the American lyric and society.

The link between culture and poetry lies at heart of Frost's vision. As I explained above, Frost's democratic poetics are grounded in the actualities of his particular American place, Derry New Hampshire, and the use of its vernacular is a translation of

the calls for a democratic modern American lyric, which should be susceptible to the cultural heterogeneity of this nation. Kallen's cultural pluralism, his understanding of the American nation as a cooperation of cultural diversities, is similar in vein to Frost's democratic verse, which is also based upon the cooperation between the lyric and the American culture. As I argued above, Frost's lyric is highly dependent in its realization upon the direct contact with the vernacular, which as such constitutes a major part of the American national identity. The people, their idiom, and their place (and their culture as such), all become vital part of the making of the poem, just as a medley of races constitutes an essential part in the making of a democratic nation. Frost's sense of what the American lyric *is* builds bridges between art and culture, thus making people (in this case those who reside in New England and New Hampshire) feel how valued and important their rural background is to poetry, especially that some Anglo-American aesthetes and elitists dismissed the common people and their low diction from the industry of art. While Eliot and Pound were experimenting with Anglo-European models and writing in an allusively intellectual and learned diction, Frost was experimenting with the vernacular, keeping the spirit of the American land in contact with its people through a poetry that attends to their predicaments and values their life experiences.

Democratized in a place-based poetic enterprise, Frost's *North of Boston* and his later *New Hampshire* poems reach different audiences of different ethnic backgrounds through their connection to the human part of the place. Unlike his Anglo-American peers, Frost never welcomed the urban Symbolist tradition, choosing instead to revolutionize poetry by relying on the American idiom. Frost's democratic modernism offers a pluralist conception of American poetics and culture for American and English

poets. Contrary to the elitism and countercultural practices of his Anglo-American peers, Frost's advocacy of cultural pluralism and his close connection to the human and rustic parts of place are a demonstration of the very ideals of the democratic American nation.

Philip Larkin

Like Robert Frost, Philip Larkin also uses a place-based English idiom, especially in volumes such as *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*, bringing poetry back to the English reading public after decades of being made the domain of Anglo-American Modernist elitism. Clive James argues that “by rebuilding the ruined bridge between poetry and the general reading public, Larkin has given art a future, and you can't get more modern than that” (108). This serious interest in the plainness of the poetic idiom is part of what defines the postwar English poets who sought to respond to the political and cultural ruptures of modernity in a language representative of the middle-class Englishman and of his receding English rural values, such as solidarity, rootedness, and community-based life, among many others.⁶ Larkin and the Movement poets “aimed to communicate clearly and honestly their perceptions of the world as it was and were highly reliant upon ordinary language philosophy” (Lodge 72).

Also like Frost, he eschewed Anglo-American Modernist radical experimentations with style, absorbing and assimilating “within his own repertoire of effects a set of linguistic registers and rhetorical contrivances to be deployed later with immense technical assurance” (O'Neill 150). Larkin has always had recourse to the English-based idiom especially after his first volume the *North Ship*, and he tends to use

⁶As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, I will explain one specific English virtue as represented in Larkin's train poems, which is rural solitude. What I am noting here is Larkin's departure from the Anglo-American Modernist experimental poetic language and his engagement with his contemporary environment.

it even more strongly in his *High Windows* (1974), a volume of poetry which particularly made him a national English figure (Motion 446). In this volume, the “diction is more thoroughly unpoetic, more robustly demotic, more blatantly philistine and more decidedly divested of the gentilisms” (Chatterjee 249). Larkin’s dismissal of aesthetic refinements and his recourse to actual English life experiences can perhaps be traced back to the influence of Thomas Hardy, whose impact on the younger poets in 1910s and onwards (through the forties and the fifties) was of great importance (Perkins 139).

In the first twenty-five years of the twentieth-century, Hardy’s poetry, alongside Frost’s and Yeats’, were recognized as the “prevailing mode of the period” (Perkins 136). During this period of time, Eliot and Pound were also the “chief inaugurators of an essentially different, anti-popular poetry” (Perkins 136). Similar to the “accessible, sympathetic, and the sometimes deliberately popular poetry” of America, which was inaugurated by poets such as Frost, Sandburg, Lowell, and Masters, British modern poetry which was developed by figures like Hardy, Lawrence and the Georgians was also “open and accessible” (Perkins 135-136). Modern British poetry of this period was similar in its accessibility to what is known as ‘popular Modernism’ in America (Perkins 135). This type of modern poetry made use of “colloquial and fresh” language, and the “theme or the occasion of the poems go to actual and familiar experience” (Perkins 138). In this new poetry, locality is also a predominant feature besides middle-class characters and their actual daily activities. In the first quarter of the twentieth-century in both America and England, such “popular modernism” was “read with pleasure by a relatively large public” (Perkins 135).

Larkin must have found the plainness of native English diction and the investment in the actual experiences of middle-class Englishmen very appealing given that he tended to shy away defiantly from the radical stylistic experimentations of the Anglo-American Modernists and their transcultural poetic scope. Larkin found inspiration and value in such popular modernism whose English progenitor was Hardy. David Timms explains that the example of Hardy,

Taught Larkin to draw on what he actually saw and felt strongly about for his work, rather than on what he ideally saw or what he believed he ought to feel strongly about. The young poet no longer worried that the real events, objects, emotions, and feelings of his own life were not fit material for poetry. (59)

Larkin himself had expressed his admiration for the poetry of Hardy and conceived of it as being a different modern vogue of the twentieth-century. Larkin appreciated Hardy's "temperament and the way he sees life," adding that Hardy "is not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love" (qtd. in Draper 29). According to R. P. Draper, Hardy's poetry represents an "alternative tradition which is distinctively modern, but keeps its connection with rational discourse" (35). In this Hardyesque tradition, there is "meticulous craftsmanship and a close attention to the demands of the paraphraseable sense" (Draper 35). Unlike the Anglo-American Modernists' disjointed, fragmentary syntax, their learned allusiveness, and highly stylized diction, Hardy's syntax is "carefully controlled" and his diction is "plain" (Draper 37). Being "less self-consciously modernist," Hardy, Housman, Kipling, and Frost,⁷ Draper elaborates,

⁷These four poets Draper conceives of as representing an alternative tradition, one that was in essence different from the Anglo-American Modernist tradition of Eliot and Pound.

were readily to be seen as continuing, rather than making a deliberately sharp break with, nineteenth-century practices. In particular, they are much more willing to retain the formally correct syntax that poetry had hitherto shared with prose, their verse is more likely to scan, and their allusiveness when they employ it as a technique, is more likely to be self-explanatory—or at least not so essential to the overall meaning of the poem that annotation becomes indispensable to its understanding. (33)

This is similar in essence to what Blake Morrison describes as Larkin's and the Movement poets' dismissal of allusions in the poem when they become "essential to understanding" and when they require explanation (168). As Morrison points out, Larkin's and the Movements poets' imperative is that the learned allusion should not "alienate the non-intellectual" and would still be a "bonus to the intellectual" (168).

In his *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, Larkin refused to include poems which require 'a glossary for their full understanding' (qtd. in Draper 230). In general, Larkin had a strong "dislike for the obscurity generated by modernist allusiveness" (Draper 230). Inspired by the alternative tradition of Hardy and of English poets who used plain diction and eschewed self-conscious Anglo-American Modernist looseness of style and difficult allusiveness, Larkin opted for "modes of writing which seek freedom of expression" and rejected "disciplined craftsmanship" (Draper 231). Larkin was hence inspired by this rationally discursive alternative tradition and its regularity of style, meter, and the rationally paraphraseable meaning.

All in all, Larkin's poetry avoids a highly stylized diction and so indicates Larkin's respect for his native English idiom. As Bruce Martin suggests, Larkin's

“recourse to the slang in many of his poems suggests his recognition that the language of the street is more honest than that of the academy” (*Philip Larkin* 93). Martin adds that the “this respect for the common man’s language does not mean a surrender to language or to total informality” (93). This is a demonstration, Martin argues, of Larkin’s “healthy skepticism toward an overly academic view of life or poetry, and a determination to say things in no more esoteric terms than necessary” (93).

Upset at the political and cultural ruptures of modernity posed to his native England and to Englishness, Larkin did not look for solutions either in the Fascism of Pound or in the Christian revivalism of Eliot. Nor is the radical solution of establishing utopian places Larkin’s alternative for contemporary cultural wretchedness in his English cities. Instead, he means to represent England through the sheer power of his ability to commemorate its vanishing rural uniqueness, specifically its rural solitude and the sense of community-lived experience enjoyed before the spread of urbanism. By casting himself as a detached train traveler, he engages from a distance with the English crowd as they are seen immersed in their consumerist routines. By using a native English idiom derived from the very places he roams and observes, he engages with his postwar England not as an Anglo-American Modernist prophet of change but as an English train passenger. Larkin’s train passengers are not engaged with Socialist agendas nor with utopian dreams. Their observations, critique, and commemoration of the places they visit are grounded in deep-seated, personal, and depoliticized relationships. Their modes of describing these relationships are rooted not only in the native idiom of their land and but also in the receding English rural ways of life.

In his poem “Going, Going,” for instance, Larkin “seems to feel that the English are abandoning their traditions and their identity for the sake of a future as the uncared-for corner of a soulless super-state” (Picot 69). Postwar English people, Larkin suggests in his poems (especially those published in *High Windows*), “have ceased to care about their communal and national identity,” and their personal “needs as individuals” are all they care about (Picot 69). As Edward Picot explains, Larkin locates value in a lost “traditional and rural existence, which is associated with a nationalistic idea of the lost beauty of England” from which the English people fell when they “abandoned tradition and the countryside” and allowed themselves to be swallowed by an “urban lifestyle dominated by the power of selfishness” (78).

In a modern England of lost rural values, Larkin writes a poetry that concerns itself with the economic obsessions of the English people and their moral laxities. In “Homage to a Government,” Larkin laments the absence of English glory and dejectedly represents the degeneration into a state where values like nobility and responsibility are missing. Again, his “Going, Going” laments the destruction of “the rural English landscape and the threat of its impending obliteration due to the invasion of pervasive urbanization and the expansion of industry” (Chatterjee 254). In “MCMXIV,” Larkin urges the English people to preserve the rural, vanishing aspects of England.

As Rory Waterman contends, Larkin is “a poet of Englishness,⁸ of English customs and establishments, some of which he perceives as being under threat” (63). The destruction of the English landscape, the threat of industrial expansionism to the rural

⁸In the chapter dedicated to Larkin, I situate his Englishness within a specifically *rural* English tradition which consistently expressed concerns over the threat posed by industrial capitalism to the English countryside and to the English community-based life experience.

English places, the obliteration of community-based life in rural England, contemporary obsession with sex and money—these all, among many others, are themes which Larkin represents in a poetry that uses the English idiom of the very rural places that are threatened with the encroaching power of an industrial modernity.

Perhaps what Samuel Hayes said once about Hardy in praise of the latter's rural English localized poetics can be evoked to describe Larkin and his commemoration of the vanishing English rural experience. In his "The Hardy Tradition in Poetry," Hayes recommends that we should look at Hardy as "the great poet in an old and central tradition, a poet conscious of the pressures working against belief, but asserting against those pressures his instinctual and emotional convictions that the universe is informed by value, and that man and nature share a relation to that value" (50). The values which Larkin celebrates in modern England are the ones that still nurture a sense of community as based upon the collective experience in a once rural England. In "To the Sea," for instance, Larkin commends the rituals of going to the sea, where the speaker sounds confident about the valuable benefits such communal ritual will provide for his sense of human connection with the world around. The poem also "celebrates the sense of generational mutuality" and commends "the value of ordinariness and endorses the beauty of commonplace life" (Chatterjee 266).

In one of his interviews, Larkin ponders over the end of his particular place, over the threat that global modernity and consumerist culture pose to his concept of rural Englishness: "but really one wonders what will be the end of place, one huge dismal wet imbecile Yanked-up slum, half-borrowed vitality (Odeons, and Coca Cola), half

exhausted mummery” (*The Complete Poems: Philip Larkin* 455).⁹ Larkin was referring to the vanishing rural Eden in a contemporary England infiltrated by an American “Yanked-up” modernity that spawned materialism and fostered an obsession with sex and money. For his part, however, Larkin does not mobilize an Anglo-American Modernist discourse of political intervention and social transformation; his main intention of describing the enduring rural qualities of the English place is to reach a compromise with the status quo, some sort of an adjustment and reconciliation with the social reality of the now modernized England and its neighboring cities such as Hull. His solution for the dreariness of postwar England is to “identify himself with the human community, the humdrum, the sordid and the trivial, to love it and praise it, to be part of it” (Chatterjee 336). In many poems, such as “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel,” “The Card-players,” “Show Saturday,” and “To The Sea,” Larkin commemorates the actual experiences of the English community, this commemoration being his source of solace for the Englishman who has already lost the rural values of ‘Old England’ and who is now left vulnerable to the dangers of industrialism and to the threats of a consumerist culture of greed.

Larkin thus does not provide solutions for contemporary deterioration in modern England. What he does instead is teach himself how to come to terms with this postwar cultural disarray. He does not have political alternatives for what Eliot and the other Anglo-American Modernists considered as the dystopia of the twentieth-century, nor does he have political agenda for postwar England. Larkin, John Osborne explains, “begins in the knowledge that all Modernist utopias have been implemented and found to

⁹ Hereafter abbreviated as *CPL*.

be disastrous” (153). His poems, which are neither a blueprint for the age nor a utopian haven for the wretched, do not “line themselves up with one side of binary opposition— utopian versus dystopian, Communist versus Fascist, Christian versus Jews” (Osborne 153). Unlike Larkin, the Modernist utopians, Osborne contends,

addressed the supposed utopias with what they thought root-and-branch solutions: hence the Fascism of Pound, Kunt Hamsen and Pirandello; the Communism of Mayakovsky, Brecht and Hugh MacDiarmid; and the Christian revivalism (accompanied by anti-Semitism) of the later Eliot and the Welsh poet David Jones. These utopian Modernists were seeking to dispel the corrosive relativism of the age with blueprints for a new civilization; they were looking for grand certitudes with which to annul all doubts and indecisions. In Lyotard’s term, they were in search of metanarratives with which to reverse the descent into Babel of micro-discourse. (153)

Larkin already had early examples of some Anglo-American Modernists who evoked the English place in their poetry, but not for purposes of deploring the absent rural English life nor of commemorating the actual experiences of English people. It is true that the places evoked in Anglo-American Modernist poetry are meant to stand for the loss of cultural values, but place in the process is reduced to a mere symbol and thus loses its particularity and distinctness. This stands in sharp contrast to Larkin’s approach to the English places he writes about, their material presence stressed and their significance for the poet made readily evident. Larkin’s “Here,” a poem which describes a train journey to Hull, evokes the particularities of that city and represents in specific details the natural landscape that surrounds the city. In response to a question about the

poem, Larkin said that he “meant it [the poem] as a celebration of here, Hull¹⁰. It’s a fascinating area, not quite like anywhere else” (*CPL* 392) Though some of the sites described are not mentioned by their specific names, yet through the speaker’s celebratory note, we are able to realize the distinctness of the place portrayed and its importance to the speaker. I will discuss this journey poem alongside others in the chapter devoted to Larkin. What I wish to stress though is the fact that Larkin assigns value to his English places like Hull by defining his sense of Englishness in accordance to the rural life qualities which these places used to afford before the onset of urbanism and consumerism.

In Larkin, Hull, England, and Coventry are never reduced to symbols and their rural merits are commended. This is different from what Eliot does to London as a place. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes London “the international and the urban locus of his brand of poetic modernism” (Davis and Jenkins 14). As a place, Eliot’s London, Alexi Davis and Lee Jenkins argue,

is textual rather than temporal or, despite the specificity of the poem’s reference to street names and London landmarks, a geographical phenomenon. Eliot’s London is a series of shifting elisions of time and place, where you may meet Symrna merchants and fifth century BC Greek soldiers who may also be American cowboys. National and temporal boundaries are dissolved by Eliot’s Tardis-poem, his mobile time-machine, as it goes about its business of replacing

¹⁰ In the chapter dedicated to Larkin, I will explain in detail Larkin’s representation of Hull and his personal relationship with it. The receding rural quality of this city, its once coveted rural solitude, is the one value which Larkin commemorates in postwar urbanized England. As I mentioned earlier, this virtue of rural solitude is quintessentially English and defines an Englishness grounded in the rural qualities of the English place and experience.

national definition with intra-national superimposition and of dissolving a strongly particularized London into urban hallucination—Jerusalem Athens Alexandria /Vienna London—and yet all these cities are ‘Unreal.’ For Eliot, the modernist cityscape is a composite ‘Unreal City,’ a description, to paraphrase Wallace Stevens, without a place, a site in which the alienation of the modern urban experience . . . becomes both an analogue and a model for the cultural fragmentation of the modernist era. (14)

Larkin does not do with Hull what Eliot does with London: while in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* the national distinctness of a metropolitan London is replaced with intra-national superimpositions, and the city itself becomes an ‘analogue’ for the cultural degradation of the Western world, in Larkin’s “Here,” Hull remains a distinctly English place with a valued rural English tradition.

Eliot reflects on the modern era through the representation of a London whose particularity is dissolved in a web of cultural and intra-national connections that provide a picture of Western degradation and urban hallucination. Though he does not represent ‘Unreal Cities’ like Eliot, Larkin engages the same questions about modern wretchedness, but through the focus of specific places whose rural qualities are gradually receding in a postwar reality of urbanization and consumerism. The wish to return to a past of English community-based experience is not papered over with a sentimental nostalgia nor with radical nationalist credos. As I argued above, Larkin’s poetic enterprise is one that tries to reach a reconciliation with this new postwar reality. His is a path of adjustment and re-evaluation of a contemporary England, a celebration of the remaining English community merits, and reconciliation with the loss of rural English qualities in the present. Unlike the

Anglo-American Modernists, he is not a prophet of social transformation, nor a rebel against the existing political order. His cities and towns are real, contrary to the depopulated Unreal City of Eliot. He uses the language of the masses to write his poetry and travels across their towns and cities. This has to do with the different understanding of what the poet is. In a postwar climate, the poet was no longer viewed as an elitist hero bent on transforming the existing social and political order; the Anglo-American Modernist labels of redemption had by now fallen off, leaving the poet naked of his privileged elitist status he had once enjoyed.

Seamus Heaney

Similar to Robert Frost and Philip Larkin, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney assigns value and significance to his birthplace—Derry. In most of his poems, especially in his early collections, he writes poetry about Irish rituals that are part and parcel of his personal experience as a child in his locale Derry. Heaney's sense of place differs markedly from his closest poetic predecessor and modernist William Butler Yeats. Just as Larkin's invocation of England differs from that of the modernist and more urban poetry of T.S. Eliot's, and Frost's Derry, New Hampshire, has a different resonance than the modernism of William Carlos Williams' Paterson, so, too, does Heaney's Ireland differ from Yeats'.

To summarize, Yeats was attracted to the mythic aura of the Irish land as such, and he continued throughout his career to reinvent Irish places, believing that Ireland's history is distinctly Irish and replete with lost cultural treasures. As a faithful proponent of Irish nationalism, Yeats had always espoused poetry's engagement with the national,

arguing for an art that is grounded in Irish places.¹¹ The appeal of Irish places had a direct bearing on his own sense of cultural nationalism. As he argued in most of his letters and prose writings, the survival of literature is highly reliant upon its association with the Irish spirit of the place. Sligo, for instance, shaped his sense of place and his fervor for fashioning a national poetry whose main purpose is to define and reinvent a nation. He was deeply committed to the cultural agenda of Irish nationalism, consistently employing poetry to revitalize a lost Irish heritage that would help in the process of identity reclamation.

By contrast with Yeats, Heaney understands that the Romantic ethos of place might not be the best option for an Irish poet. According to Edward Picot, Heaney seems to be recognizing that he is “moving towards a more complex and troubled vision of Irish history than the usual Nationalist Eden-myth” (231). Especially after the publication of *North*, Heaney had started to recognize, Picot comments, “that the Eden-state is a form of stasis and that disruption of the status quo maybe necessary if stagnation is to be avoided” (231). Heaney’s alternative is a local-based poetry that transcends the limitations of Yeats’ vision and offers instead a more stable potential. The local becomes his source for this stability at times of cultural and political ruptures in Northern Ireland in general and in Derry in particular.

As I shall explain in the fifth chapter, Heaney turns to the local to find a collective discourse of a shared history that could eradicate political and religious difference. By doing this, he assigns value to the local qualities of Northern Ireland and understands their immense importance in bringing Catholics and Protestants together as one unified

¹¹ See Yeats’ “The Celtic Element in Literature” 266-276.

group of Irish people who have a shared local heritage. This shows Heaney's difference from the Anglo-American Modernists who diminished the importance of their urban places by making them stand as symbols for transcultural degradation. Like Frost and his New Hampshire, Heaney views Northern Ireland as a valuable region that could accommodate religious and political difference. Similar to Larkin, he confronts the political Irish reality without turning into a poet of blood and land or into a propagandist of radical nationalism.

Heaney assigns his local poetry the responsibility of addressing the divided sensibilities of the nation that had for long been shackled to chains of political division between Catholics and Protestants. With regards to this, Heaney stresses the fact that the Irish writer should always be "responsive to the cultural milieu of his place." (Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 5). To Heaney, Irish local places such as his locale Derry resonate with a local history that reaches beyond its contemporary political and religious affiliations. As he contends, imagination can help us reach this local resonance—a resonance that extends beyond the political and the religious manifestations of place. By imagination, he simply means the deliberate recollection of a shared local meaning of home which people of the same racial origin can summon up from their collective cultural memory. With disregard to one's "creed or politics," and with disregard to "what culture and subculture may have colored one's individual sensibilities," the "imagination assents to the stimulus of the names" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 132). "It is this feeling," Heaney continues,

assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a

shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savored literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 132)

Of Politics and Place: The Sense and Value of Local Place

What Heaney once said about his fellow Irish poet's sense of place—John Montague—can also be applied to him. Just like Montague's, Heaney's local sense of place “admits a hope for the evolution of a political order, one tolerant of difference and capable of metamorphoses within all the multivalent possibilities of Irishness, Britishness, Europeanness, planetariness, and creatureliness, whatever” (Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 199-200). This sense of place recognizes cultural diversity and allows for the inclusion of racial/ethnic strains that reach beyond contemporary political orders of North and South.

All in all, Heaney aspires for a reconciliation of some sort between the varied manifestations of cultural identities in the Irish *region*, himself admitting that his cultural identity as a Northern Irishman “was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances” (Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 202). Heaney has always re-imagined the Irish local place (Northern Ireland and Derry as well) in terms of its cultural richness and apolitical geography. For him, the local becomes a source of future nourishment, both spiritual and aesthetic. In his poetry, Heaney re-invents his local place Derry and assigns himself the responsibility of re-imagining its history, culture, and geography, fashioning a place-based, rather than a place-bound, poetry that is concerned more with personal connections to the land than with its political dimensions. As the

speaker of his poem “Poem” says, one goal of writing poetry is to “arrange the world” with “new limits” (*Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* 13).¹²

Heaney’s “Personal Helicon,” for instance, spells out terms of relationship with Derry in specific and with the local Irish place in general, sketching out a comparison between the speaker’s earlier and later modes of attachment to place. As a child, the speaker was a lover of wells, and “old pumps with buckets and windlasses,” always admiring the “dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells/ of waterweed, fungus, and dank moss” (*OG* 14). Listening to the echoes of his own voice down the well, he would feel excited about the “clean new music” coming from the deep bottom of the old wells. Dragging out “long roots from the soft mulch” and watching rats slapping “across my reflection” in water (*OG* 14), the speaker credits the responsiveness of the land through these images that reflect his deep-rooted connection. No one could “keep” him from frequenting these wells, and he would especially admire the one well “with a rotted board top” (*OG* 14). As an adult, it has now become “beneath all adult dignity” to “finger slime” and “to pry into roots” (*OG* 14). Instead, the speaker is bent on rhyming “To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (*OG* 14). Once a “big-eyed Narcissus” fingering “slime” and now an adult poet rhyming to “set the darkness echoing,” Heaney defines his poetry against a personal connection to the Irish local place, to its lost local treasure and old objects.

In his “The Sense of Place,” Heaney demonstrates yet another value of the Irish local place. The marriage between the legendary and the local, Heaney argues, is prevalent in the history of the names of Irish local places. In this essay, he alludes to a

¹² I am using Seamus Heaney’s *Opened Ground* for most of the poems I cite here and elsewhere. Hereafter abbreviated as *OG*.

famous Irish legend which must have been very popular among the people due to the fact that Irish was the *lingua franca* back then. Heaney seems to suggest that the marginalization of Irish as the *lingua franca* of Ireland is one reason why such legends tend to recede from the Irish collective memory.¹³ A full reading of local names cannot be possible unless we recover the Gaelic history of the place, its mythological roots. Fleshing out the place name, its mythological, etymological, and local origins inspires an informed understanding of the place and thus strengthens the bonds of one's local attachment.

To Elmer Andrews, Heaney's deep-seated interest in the local is not simply a poetic choice but rather a feeling conditioned by a postmodern erosion of rootedness and delocalization. In his *Writing Home*, Andrews contends that acts of mobilizing the local in contemporary Irish poetry can be seen as postmodern "strategies of resistance against the potentially leveling, homogenizing or banalising effects of global placelessness" (284), implying that Heaney's—and his fellow Irish poets'—consistent centralization of the self within the local is an attempt to counter this postmodern narrative of deracination. But as I shall argue in the fifth chapter of this dissertation, this centralization within the local, rather than being symptomatic of a strategic resistance to contemporary global threats of rootlessness, is a manifestation of Heaney's non-ideological commitment to an intercultural definition of place that is open to otherness, admits of racial difference, and resonates globally in a context of tolerance and peace. As

¹³Heaney briefly recounts the story of Cuchullain's slaying his brother Ferdiat at Ardee, a place which means in Irish Ferdiat's Ford (the murder took place at a ford in the River Fane). The local place and its Gaelic-related legend are part and parcel of the meaning of place. The place name, Ardee, then, weaves together the local (the name of the town in Co.Louth) and the legendary, the mythological story of Cuchullain and Ferdiat. See Heaney's *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*.

I shall show, and contrary to what critics like Andrews proposes, the local in Heaney is more than a strategic medium of resistance. It is rather a cultural substance which Heaney deems foundational not only for his sense of Irishness but also for his career as an Irish poet writing a local-based poetry for a global audience of different cultural backgrounds.

For Heaney and some of his contemporary Irish fellow poets,¹⁴ local places are more than a physical geography of their own, and local poetry as such, Heaney argues, can create a “counter-reality,” one that “has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual” and because it has “a redressing effect [which] comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation for a potential” (*The Redress of Poetry* 3-4). This conceptualization of local poetry as a source of redress and a revelatory potential is the product of Heaney’s direct engagement with the political actualities of Northern Ireland as a place burdened by a long history of ideological and religious conflict. Heaney’s theorization is directly linked to the political history of Northern Ireland as a region involved in decades of dissension and strife. Poetry as salvation and revelation engage an Anglo-American Modernist conception of art as a tool of political and social transformation. However, what Heaney does is yet assign a greater value to the Irish locale which he feels he has the moral imperative to represent and fashion more tolerant and inclusive social and political orders for—even if these orders are imagined ones.

¹⁴The Irish poet John Montague conceives of the Irish landscape as “a manuscript” which people can no longer read. Heaney must have found Montague’s conception of place appealing and informative, hence his poetic metaphor of digging deep into the layers of land. Heaney’s famous poem “Digging” is inspired by Montague’s conceptualization of place as a manuscript which requires a conscious learning on one’s part to be able to truly understand. In his poetry, Heaney represents this act of digging as an informative search for a true knowledge of place.

Heaney has always been attracted to the work of other regional writers from the US, Britain, and Northern Ireland, including Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Thomas Hardy, William Wordsworth, John Hewitt, and Patrick Kavanagh. His sense of place as culture rather than as an ideology thus took shape against the influence of many place-based writers, whose poetry helped him understand the significance and value of place. Heaney, just like Frost and Larkin, fashions poetics of his own through assigning significance to the cultural values of his Irish locale Derry in particular and of Northern Ireland in general.

CHAPTER III

ROBERT FROST'S PLACE-BASED VERNACULARISM

In this chapter, I contend that Robert Frost's place-based vernacularism is rooted in the democratic and egalitarian tradition of the American vernacular. Frost's egalitarian socially committed aesthetic is best exemplified through his empathic attitude towards the rural New England community and through his direct association with the vernacular culture of the place. By this token, the vernacular in Frost refers not only to the American idiom used in a specific region but also to an essentially American cultural imprint, which goes beyond matters of language to include the rural traditions and values of New England.

As Leo Marx argues in his seminal essay the "Vernacular Tradition in American Literature," the vernacular affirms "an egalitarian faith" and is "radical" since it "sweeps away received notions of class and status" (8).¹⁵ Marx does not discuss Frost in this essay, though Frost's vernacularism, as I argue, reflects this egalitarian mindset which Marx detects in the works of American authors, such as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. In his "Frost as A New England Poet," Lawrence Buell traces Frost's New England vernacularism to major poetic predecessors such as William Cullen Bryant and Edwin Arlington Robinson. Placed among major New England American authors, Frost according to Buell is seen as establishing affinities with a New England tradition that was grounded in egalitarianism *à la* John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Frost's place-based vernacularism shows affinity not only with

¹⁵ The essay is included in Leo Marx's important contribution *Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United State* (1988). The essay was first presented as a lecture on April, 25, 1957, at the University of Mainz, Germany

an egalitarian American tradition but also with the non-elitist aesthetic and political climate of the thirties.

By the 1930s, it became an “aesthetic as well as a political imperative” to erase “the space between social others—the middle class from the poor and working class, Jews and the Gentiles, blacks and whites from each other” (Rabinowitz 267). Frost’s career was concomitant with this tolerant environment of the thirties, and even more so he had already embraced the democratic initiatives of aesthetic and political change in American aesthetics and cultural politics. In her *Gospel of Beauty in the Progressive Era: Reforming American Verse and Values* (2011), Lisa Szeffel argues that during the Progressive Era there was a radical transformation of American values and culture, empathy towards people of all social castes by then becoming the basis for “large scale political and social change” (46). The call for a democratic American verse was concomitant with the emergence of Progressive politics in the US. The proponents of Progressivism were mainly concerned with effecting social and political transformations in the country, taking steps and undertaking measures to reform all aspects of American society and life. Szeffel argues that to the progressive poets, “reading and writing verse was not merely a marginal treat or an esoteric ideal but a foundational tenet, offering pleasure, insight, and empathy, and was crucial to the discernment of value, meaning, and individual freedom” (46). During this time, poetry was no longer an escape from life but rather an encounter with its dramatic changes and transitions, especially in the “wake of major shifts occurring in modern American thought and practice” (Szeffel 46).

Even more so, some progressive poets and reformers were actively engaged in this democratic climate of helping “victims of industrialization and capitalism” through

their revolt against “free-market individualism of Lock, Smith, and Mill which they saw as unduly harsh and wrongheaded” (Szeffel 46). All in all, “sympathy for the poor, the creation of practical tools for uplift, and the strengthening of social cohesion,” the emergence of egalitarian calls “for nation’s diversity of races and ideals, the “advances in science and liberal thought,” the spread of “movements toward social democracy,” and most importantly, the strong belief that poetry can contribute to the formation of American values—these all defined the general spirit of American politics and culture in the early decades of the twentieth-century (Szeffel 46-201).

Frost’s career was then informed by the political and social environment in the twenties, and his writing about the ills of industrial capitalism and its negative impact on the rural economy and people of New England identifies a corresponding egalitarian concern for the underprivileged American rural community and their vernacular culture. Inherent in this egalitarianism towards the socially inferior is Frost’s understanding of the value of this receding vernacular American culture. Frost’s place-based vernacularism is an expression of this democratic and egalitarian sensibility which emerged in the early decades of the twentieth-century and was the result of a radical transformation of American politics and culture. Besides, the very use of the vernacular speaks for Frost’s essential difference from the aesthetic conservatisms of the time. Frost’s individualism, his disregard for what was the norm, sets his poetics apart from the Anglo-American Modernists’ elitist urbanism and their highbrow diction. A significant part of Frost’s “revolution [was] to restore human subjectivity to the center of aesthetic experience” (Hoffman 27), but he also did this through allowing the fundamentally rural experiences of New England community to be the core substance of this egalitarian and

individualistic aestheticism of his. Crucial to this egalitarian individualism is also the making of the rural place New England (with all its human experiences) the center of his poetic and personal experience.

In what follows, I show how Frost's egalitarian socially committed aesthetic is best exemplified through his empathic attitude towards the rural New England community and through his direct association with the vernacular culture of the place. I argue against the two views—those of Justin Replogle's and Roland's Bieganowski's—that Frost's vernacular experiments are simply a matter of preference and that his place-based poetics are basically a personal expression of attachment to the land. Central to this argument is the fact that Frost's place-based vernacularism establishes a social direction towards other people, which makes wanting the view that the relationship between Frost and place is purely personal.

To attribute Frost's use of this place-based vernacularism to a mere personal preference on the part of the poet is to downplay the cultural content and the values attached to this American distinct mode of speech. In his "Vernacular Poetry: Frost to Frank O'Hara," Replogle states that Frost "wanted to write talk not for social or ethical reasons;" Frost, as Replogle claims, "*liked*" it (his emphasis) and "was not trying to get close to the common man or make pop art" (142). For Replogle, the vernacular was "one kind of language game" and an "opposite sort of phonology" which flourished in isolation from the imagist and post-Symbolist "habits" of High Modernist poets such as, Ezra Pound T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams (140-141). Replogle states that Frost, W.H. Auden, and Marianne Moore were "the three first-rate writers," who "played" this vernacular phonology so often (140).

The only explanation which Replogle has for Frost's inclination towards vernacularism is the latter's conviction that there was "no game more important" than the "game of vernacular poetry" (153). Though he explains in detail the technicalities of Frost's vernacularism, he does not clarify why this *game* was important to the poet in the first place. Replogle wants to suggest that Frost's theory of sound of sense and its utilization of vernacular voices was fashionable and temporarily predicated upon a short-lived interest in the spoken language of the people at Derry in New England. Frost's stay at his Derry farm "affected his speech" and was "no doubt," Replogle claims, the reason why he "doted on the sound of sense" (145). Frost's "farm-idiom vernacular," according to Replogle, was "partly a role," which the poet played well and learned from former poets such as William Shakespeare, John Donne, Longfellow, and Ralph Emerson (145). These poets, however, were not as "doted" on the vernacular as Frost was; unlike his antecedents and his contemporaries as well, Frost made the vernacular the "basic idiom of his poetry" (148). As far as Replogle's argument goes, Frost was the "best theorist" and practitioner of the sound of sense by virtue of his excessive use of vernacular strong voices in his poems: "when he's [Frost] got his sound of sense going well, nobody is better at it" (145).

Though Replogle acknowledges Frost's interest in vernacularism and discusses its technical aspects, he does not further explain as to why the tones of this spoken language mattered to the poet. Frost's stay at Derry, however, affected not only his speech but also his personal awareness of the place as conduit of rural American values and as an encounter with a cherished regional American culture. His vernacularism though is not simply an incidental preference; it is a place-based vision inspired by a desire to

democratize the American lyric and to build bridges of contact between common man and art. Frost chose the spoken idiom of New England not simply because he *liked* it, as Replogle claims; his choice, rather, was a willful commitment to place and what it stands for. Replogle does not highlight the value of Derry as a place contributing to the poet's experiments with the Yankee diction. Frost's vernacularism is an act of socialization and a national statement professing a deep affinity between the poet and his American place and American people of all classes. This egalitarian, place-oriented vision is basically made the foundation for a democratic conception of art divorced from the elite sentiments entertained by most Anglo-American Modernists. Frost did not have contempt for one class over and above another but held rather to the view that individuals matter more than the class to which they belong. Frost was able to develop his theory of sound of sense through frequent conversations with the residents of Derry, socially bonding with them and listening to their stories. These conversations would later on become the basis for a theory of poetry that commits itself to the American place and to the American people and their vernacular voices.

Frost's commitment to place was a translation of the national calls for a poetry rooted in the American land and written in the American tongue. Frost's conception of what poetry should be like appeals to the rough diction of the American place—a place which inspires trust in the poet to move beyond an upper-class European aestheticism. The highbrow diction is dismissed in favor of a regional tongue that reflects the national spirit of the place and its people of different cultural roots. As I mentioned earlier, Frost responds to this cultural heterogeneity in his own terms, revealing the power of the American vernacular and mobilizing a sensibility of tolerance towards the Derry people

who were part of a larger cultural matrix of New England. That being so, Frost acknowledges not only the importance of the vernacular but also the experience itself. His vernacularism is neither a game nor simply a role acted out for the purposes of dabbling with Yankee phonology. Frost's aesthetic imperative was consistent with an urge to break free from an upper-class English poetics and to attend instead to the cultural and social complexity of a democratic nation whose American idiom speaks for, and about, the American people.

Restating D.H. Lawrence's thesis on the uniqueness of American literature and its rootedness in the American place, Ronald Bieganowski shares Lawrence's sentiment pertaining to this one "unique" and "fundamental characteristic of American literature"—"spirit of place" (29). According to Bieganowski, Lawrence "sees the spirit of place which inspires the young American literature as emerging from the new national experience" (29). For Lawrence, Bieganowski explains, "the escape from Europe, the beginning on unbroken ground, the submission to the virgin land, and the confluence of cultures, and democracy give classic American literature its shape, its spirit" (29). Bieganowski shares these specific sentiments articulated in Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, conceiving of the modern poet Frost as "an embodiment of the spirit of New England" (29). In his "Sense of Place and Religious Consciousness," Bieganowski sees Frost's sense of place as a continuation of nineteenth-century American aesthetic consciousness and its commitment to the American land. Bieganowski though thinks that Frost's sense of place highly reveals his "religious consciousness":

Beyond Frost's use of poetic tradition, his characteristic point of vantage, and his wanderings, Frost's sense of place represents the workings of his spirit within his poetry. While the nation or a state, a farm with its terrain, or the ground itself shape his poetry and offer a perspective, place also locates his religious sense.

The dimensions, limitations, specific qualities of a brook or spring or pasture field become the means by which he learns of his spiritual life. (29-30)

For Bieganowski, place in Frost is the medium by which the poet "test his doubts, fears, and affirmations" (30). Bieganowski contends that place nourishes the poet's quibbling about existence, human soul, belief, and God himself. Frost, as Bieganowski thinks, explores these spiritual subjects about human existence with relation to a particular locality—Derry. Bieganowski claims that Frost learns to "overcome his feelings of dislocation (separation from the Heavens) by attending to a particular locale" and by "uncovering the dimensions of this earthly realm" (35). The places in Frost represent "major landmarks on his spiritual journey," a journey from the "country" to "the spiritual realms" (44). The natural scenery and the rustic life in New England, Bieganowski says, "refreshes" the poet's spirit, thus redeeming that sense of spiritual loss fostered by the fall from the heavenly realm (35). For Bieganowski, place is a spirit-nourishing realm which helps the poet to "expand his religious consciousness" and to "firmly connect himself to nature," the very realm of the spirit (45). As far as Bieganowski's argument goes, place inspires a spiritual vision on the part of the poet whose connection to the inhabitants of this place is as equally important as his connection to the place itself: "While Frost surveys the land and the people of New England, his sense of place matures into a religious consciousness" (44).

Frost is thus as much tied to the land as he is to its people whose Yankee diction and rural life are part and parcel of the whole spiritual vision of the place. Bieganowski concludes that Frost's spiritual vision reveals "an awareness of the lasting vitality" of the place and shows how important the rural dimension of this place is for poetry (45). In spite of the diminishing state of the rural at the inception of a modern industrial order, Frost, Bieganowski seems to imply, still appealed to the rural American place as a source of spiritual nourishment and as a means to reconnect with the socially marginalized people in New England. Bieganowski cites Frost saying that:

Poetry is very, very rural—rustic. It stands as a reminder of a rural life—as a resource, as a recourse. It might be taken as a symbol of man, taking its rise from individuality and seclusion—written for the person that writes and then going out into its social appeal and use. (qtd. in Bieganowski 44)

Frost was after all concerned with the social appeal of a poetry rooted in the actualities of the American rural place. For poetry to be socially appealing, it has to have to recourse to the commonalities of audience and their daily concerns. Frost's poetry reaches out for a people struggling with a new economic order, which rendered their rural values culturally outmoded.

Contrary to the European-oriented modernism, Frost's democratic modernism never excluded the socially underprivileged and their vernacular tongue from its parameters; Frost revolutionized his poetry through a direct engagement with the people and their vernacular tones. For Frost, poetry was not a solipsistic practice but rather an act of involvement with the people of all classes. Bieganowski credits Frost's predilection towards the rural and suggests that the rural in Frost's poetry "offers a stance, a direction

toward other people and towards one's self" (44). Bieganowski's main purpose is to explain how Frost's immersion in the rural aspects of place (New England) expands the poet's religious consciousness and redeems his sense of exile from the realms of spirit. However, Bieganowski does not further elaborate on the connection which Frost creates between poetry and the people, nor does he explain how the rural serves as a direction toward other people.

As I argued above, Frost's place-based vision mobilizes an aesthetic of egalitarianism through the use of a lowbrow diction and the acknowledgement of a vanishing rural culture in New England. Bieganowski explains Frost's place-based spiritual vision in terms of the latter's personal loss and sense of dislocation. As far as Bieganowski's argument goes, place is *the means* by which the poet is spiritually redeemed. New England, however, is more than a vehicle of spiritual redemption; it is a place that dramatizes the ensuing conflict of a people surviving a new social and political phase. Frost's poems in *North of Boston* reveal more than a personal loss; reading these poems, one realizes that loss is a collective ordeal experienced by the inhabitants of New England. As Bieganowski points out, Frost's investment in the rural serves as a direction towards other people, but he explains this direction in terms of the poet's *personal* spiritual outlook as arising from an awareness of the religious aura of specific objects such as a brook, a spring or a pasture field. That being said, I argue that this use of a place-based vernacular is in itself a *social direction* for poetry, since the vernacular acknowledges the culture of a people who use this Yankee tongue and who are exposed to new social and economic orders. In its reliance upon the regional place and the vernacular tones used by New England citizens, Frost's poetry reaches beyond the elitist

solipsism of Anglo-American Modernism and reconnects with the lowbrow culture of America.

The experimentation with the vernacular helps Frost to change the direction of Anglo-American Modernist poetry that dismissed the lowbrow as being inimical to the high industry of art. His individualism as based upon the use of vernacularism serves as a social direction for an elitist Anglo-American Modernist poetry which looked down upon the rural values that people still cherished in the modern era. For Frost, the vernacularization of the lyric is a diversion from the highbrow elitist tendencies of Anglo-American Modernism and an experimental revolution not only against the standard English diction used in poetry but also against the urge to appeal only to the educated elite in so much modernist poetry.

It is interesting how Frost's vernacularism reveals an awareness of class prejudice and of aesthetic elitism even at the level of the sentence. In a letter to Sidney Cox, dated December 1914, Frost conceives of his sound of sense, his use of American vernacular, as an "assault" on the "prejudice" of the "sentence as a grammatical cluster of words." (qtd. in Barry 67). In the same letter, he differentiates between the "grammatical sentence" and the "vital sentence" (qtd. in Barry 67). For him, "the grammatical sentence is merely accessory to the other and chiefly valuable as furnishing a clue to the other" (qtd. in Barry 67). With its intonations and sounds, the vital sentence, which shows on page the tones of the spoken line, can say all that which the grammatical sentence can usually convey through words only. Meaning can be conveyed more vitally through the use of sentence sounds, which depend mainly on the vernacular tones of the spoken idiom. In this letter, Frost shows a great interest in his experiments with the vernacular

and argues against the “dreary” and “professorial” grammatical sentences which are often used in prose (qtd. in Barry 67). As a champion of an “audible” spoken idiom, Frost encourages Sidney Cox (then a young writer, friend, and a great admirer of Robert Frost) to use “anything you please,” stating the need to “write in accents we hear” (qtd. in Barry 68). “We value the seeing eye already,” Frost claims, and for him it is time “we said something about the hearing ear—the ear that calls up vivid sentence forms” (qtd. in Barry 68). It is the sentence’s vitality and audible quality, rather than its visual vividness, which Frost embodies in his vernacular sentence forms. This aesthetic individualism was in reaction to those people who dictated writing in a “special language,” that dreary and grammatical one which follows the logic of syntax (qtd. in Barry 68). The “great fight of any poet,” Frost adds,

is against the people who want to write in a special language that has gradually separated from spoken language by this “making process.” His pleasure must always be to make his own words as he goes and never to depend for effect on words already made even if they be his own. (qtd. in Barry 68)

For Frost, the spoken language is a rich source of non-familiar words, words that did not become banal due to “common usage” (qtd. in Barry 68). In the making process, (and by that Frost means the process of writing down a poem and choosing words) the poet should have recourse to “unmade words” and avoid the “familiar made ones that everybody exclaims Poetry” (qtd. in Barry 68). For a better effect, the poet should make his own words and avoid the common ones used in previously written poetry. The vernacular is Frost’s source of unmade words, ones that reconnect poetry with the spoken language of a specific place. Rebelling against the usage of common *poetic* words and

speaking out in favor of a vernacular diction and of a vital audible poetry, Frost maps out a demotic track for a poetry that is susceptible to the tones and sentiments of the American people. This regard for the culturally diverse nation of American people and their spoken tongue attests to the democratic, tolerant sensibility which Frost illustrates through his vernacularizing of the lyric.

As this letter to Sidney Cox implies, Frost shows great concern over the separation between culture and poetry. He speaks out against this special language which left poetry dreary and socially and culturally irresponsible. The vernacularization of the lyric bridges the gap between a detached Anglo-American Modernist poetry with specialized lingo and an American society experiencing new political and cultural waves. It is of no coincidence that Frost's aesthetically inclusive vision of tolerance towards the common people developed in a democratic setting in the U.S. in the 1930's and onwards. By writing about farmers and rural places, Frost shows concern for an American audience struggling with diminishing and emerging values in the American society in the early decades of twentieth-century. This engagement is established through a vernacularism that captures the essence of the American place and responds to a demotic urge to make the American people (their places, tones, values, and struggles) a significant part of an American modern aesthetic. In this context, Frost's vernacularism was neither a phonological game nor a role acted out for personal pleasure; it was not either simply the means through which he spiritually reconnected with the natural elements of New England. This place-based vernacularism is social and cultural in orientation, expressing sentiments of tolerance towards, and appreciation of, a regional culture.

Robert Frost's Socially Committed Egalitarianism

First published in *A Boy's Will* (1913), "The Vantage Point" most fitfully conveys the poet's gradual cultivation of this socially committed egalitarianism. First entitled the "Choice of Society," this poem "emphasizes the preference," Lea Newman explains, "for the natural world over the social entanglements of the town" (20). This dichotomy between the natural and the social was an early concern for a poet who was beginning to show a preference for seclusion and an avoidance of social engagement. This poem was written in 1900, around the time when Frost had already moved to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. Similar to the thirty-two poems in the volume, this poem describes the conflicting allegiances of social involvement and personal seclusion. According to Newman, Frost during this time had "little contact with the people in the village—his interests focused instead on the farm and his family" (20). In a conversation with one of his friends, Frost said that these poems represent his withdrawal "into the wilderness" (qtd. in Parini 119).

However, the poem shows that the persona seeks "mankind" when he feels "tired of trees," suggesting that he is not completely in favor of a permanent retreat (*CP* 26). According to Jay Parini, this poem is a turning point for the poet since it "acknowledges a reacquaintance with the social world" (120). The state of seclusion which he prefers over social intercourse (in his first poem "Into My Own") is reconsidered as he was about to realize that this reacquaintance would serve not only a valuable social purpose but also an aesthetic one.

It is these acts of socialization with the inhabitants of Derry that would help Frost to develop his interest in the spoken idiom of the place. As a landscape, Derry rekindled

his interest in the people, their customs, values, lives, and spoken tongue. Ironically, the persona learns how to be socially engaged through his observing the natural aspects of the place. Smelling “the earth” and the “bruised plant” (*CP* 26), the speaker then looks into the “crater of the ants” (*CP* 26), whose collective activities of looking for food must have reminded the speaker of the importance of the social and the value of building up relationships with the community where he resides. He learns of the social through his acts of retreat into nature which functions as a reminder of the significance of social communication. Even “far off the homes of men,” the speaker can still see the “graves of men on an opposing hell,” signaling the persisting presence of people in nature—even if these people are dead (*CP* 26).

“The Vantage Point” is Frost’s point of access, as it were, through which he weighs his options and carves out a socially egalitarian direction for his poetry. As Frost once said, Derry was “the terrain of my poetry” and “the core of all my writing” (qtd. in Newman 20). In these years of withdrawal, Frost cultivated tolerance towards the people of New England, equating knowledge about the rural with the “understanding” of the people: “Another reason for being versed in country things is for the understanding of people. I do not think that any one understands people unless he had learned from country life that lots of people are smarter than they look” (qtd. in Richardson xxxi). Frost’s withdrawal into the country helped him to reevaluate public conceptions not only about the virtues of rural life but also about the character of the farmer. As Maria Farland argues, Frost was reacting against public misconceptions about agrarian inferiority in terms of character and intellect, which is true since he in more than one respect opposes elitist urban attitude towards rural America in general and towards rural New England in

particular. During the early decades of the twentieth-century, there appeared scientific and sociological studies that equated agrarianism with “degeneracy” (906).¹⁶ Frost’s aesthetic treatment of agrarianism subverts the then contemporary discourse on the degeneracy of the rural mind and character, giving the reader instead, Farland argues, “sophisticated poetic presentations of a fully realized agrarian mental astuteness, with the verbal expression to match” (917).

In Frost’s second book, *North of Boston*, the characters, Farland contends, “offer themselves as the speaking embodiment of an agrarian society that is neither degraded nor deficient, but alive with cultivation, in culture as in nature” (917). Frost’s aesthetic treatments of the American rural thus serve as a counter-narrative, Farland maintains, for the essentialist scientific and sociological discourses that ascribed “rural decline” in New England to “biological and behavioral” factors (930). At the inception of a new modern, technological, urban phase in America, the farmer was viewed, Farland comments, as a “remnant of a retrograde agrarian past, immune to modernity’s advances in economic, technology, and education” (911). Refusing to change his old agrarian habits of farming, the farmer remained “tethered,” Farland explains, “to rituals, traditions, and habits seen as increasingly outmoded and outside the culture’s mainstream” (911). The introduction of modern farming techniques was met with “skepticism” in some “farming

¹⁶In her “Modernist Versions of Pastoral: Poetic Inspiration, Scientific Expertise, and the Degenerate Farmer” (2007), Maria Farland mentions examples of scientific and social scholarship that equated backwardness with the agrarian: Henry Goddard’s *The Kallilak Family: A Study of the Hereditary of Feeble-mindedness* (1912), Arthur Estabrook’s *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics*, Florence and Danielson and Charles Davenport’s *The Hill Folk: Report on a Rural Community of Hereditary Defectives* (1912). In her study, Farland shows how Robert Frost’s “Fairy Tales of Farming” and his poems in *North of Boston* (she discusses “The Death of the Hired Man” in specific) engage with these scientific narratives only to subvert them and to “valorize agrarian capacities and creativity” (917).

communities” which rejected, Farland mentions, “technologies” such as “rural electrification” and also “educational reform” (911). Rural decline in the American region was precipitated by “the diminishing number of laborers for hire,” since many of these laborers, Farland comments, rushed to the urban centers to look for jobs (915-916). The “resulting shortage of labor” and the already existing state of impoverishment in the region negatively contributed, Farland points out, to the state of rural decline (915-916).

According to Farland, the regional and the scientific literature also attributed the causes of this state of rural degeneration to what they describe as the “irrational,” “isolated,” and “barbaric” agrarian mindset (914). As Farland mentions, rural decline in New England was explained by the scientific literature then as a condition “stemming as much from physiological as economic or social factors” (930). These studies negatively contributed to the emergence of an “essentialist” view with regards to the role which “rural identity” played in this scenario of rural degeneration (930). As Farland explains, “rural America” was described as a “biological and behavioral disposition, whose origins were not cultural or environmental” but (as James Agee’s essentialist remark shows and which Farland quotes) “psychological, somatic, traditional, perhaps glandular” (930). In *North of Boston*, Frost, Farland argues, challenges this scientific essentialism by valorizing “the rural mind” and by representing it as “alive with creativity and artistry” (916).

Farland’s main critical endeavor is to explain how the Modernist pastoral serves as a valorizing “counter-discourse” to the scientific narrative and “rural sociology” that flourished with the advance of the modern technological phase in regional America (917). Although I am not concerned with the pastoral, I do find that what Farland has to

say applies as well to Frost's interest in the sociology of rural New England. According to Farland, the modernist pastoral modes "arose to redefine our conception of American agrarian life" (930). These modes, Farland adds,

were both more inclusive—the farmers seen in modernist pastoral are immigrants, blacks, and the working poor—and more skeptical toward professional scientific expertise. They departed from pastoral's characteristic elision of class differences and conflicts, instead viewing the rural-urban divide as a defining social division through which other forms of alterity—male-female, savage/civilized, black/white—could be mapped and explored (930).¹⁷

Farland engages with Frost's *North of Boston* in the context of this urban-rural divide in regional America in the early decades of the twentieth-century. As I argued earlier, Frost's aesthetic exploration of difference was in effect a translation of the democratic sentiments that called for a national poetry that should speak for all Americans. His exploration of what Farland calls alterity embodies the principles of the democratic American experiment and values people of all social castes. Though Farland does not address Frost's engagement with the rural from this perspective, her insights on the poet's elevation and reevaluation of American rurality are very fruitful to the overall discussion of Frost's egalitarian attitude towards the working class in New England.

¹⁷ In her essay, Maria Farland discusses Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Jane Toomer as three pioneers of the Modernist pastoral which "elevates" the rural to a "subject of literary importance" (911). This elevation takes place "not through a narrative of utopia or commentary on loss, but through a reevaluation of rural milieu in decline and crisis" (911). From this perspective, Farland contends that the modernist pastoral moves beyond the nostalgic sentiments of pastoral poetry and challenges instead the essentialist narrative against rural identity.

In “Mending Wall,” for instance, Frost engages with alterity in an attempt to subvert the essentialist perceptions of the rural identity in New England. For Farland, Frost does this through showing us that the farmer is “no slave to tradition” and that he “possesses inventiveness almost magical” (917). Even though the activity of mending the walls is a tradition which the farmer is not completely willing to revoke, the poem does not explain the terms of this adherence which we as readers should understand from the perspective of the farmer himself. Farland explains how science and rural sociology at the time were lacking in adequate knowledge of rural life and traditional ways of agriculture, hence the misconceptions and misrepresentations of the agrarian culture. Since some of the rural folks were skeptical of modern agriculture, their skepticism and unwillingness to embrace science-oriented agricultural reforms made them an easy target for accusations of irrationality and primitiveness. The reformers knew very little about the valued relationship between the farmer and his piece of land. In her essay, Farland quotes Louis Mertins who shows in his book on Frost the importance of the land to the farmer: “On the farm one thinks clearly. There is time for ripened thought in a garden, in a hayfield. Out in the meadow, or the woods, or the orchard, there is nothing to distract” (qtd. in Farland 915).

As Mertins suggests, the farmer used to conceive of his land or orchard as a place for meditation. Physical labor as an incentive for meditation and rumination alludes not only to the significance of manual labor as such but also to the place (the orchards or the meadows or the farms) where this meditation takes place. In “Mending Wall,” the farmer shows great concern for preserving the intactness of the fence separating his orchard from that of the speaker’s, who seems skeptical of the whole activity. However, the neighbor is

insistent on repairing the fence, pledging allegiance to the old saying “Good fences make good neighbors.” What the poem demonstrates is this appreciation for the physical labor involved in the process of fixing. The inventiveness and magical powers which Farland commends as part of the creative process of rural labor consistently recreate themselves in the representation of the activity of repair:

To each the boulders that have fallen to each

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls

We have to use a spell to make them balance. (*CP* 39)

It is true that Frost is paying tribute to this vernacular culture of mending walls, but he also means to draw our attention to the essentialism involved in the representation of farmers whose observance of their regional rituals was looked down upon with condescension and ridicule. As Farland shows, the speaker’s neighbor fulfills the representation of the isolated, barbaric rural individual, hence the persona’s use of the label “old-stone savage” (*CP* 40). Farland does not consider the speaker’s biased perspective, which I think is very important to point out since this bias informs his reaction not only to the neighbor but also to the whole vernacular culture of repairing walls. As much as Frost acknowledges the vernacular culture of New England, including the repairing of fences, he disavows the burgeoning prejudice against it.

In “Mending Wall,” the speaker sounds scornful of the whole process of rebuilding the fence which for him does not serve a practical purpose at all: he makes the observations that his “apple trees will never get across” and “eat the cones under” the neighbor’s “pines” (*CP* 39). As playful as this observation might sound, it still betrays a tinge of condescension towards what constitutes a valued practice in the vernacular

culture of New England. According to Douglas Wilson, such observation betrays even a seeming lack of full knowledge of the concept of “boundary” which rural people had always embraced in their neighborly relations (“The Other Side of the Wall” 69). For the neighbor in “Mending Wall,” as much as for all country people in New England at the time, a boundary, Wilson comments, was an “acknowledgement of responsibility and a token of respect” (69). For country people, boundaries were, “a guarantee against dispute,” and, Wilson comments, “a hedge against uncertainty” (69). Boundaries were part of the vernacular culture of the people at New England, and neighborly relationships relied heavily upon the maintaining of these boundaries.

According to Wilson, readers have always approached the poem with disregard to the neighbor’s rural background. Being mostly “city dwellers,” readers and critics viewed the poem, from what Wilson calls, “an unmistakably urban perspective” (69). Wilson introduces his discussion of the poem by bringing into prominence the fact that we are all “creatures of our own experience” (65), arguing for a critical stance that should take into consideration the neighbor’s experience as a country farmer living in a rural New England. As city dwellers, commentators were not able to relate to the proposition of maintaining boundaries between two farms or orchards since their judgment is informed by a totally different experience—urban. The reading of this poem, Wilson contends, should “appeal to experience” so that we as readers can fully understand the neighbor’s proposition that “Good fences make good neighbors” (68). Wilson points out the fact that Frost himself was a farmer and lived for a considerable amount of time in Derry, New Hampshire. This period helped Frost to understand the rural mindset and the vernacular culture of the region. According to Wilson, Frost’s experience in New England “had

brought about a dramatic change in his attitude towards rural New England and the life he had lived there” (70). This direct engagement with the place taught Frost how to relate to the experience of others and how to cultivate an empathic understanding of country people and their vernacular ways of life.

Wilson agrees with the opinion that the speaker’s position on the importance of walls is not that of Frost’s since if this were true it would have been “at odds with everything else he has written on the subject” (69). This would even have been at odds with Frost’s poetic vision of tolerance towards the other and towards his highly prized relationship with the place and its people. As I mentioned earlier, Frost urged for the understanding of the people and understood the necessity of being versed in country things. From this perspective, the speaker of “Mending Wall” represents a biased attitude towards boundaries and towards what they mean for country people. The speaker allows himself the pleasure of ridicule when he attributes the causes of the fence deterioration to “Elves,” describing the neighbor as a “savage” “moving in darkness” (*CP* 40). Adherence to vernacular culture is equated with irrationality and savagery, and the speaker’s lack of full knowledge of the significance of boundaries in a rural community informs his patronizing skepticism: “*Why* do they make good neighbors?”

Wilson attributes Frost’s learning and acknowledgement of the value of country boundaries to the latter’s personal experience in Derry. Frost learned more about rural values when he lived in Derry and socially engaged with the rural community therein. The speaker of “Mending Wall” can even be said to be an experiencing Frost acquiring first-hand knowledge of the rural and developing a vision rooted in the values of the vernacular American place. Perhaps, if Frost ever had a biased, uninformed conception of

boundaries and fences in rural America, the activity of mending walls (and his residing in Derry) must have had a huge impact on him as a poet aspiring to be a “caviare to the crowd” (qtd. in Barry 27).

Interestingly, for all of its New England focus, Frost wrote this poem when he was in England. While there, he began to see his former experiences as a farmer in Derry “in a very different and what we might legitimately call a liberating experience” (Wilson 74). As I argued above, fences between neighbors signified respectability and encouraged social communication as being a major factor in building up neighborly relationships. Mending the walls was a rural American value that Frost valorizes as part of a culture that defines vernacular America at the time. The representation of this diminishing virtue of the American land is Frost’s invitation for the audience to reconsider the value system of the vernacular culture. As part of a rural value system, mending walls helped to build up a community of neighbors collectively propelled by the need to maintain the strong foundation for the system of values, which they held in high regard as part of their American identity.

The Rural System of Values

In his quest as an American poet deeply attached to his American place, Frost was able to evade notions of radical nationalism through his cultivating of vernacular virtues. His writing about the diminishing values of his New Hampshire culture was his way of appealing to a less fashionable, yet far more broadminded, sense of place. This political dimension to his poetics of place occurs when both Fascism and Nazism were on the rise. Their race supremacy and radical territorial allegiance were made the legitimate motives for acts of terror and oppression against the Other. Frost recognized the risks of talking

about his own attachment to the American place in a period fraught with radical visions of allegiance to the land. To evade the propagandistic radicalism of political narratives like Nazism, Frost appealed instead to the culture's vernacular speech, the talk of the place rather than to its political violence-instigating discourse of allegiance to one ethnic religious or racial identity.¹⁸

In her *The Vernacular Matters of American Literature*, Sieglinde Lemke defines the boundaries of vernacularism and shows its appeal to American writers. Though she does not mention Frost, I think that her appraisal of "vernacular literature" as being different in content and form from the "propagandistic, proletarian, and cultural nationalist literary works" (94) is very relevant to Frost's place-based vernacularism. Lemke argues that "vernacular literature" usually "expresses itself as a critique or commentary of the established value system with inherent contradictions" (94). She adds that "its messages are anarchic, challenging the moral norm and the dominant value system" (94). Frost's vernacularism does not directly critique the value system of industrial capitalistic America. Rather, the critique is embedded in a poetic discourse that valorizes not only the American rural mind as Farland argues earlier but also American values and virtues of the land—the whole vernacular culture of the region.

Frost's emphasis on rural American qualities is an acknowledgment of the significance of a system of values that contributed a great deal to the American communities before the introduction of late twentieth-century technology and the emergence of new capitalistic modern system of finance. Why this system of values

¹⁸This is true when one considers some of Robert Frost's poems about the other. While in "Vanishing Reed" Frost condemns racist violence, he embraces equality as philosophy in "The Black Cottage." Even more so, in "The Ax-Helve," he expresses appreciation for his Canadian neighbor and cherishes his companionship.

mattered to Frost and to the rural community was simply because rural America was the “place where people live genuine lives and where physical and mental health are restored” (Danbom, “Why Americans Value Rural Life” 17). David Danbom adds that rural America “is the heartland of American values of liberty and equality” (17). It is noteworthy how America’s views on the rural varied across time. Thomas D. Rowley contends that:

The early colonists viewed rurality as dangerous, unsophisticated, and even wicked, instead revering the city like European cousins. That view changed with the American Revolution. The new Nation’s rural areas, populated largely by independent, land-owning farmers, stood in sharp contrast to Britain’s stratified society and provided a strong foundation for the development of America’s democratic institutions. (3)

Views on the rural diverted in direction since the American Revolution and onwards, rurality establishing a foundation for a democratic America as opposed to a class-based monarchial Britain. This, I believe, gave awareness to writers like Frost about the importance of acknowledging a diminishing system of values that contributed a lot to the democratic process in America as early as the American Revolution and that defined America as a nation different in its national/vernacular guise from the British class system. With the advent of capitalism, the stability of this system of rural values was disrupted, hence the feelings of uncertainty, fear, and insecurity which haunt most of the characters in *North of Boston*. Now that their system of values is diminishing in a new economic order, they experience varying degrees of misgiving about their current affairs.

In “The Death of the Hired Man,” “haying time” is a pressing problem for the landowner Warren since it is during this time that “help is scarce” (CP 41). His only farmhand—Silas—is *now* old, sick, unreliable, and, most importantly uncommitted:

Who else will harbor him

At his age for the little he can do?

What help he is there’s no depending on.

Off he goes always when I need him most. (CP 40)

Silas often returns during wintertime when haying season is over, asking for shelter and “little pay” to “at least buy tobacco with” (CP 40). Upon Silas’s return to the farm, Mary reminds her husband Warren of a time long ago when Silas wanted to teach a local boy Harold, who was working on the farm as his summer job before college, all that he knows about hay harvesting. In his sickness now, Silas has recalled that time and told Mary that he is willing to team up with Harold and “ditch the meadow” (CP 41).

If Warren ever shows interest in hiring Silas back, it is not presumably because he needs a farmhand to “lay [his] farm as smooth” (CP 42). It is, however, due to his realization that he now must care for a man about to die. Historically, there were no longer a large number of farm workers in the early decades of the twentieth-century due to a rapid rural decline in population. Warren and Silas must have been among the very few who decided to stay in country towns at the time when huge numbers of people—especially young ones—started to flee to the adjacent and distant cities for factory jobs. Even those in the middle class like Harold, Frost wants to show, were among the young people who must have thought of the city as a more promising place for a future career than farming to a middle class life. The American historian Danbom ascribes the “exodus

of young people from the land” to “the burgeoning urban opportunities and material inducements, the increasing difficulty of securing good, cheap land, and in a few cases, farm mechanization” (*The Resisted Revolution* 19). Rural decline also contributed to the “fear” among countrymen that their “quality” was declining due to the substantial number of the most educated and “ambitious” people that fled to cities like New York and Chicago (*The Resisted Revolution* 19).

In the poem, Harold is shown to be among these ambitious young men who were seeking self-betterment. He is “daft on education” and “studied Latin like a violin” (*CP* 42), to the indignation of Silas who does not seem to appreciate the knowledge which Harold gained throughout years of studying and learning. Teaching Harold how “to build a load of hay” and “find water with a hazel prong” (*CP* 42) seems to be more important to Silas than formal education. Most of what we are told about Silas is reported by Mary. In his reading of the poem, Tim Kendall does not subscribe to the view (which is endorsed by many critics) that Mary only represents “mercy and emotion,” contending that to “associate Mary with mercy and emotion to the exclusion of justice and reason is to miss the sophistication of her speech” (62). Kendall argues against the gendered reading of Mary and conceives of her victory to win the argument (by dint of her rhetorical ability and “genius”) as the “subtlest of victories” (62). Silas comes back seeking shelter, to the indignation and annoyance of Warren who finally yields to Mary’s more tolerant proposition that questions of merit do not count in acts of kindness. While Mary thinks that belonging to a community (“Home”) should not depend on how much personal value you have, Warren believes that lack of worthiness warrants social exclusion.

Kendall directs our attention to the question of value which Warren deems important in his personal valuation of hired farmhands. For Kendall, Mary's main task is to "remove the burden of the marketplace from her husband and to draw his attention to more important values" (61). Since Warren detests Silas's nonproductivity and unreliability (he can do "little" at "his age" and there is "no "depending" on him), he is unwilling to accept Silas for what he is now. To use Kendall's words, Silas' "identity," based on Warren's evaluation, becomes subsumed into "functionality" (60). The basis of assessing the value of Silas in this community is based upon how much effectiveness he can demonstrate in his work as a farmhand. Kendall points out how Mary's opinion reaches beyond matters of functionality and lucrative-based merit. Mary, Kendall notes, knows how "little" Silas can achieve (as her husband says), yet she "argues that even hired men who are no good have some value, and that their betrayed employers have obligations to them" (61). In other words, Mary is making a philosophical ethical case for egalitarianism: she insists that Silas be made equal to them by virtue of simply being a human. She posits the view that Silas should not be judged unequal because he no longer has use value. Mary still knows how ineffective Silas would be as worker in the farm, but she notes how "keen" Silas is to "improve others according to his own standards" (Kendall 61).

Mary's tolerant proposition based as it is on egalitarianism disrupts the reductive logic of the marketplace and underscores the value of the individual in isolation from these market values which Warren relies on in his estimation of the worth of Silas. Mary valorizes the human part of Silas and mobilizes a tolerant narrative of acceptance and social inclusiveness. Her husband's view is informed more by the values of the market

than by the values and virtues of the American vernacular culture. Mary reminds Warren that tolerance based on equality is one virtue which they both should cultivate in times like these, where rural decline has negatively impacted the lives of farmers and their families. Frost underscores Silas's dilemma in a period of decline where many workers were eager to earn extra cash. Landowners, on the other hand, either left their farms or decided to sell them at the cheapest prices available. What makes Silas' situation more difficult is the fact that he is as twice affected by the circumstances; he is old, jobless, and abandoned by his own relatives in times of need.

In this poverty-stricken region, Mary would still show empathy towards the poor as she is able to step beyond the essentialist narrative of rural degeneracy and reintroduce agrarian values of acceptance, companionship, kindness, and respect. Above all, her fairness to the predicament of the yet more impoverished people (those who are of the lowest social ranks in the rural community, such as Silas) extends beyond the parameters of a class-based system of values generated by an industrial economy. Her sense of value is directly derived from her sense of place which informs her unbiased treatment of others who are part of this rural community. When Warren eventually decides to talk to Silas, Mary admonishes him to "Be kind," reminding him of how serious Silas is this time: "He's come to help you ditch the meadow/He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him" (*CP* 45). Earlier, she describes to Warren how drowsy with fatigue and desperation Silas looks:

He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.

When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,

Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,

A miserable sight, and frightening, too. (*CP* 41)

Silas remains an absent presence in the poem, and Mary's speech and remembrances (besides her husbands') are our only access to his mind and character. In fact, the dialogue itself between Mary and Warren serves as a door through which we are allowed entry into the rural community where Silas lives. As audience, we can get a sense of the place which the poem gradually reveals through the utilization of an American vernacular idiom. As Marx argues in his "The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature," American vernacular modes of writing register "an extraordinary sense of immediacy," specificity, and evocativeness (7). The sense of place which Frost fashions in this poem (besides the rest of the poems in *North of Boston*) reveals a corresponding power of immediacy and descriptiveness. The absent presence of Silas and his plight are evoked in a native New England idiom that is faithful to the very place and to the rural values it stands for.

Earlier, Farland suggests that the Modernist pastorals (including Frost's) valorize the rural mind and character, suggesting that they open up new possibilities for the negotiation between different forms of alterity. Frost evokes the idiom of the working class in New England to underscore its *cultural difference and significance* (my emphasis) in a poetry that evades the standard English diction and utilizes instead the vernacular as a mode which usually "sweeps," as Marx argues earlier, these very "received notions of status and class" (8). Frost thus valorizes not only the rural mind but also, and most importantly, the American idiom, at least the New England version of that idiom, which shows its "literary usefulness" (Marx 4) to a national/vernacular American

lyric. His main attempt is to use this place-based vernacularism to “shake the old unity-emphasis-and coherence Rhetoric to its foundations,” as he claimed in his letter to Sidney Cox, which I quoted earlier in the discussion (qtd. in Barry 67). His place-based vernacularism, his representation (by dint of the native idiom) of the American rural identity and its different cultures and values, serves as counter-language of revolt against some aspects of the contemporary and the inherited in poetry.

Returning to Replogle, then, it is hard to think that Frost only employed the vernacular because he *liked it*. Frost established a social direction for American poetry and moves beyond the elitism of the Anglo-American Modernist lyric. As an expression of a national culture based on a radical individualism and a commitment to egalitarian ideals, the American lyric for Frost becomes rooted in the American place associated with both those ideals and with a poetics of talk in meter, New England. In such poetry, Frost reaches through the American vernacular to realize such people as Warren, Mary, and even Silas. Far more evocative and faithful, Frost seems to believe, than the dreary and grammatical language which follows strict syntactic rules, their talk reflects not just their place but also the values of their place. It is interesting what Lemke says about the power of the vernacular in the study which I referred to earlier and which I find so relevant to Frost’s theory of the sound of sense. Lemke’s analysis of the vernacular texts shows that “vernacular voices speak to the reader in intriguing ways: the orality enticing readers to explore structures of feeling that originate in another symbolic order” (8). She goes on to argue that “colloquial and oral aesthetics enable narrative voice to produce striking timbre and rhythm, what may well be termed sound of fiction” (8). Though her

focus is American fiction, her remarks, as I suggested earlier, are relevant to Frost's theorization on the same topic.

Frost's technical experimentations with the native idiom bring the sound of the spoken voice to the ears of the reader. The question of orality is Frost's major focus and aesthetic orientation. Similar to what Lemke proposes in her reading of some American authors, Frost as well uses the oral to entice the reader to explore structures of feelings. Perhaps even in stronger effects than the American authors whom Lemke singles out for her study of the vernacular, Frost is able to reveal to his audience emotional moments of suffering by virtue of his sentence sounds, which combine the spoken idiom with measured verse.

Frost's "Home Burial" is one apt example of experimentation of with the American vernacular. As a poem, it also demonstrates the trials and tribulations of a rural American family in a period of transition and decline. If in "The Death of the Hired Man" the decline of the rural system of values engendered in conflicts between hired farmers and landowners, in "Home Burial," the decline negatively impacts the stability of nuptial life. In "Home Burial," just like in most of the poems in *North of Boston*, Frost "dropped," as he said in a letter to Thomas B. Mosher (dated July 17, 1913), "to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above" (qtd. in Pritchard 92). In her remarks on the poem, Newman gives a good summary of the technicalities involved in the association between New England plain speech and poetic meter:

Frost's speaking-voice style is not a mechanical recording of the everyday speech of New Englanders. A close look will reveal a poet at work. The poem follows the formal meter of blank verse, which mandates five two-part beats to each. Frost

follows that rule, but he allows the speech rhythms to override the regular beat as the emotional tension increases. (81)

With regard to the notion of overriding the regular beat to match the intensity of the emotional experience dramatized in the poem, Frost famously once said, “Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is dramatic or nothing” (qtd. in Newdick 262). According to his understanding of the sentence, Frost believes that the sentence can only attract the attention of the reader as long as it is dramatic. In his appraisal of the dramatic, Frost argues that,

a dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold attention unless they are dramatic.....All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song. (qtd. in McNair 69)

Frost had always thought of the ear of imagination as the most important in the process of writing a lyric. He underscores the importance of the visual imagination, yet he argues that the audible side of the spoken utterance is far more important in evoking the intended emotional response from the reader:

There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart of the mind. It is most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. And surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it is more important to choose and arrange words in a sequence so virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the readers’ voice. By the arrangement and the choice of words on the

part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and in fact, all effects, can be indicated or obtained. (qtd. in Barry 12)

As far as I can understand Frost, the writing of the lyric is a task performed in collaboration, as it were, between the reader and the poet. By proposing this, Frost opens up possibilities not only for the American vernacular as such but also for the very process of interpretation. The voices in the poem, dramatized and democratized in a line that joins together regular meter and natural rhythms of speech, reveal an intensified human drama in a period of disrupted system of rural values. To match the emotional complexity of the imagined dramatic scenes, Frost employs the human voice—the spoken Yankee accent—to faithfully articulate his sense of place. As far as the sentence sounds are involved in this act of setting the boundaries of both reading and writing the lyric free, Frost affords his readers the opportunity to assess the dramatized human drama (which is mostly written in the form of interaction) without prejudice or bias. The conflict which he enacts and the values which his characters embrace are dramatized in dialogues and conversations. As Rexford Stamper argues, “for Frost all values, both external and internal, are ultimately defined as personal interaction with another individual or as man’s interaction with his own immediate environment” (68). Frost thus cannot allow for a one-sided representation of a conflict engendered by a clash of two different value systems, the rural and the capitalistic. By dramatizing human interactions, Frost seems to imply that human nature is too complex to be represented monologically. Dialogues and interactions disrupt the logic of prejudice on the part of the reader and allows for a better understanding of the conflict.

Since the intonations of the speaking voices produce greater emotional effects, Frost makes sure they become entangled in as much varied sentence structures as possible. Of course, for Frost the definition of a sentence can be as democratically inclusive as the tones of the human speech can allow. Since he objects to the dreariness of the grammatical sentence and embraces instead the vital one (simply the spoken), Frost feels free to conceive of individual words, fragments, very short utterances, and even tones as sentences. Each and every sentence can convey more than one meaning, depending on the context in which this sentence is uttered. The same sentence can have a different meaning in a different situation. For him, sentences, as much as words, also have intonations, and it is the responsibility of the poet to capture these intonations in a measured line of poetry. If the sentence contains many words, the sentence still in its entirety has a different separate intonation from the individual words that constitute this very sentence. That's why he calls them sentence-sounds.

What is of high significance here is that Frost sometimes refers to his sentence-sounds as voice-posturings. The characters adopt a posture, or what one might call a stance towards his/her own reality. In his *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky refers to the voices of poetry as social presences. As he argues, there is always a "crucial human power" that dwells in the "audible shapes of meaning" (46). This power, he contends, is "social as well as psychological" (47). For Pinsky, the audible in "Home Burial" has a "physical presence" which the reader can detect in "the rhythmical sound of the social life" (26). Pinsky explains how the vocality of the poem has a social presence embedded within its parameters: "The vocality of the poetry, involving the mind's energy as it moves toward speech, and toward incarnation, also

involves the creation of something like—indeed precisely like—a social presence” (18). Though Frost does not necessarily conceive of his vocality as social presence (in the precise terms which Pinsky coins), he maps out, as I have argued earlier, a socially egalitarian committed direction for poetry, meaning that he brings his poetry into contact with the American social life in a decade of confusion and disruption of rural values. As I see it, Pinsky’s main contention is to argue that poetry still counts in today’s modern democracy and public culture. Poetry, Pinsky wants to suggest, is not a solipsistic, irrelevant exercise of passion. It is rather a social domineering presence in today’s contemporary world. Frost, I believe, opens up possibilities for this social presence in a vernacular-based poetry. His dramatized interactions are pregnant with social presences dealing with a disruption of rural values. As Frost himself implies (which is somehow similar to what Pinsky states), words themselves are social and human in nature since they “adapt” themselves to “persons, places, and times” (qtd. in Barry 14).

Words, which are basically sounds, “exist in the mouth” and not in books,” as Frost adds (qtd. in Barry 14). Since they are place-based, these sounds already reflect the community life and values of the people who use them in their speech. Sounds, to use Lemek’s words again, explore structures of human feelings, and it is Frost who could best anticipate the relationship between sounds and feelings. The rhythmical sounds of social life in “Home Burial” are a translation of this association. Since the conflict in the poem is already dramatized in the form of interaction, it powerfully conjures up this social presence which Pinsky talks about—a presence in psychological turmoil.

In “Home Burial,” Amy is troubled by her husband’s apathy and callousness towards the death of their only son. The heightened debate between husband and wife reminds us how conflict or disagreement in a Frostian poem is always couched in the form of an interaction. As most critics believe, lack of communication is what we as readers can first notice taking place in the poem. There is already a lack of communication between husband and wife, and what makes the situation worse is that there is a story of a dead child. While the husband seems apathetic to the tragedy, Amy is somehow still in a state of utter disbelief as she cannot psychologically cope with the death of her own son. Amy thinks that her husband does not show *enough* grief for the tragedy, which tells us that their fight is not really (or only) because of a seeming lack of communication. Rather, their fight is the result of a disagreement, a discrepancy with regards to the socially and morally *proper ways to express* grief and sadness over the death of someone close. The problem between the two is related more to expression than to communication. The sound-posturings in the poem, ironically enough, are highly expressive of the conflict over expression.

Once the husband recognizes what Amy is staring at through the window (as she is seen standing at the top of the stairs while her husband at the bottom), he intones ‘Oh, and again, ‘Oh’ (CP 55). The tone of impatience embedded in this sentence-sound reveals the slight amount of irritation over Amy’s compulsive anguish and her tendency to remind him of how apathetic his reaction to the tragedy is. In fact, Amy’s emotionally intensified response to her husband reveals to the audience the focal point of their fight. Amy is annoyed by her husband’s callous and casual way of talking about the death of the child, completely dissatisfied with her husband’s lack of the proper way to remember

the tragedy. When he complains that a “man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead,”
(*CP 57*) Amy responds back in fiery tones of desperation and disappointment:

You can’t because you don’t know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air. (*CP 57*)

These lines, written according to the natural rhythm of vernacular speech, explore the high degree of distress which Amy feels at the moment. In these lines, the natural rhythm of speech prevails over the regular iambic beat, especially where the spoken exclamatory phrase “how could you” is suddenly introduced to stress what Amy conceives of as heartless and uncaring on the part of her husband. “How could you” is a spoken individual tone entangled in the regular accented syllable of the line which itself functions as a sentence-sound for Amy’s tones of frustration and distress. The husband’s main problem, according to Amy, is that he does not “know how to speak.” The husband’s lack of proper expression is intoned in a line where regular metric beat and spoken words together exemplify the focal point of the conflict—absence of proper social expression. The line is regular in terms of meter and highly expressive of Amy’s insistence on her husband’s insensitivity. The accented verb “speak” further brings into prominence notions of socially expected forms of expression at times of tragedy.

The many examples of sentence-sounds in the poem exemplify how sophisticated Frost’s notion of vocality is and how much useful it can be to the representation of human emotions and to the evocation of social presences. In a final confrontation between the

two, Amy cries out “*You,*” in a line that evokes a high degree of impatience and anxiety. Their altercation amounts to a physical gesture of defiance:

‘*You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—*

If—you—do! She was opening the door wider.

Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!’--- (CP 58)

The determination intoned in the sentence “I will” is an invitation for an extension of the confrontation rather than an open door for reconciliation. The only reconciliation achieved in these lines is the one between the vernacular idiom and the metrical rhythm—in spite of its irregularity. The two social presences here become engaged in an *irregular* dance of defiant beats and tones, implying a clash between two separate value systems which each one of them embrace to shape a different meaning and vision of the world. Causes for the death of the child are not made mention of in the poem, but as we can infer the husband accepts the death of his son as part of the natural cycle of life where “rainy days” can “rot the best birch fence a man can do” (CP 58). Humans can rot as well and die in rainy days and “foggy mornings,” the husband seems to imply (CP 58). Amy seems to be more worried about the perfect form of expressing grief than about the actual death of her son: “Think of it, a talk like that at such a time!” (CP 58) “You do not know how to speak” (CP 57), and “I can repeat the words you were saying” (CP 58) are examples which show her concern over the proper ways of expression.

The voice-postures in such poems as “Mending Wall,” “Death of the Hired Hand,” and “Home Burial,” which I have discussed in this chapter, reflect a social environment troubled by a deterioration of relationships in a context of rural decline and of the collective ordeal of acclimatizing oneself to a modern reality of mechanized farming and to a new system of family relations and community values. The social presences in Frost’s poems experience varying degrees of concern over their current affairs. Frost’s understanding of the afflictions of his place and his people in New England reaches beyond the borderlines of descriptive commentary. What Frost does is demonstrate the resilience of place, its people, and its system of values. This demonstration of resilience is achieved through using the very spoken idiom which the people use to communicate their trials and tribulations. The vernacular is Frost’s medium of digging deep into the roots of American culture, of opening up the boundaries of the American national lyric, and of rebuilding the bridges between culture and poetry.

CHAPTER IV

PHILIP LARKIN'S RURAL-BASED ENGLISHNESS

In this chapter, I argue that Philip Larkin makes out of rural isolation and personal privacy which places like Hull could still offer in an urbanized England significant English virtues. These English virtues bring into relief Larkin's experience of alienation from the corrosive urban environment of postwar England. As Larkin engages with the entry of 'Old Rural England' into modernity—particularly into the postwar era of urbanism and consumerism—and with the contingent questions of what make postwar England English, he clings to a cultural, rather than, to an ideological or political meaning of Englishness. Critics tend to situate Larkin and his poetics of place within the political discourse of the fifties, but as I contend here, Larkin's poetics of place are tied to his experience of alienation which he significantly reveals to be in consonance with an earlier pressing *cultural* debate on modernity and urbanism (which started as early as the nineteenth-century) rather than with the predominantly *political* discourse of the fifties. The English virtues of rural isolation and personal privacy not only inform his reaction—his poetics of place as well—to the alien culture of urbanism and consumerism but also serve as English cultural foundations for what constitutes his sense of Englishness and his sense of English place.

Larkin allows us access to his English places and to his period of time through a mode of train travelling. Often cast as a train traveler or a passenger or simply a pedestrian in the city, Larkin takes his readers on a journey to relate to them his own experience of alienation in the now partly urbanized cities of England. In the poems that I shall discuss—"Here," "The Whitsun Weddings," and "I Remember, I Remember"—

Larkin is cast as a train traveler estranged by the alienating aspects of the English country now that its former rural values are receding in the corrosive urban environment of the fifties.

Approaches to Philip Larkin's Hull
and to his Sense of Place

In his poem "Here," Larkin describes a train journey from the industrial Midlands to Hull, a city "that is in the world, yet sufficiently on the edge of it to have a different resonance" (*CPL* 392). In response to John Haffenden's question as to whether "Here" should be read as a "brief for retirement," Larkin affirms that this poem is just meant as "a celebration of here, Hull" (*Further Requirements* 59). In the poem, though, solitude and serenity are the different resonances which Larkin appreciates about Hull and its distinct geographic typology: "Behind Hull is the plain of Holderness, lonelier and lonelier, and after that the birds and the lights of Spurn Head, and then the sea . . . having its face-turned towards distance and silence, and what lies beyond them" (*CPL* 392). For Larkin, Hull is a "fascinating area," a place that is "not like anywhere else;" it is a place that is "busy, yet so lonely" (*Further Requirements* 59).

If there is any sense of retirement involved, it is the retirement from the metropolitan center of London: "well, it all depends on what you mean by retirement. If you mean not living in London, I suppose it might be interpreted along those lines" (*Further Requirements* 59). I agree with those critics who allude to Larkin's typically *English* preference for privacy. As a secluded place, Hull would have been the best option for an Englishman like Larkin who highly valued the place for its peace and rural

isolation. His choice to live in Hull for thirty years or so was “part of this general value for comfort and familiarity” (Rossen 50).

For Larkin, lonesomeness meant security and protection from “intrusion,” and if Hull was ever the ideal place, it was because of its peripheral location and physical remoteness “within the larger, insulated Island of England” (Rossen 50). From Larkin’s perspective, Hull affords a sense of “beneficial, protective isolation” (Janice Rossen’s words), a view which Rossen associates with the larger scheme of the poet’s sense of Englishness, his poetic representations of, and personal relationship with, England. Rossen suggests that Larkin’s physical remoteness from the urban center of London mirrors his detached observations of the English place and its people, customs, and traditions.

By virtue of his thirty-year stay in the geographically peripheral city Hull, Larkin was able to “transform this disconnection and detachment from England into a close dispassionate study of its monuments, its social festivals and its unregarded trash littering the countryside” (Rossen 53). This detached attitude explains as well the poet’s resentment for the idea of being abroad: “I hate being abroad. Generally speaking, the further one gets from home the greater the misery” (qtd. in Rossen). In Rossen’s view, as an “observer, and not as a participant, Larkin seems to have felt most at home, and most thoroughly English” (53).

Although he did stay in Hull for thirty years, for Noel Hughes, Larkin’s loathing of traveling is a “fiction”: “the truth is that Larkin’s antipathy to abroad was a fiction. When it suited his pleasure and convenience, he went abroad; when it did not he stayed at home” (57). To bolster his point, Hughes points out that Larkin was hired as a librarian at

Queen's University in Belfast. On the other hand, Larkin's choice to leave Ireland after a span of three years is also part and parcel of his need to be settled in England. Although his leaving Ireland had nothing to do with any personal bias against Irish people as such or against Ireland in general (Hughes 56), the political unrest in Ireland was a source of both discomfort and distraction for the poet. According to Hughes, the "world around Larkin was changing," given the blooming businesses of tourism and railways; Larkin's choice "to stay put," Hughes reckons, seemed to many friends and acquaintances as an instance of "oddity" when touring around was very fashionable amongst many British families who "flocked abroad for their holidays" (57).

As Hughes mentions, Larkin was not always the "one to join the herd," and his turning down invitations to "academic gatherings" and conferences in and outside the island (mainly in Europe) was not merely because he disliked the idea of travelling; Larkin, Hughes points out, simply wanted "to write poetry" and not to "lecture about it" (57). Evidently, that poetry was best written in Hull, which might have been the ideal place for this serious commitment to poetry since it afforded Larkin the opportunity to enjoy the peace and solitude which he always craved. In Hughes' opinion, it was in "Hull that [Larkin] consolidated the reputation he had begun to make" (56). Beginning in 1955, for instance, Larkin held a post as a librarian at the University of Hull and stayed there until his death in 1985.

Against those who read Larkin as a decidedly English poet of place, critics like Douglas Porteous argue that Larkin's sense of place is "marginal" and "merely a minor deviation from his deeper and broader sense of no-place" (2-7). For Porteous, "having a sense of place does not mean that the writer loves that place;" Larkin, Porteous claims,

appreciated Hull for “its relative remoteness” and “its liminal location on a geographical edge, close to the sea,” suggesting that what basically “appealed” to Larkin was its “placeless ordinariness” (2). Robert Snyder’s “Elbowing Vacancy: Philip Larkin’s Non-Places” echoes the sentiments of Porteous’ claims about Larkin’s sense of no-place. In Snyder’s view, considering the “significance of place in Philip Larkin’s oeuvre may seem a foredoomed endeavor” (115). According to Snyder, only a handful of poems “include references specific to English sites,” this anomaly being divergent from the poet’s “typical milieu” which consistently contains “indeterminate locations, blurred vistas, and generic topoi” (115). In the context of his “marginal and attenuated landscapes” and his “engagement with vacuity,” Larkin, Snyder argues, “commits himself so assiduously to ‘elbowing vacancy’—to exploring absence, nullity and displacement” (116). From this standpoint, Larkin is recast as an “equivocally postmodern author” whose absent no-places show that loss and “dispossession [are] our universal heritage” (Snyder 116).

Rather than read him as an English poet of place, then, Snyder interprets Larkin as a postmodern author of placelessness and deracination. On account of his consistent representation of the gloomy, skeptical and dismal reality of postwar England, Larkin, Snyder further argues, often moderates this state of postwar desolation with transitory “images of a transcendent reality that lies just beyond the verge of recovery” (116). By and large, the implication is that Larkin eventually comes across as a hopeless, groundless postmodern figure with very little to hold on to save for these fleeting transcendental moments. From Snyder’s perspective (and Porteous’ as well), place for Larkin becomes only a stage for an unfolding drama of skepticism, pessimism, and aloofness.

Contrary to these remarks, I believe that Larkin's sense of place—in spite of its marginality and deviation from his larger sense of no-place—does not become marginal and attenuated when we take into consideration the complex, multifaceted insights it evokes as a response to an equally intricate period of cultural and historical transition. As a citizen of England and as a purveyor of modernity, Larkin assesses his sense of place according to the new measures which dictate his terms of attachment to Hull and to its surroundings in the new urban-based environment. In his “Reflections on the Place of Larkin,” Derek Spooner explains Larkin's association with place in terms of the social and the emotional, adding yet another point of focus to our understanding of the poet. Following the insights of Humanistic Geography, an interdisciplinary approach to literature, Spooner argues that often an “individual becomes rooted in a place as he/she develops relationships with it” (211). Rootedness, as Spooner understands it, “relates not only to a geographical landscape but also to a social landscape (in a community), an emotional landscape (intimacy with individuals) and an intellectual landscape (acquired knowledge and ideas)” (211). From this perspective, we come to understand Larkin's exploration of his city Hull as a reflection of his gradually evolving relationship with it over the course of so many years.

When he first settled in Hull, for instance, Larkin initially deprecated it. That depreciation can be seen in the context of his disdain for the gradual disappearance of the ‘English ways of life’ as opposed to the modern ways of life in postwar England. Over time, though, he became attached to the city and, as a result, more committed to his own Englishness and to the Englishness of his place. In his interviews, Larkin is often specific about what he finds abhorrent in the city, and a closer look would reveal how more

contextual his understanding of the sources of his contempt had gradually become. In citing Larkin's earlier and later statements about Hull, Spooner shows how Larkin had eventually emerged as a "rooted" insider after he had initially been a displeased newcomer to the city. At one point, Larkin liked Hull for one feature: "I wish I could think of one nice thing to tell you about Hull—oh yes, it's very nice and flat for cycling: that's about the best I can say" (qtd. in Spooner 213).

For Larkin, the smell of fish was rather a "revolting" one aspect about the city as well: "Hull smelt revolting of fish this morning: my secretary said that meant it was going to rain. And it did" (qtd. in Spooner 213). Larkin made these two observations about Hull on two different occasions in the year 1955. As specific in his observations about the city as always, he also expressed his dislike for yet another "peculiar horror" in Hull—"smuts": "I have come to the conclusion that the peculiar horror about Hull is that the smuts—and there are a plenty of them, drifting around, are fish. . . I've not come across this feature anywhere else and I do not like it" (qtd. in Spooner 213). He made these remarks about smuts in his interview with Judy Egerton in 1956, but in 1957, one year later, his personal criticisms of the city took on a different guise. In his interview with Robert Conquest, Larkin made a keener observation about Hull, his source of irritation—industrialism—being more relevant to the postwar milieu of the period: "Hull is like the backdrop for a ballet about industrialism crushing the natural goodness of men, a good swinging, left-wing ballet" (qtd. in Spooner 213).

Despite those criticisms, more than two decades later, in an interview with the *Observer* in 1979, Larkin would commend Hull for its unpretentiousness and remoteness: "[Hull is] so far away from anywhere else. On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it.

It's in the middle of this lonely country and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea. I like that. And Hull is an unpretentiousness place. There's not so much crap around as there would be in London" (qtd. in Spooner 213). Spooner cites these more positive comments to showcase the poet's personal development in his relationship with Hull as a place distinct in its geography and attractions from the highly urbanized cities such as London. Spooner though does not make mention of Larkin's very latest comment on Hull, which I quoted earlier and which greatly shows how more appreciative of Hull Larkin had eventually grown.

Turning to "Here," then, one finds that it is a celebration of Hull, which, by the time of the poem in 1981, had become for Larkin a fascinating area and a place totally different from any other. By then, Larkin does not seem to show contempt for the city as a whole. In his evolving relationship with Hull, he seemed to have realized how industrialism and its consequent effects on the natural goodness of men were more topically serious and more pertinent than such small nuisances like smuts and fish. His last assessment of Hull as a fascinating place evokes his *growing* affection for it, the smell of fish and the smuts having become by then marginal to the true and more urgent concerns for an English poet assessing his new place and constructing a sense of place in an urbanized England. Larkin's contempt (Spooner's word) for Hull seems to be associated with only these aforementioned quotes which explain what by and large I see as nuisances rather than a derision of the city per se. These were personal reactions to, and temperamental complaints about, aspects, which he as a person did not appreciate about the city. In his earlier comments about Hull, Larkin seems to be very

impressionistic, given his arrival as a newcomer and as someone who had not yet developed any sort of feelings for the place.

In Spooner's reading, Larkin does not come off as a totally detached one-dimensional figure, his sense of place revealing a complex, far-reaching relationship with Hull in specific and with postwar England in general—contrary to what Porteous and Snyder would like us to think of as a marginal and deviational sense of attachment to place which in the long run evokes nothing on the part of Larkin but utter bleakness and a predominant sense of placelessness. Larkin's sense of place, I believe, inspires a fundamental understanding of the individual's changing relationship with the places he/she visits and lives in. His specific relationship with Hull is an open door to understanding more about his experience of alienation in postwar England and about his poetics of place as rooted in an English rural tradition.

Philip Larkin's

Foundation of Rural Englishness

Although Spooner appears to support a reading of Larkin as one of the most famous fans of Hull, he makes clear, too, that Larkin's sympathetic views of Hull “provide a limited scope for the exploitation of the Larkin heritage in the city of Kingston Upon Hull” (215). The “use of Larkin's poetry for city promotion,” Spooner further contends, “is likely to be constrained” given the poet's ambivalence towards Hull, the “lack of glamour in his portrayal of it,” and the “sparseness” of a detailed geographic typography of the city (215). Positive depictions of a place, however, ought not to be considered the same as a poetics of place. I contend that Larkin is a poet of place, of England, and of Hull. To say that his heritage (his poetry, his interviews and intimations

about Hull) cannot be employed for purposes of city promotion would most likely be dismissed by Larkin himself as irrelevant to what he considered relevant to the kind of poetry he writes. In his well-known Statement, Larkin intimates the contours of what I am calling a *poetics of place*,

I write poetry to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (*Further Requirements* 79)

Preserving the experience of place—rather than promoting the place—defines the central feature of Larkin’s poetics of place. As such, the lack of glamour and the absence of geographical specificities are of little significance because registering the experience which he felt in his relation to Hull, a place which he saw, felt, and thought about over the course of thirty years, defines a place for him.

Against that experiential definition of place, one might contrast a public evocation of heritage in reference to Hull. After all, Larkin as an English poet lived in a period where resurgent *politics of place* took hold of the English imagination right after the decline of the Empire. The need to fashion a specific *political* sense of Englishness was a national prerogative by the fifties. At that time, the surge of nationalist movements in the British colonies and the rise of American geopolitical importance put England’s reputation as the center of imperial power into serious question. One trend in this new self-questioning era concerned the impact of industrialism on England and on Englishness.

In his *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, Martin Wiener eloquently explores the ambivalence engendered by the introduction of industrialism and its offshoot urbanism to England. From politicians and journalists to novelists, poets, and cultural critics, England was debating the degree to which industrialism negatively impacted the pre-industrial quality of the English ways of life. It is quite ironic, Wiener notes, that the “nation that gave birth to the industrial revolution and exported it throughout the world should have become embarrassed at the measure of its success” (5). The English nation fashioned its “conception of Englishness” to the exclusion of its “prodigal progeny” that is industrialism (Wiener 5). Despite the dichotomous views on the subject since the early decades of the nineteenth-century and onwards (up until the 1980s), there was a shared growing concern about how England should embrace industrialism as a modern global system of values, which in its essence is starkly different from the quintessentially English one.

By the 1950s, after all, the emergence of new global market-based system of values put the industrial definition of Englishness into grave doubt and exacerbated what had always been an ambivalent reaction to industrialism and urbanization. William Wordsworth, for instance, was one among many other Romantic poets who “feared the soulless of urbanism and industrialism and the utilitarian and the materialistic habit of mind these conditions represented” (Wiener 29). For his part, the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope showed in his novels how anxious he was at the time about “commercial values infecting and corrupting an older, quasi-feudal society” (Wiener 31). These commercial values were also a source of unease for the English novelist and social critic Charles Dickens who “turned away from the values of industrial capitalism” and

championed “the renovation of older gentry values” (Wiener 35). The rapid urbanization of English cities by the late eighteenth-century had led some, such as Robert Vaughan and others, to “proclaim the immense demise of feudalism and rusticity” (Wiener 74).

In short, much of English literature, especially the poets, had celebrated as particularly English all that which was opposed to the commercial-driven ways that industrialism and urbanism had made standard by the 1950s. Indeed, this became the party platform of postwar Conservatives who embraced an “essentially rural” and “unchanging England,” with its country sides and rural ways of life serving as a source of consolation (Wiener 55). The general conception in the political and cultural realm was that “rural life was the repository of the moral character of the nation,” and any “change” to this repository could mortally endanger England (Wiener 56). Wiener goes so far as to call this a counterrevolution of values that posited as decidedly English that which still existed outside of cities in the ordinary and familiar old English churches, towns, “winding roads,” “wayside inns,” and “green meadows” (Wiener 75). According to Wiener, despite the fact that England by the fifties was largely urbanized, the Englishman’s attraction was more to the idea of England as a rural country than to England as an urban space (75). The ordinary Englishman emotionally clung to an England steeped in the rural, folk ways of life with all its “moral and spiritual values” which by now had been “marred” by the commercial values introduced by industrialism (Wiener 75). The English village, “the furrows,” the shires, the “old market towns,” and the workers at the farm with their sheep were part and parcel of a cultural English milieu that showcased a national consciousness and a continuity with the past (Wiener 76).

By the time Larkin settled in Hull, then, according to Wiener, reactions to industrialism and the transformations it brought to Britain in general and to England in specific were critical, and “the materialism that seemed part and parcel of industrial society” no longer defined the meaning of England, Empire, and Englishness. (Wiener 79). That urban industrial England was now seen as an aberration. Against it, the “real England” of a vanishing village life was not only celebrated but also championed as an “oasis of tranquility, and a bulwark against the stresses of modern life” (Wiener 79-87). As an example, Wiener cites Trevelyan: “Agriculture is not merely one industry among many, but is a way of life, unique and irreplaceable in its human and spiritual values;” for Trevelyan, corrosive urbanism is a “deadening cage for human spirit” and contributes to the “gradual standardization of the human personality” (87). Intriguingly, both Liberals and Conservatives made the same argument concerning the “real England.” As a Liberal, Trevelyan’s reaction was not different from the Conservative Party that attacked “commercialism, materialism, and profiteering,” what Wiener calls a “rustic spirit of the nation” (98-99).

For some, that earlier period had a historically specific moment in the past. For others it was a more generalized structure of feeling. Regardless, both Liberals and Conservatives turned to rural isolation as a cherished English way of life and both considered urbanization a threat made only more palpable as English cities became easily connected with the countryside through a network of railways. With the introduction of trains, spatiality and temporality acquired a new meaning, and the isolated rural areas of the country were easily reached. This was a double edged sword. On the one hand, rural England increasingly became suburban England, just another outpost of the city. On the

other hand, the physical remoteness of the countryside was no longer a problem, and thus more urbanites had access to the quality of isolation which the rural parts of the country enjoyed. Larkin, I presume, preferred the serenity and calmness of Hull, which was still at the time partly urban and partly rural. However, this English quality of the rural, I think, manifested itself in Larkin in very strong terms.

According to Wiener, this quality of rural isolation, which was a valued part of the English way of life and which “preserved the stable culture of the past,” was gradually diminishing owing to the “arrival of modern mobility” (52). Larkin’s preference for the rural peace of English places like Hull, whose landscape was gradually being urbanized by then, is quintessentially English and derived from a rural conception of England. It can be argued that his sense of place is rural in character. Rurality is basically the foundation of an English vision that valued an English culture opposed in essence to the alien culture of materialism created by decades of industrialization and modernization. As far as I can understand Wiener’s assessment of the subject, rurality for the Englishman (as can be inferred from the decades-old discourse on the subject) is a national groundwork for preserving the integrity of the English community and the English place. Throughout these decades, the mainstream discourse against industrial urbanism eventually contributed to the economic stalemate in England in particular and in Britain in general. For Wiener, the eventual economic decline in England did not occur in a vacuum, the long-standing institutional narrative against industrialism being hugely responsible for the economic crisis.

As an English citizen and poet, I see Larkin as implicated in this centuries-long debate on industrialization and its impact on England. Wiener explores the mainstream

narrative, discussing the mindset of the English elite and their championing of an old English life that was threatened by a modern mode of life alien to the values of a receding English culture. Larkin was neither a politician nor a member of an elite upper-class group rallying up against capitalism as such. As an English citizen and a poet, he simply shared similar concerns but was neither radical nor dogmatic in his poetic treatment of the issue. As James Booth puts it, Larkin “made no attempt to be ideologically consistent on any issue” (“Lyricism, Englishness, and Postcoloniality” 201). Except for his affiliation with The Movement—a group of poets concerned with the promotion of English poetry and acting against the modernist experimentations—Larkin was not a fervent ideologue consistently espousing imperialist English ethos or campaigning against immigrants in England. The extremism of elite figures, such as Oswald Mosley and Enoch Powell, was not the legacy Larkin embraced in his response to the cultural decline in the postwar era and in his promotion for the essentially English character of England.

As Wiener demonstrates, this debate on England as a place and on what constitutes Englishness as a cultural identity was not confined to the postwar era only. Larkin’s reaction to urban industrialism, therefore, should be seen in the larger context of this debate. Larkin, however, steps away in his reaction from some of the radical views on the issue and chooses instead to engage with the question of cultural decline in a manner akin to the ordinary Englishman and without recourse to ideology or the radical politics of the elite intelligentsia figures. In his poetry, Larkin though reveals his concern for the diminishing quality of life in a consumerist culture. He is not against change as such, but can be seen as echoing the sentiments of some English figures: Larkin would

perhaps have subscribed to J.B. Priestley's estimation that the English nation should counter "change for change's sake" (qtd. in Wiener 166).

Larkin manifests this discontent with industrialism and urbanism through his poetics of place, which I have argued are also tied to his experience of alienation in this place. As such, Larkin's poetics of place, his Englishness, concerns the experience of alienation. Nor was Larkin alone in such a feeling. Through numerous examples, Wiener demonstrate an overwhelming sense of alienation that industrialism and urbanism (modernization) had introduced to England. Although Larkin seems to be non-specific about which *historical* England he yearns for, the point I wish to underline is that his experience of alienation is itself historicized, part and parcel of the England of the 1950s when he first began to write his serious poetry. There, he addressed the alienating experience of modern life—a modern life which his predecessors attacked on all fronts and felt estranged by.

The view that Larkin is rarely occasionally specific about the places he mentions or the history he evokes misses the overarching and recurring argument about the alienating experience of modernization, particularly as that issue informed English life in the period he wrote his poems. I wish to point out that Larkin's main ordeal—alienation—was and had always been part and parcel of the larger cultural debate about the industrialization and the urbanization of England. It was the alienating aspects of the modern experience which fueled the debate over Englishness and England as a nation in the first place. I also believe that Larkin's non-specificity helps him to transcend any ideological or extreme definition of place even as it allows him to manifest a decidedly *English* experience of place that is both geographically and historically based. Indeed, I

argue that his inconsistency about what specifically defines a better England in the past brings more into focus the real issue of his present moment—alienation. Larkin's representation of modern England belongs not only in the postwar English discourse on national politics but also in the cultural debate over industrialization.

A few Larkin scholars have explored the meaning of alienation in his poetry. Among them, Nigel Alderman is most relevant to my argument because he labels Larkin a "belated English poet" (285). He explains that Larkin had to struggle with his own sense of what constitutes Englishness, arguing that the poet "corresponds to England's problematic status as a belated nation" (285). He points out that the beginning and the end of Larkin's career (1945) were concurrent with the decolonization of the Empire and the entry of England into the "larger system" of global market and The European Economic Community (285). For Alderman, Larkin's task as a belated poet is akin to that of politicians who belatedly struggle to re-define the Englishness of England. Larkin's poetry, Alderman conclusively argues, had to negotiate through the various political facts of "decolonization and imperial decline, and of European community and American global power" and also to do so not in the international style of "high modernism" but rather in some unique English style (296). For that reason, says Alderman, Larkin's poetry, by virtue of its sheer belatedness, registers the circumscribed possibilities for the emergence of "new narratives" of English nationalism that are not implicated in the nostalgic memory of the loss of the Empire (296). Alderman calls this the "failure of reproduction" and argues that Larkin's poetry "highlights" this loss in a manner that is "elegiac" and "sepulchral" (296).

As Alderman contends, Larkin's poetry belongs to the postwar narrative of English nationalism that was markedly politicized in terms of the nationalist utopian politics it embraced. Larkin's understanding of what England means to him is not deeply steeped in the political language of the period, nor does his poetry forcefully speak for English nationalism as an ideology of utopian dreams. As Alderman argues, his poetry expresses "the communal, *gemeinschaft* pastoral landscape" (282). In this way, his poetry basically adopts a "rhetorical strategy typical of post-war British political discourse of both Left and Right" (282). This strategy, Alderman contends, enables the "reality of change from a precapitalistic to a capitalistic society to be occluded" (282).

Alderman does not pay attention to the experience of alienation as Larkin's particular experience of place, of England. More than a rhetorical strategy, Larkin's poetics of place, his poetry of alienation, allows him to confront (or reconcile with) the status quo rather than recoil from it. His evocation of the rural past is not a strategy of occlusion but rather one of bringing into relief the non-alienating aspects of a vanishing rural England in a modern setting that is thoroughly alienating. By allowing space for the rural actualities of an early England, Larkin is simply bringing their value into prominence, as if he were positing some relief from the all too present feelings of alienation that threaten to overwhelm him.

Larkin paces back and forth through memory and through the English streets to gain perspective and to understand his relationship with modern-day England and with the English crowd of his present moment. By being in close proximity to the English crowd, Larkin basically steps beyond the Anglo-American Modernist rhetoric of elitism and socially engages—albeit from a distance—with the English people and their postwar

reality, a reality of shared alienation. Critics oftentimes tend to underscore Larkin's detachment in the context of his distanced engagement from the public and in his preference for isolation. It is true that Larkin was exceptionally odd when it came to his penchant for staying away in isolated places and from people in crowded spaces in the city. However, this detachment, I contend, was not an expression of a personal animosity towards the crowd but rather a statement against the consumerist and commodified ways of life which this crowd started to adopt in postwar England.

“Here” and “The Whitsun Weddings”:

Train Travel and Englishness

In the train poems, Larkin's train travelers make a rediscovery of England through the windows of the train, the train journey becoming a space of engagement with the mundanities of the English city. Though detached from the scene, Larkin's train travelers are also part of the crowd and identifies with it. The speakers in these two poems remain non-participants in the social practices of the people, yet they tolerantly acknowledge these practices as defining features of an English rural tradition. In “Here” and “The Whitsun Weddings,” Larkin's speakers are not politically protesting against change; rather, they do understand the transformation of England in a manner that reflects their lack of intimacy with the materialistic culture of the urbanized parts of England.

Larkin's personae are passengers on a train looking through the window and relating to the readers their observations of their places. “Here” describes a train journey to Hull, where the speaker-passenger is on board of a train heading from the “rich industrial shadows” to the “solitude/Of skies and scarecrows” (*CPL* 49). This poem records the speaker's impressions as the train moves along what the speaker describes as

“fields/Too thin and thistle to be called meadows” (*CPL* 49). The speaker’s sense of place is one of alienation, which becomes apparent as he realizes that the English meadows have been transformed into less appealing urbanized spaces.

For James Naremore, “Here” is a “rapid panorama of the north of England seen through the windows of a passenger car” (341). Naremore argues that “the thoughtful moods and the hypnotic rhythms” of the train ride gives Larkin “the opportunity to observe life without participating in it” (341), which makes Larkin (cast as a train traveler) simultaneously detached and involved with Hull. It might be true that Larkin is creating a “mythology of privacy” in his poetics of place (Motion, “Philip Larkin and Symbolism” 50); his solitariness, however, is a condition dictated by the contemporary consumerist landscape. One can get a better sense of how Larkin engages with his contemporary landscape by a closer look at the poem. Looking through the compartment window, the train traveler describes—or rather lists—aspects of the city:

Swerving to solitude
Of Skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares, and pheasants,
And the widening river’s slow presence,
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud,

What seems to be a cherished rural solitude is now turning into urban actualities:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,
And residents from raw streets, brought down
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires—

Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers— (*CPL* 49)

The speaker goes on to describe the residents as a “cut-price crowd” which are “urban yet simple” (*CPL* 49). Generally, the lines bring into relief the consumerist attitudes of the citizens, here depicted as the crowd. Looking from the train, the speaker is physically detached from what he wishes to stay away from—the consumerist crowd. Perhaps the evolving *simplicity* of the crowd is a reminder of their alienation: they, too, are losing cultural sophistication and depth, their appellation as *the crowd* being reflective of the receding presence of what one might presume had once been non-consumerist *community* rural values. Concurrent with the transformation of the rural into the urban is the transformation of the people from communities of value into city crowds immersed in a life of material possession, as is made blatant in the list of items the speaker describes.

In his reading of this poem, Picot argues that Larkin “believes that traditional, pastoral ways of life allowed human beings to achieve an unselfconscious dignity which the modern urban population generally lost” (61). Picot further contends that this “belief seems to be partly derived from the simple feeling that people are better living few and far between in rural setting than coming together in large numbers in towns or cities” (61). As the earlier discussion makes clear, this is not just a simple feeling which Larkin the Englishman happened to share; it is part and parcel of the rurality that Weiner and Alderman depicted. Rurality as such was the very definition of the national English community, which in a postwar urbanized environment has turned into a crowd lacking in—or losing in the process—the very foundation of their rural-based Englishness.

In “Here,” the passenger-speaker directly calls attention to the cultural relegation of the people from community to city crowds: the kitchenware, the cheap suits, electric mixers, toasters, washers, and driers are indicative of the cultural commodification of Hull whose “skies,” “scarecrows,” “haystacks,” “hares,” and “pheasants” are now losing their value by virtue of their dwindling importance for the people (*CPL* 49). On that account, Larkin, contrary to what one expects a national poet would say about the place he deems valuable, does not glamorize Hull as a site of tourist attraction.

Earlier in the discussion, I pointed out Spooner’s observation about the sparseness of details and the limitations that Larkin’s poetry (especially his poem “Here”) would pose for the national promotion of the city or of the poet’s heritage therein. Larkin, I claim, fully understands the public zeal to promote a place either for money, or for some other vague sense of national or local glory. Against such ideological promotion, Larkin in “Here” characterizes Hull as both the rural nature it contains, along with its solitude, and the contemporary urbanization of that natural environment. This poem can be read in terms of national glorification but that entails more than celebrating the place for the cultural values that no longer exist for its people. Perhaps this is why Larkin refrains from evoking images of Hull as an English territory. Larkin only appeals to the urban-rural façade of the city, aka, the picturesque. As Booth puts it, “Larkin’s England is not an ideological territory comparable with the Englands of Hill and Hughes” (“Larkin, Heaney, and the Poetry of Place” 203).

For all that, Larkin’s poetry “digs deep,” though when it does dig deep it “does not dig beneath the flag” (“Larkin, Heaney, and the Poetry of Place” 203). Commenting on poems such as “Mr. Bleaney” and “The Whitsun Weddings,” Booth argues that the

England they share is one of “parochial identity” rather than of “provincial ideology” (“Larkin, Heaney, and the Poetry of Place” 203). In this, Booth makes a distinction between provincialism and parochialism. According to Booth, the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh affirms that “parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites...A provincial is always trying to live by other people’s loves, but a parochial is self-sufficient” (qtd. in Booth 193). Applied to Larkin, the provincial is very much concerned with what others say about his place, whereas the parochial is never stressed over how others perceive his/her place. According to his schema, Larkin is parochial not provincial as he does not seem to care whether or not his representation of Hull lives up to the expectations of English or of non-English people; he does not want his appreciation of Hull to be a pamphlet of national promotion. Kavanagh’s distinction adds complexity to Larkin’s approach to place, since this parochialism demonstrates how self-sufficient Larkin must have felt in his understanding of Englishness and in his relationship to Hull and England. It also manifests his own comfort in the uncomfortable: from his parochial perspective, he had no option but to represent his own experience of alienation as the very essence of his poetics of place.

In the work of David Storey, one can see how the alienation which a poem like “Here” represents is also part of the larger concept of rurality as particularly English. In his poem, Larkin eschews the postwar nationalist notion of Englishness by adhering to a rural conception of Hull, his place-rurality being based more on a *shared* understanding than on an exclusive territorial ideology. According to Storey, concepts of “land and territory are utilized in conjunction with selective interpretations of history in forging and reproducing a sense of national identity” (17). Storey recognizes “the emphasis on rural

imagery” in English aesthetics and assesses it as “a reaction to the process of industrialization and urbanization,” arguing that the “construction of urban as evil and contaminated” was “mirrored by the creation of the ‘rural idyll’ through which all that is ‘pure’ and ‘natural’ is seen to be associated with the rural landscape and with the rural life” (16). Here, of course, he cites the example of England to show how rurality had been always associated with nation-making, which Larkin seems to have recognized as the optimal alternative to the territorialized notion of the nation.

Though fully understanding the inclusive nature of Englishness as based on rurality, Larkin does not represent an idyllic England; he instead expresses a feeling of alienation, a feeling embedded in his own sense of Englishness because it defines and reflects just how emotionally distanced he feels from this idyll now that the values that used to define it are gradually losing ground. In the midst of these “cranes, spires, and domes,” Larkin’s speaker must be feeling out of place, hence his perfunctory inventorying of the commodities, which the crowd is eager to buy by pushing “through plate-glass swing doors.”

Near the end of stanza three, the train moves through the horizon of urbanized Hull to finally reach the isolated villages beyond. The train swerves east from the “rich industrial shadows” of England, across the “solitude” of Hull, and finally out beyond the “fast-shadowed wheat field” of the villages beyond the city (*CPL* 49). There “loneliness clarifies” as the passenger casts a weary glance towards the villages and their “unnoticed leaves” and “neglected waters” (*CPL* 49). Unlike the solitude of the first stanza, the last one evokes “loneliness” instead, affirming thus passenger’s amalgamated sense of alienation (*CPL* 49). Feeling out of place is first stressed through detachment from the

city crowds and their commercialized life and second through the depopulated scene of “the unfenced existence” looming across the horizon of the distant villages (*CPL* 49).

Turning next to “The Whitsun Weddings,” Larkin is cast as a train traveler again, but this time the journey is from Hull to London. The passenger not only describes the rural-urban scenery but also the wedding parties at the stations where the train stops. In this poem, and in fact in the poems included in *The Whitsun Weddings* and in later volumes of poetry, Larkin’s representations are “informed by a spirit of broad humanitarian tolerance and sympathy” (Chatterjee 344). Larkin’s attitude towards the multitudes of people he describes on a Whitsuntide Saturday is a point of contention amongst critics. Stan Smith argues that in “The Whitsun Weddings” Larkin opens up “margins of tolerance” towards the characters; nevertheless, Smith claims that they lose their individuality and uniqueness by dint of Larkin’s stereotypical representations. Smith argues that “only the abstracted, distanced observer preserves his individuality: there is no one else like him on the train” (“Margins of Tolerance: Responses to Post-War Decline” 182). However, the lines which Smith refers to are not necessarily suggestive of Larkin’s demotion of the uniqueness of the wedding attendees. When looked at in the context I have been describing, the wedding parties each belong to a new postwar commercialized England, an England of *the crowd*, and of consumerism. Turning to Larkin’s choice of words in the “jewelry substitutes, /The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that/Marked off the girls unreally from the rest” (*CPL* 57), one finds signals of the commercialization of the modern English weddings but not necessarily condescending stereotypical characterizations of the English brides and their attendees. Nor ought one to assume that Larkin here means to demean or mock the wedding parties. In Stephen

Regan words, Smith believes that Larkin is doing precisely that, and that “The Whitsun Weddings” “extends the emphasis on distance to show how the poem’s way of seeing turns from disengagement to condescension” (*Philip Larkin* 180).

However, this claim that Larkin’s speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” is condescending falls back on an emphasis on Larkin’s penchant for distance—emotional this time. Read in the context I have been describing, one would be more likely to agree with Booth who argues that Larkin can be seen “to celebrate a characteristically English sense of privacy” (“Lyricism, Englishness, and Postcoloniality” 193). Rather than see this speaker as condescending, Booth reads the speaker as a solitary man and explains this solitariness in connection with English culture, with what he calls a “distinctly English tradition” that values privacy (193). Privacy is characteristically English and defines as thus an identity category rooted in the soil of the English rural culture. Privacy also gives a new view of Larkin’s train traveler, for as a solitary observer, the train traveler can be of the crowd and still maintains his privacy. Indeed, trains afford the opportunity to socialize but Larkin’s speaker chooses to detach himself not because of hostility towards the people but because he recognizes that a complete engagement with a crowd means full acceptance of their commodified world. J. R. Watson notes that “The Whitsun Weddings” is “marked by a certain steady gravity, a compassionate observation rather than a self-satisfied superiority” (“Philip Larkin: Voices and Values” 105). Watson would agree with Hermann Peshmann that Larkin’s *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* establish Larkin as “the poet of *l’homme moyen sensuel*, the Laureate of the Common Man” (57).

next station, the speaker describes a wedding scene. There are the “cafés” and “banquet-halls;” attendees are shouting from outside the train as the “fresh couple” climbs aboard (*CPL* 57). There are “fathers,” “children,” “women,” and “girls gripping their handbags tighter” (*CPL* 57-58). Once the newlyweds climb aboard, the train “hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam,” and the brides and bridegrooms sat “side by side” watching “the landscape” (*CPL* 58). In a moment of pensiveness, the speaker starts to think of “London spread out in the sun” and of its “postal districts” that there are “packed like squares of wheat” (*CPL* 58).

“Here” and “The Whitsun Weddings” are not Larkin’s only train traveling poems. In “I Remember, I Remember,” the speaker-passenger, rather than preserve his state of detachment, engages in a short conversation about his birthplace Coventry with his fellow traveler. Before providing an answer to his companion’s question about the place, the speaker-passenger remembers as summarized by another critic, “all those fictionalised, romantically inflated childhoods popularized in the biographies or autobiographical novels of celebrated writers” (Chatterjee 142). The exchange in the final stanza reveals the speaker-passenger’s understanding of home:

‘You look as if you wished the place in Hell,’
 My friend said, ‘judging from your face.’ ‘Oh well,
 I suppose it’s not the place’s fault,’ I said.

‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.’ (*CPL* 41)

Critics read this response to his fellow traveler as a reference to a bombing incident in Coventry that took place in 1954. If so, it is in keeping with Larkin’s tendency, as Booth says, to understand place as “couched in terms of universal plight” (*Philip Larkin: The*

Poet's Plight 137). There is no derision involved in the deliberate de-romanticization of Coventry, this lack of glamour being similar to the one we find in Larkin's representation of Hull. If anything, it points out once again Larkin's parochialism. As a parochial, Larkin's speaker-passenger does not care about his friend's perception of Coventry, nor does he make an effort to make his friend love the place. An odd combination of parochial and train traveler, Larkin resists through the voice of his speaker the commodification of the place. Rather than resort to what Storey calls the "increased emphasis on local distinctiveness" in the age of globalization (14), Larkin speaks in the detached observational tones that allow him to evade both the postwar nationalist ideology of Englishness and the commodified notions of rurality. All the same, he is still of the place, rooted in Coventry, in the rural culture of England, but only for him as a partly engaged train traveler there is no recourse to either politicization or commodification. By refraining from these two options, Larkin restricts himself in the poem to a colloquial language that best gestures towards his dissatisfaction with the overtly sentimentalized senses of place.

In the poems I have discussed, Larkin avoids the traps of ideological meanings through the use of ordinary language. This too manifests his distinctive poetics of place which are directly tied to his experience of alienation. In his discussion of Larkin, Watson links Larkin to Mathew Arnold who often directs readers' attention in his poems to the "ordinary, the commonplace, and the habitual" ("Clichés and Common Speech in Philip Larkin's poetry" 155). For Watson, Larkin "defiantly and in a twentieth-century mode" adopts Arnoldian ways of expression and the "clichés of ordinary speech" (155). Such ordinariness had become, by the 1950s, part and parcel of that sense of Englishness

associated with rurality. Watson, in his view of Larkin's work, links this English inclination for the ordinary with the poet's "respect for ordinary human feeling" (155). In keeping with a poetics of the common, he praises Larkin for reaching out for his audience in a language "untrammelled by Celtic twilight or poetic pretentiousness" (155).

Bruce Martin assesses this ordinariness in a different context. For him, Larkin and the American poet Robert Frost both helped to "take the wraps off the mystique of poetry in the United States as well as in England" ("Larkin's Humanity Viewed from Abroad" 141). Martin stresses the humanity of Larkin and his concern for "common life" (144) in poems such as "MCMXIV," "Faith Healing," "Sunny Prestatyn," "Essential Beauty," "Here," "The Large Cool Store," "Church Going, and "To the Sea."¹⁹ Altogether, then, Larkin's humanism and his interest in the qualities of rural English life should be read in light of the cultural debate concerning what constitutes England and Englishness. Read in that light, Larkin becomes a poet of place whose work is engaged with the realities of postwar England, especially with the actual experiences of the English people and their mundanities.

¹⁹Highly relevant to cite in this regard is also Mark Jarman's essay "A Shared Humanity in 'The Stopping Train' and 'The Whitsun Weddings.'" Jarman conceives of Larkin's moments of "self-effacement" (when Larkin casts himself only as an observer of the scene rather than as a participant) as a kind of "modesty" (90). In his reading of Larkin's representation of England in "The Whitsun Weddings," he says that "all of Larkin's strengths are present here, including his love of and doubts about pastoral England" (90).

CHAPTER V

SEAMUS HEANEY'S LOCAL BELONGING TO PLACE

The Local as a Cultural Campaign
and a Poetic Tradition

In this chapter, I argue that Seamus Heaney transcends Irish politics of place and radical partisanship by committing himself instead to the cultural substance of his local experience in Derry. If the vernacular and the rural are, respectively, Robert Frost's and Philip Larkin's foundations of American and English values, the *local* is Heaney's source of values as founded on the cultural aspects of place. Born and raised in the townland of Mossbawn, County Derry, Northern Ireland, Heaney grew up admiring, and consequently, writing about the life he experienced in his locale. From *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), through *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), to *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010), Heaney turned to the local for inspiration and personal and poetic nurture.

In his speech, "Keeping the Accent," Heaney stresses the significance of the local and argues that it "can be valued and embraced as a counter-balance to a value-system based on some larger national or international consensus" (qtd. in Nash 61). What is meant by the local? In "Local Histories in Northern Ireland," Catherine Nash argues that Heaney's sense of the local is similar to Doreen Massey's "progressive sense of place in which understanding local distinctiveness as the product of relationships and wider processes counteracts exclusive and reactionary understandings of the local" (61). For

Heaney, then, the local concerns specific local histories that, in turn, speak to “openness,” “interconnection,” and “local attachment” as opposed to an official state-sponsored history (Nash 61). At all times, Heaney’s attachment to the local is designed to narrow the sectarian gap between the Catholic and Protestant factions in the region (61). Nash argues that local histories “challenge unitary narratives of nation” and democratize the “practice and the content of history” (46-47). This is also Heaney’s purpose in endorsing the local.

In fact, his speech, “Keeping the Accent,” was part of an actual local histories campaign in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That campaign meant to foreground a sense of shared past and shared heritage among opposing traditions in the region. The movement argued that local histories can be found in the rural-based communal life that once was the shared heritage in the region; this heritage included the “rural vernacular architecture and artifacts,” “the reminiscences and stories of oral history,” “the photographs and postcards of local scenes,” “the local stories,” the topography of the landscape, the local history and names of townlands and parishes, to mention only a few (Nash 50-51). As Nash implies, through the search for affinities between the regionally diverse traditions in the region, reconciliation becomes an actuality; this search for similarities beyond the politics of sectarian divisions would equally allow each tradition to maintain its individual distinctness. In Northern Ireland specifically, “local historians, museum and education-sector professionals, policy-makers, cultural commentators, and community development workers... have sought ways of addressing history and constructively re-imagining ideas of heritage, tradition,

and culture in response to the problems of a singular narrative of political division” between the two divided communities of Unionists and Nationalists (Nash 49).

This idea of a shared past and heritage can comprise “the shared material culture and customs of rural life that preceded the hardening of political divisions around ethnicity and religion” (Nash 52). For instance, the movement emphasized that Northern Irish localities are a “product of wider interconnections and influences” that go back to the Normandy and Viking invasions in the region (Nash 61). According to the movement, recognition of that fact would help the two irreconcilable local traditions—Catholic Nationalists and Unionist Protestants—to step beyond their essentialism and to understand their Irishness in terms that are more democratic and inclusive. The main thrust of the local histories campaign in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is to foreground the idea that Irish localities are all “shaped by long histories of settlement, rather than cultural purity and simple division” (Nash 63). I understand Heaney’s participation in this campaign as part of his constant efforts to promote tolerance and peace among the opposing factions.

To speak of place in the work of Heaney then is to speak of this notion of the local. For him, place in terms of the local, as defined above, means a “combination of a broad horizon of understanding with an intimate fidelity to what is near at hand” (qtd. in Nash 61). In his Nobel Lecture “Crediting Poetry,” Heaney traces the foundation of this nurture and trust in the local, in what he calls the “concrete reality”:

To begin with, I wanted that truth to life to possess a concrete reality, and rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an upfront representation of the world it stood in for or stood up for or stood its ground against. Even as a schoolboy, I

loved John Keats' "To Autumn" for being an ark of the covenant between language and sensation; as an adolescent, I love Gerard Manley Hopkins for the intensity of his exclamations, which were also equations for a rapture and an ache I did not fully know I knew until I read him; I loved Robert Frost for his farmer's accuracy and his wily down-to-earthness; and Chaucer too for much the same reasons. Later on, I would find a different kind of accuracy, a moral down-to-earthness to which I responded deeply and always will, in the war poetry of Wilfred Owen, a poetry where a New Testament sensibility suffers and absorbs the shock of the new century's barbarism. Then later again, in the pure consequence of Elizabeth Bishop's style, in the sheer obduracy of Robert Lowell's and in the barefaced confrontation of Patrick Kavanagh's, I encountered further reasons for believing in poetry's ability—and responsibility—to say what happens, to 'pity the planet,' to be not concerned with Poetry.' (OG 417-418)

In this Nobel Lecture, Heaney credits poetry for "its truth to life" (OG 417). Nowhere else could he feel this truth possessing concreteness than in the emotive texture of Keats, the intensity of Hopkins, the rural directness and plainness of Frost and Chaucer, and the true-to-life representations of Owen and Kavanagh. This group of poets provided the foundation for, and corroborated the value of, his place-based poetry. From their example, Heaney knew that his poetry, like theirs, could also possess a corresponding directness, down-to-earthness, and accuracy. To do that, though, he had to ground his poetry in the place he was born and raised at—County Derry. Beyond that, he also turns to Northern Ireland in general. What these aforementioned poets were able to achieve—through their accuracy, intensity, down-to-earthness, New Testament sensibility, sheer

obduracy, and barefaced confrontation—Heaney internalized in his beginnings as an aspiring Irish poet. Already a minority Catholic in the predominantly Protestant milieu of Northern Ireland, he turned neither to the Catholic nor to the Protestant issues and instead focused on a direct, upfront poetic representation of the world he inhabited.

Heaney made use of the material he always had within his reach—local places, especially his locale of County Derry. Derry was the place where Heaney as a child travelled up and down, where he grew most intimate and familiar with the texture of its landscape, and about which he wrote poetry. His understanding of the value of the local not only to his poetry but also to his identity as an Irishman is based upon a poetic tradition which esteemed the texture of what constitutes Irishness. In turning to the local, Heaney follows, says Patrick Duffy, an already on-going Irish tradition. In his “Change and Renewal in Issues of Place, Identity and the Local,” Duffy explains that Irish poets have long invoked the local, citing Heaney’s predecessor Patrick Kavanagh²⁰ as an example of the ever-present fidelity amongst Irish poets to what is near at hand. He argues that Irish poets like Kavanagh had turned to the local for value at times when “urbanization was impinging on rural areas from outside” and when “local communities themselves were uninterested, indeed ashamed, of any label of localness” (15).

According to Duffy, Kavanagh “was ahead of his time in unashamedly and publicly celebrating local places at a time when the ‘City’ and urban places either here [in Ireland] or overseas were the principal markers of modernity and progress” (15). Kavanagh, Duffy adds, confronted the labels of “deprivation and backwardness” that were usually associated with the local in all its different manifestations at the level of farms, traditional

²⁰ For an insightful discussion of Kavanagh’s investing in the local, see Tomaney’s “Parish and the Universe” 311-325; Andrews 21-52.

cultural artifacts, and Irish parishes and townlands (15). As a pioneering localist in the 1930s, Kavanagh emphasized local identity against the backdrop of an encroaching global identity that took over in the surge of a “deepening globalization” across the globe (Duffy 14). Kavanagh’s localism was the launching pad for a discourse which emphasized the importance of the tiny details of the Irish local life. According to Duffy, the Irish Folklore Community, following the example of Kavanagh, “realized the importance of the local and how rapidly changes to it were taking place as long ago as the 1930s” (28). Scores of collectors,” Duffy adds, “spent lifetimes recording the little bits and pieces of life that add up to the texture and meaning of local places and landscapes, which now form a valuable archive of Irish folklife” (28). What Kavanagh and the pioneers of local perseveration programs demonstrated was the fidelity to, and “pride” in, “local settings of local communities, local culture, local building traditions, accents, dialects, music, and all the marks of significance of locality and place” (Duffy 29). In his essay, Duffy points out that poets were almost alone in recognizing the significance of the local to one’s sense of “belonging,” “roots,” “community,” and personal memory (16-17).

In addition to Kavanagh, Duffy also cites Heaney as an “organic link” between local places and their people. To Duffy—and as much as to Heaney as well—the local basically means “our first place,” the one where our “first memories” are grounded: “*Here* is where I grew up, *there* is where I went to school, *there* is the last resting place of family and ancestors” (16). In Duffy’s understanding, the local can also mean “the space we travel up and down, back and forth, every day—routine space where the tangible form and texture of landscape, like houses and buildings, fields and hedges and road networks,

are most familiar, most intimately named and known” (18). Duffy does not discuss Heaney’s relationship with Derry as such, but he acknowledges Heaney’s “particular rendition of the power of place, especially local place” (16). Turning to Heaney’s essay, “The rooms where we come to consciousness,” Heaney explains,

The cupboards we open as toddlers, the shelves we climb up to...the secret spots we come upon in our earliest solitudes out of doors, the haunts of our first explorations in outbuildings and fields at the verge of our security...At such moments we have our first inklings of pastness and find our physical surroundings invested with a wider and deeper dimension (qtd. in Duffy 16)

Though Heaney does not explicitly refer to Derry in particular in this essay, he must have thought about it as the foundation for this reflection on the power of local places in people’s lives. Citing this passage from Heaney’s essay, Duffy argues that Heaney “graphically” describes the sort of “place-anchored experience” in rural localities where individual’s “earliest memories are of learning the first practical exercises in scale, location, distance” (16). One’s earliest memories of his/her locality are “embedded in place, laden with associations for family neighbor, and community” (16). In Duffy’s words, Heaney shows us that this embeddedness “expresses a kind of organic link between place and people, where time and space are inextricably interwoven in memory and experience” (16). Says Duffy, the turn to the local is necessary, particularly at a time when a “global convergence of cultures, reflected in a universalizing of values, tastes and lifestyles,” has made the world become “dominantly global” and the people markedly less connected to their localities (Duffy 24). This lack of embeddedness, or what Duffy calls “the process of de-localization,” has rendered “local allegiance” and “local

commitment” tenuous amongst Irish people whose localities were “seeking to open up planning processes” by initiating “widespread housing projects” in the Irish countryside (Duffy 23). The characteristically local typography of the Irish landscape (with its lanes, country roads, “areas of open countryside,” and “wilderness) has been significantly altered by these projects and by their contingent urbanization ventures (Duffy 23-29).

The Irish Locale Derry

This is certainly true for Heaney’s Derry, which had been physically altered by urbanization and development projects. More to the point, local community-based life in Catholic neighborhoods had been routinely disrupted by urban progress and violence. In her study, Margo Shea contends that because of this physical transformation of Derry, the “social foundations of everyday life were shaken” (375), and many extended family members had to be separated and transferred to new residential buildings as a consequence of the destruction of their local houses and neighborhoods:

Extended families were rarely placed near one another in the new estates, so for many Derry Catholics urban renewal introduced an element of distance into family dynamics. The breakup of many of extended family networks coincided with other changes to cultural life. Residents moving to the new estates left behind their churches, schools, and community centers...Moreover, in the climate of the Troubles, the bonds of trust which had been built through proximity, family connections and longstanding neighborly relationships were insufficient as models for new residents who might have sought to establish relationships in the

new estates. The pervasiveness of surveillance and the real threat of internment led many to fear and mistrust those whom they did not know very well.²¹ (375)

However, the radical elimination of familial and neighborly ties in local communities in Catholic Derry—owing to the obliteration of the very spatial local arrangement that once helped to strengthen and to preserve these ties—did not keep Derry Catholics from re-invoking and remembering these social foundational ties in a collective memory work that ranged from stories and pamphlets, to magazines and public reviews.²²

In their collective acts of remembrance, Derry Catholics, who by the mid-60s and the mid-70s were experiencing within their own community a variety of emotional rifts and political divisions, sought to collectively remember the pre-Troubles period and the time before Derry's urbanization when community-based and local-anchored modes of living “yielded a vibrant, embracing community that prized neighborliness, social responsibility and the ability to make do with humor and grace” (Shea 396). Shea argues that such acts of remembrance amongst the Catholic local communities in Derry were not “simply an expression of nostalgia for a way of life that had ceased to exist;” rather, these acts, “conjuring up images and narratives through memories of the past, articulated a sense of what could be hoped for—trust, mutual regard, responsibility and a sense of belonging” (Shea 396). Heaney's idea of the local, recall, is, however, not grounded

²¹In her study, Shea contends that urban renewal coupled with the eruption of violence in 1960s and onwards reshaped the physical surrounding of the city—to the indignation of the Derry Catholics whose sense of community was highly derived from, and grounded in, the communal pre-Troubles experience in the characteristically Catholic neighborhoods.

²²Shea's overarching premise is to show how Derry Catholics cherished their social ties and the values they have always embraced— before the onslaught of violence and the introduction of urban redevelopment to the city—through collective efforts of remembrance. In her study, she records and cites a dozen examples of local people's reactions to the destruction of their neighborhoods either by violence or by urban progress.

necessarily in the opposition between Catholic and Protestant that defined so much of Derry's history. Rather, his poetry seeks to invoke the local precisely to overcome such partisan politics and theology.

For the purposes of understanding the local in Heaney's poetry then, it matters to know that Derry itself had a history of de-localization. The people in Heaney's hometown had undergone a decreasing sense of belonging to the local due to a contemporary global convergence of urbanization and The Irish Troubles. Duffy's insights demonstrate the ever-increasing desire of Irish poets to counter this trend and to mobilize local sensibilities. Kavanagh's localism pioneered this interest in what defines the identity of the Irish and was later applauded and embraced as a valuable model for poets and even for the local tourism enterprises.²³

As Shea shows, Derry though was different because its people were not entirely delocalized and dependent on poets for a return of what was lost. Instead, the Catholic people of Derry in particular remembered what life was like before the Irish Troubles and before urban renewal; indeed, they did their best to maintain their neighborly and familial relationships and values. These acts of collective remembrance helped the local Catholic community absorb the shock of violence when it did come during The Troubles. By invoking a past where such values as love, peace, and locally based sentiments were the anchor for social harmony and belonging, they could, as it were, prove that their place Derry was not itself the problem.

²³According to Duffy, there was an "evident rise in local heritage tourism" and a "rising interest in local studies and history courses" in Ireland in 1997. During this year, the "best-selling *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* was published, rekindling a serious interest in "re-localization" in the academia and in the tourism industry (26). In 2001, the National Museum of Country Life opened in Castlebar, "presenting the work of decades of collecting by the Folklore Commission and Folklore Department of University of College Dublin" (29).

Given that Heaney grew up in this Catholic milieu of Derry, I understand his valorization of the local in general and of the local lyric in specific. It is no wonder why he has always been a spokesperson for the significance of the local not only in the twentieth-century but also in the twenty-first.²⁴ A Catholic child raised in the rural parts of County Derry, Heaney fully understands the local substance of the Catholic experience and recognizes the ruptures which left the Catholic community physically and psychologically severed from the source of their local identity—pre-urban and pre-Troubles Catholic Derry.²⁵ As a poet, though, Heaney recognizes why his people, at a time when violence and urban renewal radically transformed the spatial coordinates of the city, would invoke their place-anchored experiences as they existed *before* this rupture.

Though Shea does not explicitly address this point, we can understand that the local was not remembered in terms of an exclusivist political or theological definition of Irish Catholic identity. Instead, Heaney reflects a moment when the Derry Catholic community cherished a lived community experience. In his poetry, he resorts to that which the Derry Catholics cherished before the onslaught of violence and the state-administered urban renewal. The value of one's eroded local life becomes even stronger than before at times

²⁴In 2003, Heaney would still express his attachment to the local lyric in his "The Guttural Muse in a Global Age," a 2003 "critically neglected essay," according to Richard Rankin Russell in his very recent book *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (2014). In a section dedicated to unravelling the complexities of Heaney's insistence on the local as represented in some of his poems in *District and Circle*, Russell shows how Heaney's speakers are able to reconcile their locally grounded identities with the globalized world they live in. In Russell's book, the long history of Irish regionalism is the critical context for discussing Heaney's oeuvre and his recourse to, and reconceptualization of, this Irish critical tradition.

²⁵In his *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing* (2002), Eugene O'Brien establishes a compelling argument with regards to the association between place and identity. Though he does not discuss Catholic Derry in specific and the ruptures of local life therein, he shows how "issues of identity become problematic" when "the relationship between a people and a place is fractured by the processes of history" (3).

of conflict.²⁶ Said another way, it is not Catholicism as such that makes things *grand*; rather, it is the recollection of a shared communal experience that Heaney means to recollect. He returns to the moment of social solidarity that preceded the political and cultural rupture of The Troubles. A poet, a cultural critic, and a close friend of Heaney, Seamus Deane underscores this community solidarity and the significance of Catholic Derry as a place:

My experience reveals something that neither Rawls nor the Western tradition either advocates or sufficiently takes into account: community, a reality characterized by the intermeshing and interconnecting mutual support which is soldered and held together as a result of people working in concert with each other for the purpose that transcends their individual selves. (qtd. in Shea 409)

As Deane explains, for the Derry Catholics, what counted was the community-based experience of life. Neither he nor Heaney resort to jingoism or theological dominance. Sensitive to the ways in which the local and place can lead to place-bound ideologies such as Nazism and Fascism, his poetry instead returns to attachments that are fundamentally experiential rather than entirely political.

The Local as a Repository of Values

Heaney won the Nobel Prize in 1995. In his “Nobel Lecture,” he makes the case for a persisting consolidation of the universal resonance of a characteristically Irish local poetry that was first internationally recognized for its value through the example of Yeats. To do this, he first alludes to his own poem, “St Kevin and the Black Bird.” That poem depends on a local story, and through it Heaney shows how the local story (and

²⁶For the association between local attachment and conflict, see Tomaney.

how many others in Northern Ireland and in the world even) functions as “a bearer of values” (*OG* 425). In discussing the importance of this local story, he identifies his belonging to the local and focuses on the formative nature of the experience he had in Derry and not on politics or theology, though he does not entirely exclude identity politics from the equation.²⁷ In short, through his focus on the local realities of his Derry and of his experience as a Derry Catholic Irishman, he addresses the more fundamental and human issues of the local as a universal experience.

Quite interestingly, for the local to function as a bearer of value, it has to resonate universally. According to Heaney, “St. Kevin and the Black Bird” is a local story that comes “out of Ireland” but has the universal resonance of a tale that people of different nationalities and across the globe can find thematically relevant (*OG* 424). In a gesture of human compassion and empathy, St. Kevin, kneeling down with his “arms stretched out,” remains motionless while one of his “turned-up” palms becomes the nesting place for a blackbird. In a gesture of altruism, Kevin, feeling “the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked/Neat head and claws,” decides to endure pain (*OG* 384):

Kevin...finding himself linked
 Into the network of eternal life,
 Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
 Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
 Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown. (*OG* 384)

²⁷For a summary of identity politics in Northern Ireland, see Cashman 114. For the problematics of Heaney’s identity politics, see Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 186-203.

The speaker invites his readers to reflect on the plight of the saint, who willingly chooses to suffer for the sake of the bird and its fledglings:

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,

Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?

Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?

Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?

Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?

Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,

'To labor and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely

For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird

And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. (*OG* 384)

The trials of this prayer in a confined cell are physically and psychologically hard to tolerate, but Kevin is even willing wholeheartedly to embrace agony and to erode completely the selfhood in this mystic communion. The rhetorical question as to whether Kevin is in agony or basically in a state of utter forgetfulness underscores the impossibility of this feat but shows as well his unprecedented dedication and commitment. In her discussion of the poem, Fiona Stafford argues that Heaney's choice

to talk about this poem in an international event like The Nobel Prize demonstrates the “paradoxical power of creative work to be both local and universal” (2). She is right to argue that the foundational basis of Heaney’s Nobel Lecture is a “celebration of local truth” (2) which can be readily seen in the poem. According to her, St Kevin’s story was “local not in the sense of having its meaning restricted to those familiar with Glendalough, but rather because it embodied an utterly convincing truth to life” (3). Stafford argues that St. Kevin’s story “remains firmly in touch with the world that we can all recognize: this is a real man, suffering the same pains as any other” (3). What makes the story universally resonant is that it has the power to “speak to people who have never been to Ireland, who know nothing of the Catholic faith, and who would not be able to identify a blackbird” (4). St Kevin, Stafford argues, is a “local hero whose story is very well made, but he also stands as symbol of hope for the entire human race” (4). Stafford rightfully points out that St. Kevin’s story acknowledges the “possibility of connection” with others (4) in a world where egocentricity and self-absorption have become the basis for human beings’ neglect of, and clinical detachment from, others. In his endurance, self-abnegation, and acceptance, St. Kevin is “revealed to be an integral part of the larger, organic unity of the world,” in spite of his hermetic solitariness (Stafford 3).

In spite of its being quintessentially Irish, St. Kevin’s story is not evoked in the context of “a partisan pride” in the Irish place whence this story came (Stafford 4). In his Nobel Lecture, Heaney himself explains the context of his local reference:

Kevin's story is, as I say, a story out of Ireland. But it strikes me that it could equally well come out of India or Africa or the Arctic or the Americas. By which I do not mean merely to consign it to a typology of folktales, or to dispute its

value by questioning its culture bound status within a multi-cultural context. On the contrary, its trustworthiness and its travel-worthiness have to do with its local setting. (*OG* 242)

Heaney describes such stories as “travel-worthy.” By that he means that they can travel because they have a universal appeal for people across the globe. Whether Irish, African, American, or Arctic, for Heaney, local stories can be of universal resonance and relevance to all people. In the same Lecture, Heaney goes on to emphasize how the “cultural values” which local Irish stories (and local stories across the globe as well) propagate can persist and outlive the extremism of radical regimes. Heaney acknowledges the fact that “elevating” and valorizing our national, local, and religious “heritage” can sometimes degenerate into the ideologies of fascism and other radicalisms, yet he proclaims that this should not stop us from maintaining strong ties with the “indigenous”:

Once again, I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing - as we have learnt to say - the local. I wish instead to suggest that images and stories of the kind I am invoking here do function as bearers of value. The century has witnessed the defeat of Nazism by force of arms; but the erosion of the Soviet regimes was caused, among other things, by the sheer persistence, beneath the imposed ideological conformity, of cultural values and psychic resistances of a kind that these stories and images enshrine. Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in an ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, our

vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous per se. (*OG* 425)

Here and elsewhere, Heaney credits the local Irish tale for its ability to subsist, endure, and finally prevail over oppression. At some point in “The Nobel Lecture,” Heaney even credits the local lyric for its transformative power, referencing W. B. Yeats’s Nobel Prize speech and his coming to Sweden to “tell the world that the local work of poets and dramatists had been as important to the transformation of his native place and times as the ambushes of guerrilla armies” (*OG* 426). The underlying implication for referencing Yeats and the Irish Movement figures (who were basically a group of local poets immersed in the project of cultural transformation in a war-bitten Ireland) is to demonstrate the by then universal significance and international reputation Yeats’ locally based poetry had acquired. With Yeats as a precedent, Heaney consolidates the value of the local to art in general and to poetry in specific.

In addition to his Nobel Lecture, Heaney had evoked the example of Yeats in an earlier essay of his, again to support the value of the local to the work of art. In his essay, “The Sense of Place,” Heaney wrote “that the first in the hierarchy of Yeats’ recollections is an experience that was obviously local and deeply involved in the spirit of place” (*Preoccupations* 136). However, Heaney is still wary of completely subscribing to all that which Yeats preached. Unlike Yeats, for instance, Heaney’s Irishness as defined by his local attachment to, and valuation of, place, is different from Yeats’ in that it makes no effort at endorsing jingoistic nationalism. By contrast, Yeats, in the 1890s and after, was “involved in a virulent effort by cultural nationalists to define their country as fundamentally opposed to Anglo-Saxon values and English identity,” cultivating “a

consciousness of national difference between Ireland and its imperial neighbor” (Allison 58). Nineteenth-century cultural nationalism, of which Yeats was a strong proponent, “promoted an idea of ethnic singularity and racial purity,” which was “associated with a Gaelic identity untainted by exogamy” (Allison 57). As Yeats propagated, the terms of commitment to a myth of an Irish place and the definition of a place-bound Irishness should embody these “essential qualities;” to him, Irish art should as well be grounded in these same merits (Allison 85).

Against that model, Heaney depicts not an atavistic race pride in Gaelic culture but rather a pride in an Irishness open to otherness. In his “Frontiers of Writing,” for instance, he explicates the terms of reconciliation between Britishness, Irishness, and even Europeanness in all their different cultural manifestations, calling for adopting a state of “two-mindedness” as a safeguard against the exclusive, one-mindedness that some people on both sides (Protestant and Catholic) prejudicially cling to (*The Redress of Poetry* 202). He invites the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland (who are fundamentally British loyalists) to “start to conceive of themselves within—rather than beyond—the Irish element” (*The Redress of Poetry* 202). Of course, this does not mean for them to entirely dismiss their British links. What Heaney basically means is that they should perceive themselves as both Irish and British. Heaney as well invites the Catholic Nationalists (a vast majority of them conceive of themselves as essentially Irish) to acknowledge the British heritage as part of their cultural identity. In fact, Heaney did not rule out any British links to his identity nor to his poetry: to him, as O’Brien argues, “the knowledge of home is the knowledge that identity must be balanced by an awareness of difference” (40).

Eschewing the limitations of Yeats's essentialism and embracing difference, Heaney invokes his local experience as a Catholic Irish poet growing up in Derry, this experience foundationally being a bearer of values rather than a demonstration of an exclusivist difference from other local Protestant experiences in Northern Ireland (*OG* 425). Despite the fact that Yeats' poetry is rooted in, and about the local, the cultural principles on which he drew to propagate his vision of Irishness Heaney refuses to follow. Instead, he cultivates a sense of place far more inclusive. Rather than Yeats, Heaney (and his generation of poets) turned instead to Kavanagh who marked "a release from the limiting perspectives of cultural nationalism and undemocratic Anglo-Irishness" (Vance 214).

But at the same time, as I pointed out earlier, Heaney is also different from Kavanagh. Where Kavanagh wrote apologetically about the local for those who had either forgotten or repressed it, Heaney, by contrast, does not. Wary of the sentimentalization and the fetishization of the local that sometimes marks Kavanagh's poetry, Heaney invokes the local solely through the filter of his own place-based experience in Catholic Derry. If Kavanagh was "a great apologist for the local" (Duffy 14), Heaney basically was not. As a poet, theorist, Irishman, lecturer, and a scholar, Heaney made every effort to systematically theorize and explicate the meaning of the local, recognizing the risks of sentimentally and apologetically invoking local sensibilities in an already divided nation.

In Heaney's poem "Digging," one, too, finds an example of a moment of reconciliation achieved between the demands of the profession and his local tradition. For instance, the speaker in "Digging" chooses to dig with a pen. Though wanting to pursue

an aesthetic profession, the speaker-poet makes this local culture (specifically defined in the poem as turf-cutting and farming) central to his vision of digging into, and exploring, the roots of his community. For Heaney, “tradition allows the regional poet to affirm the centrality of local experience to his own being, but with the hope of making that experience accessible to readers from wholly different walks of life” (Tobin 16). The speaker of “Digging” shows how substantially parallel his father’s and grandfather’s tradition is to his aesthetic pursuit: for him, his father’s local tradition is a worthy subject-matter to write about and constitutes the very substance of the poetic act. Heaney has already warned us against elevating our local pieties and conservatisms, and what he basically does in “Digging” is announce an artistic commitment to the local experience—a proclamation of making his tradition the core foundation of his aesthetic mission: “Between my finger and my thumb/the squat rests/ I will dig with it” (OG 4) This proclamation to preserve what he cherishes and what defines him as an Irish poet rooted in the soil of Mossbawn, Country Derry, constitutes the fundamental basis for his whole career.

Derry, in its basic crude local guise, captured the imagination of Heaney since he was a kid. In his interview with Seamus Deane, he remarks that “the private county Derry childhood rather than the slightly aggravated Catholic male part” was the “one temperament that took over” (“Unhappy and at Home” 61). Not only does “Digging” reflect this but so too do most of his Derry poems. In them, Heaney is concerned more with Derry as the private ground of local experience than with Derry as the site of political violence.²⁸ In his artistic endeavor (and in the midst of ongoing violence),

²⁸ From 1966 to 1972, Heaney had already published three volumes of poetry: *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, and *Wintering out*. In these volumes, his childhood experience in

Heaney has recourse to the local experience for inspiration and nurture. In this, he is doing just what the larger Catholic community in Derry did when they too found succor and stability in the Catholic collective experience that had existed before the urban and political ruptures of the Troubles. By being a member of this community, Heaney as a poet gives further credence to the culturally shaping ‘power of place’ in peaceful and in violent times.²⁹

In Heaney’s scholarship, the emphasis on local place is oftentimes read in terms of Heaney’s preoccupation with loss (Andrews 82), as if his turn to his childhood in Derry means to suggest a fall from an Edenic past. Against that view, I claim that his turn to place and the local is never just one thing but rather is *a constant moderation of his localist sentiments*. Throughout his career, Heaney persistently modifies his terms of local belonging to place:³⁰ as I pointed out earlier, he knows that one’s local belonging can degrade into radical fascism. Not only does Heaney avoid the problem of fascism through his focus on his own experience in Derry, but he also evades it by resorting to

Derry constitutes the substance of most of the poems. Attacked for his silence on the Irish Troubles, Heaney would publish his *North* in 1975 as a response to the eruption of violence in Northern Ireland. In later volumes, Heaney still tackles violence, but he gives primacy to the locally formative experience in Derry. It is important to mention that not only County Derry was affected by violence but also a number of other Counties and locations, such as Belfast, County Armagh, County Down, County Antrim, to mention only a few. The most devastating tragedy in the history of the country though was The Blood Sunday, which occurred in Derry in 1972. In this tragic event, the British paratroopers killed thirteen civil rights campaigners and wounded many others. For a thorough understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland, see Ruane and Dawson.

²⁹For a better understanding of place as a cultural anchor of stability, see Whelan 13-20.

³⁰My understanding of Heaney as a poet consistently interrogating and modifying his priorities is informed by Eugene O’Brien’s *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing*, Stan Smith’s “The Distance Between,” and Robert Welch’s *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*. These references are helpful in reading Heaney as constantly trying to gain new perspectives and testing out possibilities for his material. The context of my argument though is different, which is linked to Heaney’s modifying the association between localism and radicalism.

stories that refer to inclusiveness and tolerance rather than exclusion and triumphalism. For instance, the Irish local story of St. Kevin is for Heaney a story that speaks to the need to cultivate an empathic sense of solidarity with the other. Reading that story as one of tolerance in the immediate political context of Northern Ireland and its political partisanship, one can see that it speaks to the need to cultivate a sense of fellowship—irrespective of the restrictive boundaries of political affiliations. The story shows the necessity of tolerance for the emergence of a sense of social cohesion, a cohesion that can be founded on peace and respect not violence and power.³¹ On a universal level, St. Kevin's example speaks for hope, human suffering, connection, and acceptance. In his Nobel Lecture, Heaney applauds the “the good of the indigenous” and urges his audience to place “trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good” (*OG* 425). The good which the local holds “should encourage us,” Heaney says, “to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation of a salubrious political space” (*OG* 425).

Another way Heaney evades radicalisms like fascism is by defining his place in terms of the substance it offers to his art rather than to some atavistic concept of the Irish nation. In “Digging,” again, Heaney's local tradition is foundational to his aesthetic vision. Also, there his search for origins concerns only his family and his lived experience: he recalls digging for potatoes—without sentimentalization—in evocative details:

³¹Academic and cultural campaigns consistently tend to redefine Irishness on grounds of inclusiveness and cohesion between the opposing communities. The contributors to *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography* argue for the need “to deconstruct monoliths of exclusive identity in Ireland in favor of narratives of diversity, inclusiveness, hybridity, and fluidity” (xxii).

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
 Against the inside knee was levered firmly,
 He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
 To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
 Loving their cool hardness in our hands. (*OG* 3)

Rather than attempt to recall some racial conception of nation, he instead means to draw attention only to the distance between the speaker who has “no spade to follow” the father and the father himself. The poet speaker knows that he is separate from his father and the local tradition he stood for. But paradoxically, in the poem itself he makes that same tradition the substance the very heart of the poem. Poetry and potato farming are linked through the metaphor of digging, a metaphor for his own aesthetic prying into roots. At the same time, this poem does invoke an ongoing community of Irish Catholics in Derry where generations of turf-cutters and farmers (like his father and grandfather) understood the significance of their rural work to a local Catholic Derry community. In Neil Corcoran’s estimation, “Digging,” by “rhyming the pen with the spade,” promotes “a conception of the poem’s continuity with the world of rural work and with the quotidian life of the [Irish] rural family”³² (67). To Heaney, “Digging:”

Was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of
 words: I felt I had let down a shaft into real life. The facts and surfaces of the

³²Perhaps Heaney’s first sonnet in “Glanmore Sonnets” is the best representative example of this continuity between the poem and rural work. In this sonnet, Heaney likens the process of writing a poem to that of ploughing a piece of land. “Glanmore Sonnets” were published in *Field Work* (1979), when Heaney took a retreat in Glanmore, County Wicklow, The Republic of Ireland. In fact, the title of his collection—*Field Work*—can be seen as a testimony to the continuity between art and the land. In *Field Work*, he proclaims this ‘new’ art of his to be “a paradigm of earth new from the lathe/Of Ploughs” (*OG* 156).

things were true, but more important, the excitement that came from naming them gave me a kind of insouciance and a kind of confidence. (*Preoccupations* 37)

For his art to nourish and gain universal foothold, Heaney lays his confidence in the very local ground which he was raised at. Though he was speaking about Derry in a different context, Heaney conceives of his birthplace as giving abstract concepts “a real substance” (qtd. in Russell 321).

Another way through which Heaney moderates his local belonging to place other than the recollection of particular events and experiences is the invocation of specific things, items that are charged with local meaning. In the case of his poem, “The Harvest Bow,” for instance, the object that forms the poem’s title is linked to peace, and in so doing the object and the poem links the local to peace as well. The speaker in “The Harvest Bow” remembers his father silently plaiting a harvest bow, in what seems to be a rural ritual often performed at the end of harvest season. In an implied reference to the persistence of this emotional and significant memory, the speaker evocatively recollects the:

wheat that does not rust
 But brightens as it tightens twist by twist
 Into a knowable corona,
 A throwaway love-knot of straw. (*OG* 175)

According to Corcoran, Heaney in this poem “gives ample testimony to what is for him the permanent imaginative value of the Irish rural” (69). Described as a piece of art, this stalk of wheat becomes a symbol of peace: “The end of art is peace,” he writes in this

same poem. Of course the speaker is cherishing the memory of his deceased father, who is resting in peace and whose memory lives on through this token of love:

The end of art is peace

Could be the motto of this frail device

That I have pinned up on our deal dresser— (*GP* 175)

In his “Place, Pastness, and Poems: A Triptych,” Heaney refers to one’s sense of past as “a fundamental human gift, as potentially civilizing as our gift for love” (30). For Heaney, objects from the past are not *just* objects but a “point of entry into a common ground of memory and belonging” (31). Though Heaney does not reference his poem “The Harvest Bow,” it is a perfect representation of what he talks about in this treatise.

In his later volumes, especially *Seeing Things*³³ and *The Spirit Level*, Heaney shows the significance of objects—mostly domestic and rural—in his life as a Derry child and as a poet still in touch with a treasured past in Catholic Derry. As a cornerstone of belonging to the local through a valuable object of memory, “The Harvest Bow” cannot be said to be only a representation of “a simple happiness the poet has earned through his own imaginative plaiting of the strands of moments recalled from his boyhood in rural Ireland” (Garratt 275). In Daniel Tobin’s words, “The Harvest Bow” announces a “continuity between [father’s] fieldwork and his son’s poetry,” uniting into a

³³Notable poems among these are “The Pitchfork,” “The Settle Bed,” “Wheels within Wheels,” “The Biretta,” “A Basket of Chestnuts,” to mention only a few. In his book *Alterities: Criticism, History, and Representation*, Thomas Docherty argues that Heaney’s postmodernist interest in objects and items bears witness to the poet’s desire to “construct a world from the point of view of objects rather than that of subject of consciousness” (31). Docherty contributes to Heaney scholarship by situating the poet within a postmodernist context, opening up the conversation on postwar Irish literature and its association with postmodernism. Heaney and his postmodernist inclinations lie beyond the scope of this chapter, but this association shows how a characteristically local poetry like Heaney’s can engage questions about consciousness and life beyond the scope of its circumscribed milieu.

love knot contrary modes of living and more importantly bringing into realization Heaney's desire to make artistic and physical labor connect (Tobin 168). He had made this same desire clear in "Digging" where two other objects, the pen and the spade, are made to connect across a barrier despite their apparent disconnection: "in a profound sense, then, 'The Harvest Bow' fulfils Heaney's hopes in 'Digging' " (Tobin 168).

Where in "Digging" the only artist is the son writing with his pen, in "The Harvest Bow" his father plait a paradigm of art which reveals "a cosmic unity to which his son gives his own artistic assent" (Tobin 168). The dedication shown in plaiting the straw—"Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks/And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks/Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent" (*OG* 175)—is matched by the commitment to writing about it and to "gleaning the unsaid of the palpable" (*OG* 175). By intently eyeing this palpable stalk of wheat, Heaney evokes the memory of his father and connects with a vanished way of life. He gleans the unsaid of his experience into a visible thing: appreciation, love, continuity, and attachment to local tradition are suddenly made tangible. Heaney's valuation of the rural (which serves as an important aspect of his local experience in the rural parts of Co-Derry) does not degrade into romantic idealization or nationalistic radicalism. He values the local substance of Derry for the personal nurture and inspiration he received.

In "Loose Box," Heaney turns to land. There is always "health and worth in any talk about/the properties of the land," as the speaker of "Loose Box" says (*Electric Light* 15). The poem continues:

On an old record Patrick Kavanagh states

That there's health and worth in any talk about

The properties of the land. Sandy, glarry,
 Mossy, heavy, cold, the actual soil
 Almost does not matter; the main thing is
 An inner institution, a purchase come by
 By pacing it in words that make you feel
 You've found your feet in what surefooted means
 And in the ground of your understanding. (*Electric Light* 15)

“Loose Box” generally suggests that there are so many ways of expressing belonging to place that what matters the most is the inner foundation one has established for him/herself in relationship to that place. In his essay “Mossbawn,” Heaney speaks of the *Omphalos*, a water pump that for him “marked the center of the world” (*Preoccupations* 17):

I always remember the pleasure I had in digging the black earth in our garden and finding, a foot below the surface, a pale seam of sand. I remember, too, men coming back to sink the shaft of the pump and digging through that seam of sand down into bronze riches of the gravel, that soon began to puddle with spring water. That pump marked an original descent into earth, sand, gravel, water. It centered and staked my imagination, made its foundation the foundation of the *omphalos* itself. (*Preoccupations* 20)

Again, an object, a thing, becomes significant. In a matching degree of importance to the stalk of wheat, the pump represents for Heaney the center, the foundation, and constitutes this inner institution for the imaginative replication of the experience in a poem. In the

poem, meanwhile, the object of significance is the Irish land itself. According to Heaney, objects from our past

transmit the climate of a lost world and keeps alive a domestic intimacy with a reality which might otherwise have vanished". The more we are surrounded by such things, the more feelingly we dwell in our own lives. The air which our imaginations inhale in their presence is not musty but bracing. ("Place, Pastness, and Poems: A Triptych" 31)

As I pointed out earlier, Heaney's terms of belonging can be said to represent an alternative approach to place, one that is based on an appeal to stories and legends (St. Kevin), experiences ("Digging") and rural objects ("The Harvest Bow," and "Loose Box"). Especially embedded in the "rural image" of place are "the tested, endured solitude and the generous supportiveness of community" (Corcoran 56). Also, the rural image represents the "patient effort of labor and the nobility of suffering" (Corcoran 56). In Yeats' day, the Irish Literary Revival championed this image of rurality,³⁴ but Heaney refrains from their politicized and idealized imagery and instead appeals to the memory of the rural place, its familial ties, rural objects, and local stories. The local (its rural ways of life and the local stories enshrined in the collective community memory) "is a site for the development of virtues including commitment, fidelity, civility, and nurture" (Tomaney, "Parochialism" 659).

Also, whether invoking story and legend, or experience and objects, Heaney moderates his fidelity to the local at all times by de-romanticizing it. In his "The

³⁴For more on the representation of the Irish peasant and the cultural, economic narrative associated with this representation as mobilized by the Irish Literary Revivalists, see Hirsch 1116-1133.

Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Patrick Kavanagh,” Heaney writes, “when Kavanagh writes about places, they are luminous spaces within his mind. They have been evacuated of their status as background, as documentary geography, and exist instead as transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force” (*Finders Keepers* 148). In Edward Hirsch’s estimation, what Heaney means is that in Kavanagh “it is the meditative intelligence that gives value to the places and not the other way round” (1129).

In his poetics, unlike Kavanagh, Heaney challenges the status quo about local pieties in the Irish poetic tradition. He is neither a romantic like Kavanagh nor an essentialist like Yeats; his fidelity is only to what constitutes his experience as a Catholic Derryman and as a poet aspiring for universal resonance. As I argued earlier, Heaney even consistently questions the received notions of place insofar as he invokes localism in general and Derry in particular as a site for the development of nurture, inspiration and belonging rather than as a stage for the expression of political allegiances that foster difference and division. As Robert Welch argues, Heaney constantly departs from “settled habits of thinking,” habits that are usually tied to political and theological partisanship (269).

An example of Heaney’s de-romanticization and rejection of partisanship can be found in his poem “Death of a Naturalist.” For Welch, Heaney’s volume *The Death of the Naturalist*, which is mostly about the poet’s childhood experiences in Catholic Derry, “chronicles the dying away of conventional mind with its sets of attitudes” (224). Welch is speaking in the context of the poet’s widening the contours of his consciousness and of his reaching adulthood, but his remarks about Heaney’s departure from settled ways of

thinking resonate with the point I am raising. In the title poem—“Death of a Naturalist”—Heaney de-romanticizes the experience he once had as kid near a “flax-dam.” “Every spring,” the speaker “would fill jamptotfuls” of “warm thick slobber/Of frogspawn” and place them “On shelves at school,” waiting and watching until “The fattening dots burst into nimble/-Swimming tadpoles” (*OG* 5). The pleasurable experience of collecting tadpoles is coupled with the menacing occasion when the child once witnesses the mating rituals of the frogs which “invaded” the flax-dam on “one hot day:”

Then one hot day when fields were rank
 With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
 Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
 To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
 Before. (*OG* 5)

This experience is so significant that one scholar goes so far as to say that as the child witnesses the “gross-bellied frogs” hopping, slapping, plopping, and making “obscene threats,” we “witness the birth of the poet” (Brandes 20). In the poem written from the perspective of the child, the “great slime kings,” he thinks, are “gathered there” to take “vengeance” on him (*OG* 5). Afraid of his hands being clutched by the spawn, the boy “sickened, turned, and ran” (*OG* 5). In Rand Brandes estimation, the poem prepares Heaney’s readers for the “anti-pastoral coming-of-age poems that follow” (20). As a poet, meanwhile, the older speaker recounting the event knows that some familiar aspects in his locale can be an open door to important moments of transition and changes. Even as this child awakens to a new reality in the poem’s recorded experience, the adult poet

knows what those departures, changes of direction and transitions will make for his poetry, a poetry that itself represents the local.

As a metaphor, then, it is true what Welch says about *The Death of a Naturalist*: it does usher in a termination of the conventional mind with its sets of attitudes. As the title poem to this volume, it also serves as the launching pad for a transition. In this poem, Heaney makes the transition from a world of ideal romanticization to a world of anti-pastoralism. It is true that *The Death of Naturalist*³⁵ and also *Door into the Dark* “demonstrate the ease and fluency with the local and the familiar” (Garratt 230). But these volumes, as I have been arguing, speak to a general feature of Heaney’s poetry overall: his is a poetry that is connected to its local origins but still mindful of the moderate ways of representing this connection. In the poetry which Heaney writes after this collection, he, like the frogspawn kid, is awakened to a world of radical local pieties where “one’s sense of place is often linked with opposing sectarian identities and is of immediate relevance and potentially life and death consequences” (Cashman 133).

In his response to a question about the viability of the local in a global age, Heaney affirmatively answers “Yes”, in what appears to be an unwavering faith in “the continuing vibrancy of life in the local district” (Russell 343). In *Seamus Heaney’s Regions*, Russell argues that Heaney for the most part, especially in his *District and Circles*, has the capacity to demonstrate “dynamism in vacillating between contemporary, globalized London and back to his native district in 1940s County Derry” (349).

³⁵“The Barn” is another example of a poem that represents a moment of awakening and transition. In *The Death of a Naturalist*, however, most of the poems talk about local experiences and traditions. Most notable among these are “Blackberry Picking,” “Churning Day,” and “The Diviner.” In *Door into the Dark*, Heaney also writes about local crafts such as thatching in “Thatcher.” He as well writes about fishing and local fishermen in “A Lough Neagh Sequence.”

Globalized London, amongst the “urban centers” which Heaney mentions in *District and Circles* (2006), “have a tendency to scatter and potentially sow confusion in their centrifugal power,” while “rural places gather memories and emotions of time past” (Russell 354). Returning to his Nobel Lecture (1995), I note that Heaney, who by then had already gained universal recognition in urban centers across the globe, locates this dynamic oscillation in his own person as a Derryman traveling to Stockholm to be awarded a Nobel Prize for a characteristically local poetry:

When I first encountered the name of the city Stockholm, I little thought that I would ever visit it, never mind end up being welcomed to it as a guest of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Foundation. At that particular time, such an outcome was not just beyond expectation: it was beyond conception. (*OG* 415)

The entire Nobel Lecture, meanwhile, demonstrates this oscillation between his experience as a local Derryman and his newfound role as a universal Nobel Prize winning poet asked to address an international audience. Though he acknowledges in his speech what Russell sees as rural place’s ability to preserve memories and times past, he does not specifically think about the urban as sowing confusion.

Perhaps one reason why Heaney had no inclination to turn towards the sort of nationalism and ethnic pride one finds in so many other local poets has to do with his own inclusive sensibility. Even as a child enjoying the “security” in the “traditional thatched farmstead” in Derry, Heaney, tuning in to BBC and Radio Eireann, would listen attentively on the radio to “the intonations of London and Dublin” (*OG* 416). He would also enjoy listening to “the gutturals and sibilants of European speech,” despite the fact that he could not “understand what was being said” (*OG* 416). Through this long-distance

association with the urban English, Irish, and European centers, even as a child he felt ushered along on his “journey into the wideness of the world” (*OG* 416). It is this journey, he says, which “has brought me now to this honored spot” (*OG* 416).

Later still, as a well-known, albeit Irish poet, he was asked to participate in larger, global, international forums. For instance, the BBC included local Irish poets, such as himself, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, and Louis MacNeice as active speakers of a radio local poetry segment (Clark, “Regional Roots: The BBC and Poetry in Northern Ireland, 1945-55”). While this inclusion on a national media outlet had a huge impact in promoting him as a poet, as Heather Clark shows it also helped these Irish poets gain a reputation beyond their local environment. Rather than go on to reject his local roots, however, Heaney welcomed the opportunity to mix on an English media service with both Catholic and Protestant poets. In short, this local poetry segment at the BBC had a great role in promoting peace and tolerance amongst people of different affiliations, and made of these poets and their local poetry an example and a model of bridging divisions. To build on Clark’s argument, when the BBC brought poets from different Irish localities to work together and to represent their distinctive local poems, it demonstrated the importance of what I earlier referred to as the interconnection between the history of localities, something Heaney first talked about in his “Place, Pastness, and Poems: A Triptych.”

This interconnection serves as yet another example of Heaney’s moderation with regard to his local belonging to place. Still thinking in terms of the objects and items of the past, Heaney says that each historical object we observe in a museum or so (“ancient cooking pot or the shoe of a Viking child or a gaming board from the rubble of a Norman

keep”) “cherishes human contact and trust” (“Triptych” 37). The contemplation of such things, he argues, “emphasizes the truth of that stunningly simple definition of our human neighbor offered by the old school catechism. ‘My neighbor,’ the catechism declared, ‘is all mankind’ ” (“Triptych” 37). In this passage, Heaney implies that Irish people’s definition of who they are should go beyond the limits of their political allegiances and include wider associations of cultural and historical representations that do not expunge any links to their identity. He uses Derry as an example:

Similarly with the magnificent hoard of gold objects found in my native County Derry and now held in the National Museum in Dublin as the “The Brighter Hoard:” to gaze at those arm-bands and gorgets and lunulae, so silent and solid and patiently beyond one, is to be displaced from one’s ordinary sense of what it means to be a County Derry person. For the moment, the gazer is carried out of himself, is transported into a redemptive mood of openness and readiness.

(“Triptych” 37)

In his poem “Mossbawn,” for instance, Heaney “broadens the connotative referents of the ‘north’ to include the northern European homes of the Vikings” (O’Brien 76):

I’d told how its foundation

.....

A forked root from that ground

An make *bawn* an English fort,

A Planter’s walled-in mound

.....

But the Norse ring on your tree. (OG 14)

The name Mossbawn is situated within a “trinity of influences—Irish, English, Norse— [which] attempt to locate the ‘older strains of Norse’ within the etymology... of ‘Mossbawn’ and thence to provide a broadening of political and historical reference” (O’Brien 76). The etymology of the name allows Heaney to engage with “alterities” and to “see his home as the beginning of a journey toward a wider world” (O’Brien 76). The engagement with alterities is also seen in “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” where Heaney unearths the wider connections of the trial pieces which he finds on the shore by tracing their linguistic and intercultural roots. By casting himself as “Hamlet the Dane,” Heaney becomes a parablist connected in thoughts to the Shakespearean tragedy of “murders and pieties” (*OG* 102). He further invites his readers to “sniff the wind/with the expertise/ of the Vikings,” identifying his Irishness in connection with a history enshrined in the Irish land (*OG* 102). These connections between Irish, Norse, and English histories allow Heaney to understand his Irishness in a non-fixed medium of representation. Besides, this helps him to moderate his local belonging to place by projecting it within a wider range of intercultural associations.

Place can be as much a stage for propagandizing radical pieties as a locus for developing virtues of commitment, civility, and fidelity to what is near at hand. Heaney chooses to commit himself to defining his belonging to the local in terms of the values it supplies for him and for a universally wider audience. A sense of community, supportiveness, tolerance, and peace are major virtues which he promotes through his speeches and his place-based poetics.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

Robert Frost's Americanness, Philip Larkin's Englishness, and Seamus Heaney's Irishness are based on, and not bound by, place.³⁶ By appealing to the cultural substance of their places—vernacular, rural, and local—Frost, Larkin, and Heaney move beyond a politically bound notion of allegiance to place, even as they also go beyond the conventional reading of place and modernity as focused solely on cities. Instead of explicit political ideology or a focus on the urban, these three poets construct a poetics of place based on values that pertain to the substance and quality of life *before* the transition to modernity. Each poet finds in modernity the same problems and the same alienation that one finds in poets of the Anglo-Modernist tradition.

Unlike the Anglo-American Modernist tradition though—Pound, Eliot, Yeats—they celebrate, represent, and hold fast to a cultural system associated with the time before the onset of modernity. For instance, Frost's use of the lowbrow American idiom challenges the then fashionable use of highbrow diction and democratizes the American lyric in keeping with a pre-modern ideal of pluralism. While T. S. Eliot “eventually became a fervent Anglican, and Pound built a vast edifice of interlocking ideologies that he regarded as so absolutely true and obvious as to make fools of those who disagree with him” (Hecht 63), the three poets who follow after them each evade religious dogma and

³⁶My understanding of the distinction between *place-bound* and *place-based* is informed by Doreen Massey's “Places and Their Pasts.” As I can understand Massey, places are interconnected through a network of historical associations, and once we start thinking about the history of the place (its past historical interconnections beyond its present geography), we can transcend the limitations of essentialism and radical allegiances. The construction of the identity of any place (whether be it American, French, Irish, English) should be *based* upon these interconnections rather than *bound* by political geography.

political ideology. Frost “affiliated himself with rural New England,” an American place through which he “focuses his observations, emotions, and ideas that constituted his worldview” (Hecht 69). “Unmistakable” in this worldview, which exhibits a capacity for sympathy towards American people in rural New England, is “the rigorous insistence on poetry as a vital democratic enterprise [and as] a critical perspective far different from the cultural elitism associated with high modernism” (Hoffman 48).

In their response to the cultural decline of twentieth-century and the consequent feelings of alienation, the Anglo-American Modernists dismissed the popular culture of the masses and aligned themselves with a high European culture. In his turn, Frost valued his physical and emotional closeness to the common people, especially to the ones living in the rural parts of New England, as did Larkin in England and Heaney with the people of rural Ireland. Unlike the Anglo-American Modernists who were bound by their dogma, ideology, and elitism, Frost made “human feelings and relations [his] guiding principles for moral behavior,” clinging to a far more liberal approach to life (Monteiro 104). The same could be said of both Heaney and Larkin as well.

Rooting his poetry in his American place, Frost then served as an example for both Larkin and Heaney, who root their poetry in the soil of their English and Irish places. Just as Larkin never let himself be bound by the postwar political discourse on Englishness and embraced instead the persistent values of rural life endorsed by the entire political spectrum, so did Frost with his vision based on sympathy towards the plight of common man in a period of transition largely avoid strict ideological associations. Larkin’s poetry is based on the collective acceptance of transition and on the cultivation of endurance at times of ruptures (Pritchard, “Larkin’s Presence”). Like Frost and Heaney

he always defied notions of artistic elitism, and like the other two, often bridged the gap between poetry and popular culture. Larkin gave “English poetry back to the common reader after half a century in which that reader had been kept away from it with barbed wires and tracker dogs” (Wain, “The Importance of Philip Larkin” 351). Like Frost’s worldview, Larkin’s, too, went beyond the fashionable and the dogmatic.

In fashioning a sense of place and in responding to cultural and political ruptures, Frost and Larkin transcended the limitations of radical politics and elitist aesthetics and introduced interconnections between their place-based poetics and the world beyond them. Even though Frost and Larkin write about specific places, the human tones and subjects they write about resonate universally. Frost teaches tolerance while Larkin tells us how to endure and accept change. Only Heaney, however, managed further to expand the boundaries of his place-based poetics. In his work, he creates a series of historical interconnections that transcend political geography and sectarian affiliation.

Like Frost and Larkin, Heaney also went against both ideological and radical norms of thinking about place. To him, Frost’s use of vernacular accent in poetry “reveals that the prosodic element is able to bind people together, to conjoin at the cultural level” (Hoffman 214). Frost attempted to achieve this through writing in an American New England accent, bringing American poetry to the culturally diverse nation of American readers. Heaney, in his turn, and by understanding the resonance and relevance of Frost’s liberating example to his own sense of place, recognized the value and significance of the local in binding Catholics and Protestants together. Without reducing their place-based poetry to propaganda or to a vehicle for radical political mobilization, Frost, Larkin, Heaney appealed to the enduring vernacular, rural, and local values of their regions.

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