

WILD BOAR IN THESE WOODS: THE INFLUENCE OF SEAMUS HEANEY ON THE POETRY OF RON RASH

by Matthew Boyleston

The Appalachian Mountains cut a wide arc from the foothills of Mississippi to the island of Newfoundland. They stand as a great wall guarding the interior of the North American continent and it is to these mountains that the immigrants came, the Celtic peoples: the Irish, the Welsh, and, most prominently, the Scots-Irish from Ulster. Family's with names like Jackson, Crockett, Boone—and Rash. They forced a wild living out of the back country under the ethos of tribal honor and vigilante justice; they distilled whiskey, played new versions of ancient songs, took up jobs in the textile mills when the farms went bad, worked for the TVA, and watched their glens and hollows soaked up by hydroelectricity and the advance of progress. These are Ron Rash's people.

Appalachian folk music is a palimpsest of its Celtic antecedents: behind the bluegrass banjo tune "Wild Hog in these Woods," is the much older Irish "Bangum and the Boar." Modern Appalachian poetry works in a similar way: behind the poems of Ron Rash is the entire tradition of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh verse and by extension, the poetry of Seamus Heaney.

In his essay, "Feeling into Words," Seamus Heaney remembers the first poem in which his "feeling had got into the words, or to put it more accurately, where [his] *feel* had got into words" (41). For Rash, it is this early poetry of Heaney's that released his own poetic voice allowing him to get his own "*feel*...into the words" (41). That Rash would look to an Irish poet and not an American may tell us something more culturally interesting than merely a history of a certain poet's development. What Rash hears in Heaney is the lingering ghost of a cultural memory that is still especially strong in traditional Appalachia. What he hears is his own voice separated by nearly 300 years and the wide Atlantic Ocean. Like Heaney, Rash investigates an entire area linguistically, historically, and ethnically. His poetry is the product of a definite place and is at once in the present and the past, modern and yet ancient as the stories and mountains, the dialects and the poetic forms he uses. I want to trace the aspects of Heaney's influence on Rash through the lens of the greater cultural story that is the settlement of the Appalachian region of the United States by those peoples who left Heaney's homeland, Northern Ireland.

In her essay "Incredible Eloquence: How Ron Rash's Novels keep the Celtic Tradition Alive," Kara Baldwin explores the influence of the Celtic literary tradition, a tradition that unites landscape and mythology, a tradition whose poetry expresses, in Rash's words, an "incredible eloquence" in describing, in two ways, the sacredness of the land and its culture: the direct influence of authors such as Heaney and Kavanaugh on Rash's novels, and the indirect influence of the Scotch-Irish and Welsh cultures on Southern Appalachia (31). I am interested in both influences, but in slightly different ways and on Rash's poetry exclusively. As Anthony Hecht notes in his introduction to Rash's second volume of poems, *Among the Believers*, "his family has lived in the southern Appalachian mountains since the mid-1700's, and a knowledge and feel for this region, its folklore, faiths, supersti-

tions, loyalties and cultures, is an abiding presence in his poems” (xiii). Furthermore, similarities between the two regions, both oral cultures, both steeped in religion and folklore, both defeated peoples, has often been noted especially in David Gleeson’s study *The Irish in the South: 1815-1877*, and in a different way in David Hachett Fischer’s monumental work *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*.

Surely, then, one can say that Rash should recognize the voice of a poet growing up in a region that both influenced his own upbringing and was also in a current historically and culturally similar situation. I think, though, that this is an over-simplification—it also presents a Romanticized version of the South and Ireland (somewhat moonlight and magnolia, shamrock and shillelagh). What inspires Rash, I would argue, is what Heaney does with the gifts of his region, similar or not. And by this, I mean technique. Heaney shows Rash a full-voiced rhetoric that privileges a thick, consonantal, visceral music that is rare in American verse. Compare how Heaney and Robert Hass both write about blackberries in “Meditation at Lagunitas” and “Blackberry-Picking.” This is Hass:

Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies. (ll. 8-11)

Or from later in the poem:

There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*. (ll. 28-31)

And then Heaney:

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour. (ll. 17- 21)

In no way am I trying to argue that American verse is not musical—still, it is musical in a different, perhaps less overt way. There can be a mistrust of the highly rhetorical, an unease with poets like Walcott, Murray, and Heaney for many Americans—there is even an unfortunate school of poets who intentionally, for theoretical or political reasons, eschew music. But for Rash, the beautiful music of his regional dialect prepares him for the Heaney. Perhaps it doesn’t sound overdone because it does sound like the voices of his grandparents. Furthermore, this aspect of poetry is much more important in an oral culture where the music and rhythm of verse allow for easy memorization. B. H. Fairchild expresses this same sentiment describing Rash as

some lone craftsman oblivious to fashion, laboring over poems that are interesting (and profoundly interesting) to *hear* as well as to read. Not surprisingly, though, he is from the South, where the rough music of poetry lives on, unkillable by either ignorance or the stylistic deafness of certain academic poeticians. (Fairchild)

As much sympathy as I have with Fairchild, it is this kind of thinking that can end up marginalizing or regionalizing a writer.

In a young writer's workshop I was in a decade ago, Rash spoke with admiration about Heaney's famous early elegy, "Mid-Term Break." Although there is plenty of local color, of voice, of the mourning rites deeply ingrained in the rural culture, what Rash particularly admired was the suddenness, the poignancy of the last rhyme, "No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear. / A four foot box, a foot for every year" (ll. 21-22).

I have also heard Rash describe the "Glanmore Sonnets" as perhaps the most successful sonnet sequence in modern poetry. Famously, in sonnet III we see Heaney playfully conflating and reinventing the suitor and Romantic sonnet traditions:

I had said earlier, 'I won't relapse
From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.
Dorothy and William—' She interrupts:
'You're not going to compare us two...?' (ll. 9-12)

It is Heaney's willingness to use forms as commentary on his cultural and poetic traditions (something he picked up in part from Yeats) that so attracts Rash. This also explains Rash's attraction to poets like Donne, Frost, and Spenser. Heaney's deep transliteration (acting in his own way as a palimpsest) of Anglo-Saxon, even Elizabethan, poetic traditions grows out of his own exposure to the language of his environment. It is not just that Heaney is using traditional poetic forms in new ways, it is that he is using the poetic forms as a way of imitating a traditional, in this case, rural voice in a poem. Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse is used because it best approximates the sound of the "feel" Heaney wants to get into his words. There is also, of course, the political irony of using the English verse forms in Irish verse. One thinks of poems like "Bone Dreams":

I wind it in
the sling of mind
to pitch it at England
and follow its drop
to strange fields. (ll. 12-16)

Or consider the ever present irony of Heaney's *Beowulf*. I do not want to push this idea that Heaney gets his poetic identity exclusively from another culture's poetry (part of what I am arguing Rash does)—one must remember Kavanaugh's influence on Heaney. I also do not want to necessarily suggest any kind of post-colonial reading, but it does seem that the ear can retain an appreciation for sound and craft through the movement of cultures—or more explicitly: technique and craft are content—that modernist principle.



Some forms approximate (or perhaps *preserve* is a better word) that “feeling into words” better than others.

For Rash this rewriting, this palimpsestic urging, is in the Welsh tradition—not the medieval or Renaissance English. The medieval Welsh poem *The Mabinogion* figures prominently in Rash’s second book of poems, *Among the Believers*. The volume includes a direct translation of a scene in “Branwen, Daughter of Llyr” and a transliteration of the famous tree, half of which is burning and half green with leaves. In Rash’s poem, this tree grows on the banks of the Watauga River in North Carolina. Rash also employs ancient Welsh poetic forms such as *cynghanedd* and marries them to modern American free and blank verse. *Cynghanedd* is a complex pattern of interlacing internal rhyme, accentuation, and alliteration. Indeed, ancient Welsh poetry in general and *The Mabinogion* in particular give *Among the Believers* thematic structure and historical depth. In a way, Rash’s poems are themselves metaphors for the Appalachian region whose culture has its direct Celtic antecedent. Consider the opening of his poem “The Corpse Bird.”

Bed-sick she heard the bird’s call
fall soft as a pall that night
quilts tightened around her throat,
her grey eyes narrowed, their light. (ll. 1-4)

Notice the interweaving of internal rhymes, alliteration and assonance. The rhyme of *call*, *fall* and *pall*, sounds against the internal rhyme in line one of *heard* and *bird* and the alliteration in *bed* and *bird*. The pattern of exact rhymes comes in threes which provides a formal skeleton through which to stitch less noticeable sound patterns, such as the assonance in *throat* and *narrowed*. Rhymes such as *night*, *tightened* and *light* propel the reader forward through the poem, not just from line-to-line as is often the case with end rhyme. After all, rhyme is essentially an application of rhythm, familiar sound extended over time. Jesse Graves in his essay “Lattice Work: Formal Tendencies in the Poetry of Robert Morgan and Ron Rash” points to the poem’s seven-syllable verse line and describes the poem’s effect of rhythm and rhyme as a “feast of sound chimes” (83). This particular pattern of alliteration and internal rhyme is a close approximation of *cynghanedd* in a regional dialect. Rash brings the reader into the poem through sound, or as C. S. Lewis usefully said of Tolkien, “he had been inside the language” (138). In an essential way, Rash has been inside the dialect.

Now listen for the alliterative ghost beneath these lines from Heaney’s “Death of a Naturalist”:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell. (ll. 1-6)

Heaney has internalized the rhythm of alliterative verse into contemporary verse without

being bound to its strike organizational principles. Unlike Auden's experiments with archaic meters, Heaney strikes to use the forms so that the forms do not draw attention to themselves. Heaney is not using the form as Auden does to comment interpretively on modern society, he is using the ghost of alliterative verse because it is linguistically appropriate. Neither of these is an accurate or museum-quality reproduction of older poetic forms—they are living, breathing examples of that form reborn in a modern culture.

We must not ignore content either. In a poem like "Funeral Rites," Heaney is able to link together a political awareness with its personal roots. The "neighbourly murder" around him is personalized in the experience of a young boy's sensory experience of funerals (l. 34). The great healing funeral march to Newgrange in the Boyne valley (with its hovering weight of the Battle of the Boyne) becomes this physical linking thread that sews the political and the personal together. It is not only good art; it is good politics. Heaney even attempts to link some Irish cultural past with this common funeral experience, asking Ireland to remember its first experience with death—asking Ireland to invest these new deaths with the perspective it had on the healing powers of the funeral, and, more importantly, the verification of that life by each community. As Heaney says in an introduction to this poem in a reading from the BBC, what was just as important was this verification—the returning home after the funeral to talk about the person's life (Nov. 25, 1981).

For Rash, this returning home is largely carried out in the dramatic monologue—his voice giving voice to the voices that are gone. That he has the poetic authority to do so is not necessarily a political question (that he is descended from the very speakers of which he writes); it is an authority manifested in craft and technique, getting the voice just right, the appropriateness of marrying the form to the content (while still slightly changing the form). During the costume design for *Ben-Hur*, careful decisions were made about how much to deviate from the historical accuracy of the costumes—if the costumes were presented as they really were, the audience would not believe they were accurate—instead, costumes were modernized slightly which paradoxically, allowed the audience to believe that the costumes were historically true. The same principle applies here. We believe the stoical grief of the speaker of Rash's monologue "Black-eyed Susans," a man lamenting the death of his wife who continued to love her long-dead first husband, precisely because it is not written in exact tetrameter, dialect, or *cynghanedd*, although it employs elements of each of these:

Sometimes
 on a Sunday afternoon
 I'll cross the pasture, make sure
 her stone's not starting to lean,
 if it's early summer bring
 black-eyed susans for her grave,
 leave a few on his as well,
 for soon enough we'll all be
 sleeping together, beyond
 all things that ever mattered. (ll. 60-69)

In this poem, Rash has softened and deepened his engagement with *cynghanedd*. *Sure, her* and *summer; be, sleeping, beyond*, merely suggest the triple pattern of rhyme and alliteration without explicitly stating the form. The art, the artifice, of the poem has melded with the soft lilt of the mountain speech.

Or consider the poem “Wolf Laurel” from Rash’s third collection, *Raising the Dead*. When this poem was published in *Poetry Magazine*, it was immediately noticeable how radically different the poem sounded from all else in that edition. “Wolf Laurel” tells the story of a family’s disastrous trek through the winter mountains to hunt out a wolf that had been ravaging their sheep. On the return journey through the thick snow, the father gives out and his three sons, unable to carry him home before dark, are forced to freeze his body in a creek so that it won’t be taken by the wolves in that glen. The poem is a thick mesh of patterned sound:

Tree branches ice-shackled, ground
hard as an anvil, three sons
and a father leave the blaze
huddled around all morning. (ll. 1-4)

However, what is more interesting is the way that Rash heightens the sense of dramatic urgency in the poem by developing the poem as one long sentence, clauses built up upon clauses. The marriage of the thick sound and the building cadence of the verse accurately depicts the anxious feel of feet trudging through snow, of frozen hunters desperate to get home before dark.

Compare a Rash line to the lines of three other poets also included in the December, 2001 issue of *Poetry*. This is Rash: “the creek’s scab of cold covered / with snowdrift” (ll. 22-23). And now Stephen Dodyns from his poem “[Over a cup of coffee]”: “Over a cup of coffee or sitting on a park bend or / walking the dog” (ll. 1-2). And W. S. Merwin from his poem “To Luck”: “In the cards and at the bend of the road / we never saw you” (ll. 1-2). And, finally, Chris Green from “Christmas Tree Lots”: “Christmas trees lined like war refugees” (l. 1). The music and thick resonance of Rash’s poem immediately stands out from the even-keel, plain-speech style of most of other entries—as it does from the major trends of contemporary American poetry.

There have long been studies tracing the vestiges of modes of pre-Enlightenment English in Appalachia. As Joseph Sargent Hall notes in his study “The Phonetics of Great Smokey Mountain Speech,” Appalachian speech retains certain “‘Anglo-Saxon’, ‘Chaucerian’, and ‘Elizabethan’ patterns of diction: ‘spend (express) one’s opinion, swing for singe, and use for dwell’ for example (5). But more importantly for Rash, pre-Appalachian speech makes use of a “sound system which reflects and illustrates so well the phonology of early modern English. Pre-enlightenment British and Celtic patterns of pronunciation live in this isolated region. It makes phonetic sense for Rash to look to the poetry of the British Isles for an appropriate approximation of Appalachian speech. After all, it is in this region that these patterns of diction and pronunciation have endured. Furthermore, the translation of Irish music into the Appalachian idiom has also been confirmed by the work of Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell, who recorded songs of British Isles in their Appalachian equivalents (5). This cultural exchange affirms my earlier supposition

that Rash's poems may work as a palimpsest over the antecedent traditions of Irish, Scottish and Welsh verse.

In his first book of poetry, *Eureka Mill*, Rash explicitly uses ancient English verse forms in order to clearly, poetically, divide the two different lifestyles of the Appalachian people: the ancient life of the small mountain farmer and the new life lived as a mill worker in a mill village. The alliterative verse poem, "Fighting Gamecocks," is in sharp contrast to the poems written in iambic quatrains that surround it. The alliterative verse appropriately expresses the poem's content. Fighting game birds offers a barbaric, uncivilized, psychological escape for mountain men now bound to the confining rhythms of the cotton looms. Rash alludes to the ancient soul of his subjects, people living a harsh existence where conflict and gambling were more than merely entertainment, they necessary skills to survive.

What I admire most about Rash's poetry is his unwillingness to subvert verse to the flattening out of prose or plain-speech. Where Seamus Heaney invests his own poetry with the sound, 'the feel,' of his native Northern Irish, Rash tunes his poetic ear to the last wisp of an earlier dialect. Both Heaney and Rash realize that one's speech is a marker of one's identity and that to truly capture a people in verse, one must trace the very words they use and their patterns of pronunciation. One must find the "feel of the words." Rash's poetry engages fully the cultural and historical traditions of the people of the Southern Appalachian mountains. His voice is the bluegrass beyond the bagpipes—the bourbon born out of the peat and pot-stills.

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