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CULTURAL AMBIGUITY ABOUT FAITH: SOME ALLERGIES IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: It is rare to find a militant atheism in the English literature of any quality; nowadays in the field of narrative of fiction the religion is more absent than satirised or attacked. Nevertheless there are three families of narrative that the Author explores: first, the novels and novelists who seem initially atheist ((I. McEwan, R. Ford); secondly, a whole family of fiction that is openly spiritual without being religious (Y. Mantel, D. Copland); thirdly, some novelists who seek to counter atheism by mean of their writing (F. O'Connor, J. R. Tolkien). This article offers some theological reflections on the evangelization because «a certain openness to the possibility of mystery» remains as a characteristic of the literature.

KEYWORDS: literature and religious faith, pre-evangelization, religious imagination, pedagogy of desire.

Ambigüedad cultural acerca de la fe: algunas alergias en la literatura

RESUMEN: Es raro encontrar un ateísmo militante en la literatura inglesa de cierta calidad; hoy en día en el campo de la narrativa de ficción la religión está más ausente que satirizado o atacada. Sin embargo, hay tres familias de narración que el autor explora: primero, las novelas y los novelistas que parecen inicialmente

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ateos ((I. McEwan, R. Ford), en segundo lugar, una familia entera de ficción que es abiertamente espiritual sin ser religiosa (Y. Mantel, D. Copland); en tercer lugar, algunos novelistas que tratan de contrarrestar el ateísmo por medio de su escritura (F. O'Connor, J. R. Tolkien). Este artículo ofrece algunas reflexiones teológicas sobre la evangelización, porque «una cierta apertura a la posibilidad de misterio» permanece como una característica de la literatura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura y fe religiosa, pre-evangelización, imaginación religiosa, pedagogía del deseo.

Although most of the literature I will be discussing comes from the field of narrative fiction, and mainly in English, I would like to begin with a poem. In fact this poem was written by an Irish friend of mine, Seamus Heaney, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, but who sadly died a month ago (and at whose funeral I was invited to say a prayer). This short poem is entitled «In illo tempore», thus echoing the opening words of the gospel reading in the Latin Mass. It also points to an older epoch or context for faith, because as we will see the poem divides into two moments, a time of childhood religion and then a time of adult unbelief. This poem about radical religious change evokes the collapse of a whole language of meaning. It captures the end of a traditional culture, where religious symbolism had constituted the natural cement of a whole society, and then this unity of culture is succeeded by the arrival of a new loneliness, a situation of insecurity where religion has become unreal, and where all forms of credibility have become fragile. This poem therefore is not really about atheism in the strong sense of a negation or refusal of God. It is perhaps much closer to the lived situation of many people who find that the spiritual roots of their early years have weakened or disappeared, leaving them not with a rejection of faith but rather with a limbo where the religious horizon is absent. A Spanish theologian once commented, with a play on words, that «God is missing but not missed» (*Falta Dios pero no se le echa en falta*)¹. In Heaney's poem, written about 30 years ago, God is missing but to some extent missed, because there is a sense of having lost something fundamental without discovering a valid alternative anchor for existence.

¹ Josep Vives, «Dios en el crepúsculo del signo XX», *Razón y Fe*, 223 (1991), p. 468.

IN ILLO TEMPORE

*The big missal splayed
and dangled silky ribbons
of emerald and purple and watery white.*

*Intransitively we would assist,
confess, receive. The verbs
assumed us. We adored.*

*And we lifted our eyes to the nouns.
Altar-stone was dawn and monstrance noon,
the word rubric itself a bloodshot sunset.*

*Now I live by a famous strand
where seabirds cry in the small hours
like incredible souls*

*and even the range wall of the promenade
that I press down on for conviction
hardly tempts me to credit it².*

After the first stanza which pictures the old-style missal, the word «intransitively» introduces a series of references to grammar. «Intransitively» suggests the passivity of routine sacramental practices. But the short sentence «we adored» indicates something deeper, an authentic experience of mystery at the heart of the old Catholicism. The third stanza indicates how the whole cycle of daily life seemed filled with religious symbolism from dawn to dusk. As I said, these first three stanzas develop a metaphor of grammar, as if religion had previously provided a grammar for existence, a strong structure of meaning which has now faded. The fourth stanza introduces us to a different «now» and to an isolated «I». The whole first part was dominated with the plural «we», by a sense of togetherness in tradition and in the light of daytime. Now the individual walks alone by night near a sea shore. These lines play, at least indirectly, with the Latin root of *credere*. The birds seem like

2 Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*, London: Faber, 1990, p. 206.

«incredible souls»: is there anything spiritual? And the solitary walker wonders if even the sea wall can guarantee to support him. This human construct does not offer a foundation for trust, to «credit» it. All beliefs have become weak. Everything is questioned or doubted. The collapse of grammar is total. But, as I said, this is not militant or proud intellectual atheism. Rather it is a poem about cultural change, a poem mourning a lost world and honest about a new impotence in isolation.

As I said, most of the examples I will mention will come from novels, but even here it is rare to find militant atheism in literature of any quality. George Lukacs once commented that the novel is the genre of a world without God. The very existence of fiction as we know it today is a modern phenomenon, dating from the late 17th century, and from the beginning it tended to specialize in secular perspectives or in what Charles Taylor calls an «immanent frame»³. At least in the English-speaking world people identify the rise of the novel with the emergence of a new social class - those with the education of being able to read and with the leisure to read at length. Many in the audiences that went to Shakespeare's plays could be illiterate but this was no longer possible for novels. Obviously the new public for fiction wanted to read about their own concerns and the new literary genre had a particular gift for exploring the drama of the individual, for entering into the feelings and consciousness of characters and not simply recounting outer events. In this sense a novel does not normally deal with philosophical positions directly. To echo a remark of Chesterton, only second-rate fiction gives us the naked wrestling of ideas. Instead philosophies become incarnate in complex ways, more by evocation than by affirmation.

Few are the novels that confront religious horizons from the inside, from the point of view of the believer. There are famous exceptions such as *The Diary of a Country Priest* but the vast majority of novels that explore religion do so from the outside: they tend to avoid the experience of faith or else they concentrate on the externals of church religion. But in most literature of today religion is totally absent rather than satirised or attacked. Unbelief is often silent. Faith is marginalized or unreal. The life presented usually seems radically immanent and godless. But this initial majority appearance is not the whole story. There are three

3 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 539-593.

different families of narrative that I want to explore. First I want to highlight some paradoxical aspects of novels and novelists that seem initially atheist. I then want to mention a whole family of fiction in English that is openly spiritual without being religious. And thirdly some attention should be given to Catholic novelists who seek to counter atheism by means of their writing. Having surveyed these three tendencies I hope to offer some more theological reflections on all this field.

I begin with an Irish novel of this last year, Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary* is one of the candidates for this year's Booker Prize. The story gives us an elderly Virgin Mary full of memories, almost a prisoner of her son's disciples, whom she regards with contempt and who do not want her version of the story. She saw no miracle at Cana, she leaves Calvary before Jesus died, and she thinks she dreams of something like Resurrection. Obviously this narrative is deliberately unorthodox and provocative. It is a dark tale of tragedy rather than a «sweet story» redemption that «will grow poisonous» and Mary's final summary of the situation is one of desolation: «it was not worth it»⁴. Clearly this is an atheist novel written in a mood of deconstruction, and a theatre version of it caused protests in New York when it was performed as a monologue. Toibin's previous novel, *Brooklyn*, contained a surprisingly positive figure of a priest, but this time he has opted for something more hostile and disturbing. As distinct from McEwan and Pullman whom I will discuss next, this is written from within an inherited Catholic imagination, in a spirit of revisionist rejection.

Everyone has heard of the so-called «new atheism», especially in English and especially associated with Richard Dawkins. It can be seen as a form of fundamentalist scientism allied to a hatred of religion as a source of deception and of evil. It is painfully ignorant of theology and sees no difference between faith and discourse about the existence of God. There are some novelists who admire this new atheism but it is significant that their writings are much more subtle than the rather crude diatribes of Dawkins. Some of the principal authors here include Ian McEwan, Philip Pullman (both English) and the similar but less openly atheist approach of the American novelist Richard Ford. Pullman, whom I will treat briefly, is the popular author of about 30 books and his target audience is older children, the ones who might be reading

4 Colm Toibin, *The Testament of Mary*, New York: Viking Books, 2012, pp. 67, 80.

the more obviously Christian Tolkien. Instead Pullman has said that his books are about killing God (who is called the Authority and his organization is Magisterium)⁵. Although Pullman says that through his fantasy stories he wants to undermine Christian belief, the previous archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has welcomed the books as a potential purification of false images of God so frequent in our culture. Certainly the god figure who is the enemy in Pullman's books is not the God of Christian revelation, but how many of the young readers are able to make that kind of distinction? One fears that the reading of these attractive stories can easily induce a certain cynicism about churches and a suspicion that all religion is false.

Themes of belief or unbelief are not central in the work of the American novelist Richard Ford, and yet he offers some eloquent expressions of this drama. His tone is different to that of Pullman but ultimately his writings are equally closed to any definite faith. His novel *The Sportswriter* offers a perfect example of religious feeling without creed or commitment. Here we have a central figure, a journalist, whose marriage has broken up after the sudden death of one of their children. Much of the action takes place on Easter Sunday which he describes as the optimist's holiday. At one stage he ponders the fact that his separated wife will certainly not be bringing their two children to church, «a fact that worries me — not because they will turn out godless (I couldn't care less) but because she is bringing them up to be perfect little factualists and information accumulators with no particular reverence or speculative interest for what's not known»⁶. He by contrast has moments of wonder, reverence, artistic self-transcendence, which he recognizes as quasi religious. At one point unexpectedly he decides to visit a Presbyterian church during the Easter service, but stays symbolically at the back. He listens to the sermon without sharing its vision of faith. But while joining in a hymn he reaches the feeling he had been searching for: «a rare immanence is mine... in the promise that more's around here than meets the eye, even though it is of course a sham». Suddenly he decides

5 See Arthur Bradely and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, London: Continuum Books, 2010, pp. 56-81. The subtitle of this book is significant, pointing to the fact that the success of the new atheists came in the years after the shock of the attack on the Twin Towers and the consequent revulsion with religion as a source of violence.

6 Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 200.

to leave the church, saying «I am in no need of messages, having taken in all I want and can use, am 'saved' in the only way I can be (pro tempore), and am ready to march on toward dark temporality»⁷. This seems to capture a stage beyond the Heaney poem — a convinced and even cynical unbeliever who nevertheless needs to nourish his undernourished sense of mystery.

Turning to Ian McEwan we have an openly atheistic novelist but one who offers a certain self-critique of a merely materialist philosophy. In his 2005 novel entitled *Saturday* the central figure is a neuro-surgeon called Henry Perowne whose thinking tries to be totally «factualist» to use that word from Ford. The text even describes him as a «coarse unredeemable» materialist or a «professional reductionist»⁸. However the movement of the story and even the members of his own family put his narrow empiricism into question. His daughter is poet. His son a musician. At the end of a day of crisis this pragmatist surgeon operates on and saves the life of a disturbed man who nearly murdered his family. Indeed it was the recital of a famous poem about loss of faith (Arnold's «Dover Beach») that caused the potential killer to stop. Here we have an indication of McEwan's substitute religion of «secular transcendence» (138), or of what even Christopher Hitchens called novels of the «non-supernatural numinous»⁹. It is as if he is undermining the more extreme positions of Dawkins, with its reduction of all questions to scientism. For McEwan the novelist, as distinct from Perowne the positivist, the creative art of the novel itself invites us beyond mere rationalism to acknowledge aesthetic and moral horizons that speak to human depths. «The human disposition is to believe» and when crisis comes, to «shift ground» and «go on believing» (151). This human need is embodied in the novel and even if the religious answer is rejected as an illusion, an «excess of the subjective» (17), the novel itself undermines any excessively confident or naïve materialism. Instead it celebrates other dimensions of human consciousness and of human need. Ultimately *Saturday* is suggesting that literary imagination itself offers a limited but crucial answer to religious hunger and gives expression to what is paradoxical in our humanity. Thus the novel dramatizes an

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239.

8 Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, London: Vintage Books, 2005, pp. 134, 272. Other page references to this novel will be given in parenthesis in the text.

9 Quoted in Bradley and Tate, *The New Atheist Novel*, p. 18.

ironic conflict of horizons — between the closed atheism of the central character and the inadequacy of this philosophy to do justice to his own artistic moments of strangeness. One recent commentator has argued that Saturday «longs for the unbound utopian energies that it seeks to contain»¹⁰.

In McEwan and in Ford, and in other writers to be mentioned later, we can diagnose a particular form of contemporary atheism, what I will call threshold paralysis. This means an inability to cross the threshold into the definiteness of Christian faith, accompanied with a recognition of a human need to search beyond the surface of life. Before looking at some other examples of this attitude, let me draw on an insightful text of Karl Rahner, written nearly 40 years ago:

«Many agree that we can adore the ineffable in silence, but it seems almost a lack of good manners to point to this or that reality in our experience and to say: God is here. It is obvious that for Christianity, as a religion of historical revelation, this tendency constitutes a radical threat»¹¹.

In this way Rahner pointed to a non-intellectual and more subtle form of unbelief as a complex challenge, in the sense that many people admire depth or religiousness in a vague way but they do not have the conviction to enter the Christ-encounter that is the core of faith. The realism of the gospel seems too much, too definite. This is not atheism in a strong sense. Instead it is a form of existential shyness about faith that seems more typical of our time. Before we ask how are we to discern this phenomenon, let us look at some more examples in literature of this allergy against full Christian faith.

As expressions of a more openly «spiritual» form of resistance to concrete faith commitment, I want to discuss two popular Canadian novelists, Douglas Coupland and Yann Martel both of whom explore religious issues more positively than explicit British atheists such as McEwan or Pullman, and yet Rahner might accuse them of exploring mystery without the courage of any commitment or creed. In my terms they represent subtle versions of threshold paralysis. They could be classified as

¹⁰ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-first Century Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 157.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, New York: Seabury Press, 1978, pp. 82-83.

embodiments of religious relativism, but perhaps they challenge us to avoid hasty judgement and to exercise a certain skill of discernment. I propose that this spiritual searching marked by impotence for commitment, which is central in these two authors, represents a significant cultural phenomenon of today, and one that requires serious pastoral and theological attention. Obviously here we are dealing with a very different kind of literature to the anger of Toibin or the more cool dismissiveness of McEwan or Pullman. Instead we find a fascination with religious hunger and with spiritual experience but a general inability to reach any affirmation of faith.

I start with Martel and with his well known novel which, with the same title, became a film, «Life of Pi». The book is explicitly about the possibility of believing in God and it ends up seeking to affirm God. But it does so in ways that would not pass a litmus test of theological orthodoxy. Is this surprising? Does its lack of Christian concreteness mean that it is really an expression of unbelief? Some more impatient theologians might judge it negatively. What might their main accusations be? That its central figure is a syncretist mixture of various religions, having created his own convergence of Hindu, Muslim and Christian. That the plot is typically post-modern in that the key question at the end is which story do you prefer to believe? That the so-called spirituality of the novel is one of quasi-gnostic vagueness, so that the text is studded with expressions about «a trusting sense of presence and ultimate purpose»¹². On the other hand the novel can be defended as an honest pilgrimage in tune with contemporary sensibility, and one that faces the difficulties of faith today. «God is hard to believe, ask any believer». Using terms that are parallel to what was seen in McEwan and Ford, the young boy (who has survived a long journey across the ocean with a tiger) says to his empirical questioners: «You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently... You want dry... factuality»¹³. Thus, as we have seen in other examples, this novel situates the tension between belief and atheism in the zone of disposition, in a conflict between narrow practicality and imaginative openness. Ultimately, unlike McEwan and company, this novel is saying that God is the better story. How can theology

12 Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, New York: Harcourt, 2001, p. 92.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 437.

react to such a position? Should we be grateful that the God question is not only not absent but surprisingly present? Or should we regard it as a more subtle form of non-faith, fideist and relativist in a postmodern way? Both judgements can be defended. My central point, however, is that literature, whether friendly or hostile to the possibility of God, is by its very nature much more ambiguous than philosophy. It is at least significant that Martel's popular novel offers an ironic critique of rationalist atheism and a tentative suggestion that we do not arrive at faith except through a narrative of surprise.

Something similar can be found in the writings of another Canadian, Douglas Coupland. To put it simply, they are allergic to ecclesial or creedal forms of religion but they dramatize an eloquent defence of spiritual horizons and of fundamental questions about meaning and purpose. For instance in his collection of stories entitled *Life after God*, he says that he writing for the first generation raised without religion and the central character worries about the numbing of religious feelings. This generation lacks something important, we are told. Thus we find sentences such as the following: in our culture «the absence of death in most people's early years creates a psychic vacuum of sorts»¹⁴. In a later novel entitled *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a spiritually suppressed generation is depicted as «desperate for just the smallest sign that there is something finer or larger or more miraculous about ourselves than we had supposed»¹⁵. They think «the opportunity for holiness is gone, but this isn't true»¹⁶. These surprisingly explicit evocations of a spiritual desert after the collapse of traditional religion have considerable success with some young adult readers in the English-speaking world, and some of his books have been translated into Spanish. They reveal another form of what I was calling threshold paralysis, which, as already indicated, seems to be a more significant phenomenon today than outright atheism.

How can we describe or understand this further? A distinguished Irish philosopher, William Desmond, identifies a barrier between immanent self-transcendence and the more authentically religious horizon of Transcendence as Other «beyond all self-determining self-realization»¹⁷.

14 Douglas Coupland, *Life after God*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 109.

15 Douglas Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, New York: Harper Books, 1998, pp. 282-283.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

17 William Desmond, *God and the Between*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p. 23.

The various literary authors that I have mentioned find that frontier impossible to cross. Unlike more militant philosophical atheists, the very nature of literary imagination tends to recognize the ambiguous hungers of human self-transcendence, but as Rahner so accurately indicated, for these authors the possibility of a transcendent God is simply off their map.

Before asking, by way of conclusion, what theological or pastoral insights emerge from this exploration of some works of literature, I should acknowledge that there are many famous literary figures in English who embody a highly Catholic and orthodox faith vision, either directly like Flannery O'Connor or indirectly like Tolkien. Indeed they both set out to disturb the dominant secular culture but in rather different ways. O'Connor once wrote in a letter that for her «there is only one Reality», the Incarnation in which «nobody believes» today, and hence «my audience are the people who think God is dead»¹⁸. She wrote that «at its best our age is an age of searchers», of those who «can neither believe nor contain [themselves] in unbelief»¹⁹. In another lecture she put it more strongly: «Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause»²⁰. Hence her stories and novels narrate comic and grotesque situations of the erosion of pride and the arrival of grace. The typical strategy of her narrative could be called confrontational and dialectical. Tolkien by contrast was gentler and less vehement, and yet equally clear about his intention to awaken a sense of faith. He saw his fantasy-fiction as at least a form of pre-evangelisation. In his book of essays entitled *Tree and Leaf*, he talks of how through a narrative, encountering a world of mystery we can realize that the horizon may be larger than we imagine. Thus fairy stories allow «a gleam of joy come through» and in this way fiction (including of course his own) can be «an echo of *evangelium*» because the gospels «begin and end in joy»²¹.

18 Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, New York: Library of America, 1988. p. 943.

19 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, London: Faber, 1972, p. 159.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

21 J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, London: Unwin, 1964, p. 62.

Returning then to such authors as McEwan or Ford, and other literary writers who depict life without the possibility of religious faith, what implications emerge for theology or for evangelization? We have seen that there is serious alienation or distance from church forms of faith, and hence these literary authors seem to represent a widespread reality in the lived culture of today. We have also identified a form of paralysis or impotence before the definiteness of Christian faith. But reflecting theologically and more positively, many of these works of literature challenge us to recognize spiritual self-transcendence as a contemporary Areopagus. A certain «openness to the possibility of mystery» remains characteristic of the much literature²². In other words, an important gateway towards faith can be found in the pre-religious zone of aesthetic wonder. The indirect rhetoric of Tolkien seems more suited to our cultural moment than the brilliant shock-tactics of O'Connor. As I have tried to argue in a recent article, we are invited to re-think pre-evangelization (a term used by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi* but seldom mentioned today)²³. This ministry in the zones of disposition and of desire is as crucial today as they were for St Paul in Athens. Even the novels of some convinced atheists give evidence of honest self-questioning, leading their characters into moments of shy fragility and of searching beyond the confines of their explicit ideas. Shakespeare's Hamlet said to his friend Horatio, «there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy» . The imaginative complexity and subtlety found in literature liberates us from the more closed and ultimately unworthy certitude of more militant atheists.

One final perspective should be mentioned, even if it cannot be developed on this occasion. John Henry Newman is one of many religious thinkers who have stressed the role of the «religious imagination» in the journey towards faith. In fact he himself wrote two novels but that is not the point here. His position can be summed up in words that he used as an Anglican (in controversy with the prime minister Robert Peel) and repeated years later as a Catholic: «the heart is commonly reached, not

22 Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: religious readings of contemporary fiction*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 59.

23 «Hacia una nueva pre-evangelización: reflexiones para el Año de la Fe», *Razón y Fe*, No. 1379 septiembre 2013, 117-128.

through the reason, but through the imagination»²⁴. For Newman the function of imagination was literally to «realise» faith, in the sense of making God existentially real in one's life. The danger he discerned was that without imagination God can remain vague, conceptual, or «un-real» (a favourite negative word of his) but imagination is able to open doors of spiritual perception where religious truth is recognized personally. Imagination in fact can rescue us from a sense of absence to give us a sense of presence.

In this light what we have discovered in various literary authors can be given more focus. In general perhaps the battleground of our culture lies more in our self-images than in our ideas. More specifically even atheist novelists find that their imagination calls them beyond closed intellectual horizons into realms of positive ambiguity and a certain openness to mystery. If so, our theology of evangelization needs both to pay attention to the sensibility revealed by literature and also to renew its own ability to create a contemporary «pedagogy of desire» (to use an expression of Pope Benedict)²⁵ in order to communicate with more imagination, not just an affirmation of the existence of God, but the different and larger horizon of the freshness of Christian faith.

IN ILLO TEMPORE

El gran misal desplegado
y, colgando, las cintas sedosas
de esmeralda, púrpura y blanco acuoso.

Intransitivamente, asistíamos,
nos confesábamos, recibíamos. Los verbos
nos asumían. Adorábamos.

Y alzábamos nuestros ojos hacia los sustantivos.
La piedra del altar era el alba, la custodia mediodía,
la palabra rúbrica en sí misma una puesta de sol ensangrentada.

²⁴ John Henry Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, London: Longmans Green, 1909, p. 92.

²⁵ Audience of 7th November 2012: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121107_en.html

Ahora vivo al lado de una playa famosa,
donde los pájaros marinos gritan a tempranas horas
como almas increíbles

y aún el límite del muro del paseo marítimo
que presiono por convicción
apenas me tienta a dar crédito a ello. (Seamus Heaney, 1984)