

Frontier Crossing as a Literary Quest Metaphor

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The starting point of this paper (though included towards its end) is a poem by Irish Nobel Prize laureate *Seamus Heaney* – “From the Frontier of Writing”. This offered the possibility of looking at the frontier and its crossing in a variety of ways, including the American frontier thesis (Frederick Jackson Turner), the frontier between reading and writing, criticism and creativity, and, most frequently, the one between the two halves of the metaphor. I. A. Richards’ metaphor dichotomy between tenor and vehicle is extended to include all of the relationships that develop around a text, with writer, reader, and critic in metaphorical relationships to one another and to the work (one example comes from as far back as John Donne). Metaphor thus comes to be viewed as the supreme rhetorical figure of literature and of the processes (writing, reading, criticizing) that the literary mind is involved in.

Keywords: *frontier – boundary – border; metaphor; passage; cognitivism; critical mind; creative mind; writing; translation.*

Motto: *“It is the very mind itself
That leads the mind astray;
Do not be mindless
Of the mind...” (Apocryphal)*

For quite a long time – if not since its very beginnings – the writing mind has been struggling to find a balance between its critical impulse and its creative drive. This paper may seem based upon the paradoxical premise that the critical impulse had been there before the creative drive; the point, however, is that of looking at the two components or sides of thinking as being separated and united by some kind of flexible frontier when engaged in writing, and which the poet has simply called “the frontier of writing”. The unusually subtle thing here is that the frontier, once crossed, is never left behind, but stays with the writer for the rest of the passage.

The historic-cultural parallel that comes to mind is that of Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory or thesis of the frontier; the 19th-century historian proposed the idea that the whole of the American nation – indeed, the whole of the American continent – was created as a result of people’s repeated confrontations with one frontier or another, moving from East to West and conquering one natural frontier at a time, but, as already suggested, never leaving them behind, but rather appropriating them, making them their own; empires have thus been built, the empire of literature included. This way writing is very much like living, and our poem will be proof enough of that: as one writes or as one lives he crosses frontiers, and this metaphor is more

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effective that one would suspect.

So effective that it also includes the reader who crosses a frontier every time he takes a book in his hands; very much like the writer (as we shall see), he leaves part of his own self behind and immerses himself in the other world with, most likely, a new identity. This does not mean that a reader will have as many identities as the number of books he reads, but simply that his identity changes bit by bit as he crosses frontiers and enters other continents (and this may be regarded as a metaphor for education). Thus the reader and the book are both parts of another metaphor as there is here a frontier and a transfer tenor-vehicle. Then – and we will return to this –, as he becomes a critic, the transfer is backwards, and the metaphor is that of the book and the critic; everything around a text seems to be constructed in terms of metaphors; and wherever there are two minds at work, the transfer between them is always a metaphorical one, i.e. figurative – more than literal and less than semantically complete.

As we approach Seamus Heaney's writing, we first notice a "Haw Lantern" (volume title of 1987), i.e. a nictitating lighthouse, signaling with its intermittent flashes; this is already a frontier, and an important one, too, marking the primordial boundary between water and land, one realm and another, and where the passage or crossing is both danger and salvation for the nautical vehicle; the ship or boat may dash against the cliffs, or it may linger and find a safe haven; it all depends on how heavy the cargo (tenor) is, which once again has a double implication; if it is heavier, the ship is steadier, but also harder the impact is, while it is also easier to navigate: constructing a great metaphor requires great effort.

And thus, with land and sea, cargo and vehicle, captain and crew, storm and lighthouse, we already have a universe to explore; if the storm is too heavy, the vehicle collapses again; and if the lighthouse malfunctions, the result might be the same, and, of course, in spite of all these, it all depends on how skillful the skipper is in commanding his crew. In other words, for a voyage from one address to another to be successful, you need to have a talented captain, to make sure you do not overload the vehicle, hope that the receiver at the other end is prepared, and the traffic conditions would not be too bad. I. A. Richards' critical mind took only two of these elements into account, the vehicle, and what it carries along, the tenor; but one can easily see that a successful metaphor also depends on who proposes it, how the transfer is controlled, how long and smooth the passageway is, and how well prepared the addressee with his lighthouse; needless to repeat that the boundary, even if crossed, remains in position and has to be reckoned with.

This way one might think, for instance, that there is a long and bumpy and stormy distance between two lovers and a pair of compasses and that, at your end, you might not be signaling for a positive entrance into your harboring attention; but if the skipper be metaphysical enough, as John Donne (1572-1631) certainly was, and his mind equipped with a good many navigating instruments and tools, then the barrier between geometry and emotion or feeling may be overcome – at least for a while, until he becomes too graphically allusive:

*"Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet,
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.*

*If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two:
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth if the other do.*

*And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and bearkeens after it,
And grows erect as that comes home.*

*Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.”*

(A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning)

The frontier here is the difficult line between human feeling and technological rigidity or mathematical abstraction. Geometry might be our key concept for the moment, as we are prepared to remember that creative thinking is more of a geometrical, spatial type, as opposed to critical thinking, that more frequently takes an algebraic form. So, creative and geometrical in the right brain, with critical and algebraic in the left brain; whence also the suggestion that both fiction (see Joseph Frank’s “novel as spatial form”) and music, regarded by philosophers (Lessing) and critics as temporal arts are, in fact, spatial arts for their creators; they see the arrangement and patterning of stories or symphonies as spatial types of plotting, as diagrammatic configurations projected in space. Let us not overlook, however, in this left-brain / right-brain dichotomy, the presence between them of a deep situated transverse corpus callosum – an extremely interesting frontier – uniting the two and making possible all sorts of transfers between verbal and visual, criticism and originality, neutral and affective, or linear and nonlinear.

Let us, therefore, suppose that our purpose is that of analyzing (left brain) how such a metaphorical passage might originate and develop in the realm of critical thinking and find its reflection in that of generative creative thinking (right brain). The tenor or heft of the creative effort that we choose to think about is that of crossing the boundary between a state of not-writing to the process of writing, i.e. moving from intellectual inertia or repose toward the labor of creation, of composition in writing. What this looks, presumably, like is a sort of metaphor for the journey that the metaphor of writing represents; the implication, as always, is that you use a metaphor whenever the usual resources of your language are a barrier to, rather than a carrier of meanings. So, the question is can you or can you not talk / write coherently and consistently, in a sequential, focused, analytical manner about this passage from idle musing to creative work?

One can always try. Thus, since our journey implies a border, why not think about it in terms of a real frontier between one universe and another, one country and another; being, as we are, Europeans rather than Americans, we should look at it as something where you are stopped and show your papers, rather than as something that challenges you to neglect and overcome. Such borders do not usually go through busy towns or parts of the country, being rather isolated and distant from the noise and liveliness and bustle of a village or city; moreover, you also mean to suggest the fact that this effort of crossing into the creative country is an independent, lonely, solitary, even a secretive one; only a select few are chosen. Being a border between two countries, it must needs have border-guards and customs officers on both sides, your own co-nationals on this side, and the foreigners on the other. The first troops stop your vehicle – being in the twentieth century, it must be an automobile – to inspect its make and number and thus make sure that it is not stolen, i.e. plagiarized from some John Donne or another; you don’t leave your driver’s seat, as you have to be in control of your developing metaphor all of the time, but you notice one of the border-guards bending his face toward

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your window, probably to make sure there are no illegal persons or objects in your car; as you leave your country behind, that of your everyday common language that you found inappropriate or insufficient for the greater meanings you are bound for, you need to make sure you have not overlooked one item or another. The inspecting customs officer is not alone, and you catch sight of more guards on a hill beyond, each one gun in hand, holding you, as it were, under cover, in case you mean trouble; there are a number of questions, followed by your answers, which may seem to their satisfaction, and you are motioned on with the rifle; the land of metaphor beyond, the land of the tenor in fact, is severely guarded by the grammarians and lexicographers, by the purist, objective, vertical, and logical speakers of your native tongue.

This is not to say that the use of metaphor is confined to poetry or literature in general, as we well know – and have been told repeatedly – that everyday language is full of metaphor as the earth is full of corpses; only these metaphors have been frozen and buried long enough to become unrecognizable as such and the effort implied in their making all but remains unknown. The cognitive aspect here is that of witnessing the creative mind in its labor of finding a possibility of transfer that enhances communication on a level different than that of direct statement; what the poet does is not to make understanding easier, but rather to complicate it for the purpose of requiring a similar effort at the other end, that of the reader: the watching border-guards may not understand at first, but, at least, are left wondering, and that is the whole point.

We believe we should point out here that our purpose is not to suggest that the passage is from one regime of dictatorship – where the rigors of the language are very strict and demanding (pace George Orwell) – to a free country, but the labor of metaphor might give one the sense of having to pull down an iron curtain. Most of the words must be kept, for as long as necessary, inside the boundaries of the native land, while the few that are allowed to cross over have to leave behind all their side meanings and multiple senses, and must be stripped of all illegal connotations. And this is obviously the process of translation and the difficult problem of the choices an interpreter has to make as he crosses the boundaries between two languages (it seems no accident that Heaney is also a translator) one needs to negotiate and compromise, as at any frontier crossing, between what one can and what one cannot take to the other country; after Babel (see George Steiner's book of this title) the world raised up hundreds of boundaries that make the job of translators more difficult and interesting than it may seem; anyway, what you are allowed to take into another language depends not only on the strictures imposed by the border-guards, but also on the translator's ability to fool them into believing that he can behave very much like a native in the other realm; and this way the translator may be also regarded as a smuggler or buccaneer from one perspective and as a hero or benefactor from another. Otherwise he is working inside the metaphor that two languages represent in the relationships to one another.

And thus, back to the poem, on you move, accelerating gradually, still moving slow, as you are not yet sure of what turn the events might take, of what tenor your vehicle may haul on; but the effort of construction is there, your quest is taxing and you feel a little emptier, a little spent by the tension you yourself created in your mind; one needs to still accept the rules of the language, to obey both grammars and dictionaries – there is no complete way out of this type of subjugation, even as you are formally leaving them behind; only formally.

So you drive on to the frontier of writing, where it happens again, i.e. you need to go through the same formalities and procedures, only from another perspective; the point of view, therefore, is changed, the whole matter is regarded from the other end of the instrument, the border-guards seem to be even more careful and strict, with their guns on tripods and a sergeant who uses his walkie-talkie to have your identity checked and some kind of clearance given; the creative effort, as well as the translator's, requires a good look at yourself, from opposite angles

if possible, as crossing into the other half of the metaphor is, first painful, and then rewarding, first difficult and later simple. In fact, this is the really difficult threshold, that of really getting over, of crossing the boundary between one kind of reference and another, between one meaning and another; which is why you do not only see the officer describing your identity, but also the other marksmen really looking hostilely at you along the sights of their guns; the readers have always been suspicious; exchanging connotations, seeing how denotations overlap, taking part in or even being the cause of the birth of new meanings is, once more, like a real smuggling travail, an exertion that is, again, both consuming and, hopefully, rewarding.

The third stage of your exploit begins when you find yourself able to really drive on, toward freedom as it were, after all this arraignment, accusations, or indictment, after all the suspicions, side glances and murmurs and insinuations, after all the hesitations, indecisions, and revisions (Eliot's Prufrock looms in the background); suddenly you are through, your vehicle has covered almost the whole distance, the whole tenor, and you are ready to contemplate the outcome; having fought against the dictatorship of one regime, having escaped from the prison-house of language (Jameson), you are free to start your life all over again, i.e. you are free to embark upon a new search, toward a new shore and another country; and this is so because the meaning you have just finished creating, the kind of transfer that you operated inside and outside the boundaries of the old country, seems only to be one more invitation onto another quest.

The problem now is to describe your feeling, to find ways of expressing what it is like to move from one area of meaning into another, what effort it takes to describe the various confrontations and challenges, how much you hated and enjoyed looking for the right vehicle, how you visualized your tenor, how many times you had to stop and return (revise), try and miss and try again; but the whole thing is over, and now you know where you are and who you are, in the new context, with its new meanings and values, with other reference points and other standards; you know that you have traveled a long and difficult road, and you know it was worth the trouble as you are looking at the first eighteen lines typed or printed on the page; and you know it is probably time to sit back, relax and put down your signature, write your name as the mark of your identity in the new land.

Wrong: because any kind of creation inside the confines of a certain language only requires a re-definition of those confines, a redrawing of boundaries and a reconsideration of where you are and who you are; your name is still Seamus Heaney in the passport, but you find yourself now behind the transparent curtain of a waterfall, on some kind of stage, between the cliffs and the rocks behind and the film of water in front of you, and your new journey has hardly begun; the uninvited passage is now from this place onto a tarmac road – you are still driving, you are still in your vehicle –, along which you no longer see the customs officers and border-guards, but real soldiers and armour-plated vehicles; you find yourself in the middle of a real war, where old meanings seem to collapse, where values and standards no longer hold, as you really are on foreign territory; the road itself is some sort of river or current, your vehicle may be a boat, the movement is in the realm of pure relativity, with the soldiers disappearing from view; but this is inconvenient again, since they are not real soldiers, but are tree shadows barely reflected in the windscreen of the car you are driving along the river that never ends.

The page is now printed – twenty-four lines grouped in eight tercets; except that the algebraic, analytical, left-brain description above becomes geometrical, generative and right-brain; the narrow truth of our prose description of a journey and quest inside a metaphor is revealed as the ample truth of the metaphors themselves; what seems to have been focused, semantic and possibly objective is now diffuse, subjective and poetic; the linear construction of hypotheses is replaced by associative linearity; convergent melts into divergent, vertical into lateral, probability into possibility; the answer in the critical thinking prose becomes an answer in the poetic thinking; deduction and induction are replaced by abduction; analogy, simile and hair-

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splitting by metaphor, imagery and symbol; sequencing leaves the stage for brainstorming, while classification is substituted by enumeration or listing and so on. But here is the second discourse:

*“The tightness and nilness round that space
when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
its make and number and, as one bends his face*

*towards your window, you catch sight of more
on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
down cradled guns that hold you under cover*

*and everything is pure interrogation
until a rifle motions and you move
with guarded unconcentrated acceleration –*

*a little emptier, a little spent
as always by the quiver in the self,
subjugated, yes, and obedient.*

*So you drive on to the frontier of writing
where it happens again. The guns on tripods;
the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating*

*data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.*

*And suddenly you are through, arraigned yet freed,
as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
on the black current of a tarmac road*

*past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.”*

Seamus Heaney, *From the Frontier of Writing*, “The Haw Lantern”, 1987

Needless to say, this second discourse is undoubtedly the first one, and what we may have done in this paper is only to pretend that any critical thinking could anticipate Heaney’s poetic thinking, or, more plausibly, that we could anticipate the kind of critical thinking that went into the poet’s thinking before his writing of the poem; on the other hand, one could easily claim that Richards’ criticism in his study of metaphor anticipated some of Heaney’s creative efforts. However it may be, the quest seems to be for the same object – how one can present the metaphor of the threshold of writing –, but the results may look quite different. Once again, our thesis here is not that critical thinking always precedes creative thinking, at least ever since Aristotle in the Western hemisphere –, though this may very well be the case. Now, when it is too late, we could have experimented with the hypothetical reader in a hypothetical debate, by giving you either the critical presentation followed or not followed by the poem, or the poem, again followed or not followed by the critical essay.

This very succession is very much of what cognitive criticism seems to be about: the writer (Heaney) moves like us (readers) from a critical background that is more or less elaborate, more or less complex and sophisticated, to the creative part of the mind which thus develops on top of the critical mind; or, on the contrary, he may first write a poem (which is more unlikely) and then see, again like us readers, its critical, philosophical, aesthetic implications. The most convenient answer is that the two cannot be separated, that they go hand in hand, and that literature is thus one. But as not all readers are literary critics, one may simply be satisfied with reading a poem about crossing a frontier, of writing or no writing.

One way or another, the experience has a pedagogical implication, i.e. as a teacher of literature, what does one do in his or her class on Heaney, for instance: gives them a critical commentary – or several critical commentaries, including one of his / her own; does one give critical commentaries and the poem: does one simply give the poem; does one also include a presentation of the author and his work (Irish poet, playwright and translator, Nobel Prize winner in 1995 after such co-nationals as Yeats, Shaw, and Beckett, dozens of volumes of poetry, subjects and themes, influence, major achievements, place in the Irish and British traditions, world reputation...)? If you have already decided that our commentary does not help the poem, then you agree with Susan Sontag that literature and literary thinking (right side of the brain) transcend the analytic faculties of the critical mind (left side of the brain); if you think that the commentary complements the poem, then you might be suggesting that this is not a good enough poem, that it does not communicate what it was meant to communicate; and if you believe that the poem and the critical commentary are two entirely different things, then you should regret your having given us half an hour of your time reading them; but if you think otherwise altogether, then we are in agreement and we need to welcome you to the country where metaphor is king and absolute master.

However, finally – and naturally –, or at least for the sake of an imaginative exercise, the question of the way back requires attention; once inside the other country or the other half of the metaphor (with, again, the highly attractive idea of America as the second half of the metaphor in relation to Europe), what happens when you return? Nothing spectacular happens, except that you cannot re-cross the frontier wholly, as part of you is left to inhabit the other area; the translator who was intrepid enough to translate Eminescu into another language, can only come back home without that part of himself which he invested in the translation; the creator who, like Heaney, writes dozens of volumes of poetry, is all the time another creator, no longer an author in general, but, at each moment, the author of the previous volumes and border crossings; after each frontier conquered, he is different as he faces another frontier with another identity. Each poet, each writer, is with each poem or text another writer, a foreigner in his own work: a man of frontiers.

And so is the reader. And so is the critic. The complication here is that the reader-critic confronts a frontier (Heaney's text) which is about just that, i.e. the frontier of writing; thus a double transfer or, as a rhetorical critic could put it, a mixed metaphor: the metaphor of a transfer forward, into the realm of creativity, and a transfer backwards, into the realm of criticism. So we are confronted again with the temptation of cognitively considering that the critical mind and the creative mind are (often) one: the critic in Heaney anticipates the poet in Heaney who anticipates the critic in us.

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