Seamus Heaney
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Seamus Heaney
Poet, Critic, Translator

Edited by
Ashby Bland Crowder
and
Jason David Hall
To the memory of Paul Turner
(1917–2005)

‘And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.’
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*Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall*

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Acknowledgements

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**Alison Finlay** serves as Honorary Assistant Secretary of the Viking Society for Northern Research and as editor of the *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*. Recently she translated *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Men of the Hitardal People* (Hisarlik Press, 2000), and she has published numerous articles on Old Norse literature. Since 1977 Finlay has taught at Birkbeck College, London, where she has directed the MA in Medieval Studies.

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Colleen McKenna's article ‘Seeing “Last Things”: Reading Yeats through the Eyes of Seamus Heaney' was published in Yeats Annual 13 (Macmillan, 1998), and essays on Heaney's Sweeney Astray and the small press in Ireland are forthcoming. A recent PhD at Royal Holloway College, London, she is a member of the faculty at University College London.

Ruben Moi is a research fellow at the University of Bergen. He holds degrees from Agder College, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Tromsø. From 1996 to 2000 he was head of the Department of English at Harstad College in Norway. Moi has published essays in both Norwegian and English. His most recent essay on Paul Muldoon's Hay appears in New Voices in Irish Criticism 3 (2002). Other articles on poetry from Eliot to Heaney have appeared in Irish Studies Review and Nordlit.


Daniel W. Ross is a professor of English at Columbus State University in Columbus, GA (USA). He is the editor of The Critical Response to William Styron (Greenwood, 1995) and the author of numerous articles on British and Irish writers, including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Conrad, Heaney, William Trevor and Seamus Deane.

Richard Rankin Russell is Assistant Professor of English at Baylor University. He has published articles on Seamus O'Kelly's ‘The Weaver's
Grave’, W. B. Yeats and Eavan Boland, Frank McGuinness, Michael Longley, and brief essays on Arthur Conan Doyle, John Hewitt and Philip Hobsbaum. Additionally, his article on Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* was recently published in the *New Hibernia Review*, and his article on Peter Fallon’s pastoral elegies recently appeared in *The Colby Quarterly*. Russell is finishing a book-length study of contemporary Northern Irish literature and has started researching and writing a monograph on Bernard MacLaverty along with a separate study of Brian Friel.

**Paul Turner**, who died in 2005, was the author of *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (Blackwell, 1998); translator of *Daphnis and Chloe*, Lucian’s *Satirical Sketches*, and Thomas More’s *Utopia*; and editor, with Rita Patteson, of Robert Browning’s *Aristophanes’ Apology*, in Volume 12 of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning* (Ohio University Press). When he composed his chapter for this collection, he was Emeritus Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford, and formally University Lecturer in the Oxford English Faculty.
In his recent study *Seamus Heaney: Searches for Answers* (2003), Eugene O’Brien points out that each new book on the poet must justify its existence by distinguishing itself from the already voluminous body of Heaney scholarship: ‘To write a book about Seamus Heaney, one must, of necessity, declare one’s *raison d’être* from the outset as with over 30 books devoted to his work, the field is in danger of becoming over-ploughed’.\(^1\) This is not an overstatement. Commentary on Heaney’s work is spread over 40 years. New monographs, casebooks and a profusion of scholarly articles, notes and reviews appear almost daily. Book-length collections of essays alone – of which the present volume is but one example – form a significant portion of the critical work available. Others include Harold Bloom’s *Seamus Heaney* (1986), a group of 14 essays by divers hands, among them well-known critics like Terence Brown, Anthony Thwaite, Blake Morrison, Richard Ellmann and Helen Vendler. Collections issued since the early 1980s – the decade in which the Heaney critical juggernaut began to gather speed – include Tony Curtis’s *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (1982), Jacqueline Genet’s *Studies on Seamus Heaney* (1987), Elmer Andrews’s *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1992), Robert F. Garratt’s *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* (1995), Catharine Malloy and Phyllis Carey’s *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit* (1996), and Michael Allen’s *Seamus Heaney* (1997).

As a rather belated addition to ‘Heaney Studies’, the present collection of essays cannot escape the obligation O’Brien describes. So what is the *raison d’être* of *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*? There are several. One among them is a desire to represent more comprehensively the abundance and variety not only of Heaney’s writing but also of writing on Heaney, something that is not adequately reflected by the existing compilations. Previous collections have tended to privilege poetry, especially

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the early poetry. This present volume does not neglect Heaney’s poetry but looks mainly to more recent works, not to the thoroughly ploughed fields. It also gives special attention to his translations, his prose, and the connections between the prose and the poetry. The prose, in particular, has received little interrogation in existing studies. Eugene O’Brien finds critical treatment of Heaney’s prose to be a ‘glaring lacuna in . . . “Heaney studies” over the years’. ‘Until now’, he writes, ‘Heaney’s prose has been generally used as a preparatory gloss on his poetry; it has never been subjected to any sustained critique in terms of its role in Heaney’s overall project.’

O’Brien’s book goes some way towards, as he puts it, ‘redress[ing] this balance’, opening with a complete chapter in which the author makes a case for regarding the prose as ‘central to his developing project’ rather than as merely ‘a meta-commentary on his poetry’. The present collection extends this critical enterprise, offering two essays that address the ways in which Heaney’s prose demonstrates his skills as a reader of other writers’ work and the extent to which the appellation ‘criticism’ is warranted. Two other essays draw heavily upon the prose, namely Colleen McKenna’s and Jerzy Jarniewicz’s.

This volume emphasizes the range not only of Heaney’s output but also of scholarship devoted to his work. In most of the existing compilations, the list of contributors contains a few usual suspects: Helen Vendler, Edna Longley and David Lloyd are names that crop up often. Vendler, for example, contributes to three of the above collections, and both Curtis (in his 1994 edition) and Garratt offer the same essay (her reading of The Haw Lantern), which Vendler herself reprints in her monograph Seamus Heaney (1998). All three editions of Curtis’s collection contain Longley’s essay ‘North: “Inner Emigré” or “Artful Voyeur”?’, this essay, under the modified title ‘“Inner Emigré” or “Artful Voyeur”? Seamus Heaney’s North’, appears also in Allen’s Seamus Heaney. Both Allen and Garratt include Lloyd’s essay “Pap for the Dispossessed”: Heaney and the Postcolonial Moment’ – published previously in Lloyd’s own book Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment (1993) – and in doing so help to establish Heaney in the hegemonic tradition of the ‘well-made poem’. Many of the other critics represented in these collections have well-established relationships with Heaney’s work. Both John Wilson Foster and Bernard O’Donoghue, to cite just two, have published monographs on Heaney. The essays in Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator, however, have not been recycled – each one has been commissioned especially for this project. Moreover, this collection offers a refreshing variety of commentary. While some of the contributors are seasoned Heaney scholars, others are fresh on the scene. Some of the
essays emphasize Heaney’s internationalism, and the volume as a whole the complementary international interest in Heaney. American, British, Eastern European and Scandinavian perspectives obtain. Some contributors, like Paul Turner and Alison Finlay, bring their expertise as classical and Anglo-Saxon scholars respectively to bear upon Heaney’s translations of the classical Greek of Sophocles and the Old English of Beowulf. It is our hope that this diversity of perspective will provide a welcome alternative to the mainstream of Heaney criticism.

The scholars whose work is gathered here do not subscribe to a particular way of approaching or apprehending Heaney’s writing – that is, they are not necessarily linked by their application of post-modernist, deconstructive, historicist, post-colonial or any other theoretical apparatus, though they remain alert to and frequently draw on current critical and theoretical discourses. Also, while these essays do not reject, as Belfast-born poet and critic Peter McDonald once did, ‘a stake in the “Irishness” debate’, the authors do not feel bound – as many recent critics have – to read Heaney’s writing in an exclusively Irish context. In an essay on Austin Clarke, John McAuliffe makes a provocative point that is worth citing here: “‘Irish studies’ criticism has been narrowly reductive in its appreciation of [Clarke’s] work, and . . . studies of Irish literature, in general, must look for more than the poet’s idea of Ireland . . .’. Instead, McAuliffe argues for ‘studies of Irish literature which avoid being purely “Irish studies”’. We have preferred this approach in Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator. The scholarship in the pages that follow manages to remain cognizant of Heaney’s Irishness and his writing’s place in what Neil Corcoran has called an ‘intertext’ of critical discourse about Ireland even as it remains open to the fact that Heaney and other ‘contemporary Irish poets have reached beyond Ireland to imagine and define their poetic practice’.

The freedom and diversity of our approach notwithstanding, this collection of essays has discovered a subtle unity in Heaney’s work. ‘I grew up in between’, remarks the speaker of The Haw Lantern’s ‘Terminus’, who finds himself positioned on an interstitial ‘stepping stone’ where ‘Baronies, parishes met’. Indeed, much of Heaney’s writing is given over to exploring such in-between positions, sites of intersection and contact where discourses converge. Heaney’s liminalities manifest variously, and essay after essay in the volume focuses on significant intersections in Heaney’s work – meeting places, spaces between: tradition meeting the contemporary context as life meets death (Stephen Regan); liminal poetic representations and political divisions (Richard Rankin Russell); town and woods, absence and presence (Colleen McKenna); inner
reality facing external reality (Sidney Burris); the timely and transcendent (Michael Baron); region and wider world (Daniel W. Ross); Irish tradition encountering Polish tradition (Jerzy Jarniewicz); the space between modern English and ancient Greek (Paul Turner); the meeting of personal and formal in the translation of Beowulf (Alison Finlay); different times and perceptions meeting in problematic memory (Joseph Brooker); Heaney’s Leavisite stance in the face of contemporary critical currents (Ruben Moi); and Heaney’s imagination approaching the imaginations of other poets (Barbara Hardy).

In the first chapter, ‘Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy’, Stephen Regan looks at the way the traditional elegiac form comes face to face with modern scepticism – along the way assessing the results of the intersections of English and Irish traditions. Regan begins by escorting the reader through a broad range of Heaney’s poetry, pointing to the influence of the elegiac tradition on many poems, awakening us to see familiar poems anew, and concludes with a detailed analysis of ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, Heaney’s elegy on his cousin Colum McCartney, subject of a sectarian murder. Heaney unflinchingly gives the tradition a contemporary context; Regan sensitively puts his finger on the pulse of the poem to test the elegy’s relevance for a modern sceptical age, seeing what comfort is possible in the stark face of human loss. Regan makes it clear that Heaney has taken over where Yeats and Auden left off.

Following Regan’s attention to Heaney’s exploration of ‘that liminal space’ that is the ‘in-betweenness of life and death’, Richard Rankin Russell, in ‘Poems without Frontiers: Poetic Reception and Political Possibility in the Work of Seamus Heaney’, broadens the perspective on the liminal representations of Heaney’s contemplative poetry. Russell draws connections between Heaney and that similar mode of contemplative poetry in Yeats. Russell follows the development of liminal poetic experiences all the way to their manifestation in the political divisions in Northern Ireland, and he sees Heaney’s poetry as a model for hope and transformation.

Colleen McKenna’s “‘A Meaning Made of Trees”: The Unwriting of a Symbol’ attends to yet another liminal image in Heaney’s poetry, the space between town and woods, yet her main focus is on the significance of the ‘going through’ from the present to the absent tree in Heaney’s imagination. Heaney’s poetic terrain contains a veritable forest of trees, and McKenna does not miss the essential meaning of the trees or the forest. As Yeats identified himself with Thoor Ballylee, his tower, so does Heaney identify himself with the tree – yet, as McKenna shows, the absent tree holds far more emotional power than the present one, thus the
significance of clearances in his poetry. We follow Heaney from Sweeney Astray through to Seeing Things, and Chapter 3 closes upon an exhilarating reading of ‘Squarings xxxi’ where Heaney crosses over to undermine the very image that has figured so large in his work.

In constructing her argument, McKenna draws heavily from Heaney's prose, the main subject of the next two chapters, Sidney Burris's ‘Reading Heaney Reading’ and Michael Baron’s ‘Heaney and the Functions of Prose’. Both of these chapters give emphasis to Heaney as a reader of poetry. In Chapter 4 Burris looks at Heaney’s writing on other poets as well as on himself – and when on himself, the poetry’s place in the context of Northern Irish politics, where we find the negotiation between ‘external reality’ and ‘inner law’, that meeting place in the poet’s consciousness that gave rise to many of his poems. Burris also sees Heaney as fulfilling Virginia Woolf’s notion of what a reader of literature should be. This chapter gives special attention to Heaney's Nobel acceptance speech, Crediting Poetry, clearly one of his most significant prose works. Baron summarizes many of the usual complaints about Heaney's literary criticism, but not as a prelude to a defence; instead, he seeks ‘to understand why some of the negative comments it has attracted might be based on false assumptions’. Baron’s alert reading of Finders Keepers sees it as the meeting ground between Heaney and his detractors. The title of Chapter 5, ‘Heaney and the Functions of Prose’, suggests that Heaney belongs in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, especially in that both Arnold and Heaney bring together timely and transcendent dimensions.

Heaney’s negotiation between the timely and transcendent is also the focus of Daniel W. Ross’s chapter ‘The “Upward Waft”: The Influence of Frost and Eliot on Heaney’s Later Phase’. Concentrating on Heaney's debt to two major American influences, Ross argues in Chapter 6 that Heaney’s later poetry successfully performs a ‘counter-move against the threat of obsession with the violence of Northern Ireland’ that had figured so large in his poetry during the 1970s and 1980s. Centred on an examination of Heaney’s 1991 volume Seeing Things, Ross’s chapter reveals how Heaney saw in Frost and Eliot not only an exemplary mode of ‘intru[sion] on the [English] language and tradition’ but also a ‘way to escape the condition of boundedness’ represented by culture, place and politics.

Like Ross, Jerzy Jarniewicz looks at the meeting ground upon which Irish writing encounters external influences, specifically Polish writing and culture. Chapter 7, ‘The Way via Warsaw: Seamus Heaney and Post-War Polish Poets’, acknowledging a long-recognized connection
between Heaney and Eastern European poetry, provides a clarifying context for the Irish poet’s close political links to his long-time friend Czeslaw Milosz and other Polish poets. Jarniewicz, a well-known poet himself, takes into account not only Heaney’s poetry and prose but also interviews and radio commentaries. We come to see that Heaney’s journey in poetry involves a fertile visit to Warsaw but continues on in the tradition of English-language poetry. Despite the superficial similarities between Ireland and Poland, history, for Heaney, is not the same as it is for Milosz.

The next two chapters evaluate another aspect of Heaney’s career – his work as a translator. Hugh Denard, in ‘Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Re-visions’, has argued very well that Heaney’s version of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* establishes a connection between the classical play and the culture and politics of Northern Ireland. But his contention that ‘Heaney’s version is characterized by a conservative attentiveness to the dignity of the Greek original’9 deserves scrutiny. It is fair enough to measure Heaney’s version against Sophocles’s original, and this is what Paul Turner, drawing upon his long experience as a scholar of classical and English literature, does in Chapter 8, ‘The Cure at Troy: Sophocles or Heaney?’ With great good humour, Turner needles Heaney about the inappropriateness of his calling his play a version of Sophocles’s. Turner gently reproves Heaney for his lack of fidelity to his source, for the distortions of Philoctetes’s character, and for the general un-Greekness of his play and the unfaithful up-to-dateness of the language and attitudes. This compelling chapter judges as questionable many of Heaney’s insertions, exclusions and alterations. The intersection of classical drama and modern Irish political issues leads to an unhappy ‘version’ of the original Greek, in Turner’s view.

Alison Finlay in Chapter 9, on the other hand, finds a happy meeting of modern Irish concerns and Anglo-Saxon culture in Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*. There are features of Anglo-Saxon that could not be brought over into modern English, and so Finlay allows that Heaney’s linguistic brew includes not only innovations but in fact apt phrases from the old language that Heaney grew up hearing and speaking. And so Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*, a poem whose ‘idiom was the reverse of personal’, turns out to carry sounds long familiar to the poet. Strangely, Heaney preserves the ‘pastness’ of the poem, yet its relevance to twenty-first century atrocities is unnerving. These two very different chapters represent a beginning of serious discussion of Heaney as translator. Perhaps they will encourage further work on Heaney’s translations of Dante, Jan Kochanowski, and the recently published *The Burial at Thebes* (2004).
The remaining chapters in this present volume return to the poetry. In his shrewd examination of Station Island, ‘Remember Everything: Things Past in Station Island’, Joseph Brooker in Chapter 10 discusses a book of temporal intersections, one that is itself caught ‘look[ing] both ways, back and forward in respect to the rest of Heaney’s career’. Unpacking Heaney’s relationship to the contemporary world – and how it negotiates with the past – Brooker delves into the difficulties Heaney encounters in poems that recreate remembrances out of present perspectives. Brooker’s deep analysis takes us from railway cuttings to the spectre-filled Station Island of the book’s title, reminding us that ‘the two-way traffic of memory’ can ‘[leave] us looking in different directions, slightly confused about what time it is’. His analysis goes to issues involving the quantum mechanics of the poems – the level at which their small parts act almost independently of the larger purpose so that ‘representation’ of the past mingles ‘confoundingly’ with the poem’s effort to meditate on the past. The meeting of memory and actual past experience is fraught with uncertainty.

In Chapter 11, “The cure by poetry that cannot be coerced”: Text, Canon and Context in Seamus Heaney’s Electric Light’, Ruben Moi offers an insightful reading of Heaney’s most recent volume, in which he interrogates not only Heaney’s intersections with ‘canonical’ Western poets but also Heaney’s own recourse to literary tradition and ‘canonicity’ as correctives to the ‘theoretical revaluations’ that now dominate critical discourse. Moi brings his considerable and subtle understanding of literary theory to bear on Heaney’s poetic project to demonstrate that while in Electric Light Heaney ‘refuses to let theoretical doctrines dominate his Leavisite stance’, he remains acutely aware of contemporary intellectual currents. Electric Light, argues Moi, is not simply a hostile reaction to recent critical trends but a self-conscious agon with them. Looking closely at the poems in this new collection, Moi finds Heaney engaging in a kind of post-modern playfulness and introducing ‘innovative features that ensue from recent theories and contemporary poetry’.

The estimable Barbara Hardy, who was a contributor to the first volume of essays on Heaney ever published, Tony Curtis’s The Art of Seamus Heaney (1982), rounds off this volume with Chapter 12, ‘Literary Allusions, Appropriations and Assimilations’. Hardy evaluates what Heaney seems to be up to in his rummaging among poems of the past. Measuring Heaney’s allusive technique against the tradition of allusiveness in English poetry from the Romantics on down, Hardy judges that Heaney keeps pace with the best when his imagination succeeds in meeting another poet’s imagination – and Hardy captures wonderfully the lively moments when the imaginations of Heaney, Vaughan and
Wallace Stevens mingle to produce moving poetry. But she finds that often Heaney’s imagination blinks in the face of his predecessor, and he merely indulges in line-dropping, and sometimes his purpose seems not attentive to the poet he has appropriated so much as to himself and his self-projection. Barbara Hardy’s essay is provocative.

The contributors to this volume are performing their dance around a variety of texts that Heaney has written. They point to this, question that, notice and understand what was previously puzzling or confusing, put poems (as well as essays and a play) in relation to each other, encourage perspective. Above all, they point to the fact that Heaney is a poet of in-betweenness, a poet on the threshold of this and that. Significant events, emotional or technically poetical, occur in the meeting place of different moods and modes. The approach of these contributions enables us to move along in understanding through a sort of liminal process. In April of 1990, Heaney said to a poetry class at Hendrix College in Arkansas: there pre-exists in the writer’s breast ‘a thing-which-is-not which wants to be’ – and ‘the work is to bring the thing-which-is-not into the thing which is’. By extension, the work of the critic is to bring fully into being the thing-that-is. That is the enterprise in which this volume participates.

Notes

2 O’Brien, Seamus Heaney, p. 5.
3 O’Brien, Seamus Heaney, p. 10.
In his highly illuminating study of the English elegy, Peter Sacks recalls Wordsworth’s definition of a poet as someone with a peculiar disposition to be moved ‘by absent things as if they were present’. Acknowledging the fact that critics today are likely to be sceptical of Wordsworth’s faith in the representational powers of language and in the consolatory powers of literature, Sacks nevertheless pursues a fundamental and persistent concern in poetry with the passion of deprivation. His interest is in ‘those absences which the use of language may seek to redress or appease’.1 This is an interest that also preoccupies Seamus Heaney in both his poetry and his prose. ‘The redress of poetry’ has, of course, become a familiar part of his critical idiom in recent years. In the first of his Oxford lectures, Heaney cites the OED definition of ‘redress’ as a noun: ‘Reparation of, satisfaction or compensation for, a wrong sustained or the loss resulting from this.’ He then ponders one of the many obsolete meanings of ‘redress’ as a verb: ‘To set (a person or a thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position. Also fig. to set up again, restore, re-establish.’2 Although Heaney’s broad concern in The Redress of Poetry is with ‘poetry’s possible service to programmes of cultural and political realignment’, his definitions of ‘redress’ have a particular significance for his work as an elegist, and especially for what is arguably his most impressive and memorable elegy, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’.

The elegy is a song of lamentation for the dead, usually mourning the loss of a personal friend or a public figure, though sometimes offering a melancholic reflection on a lost way of life. Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy in a Country Churchyard’ does not address the loss of any particular individual, but it remains one of the best-known elegies in English. Throughout the history of English poetry there has been a strong tradition of elegiac writing with its roots in the pastoral elegies of Greek
and Latin writers such as Theocritus and Virgil. Many of the classical conventions of elegy are retained in familiar examples of the genre from John Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ to Matthew Arnold’s ‘Thyrsis’, including the summoning of the muses, the picking of flowers for consolation, and the longing for some kind of redemption or resurrection for the dead one. Recent theorists of elegy have shown how generic conventions are repeatedly tested and modified over time, but have also raised important questions about the adequacy of elegiac poetry in an age of widespread scepticism and disbelief. Sacks, in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), asks what happens to the conventions of the elegy when modern writers and readers become sceptical of ‘the inherited means of consolation’. W. D. Shaw, in *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (1994), similarly asks ‘how far the consolations of a life-and-death art, of a poetry of loss, can be made to seem reasonable, even compelling, to readers living now, in our own time and place’. Nevertheless, both critics acknowledge that elegies will continue to be written and read as long as there is a need among writers and readers to confront the pain and bewilderment of death.

Although Sacks writes specifically about the English elegy, the subtitle of his book ought to alert us to the suggestion that there might be other national versions of elegy. The four centuries separating Spenser from Yeats are those in which the traumatic birth of modern Ireland takes place, and it is then tempting to add a further subtitle: ‘from colonial settlement to political independence’. Prior to the adoption of classical and English models, there is already in Ireland a long-established tradition of ritual mourning or keening that exists both as a social form and as a literary convention. Keening, practised predominantly by women, becomes stylized in poetry and song, so that certain laments persist in the Irish language in both oral and written forms, and are then later translated or imitated in English. From the time of Spenser onwards, the Irish elegy is associated not just with the loss of a particular individual (a Gaelic chieftain, for instance), but with the steady erosion and destruction of Gaelic culture in its entirety. Within this history of colonial oppression and national liberation, the redemptive rhetoric of the elegy is given a much more public and more overtly political emphasis than it receives elsewhere. In the twentieth century, this tendency can be seen most clearly in the great elegies of W. B. Yeats – in ‘September 1913’, ‘Easter 1916’ and ‘To a Shade’ – as well as in Francis Ledwidge’s haunting elegy for Thomas MacDonagh and in Denis Devlin’s powerful memorial, ‘The Tomb of Michael Collins’. Seamus Heaney’s work as an elegist embraces and echoes these specifically
Irish poems of grief and loss, as well as drawing upon familiar English and classical models.

The title of Heaney’s first full-length collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), is an indication of strongly elegiac tendencies that were to become more evident in his later work. As Henry Hart has noted, the book partakes of a long tradition of pastoral elegy in which oedipal tensions frequently accompany the abandonment of innocence. Heaney’s early poems chart the passage from a child’s narcissistic world to a more mature apprehension of both sexual and political realities: ‘The journey proceeds from a pastoral unity to an elegiac comprehension of difference, division and death, from a center of undifferentiated sexuality to the decentred underworld or unconscious where Irish desires and animosities continue to fester.’

The title poem of *Death of a Naturalist* aligns an awakening adolescence with the rotting flax ‘in the heart / Of the townland’, an image clearly in keeping with the vegetation myths and the powerful narratives of death and rebirth in earlier pastoral elegies, but also cautiously pointing to tensions and conflicts in the present.

The elegiac impulse in *Death of a Naturalist* is evident in the book’s pervasive and plangent awareness of ineluctable natural processes and struggles for survival. It finds its simplest expression in the child’s knowledge of inevitable loss and decay in ‘Blackberry-Picking’:

> I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair  
> That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
> Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not.

This dramatization of childhood sorrow is accompanied by more formal elegiac compositions, including ‘Mid-Term Break’ and ‘At a Potato Digging’ (one an intimate, personal poem of mourning, the other a communal, historical poem of national sacrifice and loss). ‘Mid-Term Break’ is an elegy for Heaney’s younger brother, Christopher, killed in a road accident at the age of four in 1953. It was written just before the tenth anniversary of that event. The title ruefully points beyond the usually happy associations of a break from school to the premature ending of a child’s life and the rupture it causes in his family. Familiar images of mourning prepare us for the stark appearance of the dead child – ‘bells knelling classes to a close’ . . . ‘Snowdrops / And candles soothed the bedside’ – but the ‘poppy bruise’ on the child’s forehead is a striking image that both registers physical injury and retains the memorial function of the flower. What saves the poem from sentimentality is its
careful modulation of the voice and vision of an adolescent boy finding his parents in acute distress: ‘my mother held my hand / In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs’. The painful intimacy of that moment gains an additional poignancy when read alongside the elegiac sonnets for Heaney’s mother in The Haw Lantern (1987). As if demonstrating an incomplete break, the closing line of the poem is set off from the blank verse tercets that precede it and yet connected to them by the rhyme of ‘clear’ and ‘year’. That single isolated line abruptly curtails any further exploration of the child’s death, but it also registers the exactness of grief: ‘A four foot box, a foot for every year’. The line is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Thorn’, in which an infant’s death is similarly set alongside the poet’s careful measurement of things. Wordsworth’s thorn tree is ‘Not higher than a two year’s child’. The confessional intimacy and candour of the poem also suggest the pervasive influence of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959), a book remarkable for its intense, yet conversational, rendering of family grief and loss.

‘At a Potato Digging’ opens with a description of modern agriculture (‘A mechanical digger wrecks the drill’) but deepens into an elegy for the victims of the Great Famine in the 1840s. The physical gestures of the potato pickers are both a reminder of a continuing ritual appeasement of the earth and a ritual mourning for the victims of 1845. The workers take part in a ‘Processional stooping through the turf’, with heads bowed and bodies bent, and go down on ‘humbled knees’ before ‘a seasonal altar of the sod’. A strong sense of continuity is established between this ‘higgledy line’ and the ‘higgledy skeletons’ of the previous century. The modern labourers are survivors of agricultural catastrophe and yet always subject to a treacherous history and a ruthless nature. Their fingers ‘go dead in the cold’, just as later they collapse ‘Dead-beat’ into a ditch. The potatoes, grotesquely described as ‘live skulls, blind-eyed’, are shockingly transformed into the emaciated victims of the Famine, as the poem slips from present into past between Sections II and III. The closing section re-presents the workers ‘Thankfully breaking timeless fasts’, but also shows them in continuing obeisance to the earth as they ritualistically spill ‘Libations of cold tea’ and ‘scatter crusts’. ‘At a Potato Digging’ is an ambitious poem that shows Heaney’s capacity to write an elegiac poetry of far-reaching political and historical significance. As Neil Corcoran observes, ‘The poem’s rituals make it clear how deeply the sufferings of Irish historical experience are inscribed in the landscape itself and in the human psyche.’ The poem is an early anticipation of a method that Heaney would later use extensively, especially in the bog poems of Wintering Out (1972) and North (1975).
A willingness to explore the potential of elegy as a way of giving form to both private and public mourning is also evident in *Door into the Dark* (1969). ‘Elegy for a Still-Born Child’ risks mawkishness in addressing the lost child in a direct second-person voice but manages to maintain a sympathetic concern for the mother and father. The poem avoids any excess of conventional elegiac ritual, confining its tokens of grief to ‘A wreath of small clothes’ and ‘a memorial pram’. Instead, it articulates its sense of loss through the speaker’s communing with the landscape and his sensitive closing perception of ‘White waves riding home on a wintry lough’.12 A different kind of experiment with voice is evident in ‘Requiem for the Croppies’, an elegiac sonnet commemorating the Irish patriots who died at Vinegar Hill in County Wexford during the 1798 rebellion. The poem speaks from within the ranks of the croppy boys (so called because they wore their hair in the style of French revolutionaries), incorporating within the sonnet form a strange and prophetic monologue from beyond the grave. In his illuminating essay ‘Feeling into Words’, Heaney explains that the poem was written in 1966 to coincide with the anniversary of the 1916 Rising, though it looks back to 1798 and the ideals of the United Ireland movement. The barley carried by rebels on the run serves as an emblem of resurrection in the poem, though at the time of its composition, Heaney was not able to foresee the further consequences of the earlier political conflict: ‘The oblique implication was that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the Year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called “the right rose tree” of 1916. I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published.’13 What seems remarkable from a technical perspective is the way in which Heaney asserts control over the complex historical and political implications of the poem, at the same time as maintaining the fiction of a credible speaking voice. The modified sonnet form clearly has much to do with this, allowing for the intensity and compression of lines such as those describing the appalling scale of the massacre: ‘Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon. / The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.’ The rhyme scheme pulls away from the usual pattern of the English sonnet by repeating the fifth and sixth rhyme sounds in place of a closing couplet: *ababcdcdedefefef*. The arrangement of rhymes suggests the familiar subdivision of the first 12 lines into three quatrains, but the pattern is disrupted again by the erratic punctuation (repeated dashes at line endings) and the disorderly syntax of Heaney’s sonnet. Similarly, the sonnet hurtles past the turn
between octave and sestet, intensifying the impression of hectic conflict until it reaches its slow and sombre close: ‘They buried us without shroud or coffin / And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.’

The closing line stretches appropriately beyond the confines of the staple decasyllabic line of the sonnet and also pulls away from an iambic base towards what sounds like an anapaestic, song-like metre. As well as writing a memorable elegy for the patriots of 1798 and 1916, Heaney succeeds in marrying the sonnet to the idiom and measure of popular folk songs like ‘The Croppy Boy’.

As Heaney points out, his ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ was to become, unexpectedly, a poem that linked the violent deaths of 1798 and 1916 with the escalating sectarian conflict in the North in the late 1960s. *Door into the Dark* was to prove an ominous title, as the metaphysical and psychic darkness of imaginative exploration gave way to the grim political darkness of the 1970s. The poems that later appeared in *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) are indicative of Heaney’s urgent reconsideration of the role of the poet and the role of poetry in that decade. In the same essay in which he explains the impulse behind ‘Requiem for the Croppies’, Heaney makes it clear that after 1969 his poetry moved from ‘being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament’. He turns to the example of W. B. Yeats in his ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ and declares that he must now find ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.

The most striking emblems of adversity can be found in the bog poems of the 1970s, in which Heaney explores the troubling parallel between sectarian killings in his own North and the ritual sacrifices to the earth goddess in early Iron Age settlements across other parts of Northern Europe. Writing about the impact on his poetry of P. V. Glob’s anthropological study, *The Bog People* (published in English in 1969), he remarks that ‘the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles’.

There is, undoubtedly, a strong elegiac tendency in the bog poems, and this extends to both the Iron Age victims and their modern-day counterparts. ‘The Tollund Man’, one of the earliest of the bog poems, observes familiar commemorative rituals, beginning with a pilgrimage – ‘Some day I will go to Aarhus’ – and committing itself to an act of respectful observance: ‘I will stand a long time’. As Jahan Ramazani points out, Heaney is, in some respects, following the example of traditional elegists by reactivating ‘the mythic substructure of elegy’, including the fertility cults in which ‘ritual death assures rebirth’.
Ramazani claims that Heaney subverts these ‘mythic paradigms’ by denying the usual forms of rebirth: ‘The dead undergo no spiritual transcendence but remain tenaciously material, bodies bound to the earth. They are reborn not in new life but in new violence and death.’

This is not entirely the case with ‘The Tollund Man’, however, since the poem is prepared to ‘risk blasphemy’ in praying to the Tollund Man to ‘germinate’ the dead bodies of those killed in Irish political and religious struggles. It might be a desperate wager, but it points to a wish for something better, for a peaceful settlement beyond the current wave of violence and death.

Nevertheless, Ramazani’s principal argument is a good one: even though elegy assumes a central importance in Heaney’s work in the mid-seventies, the bog poems are highly unconventional in their startling juxtaposition of modern sectarian killings with ancient ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess. It seems as if conventional elegiac forms are rendered inoperable ‘by the shock and immediacy of the renewed violence’. If poems like ‘Bog Queen’, ‘Punishment’, ‘The Grauballe Man’ and ‘Strange Fruit’ gaze obsessively at the mutilated victims of the ancient past, other poems in *North* show in the rawness and starkness of their loss precisely why some meditative, mythological structure might be deemed a psychological and emotional necessity. In ‘Funeral Rites’ a vivid account of funerals attended in the poet’s youth prepares us for the vast communal grief of the present and emphasizes the need for assuaging rituals:

Now as news comes in  
of each neighbourly murder  
we pine for ceremony,  
customary rhythms:  
the temperate footsteps  
of a cortège, winding past  
each blinded home.

The poem imagines an immense procession culminating in the prehistoric burial chambers of the Boyne. As a further instance of reconciliation, it recalls the Icelandic saga in which Gunnar is violently killed but ‘unavenged’. Gunnar is presented, as he is in *Njal’s Saga*, as resurrected in death and ‘chanting verses about honour’. In the closing lines of the poem, he turns ‘with a joyful face / to look at the moon’. For all its attempted peacefulness, however, what the poem recovers from the realm of mythology is a highly fragile and tentative image of hopefulness.
The poems in *Wintering Out* and *North* have a strongly elegiac charge, but their grief and loss are generalized and pervasive. As ‘Funeral Rites’ suggests, the urge to mourn is overwhelming and affects whole communities. In *Field Work* (1979), Heaney adopts the more usual, formal mode of elegy in mourning the deaths of fellow artists, friends and relatives. There are elegies for Francis Ledwidge, the Irish poet killed in the First World War in 1917; for Sean O’Riada, the Irish composer who died in 1971; and for Robert Lowell, the American poet who died in 1977. There are also elegies for the victims of sectarian violence in the 1970s. ‘Casualty’ mourns the death of Louis O’Neill in a reprisal pub bombing by the IRA, and ‘A Postcard from North Antrim’ commemorates the death of another friend, Sean Armstrong, whom Heaney had known at Queen’s University in Belfast. The elegy that most closely adheres to classical precedents and yet at the same time offers the most striking revision of elegiac myths and emblems is ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, written in memory of Heaney’s second cousin, Colum McCartney, shot dead by Loyalist gunmen on 24 August 1975.

‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ is remarkable for the subtle way in which it both utilizes traditional elegiac conventions and simultaneously renovates those conventions to make them more appropriate for the needs of the present. The epigraph from Dante’s *Purgatorio* gives an appropriate solemnity to the poem, but it also felicitously connects one ‘strand’ with another and conveniently provides the rushes for the mourning ritual at the close of Heaney’s elegy:

> All round this little island, on the strand
> Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
> Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.

At the same time as establishing its affinities with poetic tradition – with Dante and Virgil – the poem declares its own modernity, its own specific place and time:

> Leaving the white glow of filling stations
> And a few lonely streetlamps among fields
> You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton
> Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars . . .

The suburban or semi-rural ‘filling stations’ and ‘lonely streetlamps among fields’ have an unusual prominence at the outset of what is, essentially, a pastoral elegy. Like the deserted airports at the beginning of
W. H. Auden’s great elegy for Yeats, these seemingly mundane images are ‘proof of the unexalted world in which contemporary elegists have to work’. At the same time, both images conjure up deeper levels of significance: ‘stations’ and ‘lamps’ are words that in the context of Catholic liturgy imply an attitude of respectful mourning and careful watching. The ‘white glow’ is starkly modern and secular, but it prepares us for the mysterious light in which the dead man reappears at the end of the poem. Initially, however, McCartney is seen to leave the light behind and lose his way ‘beneath the stars’ on what had once been ‘a pilgrim’s track’.24

From the outset, then, Heaney’s poem delicately balances an unflinching response to contemporary realities with a sensitive awareness of the spiritual responsibilities that the elegy has traditionally carried. In view of the untimely death that Heaney describes so vividly and disturbingly in the first section of the poem, the opening word ‘Leaving’ carries a poignant and powerful stress. The verbal participle presents the dead man in the physical act of driving away from his known environment and simultaneously gestures towards that metaphysical ‘leaving’ that has always been a crucial element in personal elegies, whether in Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ or Auden’s ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’. In a canny reversal of traditional elegiac conventions, however, Heaney’s elegy has the dead man ascending towards his death.

Along with the place name in the title, specific references to Newtownhamilton and the Fews Forest establish the poem as a Northern Irish elegy. The road that links these places also leads into the realm of Irish mythology. Where earlier English elegies, including ‘Lycidas’ and Shelley’s ‘Adonaïs’, invoke the muses or make passing reference to other familiar figures from classical mythology, Heaney recalls the seventh-century Irish king who, in medieval Irish legend, is transformed into a bird and banished from Ulster. Sweeney’s vision of ‘bloodied heads’ and the grotesque imagery of the ‘demon pack’ he met on his travels prepares us for the violent murder of McCartney without in any way mitigating or diminishing the real, contemporary force of that sectarian killing. Sweeney’s terrified experience is merely the pretext for the poem’s attempt to imagine and understand the horrific death that McCartney encountered. That moment can be registered only in anguished rhetorical questions: ‘What blazed ahead of you? A faked roadblock?’25

The vocative of direct address, the intimate second-person communing with the dead, is a familiar and persistent convention in elegiac writing, and Heaney uses it throughout ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’. It begins in
line 3 of the poem and is carried through to the end. The intimacy between the poet and his lost relative is strongly pronounced in the sad recognition that McCartney died ‘Where you weren’t known and far from what you knew’. According to Peter Sacks, the purpose of the formulaic ‘Where were you?’ is to mask and conceal the implied and troubling question, ‘Where was I?’ At the time of his second cousin’s death, Heaney was himself living far from what he knew, having left the North in 1972 to settle in Glanmore, County Wicklow. He was also beginning to compare his situation with that of the exiled Sweeney, and his first attempts to translate the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* date from that time. The function of the second-person address and the insistent questioning so common in elegy is ‘to set free the energy locked in grief or rage and to organize its movement . . . deflecting that closely related element of mourning [which is] guilt’. The repetitive nature of the questioning emphasizes the expiatory element of mourning in traditional elegies, and Heaney’s elegy acknowledges and repeats this familiar convention.

There are very few modern elegies that observe the conventions of the genre so trustingly as ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’. The waters of Lough Beg and the ‘soft treeline of yew’, with its traditional associations of churchyard mourning, are in keeping with the conventional landscapes of pastoral elegy. So, too, are the marigolds and bulrushes that grow along the strand. Colum McCartney is placed within this landscape, not as the traditional shepherd but as a peaceful and slightly timid cowherd. The boy who ‘once heard guns fired behind the house’ and was ‘scared to find spent cartridges, / Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected’, would not be out of place in *Death of a Naturalist*. The three parts of Heaney’s elegy work steadily to recover and rehabilitate McCartney within the landscape that he knew. The first part presents the circumstances of his death with shocking immediacy; the second part recalls the dead man’s youth and his former rural occupation; and the third part moves towards a tentative resolution and resurrection. The loose pentameter and sporadic rhymes ensure a narrative progression and cohesion without the verse appearing strained or mechanical.

As well as mourning the loss of McCartney, Heaney offers a more general observation on a community beset with violence. This is not inimical to the tradition of the elegy, but part of its well-established pattern of blending private grief with public notice. Heaney appears to conflate two familiar elegiac conventions. In the first of these, the mourner charges with negligence the guardians of the deceased; and in the second, the mourner raises questions about the nature of justice. The innocence and vulnerability of the youthful McCartney are rendered all
the more moving in the context of his community's inherent passivity and disavowal of violence:

For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy,
Spoke an old language of conspirators
And could not crack the whip or seize the day:
Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground.29

Neil Corcoran finds in these lines an instance of Heaney's 'rueful acknowledgement of his family's incapacity for facing some of the violent realities of sectarianism'.30 The point is well made, and it is worth adding that what might appear digressive in this particular elegy can be seen, in terms of the genre's familiar conventions, to be entirely integral to the process of mourning and the evolution of the mourner's thoughts and feelings.

The most daring aspect of Heaney's elegy is its embrace and modification of traditional elegiac rites, especially those that gesture towards consolation and redemption. In the final section of 'The Strand at Lough Beg', Heaney clearly confronts those risks that modern critics of the elegy have pondered: how can the mythic structures and traditional sources of consolation inherent in the genre continue to function in an age of scepticism and disbelief? In a revealing interview with Melvyn Bragg for ITV's South Bank Show in October 1991, Heaney comments that traditionally the elegy 'resurrects the dead one in a benign landscape and makes the dead walk again in a beautiful, freed way'. In this poem, he says, the boy's doom is 'mitigated by the gentleness of the landscape he comes from and his being reunited with that benign landscape'.31 Heaney is careful, both in the poem and in the interview, not to make any precise allusion to Christian resurrection. Nevertheless, the poem does suggest a ghostly reappearance of his dead relative, and it does so through a subtle presentation of the landscape. Heaney bathes the strand in morning mist, so that Lough Beg 'half shines under the haze'. The cattle graze 'Up to their bellies in an early mist', as if suspended in air.32 As Jahan Ramazani suggests, Heaney's rural setting 'ingeniously fulfils the demands of both apotheosis and worldliness. ... [H]e figures his own imagination in the mist and dew that soothe, unify, and engulf without, however, betraying terra firma for a heavenly flight.'33

The ghostly shimmering of the closing section ushers in the shade of the dead cousin. Strangely, the transition is eased by the earlier delicate
suggestiveness of ‘rising time’ and the memory of the duck shooters who once ‘haunted’ the landscape. The elegy prepares us for the possibility of the miraculous, for the possibility of seeing things. The rhymes become more regular and pronounced, giving the verse a steady sense of control and authority. There is also a quiet shift in verbal tense, so that as we enter the final section of the poem we find ourselves in the haunted present. For the first time (in line 35), we hear the first-person voice:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin.\(^{34}\)

The act of turning effectively marks the break between the innocent past and the murderous present. An imaginative reunion with McCartney is brutally displaced by the actuality of his death.

The poem initiates a rite of mourning in which the submissive and compliant suggestions of a victim on his knees are countered by the more priestly and prayerful suggestions of that same physical attitude. The washing of the dead cousin with dew recalls the opening of the \textit{Purgatorio}, in which Virgil wipes the face of Dante and girds him with a reed, as commanded by Cato. In lines 49–52 of Canto I, Virgil bids Dante kneel in reverence before the figure of Cato. As if both summoning and resisting traditional elegiac conventions, Heaney has ‘a low cloud’ come down to earth rather than risk the suggestions of an ascension into heaven. Even while imagining the ghostly reappearance of his cousin, he maintains a strong physical sense of his weight and solidity: ‘I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.’ The plaiting of rushes is a familiar elegiac convention, quite possibly a psychic means of creating a fabric to fill a void. The weaving of burial clothes or a shroud similarly emphasizes material productivity, a way of responding to emptiness and rupture with a sense of continuity and process. Heaney’s elegy closes with a specifically Irish Catholic and Nationalist iconography. The green vestment in Catholic liturgy signifies renewal, but it also recalls the old United Ireland ballad, ‘The Wearing of the Green’, and its memorable evocation in Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’. There is no dogmatic assertion of belief, either political or religious, but rather a subdued and tender search for comfort in the stark realization of human loss: ‘With rushes that shoot green again, I plait / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.’\(^{35}\)
In a quiet act of verbal substitution, the green shooting of rushes effectively disarms and displaces the more violent images of shooting earlier in the poem. As if refusing the consolation afforded by his own elegy, Heaney returned to the subject of Colum McCartney’s death in Station Island (1984). In the title poem, he follows the penitential rites of pilgrims visiting an island closely associated with Saint Patrick and the coming of Christianity to Ireland. The meditative nature of the quest produces a poetry that is strongly self-questioning and self-reflexive. In Section VIII of the poem, having made his peace with the spirit of an archaeologist friend, Tom Delaney, Heaney encounters ‘a bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud’. In a startling imagined dialogue, McCartney rebukes the poet for having fastened his attention on the strand at Lough Beg and for having sentimentalized his death:

‘You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact. You confused evasion and artistic tact. The Protestant who shot me through the head I accuse directly, but indirectly, you who now atone perhaps upon this bed for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio and saccharined my death with morning dew.’

The function of this encounter is not to cancel the elegiac response in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, but rather to test the adequacy of lyric modes of writing against the competing claims of narrative, dramatic poetry. ‘Station Island’ is, after all, as much an artistic framing of experience as ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ and one that continues to draw on allusions to the Purgatorio. At the end of the ‘Station Island’ sequence, however, it is James Joyce rather than Dante who provides artistic sustenance. Joyce tells the poet, ‘What you must do must be done on your own’, and all the signs are that Heaney has since reaffirmed his belief in lyric intensity and concentration, even in the context of elegy.

Heaney’s continuing trust in the possibilities of lyric form is given ample expression in The Haw Lantern (1987), especially in the deeply moving sequence of elegiac sonnets titled ‘Clearances’. Written after the death of Margaret Heaney, the poet’s mother, in 1984, these sonnets suggest a clearing away of many things. Historically, clearances involve the clearing of land, including the chopping down of trees, and so at one level the sequence draws on the deep reserves of cultural memory.
and national loss. At a more intimate, personal level, the title suggests the painful processes of grief and adjustment after the death of a loved one. It recognizes what has been lost but also apprehends the new space in which life continues. As with the earlier sonnet, ‘Requiem for the Croppies’, Heaney finds an appropriate medium for memory and grief in the compressed and confined space of 14 lines.

The third poem in the sequence deftly employs the dynamics of the sonnet form, including the conventional turn between octave and sestet and a tightly organized rhythmic structure, to give shape and significance to memory. From the outset, the sonnet is poignantly alert to the patterns of possession and dispossession that death distorts. Looking back from a desolate present on scenes of childhood closeness and companionship, the poem recalls how ‘I was all hers.’ An ordinary, domestic event – peeling potatoes on a Sunday morning – is invested with special significance in the octave of the sonnet. The potatoes are ‘things to share’, associated with the happy sights and sounds of the kitchen: ‘Gleaming in a bucket’ and giving rise to ‘Little pleasant splashes’. At the same time, they plangently recall what has been lost and broken. The potatoes falling in the water are likened to ‘solder’ and the word ‘weeping’ immediately suggests tears, as does the word ‘splashes’. The repetition of the phrase ‘let fall’ takes on a ritualistic power that links the customary work of the kitchen with the later patterns of grieving and the psychological need to let go. The strongly marked turn between octave and sestet completes the strange inversion of domestic and sacred rituals in the poem, so that potato peeling becomes religious and sacramental in its watery element, while the last rites of the Catholic Church take on the semblance of a domestic task, with the priest going ‘hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying’. This unexpected relationship between two powerful memories – one of abundant life and one of approaching death – gains its clarity and intensity precisely because of the possibilities afforded by the sonnet form.

In the anguished final moments of death, the sonnet retrieves those other moments of life’s early intimacy and attachment: ‘her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine’. With the rueful wisdom of a Hardy lyric, the sonnet acknowledges the full significance of that earlier memory and of those ‘fluent dipping knives’ only when it is too late to reinstate or re-enact it: ‘Never closer the whole rest of our lives’.39

Contrary to the common supposition that the elegy has exhausted its validity and appeal in recent times, Heaney’s work has continued to draw deeply on traditional elegiac resources, at the same time making them relevant and compelling to a modern readership. Much of his
work in the past decade has adopted an attitude of reflection and meditation in the uncanny space between the living and the dead. The exploration of that liminal space provides the impulse for several poems in *Seeing Things* (1991), including the finely honed elegy for Heaney’s father, ‘Man and Boy’, and the miraculous three-part title poem, ‘Seeing Things’, in which the in-betweenness of life and death is beautifully and memorably sustained:

That afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.40

*Seeing Things* also includes ‘The Sounds of Rain’ (in memory of Richard Ellmann) and ‘The Schoolbag’ (in memory of John Hewitt). More recently, *Electric Light* (2001) shows Heaney confirming and consolidating his ample achievements within the lyric, elegiac mode. Heaney’s father reappears within the newly lit perspectives of the volume in ‘Seeing the Sick’, and there are elegies that take their impulse and direction from specifically Irish words and places, most notably ‘Clonmany to Ahascragh’ (in memory of Rory Kavanagh) and ‘Sruth’ (in memory of Mary O’Muirithe). Three elegies in *Electric Light* are for fellow poets: ‘To the Shade of Zbigniew Herbert’, ‘On His Work in the English Tongue’ (in memory of Ted Hughes), and ‘Audenesque’ (in memory of Joseph Brodsky). The elegy for Brodsky keeps open its dialogue with Auden’s great elegy for Yeats, while deftly blending conventional formality and conversational ease:

Joseph, yes, you know the beat.
Wystan Auden’s metric feet
Marched to it, unstressed and stressed
Laying William Yeats to rest.

There is a well-earned rightness and justification in Heaney’s readiness to take over where Yeats and Auden left off. Like his predecessors, Heaney has always measured lyric potentiality against the most trying and intractable social and political circumstances. In keeping with other modern Irish elegies, Heaney’s poems of loss have never been narrowly preoccupied with personal mourning or obsessively inward-looking, but always striving for connections with those other challenging modes
of writing: ‘the visionary prophetic, the patriotic witness, the national epical’. Few readers would deny Heaney the title that he once admiringly bestowed on Robert Lowell: ‘the master elegist / and welder of English’.41

Notes

7 Heaney, ‘Mid-Term Break’, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 15.
8 Heaney, ‘Mid-Term Break’, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 15.
22 Heaney, ‘Funeral Rites’, *North*, p. 18.


I am grateful to Louise Cole for this thoughtful observation.


Heaney, ‘Station Island XII’, *Station Island*, p. 92.


If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning [of the poem] can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist.

(T. S. Eliot, ‘The Music of Poetry’)¹

Seamus Heaney's most striking proclivity is his ability to put himself in a mediating position between polarities. Growing up part of the minority Roman Catholic community in officially British Northern Ireland placed him in an ostensible conflict between two cultures and consequently between two ways of conceiving himself politically. Jonathan Allison has recently noted the critical frequency of this description of Heaney: ‘To regard Heaney as a poet of self-division has become a critical commonplace. His poetry is said to mediate between, oscillate between, chart a course between, struggle between, and voice the conflict between certain opposing choices.’² Yet this same criticism, which rightly points out Heaney’s penchant for being ‘a poet of self-division’, wrongly suggests that this oscillation is often a position of conflict for the poet; in fact, it is usually enabling for him. For while he undoubtedly feels the attraction of various cultural and religious allegiances as he places himself between antinomies, in a significant strand of his poetry, Heaney purposely places himself into an ambiguous in-between position in order to receive poetic images or rhythms.

The process by which he gains access to these poetic ‘messages’ features prominently in some of Heaney’s best poems. Writing about his own
writing has been a common theme in Heaney’s work as Blake Morrison has observed: ‘Heaney devotes much of his energy to producing a literature that is about itself.’ After a brief exploration of how Yeats employed a similar and exemplary process, this essay will focus on those meditative, liminal states that Heaney enters in order to become a sort of receiving station for voices from his unconscious that he can then render into poetry, which process is itself sometimes displayed within the very poem that features himself in this position. Often the psychological entrance to these situations occurs when the poet is near a physically liminal area such as a window, door, or space between water and land. The well-known poems ‘Digging’, ‘North’ and ‘Station Island’ illustrate this process particularly well. These poems have been consistently misunderstood by critics who have not grasped their portrayal of the particular poetic process Heaney has undergone to write them. His ability to enter into these meditative states and dwell in ambiguity has finally also enabled him to evolve a theory of poetry that redresses reality and creates a new space of poetic and political possibility, which in turn has helped him become an outstanding spokesman for the normalization of relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

The ability of one of Heaney’s exemplars, W. B. Yeats, to enter into a threshold position of perception has been especially influential upon the younger poet as he has evolved his liminal theory of poetic reception. In his 1901 essay ‘Magic’, Yeats articulates his theory of the great collective memory that can be evoked through symbols. Later in the essay, Yeats asks, ‘Who can keep always to the little pathway between speech and silence, where one meets none but discreet revelations?’ This ‘little pathway’ is essentially a via media between utterance and quiet, a position from which he is able to meet ‘discreet revelations’. For Yeats, this essentially liminal state of being enables him to become receptive to phenomena beyond consciousness. His language in this question corresponds closely with descriptions of perceptions of the Otherworld in Irish mythology. For example, Alwyn and Brinley Rees have observed that unions between opposites in Irish mythology often transport humans to a liminal position from which they may view another dimension of reality: ‘The thin line between opposites has essentially the same significance as the dangerous bridges that lead to the citadels of the Other World, the narrow bridge, the razor-bridge, or the see-saw bridge which can only be negotiated by leaping on to its middle. . . . [I]t is the middle course between Scylla and Charybdis.’ Yeats’s and Heaney’s predilection for entering liminal states stems at least in part from their early and ongoing immersion in Irish mythology.
Most of Yeats’s major poems and many of his minor ones display an abiding aspect of his particular fascination with liminality, one that has been suggestive for Heaney as well – how geographically marginal positions may effect psychographically marginal situations. For example, Yeats’s early poem ‘Ephemera’ portrays two lovers who are literally and metaphorically on the brink of this world and the afterlife. Although the love of the couple is ‘waning’, the woman urges the man ‘let us stand / By the lone border of the lake once more . . .’ (lines 5–6). The lovers are literally standing between the water and the dry land in a liminal spot between earth and water. Their location, along with the knowledge that their love is ending, leads their thoughts towards another dimension: ‘Before us lies eternity . . .’. In other words, the physically liminal position of the two lovers not only corresponds to their thoughts of another dimension but also actually precipitates these thoughts. Alwyn and Brinley Rees suggest that physically liminal places such as the shoreline traditionally are revelatory: ‘Irish poets deemed that the brink of the water was always a place where eicse – “wisdom”, “poetry”, “knowledge”, – was revealed.’

Yeats actively cultivated his sense of liminality. He discusses his continued attempts to evoke a liminal state within himself through rhythm in his essay ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols . . . . I have heard in meditation voices that were forgotten the moment they had spoken, and I have been swept, when in more profound meditation, beyond all memory but of those things that came beyond the threshold of waking life.

Earlier I mentioned Yeats’s sometime-occupation with the via media – the middle way between the human world and another world of spirituality. This passage is his explanation of how he comes to occupy this middle ground in which he is able to perceive elements beyond the grasp of the conscious mind; instead of terming it, as he has in ‘Magic’, the ‘pathway between speech and silence’, he describes this liminal state as something akin to a trance – ‘the moment when we are both awake and asleep’. Rhythm is his mantra that lulls him into this realm of contemplation,
from which he is then able to interact with ‘those things that came from beyond the threshold of waking life’.

Lest there be any doubt that liminality was a major aspect of Yeats’s abiding interest in mysticism, his late essay ‘A General Introduction to My Work’ affirms his interest in this concept. He again describes a state of being that enables him to experience insights: ‘What moves me and my hearer is a vivid speech that has no laws except that it must not exorcise the ghostly voice. I am awake and asleep, at my moment of revelation, self-possessed in self-surrender; there is no rhyme, no echo of the beating drum, the dancing foot, that would overset my balance.’ This essay demonstrates his continuing interest in liminality, though here he further describes it as a position of ‘balance’. Much of the language of this passage parallels that of ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’ passage cited above; he is again depicting a period of time between the unconscious state of sleep and the conscious state of wakefulness in which he has experienced mystical revelations. As we shall see, Heaney implicitly draws on Yeats’s theory of liminality in his own poetry. Many of Heaney’s best poems suggest that he places himself in physically liminal places in order to receive knowledge and insight as Yeats did.

Heaney’s most famous early poem, ‘Digging’, from Death of a Naturalist (1966), obliquely portrays this process. The poet sits at a window watching his father digging in a flowerbed in the present; this scene sets off a memory of his father digging potatoes and of his grandfather cutting turf on Toner’s Bog. Placing himself between the domestic and exterior world and between the present and the past enables Heaney to project his future as an artist. As innumerable commentators have remarked, ‘Digging’ is an apprentice poem in which the poet both aligns himself with the family tradition of digging and crucially breaks from that tradition, declaring himself by poem’s end a poet whose tool will be very different from the spades employed by his father and grandfather. The concrete pen with which the poem concludes, however, is only reached after Heaney digs into his memory, an abstract process that he undergoes through reflectively listening to and seeing his own father digging outside his windowsill, a physically liminal position that enables Heaney to cast himself into a reverie.

The primary link between Heaney and his ancestors in this poem stems not from the slightly strained analogy of digging and writing and the corresponding tools of shovel and pen, but through the rhythm of the three Heaney generations as they practise their crafts: Heaney thus writes a rhythmic poem about his inheritance of rhythm from his father and grandfather. In stanza two, Heaney hears ‘a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging’. This sound is
not created by a unique motion; rather, Heaney is hearing the rhythm of his father repeatedly digging, a fact emphasized by the present participle of the verb. And just as on this occasion Heaney is hearing repeated digging, we realize that he has repeatedly sat and listened to his father repeatedly digging. This listening represents Heaney’s typical poetic posture that he represents time and again in his poems. He is listening, pen held in reserve, to his father digging in the present in stanza two and digging in the past in stanza three. Patrick Heaney’s particular potato-digging rhythm is mentioned explicitly in this third stanza as the son now looks out the window: ‘I look down / Till his straining rump comes up twenty years away / Stooping in rhythm through potato drills / Where he was digging’ (my emphasis).\(^{10}\) The poet is remembering and holding in his mind his true heritage – his father’s rhythm – continually available through the poet’s memory.

While the opening stanzas convey Heaney’s listening to and viewing the repetitive motions of Patrick Heaney digging repeatedly in ‘the flowerbeds’ of the present and potato drills of the past, the sixth and seventh stanzas articulate a specific memory of the poet’s encounter with his grandfather, a turf-cutter. He deftly and deeply makes his cut, does not overreach, and then dexterously tosses the turf ‘Over his shoulder’. In this stanza, Heaney remembers and gains the repetitive rhythm of his grandfather’s turf-cutting as a guide to his own rhythmic art. Since he concludes, ‘But I’ve no spade to follow men like them’, he crafts an extremely well-made poem, framed with the image of the pen in equipoise ‘Between my finger and my thumb’. His concluding affirmation, ‘I’ll dig with it’,\(^{11}\) suggests that while he will not follow their vocation, his own work will be similarly marked with consistently employed rhythms.

His predecessors’ gift of rhythm will enable him to reach not physical, underground depths, but those of his subconscious instead. As Michael Molino notes about the implications of the present participle form of the title, ‘the father and the grandfather are captured in a continually present moment as events from the past continue, or echo, in the present’; the poem thus exists in a ‘consistently present moment that, while inhabited with echoes of the past, truncates and reinscribes those echoes as they occur’.\(^{12}\) Typically then – and in a way that Molino has not noticed – this early poem obliquely suggests that the inside of Heaney’s head functions as a sort of sound chamber where the rhythm of various types of digging in the past and present trigger, then echo, the rhythms of his writing the poem in the present. In this sense, ‘Digging’ accords with T. S. Eliot’s theory that ‘a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches
expression in words, and . . . this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image.'13 This early poem thus adumbrates Heaney’s theory of ‘technique’ as a necessary process of retrieving images of poetry that lie submerged in the inner depths of his psyche and can be retrieved through reveries often precipitated by liminal spaces.14

Over 20 years later, in his 1988 T. S. Eliot Centenary Lecture at Harvard, ‘Learning from Eliot’, Heaney made clearer the importance of what he terms ‘the auditory imagination’ for Eliot’s poetry and for his own. For the elder poet, Heaney says, this involved a process akin to mental digging: ‘“the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back . . . [fusing] the most ancient and the most civilized mentality”’. Eliot’s fidelity to the auditory imagination was inspirational for Heaney in exploring his own subconscious feelings: ‘his example of a poet’s intelligence exercising itself in the activity of listening . . . seemed to excuse my own temperamental incapacity for paraphrase and my disinclination to engage a poem’s argument and conceptual progress. Instead, it confirmed a natural inclination to make myself an echo chamber for the poem’s sounds’ (my emphasis).15 Many of Heaney’s best poems do just this, capturing in words the process by which he has received these same words and images offered by the poem presenting itself to him while he has slipped into a contemplative state.

While his first four volumes, including North, often metapoetically evince a fidelity to poetry above other allegiances that compete for the poet’s attention, in the volumes that appeared beginning with Field Work (1979), Heaney confirms that devotion and employs it to transform reality itself, a process highlighted in his 1984 volume, Station Island. In ‘Feeling into Words’, he explicitly recognizes the liminal power of language: ‘Words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning.’16 Heaney’s œuvre itself enacts this backward- and forward-looking vision that he attributes to words in this essay. If these early volumes looked back ‘to a ramification of roots and associations’, then later volumes ‘look forward to a clarification of sense and meaning’, especially through developing his liminal theory of poetry by which the consciousness may be plumbed to clarify his poetic vocation and through which poetry can redress reality by creating a new space of poetic and political possibility.

In pursuing this subterranean knowledge, Heaney has increasingly cast his vocation in religious terms. As he says in his 1978 essay
'The Poet as a Christian’, ‘The poetic vocation involves a pursuit of psychic health, a self-possession, an adjustment between outer and inner realities, a religious commitment to the ever-evolving disciplines of the art which the poet has to credit as his form of sanctity.’ Heaney has left the Catholic Church, but being raised in such a milieu has enabled him to grasp the transcendent qualities necessary for his own work and the discipline necessary to enter states of mind in which he might be more receptive to the promptings of his unconscious.

Nowhere is this disciplined pursuit of his art more evident than in Station Island (1984). This volume demonstrates Heaney’s burgeoning penchant for placing himself in a liminal position in order to hear his inner muse. It is shot through with elements of liminality, and the central and titular poem occurs as a purgatorial dream sequence, purposely placed in the middle of the entire volume. This section dramatizes a series of dramatic meetings with various personages, including Heaney’s second cousin Colum McCartney, who first appeared in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ in Field Work, and James Joyce. Station Island would also prove to be a transitional volume for Heaney: previously his poetry had been grounded in the soil or bogs of his native Derry; Station Island shows Heaney to be attuned to a more ethereal kind of poetry, increasingly Yeatsian in its interchange with the other world and in its preoccupation with the nature of his poetic mission.

There is a loose correspondence to Dante’s Divine Comedy in the three sections of the volume. The first poem of ‘Part One’ is entitled ‘Underground’, and in it the poet enacts a literal descent, not to the underworld but to the London Underground; in ‘Part Two: Station Island’, the poet enters the middle passage that signifies the process he must follow in order to receive poetic insight; finally, in ‘Part Three: Sweeney Redivivus’, the poet ascends into an airy realm of the imagination in which he affirms a new poetic role for himself. In this tripartite structure, Station Island follows Jonathan Hufstader’s sequential delineation of Heaney’s ‘ritual procedure’ in many of his poems: ‘[There is an] entrance rite, [a] central action, and [then] the subject’s emergence from the ritual in a new state of mind.’ This crucial middle passage is most fully explored in the second section of the volume, but echoes of it abound throughout the work. For instance, in the first section, this choice of a liminal route, poetically and personally, is emphasized in the poem ‘Making Strange’, in which the speaker stands between a man with ‘tawny containment’ and ‘speech like the twang of a bowstring’ and another, unshorn and bewildered’. The former is a British soldier and the latter a native Irishman, between whom Heaney negotiates a sort of
passage for himself. He does so by heeding ‘a cunning middle voice’ that urges him to ‘Be adept and be dialect’. The pun here is on the dual meanings of ‘dialect’: first connoting the Ulster dialect he must shift to from his academic, poetic voice when speaking to fellow Irishmen or the British; and second, emphasizing the dialectical nature of Heaney himself, swinging between the poles of Irishness and Britishness that he has always oscillated between as a Catholic growing up in officially British Northern Ireland.

As Heaney the poet progressively tunes himself to hear this middle voice throughout the volume, he draws strength and insight from it. In ‘The Loaning’, he finds himself ‘in the limbo of lost words’, which eerily presage the status of the ghostly pilgrims he will encounter in ‘Station Island’. These soft, quiet voices are contraposed with the ‘Big voices in the womanless kitchen’ in the second stanza, but then in the third and final stanza, the speaker again finds a middle way, telling himself and the reader to ‘Stand still. / You can hear everything going on’. This emphasis on listening – which pervades earlier poems such as ‘Digging’ and ‘North’ – prepares the reader and the poet for the advice of the various pilgrims they will encounter together in the central section of the volume.

‘Station Island’ is itself set in a liminal place, on the island of the same name in Lough Derg, County Donegal. This physically liminal position must have been especially attractive to Heaney as he went through the Catholic pilgrimage rite of performing acts of devotion at the penitential beds of saints on the island as both a penance for his sin and as a way of plumbing his poetic depths. In order to appreciate Heaney’s ambiguous, receptive state of mind in this middle section we must properly understand the very concept of pilgrimage, which is itself liminal according to anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner. In their Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture, the Turners point out the similarities between Christian pilgrimages and passage rites:

Pilgrimage . . . has some of the attributes of liminality in passage rites: release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an axis mundi of his faith.
Heaney’s pilgrimage shares a surprising number of these attributes; perhaps most importantly, he emerges as a more ‘integral person from multiple personae’ by the end of the sequence, the various aspects of his personality integrated and functioning supremely well and freshly able to see clearly his poetic mission.

Although throughout this chapter I have been using the term ‘liminality’ as a description of an in-between position that Heaney often places himself in to receive poetic images, in *Station Island*, this usual sense of his liminality coalesces with his position as a liminar undergoing the rite of religious passage that all pilgrims to the island must undertake. In the process, he is especially open to receiving sacred or poetic knowledge in his condition of powerlessness and ambiguity as the Turners note:

> During the liminal period, the characteristics of the liminaries (the ritual subjects in this phase) are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminals are betwixt and between. Liminals are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal. Their secular powerlessness may be compensated for by a sacred power, however – the power of the weak, derived on the one hand from the resurgence of nature when structural power is removed, and on the other from the reception of sacred knowledge. Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, or communitas; while much of what has been dispersed over the many domains of culture and social structure is now bound, or cathected, in the complex semantic systems of pivotal, multivocal symbols and myths, numinous systems which achieve great conjunctive power.22

Just as Yeats often placed himself in a trance-like state between waking and sleeping, Heaney in *Station Island* enters a twilight world between the living and the dead that empowers him to receive the same sort of ghostly urges and advice for his poetry that Yeats did. The ‘multivocal symbols’ common to the religious and sociological processes of liminality just described suggest the voices of the various figures from Ireland’s and Heaney’s own past that Heaney hears in the first 11 parts of this middle section.23 Their advice is subsumed, however, by the multivocal arrival of James Joyce, a figure of artistic importance whom Heaney...
meets in a car park after the end of the pilgrimage. His entrance, though silent, triggers verbal echoes in the poet’s head: ‘His voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers / came back to me, though he did not speak yet.’

This twelfth section of the sequence culminates with Joyce’s advice to Heaney “to write / for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust / that imagines its haven like your hands at night // dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast. . . . Let go, let fly, forget. / You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note”. Heaney then steps into a liminal space luminous with potential: ‘It was as if I had stepped free into space / alone with nothing that I had not known / already’. The philosopher Michael Polanyi’s discussion of ‘tacit foreknowledge’ is apposite here since Heaney seems intensely familiar with this situation yet surprised at finding himself in it. In developing this theory, Polanyi draws on Plato’s discussion of arguments and solutions in the *Meno*:

> He says that to search for the solution of a problem is an absurdity; for either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem; or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you cannot expect to find anything. The solution which Plato offered for this paradox was that all discovery is a remembering of past lives . . . . The kind of tacit knowledge that solves the paradox of the *Meno* consists in the intimation of something hidden, which we may yet discover.

Polanyi’s conception of tacit foreknowledge seems vital to understanding Heaney’s discovery here. Having replayed his past life in recalling the various personages – and perhaps his earlier vocational possibilities that these ghosts signify, as Helen Vendler claims – that speak to him in the first 11 sections, he has unconsciously enacted Plato’s solution to the *Meno* and himself created a freed-up space in which he can now be receptive to discovering new direction for his true vocation of poetry. That space has been there all along, but he has been too preoccupied with his own past, with his fidelity to other attractions besides his poetry to notice it. By re-enacting the familiar ritual of the penitential stations with his body, a discipline that even then was still second nature to him, Heaney’s mind was allowed to wander in a limitless space of potential, reliving and finally purging his past and imagining his poetic future.

After meeting Joyce, Heaney then tells him of the inspiration he has gained from Stephen’s diary entry ‘for April the thirteenth’ – the passage in which Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* realizes...
that ‘tundish’ is a perfectly acceptable English word, despite the Dean’s professed ignorance of it. Joyce’s response is swift and derisive: “‘Who cares’, / he jeered, “any more? The English language / belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires, // a waste of time for somebody your age. / That subject people stuff is a cod’s game, / infantile like your peasant pilgrimage.” This advice explicitly rejects the victim mentality that has been so easy for many Irish people to slip into, not to mention Northern Catholics, with their ongoing immersion in a neo-colonial state. Joyce’s own mastery of the English language, the tongue of the colonizer, enables Heaney also to fully claim this language as his own and to revel in it, to reconfigure it for his own uses. Joyce, in the role of priest, thus absolves Heaney of his enslavement to the past and of an absorption with ‘post-colonial’ musings.

This meeting signifies Heaney’s setting out for the frontier of writing; he is taking Joyce’s advice to ‘swim out on your own and fill the element / with . . . elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea’. The aquatic imagery of this poetic advice is heightened by the burst of rain around Joyce as he strides away, signalling a moment of insight for the poet. Heaney has followed the procession of pilgrims until he has reached his ultimate destination, not so much a position of spiritual exaltation, but an artistically enabling space in which he can receive the advice that is given him by his aesthetic priest, Joyce. This advice is his road-map to writing, as he would increasingly negotiate between the world of the living and other realms by the brightness of the ‘elver-gleams’ – the flashes of poetic inspiration that occur from his encounters with spirits as he bestrides the division between two dimensions of reality.

The third and final section of Station Island, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, functions as an extended metaphor for Heaney’s poetic attempts to adhere to the via media between his poetry of the past and his poetry of the future, the latter of which beckons him to fly even higher from the treetops of his lines. He offers us a glimpse of the increasingly spiritual bent of his poetry throughout this volume. In its last poem, ‘On the Road’, the road upon which Heaney drives throws him into a ‘trance’ and ‘made all roads one’. In this liminal state, he hears Christ’s words to the rich man to ‘Sell all you have / and give to the poor’. Heaney’s reaction has been to take Christ’s command metaphorically, harvest his poetic gifts, and offer them as an enhancement to the imagination of those imaginatively poor. As Sammye Crawford Greer has pointed out, this section of the volume links Heaney with Dante in its affirmation of his poetic mission and in his discharge of his artistic obligation to his audience: ‘[It] confirm[s] the centrality of the pilgrim-poet’s realizations in Heaney’s
continuing exploration of the consciousness of the artist and leave[s] us with a poet who has, as Heaney says of *The Divine Comedy*, “an overall sense of having come through . . . of faring forth into the ordeal, going to the nadir and returning to a world that is renewed by the boon won in that other place.”

Already poetically liberated by Joyce, Heaney reflects on this aesthetic and spiritual ascent: ‘I was up and away // like a human soul / that plumes from the mouth / in undulant, tenor / black-letter Latin.’ For the remainder of the poem, he is ‘Noah’s dove’, signifying hope and maintaining a life of exile, meditation and exaltation. Just as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus would try to fly by the nets that his country had laid for him, Heaney here is increasingly trying out his wings, slipping by constraining nets such as an Irish over-absorption with the past or victim status. By the time of his Nobel Prize Address in 1995, 11 years after *Station Island*, he could look back and with no small satisfaction note, ‘I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous.’ This remark captures perfectly his spirited exploration of a new poetic space liminal in position between his rooted past full of witnessed violence and his airy imaginative future in *Station Island*.

This new space is a function of the poetic process thoughtfully undertaken – what Heaney sees as the ‘mind’s capacity to construct a new plane of regard for itself, a new scope for its own activity’. Yeats’s usual invocation of a trance-like state implies that this condition has been there all along – that it is there waiting for those bold enough to enter it. While ‘Digging’ and ‘North’ accord with Yeats’s theory of poetic perception, they represent a significant but incomplete part of Heaney’s liminal theory of poetry. He is finally arguing, implicitly in *Station Island* and explicitly in his most recent prose, that the most original poetry will redress a given vision of reality and transform it into another equally plausible representation of reality. Moreover, it is only through the discovery of this other liminal zone, ‘the frontier of writing, the line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature’, that the poet can create, not merely occupy, this new position.

Heaney’s assumption of such a liminally enabling position in this sense allows his poetic characters, narrators and even his audience to at least temporarily escape their present realities by virtue of his creation of a new reality shimmering with possibilities. Alan Peacock makes a similar point in an essay chiefly concerned with Heaney’s role as a poet in his verse drama, *The Cure at Troy*, noting that, ‘the role of the chorus in fact
echoes the position of the poet in its liminal, mediating function. . . .

Just as the chorus acts as a bridge between audience and action, so poetry occupies a liminal role, poised between hope and what ineluctably is . . . .38 Heaney has become a veritable poetic ambassador of hope on the world stage, his work demonstrating that poetry can make things happen, Auden’s famous protest notwithstanding, especially by reconfiguring the imagination.

This role as cultural and political ambassador is undoubtedly a primary reason Heaney won the Nobel Prize for literature. Despite being a constitutional nationalist, he has been engaged in a decades-long process of reconciling Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics that is beyond the scope of this essay to more than suggest. His dominant concern in this regard has been to develop a common language of unity in the province. One day after the signing of the landmark Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Heaney offered his views on the peace settlement in an Irish Times column that argues for the liberating power of language:

language itself seems to have gained a new friskiness through the signing of the inter-party agreement yesterday. Even the term ‘party rules’ loses a bit of sectarian weight and begins to suggest something more innocent and celebratory. By devising a set of structures and a form of words which have the potential to release all sides from their political and historical entrapment, Senator Mitchell, the Taoiseach, Prime Minister Blair and all the talk’s participants have done something evolutionary. If revolution is the kicking down of a rotten door, evolution is more like pushing the stone from the mouth of the tomb. There is an Easter energy about it . . . .39

Heaney’s celebration of the ambiguity of the words in the Agreement stems from his own development of a poetics that has thrived on indecision, on being ‘in-between’ politically and poetically. His approval of the document’s indefinite language was echoed by Irish critic Declan Kiberd’s stirring contention some two years later that in its ‘vague, even “poetic”’ language lay its real appeal to the range of cultures and religious traditions in Northern Ireland.40 The creative spirit – whether in literature or another branch of the arts – at this moment in history offers another glimpse at flexible possibility, not stubborn intransigence.

Despite its recent suspension, the changes wrought by the Good Friday Agreement augur well for the future of Northern Ireland. Recent controversies on certain aspects of it, like the full implementation of the Patten Commission on Policing, suggest that there is a bumpy road
ahead. A model of hope and transformation exists, however, in Seamus Heaney's body of work. What Heaney offers in his best poetry accords with his description of Yeats's, which he has argued proffers a 'vision of reality . . . [that] is transformative, more than just a print-out of the given circumstances of its time and place. The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them.' Increasingly, this Janus-faced poet is straddling the threshold between what is and what can be. His poetic invitation to us is to join him at the frontier of writing, where hope, tempered by reality, awaits us.

Notes
14. In his essay ‘Feeling into Words’, Heaney states that technique acts as a mediating device that brings buried psychic material into consciousness where it can then be shaped into forms: ‘Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art’ (*Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 47).
23 See Michael Molino’s explication of the ‘Station Island’ sequence for a detailed, thoughtful reading of the significance of the various ghosts and the implication of the sequence for Heaney himself, which Molino sees as a purgation of survivor’s guilt ‘when violence and death befalls others around him’ (pp. 146–67).
24 Heaney, ‘Station Island XII’, Station Island, p. 92.
25 Heaney, ‘Station Island XII’, Station Island, p. 93.
27 Vendler argues that ‘the poem both implicitly and explicitly asks, again and again, the question of male vocation. “If you did not follow my path” (the young priest might ask), “why not?” “If you are like me” (a writer such as Joyce might say), “why are you still in Ireland?” “If you write poetry” (a victim might cry), “what good is it to me?”’ (H. Vendler, Seamus Heaney (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 94).
28 Heaney, ‘Station Island XII’, Station Island, p. 93.
29 Joyce’s multivocal influence on Heaney here gives some credence to Dillon Johnston’s claim that Joyce leads the shift from a single point of view to a more dramatic form of narration in which the reader arrives at judgements formerly proclaimed by the narrator. As no insignificant byproduct of this narrative shift, Joyce suggests to the [subsequent] Irish poets a way of freeing their vision from historical determinism which has had a killing hold on the Irish consciousness’ (D. Johnston, Irish Poetry after Joyce, 2nd edn (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 33). As I have tried to make clear, though, Heaney is also heavily influenced by Yeats, especially in his essentially liminal poetic stance.
30 Heaney, ‘Station Island XII’, Station Island, p. 94.
33 Heaney, ‘On the Road’, Station Island, p. 120.
34 In his thoughtful essay on what he terms Heaney’s ‘station poems’, those ritualized poems including ‘Station Island’, Jonathan Bolton argues that this third and last stage of the station poem, the ‘epode or “aftersong”, typically involves some form of return, as if from a trance, a resurfacing or unearthing motion that completes the ritual and brings the excavated find or renewed sense of racial consciousness to light’ (J. Bolton, “Customary Rhythms”: Seamus Heaney and the Rite of Poetry’, Papers on Language and Literature, 37, 2 (2001), p. 209). While ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ clearly marks the poet’s return from his trance-like state in which he was interrogated by the ghosts of his past, it significantly does not offer a recovered physical artefact and certainly
not ‘a renewed sense of racial consciousness’, suggesting instead that Heaney’s new poetic project will be more abstract and cosmopolitan.

37 Heaney, ‘Introduction’, *The Redress of Poetry*, p. xvi. Heaney’s poem ‘The Frontier of Writing’ adumbrates this theory. The narrator is stopped twice and interrogated presumably by British soldiers on the border of Northern Ireland. After the second interrogation, which significantly happens ‘on the frontier of writing’, the speaker is released into a clear space between reality and imagination: ‘And suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed, / as if you’d passed from behind a waterfall / on the black current of a tarmac road’ (S. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 6).
Rural, organic images have always populated Seamus Heaney’s poetry, and prominent among these has been the tree, with its natural, mythical, historical and linguistic connotations. In poems like ‘Nerthus’ and ‘Belderg’, Heaney probes ancient Norse expressions of tree worship and iconography, while *Sweeney Astray* is a regional forest saga. Heaney presents the tree as written sign in ‘Alphabets’, ‘The Scribes’ and ‘Squarings xxxi’; the tree/forest is represented as otherworldly in ‘The Plantation’, ‘The Wishing Tree’ and ‘Fosterling’ and as a place of refuge in ‘Exposure’ and the Sweeney poems. There are also trees which feature in Heaney’s personal history: the childhood tree (in ‘Oracle’, ‘In the Beech’ and ‘Glanmore Sonnets V’) and the chestnut tree (‘Clearances’), which the poet identifies with himself and his mother. This chapter will consider literary, mythical and cultural representations of trees in Heaney’s work, the association between poet and tree, and ways in which Heaney challenges the fixity of the literary tree in his canon. Starting with *Sweeney Astray*, this chapter will outline the process by which Heaney cultivates the poetic tree in his early work, only to ‘unwrite’ it in pieces like ‘Clearances’, ‘The Wishing Tree’ and ‘Squarings xxxi’.

### The poet in the tree

*Sweeney Astray* is a rich source of tree symbolism; it contains named, venerated trees; its protagonist is the tree-dweller, Mad Sweeney; and it is set in the Irish forest, traditionally a home to both gods and miscreants. Heaney is alert to the potency of the forest, and in ‘The God in the Tree’, he describes the ‘mysteries of the grove’ and ‘the powers of the Celtic otherworld’ when analysing the creative role of the forest in early Irish nature poetry. Additionally, the forest is the space beyond the city
walls, where civil law no longer obtains and where the normal order of things is inverted: ‘the forests were foris, “outside”. In them lived the outcasts, the mad, the lovers, brigands, hermits, saints, lepers, the *maquis*, fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men.’2 This marginal space is the locus of struggle, transformation and redemption in *Sweeney Astray*, in which the physically and mentally unstable Sweeney is driven into the woods – his place of personal penitence and salvation.

Outcast and fugitive, Sweeney is the quintessential ‘Man of the Woods’, condemned to life as a bird-man among the trees after a transgression against King Ronan. There even exists in the narrative a figure (seemingly Sweeney’s double) who names himself thus: ‘I am Man of the Wood. / I was famous / in battles once. Now I hide / among bushes.’3 Part hermit and part tree worshipper, Sweeney is both an outlaw and a penitent, who suffers from bouts of insanity. He also experiences the ignominy of shape-changing, being forced to spend his days in the guise of a battered bird at the mercy of trees which spike and rend him:

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Hard grey branches
have torn my hands,
the skin of my feet
is in strips from briars

Tonight, in torment, in Glasgally
I am crucified in the fork of a tree.
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But this narrative of pain and atonement is countered by a celebratory impulse in the text – one that lauds the tree. In order to survive, Sweeney learns to take succour from the trees, which become his physical and spiritual sustenance: ‘I need woods / for consolation’. Glen Bolcain, Sweeney’s sacred space, is termed ‘my Eden, thick with apple trees’.6 His most exalted moment is the recitation of the paean to the paean to the trees, in which each tree is praised in turn, beginning with the oak, the ‘highest in the forest’.7 In this role as poet/scribe of the woods and in his intimate association with trees, Sweeney invites comparison with Heaney.

Beyond *Sweeney Astray*, Sweeney figures in a number of later poems, essays and interviews. The Heaney-Sweeney relationship is probed in *Station Island*, where, beginning with ‘The King of the Ditchbacks’, Heaney explores his self-identification with Sweeney by posing questions directly to the figure (identified as ‘small dreamself in the branches’). Later in the volume, Heaney reintroduces Sweeney, gives him his own section (‘Sweeney Redvivus’) and constructs in places a double-voiced discourse, in which both Heaney’s and Sweeney’s voices can be heard.
A poem that is seemingly ‘co-authored’ by Heaney/Sweeney is ‘In the Beech’. Although the pre-pubescent child-observer perched up a beech is clearly identified, there are a number of lines (7–10, 21–2) that could be spoken by either the adult poet/commentator or Sweeney the tree-dweller. Shortly after Station Island’s publication, Heaney was asked how far this personal allegory could be pursued. In his reply, he sustains the Heaney-Sweeney conflation, suggesting that the voice of Sweeney blends with ‘the child Heaney’:

There are some poems which are clearly autobiographical. There’s one poem called ‘In the Beech’. Now, the Sweeney figure spends a lot of his time roosting in trees – so in a sense, that gives permission for this voice to speak and it remembers a moment which I think all children have. It’s one of those universal childhood reveries that you remember being in a tree and the address and the airiness of it, and the secrecy and the removal from the usual world. And in my case, I remember this particular tree I used to climb; I climbed it – I must have been four or five, it was during the war anyway . . . So, . . . Sweeney in the tree, and the child Heaney in the tree are merged together there and I use them to re-collect and to re-member.8

The tree, the primary point of shared experience and utterance between Sweeney and Heaney, here signifies beyond their dialogue. Although the piece begins with the memory of a particular beech, Heaney couches this reminiscence in a discourse that simultaneously acknowledges the universal qualities of the tree. For example, in lines 7–10 the tree is compared to a stone column:

And the tree itself a strangeness and a comfort,
as much a column as a bole. The very ivy
puzzled its milk-tooth frills and tapers
over the grain: was it bark or masonry?9

There is a well-established correspondence between the tree and the classical column.10 That the sacred druid groves lent their shape and structure to Gothic architecture is commonly accepted, and Heaney draws attention to the relationship in ‘The God in the Tree’.11 In both cases, the original place of worship, the forest, gave its natural architecture to the spiritual sites that supplanted it. (Given that the transition in systems of religion and culture signified by this shift is at the heart of
Sweeney Astray, it is an apposite allusion to make in a piece partly voiced by Sweeney.) Furthermore, in the closing lines Heaney alludes to a biblical tree, the tree of knowledge. However, Heaney refers not to ‘the’ Tree of Knowledge, but to ‘my’ tree of knowledge. This repetition of the first-person pronoun, reminiscent of Yeats’s ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, is an act of possession. Additionally, the final four lines also invoke Yeats’s ‘great rooted blossomer’ in ‘Among School Children’, as Bernard O’Donoghue has observed.\(^\text{12}\) The speaker of ‘In the Beech’ conveys the personal significance of this beech while acknowledging its broader cultural importance. In the process, the poem becomes an enquiry into the very nature of the tree exposing seeming contradictions therein: it is solid and soft, strange and comfortable, timeless and time-specific, personal and universal.

Two earlier poems, ‘Exposure’ and ‘Oracle’, share qualities with ‘In the Beech’ and other Sweeney Redivivus poems. Each is predicated on the intimate relationship between the poet and the tree/forest: the former again exploiting the woods as mental and political sanctuary and containing an implicit dialogue with Sweeney, and the latter interrogating the physical childhood experience of the tree. The woodland setting of ‘Exposure’ largely determines the poem’s tone and the historical and mental frame of reference. The forest is firstly a refuge – offering ‘protective colouring’ and a less politically charged context. But the poem is driven more by anxiety than amelioration, and the physical discomfort of the December forest can be read in part as a projection of the speaker’s psychological unease: the poet-speaker’s mood alternates initially between anger and guilt, and then between relief and regret at things missed. The metaphor used to articulate the speaker’s dislocation is the ‘wood-kerne’, a historically and culturally-specific variant of the ‘man of the wood’.\(^\text{13}\) Heaney was translating Buile Suibhne during the writing of ‘Exposure’ and Sweeney can easily be imagined voicing some of the lines. For example, with its brief catalogue of trees, the opening stanza might have been spoken by a beleaguered Sweeney. As in Sweeney Astray, there is an acute sense of the speaker’s distance from his original place, a feeling of alienation from his society, a general ambivalence towards exile, and yet an awareness that the forest offers space for contemplation and renewal. The resemblances in theme, imagery and discourse are so strong that ‘Exposure’ would sit comfortably in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ section of Station Island.

Of course the tree figured in Heaney’s writing before he began translating Buile Suibhne, and he anticipates the bond between speaker and tree
in ‘In the Beech’ when he describes a formative childhood experience in a willow in an autobiographical passage and the poem ‘Oracle’:

I loved the fork of a beech tree at the head of our lane, the close thicket of a boxwood hedge in the front of the house . . . but especially I spent time in the throat of an old willow tree at the end of the farmyard. It was a hollow tree, with gnarled, spreading roots, a soft, perishing bark and a pithy inside. Its mouth was like the fat and solid opening in a horse’s collar, and, once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of a different life, looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness. Above your head, the living tree flourished and breathed, you shouldered the slightly vibrant bole, and if you put your forehead to the rough pith you felt the whole lithe and whispering crown of willow moving in the sky above you. In that tight cleft, you sensed the embrace of light and branches, you were a little Atlas shouldering it all, a little Cerunnos pivoting a world of antlers.14

The reminiscence traverses roots, bole, bark and branch, overlaying an anthropomorphic gloss (the ‘throat’, ‘mouth’ and ‘heart’ of the willow ‘flourished and breathed’) and implying a sensual, pre-sexual experience. This trope is developed in ‘In the Beech’ where ‘the school-leaver discovered peace / to touch himself’ (lines 5–6) and in the later ‘Glanmore Sonnets V’ in which the speaker recalls a childhood boortree ‘where I played “touching tongues” / And felt another’s texture quick on mine’ (lines 10–11).15 The tree defamiliarizes the ordinary (‘you were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness’) and the interior space becomes the boy’s entrance to another world: ‘once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of a different life’. The tree is positioned on the fringe of the child’s day-to-day experience in a manner analogous to the forest’s construction in Heaney’s later work. Of particular significance, is the merging of child and tree, consolidated in the image of Cerunnos, the antlered Celtic god. (As with ‘In the Beech’, a personal memory is couched in mythic imagery, here both classical and Celtic.) This conflation of identities is repeated in ‘Oracle’, a distilled account of the same activity:

Hide in the hollow trunk
of the willow tree,
its listening familiar,
until, as usual, they
cuckoo your name . . . .
calling you out:
small mouth and ear
in a woody cleft,
lobe and larynx
of the mossy places.
(lines 1–5, 10–14)

Here, the tree is a site of early verbal self-awareness. The child is represented as a fragmented subject, imagined solely in terms of the physical components of speaking and hearing: ‘mouth’, ‘ear’, ‘lobe’ and ‘larynx’. The entire dramatic situation consists of the boy perched in his tree listening to the echoing of his name. Hearing one’s name called repeatedly is perhaps the aural equivalent of seeing one’s reflection in the mirror, a trope that often signals a moment of self-reflection. In this poem, the speaker’s articulation of his own identity (particularly in the final four lines) is closely bound up with the body of the tree. So much so, that the focal point of an illustration accompanying this poem when it was re-collected in Gravities (1979) was the child’s ear, etched into the grooved bark of the tree trunk, as if it had grown there. The child physically merges with the tree and also undergoes a formative experience of self-identification in its branches.

The cumulative effect of these pieces about the childhood relationship with trees is to strengthen the concept of the tree as a defining element of selfhood for Heaney. The childhood tree is also the locus for the development of the speaker-poet as listener and detached observer: the tree becomes ‘my airy listening post’, a vantage point (‘looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness’), and an inchoate place of writing. Such heightened awareness is commensurate with the practice of poetry, as Heaney writes in ‘Glanmore Sonnets V’: ‘etymologist of roots and graftings, / I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch / Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush’ (lines 12–14).

Clearing a space

Having developed the arboreal motif across his œuvre, Heaney begins to challenge the fixity and permanence of the literary tree. Probably the most powerful tree in the Heaney canon is the absent tree, such as the felled chestnut in ‘Clearances 8’. In the ‘Clearances’ sequence and ‘The Wishing Tree’, the poet equates the death of a parent with the loss of a particular tree, whose specific history is given elsewhere.
Both poems are elegies: ‘Clearances 8’ explores the mother-son relationship and ‘The Wishing Tree’ commemorates Heaney’s mother-in-law. Heaney prepares his ground well, particularly in ‘Clearances’, whose central symbolic act is the felling of a chestnut tree, a tree that already had a presence in Heaney’s oeuvre. Indeed, this act of individuation is long and deliberate, with the familial importance of the tree and its identification with the self being made clearly in ‘The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh’ in which Heaney offers the reader a literary dendrochronology. In the essay, he recalls how this chestnut tree, planted in the year of his birth, had been associated by relatives with the poet, being the one thing that ‘grew as I grew’. After the Heaney family moved house, the new occupants felled the tree leaving only a space, which later took on poetic significance. Similarly, Heaney has explained that ‘The Wishing Tree’ (HL) is also imbued with familial and regional meaning: ‘Another tree poem, also about the loss of a parent, is called “The Wishing Tree”. The dead woman in this short poem was my wife’s mother and I associate her with a tree which grew near their home where people used to come and make wishes and drive coins into the trunk.’ In each case, supporting statements root these trees in a sort of Heaney mythology, and in the latter, Heaney’s reference to a ‘tree poem’ seemingly implies a sub-genre within his canon.

However, Heaney broadened the context for such trees beyond the personal when, in 1986, he published a private-press edition of ‘Clearances 8’ entitled Towards a Collaboration with the artist Felim Egan. This four-page pamphlet (which contains an abstract painting entitled ‘Clearance 1986’ by Egan and a copy of the sonnet on page 3) concludes with a page-long meditation on the word ‘tree’, and an account of the poet’s preoccupation with personal trees, particularly his fascination with the spaces defined by their dissolution. By tapping into a sustained cultural history of the tree while reinforcing the personal, regional signification established elsewhere, Heaney constructs a local–universal dynamic that provides an organizing tension, renews the symbol and positions his work in a broader literary context:

**A Marked Absence. A Noted Silence**

*Tree*

Tree. One of the most potent monosyllables in our tongue. A word that roots far into the ground of our human being. Tree of life. Tree of knowledge. World tree. Tree of the cross . . . . It is one of those fundamental nouns – like mother or father – each of which ramifies into a
whole tree of language in itself. Already, in the dim forest of Indo-European, its trunk was sturdily in place before it branched out into Sanskrit *daru* meaning a kind of pine, into Greek *dórus* meaning wood or a spear, into Old Irish *daur* and Welsh *drewen* meaning an oak, into Russian *drevo* and Swedish *träd* and old English *treo*(w).

When Felim Egan suggested that we collaborate on a project . . . I just said, ‘Tree’, and then, ‘No tree. Chestnut tree. Soul tree. Thorn tree. Wishing tree.’ I said so because I had been writing poems in which the loss of parents was imagined in terms of the empty spaces where these various trees had once stood, parts of a seemingly immutable landscape. Natural landmarks become marked absences; clearances; eerie brightnesses airbrushed on the air.

In the first paragraph, the tree is presented as an ur-symbol encompassing language, time, place and culture: the tree of life, tree of knowledge, world tree and tree of the cross are all used representationally to explain aspects of religion, cosmology, epistemology and ontology. Heaney’s statement is also alert to the role of tree iconography and mythology in the conceptualization of death and afterlife – a fitting context in which to consider ‘Clearances’ and ‘The Wishing Tree’. The tree has a long history as a symbol of regeneration: the Yggdrasil, the cosmic tree, the tree of life, the May tree and Sir James Frazer’s grove of Nemi can all be read as agents of renewal. Furthermore, in many societies, it was believed that the souls of the dead and the divine corresponded to specific trees. Mircea Eliade documents numerous stories of the spirit of the dead living on in trees: the dead person either takes the form of the tree, or the soul leaves the body and inhabits the tree. Frazer also records beliefs of the inhabitation of trees by dead souls. Such accounts are similar to the conviction that divinities were tenants of and indivisible from the giant trees of the forest, and both Simon Schama and Eliade argue that within the auspices of German nature worship, such beliefs obtained. In ‘The God in the Tree’, Heaney too, (as the title would suggest) acknowledges the exhaustive body of literature on the worship of tree-inhabiting gods.

Given that both of Heaney’s trees in these poems are symbolic of the mother, the branch of tree worship that links the tree to divine motherhood seems relevant. Eliade writes extensively about the goddess-tree motif and the potency of the trees that represent the divine mother and function as an eternal source of life and knowledge:

The trees signify the universe in endless regeneration; but at the heart of the universe, there is always a tree – the tree of eternal life or of
knowledge. The Great Goddess personifies the inexhaustible source of creation, the ultimate basis of all reality. She is simply the expression, in myth, of this primeval intuition that sacredness, life and immortality are situated in a ‘centre’.28

Having merged the tree and the great goddess and consolidated the many mythical attributes shared between them, Eliade interprets the symbol as a rather nebulous sacred ‘centre’, which appears to partly inform Heaney’s later construction of the tree. Read on its own, Heaney’s tree in ‘Clearances’ does not appear to be self-consciously a cosmic tree or a manifestation of the Great Goddess. However, when read alongside Towards a Collaboration, which is highly reminiscent of Eliade’s construction of the tree, Heaney’s tree takes on the qualities of a sacred space which is both personal and alert to its grounding in a larger symbolic system.

As in Sweeney Astray, ‘Clearances’ implicitly interrogates Christian (specifically Catholic) rites of death, and one detects a variation of the pagan-Christian dialectic that largely determines the narrative in Sweeney Astray. In ‘Clearances’, the tension begins to build in Sonnet 3 in which an orthodox act of Christian faith, the priest delivering last rites, is rejected and supplanted by personal acts of spirituality – first in the form of the childhood memory of peeling potatoes with the mother, an act rich with ceremony and intimacy, and then in the imagined sacrifice of the tree and the subsequent consecration of the emptied space.

The imagined felling of the chestnut tree in ‘Clearances 8’ occupies the first nine lines of the sonnet, in which a structural tension is present, with syntax (the octave is overrun syntactically by one line) working against a rhyme scheme that largely conforms to the standard sonnet pattern:

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
I heard the hatchet’s differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.

(lines 1–9)29

In these lines, the demise of the tree is graphically described, and one not only feels the weight of personal loss but also that of historical and
cultural violation. In mythology, the felling of sacred trees is usually forbidden; for example, Frazer’s primary myth in *The Golden Bough* surrounds the guarding of the tree of Diana at Nemi, which men will die to protect against destruction. But the poem goes beyond the act of clearance into the realm of sacred space, and, the harsh consonance of lines 5–9, in which the act of felling occurs, is replaced by the sibilance of lines 12–14, in which the ramification of the soul is imagined.

Both ‘Clearances’ and the statement in ‘Towards a Collaboration’ culminate in a meditation on the space generated by the absent tree: ‘the loss of parents was imagined in terms of the empty spaces where these various trees had once stood . . . . Natural landmarks become marked absences; clearances; eerie brightnesses airbrushed on the air.’ The poetics of space is a long-held interest of Heaney, who views the composing process as a figurative clearing of space: writing the poems of *The Haw Lantern* ‘was like opening a space for the poem to land on . . . the important thing was letting it come through and not touching it’. Heaney has concertedly used space as a theme, and in an interview with Rand Brandes in 1988, he describes his pleasure at discovering the potential of spaces and clearings, even if their occasion is serendipitous rather than consciously achieved:

Throughout *The Haw Lantern* these images were happily assembled but weren’t desperately hunted for – images of a definite space which is both empty and full of potential. My favourite instance of it is in the tree at the end of ‘Clearances’. There’s also the clearing in ‘The Wishing Tree’, the space at ‘The Frontier of Writing’ and it’s in ‘The Disappearing Island’. It’s a sense of a node that is completely clear where emptiness and potential stream in opposite directions.

With its dialectical interplay of fullness and emptiness, Heaney’s approach to space owes much to Yeats, and, elsewhere, Heaney quotes approvingly Richard Ellmann’s comment in ‘W. B. Yeats’s Second Puberty’ that ‘he [Yeats] could conceive of nothing as empty and also as pregnant’. Works such as ‘Sunlight’, parts of ‘Clearances’ (Sonnets 2 and 3), ‘Glanmore Revisited’ and *Crediting Poetry* exploit memories of potent childhood and domestic spaces – what Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, calls ‘simple images of felicitous space’: the childhood home, rooms, drawers, wardrobes and so on, all of which are characterized by warmth and an oneric quality for the adult subject. But as well as celebrating ‘felicitous spaces’, Heaney, particularly in his later writing, is attempting to reinvest space with an element of the ‘sacred’: ‘Ireland itself has for long been an arena where a sacred sense of the world has been under pressure and a sense of the profanity of space has been gaining
The terminology is that of Eliade, who distinguishes between the sacred space that is invested with personal, spiritual and sometimes mythical significance and the profane space that is utilitarian, neutral and unconsecrated. Heaney largely based his 1986 lecture ‘From Maecenas to MacAlpine’ (from which the above statement comes) on the difference between such spaces, and invoked Eliade in his own advocacy of the sacred and his plea to the architect to ‘remember that the spirit and the unconscious need caring for, need to dwell in amity inside a building’.37 Like the buildings he wishes for, Heaney’s poems contain attempts at the founding or re-founding of personally sacred and spiritual spaces.

Nowhere is such a space more fully opened than in ‘Clearances’, which focuses on a charged space that is literal and figurative, an ending and a beginning. This space is first realized in the penultimate poem, with the death of Heaney’s mother:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

(lines 11–14)38

In the final sonnet, the space is more presence than absence, conflated as it is with the emptied ground once inhabited by the chestnut tree: ‘Utterly empty, utterly a source // . . . a bright nowhere, / A soul ramifying and forever / Silent . . . ’ (lines 2, 12–14).39 As his prose, poetry and interviews attest, the cleared ground is transformed into a familial, and increasingly sacred locus as well as a point of self-reference.

The most potent trees in the Heaney canon are these trees which represent the absent parents, exemplifying what Helen Vendler has termed the ‘materiality of absence’.40 In his statement from Towards a Collaboration, Heaney refers initially to a range of cosmic trees: ‘Tree of knowledge. World tree. Tree of the cross’,41 and then, in an almost parallel construction in the next paragraph, to personal trees: ‘Chestnut tree. Soul tree. Thorn tree. Wishing tree’. Through this process, he constructs in his oeuvre tree symbols which have their roots in a universal cultural history, but which are still products of a local and personal mythology. He creates, in effect, his own sacred tree.

**Unwriting a symbol**

Heaney’s treatment of the tree as symbol particularly his increased interest in the absent tree, would seem to owe much to his perception of Yeats’s
poetic treatment of Thoor Ballylee. Heaney's most comprehensive analysis of Yeats's tower comes in ‘W. B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee’, which opens by rehearsing Thoor Ballylee's history – before and after its purchase by Yeats – and recounting the tower's pre-symbolic past. (Heaney establishes the provenance of the tower, because his later argument depends upon the process by which Yeats undermines and ‘unwrites’ the symbol.) He also argues that although the first function of Yeats's tower was not a domestic one, Yeats went to great lengths to align himself with the tower. The letters to his father, the autobiographical prose and the notes supporting the poems all contribute to the association of the poet with his tower. So much so that Heaney can write without hyperbole: 'The grace here was poetry and the lonely tower was the poet's sign. Within it, he was within his own mind.'

Heaney's chestnut tree does not have the depth or stature of Yeats's tower, but there are similarities in the way that Heaney has constructed the symbol. Just as Yeats aligned himself with the tower, Heaney, in his prose and poetry, has identified himself with the tree. For example, as suggested above, beginning with ‘The Placeless Heaven’, Heaney offers a narrative which links his own development to that of the chestnut tree:

And over the years I came to identify my own life with the life of the chestnut tree. This was because everybody remembered and constantly repeated the fact that it had been planted the year I was born; . . . the chestnut was the one significant thing that grew as I grew.

The story is published in verse form the following year in *The Haw Lantern* and ‘Towards a Collaboration’, and the original lecture is collected in *The Government of the Tongue* in 1988. By deliberately circulating this history of the chestnut tree, Heaney is not only grounding his identity while simultaneously raising the profile of this poetic symbol, he is also engaging in the sort of *oeuvre*-building technique that Yeats used, whereby the prose supports and is in dialogue with the poetry.

To return to Heaney's analysis of Thoor Ballylee, the argument of his lecture is motivated by a fascination with the unwriting of the symbol once it has been so firmly lodged on the literary landscape. Heaney continues to laud the stony presence of both the actual tower and its poetic manifestation, but he is more drawn to the ‘desire for unfoundedness’ which underlies the symbol, an observation originally made by Richard Ellmann. Heaney’s reading of Yeats's poetic process is that once the vision of the poet has been imposed upon the object or place, the next step is to ‘unwrite’ it: ‘this visionary imposition is never exempt from the imagination’s antithetical ability to subvert its own creation. In other
words, once the place has been brought into written existence, it is inevitable that it be unwritten.’ Heaney’s version of the unwritten tower sees it transformed into a charged space: ‘the tower is now not just an embodied attitude or symbol of loyalties but also a pure discharge of energy.’

This reading of the tower as a potent, energized space is partly realized through an awareness of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*. However, it is also informed by Heaney’s own literary preoccupation with the space of sacred centres, and there are similarities between this account of the tower and Heaney’s retrospective analysis of his own felled chestnut tree in ‘The Placeless Heaven’, in which he considers the impact of the resulting space which began to attend him in later life:

all of a sudden, a couple of years ago, I began to think of the space where the tree had been or would have been. In my mind’s eye I saw it as a kind of luminous emptiness, a warp and waver of light, and once again, in a way that I find hard to define, I began to identify with that space just as years before I had identified with the young tree.

This account anticipates the poems of ‘Squarings’ in *Seeing Things*, many of which take as their subject variations on the theme of ‘luminous emptiness’ and the ‘warp and waver of light’. This motif and idiom also appear in ‘Clearances 8’ in which the empty space (clearly marked in line 4 as a site of self-identification) is transformed by the speaker into an illuminated source. Indeed, read by the light of the previous statement, ‘Clearances 8’ can be interpreted not only as an elegy for the mother, but also as an account of the unwriting of the chestnut tree as poetic symbol: ‘Utterly empty, utterly a source’. ‘The Wishing Tree’, too, ends on the image of figures gathered around a space: ‘I had a vision / Of an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud, / Of turned-up faces where the tree had stood’ (lines 7–9). Like Yeats, Heaney has consumed and transcended his own creation, finding meaning in the space rather than the tree itself. To adapt Heaney’s reading of Yeats, the tree’s function as a symbol of nature is secondary in these two poems to its function as a monument to the soul and the self.

* * *

A final, later example of a tree poem comes from Heaney’s *Seeing Things*, a volume described at its publication by the critic Theo Dorgan as ‘a pure poetry of what almost escapes us in this extraordinary world’, and one
whose general movement tends towards unwriting as defined by Heaney. These poems describe thresholds, crossings and peripheral images; they are oblique glances rather than detailed compositions. Poem ‘xxxi’ of ‘Squarings’ epitomizes the collection’s resonance between physical presence and powerful absence, much like ‘Clearances’. Here the trees are realized in the shape of a North Antrim arbour, massive and distinctive, and, like previous examples of the symbol, they are allied to the regional place, the forest and even print (‘Calligraphic shocks’):


In 1991 Heaney told Melvyn Bragg, ‘I find something extremely gratifying and happy about going through trees. . . . [I]t has a definite phenomenological meaning. Yet, despite opening with a clear, almost painterly, image, the poem privileges the indefinite and to some extent the unnameable. Like the chestnut tree, these Antrim trees circumscribe a space in the first two stanzas into which the speaking subject enters, and in the second half of the poem, these boundaries are implicitly undermined so that the poem becomes a meditation on the sensation of crossing through a space rather than a study of this topographical place. The poem also interrogates the condition of betweenness: the piece opens with two negatives as if it were easier to define what the tree structure and the later sensation (stanza 3) are not rather than what they are. It appears that the poem is purposefully unable to name the condition/ sensation being described because the experience exists outside of written (and spoken) discourse, which is mildly ironic given that the tree is compared to a written sign. In its
inability to name with certainty, the poem enacts the impressionistic moment that it attempts to describe.

The trees are responsible for the production of meaning here: ‘a meaning made of trees’, yet ‘meaning’ is partial and hard to ascribe; the poem appears to be questioning the very production of meaning. The piece is predicated on a certain instability; it tends away from closure and is motivated by a deconstructive impulse through which it self-consciously alerts us to the provisional nature of the symbol and perhaps the poetry itself. When read in context of other tree poems, the ramifications are stronger still because not only is Heaney probing constructions of ‘meaning’, but also he is undermining a poetic symbol that has figured so largely in his work. In the poem, the trees move from distinct visual, even calligraphic entities to ‘glimpse’, ‘dapple’, ‘vanish’, ‘flicker’, ‘all trace and skim’, so that we are left with an example of the very type of unfoundedness that Heaney praised in Ellmann’s reading of Yeats’s poems. Perhaps this is where the meaning lies, in the ‘going through’ rather than in the static symbol or image itself. In this sense, Heaney ‘unwrites’ his symbol more explicitly than Yeats ever does with the tower, and there are similarities with Rilke’s celebration of the ethereal and lightsome. This conceptualization of the tree(s) is also indicative of an epistemological shift and poetic crossing, and the event itself can be read as an analogue for an artistic ‘passing through’, a paradigm for the general lightening of Heaney’s verse, which has been increasingly engaged with issues of space and the ephemeral.

Notes

3 S. Heaney, Sweeney Astray (London: Faber, 1984), p. 47. Hereafter referred to in the notes as SA.
4 Heaney, SA, p. 21.
5 Heaney, SA, p. 61.
6 Heaney, SA, pp. 45, 27. Sweeney’s existence is similar to the men of the wood described by Tacitus and Lucretius, as discussed by Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (London: Fontana, 1995), pp. 83–4. See also Henry Hart for accounts of the Celtic men of the wood which relate to Sweeney. H. Hart, Seamus Heaney: Poet of that Contrary Progressions (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), pp. 130–58.
7 Heaney, SA, p. 40.


11 Heaney, *P*, p. 186. R. P. Harrison writes on the correspondence between the tree and Gothic architecture: ‘The Gothic cathedral visibly reproduces the ancient scenes of worship in its lofty interior, which rises vertically toward the sky and then curves into a vault from all sides, like so many tree crowns converging into a canopy overhead . . . the phrase ‘cathedral forest’ entails more than just a casual analogy’ (*Forests*, p. 178).


20 Heaney’s account of the chestnut tree is firstly a personal tree myth. But he may also be aware of European and Archipelagon tree-planting traditions described in M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1993), p. 306.


23 Eliade writes that the tree symbolizes ‘the living cosmos, endlessly renewing itself’ (p. 267). He explains that ‘if the tree is charged with sacred forces, it is because . . . it grows, it loses its leaves and regains them and is thus regenerated (it “dies” and “rises” again)’ (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 269).


25 See J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 147–52. Frazer gives the example of Philippine Islanders belief that the souls of their ancestors live in trees, which they are very reluctant to fell (p. 151–2).

26 Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 279. Simon Schama writes, ‘veneration of divinities that lodged within, and were indivisible from, natural phenomena like great oaks, was practised in the open in holy groves’ (*Landscape and Memory*, p. 83).


29 Heaney, *HL*, p. 32.

30 See also Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 147–9.

34 S. Heaney, The Place of Writing (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 56. Hereafter referred to in the text as PW.
37 Heaney, ‘From Maecenas to MacAlpine’, p. 72.
38 Heaney, HL, p. 31.
39 Heaney, HL, p. 32.
41 Although the tree of knowledge and the tree of the cross have Biblical connotations, Eliade, Schama and Harrison demonstrate that such trees also have a non-Christian cultural history.
42 Heaney, PW, p. 24.
43 Heaney, Government of the Tongue, p. 3.
44 Heaney writes, ‘as Richard Ellmann has insisted, the credibility of this art is ultimately guaranteed by Yeats's readiness to doubt its efficaciousness. The very power of his desire for foundedness should alert us to the fear of unfoundedness which might lurk beneath it’ (PW, p. 33).
45 Heaney, PW, pp. 20, 30.
46 Heaney, PW, p. 30.
48 Heaney, HL, p. 36.
49 Heaney writes in ‘W. B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee’, ‘it is obvious that the tower's first function was not domestic. Here he was in the place of writing. It was one of his singing schools, one of the soul’s monuments of its own magnificence’ (PW, p. 24).
Over the past couple of decades, Seamus Heaney has quietly emerged as one of our most talented readers of poetry. It has happened gradually but with authority. While his poems have been justly given the red-carpet treatment, his prose has been content to stand to one side, gingerly recording its impressions, weighing in with its judgements, its responsible *tristia*, and delineating the lines of influence that have been partly responsible for landing those Hollywood poems their more illustrious status. Repeatedly, Heaney has proven himself a credible and revealing witness to the poems he reads. Because he is equally at home discussing metaphysics or metre, we trust his judgement of the art as well as his evaluation of the line. He is that rarity among those few who write on poetry nowadays: he is a pleasure to read. His prose crackles with the kinds of observations that can focus a poet’s essential accomplishment in a few words. Speaking of John Clare’s shorter poetry, for example, Heaney notes its ‘random swoop upon the momentary’. Or about Larkin’s deadpan fatalism, he has this to say: ‘He refuses to allow the temptations of melody to chloroform the exactions of his common sense.’ Or about the Northern Irish poets when they have been reprimanded for avoiding the political exigencies of their country: ‘the density of their verbal worlds has held up.’ More often than not, Heaney gets the last word on his poets simply because his words last in our memories; he is, as T. S. Eliot once said of Samuel Johnson, a dangerous man to disagree with.

And yet I confess that my interest in his criticism extends from my interest in his poetry. While I take seriously his opinion on Wordsworth, I wonder what his evaluation of Wordsworth will reveal about his own poems. Though I agree with him, for example, that *The Prelude* is ‘diagnostic, therapeutic, and didactic all at once’, I find myself looking immediately for similar patterns of diagnosis, therapy and didacticism
in his own work. The old saw that a poet’s criticism is a kind of instructional manual for reading the poet’s own poetry holds for Heaney too. His prose elucidates his verse, and I suspect that every reader of his prose sees the ghost of its father, the poetry, looming behind every sentence and every paragraph.

But mining Heaney’s criticism for insights into his own poetry is not precisely my purpose. Reading Heaney’s essays over the years has convinced me that Heaney is a very specific kind of reader, one that is becoming increasingly rare, and the kind that Virginia Woolf memorialized in her seminal essay on the subject, ‘How Should One Read a Book?’. In that essay Woolf tells us that the first task of reading – ‘to open the mind wide to the fast flocking of innumerable impressions’ – is preliminary to, and not as difficult as, the second task – ‘to judge, to compare’. But both of these tasks are underwritten by the reader’s native sensibility, her indigenous feeling for the words that Woolf memorably describes as ‘the nerve of sensation that sends shocks through us [and] is our chief illuminant’.3 This nerve of sensation, this illuminant, has nothing to do with a critical procedure nor will it vie for political representation. It is simply the life-blood of reading that flows long before such procedures and representations are formulated. While the lives we lead beyond our books are patterned by opinion and judgement, the reading life is unique, as Woolf envisions it, because of its radical freedom from law and regulation:

After all, what laws can be laid down about books? The battle of Waterloo was certainly fought on a certain day; but is Hamlet a better play than Lear? Nobody can say. Each must decide the question for himself. To admit authorities, however furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries. Everywhere else we may be bound by laws and conventions – there we have none.4

Anyone who has read the academic criticism produced over the last century realizes that part of the task involves familiarizing one’s self with the new laws and conventions that distinguish the new procedure from the old laws and conventions that date the old one. If we can say nothing else about literary criticism, we can say that it is deeply conventional. There is nothing wrong with that. But there is also a kind of reading, and a kind of writing about reading, that while it will embody many of the assumptions common to all readers and critics from the period will also
pay homage to the private experience of the individual reader. It is here, within this private experience, that Woolf locates the nerve of sensation, the illuminant that distinguishes the reader from the scholar. ‘Let us begin’, she writes, ‘by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading’.

If Heaney is a reader, in Woolf’s dynamic sense of the word, and not a scholar, he is at least a reader with an agenda. Or several agendas, several obsessions that define his approach to the writers that matter to him. It would be helpful to familiarize ourselves with those agendas and obsessions, to locate the nerve of sensation, the illuminant, that energizes his reading. If we can do this, we will have accomplished one very important task: we will have reacquainted ourselves with the old contract that was drawn up long ago between readers and their books, one that balances the distinctive lives of each reader with the discernible demands of the book. University English departments have so professionalized the activity of reading that this simple contract is often lost to us. To read Heaney’s prose, I contend, is to renegotiate that contract, and by paying close attention to the methods, turns of phrase, and perspectives that he brings to his work, we can also begin to reintroduce this old contract to a new generation of readers and students. As I have said, Heaney stands among a precious few now writing about poetry who also write engagingly for a general audience, avoiding the mindless encomia of the review columns devoted to contemporary poetry while offering up cogent perceptions on poets from the past. In this aspect alone, in his assumption that there is out there a general, intelligent audience, Heaney is the legitimate heir to Woolf and her notion of the common reader.

To my mind, the most important piece of prose that Heaney has written is ‘Crediting Poetry’, the lecture he gave when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature on 7 December 1995. It is a long lecture, as Nobel lectures go, bested only by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s in 1970 and roughly equalling Derek Walcott’s in 1992. The lecture that Heaney surely had on his mind, the one that W. B. Yeats delivered in 1923, is noticeably shorter and is devoted to the Irish Dramatic Movement. Yet it can stop you cold with a sentence, exposing the political violence that for Yeats, as for Heaney, became one of the defining contexts of their work. ‘A trumpery dispute about an acre of land’, Yeats said in Stockholm, ‘can rouse our people to monstrous savagery, and if in their war with the English auxiliary police they were shown no mercy they showed none: murder answered murder.’ The middle position here, apportioning blame equally to both sides, while staring down the atrocities on each,
is a position that would become dear to Heaney as he lived through the political turmoil of his own generation.

For Heaney, it has always been a question of how long poetry can negotiate the extremes of contradictory opinion without falling into cant and sloganeering, how amid such human suffering, poetry can make a claim for the validity of its practice. In his Nobel lecture, setting himself this quandary once more, Heaney turns to Yeats; specifically he turns to his monumental treatise on art and violence, ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’. Heaney’s comment on the poem stakes out familiar turf:

It satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust. It is a proof that poetry can be equal to and true at the same time, an example of that completely adequate poetry which the Russian woman sought from Anna Akhmatova and which William Wordsworth produced at a corresponding moment of historical crisis and personal dismay almost exactly two hundred years ago.7

‘I stood between them’, Heaney writes in ‘Making Strange’, and although the two poles of this lyric are represented by a man from the city and a man from the country, it is still the ‘cunning middle voice’ that Heaney strives to embody, and it is one that he has worked a lifetime to cultivate.8

The Nobel lecture is essential for understanding the reader that Heaney has become if only because it so efficiently unrolls the blueprint for Heaney’s long and productive reading life. It is fundamental in every way. For example, American readers have always known something about the political allegiances that structure Northern Ireland, but how many could talk about the exotic oddities of the Protestant Republican sensibility? How many could talk of Tom Paulin’s work? How many of Heaney’s American readers feel fluent with the kind of Northern Irish politicalesen that centres around the poet’s role in the political life of his country? A poet’s role in the political life of his country . . . it is not a subject Americans have much reason to discuss. And how many of us could reasonably consider the ways in which these tensions affect the process of reading? But here is Heaney in the Nobel lecture, laying out the stress lines as clearly as he ever has; he is speaking about the hardened attitudes that Northern Ireland created in him, his mistrust of poets like Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Rilke and Emily Dickinson, poets whose ‘opulence’ the ‘earnest’ Northern Irish temperament taught him to
mistrust: ‘And these more or less costive attitudes were fortified by a refusal to grant the poet any more licence than any other citizen; and they were further induced by having to conduct oneself as a poet in a situation of ongoing political violence and public expectation. A public expectation, it has to be said, not of poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups.’ And yet it is the poetry for Heaney that negotiates the ‘mutually disapproving groups’, the factions that harbour mutually disapproving expectations for their country and for their art. The poetry that comes of it, for Heaney, is a poetry that takes the very act of negotiation itself as one of its primary subject matters. It takes the tensions of give and take, of sacrifice and compromise as the foundations for its psychological rhythms.

So it should come as no surprise that such a deeply acculturated psychology of division and unity has spawned a method or, more accurately, a visualization of reading that emphasizes the fruitful collisions of differing points of view. It is why Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries, has always figured so prominently in Heaney’s imagination: ‘Nowadays when I think of that child rooted to the spot in midstream’, the poet recalls of his days playing in the Moyola, ‘I see a little version of the god the Romans called Terminus, the god of boundaries.’ The poem that such a mediating vision arises from is called, appropriately, ‘Terminus’, and its third section begins with an image of the middle position: ‘Two buckets were easier carried than one. / I grew up in between’. Leave it to Heaney to contextualize the poem for us, preserving the counter-forces that gave rise to it. In his essay, ‘Something to Write Home About’, he tells us:

I wrote the ‘Terminus’ poem in the mid-1980s, when the political situation in Northern Ireland was totally locked and blocked; in the post-hunger-strike world, when the IRA’s campaign showed no sign of abating and the Thatcher government was prepared to live with what was termed an acceptable level of violence. Maybe that was why the poem ends in stasis . . .; the poem is saying that the inheritance of a divided world is a disabling one, that it traps its inhabitants and corners them in determined positions, saps their will to act freely and creatively.

The poem, however, details the dramatic colloquy that occurred between Hugh O’Neill, the last native Irish leader to resist the Tudor armies of Elizabeth, and the Earl of Essex, the Queen’s most favoured courtier. The conversation occurred, of course, with O’Neill on his horse
midway across a stream and with Essex perched on the far bank. O’Neill had already been branded a traitor by the Crown and here was Essex, negotiating with him. Both were on dangerous ground, but for the moment, as Heaney wrote, ‘the balance trembled and held, the water ran and the sky moved silently above them’. The last line of the poem, ‘Still parleying, in earshot of his peers’, reverberates throughout Heaney’s poetic career as he has attempted to carve out a place for parleying, still in earshot of the unsympathetic, while speaking confidently to his friends and allies.11

Early in the Nobel lecture, Heaney defines the particular ‘consciousness’ that comes of growing up in Northern Ireland, and it provides the key to understanding the characteristic strength that Heaney brings to his reading and the one that distinguishes his prose in general. He has just been speaking of how difficult it is to grapple with ‘political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups’:

In such circumstances, the mind still longs to repose in what Samuel Johnson once called with superb confidence ‘the stability of truth’, even as it recognizes the destabilizing nature of its own operations and enquiries. Without needing to be theoretically instructed, consciousness quickly realizes that it is the site of variously contending discourses. The child in the bedroom listening simultaneously to the domestic idiom of his Irish home and the official idioms of the British broadcaster while picking up from behind both the signals of some other distress, that child was already being schooled for the complexities of his adult predicament . . . .12

‘[C]onsciousness quickly realizes that it is the site of variously contending discourses’ – I always marvel at the quixotic strangeness of ‘consciousness’, without an article to precede it, as if it were the name of one of Heaney’s internal and tutelary spirits, an update of the Greek goddess Psyche, whose proper name has made it into the daily word hoard. And then, the radical chic of ‘variously contending discourses’ – it seems on the face of it to rescue the child in the bedroom from the debilitating nostalgia of the Irish ‘den-life’ that Heaney had announced in the opening sentences of the lecture.13 There is a good deal of conceptual traffic here, and it seems at times disorderly and without direction.

In fact, I think of Heaney’s consciousness, particularly the consciousness he brings to his reading, as a kind of traffic intersection, where various streams come together from widely varying directions. Always, Heaney is there in the middle, motioning, beckoning, adroitly manipulating the
semaphores of judgement; it’s a difficult balance to manage. There is one particular sentence in the Nobel lecture that gets it just right:

While the Christian moralist in oneself was impelled to deplore the atrocious nature of the IRA’s campaign of bombings and killings, and the ‘mere Irish’ in oneself was appalled by the ruthlessness of the British Army on occasions like Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972, the minority citizen in oneself, the one who had grown up conscious that his group was distrusted and discriminated against in all kinds of official and unofficial ways, this citizen’s perception was at one with the poetic truth of the situation in recognizing that if life in Northern Ireland were ever really to flourish, change had to take place.14

Here, then, is a ‘site of variously contending discourses’. If it is possible for a single sensibility to register the gravity and desperation of both sides of the struggle, it is also equally possible for this same sensibility to see clearly the reductive strategies involved in resorting to the labels ‘British’ and ‘Irish’. There are other tragedies involved that must choose other labels, and part of the shape-changing we see Heaney undertaking in this sentence arises from his insistence on complexity as a response to the mandate of political – and simplistic – allegiance to one cause or another. Among these other labels, ‘minority citizen’ is one, but father, son, mother and daughter also accurately describe those who have fallen victim to the violence, as do martyr, hero, soldier and sacrificial victim. With each of these labels, another way of looking at the problem is set in motion. But the legacy of loss that these words point to, while they are all equally compelling, are also equally divisive. Heaney’s poetry has dramatically recorded this legacy, and he has noted these divisions, but he has largely kept his vision tied to the hearth, to the den-life that is the final arbiter of human suffering and the contending discourses that articulate a culture.

My point is that Heaney’s reading, the record of it left behind in his essays, characteristically clears out an internal space for these contending discourses to thrive and have their day, and he is drawn to those authors whose writing arises from these contending points of view, whose achieved stance rests on the momentary resolution of hostile forces. So if we apply one template to the poets he favours, we see a gallery of British poets: Shakespeare, Keats, Wordsworth, Hopkins, even Eliot. He has written movingly and well about these poets, and he has in a few of the Hibernian holdouts been accused of doing so. Yet apply another template to Wordsworth, for example, and it is not his Britishness that
interests Heaney at all. It is something more akin to Wordsworth’s ability to find the poetic form for the warring forces – the contending discourses – that structure his life. Heaney is writing about the tenth book of *The Prelude* where Wordsworth confronts the very real difficulty he faced when England, his home, declared war on France, the source of much of Wordsworth’s passion for liberty and freedom. As Heaney discusses Wordsworth’s quandary, he could just as well be discussing his own:

The good place where Wordsworth had been nurtured and to which his habitual feelings were most naturally attuned has become, for the revolutionary poet, the wrong place. Life, where he is situated, is not as he wants it to be. He is displaced from his own affections by a vision of the good located elsewhere. His political utopian aspirations displace him from the beloved actuality of his surroundings so that his instinctive being and his appetitive intelligence are knocked out of alignment. He feels like a traitor among those he knows and loves. To be true to one part of himself, he must betray another part. The inner state of man is thus shaken . . . .

This is from a talk, since collected in *Finders Keepers*, that Heaney gave at Grasmere, England, in 1984. The stance, however, of feeling oneself to be a traitor among those he knows and loves is one that Heaney has written about in his own poems.

A decade earlier, in ‘Exposure’, the last section of ‘Singing School’, which had appeared in *North*, Heaney cleared for himself a space where he might air his own sense of betrayal, an arena where he might give his own contending discourses their podia:

> How did I end up like this?  
> I often think of my friends’  
> Beautiful prismatic counselling  
> And the Anvil brains of some who hate me  
>  
> As I sit weighing and weighing  
> My responsible *tristia*.  
> For what? For the ear? For the people?  
> For what is said behind-backs?

Both Wordsworth and Heaney become traitors among those they know and love. This, then, is the source of Heaney’s devotion to Wordsworth’s poetry: Heaney finds in Wordsworth not some strain of mystical English music whose cultural sovereignty he envies, but he discovers there
instead a ‘site’, to use Heaney’s word, where similarly conflicting allegiances are brought together and a music pressed out of them. While his own poetry has charted such confrontations and recorded the music that came out of them, his essays have provided us with the pathways he followed to locate these confrontations in other poets.

Because his essays represent open explorations of other poets, they exhibit less of the achieved form of his own poems. They are more open to surprise in some ways than even the most lyrical of his poems, and so they recapture for us the quixotic and unpredictable self-revelations that reading deeply occasions. In the Nobel lecture, he speaks of a ‘salubrious political space’ that will arise from our veneration of the indigenous, and I would argue that this ‘space’ exists most dramatically in Heaney’s essays, and it is a space wherein self-revelation often arises spontaneously:

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 the 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. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage us to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space.17

Time and time again in his essays, Heaney clears out just such a space for himself and the poets he values. What else but a salubrious space could give Heaney the elbow room he needs to see Eliot’s essential task as one very similar to his own? How else could an Anglican monarchist speak to a Catholic republican? In his essay ‘The Government of the Tongue’, Heaney quotes from a letter that Eliot had written E. Martin Browne concerning the futility he felt in wartime London as he sat down every morning to fiddle ‘with words and rhythms’. Heaney’s sympathies with Eliot’s quandary shift into overdrive as he comments on the letter:

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity; they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense, the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing
There is much that Heaney might find repulsive or oppressive in Eliot’s writing; and while he can virtually embalm the man with a phrase – ‘the intellectual mystery man from Missouri’, Heaney calls him, continuing, ‘was mutating into the English vestryman’ – he also realizes that a large part of Eliot’s achievement lay in teaching us how to read, which is precisely what Heaney’s essays are doing. ‘If Eliot did not help me to write’, Heaney admits, ‘he did help me to learn what it means to read.’

Heaney, in his prose, has found a salubrious space to share with Eliot, and it is a sharing that very few would have predicted. My point is that Heaney’s essays, long before they stake out what might be called their political turf, reveal Heaney’s own particular ‘consciousness’ both as one attuned to the music of contending discourses and as one intent on allowing each discourse its particular hearing. Preferment and preference will of course follow such hearings – part of Heaney’s credibility as a reader stems from the fact that he does not favour every poet he reads. But unlike the poems, Heaney’s essays begin with an honest and open form of inquiry that the aesthetic designs of his poems, with their determined teleology, cannot allow. The essays in many ways represent his poems’ baggage, unpacked and spread out for us to examine.

In the Nobel lecture, Heaney continually insists on the importance of making the kinds of decisions in his writing that will situate poetry firmly on the ground of responsibility and accountability. It involves, finally, an intellection of sorts, and this intellection lives most comfortably in the province of the prose. The passage in the lecture from which Heaney draws his title, ‘Crediting Poetry’, is significant because it sets clearly the lines of allegiance between which poetry will ultimately find its accreditation. Heaney is speaking of his move to County Wicklow in the mid-1970s, an escape from the massacre that was currently going on in the North:

Feeling puny in my predicaments as I read about the tragic logic of Osip Mandelstam’s fate in the nineteen-thirties, feeling challenged yet steadfast in my non-combatant status when I heard, for example, that one particularly sweet-natured school friend had been interned without trial because he was suspected of having been involved in a political killing. What I was longing for was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism, a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology.
The lines of allegiance here are not complicated. They follow the path that poets follow who craft their poems in response to the world around them, while trying to remain faithful to the internal dynamics that have given them those poems in the first place. Heaney defined poetry, in the Nobel lecture, in a similar way as ‘an order true to the impact of external reality and . . . sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being’. If Heaney’s poems show us the final product of that negotiation between the external reality and the inner law, then his essays, particularly his Nobel lecture, reveal to us the negotiation itself. They are in many ways complimentary to his poems, taking us into the foundry of his reading where the informing sensibility of his poems is first forged.

The Nobel lecture is important too because it returns to the grounds first staked out by Aristotle and Plato regarding the relationship between poetry and society. Plato’s intolerance of the art’s persuasive powers – its capacity to lie with credibility – are well known, as is his decision to banish it from his Republic; Aristotle, of course, argued that an error in representation in poetry – a lie, in fact – does not touch the essentials of the poetic art, and ever since then writers and theorists have been situating themselves somewhere between the two camps. Heaney has done his share of situating as well. But in the Nobel lecture, he bears down hard on the twentieth-century’s version of this old dichotomy and comes up with something like a resolution. His take on our century’s version of the problem is revealing:

Only the very stupid or the very deprived can any longer help knowing that the documents of civilization have been written in blood and tears, blood and tears no less real for being very remote. And when this intellectual predisposition coexists with the actualities of Ulster and Israel and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth, the inclination is not only not to credit human nature with much constructive potential but not to credit anything too positive in the work of art.

In a media-drenched society where information and imagery are passed around the globe within minutes, even seconds, of its happening, our knowledge of human atrocity, of the ‘blood and tears’ that mar our civilization, threatens to overwhelm the artist’s traditional capacity for celebration. Heaney is pointing to the obvious, but often ignored, fact that since the days of classical Greece the original terms of the debate have shifted. Heaney is not worried that his poems will lie or misrepresent the truth of the armed struggle in Northern Ireland. He fears that with
the world so much with us, so emblazoned across our TV screens, the
evidence for the destructive potential of human nature has nearly out-
weighed the informing hope of all art: the hope that our constructive
capacity will finally prevail, and that poetry, in Heaney’s case, will stand
as an eloquent testimony to the expressive and ennobling side of
human endeavour. This hope, Heaney fears, which is the hope of all art,
is now, perhaps for the first time, seriously imperilled.

Heaney has spent a good deal of his life plotting his varying
campaments on the wide plain that lies between Plato and Aristotle. In
1991, four years before he delivered the Nobel lecture, he had already
formulated the essential terms of the argument as he speculated on the
proper use of art, a speculation that becomes more and more prominent
in our discourse as art’s eminence seems more and more imperilled.
There is a note of desperation here, but Heaney finds a way to resolve it
as he makes a last-ditch appeal for the place of artistic expression in a
besieged democracy:

The paradox of the arts is that they are all made up and yet they allow
us to get at truths about who and what we are or might be. . . . [W]hat
good is a devotion to and an appreciation of the beautiful, the question
goes, if some of the most cultivated people in a most cultivated
nation could authorize mass killings and attend a Mozart concert on
the same evening? Yet if it is a delusion and a danger to expect poetry
and music to do too much, it is a diminishment and a derogation of
them to ignore what they can do.

So what can the arts do? ‘The good of literature and of music’, Heaney
responds, ‘is in the thing itself, and their first principle is that which
William Wordsworth called in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, “the grand
elementary principle of pleasure”, the kind of pleasure about which the
language itself prompts us to say, “It did me good”.’24 And so we’re back
in Aristotle’s neighbourhood where even if the poetry is not true to fact,
it is still as ‘it ought to be’, creating an ideal order of the well-rendered
emotions, an order whose sole purpose is to give pleasure. It is an
ancient criterion for judging artistic excellence, and as he embraces it,
Heaney takes his place among the modern-day Aristotelians.

Yet Heaney’s position there is hard-won, and his Aristotelianism is
impure. While he reserves for art the essential raison d’être of pleasure, he
has come to it trailing clouds of atrocity and suffering, the affairs of the
polis, and these are clouds, we realize, that will remain permanently on
his horizon. The negotiations he undertakes between the demands of
the *polis* and the demands of his art are most dramatically represented in his prose because the reading sensibility that he has fashioned over the years is one that excels at discovering how other writers have carried out similar negotiations in their own lives. But he has turned a similar sensibility to his own career. He makes this very clear in the Nobel lecture where he pinpoints a momentous change in his life and his art: ‘Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous. And once again I shall try to represent the import of that changed orientation with a story out of Ireland.’ The story out of Ireland is the story of St Kevin who, while kneeling and praying with outstretched arms, attracted a blackbird to nest in his hand. Kevin, of course, remained in his supplicant posture, overcome by sympathy for the bird, month after month, until the eggs hatched, and the young birds flew away. Kevin remained, according to Heaney, ‘true to life if subversive of common sense’ and it is here, dealing with life’s extremest demands, even when they go against our common sense, insisting on the marvellous in the face of the murderous, that Heaney locates his notion of art. Realized in this fashion, art is an order ‘that is true to all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections’. With full knowledge of the blood and tears that stain our civilization, Heaney reaffirms in the Nobel lecture a position that falls between a silencing guilt and an unalleviated celebration. Significantly, he claims that he has had to ‘make a space’ in his reckonings for the antipodes of his culture to coexist, for them to find a way into his writing. It is this ‘space’ that is important because it harks back to the central moment earlier in the lecture when he had spoken of his ‘consciousness’ as ‘a site of variously contending discourses’.25 Such a site, such a space, I have argued, is more readily apparent in his prose, as he charts the incoming and often contradictory pulses received in his reading, than it is in his poems, which self-consciously and artfully select the contradictions and harmonies they will represent in their final form.

So while I find Heaney’s poetry as necessary as I ever have, I confess now – it feels like a confession – that I turn just as regularly to his prose. There I get the rambunctious intellection, the woodnotes, that will sooner or later take on the burnish necessary to live in the poems. There is at times, I am saying, a spontaneity in the essays that does not find full representation in the lyrics. The first essay, for example, in *The Government of the Tongue* is entitled ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac, and a Knocker’, and it begins with an anecdote from 1972 when Heaney
and singer David Hammond were scheduled to make a tape of songs and poems for a mutual friend. They never made the tape because on that same day, Belfast erupted in bombings, with the news of casualties and the wail of sirens, and as Heaney writes, Hammond ‘could not raise his voice at that cast-down moment. He packed the guitar again and we both drove off into that destroyed evening.’ Recalling the event later, Heaney thinks of Nero, as he made music while Rome burned, and with a marvellous peremptoriness has second thoughts about his and Hammond’s decision to renege on the recording session. He formulates, with great gusto and gumption, the one question that has pursued him resolutely throughout his career: ‘Why should the joyful affirmation of music and poetry ever constitute an affront to life?’

It is a rhetorical question, as I read it, and if this ‘joyful affirmation’ comes, as I believe it does, from singing among the flames, if it survives by encouraging all the contending discourses of the lyric impulse to have their say, then it is to Heaney’s essays we will turn to hear them out. There, we read Heaney reading, locating sympathetic frequencies in poets whom we figured incapable of such transmissions, and as regularly as his selection of poets surprises us, just as regularly do the criteria for his selection impress us with their great acts of tolerance. It is the kind of tolerance that does indeed depend upon a salubrious space, a space that in our own destroyed and destroying decade might have relevance to a vital part of our lives that lies well beyond the literary. Heaney reads rapaciously, taking what he needs, noting the rest and moving on. I do think of his reading sensibility now as a site of contending discourses, and as I had never conceived of reading quite so dynamically until I read Woolf and Heaney, I find the Nobel lecture to be the most important piece of prose he has yet written. And so I can say of Heaney what Heaney said of Eliot: he has helped me to learn what it means to read.

Notes

2 Heaney, ‘Place and Displacement’, Finders Keepers, p. 125.
4 Woolf, Common Reader, p. 258.
8 Heaney, ‘Making Strange’, Opened Ground, p. 221.
15 Heaney, ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’, Finders Keepers, p. 124.
5
Heaney and the Functions of Prose
Michael Baron

her prose is the continuation of poetry by other means
(Joseph Brodsky, on Tsvetaeva)

Too many poets are poet-critics
(Peter McDonald, reviewing Finders Keepers)

In May 2003 Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001 won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. The $50,000 award, billed as ‘the largest annual cash prize for literary criticism in the English language’, is administered for the Truman Capote Estate by the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. ‘Writing for The New Yorker, past Capote Award winner Helen Vendler praised Finders Keepers for “A brimming metaphoric energy . . . a buoyant vivacity of description . . . reflective humor . . . and an imaginative penetration . . . unequalled in contemporary critical prose.”’

Despite this news, Heaney’s prose has had a mixed press; there have been persistent negative voices to match the persistently positive ones such as Vendler’s, and even some admirers write cautiously. Reviewing The Redress of Poetry, John Bayley wrote of Heaney as poetry’s ‘courtier’. I take it he meant something more than a mere servant, perhaps something like Castiglione’s ideal, a cultured and, above all, eloquent ambassador; but the word inescapably implies hierarchy, service and exclusiveness. Earlier, Anne Stevenson, comparing Heaney’s criticism with Eliot’s, praised his essays on other poets, where he ‘put[s] their language first, before their meanings or their subject matters’ and thus ‘achieves that distinctively inside perspective on the poetry that a purely academic critic might miss’; but she went on to regret that for all his love of Dante, he had not ‘so far engaged in the satisfactory activity of populating Hell with his enemies’ – implying that Heaney’s readers
might also look forward to that satisfaction.³ Positive responses seem to me to have diminished over the years, and the publication of Finders Keepers was marked by no major revaluation of Heaney's prose that I am aware of. Peter McDonald's review, quoted above, is the most considered response, and it is largely admonitory. Heaney's prose, we are told, sometimes lacks a basis in that ‘critical authority’ which ‘comes from careful judgement, engaged analysis, and reasoned argument’;⁴ instead, it relies on the ‘personal’ authority of Heaney as a leading figure in contemporary culture. This is bad, and dangerously bad: he encourages others and should be held partly responsible for the current plethora of ‘poet-critics’ who think their status as poet gives them authority to sound off about poetry in general. McDonald’s claim looks extreme, but it indicates that his real target is not Heaney but a cultural fashion. His review is worth looking at for two reasons. First, he properly attempts a brief overview of Heaney’s ‘criticism’, which Heaney in fact encourages in the preface to Finders Keepers. Second, he says what is implicit in much criticism of Heaney’s prose over the last 30 years: that Heaney does not adequately separate poetic and critical writing, and that much (too much) of his prose relies on verbal and oratorical gesture as a sign of sincerity and consequently authority. I will come back to this central strain of criticism, but it may be useful first to list the range of what has been said against Heaney’s prose. This is selective but I think representative.⁵

1. There is ‘collusion’ between the two roles of poet and critic, and the criticism lacks its own authority as opposed to the authority of personality, fame, glamour, veneration (McDonald’s view, as above). A differently nuanced version is Seamus Deane’s characterization of Heaney as both ‘acolyte’ and ‘celebrant’ of the one mystery; the acolyte being the prose writer; the celebrant, the poet; the mystery, poetry.⁶ Perhaps Edna Longley’s widely quoted view of North belongs here too: ‘the gap has narrowed between Heaney’s critical and creative idioms, while widening between word and thing’.⁷ Bernard O’Donoghue puts a positive twist on Longley’s remark: Heaney’s mature poetry has always included criticism, and conversely his ‘criticism is . . . unmistakeably [sic] the work of a practitioner, thereby satisfying the demands of modernists since Eliot that the critic of poetry should, ideally, also be a poet’.⁸

2. A related view is that Heaney is too collusive with literary-critical institutions: his major essays are based on lectures given at universities, whether as Oxford professor or not. He uses prose to project his presence in the wider world, including the media, which bolsters approval of his poetry (McDonald). Similarly Derek Mahon wrote that Heaney is
‘excessively professional’ as a critic. An earlier version of this charge forms part of Desmond Fennell’s critique of the ‘Heaney phenomenon’ in ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1’, which argues that the poetry as well as the prose is directed more towards the academic world than ‘ordinary readers’. Heaney has ‘actively manage[d] his career’, cultivating the marketable lyric (as distinguished from narrative or satiric or philosophical poetry) and taking on the dual role of poet and critic in an industry dominated by ‘the academic-poetic complex’ with its ‘representatives, regular or occasional, in the general media – and its judgements broadcast by those media’.

3. In praising other poets he is sometimes ‘prone to overwriting’ (Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*); or, ‘verbal play . . . substitutes for logic and demonstration’ (Stan Smith, ‘The Distance Between’).

4. Heaney gives only the good news about poetry in general and the writing of individual poets under consideration. His essays form an extensive defence of poetry. I’ve already noted Anne Stevenson’s wish that Heaney would write about his ‘enemies’. The more positive version of this is O’Donoghue’s remark that he is a particular kind of critic, a ‘glossator, commentator’ (interestingly, O’Donoghue is also thinking of Dante).

5. He is predatory upon the poets he writes about (Corcoran), taking what he wants and leaving the rest. This view is shared by Barbara Hardy in her essay in the current volume.

6. His prose is ‘bland’ (Marjorie Perloff) and it lacks ‘an ideological charge’ or ‘intellectual and political content’ (Gus Martin and Eilean ni Chuilleannain, respectively). Desmond Fennell also makes this charge: Heaney is wary of speaking out on political and philosophical issues, to the detriment of both his poetry and his prose; and his essays have become exercises in defence of a poetic establishment; hence his emphasis on the ‘good’ of poetry. (This clearly relates to point 4 above.)

7. His values and critical strategies are Romantic or Victorian. His definitions of ‘poetry’ and its function in society reflect the Arnoldian tradition (Paul Muldoon). In the same vein Neil Corcoran identifies Heaney’s repeated use of critical phrases from Yeats, Eliot, Frost and others as Arnoldian ‘touchstones’, which are used as shorthand for critical argument.

8. Heaney is too aware of his own cultural status. Muldoon writes, Heaney must ‘forget that [he] must be the best Irish poet since Yeats’. This is a major theme in James Simmons’s essay ‘The Trouble with Seamus’.

9. He is too abject and at the same time self-aggrandizing (Corcoran). This relates especially to *The Government of the Tongue* and Heaney’s sense that the English-language poet has not the same clear opportunity or compulsion to equate poetry and political opposition that East European
poets like Miłosz or Zbigniew Herbert have. That volume was quite widely criticized for undervaluing British poetry in comparison with European, for example by Edward Mendelson in the *Times Literary Supplement* and by Andrew Motion, who argued that Heaney’s identification with European poets cut him off from the suffering of English poets under class, culture and gender.24

10. He is a poet and critic of ‘commonplace ideas, timid moral postures and shallow metaphysics’ (Simmons, ‘The Trouble with Seamus’).25

11. He is a poet of ‘one problem alone’, the problem how to remain a lyric poet in the face of political circumstance (Paul Breslin, reviewing *The Spirit Level, The Redress of Poetry* and *Crediting Poetry*).26 Breslin is chiefly concerned with poetry, but says that this single ‘problem’ haunts the prose too. McDonald also argues that Heaney’s criticism has been ‘dogged’ by ‘the issue of authority’.27

The list is not exhaustive, nor is it fair to some of the named critics because I have mixed the negative comments of people, like Corcoran, who have many very positive and discriminating things to say about Heaney’s prose with the judgements of less sympathetic readers like Perloff and Nye and Simmons; but important issues are raised by the sympathetic and unsympathetic alike. In this essay I want to explore a few of the charges listed above, partly because they seem to me the most important, partly because Heaney responds to them in *Finders Keepers*. I read that volume as in part a considered riposte to his critics. But this essay is not a defence of Heaney’s criticism; rather, it is an attempt to understand why some of the negative comments it has attracted might be based on false assumptions – broadly, silent assumptions about what ‘criticism’ is and an uneasiness about the status of prose written by poets: criticism, manifesto, autobiography or some combination of the three?

Before beginning, it may be as well to ponder Heaney’s (defensive? aggressive?) remark that he regards his work other than writing poetry, for example, the *Beowulf* translation and the Oxford lectures, as distraction from the ‘desperation’ of periods in between the three-month ‘binges’ in which he writes poetry. These other tasks ‘give you the illusion of purpose between the poems. They keep you exercised and convince you that you have some verity’.28

* * *

What follows will deal chiefly with the first, second and fourth of the points listed above, which overlap somewhat, and will also touch on the third and seventh. McDonald and others who have criticized Heaney for
not keeping sufficient distance between his poetry and his prose, or himself and his subject matter, do not simply describe a phenomenon: they clamour against it. Heaney’s procedures are not just misguided, we are told; they are wrong. This charge assumes that his essays have some effect on his readers (or why bother attacking them?), and the effect is deplored, so Heaney is accused of selling poetry short. Simmons’s comments (McDonald’s too, and Muldoon’s in his first Oxford lecture) amount almost to an accusation of treachery. I say ‘almost’ because treachery implies a traitorous will, and I am not sure these readers want to accuse him of that rather than an insufficiently cautious attitude to the institutions of poetic fame. What I find uncomfortable about this kind of criticism is that it assumes a high public profile for poetry and its attendant prose, and it also assumes readers are mere consumers who won’t or can’t make judgements about it. It attributes too much power to mere exposure (everyone is interested in star poets – are they? Does anybody remember the mid-1990s slogan ‘poetry is the new rock and roll’?) and too little independence and interpretative power to readers (nobody knows how to read it or judge it confidently). Does this look like a collective failure of nerve among poet-critics, an inability to construe success, let alone fame, in their fellows? A distaste for the popular cult of fame in the media?

This is perhaps unfair to McDonald, whose position is based on careful reasoning premised on T. S. Eliot’s argument in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ (1956) that there should be a rigid distinction between poetry, which can encompass criticism in the act of writing, and criticism, which must not contain creativity because it is essentially about something else. Eliot writes:

> I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition, is about something other than itself. Hence you cannot fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation. The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kin of union with creation in the labour of the artist.29

McDonald admires passages like this in Eliot’s late prose for their candour and sense of limitation, of the things criticism cannot legitimately do. But he also admires Eliot’s dismissal of his early critical positions as ‘a few notorious phrases which have had a truly embarrassing success in the world’.30 Fame again. There is something in Modernist poet-critics and their admirers that looks like fear of vulgar success. Wordsworth also wrote ‘a few notorious phrases’ but never felt he ought to disown them.
There is a related assumption that poetry has a duty to be in opposition to popular uses of language. This argument has sometimes been made very crudely, for example by cliques in Britain to whom the phrase ‘a Faber poet’ is mud for slinging and popularity the mark of a charlatan. The subtler version turns on the relation of poetic and popular language within poetic texts. For McDonald, the contemporary poet-critic whose work is most illuminating is Geoffrey Hill, and he reads Hill’s seminal essay ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ as his ‘Defence of Poetry’, noting its overlap with Sidney’s *Defence*. Sidney’s argument that the poet ‘nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth’ parallels Hill’s interest in J. L. Austin’s notion of ‘performative language’, with its suggestion that poetic language is always in invisible quotation marks and therefore not falsifiable. Such utterances ‘cannot be said to enact, contrive to avoid taking the rap for their own claims’. As McDonald notes, Hill’s essay does not affirm this position but shows how the poet is ‘mired in the complexity of language’s relations with both affirmations and seriousness, as well as with imaginative will; as someone in a fix, who is not triumphing over language, but battling a path within language’. Hill offers ‘an exemplary and unique alertness to this incomprehension, and to the misapprehension with which his language contends’. This is not to say, of course, that poetry should avoid plain statements in popular language, but that the poet should be alert to its provenance, opaqueness and unreliability. Hill’s poetry notably plays with cliché.

Heaney uses a similar distinction between ‘social speech’ and ‘poetic language’ in the preface to *The Redress of Poetry* and illustrates it by showing how the two can function within individual poems (the examples are Frost’s ‘Directive’ and Hardy’s ‘Afterwards’ – which I will return to in a moment). But although Hill and Heaney are both aware of the issue, they treat it very differently: Hill in dense but centrifugal verbal analysis, itself enacting an exemplary ontological *agon*; and Heaney in freer, more personal writing. Many readers will agree with McDonald in preferring Hill’s asceticism as a literary critical credo, if that means avoiding talking about the more sensuous pleasures of reading and writing. But they may also recognize that Hill’s poetry uniquely sensualizes asceticism and warns against it as the last and subtlest indulgence (‘When thou hast done, thou hast not Donne’). Recommending fastidiousness, Hill is the most fastidious of poets and critics and has become, in his own chosen word, ‘exemplary’. McDonald reads Hill as a trustworthy critic because of this *agon*:

his criticism comes closer than others’ to defining in contemporary terms the task of anyone trying to write poetry without self-flattery or
self-indulgence, in a world where language is more and more an instrument of forces beyond, and even hostile to, poetry itself. One such force is our own high view of ourselves, and our wish for others to share that view; another is the consequent conviction that the force of personality can make words do what we want them to do.\(^{37}\)

This is a memorable formulation, but perhaps it does not do full justice to the performativeness of the prose in which the struggle is acted out. McDonald contrasts Heaney, who ‘relies too much on his own good intentions’,\(^{38}\) but the difference may not be as absolute as he claims.

In the terms adopted above, Heaney’s prose is evidently and sometimes extravagantly performative. His critique of Hardy’s ‘Afterwards’ in *Redress* is an extreme example, and I want to look at it because, as Hardy wrote, a ‘full look at the worst’ can be salutary (but is it the worst?). Heaney reads the poem as a conversation à trois: the voices are the poet’s country neighbours, who knew or noticed him and were users of ordinary ‘social speech’; poetry readers who also communicate with each other in social language (the change of tense here is built into Heaney’s analysis); and the ‘poetic’ language of the poet’s noticings.

‘He was a man who used to notice such things’, say the neighbours, on this side of the frontier. ‘Which things?’ asks the reader, and from the other side the poem answers, ‘The May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings, / Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk.’ ‘To him this must have been a familiar sight’, say the neighbours. ‘What must have been a familiar sight?’ asks the reader. ‘The dusk, when, like an eyelid’s soundless blink, / The dew-fall hawk comes crossing the shades to alight / Upon the wind-warped upland thorn’, says the poem. ‘Anything else?’ says the reader. ‘Blackness, mothy and warm’, says the poem. ‘The full-starred heavens that winter sees’, things like that. ‘My God!’ says the reader.\(^{39}\)

This is an exciting critical performance: it communicates dramatically a way of reading and implies we can all do it, neighbours and critics alike, but it reverses a common heuristic hierarchy: neighbours explain the poem to readers, not vice versa. An empathetic and exemplary reading. He reads on ‘our’ behalf, telling us what ‘the reader’ thinks and feels. Much criticism does the same, but seldom so nakedly. Exemplary in another way, too: outstanding, ideal, almost ‘excellent, perfect’ (the meaning listed in the *OED* as obsolete): something to be followed. Neil Corcoran notes how important the words ‘example’ and ‘exemplary’ are in Heaney’s
own criticism,40 reflecting an interest in exemplary figures morally as well as aesthetically: a kind of displaced Catholicism that sanctifies the chosen guide or forebear. But it can also be entirely secular, as in the essay ‘Yeats as an Example?’41

I’ve said what I consider best about this passage in Redress, but there are worrying things about it too. If we ask whether ‘the reader’ is coerced by it, we have to notice that Heaney’s imagined ‘reader’ of Hardy is in one sense Heaney himself but in another sense Heaney’s reader, the reader of his reading, whom he imagines reading Hardy. What happens in the passage is that we are asked to allow our two acts of reading to converge. Whether ‘the reader’ complies is not something an individual can judge. I comply, uneasily; and here I stop using the plural ‘we’, not because I don’t think art and criticism reach for Kant’s subjective universal, but because Heaney has embraced the politics of readership and yet attempted to revive the unfashionable idea of ‘inwardness’: a term he used in a talk on Hughes given at The Prince of Wales Summer School in July 2003.42

All writers hope to persuade readers that their readings are valuable, and they are more or less anxious and honest about it. Heaney’s strategy here is extremely risky. It risks disbelief, which is critical disaster, and the risk is greater because he reproduces the whole text of Hardy’s poem before giving his reading, so that a reader can go back and think about how justly Heaney has represented the poem. Such a reader may well come to the conclusion that Heaney has replaced Hardy’s poem with one of his own, a three-way conversation between reader, poet and neighbours which in one simple sense plainly misrepresents the dynamic of events in Hardy’s poem. In Heaney’s scene the neighbours’ voices come first, prompting the reader’s question (‘what things?’), which the other bits of the poem answer. This is not how Hardy structured the poem.

* * *

Heaney’s defence of the authority of poetry, a recurrent and major theme, is widely recognized as two-edged. He writes of poetry’s autonomy as a special ‘jurisdiction’ exercised over a certain ‘territory’ with its own ‘frontiers’: these ideas inhabit his poetry (especially in The Haw Lantern) as well as his prose, and he is fully aware of the political meanings of the terms. Yet, as we have seen, he writes in Redress of the interplay of poetic and ‘social’ language within poems – so much so as almost to raise the question whether Hardy’s ‘Afterwards’ should be read chiefly as a piece
of literary criticism. Again, he repeatedly strays over the frontier by using ‘poetic’ tropes and structures in his prose. Clearly the early love of Hopkins attested to in ‘Feeling into Words’ and even earlier in his *Gorgon* essay is echoed in later alliterative rhythmic clusters: ‘its lambency, its skim-factor, its bobbing unencumbered motion’, Heaney writes of Clare’s poetry. In places like this he not only challenges his own conception of the ‘territory’ of poetry but clearly transgresses Eliot’s rule that poetry can include criticism, but criticism must not include poetry.

We can, if we like, defend these breaches in simple pragmatic terms: if the criticism works (enlightens, encourages), let it break the rules. But we should also consider the weight of a different critical tradition that says that criticism ought to be like poetry: imaginative, enthusiastic, related to personal springs. Some of the Russian poets Heaney wrote about in his pre-1989 essays in *The Government of the Tongue* and in the important 1985 essay ‘Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’ were models of this kind of poetic and critical practice. Though some have been excluded from *Finders Keepers*, possibly because of the chorus of critics who, as I noted above, objected to his appropriation of them as iconic subversive figures while simultaneously being reluctant to speak out on contemporary Irish politics, I think they continue to exert a pressure in Heaney’s prose. In a later section I will offer evidence for this claim by looking at *Finders Keepers*, but in the meantime it may be useful to point to some formulations of the role of the ‘poet-critic’ that specifically run counter to Eliot’s.

Heaney’s readers associate him with Joseph Brodsky, whose comment on Marina Tsvetaeva’s essays I have used as an epigraph, mainly because they and Derek Walcott jointly contributed interviews to a volume on Lowell, but also because of their reading of East European and Russian writing of the Soviet period; also perhaps because of the obituary notice Heaney contributed to the *New York Times* and reprinted in *Finders Keepers*. Brodsky shows a particular fascination with the work of Marina Tsvetaeva as a writer whose poetry and prose are offshoots of the same integrity of vision and so cast a special light on the question how the two media are related. Her prose is ‘the continuation of poetry by other means (which, in fact, is what prose historically is)’. The statement seems at first to bring poetry and prose easily together as media that serve the same end (they are ‘means’). On the other hand the echo of Clausewitz’s statement, commonly recalled as ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’ and felt to contain a paradox, suggests a much more uneasy relation. Are we to think of prose as war and poetry as politics? Sense could be made of this homology: the belligerence of
aesthetic manifestos as against the subtler workings of poetry. Sense could also be made in an opposite way: the shock of new art as against a more considered engagement of the audience in explicatory essays and publicity. Either way, or even resisting the temptation to explore these analogies, Brodsky’s use of the phrase suggests an ambiguity underlying his brash assertion: it shocks us into question. It may be that Brodsky considers Tsvetaeva a special case, but he is ambiguous. His parenthetical remark ‘(which, in fact, is what prose historically is)’, if it is not just a distracting aside, suggests she is not. It claims for poetry a general primacy over prose, as Rousseau and Shelley did. Tsvetaeva is exemplary in this way, but Brodsky goes on to suggest she is not only exemplary but also unique (these terms are not contradictory). The reader of her prose is ‘constantly dealing not with a linear (analytic) development but with a crystalline (synthetic) growth of thought’. The relation between poetry and prose in her case, Brodsky argues, is peculiarly strong:

if we were not thinking of Tsvetaeva, it might be possible to see in a poet’s turning to prose a kind of literary nostalgie de la boue, a desire to merge with the (writing) mass, to become, at last, ‘like everyone else’ . . . . Prose for Tsvetaeva is by no means a refuge; it is not a form of emancipation – either psychological or stylistic. For her, prose is a witting expansion of her isolation, that is, of the possibilities of language.

The implication is that other (lesser?) poets go slumming in prose from time to time when they are not up to the demands of the afflatus, but not this one. ‘A witting expansion . . . of the possibilities of language’: at this point there is a definite emphasis on the unique power of Tsvetaeva’s, leaving open the possibility that others’ may fall short of this standard.

Brodsky also sees her as exemplary in relation to the autobiographical turn in poets’ prose:

Perhaps this may partly explain why a poet turns to prose, especially to autobiographical prose. In Tsvetaeva’s case it is . . . a withdrawal from reality into prehistory, into childhood. However, this is not the ‘when-nothing-is-known-yet’ childhood of a certified memoirist. It is the ‘when-everything-is-already-known’ but ‘nothing-has-begun-yet’ childhood of the mature poet caught up in the middle of her life by a brutal era. Autobiographical prose – prose in general – in this case is just a breather. Like any respite, it is lyrical and temporary.
'The sensation of respite and its accompanying qualities' is, he claims, 'quite evident in most of her essays on literature, along with the strong autobiographical element. Because of it, her essays prove to be “literature within literature” to a much greater extent than all modern “textual criticism of text”. But they are also ‘lyrical and temporary’: not marmoreal, not a monument to the poet or her subject. Brodsky seems in two minds as to whether this is particularly so about Tsvetaeva’s autobiographical prose or her prose in general, but the characterization is powerful, and it reminds us that critical writing can be temporary in a sense other than topical: it embraces the moment but does not conceive it in topical or political terms. Though printed criticism colludes, in the very medium of print, with a notion of general and lasting validity, it is most vital in moments where it reports or creates moments of insight. Brodsky’s argument corresponds to Tsvetaeva’s own remarks about the function of criticism:

A major poet’s criticism is in the main a criticism of passion: of kinship and non-kinship. This is why it is a relation, not an evaluation, this is why it isn’t criticism, perhaps this is why I listen to it. Even if what his words produce isn’t me, at least he himself is visible. A kind of confession, like the dream we dream of others: you acting, but me prompting! The right to assert, the right to deny – who disputes these? I’m only against the right to judge.

Brodsky’s comments on Tsvetaeva as a poet and critic have parallels in Heaney’s reading of Osip Mandelstam. On this subject Neil Corcoran writes: ‘Heaney on Mandelstam is a poet-critic balancing reverence or awe with a spirited zeal of self-recognition. The sense that critical appreciation is coterminous with creative desire modulates obeisance into inheritance; and the critical writing is, as a result, mobile with both definition and potential.’ This is a measured and just characterization, I think, but perhaps it underplays the element of unruliness to be found in some of Heaney’s most appreciative writing. A single example: Heaney writes about Mandelstam’s insistence on language’s resources and is inspired to use them himself – and to invoke the name of another poet who luxuriated in language, Keats. Mandelstam ‘sponsors all over again the Keatsian proposition that beauty is truth, truth beauty’. Mandelstam is read as a writer who blurs distinctions between prose and poetry. Of his Journey to Armenia Heaney writes:

Poetry came back to him. Indeed the prose itself is bursting with eagerness to break out as a sequence of poems. As each sensation hits
the tightly stretched drumhead of each sense, it emits waves from the omnipresent ‘nugget of harmony’. Supply has been located, the gusher has been breached and capped, the linguistic hydraulics grip and shift into action all over again. . . . What Mandelstam said of Darwin’s style applies here perfectly to his own: the power of perception functions as an instrument of thought.54

This passage is exhilarating but perhaps also a bit embarrassing: Heaney’s metaphors themselves gush out of control, but the passage as a whole structures a moment of excited discovery, announced by the pithy first sentence, which bursts into a rush of metaphor, and is finally lodged in an allusion to Mandelstam’s own words of discovery. In passages like this, we might remember that unusual moment in T. S. Eliot’s criticism where he excitedly remembers Wordsworth’s excitement at being told that Aristotle had said something that he (Wordsworth) knew instinctively was right (‘Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so . . . ’). Eliot ‘find[s] that “it is so” very exhilarating’.55 Excitement breeds excitement. With sublime confidence Wordsworth makes an inaccurate statement about Aristotle and uses it as a starting point to elaborate his own convictions. Reading this and Eliot’s surprising endorsement of it is disarming: it tells us that criticism can change minds by disorderly as well as orderly conduct.

* * *

The title of my chapter deliberately invokes Arnold’s ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1865) in order to emphasize the moral imperatives of Heaney’s prose and its apparent aim to be both timely and transcendent. Arnold diagnosed a contemporary need and instinctively related it to what he thought of as eternal truths (he was always finding contemporary needs): to this extent Muldoon is right in describing Heaney’s criticism as belonging to the Romantic and Victorian tradition. But whereas Arnold addresses the ‘function’ of criticism as an ideally singular and unifying cultural form, Heaney’s writing about writing is both more diverse in genre and more embedded in the textual processes of both writing and reading. He aims to show that poetry engages with social and ethical life but nevertheless points to a space reserved for contemplation, surmise and prevision; where, as he puts it in Redress, consciousness is offered ‘a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways’, which actions ‘constitute a beneficent event, for both poet and
It is a central fact of Heaney’s prose that he imagines and commemorates the particularities of reading poetry, that what he says about writing is squarely based on the memory of his own earlier reading: hence the link between criticism and autobiography (and perhaps his repetitiveness), but hence, too, his rejection of ‘positional’ reading.

The passage quoted from *Redress* follows a fantasized confrontation between Wallace Stevens meditating on poetry as ‘a violence from within that protects us from a violence without’ and ‘some disaffected heckler... crying out against the mystification of art’. Heaney imagines the heckler adopting Thomas Mann’s view, ‘In our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms’, without knowing that it was Mann’s, ‘echoing something he has read somewhere’: unoriginal and ignorant, one of Tony Harrison’s ‘rhubarbarians’. This is a memorable formulation of outer conflict, if rather a crude one. It is interesting that Heaney does not tell us where the quoted phrase comes from, so we are left to suppose he got it at second hand from the epigraph to Yeats’s poem ‘Politics’, itself a crude rejection of the position attributed to Mann. Or possibly at fourth hand, since Yeats found the remark quoted by Archibald MacLeish in an article in *The Yale Review* in 1938, in which, incidentally, MacLeish praises Yeats for being a poet ‘of the world’ as well as in the world. The phrase has a knock-about history suited to its use in *Redress*.

We may feel that the vigour of this passage undermines the argument, which, after all, is for subtle, attentive reading and against crude position taking. Is it not inappropriate to adopt an ‘ignorant’ opponent’s methods? Heaney seems occasionally to be drawn to the knock-about and to remind us of the Larkin of ‘Poetry of Departures’, ‘flushed and stirred’ by phrases like ‘Take that you bastard’. There are other hecklers in Heaney’s prose, and they get equally short shrift: for instance the ‘reliable citizen’ in ‘Yeats as an Example?’ who says, ‘Anybody who believes in fairies is mad’. Such moments are memorable but not defining: they function in the memory as hooks to hang subtler pictures on.

Corcoran finds an Arnoldian element in Heaney’s repeated use of certain phrases from Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Frost, MacLeish, Lowell, Brodsky, Milosz and others; they are, he says, similar to Arnold’s ‘touchstones’ because they are used to orientate readings of others’ poems. This is true, but there is an important difference. Arnold is not concerned to tell us how or when or why he adopted a particular touchstone, whereas, reading Heaney’s repeated invocations of, say, Yeats’s phrase ‘the spiritual intellect’s great work’, we are left in no doubt that they are part of Heaney’s own history. Corcoran speculates on what this tells us about Heaney’s critical reading habits and imagines, in an account that seems to
me convincing, an acute critical opportunism. He remarks that Heaney may have come across some of these in James Scully’s anthology of critical dicta, *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Fontana, 1966), though he offers no proof of this; but his surmise that in ‘Englands of the Mind’ Heaney may have taken Eliot’s phrase ‘the auditory imagination’ from a snippet in John Hayward’s edition of Eliot’s *Selected Prose* (1953) – an anthology of ‘assembled and digested’ passages – is confirmed by Heaney in ‘Learning from Eliot’, published belatedly in *Finders Keepers*.62

Repetition and opportunism: Heaney’s use of quotation and allusion suggests that he has more in common with Hazlitt than Arnold. Hazlitt also reaches for phrases from his reading (often from Shakespeare but also frequently from his contemporaries), reproduces them apparently from memory, mangling them sometimes, and seldom attributing them. These features of his prose have been seen as proof of his deep familiarity with his material and his critical gusto and (more tendentiously) his subversiveness. Though Tom Paulin and other recent admirers of Hazlitt might be appalled by the thought of a comparison with Heaney, it at least shows that a habit of casually invoking past writers is not necessarily a sign of conservatism or nostalgia – as the Arnoldian notion of ‘touchstones’ is often taken to be. Heaney’s repeated references are memorable acts of construction even when they are also forgetful or memory skewing. (And here Yeats is an example, with his conspicuously staged acts of forgetfulness – ‘Was it not X who said that . . . ?’ – as Stan Smith has noted.63) Like Hazlitt, he wears his rhetoric on his sleeve.

To the extent that these remarks are a defence of Heaney’s critical style, they are paralleled by Steven James’s comments on Heaney’s verbal ‘archaeology’, which has been noted by a number of critics in both his poetry and his prose. On the etymology of ‘redress’ James writes:

[i]t might be legitimate to characterize Heaney as disarming in the way he handles his etymology, but it would be wrong to extend this to a charge of disingenuousness. His argument, though it depends on casting the word ‘redress’ in an essentially innocuous light, does not depend upon underhand procedures. The buoyancy and gravity, the confidence and diffidence of Heaney’s prose style are themselves part of the message and not a means of concealing anything insidiously less amendable.64

James credits Heaney with good faith but – more important – also draws attention to style as ‘part of the message’. My argument in this section has been that Heaney uses the kind of shorthand vigour that catch-phrases and repetitions offer and also values subtlety of reading; that these
sometimes conflict but sometimes support each other. He presupposes in his readers an ability to switch between modes and implicitly draws attention to the fact that reading is an active, constructive process, a ‘call[ing] forth of power’ in the reader, as Wordsworth put it.

In the Preface to *Finders Keepers* Heaney implicitly defends his practice of holding on to the experience of reading as the origin of criticism. The very title is a riposte to those who regard his critical acts as predatory: ‘finders keepers’ is a predatory chant, and a divisive one as well if we add ‘losers weepers’. Who are the implied losers? No one, apparently: readers ‘celebrate and take possession’ of poems, but no one is denied possession; poems remain free to all. The title rebuts the charge of predation by reformulating it in a challenging way. Here, as elsewhere, Heaney’s strategy is a risky stubbornness that provokes the reader to disagree. He imagines other readers will be up to the challenge of finding and keeping the poem for themselves.

The design of *Finders Keepers* reasserts connections between autobiography and criticism, beginning with the ‘omphalos’ as a source of self, poetry and metaphor in ‘Mossbawn’ and ending in elegiac mode with short obituaries of Brodsky, Hughes and a valedictory piece about Milosz. There is a curious tension – or is it a balance? – between the Brodsky and Milosz pieces. Brodsky ‘exemplified in life the very thing that he most cherished in poetry – the capacity of language to go farther and faster than expected and thereby provide an escape from the limitations and the preoccupations of the self’. ‘Farther and faster’: outstripping habit, use and even consciousness. And note that the formulation applies to reading as well as writing: there is discovery as well as practice in both. Milosz’s poetry, on the other hand, ‘constantly reveals human consciousness as a site of contending discourses, yet he will not allow these recognitions to negate the immemorial command to hold one’s own, spiritually and morally’. Putting the two together, Brodsky is a model of delight, danger and (in some form) self-oblivion. Milosz, on the contrary, stands for steadfastness. The very last words in the volume are those of Milosz, translated, a poem quoted whole:

> What once was great, now appeared small.  
> Kingdoms were fading like snow-covered bronze.

> What once could smite, now smites no more.  
> Celestial earths roll on and shine.

> Stretched in the grass by the bank of a river,  
> As long, long ago, I launch my boats of bark.
Milosz also stands for reaching into the past, as Heaney expresses it in a sentence that itself reaches into the past of poetry, with a veiled reference to Larkin’s ‘Church Going’, a clear evocation of Wordsworth’s ‘Immortality Ode’ and an explicit and glaringly inaccurate quotation from Keats: ‘Milosz . . . satisfies the appetite for seriousness and joy which the word “poetry” awakens in every language. He restores the child’s eternity at the water’s edge, but expresses equally the adult’s dismay that his name is “writ on water”.’ Heaney returns us, via Milosz, to the finding that ‘Mossbawn’ celebrates and reminds us that keeping means not only holding on to but also ‘look[ing] after’.67

Notes
1 Quotations are from the Award web site: <www.uiowa.edu/~ournews/2003/may/050803heaney-capote-award.html>.
9 Quoted in Brandes, ‘Secondary Sources’, p. 74.
14 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p. 213.
15 Quoted in Brandes, ‘Secondary Sources’, p. 70.
17 Fennell, Whatever You Say, Say Nothing, p. 12.
18 Fennel, Whatever You Say, Say Nothing, p. 17.
30 Eliot, quoted in McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 72.
32 Quoted in McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 100.
33 Hill, The Lords of Limit, pp. 141–2.
34 McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 100.
35 McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 101.
37 McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 102.
38 McDonald, Serious Poetry, p. 94.
39 Heaney, Redress, p. xvii.
41 Geoffrey Hill is another frequent user of the word ‘exemplary’; for example, in ‘Funeral Music’ from King Log (London: Deutsch, 1968), p. 25; and in ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, in The Lords of Limit, p. 11.
44 Heaney, Finders Keepers, p. 288.
52 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 212.
53 Heaney, Redress, p. xx.
54 Heaney, Redress, p. 85.
56 Heaney, Redress, p. 2.
57 Heaney, Redress, pp. 1–2.
66 Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, pp. 403, 413.
As Edna Longley has said, Seamus Heaney, like many other Irish poets, has always felt a strong pull towards the American dream. For Heaney and several of his contemporaries, that pull has become quite literal, drawing them to prestigious US universities where they often enjoy fame and connection to many of America’s own leading literary figures. But while Heaney’s years at Harvard have no doubt influenced his poetry, there is a more elemental American influence on his work. Heaney’s career has been so greatly affected by the Troubles that it would be hard for him not to see America in a special light, as a former British colony that has distinctively found its own identity and literary tradition within the confines of the English language. One could make a considerable list of American influences on Heaney’s poetry, but I will confine my discussion to two especially important ones – T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost. Both have helped Heaney not only to address the conflicts of his beloved Northern Ireland, but ultimately to push his poetry beyond these into new realms.

There are two essential aspects of that influence. The first is to be found in the impact on Heaney’s poetic language. Heaney’s American predecessors have given him a model for making the language of his oppressors his own. The second influence has been helping Heaney to escape the condition of boundedness. Much of the best poetry of Heaney’s early and middle periods is focused on his local concerns and, while this is indisputably great poetry, it ultimately became a confining subject for Heaney. The American influence has allowed Heaney to imagine his poetic career more broadly, and that broader vision has made the period of Heaney’s superb late poetry possible. To illustrate this influence, I will eventually focus considerable attention on the late volume, Seeing Things.
These two vital issues – language and boundedness – are connected in Heaney’s work. In the 1972 essay ‘Belfast’, published originally in the *Guardian*, Heaney issued his most ringing manifesto about his relationship with the English language and its literary tradition: ‘I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspective of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home.’ This is not an empty claim, for Heaney has put his own linguistic stamp on the tradition of ‘English’ poetry, in part by writing poems like ‘Broagh’ and ‘Anahorish’, which focus on some very un-English words and place names, and in part by allowing poems to turn on such un-English words as ‘bleb’ (in ‘North’). In ‘The Ministry of Fear’, a monologue addressed to Heaney’s fellow countryman, Seamus Deane, the poet jokes about how he

. . . innovated a South Derry rhyme
   With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*.  
Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountains 
   Were walking, by God, all over the fine 
Lawns of elocution. ³

Heaney’s sense of being an intruder on the language and the tradition would not surprise either Frost or Eliot, both of whom came to England early in their careers to establish their poetic credentials.

Heaney’s essay ‘Learning from Eliot’ makes it clear that one of his primary debts to the great poet of modernism is auditory. Much like Yeats, Eliot is for Heaney an acquired taste. In both cases Heaney seems resistant both to the high modernism and the Protestantism these poets represent. Yet, while Heaney admits to struggling with Eliot’s subject matter, he says that what he heard made sense. In ‘Burnt Norton’ Heaney was drawn to the way ‘the interweaving and repetition of the words “present”, “past” and “future” [go] round and round, like a linked dance through the ear. Words going forward meet each other coming back. Even the word “echo” meets itself on the rebound.’ Heaney uses a similar technique in a number of poems. Though Heaney cannot find in Eliot the comfortable association of word and thing that he does in Frost, he credits Eliot for teaching him a ‘soundscape’. ⁵

Heaney’s comments on Frost’s sound patterns indicate a further degree of influence. Frost was a gifted poet of the American idiom, and it is easy to see why Heaney, trying to adapt his own local idiom to the English tongue, would be attentive to Frost’s use of language. He cites ‘Desert Places’ as an example of language with ‘an urgency created by
various minimal and significant delicacies’. Heaney resorts to a similar kind of language in many of his best poems, including ‘North’, ‘The Tollund Man’ and ‘Punishment’. For Heaney, Frost’s cadences, which the American poet himself compared to voices heard through a door that cuts off the words, ‘re-establish a connection with the original springs of our human being’. Here Heaney speaks of one of the two great hungers that undergird his poetry – one for origins, the other for transcendence. The former has led Heaney to a career as a translator of Beowulf and Sophocles. It is also the spirit of poems like ‘Alphabets’, where Heaney tries to recapture an originary sense of his encounter with language. This effort almost enables Heaney to escape Englishness, to trace his way back to a language more ancient than the primary British literary tradition of Chaucer and his successors. Heaney describes the process in his rarely cited poem ‘Bone Dreams’:

I push back through dictions, Elizabethan canopies. Norman devices, the erotic mayflowers of Provence and the ivied latins of churchmen to the scop’s twang, the iron flash of consonants cleaving the line.

Heaney has become well known for such ‘skinny quatrains’, but surely the clipped sound of this poem bears striking resemblance to Frost’s voices heard behind doors. It also mirrors Frost’s desire to find the elemental quality of language.

Earlier, I mentioned the connection in Heaney’s work between language and boundedness, and, in truth, it seems that his desire to find a proper ‘soundscape’ has become one way for Heaney to release himself from boundedness. As his career has progressed, Heaney has made frequent comments about his sense of boundedness. For instance, in an interview he told Neil Corcoran that he had been, from his beginnings, ‘very conscious of boundaries. . . . I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start’. In the post-ceasefire
essay ‘Something to Write Home About’, Heaney elaborated on his experience of growing up in between—bounded by the Protestant ethics of Castledawson and the Catholic mores of Bellaghy—‘two sides divided by the way they pray, for example, and in little subtle but real ways . . . by the way they speak.’

Heaney imagines relief from the old sectarian strife in ‘the ground of language and the ground beneath our feet’. It is poetry that offers the best possible hope for escape from the old boundaries. Heaney’s later work, beginning with Seeing Things, aims at a transcendence beyond the old boundaries that have limited both him and Northern Ireland.

This turn towards a more transcendent theme is the second one in Heaney’s career that bears a distinctively American influence. Before he arrived at that point, however, Heaney had become keenly aware of how America—in this case its landscape more than its poetry—had helped him imagine ‘Bogland’, a signature poem which launched his most political phase of poetry. In this poem Heaney imagined the landscape of Northern Ireland in contradistinction to the American: ‘We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening . . .’. In ‘Feeling Into Words’ Heaney said he had been ‘reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up—or rather, laid down—the bog as an answering Irish myth’. The bog poems follow a pattern that Heaney had established in his first volume (Death of a Naturalist) by using the metaphor of digging or divining: however, the American model showed Heaney a way to broaden the metaphor of landscape and history as a figure for national consciousness and identity.

The American model has also been important to the second major turn of Heaney’s career, which I have described as the turn towards the transcendent. In this case, it is a vertical rather than a horizontal vision that becomes important to Heaney. I want to focus on this turn, partly because it is an important facet of Heaney’s career, but also because the influence of Eliot and especially of Frost is so important here. Without this turn Heaney could have faced a major poetic crisis: he had come to feel that his focus on the political troubles of Northern Ireland had become a too-consuming passion. Like Wordsworth, whom he so openly admired, Heaney had reached a poetic impasse. Unlike Wordsworth, however, Heaney’s voice found a new resonance rather than hardening into predictable cant.

The turn began in the 1980s, after the successful volumes North (1975) and Field Work (1979), the latter containing his elegy to his cousin Colum McCarthy, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’. One signifier of the turn is Heaney’s retraction in Station Island (1984) of the way he had ‘whitewashed
ugliness’ and ‘saccharined’ the death of his cousin. Earlier, in ‘Punishment’, he had expressed a similar fear that he had become an ‘artful voyeur’. In his retraction Heaney seems to be suggesting that he has lost the power of writing about the violence in Northern Ireland without descending into sentimentality. A key figure in this turn is Dante, as Heaney begins his journey from his own personal Inferno towards the light of paradise. In turning to Dante, Heaney is also following in the footsteps of Eliot. Heaney, in fact, began his 1988 essay on Eliot by quoting from Eliot’s essay on Dante: ‘The majority of poems one outgrows and outlives, as one outgrows and outlives the majority of human passions: Dante’s is one of those which one can only just hope to grow up to at the end of life.’ These words had obvious resonance for Heaney, who was approaching 50 when he wrote the essay. He admits that it took him a long time to grow up to Eliot, just as Eliot had grown up to Dante, but by the late 1980s he was re-examining Eliot’s influence on him. Aside from Eliot’s model of soundscape, Heaney found in him a way to consider mystery in the poetic process. Reading Eliot at this stage of life affirms ‘that there is a reality to poetry which is unspeakable and for that very reason all the more piercing’. We can hear in Heaney’s later phase a mature effort to give voice to the unspeakable, to search for meaning in mysteries beyond the painful violence of sectarian struggle.

However, Heaney has not commented on the most important aspect of Eliot’s influence. Heaney appears not to have thought about the close resemblance between his own turn back to religion and Eliot’s. In an interview with Karl Miller, published in 2000, Heaney made this comment in response to a question about the politics of his poetry: ‘I have some notion of poetry as a grace, and I’m coming to believe that there may have been something far more important in my mental formation than cultural nationalism or the British presence or any of that stuff – namely, my early religious education.’ Heaney continued by saying that the invaluable thing about his Catholic upbringing ‘is the sense of the universe you’re given, a light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being. You conceive of yourself as a sort of dewdrop, in the big web of things, and I think this is the very stuff of lyric poetry.’

And surely it leads to a different kind of lyric poetry than that which meditates on violence and other worldly events. Heaney had noted that the late Eliot, for example, ‘renounced the lyric for philosophic song’. And while that is not exactly Heaney’s move in his later phase, there can be no doubt that he does open his imagination to new possibilities.
Seeing Things was published in 1991, just three years after the essay on Eliot, and mere months after Heaney’s fine essay on Frost appeared in Salmagundi. Heaney’s comments in the Frost essay make it impossible to ignore the connection between his thoughts about the American poet and the changes evident in this new volume of poetry. Frost was not, for Heaney, an acquired taste: even his earliest essays contain praises for Frost that indicate an early and pervasive influence. Frost, after all, was, like Heaney, an agrarian poet, an unabashed inheritor of the Romantic tradition that tends to regard the landscape as instinct with meaning, even sacramental. If anything, then, the later Heaney returned to Frost for new inspiration as he lifts his eyes from the ground of the bog.

At the end of the 1980s, coming out of the dark period of assessing the spiritual and psychological effects of the Troubles, Heaney was drawn to the courage and resilience he found in Frost’s poetry, where something ‘is “genuinely rescued” from negative recognitions, squarely faced and abidingly registered’. This thesis reflects a significant swerve from Lionel Trilling’s characterization of Frost as a terrifying poet; Heaney is far less concerned with the terror of Frost’s universe than with the poet’s determination to see something beyond that terror. And while Heaney does praise Frost’s technical skills, he states that he is most concerned ‘with the specifically upward waft of Frost’s poems, and the different ways he releases the feeling . . . of airy vernal daring, an overbrimming of invention and of what he once called “supply”’.

Frost’s facility for locating pleasure (symbolized by Heaney’s use of the title ‘Above the Brim’) in the harder realities of life appealed to the Irish poet who had become uneasy with his own preoccupation with the horror of human violence. In the essay on Frost, Heaney focuses on a handful of the important lyrics, including ‘Stopping by Woods’, ‘Desert Places’, ‘Birches’, ‘Home Burial’, ‘Mowing’, ‘A Tuft of Flowers’, and ‘To Earthward’. In most of these poems Heaney senses a fascination with verticality – the ‘upward waft’ – a sharp contrast to his earlier interest in the horizontal dimensions of the American landscape and the ‘digging down and in’ in Northern Ireland. To a large extent, the horizontal connection had been a negative one, since Heaney had focused in ‘Bogland’ on the Irish absence of ‘great prairies’. But Frost, in drawing Heaney’s eyes upward, makes him aware of the common ground they share. Frost’s ‘desert places’ are cosmic and existential, not geographic. Heaney is impressed by Frost’s refusal to be predictable, citing ‘To Earthward’ as a poem that ‘goes from living and walking on air to living and enduring on earth’.

Where the characteristic mood of modernism is emptiness – a quality
strongly implied by Trilling’s notion of Frost as a terrifying poet – Heaney is drawn to Frost’s tendency to discover fullness in surprising places:

It does seem to me that the poems which hold up most strongly embody one or the other of the following movements: a movement which consists of or is analogous to a fullness overflowing, or the corollary of that, a kind of reactive wave, a fullness in the process of rebounding off something or somebody else.23

It is, indeed, a sense of fullness that strikes one so forcefully about Heaney's *Seeing Things*, especially the title poem. In light of the close proximity of the publication of this volume and Heaney's essay on Frost, we can easily imagine Frost as a tutelary spirit for these Heaney poems, something akin to the Romantics’ concept of the presiding genius.

‘Man and Boy’ is one of the poems from *Seeing Things* that has very clear resonances of Frost. Its sister poems are ‘A Tuft of Flowers’ and ‘Mowing’, both of which Heaney cited in the essay on Frost. ‘A Tuft of Flowers’ contains the line ‘sheer morning gladness at the brim’, which ultimately inspires the title of Heaney’s essay on Frost. This gladness, says Heaney, ‘inspired the mower to spare [the flowers] and so, by a little chain reaction of rapture, inspired the poem’.24 Like ‘Man and Boy’, ‘A Tuft of Flowers’ is a poem about the generations, examining the connections between fathers and sons. ‘Man and Boy’ gives us its own sense of rapture, most noticeably when Heaney celebrates the experience of fishing with the father with his own version of the Beatitudes:

Blessed be down-to-earth! Blessed be highs!
Blessed be the detachment of dumb love
In that broad-backed, low-set man
Who feared debt all his life, but now and then
Could make a splash like the salmon he said was
‘As big as a wee pork pig by the sound of it’.25

The first of these lines also echoes ‘Birches’, another of Heaney’s favourite poems, with its emphasis on the joy of ascent being dependent on the certainty that one is brought back to earth again. Just as Frost wants a taste of both heaven and earth, Heaney’s poem celebrates both water and earth, moving from the fishing scene to a Frost-like scene of mowing.

Strong as Frost’s influence is in the poem, it also contains something of Eliot’s example as well. As we’ve seen, Heaney has come to associate Eliot with mystery, and his comments on ‘Journey of the Magi’ reflect a
keen appreciation of Eliot’s skill at making a great mystery both tangible and uncertain:

The familiarity of the matter of this poem gave us the illusion of ‘understanding’; or perhaps the ‘understanding’ was not an illusion, the illusion being that ‘understanding’ the content and crisis it embodied was the equivalent of knowing it as a poem; a formal event in the language; an objective correlative.26

In its own way, ‘Man and Boy’ begins in concrete experiences (fishing, mowing) only to ascend to a realm more mysterious and mythic. Indeed, it seems that in a number of these late poems (including ‘Casualty’ from Field Work), Heaney is using fishing – a powerful Biblical symbol – in a way that resembles Eliot’s use of the magi. In each case the symbol is allusive and traditional, but is being used to reintroduce mystery and wonder in a fresh way. Furthermore, in ‘Learning from Eliot’ Heaney recalled reading Jesse L. Weston’s From Ritual to Romance to help get a grasp of The Waste Land. The lessons appear to be evident in the ending of ‘Man and Boy’ where the father and boy are translated into figures of myth:

I feel his legs and quick heels far away
And strange as my own – when he will piggyback me
At a great height, light-headed and thin-boned,
Like a witless elder rescued from the fire.27

On one level both ‘Man and Boy’ and ‘Seeing Things’ are returns for Heaney to the generational themes of his earliest poems. However, Heaney, now aware of his own aging process and feeling the loss of his father, finds a deeper mystery in these relationships than he did in the 1960s. The process of this return resembles Keats’s idea of repeating experience in a ‘finer tone’; repetition, thus, is itself a sign of entry into the mysterious.

‘Seeing Things’ is Heaney’s late masterpiece. The poem benefits from being read in the context of other poems in the volume, especially ‘Man and Boy’. Here again Heaney offers an uncanny kind of repetition, a return to an earlier experience that has taken on new meaning in the light of maturity, wisdom and loss. This poem has especially close parallels to ‘Birches’ and its later cognate, ‘To Earthward’. But once again, the influence of Eliot is not to be denied, as Heaney turns to traditional
symbols and figures from Christianity to understand his own story. Douglas Dunn has remarked on the entire volume’s debt to Virgil and Dante, and Heaney has ‘grown up’ to both poets in the process of ‘growing up’ to Eliot.

In a 1984 lecture on Wordsworth, Heaney had described the great Romantic poet as ‘stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable’. This statement represents Heaney’s personal doctrine of negative capability: it also looks forward to the transcendent mode of *Seeing Things*, where Heaney gives up on the idea of taking a single position. As Dunn sees it, this volume is about a ‘subjective reassessment of the visionary powers of poetry’. In a similar vein, Eugene O’Brien says the volume is about ‘seeing things anew – a second look where things are seen in their full complexity’. It is one of Heaney’s most evident returns to his Romantic roots, and this part of his history is commonly filtered through Frost.

In a fine study of the poetry of Northern Ireland, Peter McDonald has charted a shift in Heaney’s metaphors from the earthly to the transcendental. In particular, ‘his volume *Seeing Things* (1991) represents the poet’s most sustained attempt to achieve imaginative lift-off into a kind of poetry less constrained by identities (Irish or otherwise) and more openly metaphysical in its concerns.’ The new emphasis, McDonald continues, falls on ‘things inherent in absence’, but this does not mean Heaney is less sure of himself; on the contrary, the late Heaney is simply less willing to be fixed in any one position. He has come around to the quality he so greatly appreciated in Frost, a willingness to rescue something from negative recognitions.

The ‘upward waft’ which Heaney values in Frost, and which McDonald associates with the volume *Seeing Things*, is nowhere more evident than in the title poem. Once more Heaney calls on a fishing memory, this one fraught with much more anxiety than was evident in ‘Man and Boy’. The poem begins in a concrete location, Inishbofin. But the boy’s imagination takes him upward, out of the dangerous element:

All the time
As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.
Never before – not even in ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ – has Heaney transcended boundaries more gracefully. Bernard O’Donoghue has observed that in *Seeing Things* scenes of crossing water often symbolize a threshold crossing. At the same time, Heaney does follow Frost’s mantra in this poem, as he celebrates the ascent only so long as he can return to earth again. For the later Heaney this ability of the imagination to transform experience has made possible the escape from boundedness. Consequently, memory and history – both personal and cultural – no longer constitute the threat they represented in the earlier poetry.

While the religious impulse is very powerful in ‘Seeing Things’, it does not limit Heaney. The deeply religious symbolism of the second section of the poem is not an end in itself; rather, with its status as the second of three sections, it provides a deeper context for the poem’s concluding movement. That movement resembles the ending of ‘Man and Boy’ in its translation of the personal into the mythic. Heaney uses the fairy-tale formulas (‘once upon a time’ and ‘happily ever after’) to frame the final section of ‘Seeing Things’, and thus gives a broader perspective for the uncanny memory of the father’s return. This structure becomes another way for the narrator to step outside himself, as the boy seems to do in the opening section, and look down on his experience with sublime contentment. Earth, indeed, seems to be the right place for love.

If it seems true that ‘Birches’ might have helped make ‘Seeing Things’ possible, then it is also true that Heaney has not simply rewritten Frost’s great poem of transcendent experience. As Edna Longley says, Heaney is very conscious of influence, and he knows how to bring ‘something fresh to Frostian scenarios: a kind of sensory real presence’. While this assessment seems true, I seriously doubt that Longley has it right when she further suggests that Heaney might have underestimated Frost’s scepticism because of his own Catholicism. Rather, I would argue that Heaney fully acknowledges Frost’s scepticism and, because of his Catholicism, he is not threatened by it. In fact, he is less threatened by that scepticism than Frost himself was. Heaney has read ‘Birches’ in light of his own comments about the redress of poetry: ‘That general inclination to begin a counter-move once things go too far in any given direction is enacted in “Birches” with lovely pliant grace.’ It requires the late Heaney, who spoke of his new tendency at 50 to ‘credit marvels’, to see grace lurking in Frost’s poem that seems to reject heaven. ‘Seeing Things’, along with a number of other poems in this fine volume, represents Heaney’s own counter-move against the threat of obsession with the violence of Northern Ireland. Frost offered him a way to consider anew the values of balance and equipoise which have become identifiable features of Heaney’s late and most transcendent phase of poetic achievement.
Notes

10 Heaney, ‘Something to Write Home About’, *Finders Keepers*, p. 57.
18 Miller, *A Conversation with Seamus Heaney*, p. 36.
29 Heaney, ‘Place and Displacement’, *Finders Keepers*, p. 119.
30 Dunn, ‘Quotidian Miracles’, p. 207.
33 McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, p. 15.
The Polish connection

Heaney's interest in Eastern European poetry, well documented and often discussed, can be traced in the style and the themes of a substantial number of his poems, but also, more conspicuously, in Heaney's criticism, interviews and occasional commentaries. Among the Eastern European poets on whom Heaney has written, one finds the Czech poet Miroslav Holub and a host of Russian writers, including Anton Chekhov, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetayeva and Josip Brodsky. As a translator, Heaney has contributed to a collection of poems by the Romanian poet Marin Sorescu, The Biggest Egg in the World (1987), and offered a new version of a song cycle by the Czech composer Leos Janacek, Diary of One Who Vanished (1999). It seems, however, that – for reasons I will try to identify – the closest links bind Heaney with contemporary Polish poets, primarily, of course, with his long-time friend Czeslaw Milosz, but also with other post-war writers from Poland: Zbigniew Herbert, to whom Heaney dedicated an elegy in Electric Light (2001); Stanislaw Barańczak, exile poet and translator, with whom Heaney co-translated Jan Kochanowski’s Laments; Wiesława Szymborska, the 1997 Nobel Prize winner; and Adam Zagajewski.

Heaney's interest in Polish poetry gained momentum in the 1980s with the publication of Station Island (1984), The Haw Lantern (1987), and The Government of the Tongue (1988). It was then, after the Nobel Prize for Czeslaw Milosz, after the foundation of ‘Solidarity’, and after the introduction of martial law in Poland that Heaney's interest in
Polish poets – kindled also by his discovery of Milosz’s anthology *Post-War Polish Poetry*, whose third, expanded edition appeared in 1983 – exerted its most direct, traceable impact on his own work.

**Poetry and history**

This attention paid to the poetry written beyond the Iron Curtain stems from the poet’s ongoing concern with the problematic relationship between poetry and history. Heaney sees the work of post-war Polish poets as pertinent to his own, inasmuch as they manage to respond to the pressures of history (including contemporary political realities), without sacrificing their artistic integrity. Polish post-war poets, primarily Milosz and Herbert, have provided Heaney with an example of what he called ‘amphibious survival’ – that is, ‘surviving in the realm of “the times” and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect’.\(^1\) In this and similar formulations, Heaney’s reading of Polish poetry fits well within the paradigm that defines the way in which Polish poetry has been interpreted in the West. The effect of this paradigm was the highly selective list of only those Polish poets who, like Milosz, Herbert and Rozewicz, addressed the pressing historical and political issues, and the neglect of other poets, such as Miron Bialoszewski, Tadeusz Nowak or Stanislaw Grochowiak, who did not fulfil these expectations.\(^2\)

Heaney admired the readiness of Polish poets to confront history and to encompass collective experience in their work, a virtue lacking in the mainstream poetry in Britain and America, allegedly indifferent to, or deprived of, historical awareness. Charles Simic opened his recent essay on Milosz with a symptomatic characterization of the state of American poetry: ‘“They wrote as if History had little to do with them” – that’s how I imagine some future study of American poetry describing the work of our poets in the waning years of the twentieth century. Like millions of their fellow citizens, they believed they could, most of the time, shut their eyes to the world, busy themselves with their lives, and not give much thought to evil.’\(^3\) It is characteristic of most Western critics who comment favourably on Eastern European poetry that they identify, as Simic does, History with evil. Consequently, in most accounts written in the West, Eastern European awareness of History (the latter hypostatized and spelt almost invariably with a capital H) is understood as the first-hand experience of evil, an assumption that leads directly from aesthetic concerns through historical and political contexts to overtly ethical criteria. The tendency to rank ethics over aesthetics was – after the experiences of the last world war – felt as a necessity by many Polish
poets; for example Tadeusz Rozewicz, who confessed: ‘I felt that something had come to an end for ever for me and for humanity. Too early I came to understand Mickiewicz’s dictum that “it is more difficult to spend a day well than to write a book . . . .” So I tried to rebuild what seemed to me most important for life and for the life of poetry: ethics.’4 Closely following this line of thought that linked poetry with history and underlined the ethical consequences of writing, Heaney, in a conversation with Rand Brandes, claimed that historical circumstances required Eastern European writers to emphasize ‘the truth-seeking dimension of poetry’.5

In England similar views were expressed in the 1960s, most famously by Alfred Alvarez in his polemical essay ‘Beyond the Gentility Principle’ where the critic claimed that contemporary English poetry found itself in a state of sterility because the horrors of the twentieth century had hardly made any impact on English society. In the preface to his anthology _The New Poetry_ (1962), Alvarez criticized contemporary English culture for its self-congratulatory insularity and blindness to the disintegrating processes of history, which, like Simic, he identified with Evil: ‘Once upon a time, the English could safely believe that Evil was something that happened on the Continent, or farther off, in the Empire, where soldiers were paid to take care of it.’6 In Alvarez’s later criticism, Eastern European poetry was singled out as bearing witness to the evils of history and offering the potential of waking British culture from its sleep. Alvarez was also instrumental in introducing European voices to Britain, which included most famously perhaps Zbigniew Herbert. In his introduction to the Penguin selection of Herbert’s poetry, Alvarez wrote:

> The best Western poets, by implication at least, are deeply committed to the politics – or antipolitics – of protest. But where they create worlds which are autonomous, internalized, complete inside their own heads, Herbert’s is continually exposed to the impersonal, external pressures of politics and history. This makes for the curious reversal of values. Poets in Western Europe and America react to the cozy, domesticated, senselessly sensible way of life in a mass democracy by asserting the precariousness of things and deliberately exploring the realm of breakdown and madness. For Herbert, on the other hand, madness and disintegration are all on the outside, the products of war and totalitarianism. (my emphasis)7

Almost a quarter of a century later, in what is his most advanced statement on the matter, the essays from _The Government of the Tongue_, Heaney
endorsed Alvarez’s views that there is a correlation between historical ordeals undergone by a given community and the quality of its culture, claiming that English experience is insular and eccentric because of ‘its history of non-defeat and non-invasion since 1066’. The way to overcome this insularity, which would mean also broadening the historical and political context of English verse, said Heaney, is to open English poetry to the voices from Eastern Europe so tragically tried by recent history:

I am reminded of Stephen Dedalus’s enigmatic declaration that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead, implying that departure from Ireland and inspection of the country from the outside was the surest way of getting to the core of Irish experience. Might we not nowadays affirm, analogously, that the shortest way to Whitby, the monastery where Caedmon sang the first Anglo-Saxon verses, is via Warsaw and Prague?

The millennial poet

It is a tribute to the poetry of Eastern Europe, and to Milosz specifically, that Heaney concludes his volume of selected prose Finders Keepers (2002) with an essay entitled ‘Secular and Millennial Milosz’. In this essay, Heaney celebrated Milosz for being representative of his times: ‘decade after decade, the story of his life and the story of his times keep in step’. Such a statement bridges the gap between national histories and individual biographies, which, in the words of Jan Kott, seem ‘as if shaped directly by history’. Thus, in Milosz’s work, Heaney finds the fulfilment of that often-postulated organic unity between what is individual and what is historical, between the personal and the public. Heaney hyperbolizes his portrayal of Milosz as ‘the secular poet’ by claiming that it is not only the twentieth century that found its reflection in Milosz’s poetry, but in fact the whole millennium: ‘chronologically, therefore, Milosz is nearly as old as the century, but culturally spans the millennium which is now ending’. In Milosz, Heaney sees all the stages of the millennial history – from dark-age folk beliefs through medieval scholasticism, renaissance neo-Platonism, the mid-millennial crisis of the Reformation, and Voltairean Enlightenment, to the late-capitalist, post-modern age. To see in Milosz’s literary career the history of the whole millennium is more than a rhetorical gesture; it is an indirect exposition of Heaney’s own understanding of the role of the poet and the functions of poetry in the modern age. In this ingenious paean, grounded on a truly metaphysical conceit in which one’s life in microscopic scale
stands for the macroscopic history of a thousand years of Christian Europe, Heaney seems to express his own proneness for a creative project that would encapsulate collective history in one’s biography without transcending the individual; in other words, the point in question is how to reconcile the role of the poet as a public, if not tribal spokesman, capable of articulating collective experience, without renouncing one’s personal, and hence artistic, sovereignty.

Apart from the postulate to see the poet’s life as exemplary of his times, Heaney's eulogy on Milosz traces a corresponding dream of merging one’s biography with one’s poetic work so as to make the two an inseparable, organic whole. This is a totalizing dream, in which public history, individual life, and one’s art merge and reflect on one another, in a seeming contrast to Eliot’s separation of the man who suffers from the mind that creates. Heaney found this inspirational unity in Dante at roughly the same time that he discovered contemporary Polish poets. Dante’s work constitutes a summa of Christian Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, a historical synthesis in which there is room for the poet’s private concerns, including his personal grievances, animosities and revenge. One could risk saying that Milosz, summing up in his life and work the entirety of his age, or indeed the whole millennium, is in a sense the modern Dante for Heaney. This totalizing, uncompromising programme for art – rooted in the feeling that if one’s life and one’s poetry do not aspire to encompass the whole of experience, they will always be insufficient – is clearly laden with a sense of deep moral responsibility. The problem is never far from Heaney’s concerns. ‘The figure of the poet as somebody on a secret errand, with ancient and vital truths in his keeping, appeals to [Milosz]’, says Heaney, and one assumes that although he speaks of Milosz here, the role of the poet thus defined, the guardian of vital truths, appeals equally strongly to Heaney himself. It would be hard to find a poet with similar – prophetic, or bardic – ambitions among contemporary British, Irish, or American poets, Yeats being possibly the last one. This bardic mode, however, though anachronistic in the West, seems effectively alive in the poetry from Poland, where poets, since Romanticism, have enjoyed the reputation of moral authorities and spiritual leaders. Even as late as 1999, the editors of the American posthumous collection of Zbigniew Herbert’s poems introduced the Polish poet as ‘a spiritual leader of the anticommunist movement in Poland’ (my emphasis). Poland, or more generally Eastern Europe, was considered a place where – as if in contradiction to Auden’s famous dictum – poetry was still making things happen, being inextricably bound with the fate of communities, and in this, as pars pro toto, with
the fate of humanity in general. This tradition of poetry that gets involved in the actual historical processes, that bears witness to those processes, and that seeks truth in the age of axiological confusion, might have been an answer to Hölderlin’s troubling question ‘Und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?’ It is a possible reply to the moral doubts about the significance of ‘the song’ in times of suffering, the doubts that Heaney has so often articulated.

It is worth pointing out here that Heaney, however obsessed he might seem with history, rarely addresses historical events that lie entirely beyond his biography – such exceptions include a few early poems, for example ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ from Door into the Dark (1969), in which Heaney invokes the massacre of the Irish Republican insurgents at Vinegar Hill, in June 1798. It is, significantly, in the poet’s private, autobiographical space, in the space of his remembered childhood, that the only echo of the Holocaust in Heaney’s poetry can be heard: in ‘A Sofa in the Forties’ from The Spirit Level (1996). In this avoidance of tackling the subjects that he himself has not experienced directly, Heaney differs from Polish poets, especially Zbigniew Herbert, whose poems often concentrate on events in history, chronologically or geographically distant, such as the Peloponnesian War (‘Why the Classics’), the history of the Longobards (‘The Longobards’), or the death of Lev Tolstoy (‘The Death of Lev’). In these historical excursions Polish poets exhibit an ambition to produce explanatory historiosophical models – an ambition that Heaney, attentive reader of Herbert and Milosz as he is, seems not to share.

**Analogies**

The extent to which Heaney’s interest in post-war Polish poetry is founded on a popular belief that there is a correspondence between the fate of Ireland and that of Eastern European nations, specifically Poland, is debatable. Both countries, Ireland and Poland, have experienced long periods of suffering, leading to the emergence of the martyrological ethos that elevated suffering to the status of an ennobling, beatifying principle. Their history has often been the history of tragic struggles against the overpowering forces of a foreign culture, struggles that have generated nationalist myths, collective (if not tribal) mentality, and the subsequent formation of public Tyrtaean models for literature. Further similarities between Poland and Ireland include also the privileged position of the Roman Catholic Church, whose history has long been identified with the nationalist cause, and the predominantly peasant
culture with its concern with place, the cult of the earth and essentially conservative outlook. Such Polish-Irish analogies, which by now have taken the form of cultural clichés, have often been invoked both by Irish and Polish commentators. Stanisław Barańczak, for example, in an introduction to his selection of Heaney’s poems, describes his first meeting with the Irish poet, referring – only partly tongue-in-cheek – to these stereotypes: the immediate understanding that the two poets reached ‘was [in part] the obligatory fondness that should be felt by representatives of the two Catholic nations, wronged by history and consuming large quantities of potatoes (and their products)’.15 In a recent speech at the Polish Embassy in Dublin,16 Heaney invokes a similar set of cultural stereotypes, which culminates in the same ‘vodka and whiskey’ analogy. He observes also that in both countries the issue of preserving cultural heritage is linked with the ideals of national independence, and especially with national solidarity grounded in loyalty towards commonly shared religious values. Poles and the Irish exhibit a similar sardonic attitude to the world of the superpowers and feel the same respect for courage and stoic survival. More interestingly, Heaney points to the ability, found both in Poland and in Ireland, to link the view from above with practicality, to combine political awareness with artistic liberty. Heaney also identifies in both cultures a unique mixture that consists of freedom from illusions, opposition to an unaccepted reality, and unrestrained infatuation with the everyday.

Heaney, of course, made use of these cultural analogies much earlier in his essays from The Government of the Tongue, when he claimed that the challenge that Eastern European poets have to face is ‘immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland’s history over the last couple of decades’.17 In this essay ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker’ and elsewhere, analogous historical experiences of Ireland and Eastern Europe provide the raison d’être for the special place that Heaney grants to the poets from the middle and eastern parts of the continent. There are, however, voices of dissent that question the adequacy of this analogy, for example Gerald Dawe:

Despite Heaney’s thoughtful and sensitive reading of eastern European poets, the question arises: is there not to be found in Italy or Spain a more apt connection with Ireland, with the cultural and moral dominance of an ultra-conservative church, a society politically divided by civil war, parochially partisan and conforming to populist images of itself? Perhaps a Pasolini or Lorca may have more
to offer by way of artistic and critical analogy than a Mandelstam or Milosz. In terms of ‘the North’, with which The Government of the Tongue begins, are not imaginative contexts more readily available closer to home, in Scotland, for example, rather than in Zbigniew Herbert’s Poland?¹⁸

Dawe may be right when purely political correspondences are taken into account, yet Heaney’s interest, despite the statements he made in the Polish Embassy, lies not in Eastern Europe as such, nor even in Eastern European literature, but more specifically – in its poetry. When, alluding to Stephen Dedalus’s phrase, he wrote that the shortest way to Whitby is via Warsaw and Prague, he replaced Tara not with London, the political centre equivalent to the position of the legendary Irish capital, but with Whitby, the birthplace of Anglo-Saxon, and by extension English poetry. The way via Warsaw and Prague does not lead us to a better understanding of political and social contexts – the destination is the poet’s place, Caedmon’s monastery. Never in his poetry has Heaney referred directly to Polish history. Never has he spoken of Ireland as, for example, ‘Western Poland’, in the way that the young Yeats did in his uncollected juvenile poem ‘How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silence’, where he found analogies between Hungary and Ireland: ‘Therefore, O nation of the bleeding breast / Libations, from the Hungary of the West’.¹⁹ Heaney was not looking for analogies that would provide him with explanatory models of the political situation in Northern Ireland. Indeed, political comparisons, accurate or not, have been offered, not by Heaney, but by other Irish writers of divergent political views, who draw analogies between Ireland and the Balkans (e.g., Hubert Butler) or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tom Paulin, too, refers to Eastern European history as a matrix of Irish experience.²⁰ But Heaney seems interested only in the literary consequences of these parallels that would bring together poets who work in a similar, bardic tradition, poets who negotiate between public duties and personal concerns, sacrificing neither one nor the other, who open their poems to public history even as they remain aware of the dangers that such an intrusion may pose to their artistic integrity.

The parabolic mode

It should also be noted here that in his readings of Polish poetry Heaney focused his attention primarily on its literary aspects, discovering, as he did in his analysis of Milosz’s ‘Incantation’, the poetic possibilities of discursive speech that is not afraid to resort to abstractions. Yet of
greater consequence was Heaney’s interest in the parabolic diction of Eastern European poets. This pandemic style of Eastern European poetry, owing much to Cavafy and spreading everywhere, from the works of Popa and Sorescu, to those of Holub and Herbert, acquired specific meaning in the cultures suffering from censorship: the parable was a convenient tool to outwit the censor. Herbert’s parabolic poems, however, had a more interesting task to perform than to talk critically about contemporary realities in post-war Poland by putting on a historical or mythological costume: they established the idea of cultural continuity with European (classical) heritage, the continuity only temporarily disrupted in the twentieth century. Heaney’s *The Haw Lantern* (1987) is a poetic tribute to the vivaciousness of the Eastern European parabolic tradition. The parabolic mode as used by Heaney avoids the trap of many poems written in this tradition: that of simply serving as a literary camouflage for a decipherable, discursive meaning. The best poems in *The Haw Lantern* remain open-ended and ambiguous, as if in search of a meaning rather than camouflaging one, and often, as in the programmatic ‘Parable Island’, undermining their own assertions. This latter poem uses parabdic diction, yet at the same time compromises it by showing that the language that replaces reality with metaphors and symbols often indicates the mentality of the defeated:

Now archaeologists begin to gloss the glosses.
To one school, the stone circles are pure symbol;
to another, assembly spots or hut foundations.

One school thinks a post-hole in an ancient floor stands first of all for a pupil in an iris.
The other thinks a post-hole is a post-hole. And so on –

like the subversives and collaborators always vying with a fierce possessiveness
For the right to set ‘the island story’ straight.21

Heaney’s ‘Parable Island’ employs and deconstructs parabdic diction in the way that Zbigniew Herbert, the leading Polish parabolic poet, never did. Possibly, the clear divisions in post-war Poland, the black and white picture of its political reality, contributed to the demise of the genre by turning it into veiled, though essentially one-dimensional moralizing:

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders is smaller yet the defence continues it will continue to the end and if the City falls but a single man escapes
he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
he will be the City[].\(^{22}\)

In Poland of the 1980s there was hardly any doubt as to what the City stood for and who were its defenders expected to carry the City within themselves on the roads of exile.

The curse of history

In Poland until recently, poems like the one quoted above, *Report from the Besieged City*, which was published underground in 1983, functioned as an ethical guide in political debates and were discussed as often by political dissidents (e.g., Adam Michnik) as by literary critics. The same is true for many poems by Czeslaw Milosz, including perhaps the most popular one from 1950:

> You who wronged a simple man
> . . .
> Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
> You kill one, but another is born.
> The words are written down, the deed, the date.\(^{23}\)

This kind of diction soon came under attack by those who could not accept the tone of moral self-righteousness on which it was necessarily founded. Also the poets themselves started regarding the concept of ‘writing under pressure’ and the function of being witnesses to History as a burden that they would gladly dispose of, a troublesome limitation, rather than an aggrandizement of their poetry. In reaction, some poets turned to the examination of language while others emphasized issues that transcend history. In the works of Milosz, for example, history is often seen as the noise of the ephemeral, transient world that stands in sharp contrast to what he called ‘the eternal moment’ of metaphysical experience. Nowhere is this impatience with being involuntarily married to history more dramatic than in Milosz’s vehement reaction to Alfred Alvarez, who categorized the Polish poet’s role as that of a witness. In an open letter to the editor of the *New York Review of Books*, Milosz wrote:

> History. Society. If a literary critic is fascinated with them, that’s his choice; if, however, he is insensitive to another dimension, he risks to curtail his right to reflect on literature. Perhaps some Western writers are longing for subjects provided by spasms of historical violent change,
but I can assure Mr. Alvarez that we, i.e. natives of hazy eastern regions, perceive History as a curse and prefer to restore to literature its autonomy, dignity and independence from social pressures. The Voice of a poet should be purer and more distinct than the noise (or confused music) of History. You may guess my uneasiness when I saw the long evolution of my poetic craft encapsulated by Mr. Alvarez in the word ‘witness’, which for him is perhaps a praise, but for me is not.24

In this deeply emotional rhetorical foray into enemy territory, Milosz, making in passing an ironic remark about inadequate notions that the West has about Eastern Europe (‘hazy eastern regions’), unambiguously calls History a curse. Interestingly, though, it would be impossible to expect a similar pronouncement from Heaney, no matter how much he also aspires to ‘another dimension’ in poetry. Milosz’s words denouncing History are surprising when one remembers that they come from a poet who, apart from being the author of an influential critical book The Witness of Poetry, comes from a traditionally Catholic culture in which history belongs to the divine plan of redemption. Heaney, who feels particularly close to ‘the rag-and-bone-shop reek of time and place’,25 seems to accept history with all its contingency as part of the eternal pattern. Moreover, Heaney’s view puts him closer to orthodox Christian historiosophy than the Manichean Milosz was in his open letter. At a risk of gross simplification, one could say that of the two philosophical standpoints, Heaney seems more predisposed to accept pantheism than to endorse the radically dualistic world-view of Manichaeism.

The last sentence of Milosz’s passage above introduces what seems to be an unbridgeable opposition between history and the purer, more distinct voice of poetry. To the Polish poet, and much to the surprise of his former Western advocates, history is a confusion that he would be willing to awake from. It is associated with the world of noise, chaos and turbulence, overshadowing the realm that Milosz calls ‘another dimension’, or as the title of one of his late collections formulates it, ‘The Other Space’ (Druga przestrzen, 2002). To Heaney, the historical world conveys a different aspect: it sounds with ‘the music of what happens’. History, even in its violent and cruel manifestations and speaking in coarse, guttural language, is redeemable and cannot disturb the eternal pattern. In his autobiographical essay ‘Omphalos’ from Preoccupations, Heaney remembers the time he spent at his family farm Mossbawn during the last world war: ‘The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great action does not disturb the rhythms
of the yard.’ To Heaney, history is not powerful enough to disturb the inner rhythms of being. To Milosz, it is a merciless, destructive mechanism, whose presence violates the divine, cosmic order.

Though Heaney does not follow Milosz in denouncing History as a curse, he seems nevertheless attracted by the possibility of opening his poetry to ‘another dimension’. This is the possibility that Heaney systematically examines: in his poetic oeuvre, the overtly mythical/political collections are succeeded by books centred on Milosz’s ‘eternal moments’, devoted to the contemplation of the metaphysical dimension. Yet even in his arguably most metaphysical collection, Seeing Things (1991), Heaney does not ignore the ‘rag-and-bone shop reek of time and place’; he does not renounce his Antaeosian heritage. The very title of the collection, though alluding to the visionary possibilities of seeing things; that is, ‘crediting marvels’ and imaging the reality beyond the material world, in its literal meaning, keeps the poet close to the horizontal dimension of the tangible world of time and space, of history and place. This unresolved tension emerges in ‘Away from It All’ from Station Island (1984), in which Heaney quotes Milosz’s words from Native Realm:

I was stretched between contemplation
of a motionless point
and the command to participate
actively in history.

The way in which the scene of the poem is described evokes timelessness rather than a historical moment, a primordial space rather than a definite place. It is an extended moment of stasis, with the eternal, formless sea in the background, involved in its eternally repetitive action of darkening, whitening and darkening. Like the repeated waves of the sea, repeated words come and go, leaving the scene unchanged and unperturbed, for they are unable to disturb the peace of the undefined place and time: ‘It was twilight, twilight, twilight.’ The scenery seems to nullify Milosz’s alternative, the two sides of which prove equally abstract and strangely out of place there. Milosz’s either/or dualism is overcome and supplanted by the twilight coexistence of seemingly opposite forces.

In the same collection one finds ‘The Master’, whose ambivalent eponymous figure, because of an allusion to ‘an unroofed tower’, was identified by Neil Corcoran as Yeats. However, as van Nieukerken observes, to say of Yeats that his writing was ‘nothing / arcane, just the old rules / we all had inscribed on our slates’ sounds overtly inaccurate. Indeed, it was not Yeats that Heaney had in mind, but – as Rand Brandes
reveals – Milosz. In later editions of the poem, which appeared in *Selected Poems* and in *Open Ground*, Heaney added two important lines at the start of the fourth stanza:

*Tell the truth. Do not be afraid.*

Durable, obstinate notions,
like quarrymen’s hammers and wedges
proofed by intransigent service.

Van Nieukerken is right when he argues that the two added lines bring to mind the ethical dimension of the poetry of Eastern European writers. The Dutch critic refers here specifically to Zbigniew Herbert and to the famous lines from Herbert’s ‘The Envoy of Mr. Cogito’:

repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly
like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand

... Be faithful Go[.]

**Reistic poetry**

As we have seen, Heaney’s notion of history is rooted in the tangible world; he almost never departs from the world that he himself experienced. If he reflects on History it is the history that manifests itself in his biography and in the material objects of the everyday world. Milosz has no hesitation in spelling the word *history* with a capital *H*, but Heaney never introduces the word into his poems; Milosz’s poetic is open to abstractions, but Heaney tries hard not to lose grasp of the tangible world, as if remembering the fate of Antaeus. History manifests itself in his personal memories, especially those of childhood, but perhaps more interestingly in Heaney’s interest in everyday objects, which constitute the firm, reliable realm opposed to the hazy, falsifying world of abstract systems and ideologies. Heaney’s poems about objects appear throughout his literary *oeuvre*, always in the context of their historical significance – as testimonies to the past, as emblems of history incarnate.

The reliability of mundane material objects is, significantly, one of the themes of Zbigniew Herbert’s poems. As Stanisław Barańczak observes, the key to Herbert’s poems about objects is history. Herbert often contrasts
the reliable material reality of the objective world with the dubious world of history, which in many of his poems becomes the arena of manipulation, the domain of confusion and mystification. At the time of the deep moral crisis that the world experienced in the twentieth century (the destruction of traditional axiological systems), simple objects, having dignity of their own, remain true to themselves, immune to the encroachments of ideologies. In one of his essays, Zbigniew Herbert declared that ‘the realm of things, the realm of nature seemed to me to offer support, a starting-point thanks to which I could create the picture of the world that would correspond with our experience. When the false prophets had gone, the things unveiled their face – innocent, unblemished by lies.’

It can be argued that Heaney’s use of the image of a stone in ‘Sandstone Keepsake’ from Station Island is not accidental, but echoes Zbigniew Herbert’s famous poem ‘The Pebble’, which Heaney discussed in one of his essays from The Government of the Tongue. In the same book, Heaney quotes another reistic poem by Herbert, ‘The Knocker’, which similarly makes use of inanimate objects as repositories of authenticity, guarantors of basic truths and distinctions, both moral and epistemological, as foundations on which morality, shattered by the cataclysms of twentieth-century history, can be rebuilt:

for others the green bell of a tree  
the blue bell of water  
I have a knocker  
from unprotected gardens  
I thump on the board  
and it prompts me  
with the moralist’s dry poem  
yes – yes  
no – no[

In Herbert’s poem, it is the reliability of objects that can help to rebuild the basic axiological order, lost in the ideological confusions of modern history, but found in Christ’s teaching: ‘But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil’ (Matthew 5: 37). It can be claimed that Heaney is also prone to assert that there is moral significance in the world of mundane objects, for which, as Steven Matthews observes, the poet shows reverence, ‘as potentially a redemptive and absolving quality’.
Michael Parker and other critics have observed the thematic kinship of Heaney’s poem and Herbert’s ‘Pebble’. Yet despite Parker’s claims, Herbert’s poems about objects, unlike Heaney’s, treat objects primarily as concepts and use them as arguments in the poet’s philosophical debate on the relationship between the real and the illusory, between the abstract and the concrete. They stand for philosophical and political issues, rather than for actual physical entities that can be weighed and measured. Herbert equips them with symbolic features, abstract meanings (self-reliance, independence, authenticity) and ignores their physical qualities, such as size, weight, colour, texture, and shape. If Heaney says about his stone that it is ‘chalky russet’, ‘solidified’, ‘sedimentary’, ‘dense and bricky’, Herbert, on the contrary, writes that his pebble is

- equal to itself
- mindful of its limits
- filled exactly
- with a pebbly meaning.

It soon becomes obvious that Herbert’s description is in fact an indirect, negative characterization of human beings: unlike stones, man tries to go beyond his limits; never satisfied with his own self, man longs to be somebody else. Heaney’s description does not lend itself to such an interpretation, because it concentrates on the actual tangible object. Heaney’s eyes move on the surface of the object, perceive its qualities and, initially, resist turning it into a symbol. In the case of ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, it is the word ‘reliably’ that opens the way to the symbolic, Herbertian allegorical reading, but only after the object has been given its concreteness and substantiality in the detailed description of the first few lines:

- It is a kind of chalky russet
- Solidified gourd, sedimentary
- And so reliably dense and bricky
- I often clasp it and throw it from hand to hand.

The transformation of the concrete into the allegorical starts in the second stanza: the perceiving eye, to use Wordsworth’s formula, does not only see, but also creates (‘Therefore am I still / A lover . . . of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, – both what they half create, / And what perceive’). The stone is said to show ‘a hint of contusion’, a remark that
sparks off associations with violence and mutilation. Its associational potential is further actualized when the speaker observes that the stone changes if put into water. To him this also means discovering the possible metamorphoses that the stone may undergo.

In a series of transformations, Heaney's object becomes an emblem of history: the keepsake is a sedimentary stone, which consists of various layers of the past. Significantly, the word ‘sedimentary’ can be used in the analyses of Heaney's other poems on history; in both his ‘archaeological’ or ‘etymological’ poems, the past is usually presented as multiple layers of the soil, or of the word's older meanings. Just as sedimentary rock is composed, ‘of particles which fall by gravitation to the bottom of a liquid’ (OED), so do history, language and identity in Heaney's poetry gravitate downwards to the earth and settle at the bottom of time. Generally speaking, in Heaney's poems historical processes seem to be directed downwards and earthwards (as if belonging to the world of Antaeus rather than Hercules), with history understood as the continuous process of the unsettled matter settling down. History is in fact synonymous with sedimentation. A sedimentary stone contains the past, like words that contain their older etymological meanings, like the bog that contains the material remnants of the cultures that have disappeared. It is here that Heaney departs from Herbert and some of his Polish colleagues, who treat history as a hypostasis, an abstract sovereign element, an instrument of fate. Heaney reads and interprets Eastern Europeans, but never imitates them, using their work to his own individual ends. On his way to Tara, or indeed to Caedmon’s monastery, the zero-point of English-language poetry, he travels via Warsaw, but does not terminate his journey there.

Notes

16 Heaney was awarded the Polish Order of Merit for his contributions to Polish culture. The Polish translation of the speech was published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Cracow, 16 March 2003.


34 *Reism* is the term used by Polish critics to denote the poetry of everyday objects in the works of such Polish poets as Miron Białoszewski, Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska (see A. Brodzka, et al., *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992)).


38 Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p. 108.


40 Heaney, ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, *Station Island*, p. 20.
The Cure at Troy is subtitled ‘A version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes’. What kind of version? Is it, like the translation of Aeschylus’s Agamemnon known to Terence Rattigan’s audiences as The Browning Version,¹ severely literal? Or is it more like Pope’s Iliad, on which Richard Bentley rightly commented, ‘it is a pretty poem, Mr Pope; but you must not call it Homer’?² Whereabouts on the scale between these two extreme types of ‘version’ does Heaney’s work belong?

It begins with a 32-line ‘prologue’. This word (prologos in Greek) is a technical term in the structure of Greek tragedy for ‘the part preceding the entrance of the chorus, a monologue or dialogue which sets out the subject of the drama and the situation from which it starts’.³ In the Philoctetes the prologue is the opening dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemus (lines 1–134). But Heaney seems to use the term in a generalized modern sense to mean a preface or introduction. His ‘prologue’, instead of preceding the entrance of the chorus, is actually spoken by his chorus; and instead of setting out the initial dramatic situation, makes general comments on the whole action. It corresponds with nothing in the Greek text, nor can its comments be plausibly attributed to Sophocles: ‘Victims. . . . // People so deep into / Their own self-pity, self-pity buoys them up. // . . . admiring themselves / For their own long-suffering. / Licking their wounds / And flashing them around like decorations.’⁴ The picture of Philoctetes as a kind of masochist reminds one of Louis Auchincloss’s collection of short stories, The Injustice Collectors (1951), a title explained by the author as borrowed from Dr Edmund Bergler:

It is a term which he uses to describe neurotics who continually and unconsciously construct situations in which they are disappointed or
mistreated. This broad definition is followed by a more detailed description of the psychological process involved, in which he points out . . . that these persons are seeking unconscious masochistic pleasure. I do not . . . use the term in Dr Bergler’s exact medical sense, but in a wider sense to describe people who are looking for injustice, even in a friendly world, because they suffer from a hidden need to feel that this world has wronged them.\(^5\)

But Sophocles never suggests that Philoctetes is a willing ‘victim’ in this sense; and the idea that a tragic hero enjoys his own suffering would make nonsense of such other Sophoclean tragedies as the *Trachiniae* or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Nor would the idea have probably made much sense to any ancient Greek. Though Menander’s comedy, the *Heauton timorumenos*, is commonly known as ‘The Self-Tormentor’, the Greek title actually means ‘The Self-Punisher’; for the hero ‘imposes hardships on himself in penitence’ for his harsh treatment of his son.\(^6\)

The interpolated ‘prologue’ makes considerable use of a local volcano, apparently for several different purposes: to anticipate the speech of ‘Hercules’ (Heaney uses the Latin form of Sophocles’s Greek Heracles) at the end of the play; to recall how Philoctetes was originally given his bow by Hercules (as a reward for burning him alive when suffering intolerable pain); to suggest a metaphor for the eruption of blood from Philoctetes’s septic wound; and to supply some interesting stage-effects:

The voice of Hercules
That Philoctetes is going to have to hear
When the stone cracks open and the lava flows.
But we’ll come to that.

For now, remember this:
Every time the crater on Lemnos Island
Starts to erupt, what Philoctetes sees
Is a blaze he started years and years ago
Under Hercules’s funeral pyre.

The god’s mind lights up his mind every time.
*Volcanic effects. Lurid flame-trembles, commotions and eruptions.*\(^7\)

The Sophoclean basis for this elaborate symbolic superstructure is a bit wobbly, for ‘the crater on Lemnos Island’ never appears in the text. There is indeed a reference to ‘Lemnian fire’ when Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus to kill him: ‘seize me and burn me with this Lemnian fire’.\(^8\)
But as R. C. Jebb pointed out, ‘No volcanic crater can now be traced in Lemnos’, and the phrase ‘Lemnian fire’, though certainly associated with Hephaestus, the god of fire, who landed on Lemnos when thrown by Zeus from Olympus in Homer’s *Iliad* (i, 593), was ‘proverbial’ for ‘a fierce fire’. Moreover, ‘recent studies suggest that Lemnos’ fumarole fields with their smoke, vapours and burnt earth, rather than actual volcanic cones and eruptions, have characterized the island’s geology during human history’. Nor does Philoctetes’s later apostrophe – ‘O Lemnian land and all-powerful flash/flame made by Hephaestus’ – do much to establish any cones or craters. But the modern demand for more sensational language than Sophocles chose to use has made a crater indispensable. Hence Edmund Wilson’s paraphrase: ‘A second spasm, worse than the first, reduces him to imploring the boy to throw him into the crater of the Lemnian volcano.’ E. F. Watling followed suit: ‘take me and throw me into the flames / Of the fire that lights up Lemnos’; and Heaney fills in the details: ‘Could you not / Carry me up to the crater of Lemnos / And burn me right? // . . . Throw me into the fire . . . ’.

As already mentioned, the ‘prologue’ is spoken by the ‘chorus’, which in Sophocles, as in other fifth-century tragedy, was 15 strong. But here in the *Cure* it dwindles to three. The Greek tragic chorus ‘always performed in character as a group of people involved in the action’. Thus the Chorus of the *Philoctetes* are sailors from Neoptolemus’s ship and are under his command. When, for instance, Philoctetes makes his final appeal for the return of his bow, they turn to their captain for instructions: ‘What are we to do? It is now in your power, chief, both for us to sail and to agree to this man’s words’ – that is, it’s up to you to decide which we do (lines 963–4). Heaney’s ‘chorus’ shows no such naval discipline. It consists of three mysterious women, first ‘discovered, boulder-still, wrapped in shawls’. They have then no apparent connection with the action, and when Neoptolemus, undecided, asks, ‘Well, friends, where are we now?’, (in place of Sophocles’s ‘What are we to do, men?’), one wonders what relationship he can possibly have with these shawled friends of his, and what they are doing there. It turns out later that they have only too much to do – for they are actually sailors in drag, and between the three of them have to supply the motive power of the whole ship. ‘We’re back to the rowing benches and the rowing’, they tell Philoctetes.

They are, in fact, seriously overworked, in glaring contravention of normal trade-union demarcation rules. Not only do they have to speak the 32 extra lines of the ‘prologue’, and 13 extra lines at the end of the play (which have no connection with Sophocles except for a brief
reference to sea-nymphs); but they also have to deputize for the *deus ex machina*. In Sophocles’s play the impasse created by the absolute necessity to get Philoctetes to Troy and his absolute refusal to go there is resolved by the sudden appearance of Heracles above the irreconcilable human conflict. As son of Zeus, he reveals his father’s will for Philoctetes: he is to go to Troy, where he will first be cured of his wound, and then, with Heracles’s bow, kill Paris and sack the city. In the Athenian theatre Heracles would have either been hoisted into the air on some sort of crane, or have climbed up a hidden staircase on to the roof of the building at the back of the circular dancing-floor. In Heaney’s version, this highly characteristic device of Greek tragedy is jettisoned, and the speech is spoken by the chorus ‘*(ritually clamant, as HERCULES)*’.23

Perhaps the most difficult problem involved in any attempt to turn ancient Greek verse into English verse is the fundamental difference between the two types of prosody: the former based on quantity (long and short syllables), the latter on stress. The most that can be attempted is to give an impression of something vaguely analogous to the original. Thus English blank verse is not too remotely comparable with the iambic trimeter used for dialogue in ancient Greek drama; and indeed, except for the fact that Heaney’s typically twentieth-century blank verse allows every kind of local variation, whereas Sophocles’s is far more strictly regular, the dialogue of the *Cure* comes reasonably close to an English reader’s vague impression of the original versification. The real problem arises with the lyric passages, most of which were originally sung by the chorus. These were written in a variety of different metres at different points in the play, sometimes complicated by an elaborate system of strophe and antistrophe, where every syllable in the strophe (a metrical pattern of lines comparable to an English stanza) has to correspond with a syllable in the antistrophe. At such points no verse-translator can be expected to give even the vaguest impression of the original verse. Not even Browning, in his almost too painstaking attempt at an English facsimile of the *Agamemnon*, made any effort to suggest Aeschylus’s complex lyric versification. He was content to use irregular English stanzas, distinguished from the dialogue by sporadic rhymes. Heaney takes the same line of least resistance, with equally sporadic rhyme or assonance, for example, when starting this choral strophe:

It’s a pity of him too
Afflicted like that,
Him and that terrible foot.
And not a one to talk to.
Like the last man left alive.
How does the being survive?²⁴

Here the Greek original means literally: ‘I pity him that, with no one of mortals caring, nor having any reared-with-him eye/face, wretched, always alone, he is sick with a savage sickness, and wanders-in-mind at every something of need that arises. However, how, ill-fated, does he hold out against it?’²⁵ The violent contrast between Heaney’s and Sophocles’s language here, the one simple and cosily colloquial, the other stiff in wording and sentence-construction, with its oblique references to family life and to panic at small emergencies, is typical of Heaney’s general policy. So is the interpolation of the sensational simile: ‘like the last man left alive’. And the differences between Sophocles’s original and Heaney’s version in this short passage invite us to turn from versification to the much larger questions of style and diction.

Greek tragedy was performed as part of a religious festival, by actors wearing masks, rich formal costumes and high boots; and tragic diction tended to be equally stiff and formal. Though Sophocles’s tragic diction was rather more straightforward than the Aeschylean style delightfully parodied in A. E. Housman’s ‘Fragment of a Greek Tragedy’ (‘O suitably-attired-in-leather-boots Head of a traveller’),²⁶ he never wrote in the easy, slangy style that Heaney habitually adopts.

Let us now compare in more detail the texts of the two plays. The Philoctetes begins, like many other tragedies, with a formal announcement of the scene: ‘This is the shore of the flowed-around land of Lemnos, untrodden of mortals, nor inhabited.’²⁷ Here it is in the Cure:

Yes.
This is the place.
This strand.
This is Lemnos all right.
Not a creature!²⁸

Heaney’s Odysseus then continues: ‘And here we are then, Neoptolemus, / You and me, / Greeks with a job to do –’. The last remark may well remind older readers of a broadcast by an English general around 1944: ‘Well, here we are, doing our job – killing Germans.’ Yet there is nothing remotely like it in the Greek text; and what follows (‘But neither of us nearly half the man / Your father was. / Achilles had
nobility. / Achilles stood / Head and shoulders above everybody.’) is an expansion of two Sophoclean words that mean simply ‘strongest/best of the Greeks’.29 The expanded version also expresses a modesty quite out of character for Odysseus.

While instructing Neoptolemus how to steal Philoctetes’s bow, Sophocles’s Odysseus calls it ‘invincible’. Heaney changes the adjective to ‘actually miraculous’,30 presumably because we no longer believe in the supernatural, unless we are Catholics and accept, however cautiously, the theoretical possibility of miracles. But Sophocles, of course, had no such difficulty. The same updated Odysseus argues amusingly for a mathematical sense of proportion in morality: ‘All right, you’ll be ashamed / but that won’t last. / And once you’re over it, / you’ll have the whole rest of your life / To be good and true and incorruptible.’ The original Odysseus, however, was considerably less cynical: ‘give yourself to me for a short part of a day to do something shameless, and then for the rest of your time you’ll be called the most pious of mortals’.31 The replacement of ‘be called’ by ‘be’ essentially falsifies the ancient Greek attitude, with its special emphasis on reputation. The English Neoptolemus now protests against his orders: ‘It goes against / All I was ever brought up to believe / It’s really low behaviour.’ His Greek counterpart, less at the mercy of clichés, has time to make a more important point: ‘For neither I myself, nor, as they say, my father, was born [i.e., naturally inclined] to do anything by an evil trick.’32 The expurgated reference to his father was a much more appropriate answer to Odysseus’s praise of Achilles’s ‘nobility’. Heaney’s Neoptolemus then continues: ‘Why could we not / Go at him, man to man? If he’s so badly lamed / He’d never be a match for two of us.’ In Sophocles: ‘But I’m ready to take the man by force, and not by tricks, for with one foot he won’t get the better of so many of us.’33 The emendation of ‘so many’ to ‘two’ was presumably caused by the reduction of the chorus from 15 sailors to three women in shawls. Hence too perhaps the paraphrasing of ‘with one foot’ as ‘so badly lamed’. The interpolation that follows has a pleasant ring of Gilbert and Sullivan, but hardly of Greek tragedy: ‘We’re Greeks, so, all right, we do our duty.’34

The first lyric sung by the Sophoclean chorus is awkward for the modern poet. As sailors, they call Neoptolemus ‘master’, and then, in view of his youth, more affectionately, ‘child’. Knowing how Philoctetes has been treated, they ask how they are supposed to handle him. Obviously he will be ‘suspicious’, so what are they ‘to conceal from him or say to him?’ ‘How must we help you?’ The divine right of kings, they point out, gives him supreme knowledge and wisdom. Heaney’s mini-chorus are naturally even more baffled. Opting for the more motherly of the
two Sophoclean forms of address, but otherwise taking hints less from Sophocles than from a wish to rhyme, from their seaside environment, and from a dim memory of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, they come up with this:

What are the likes of us to do?  
We’re here and we’re supposed to help you,  
But we’re in a maze.  
We’re strangers and this place is strange.  
We’re on shifting sand. It is all sea-change.  
Clear one minute. Next minute, haze.  
But you are blessed with special insight,  
So tell us, son.  
Give us our instructions.  

Told by Neoptolemus in the original to see where Philoctetes lives, and watch out for the return of the ‘terrible wayfarer’ (apparently a reference to the terrible way he walks), the sailor-chorus very reasonably ask for more information about his habitat and present whereabouts: the woman-chorus, while still intent on rhyme, seem rather more concerned for their own safety: ‘But what about this wild man on the loose? / Is his head away? Is he dangerous? / Does he live in a den or a house?’

Sympathizing with Philoctetes’s sufferings, Sophocles’s chorus describe him as living ‘isolated from other men, with spotted or shaggy beasts’, that is, with deer or wild goats; Heaney’s chorus go much further, and picture him becoming bestial himself: ‘Behaving like a savage, / Nothing but squeals and laments, / Nothing left but his instincts, / Howling wild like a wolf.’ This interpolation is balanced by the expurgation of a less trite but less trendy image: ‘and babbling Echo is poured out from far away to accompany his bitter lamentation’. In Philoctetes’s first conversation with Neoptolemus images continue to be inserted, excluded or changed. Philoctetes complains that the men who wickedly marooned him are now ‘laughing’ but that his disease ‘has always flourished and made progress’. That piece of bitter sarcasm is replaced by a routine piece of slang and a notably ill-chosen simile: ‘The real offenders have got away with it, / And I’m still here, rotting like a leper.’ He then sums up with an expression that jumps out of the page as one that Sophocles could never have used: ‘My whole life has been / Just one long cruel parody’. Indeed there is nothing in Sophocles’s text at this point to suggest any retrospect of his whole life at all. He has just remarked, rather stoically, that fire and a roof to live under have given him all he needs ‘except not being diseased’.
explain the remote character of the island. The self-pity of the interpola- tion is a distortion of Philoctetes's character as Sophocles presents it.

While cheating Philoctetes with the untrue story of how the Greeks had refused to give him his father's famous arms, the original Neoptolemus told him: ‘Bursting into tears, I leapt up in heavy wrath and, deeply pained, I said . . .’. In order, perhaps, to expurgate the unmanly tears, or to conceal them under the ambiguous English word ‘cried’, the modern Neoptolemus prefers to say: ‘And that put me wild. / I raved and cried.’ And when Odysseus claims to have a better right to the arms than he has: ‘that put me wilder still. I had a fit.’ Not, presumably, an epileptic one, for Sophocles's word is simply ‘enraged’.

Here some curious things have happened to that famous Homeric survivor, Nestor of Pylos. Mentioned by Sophocles as ‘the Pylian’, he becomes, by a misprint, or maybe to supply a metrically desirable extra syllable, ‘Nestor of Pylius’ And whereas in Sophocles he is simply ‘doing badly’ because of the death of his son, in Heaney his son’s death has rather mysteriously ‘weakened Nestor’s own position’. Odysseus suffers a more spectacular metamorphosis, when Sophocles’s ‘That man’s a clever wrestler [i.e., trickster], but clever plans are often thwarted’ turns into ‘Odysseus can outfox most opposition. / But long runs the fox that isn’t caught at last.’ At this point Heaney’s Philoctetes appears to slap his forehead in surprise at his own failing memory: ‘Gods! I forgot! Patroclus. Where was Patroclus / When you needed him? Where was your father’s friend?’ But the real Philoctetes had not actually forgotten anything, nor were his ‘gods’ in the vocative. What he actually said was: ‘for gods’ sake’ – that is, to add urgency to the question, either because he was beginning to fear that all the good men he remembered were already dead, or because he was carefully checking the plausibility of Neoptolemus’s story.

Meanwhile that rather inexperienced young liar goes on to criticize the injustice of the gods: ‘Where the worse man has more power than the good one . . . and good things die away . . .’. So in Sophocles. In Heaney the dull statement is surprisingly enlivened by semi-animal imagery: ‘Once sharks and tramps start being in charge’. Some more dull words of ancient morality are smartened up in Philoctetes's solemn appeal to Neoptolemus to take him home, despite the inconvenience of having such an awkward passenger on his ship: ‘Put up with it all the same. To noble people base behaviour is hateful, a good deed is glorious.’ This becomes: ‘Make yourself go through with it. / Generous people should follow their instincts.’ Doubtless true, but the notion of following one's instincts, so dear to modern ethics, would hardly have appealed to
any ancient Greek. No such objection can be made to the resourceful rendering of the homespun wisdom with which Philoctetes ends this speech:

Life is shaky. Never, son, forget
How risky and slippy things are in this world.
Walk easy when the jug’s full, and don’t ever
Take your luck for granted. Count your blessings
And always be ready to pity other people.

That is indeed a pleasant paraphrase of Sophocles’s content here: ‘Save me, pity me, seeing how all things are full of fear for mortals, and full of risk of doing well and doing the other way. And while he is out of miseries, that is the time when he should look most to his life, for fear it is ruined before he realizes.’ There seems here no essential difference between the two philosophies. But between the two types of literary expression?

The conscientious conversion of what a previous Professor of Poetry at Oxford called ‘the grand style’ into the least attractive forms of modern slang continues in the following chorus: ‘You have it in for [Sophocles: “hate”] the sons of Atreus.’ Neoptolemus responds in similar terms to the Chorus’s plea for kindness to Philoctetes: ‘Take care that you aren’t going to change your tune / When he’s stinking up the boat, and your stomach’s turning’ (Sophocles: ‘when you are sated with the company of his disease’). Was Sophocles’s Philoctetes quite so smelly, one wonders? Yes indeed he was, but not at this point in the action of the play. It is only 300 lines later that he mentions among his drawbacks as a fellow-passenger his ‘shouting and stinking’, which Heaney reproduces with the fine alliteration, ‘reeks and roars’. Later again, when the original Philoctetes returns to the subject of his ‘bad smell’, Heaney’s version is surprisingly deodorant: ‘You’ll be sickened of me soon enough / Once we’re on board’. So much for Sophocles’s contribution to Philoctetes’s ‘stink’. What about the almost metaphysical conceit applied by Heaney’s Philoctetes to Odysseus? ‘I’d sooner meet the snake that poisoned me. / I’d sooner its forked tongue any day than his. / He has the neck for anything.’ Here, too, Sophocles was at least partly responsible, for he did indeed link the snake with Odysseus: ‘I’d sooner listen to that most hostile-to-me snake, that made me thus footless; but that man would say and dare everything.’ But Sophocles can certainly not be blamed for the weird anatomical switch from tongue to neck; nor for Neoptolemus’s later surprising transformation into a ‘Hard little two-faced crab’.
When Sophocles's Philoctetes first allows Neoptolemus to touch his bow, he explains that it was by a good deed (to Heracles) that he himself acquired it. Then Neoptolemus (according to the emended attribution of the speech now generally agreed by editors), responds with the litotes: 'I am not sorry to have seen you and got you as a friend; for whoever, when kindly treated, knows how to do a kindness in return, is a friend worth more than any possession.' Here Heaney's version seems to go off at a puzzling tangent: 'There's a whole economy of kindness / Possible in the world; befriend a friend / And the chance of it's increased and multiplied.'\(^55\) The word 'economy' sounds admirably up to date, but what do the lines actually mean? The next chorus starts in Sophocles with an allusion to Ixion's being bound on a wheel in Hades for trying to seduce Zeus's wife: 'I have heard in word/story, but not indeed seen, how the almighty son of Cronus . . .'. The chorus-leader's insistence that he has been unable to check the truth of this report is admittedly rather absurd in the original. But it is made no less so by altering the first-person singular to the second ('You've heard'), and making the punishment a life-sentence ('Zeus punished him for life' [to rhyme with 'wife'], when Hades is by definition the place of the \textit{dead}; or by adding the almost burlesque statement: 'And bent him like a hoop', possibly because in the Greek text Ixion was bound 'on the running rim of a wheel'.\(^56\)

From this point on it becomes increasingly difficult to detect which part of Sophocles's text lies behind Heaney's version; but for a while that still remains possible. When, for instance, Heaney's Philoctetes is beginning to realize that Neoptolemus has tricked him, he asks: 'Have you changed your mind? Can you not face the thing? / Does having to ship with me disgust you that much?' Neoptolemus replies: 'It's more like self-disgust. No. One false move, / One move that's not your own, and everything goes to the bad.' Here one can still recognize traces of Sophocles: 'Disgust with the disease has not persuaded you not to take me as a sailing-companion any more?' 'Everything is disgust when, leaving one's own nature, one does things that are not fitting.'\(^57\)

But when Philoctetes exclaims: 'Burnt bones! Sears and blisters! There was more left / Of Hercules on the pyre than's left of me. / The salamanders have me. I'm scorched to nothing', one can only hazard a guess that the corresponding Greek passage went like this: 'Oh you fire and total horror and most hateful contrivance of terrible villainy, what have you done to me! How you have deceived me!'\(^58\) The distance between the two texts now rapidly increases until, when Odysseus has ordered his men to seize Philoctetes's arms, Philoctetes comes out with a prose tirade against Odysseus. It contains very few traces of the corresponding verse-speech
in the Greek play, and two extracts from it may be enough to suggest its general character:

So why, why are you tearing me up out of the grave? Has the bad smell left me? Will you not start vomiting all over the altar now again? Will I not make you get sick into the holy vessels this time? . . . Your eye’s so jaundiced, you can’t see the balance shifting and weighing down against you – but I see it and my heart is singing. I’d give the whole agony of my life just to see you cut down in the end, and your tongue ripped out of you like a bleeding ox-tongue.59

From this point until the end of the play, the Cure follows Sophocles at a discreet distance (rather as Bill Sikes’s dog follows his master in Oliver Twist), faithful to the general movement of his poet’s plot, but making no attempt whatever to reproduce his dialogue, or even his spirit. Thus where Sophocles’s hero simply wishes to see Odysseus experiencing his own miseries,60 Heaney’s comes out with this charming fantasy:

Some animals in a trap
Eat their own legs off
In order to escape.
I’d like to see him caught
And so stuck and smashed up
He couldn’t do even that.61

Then, after a final speech from Philoctetes in prose, presumably to suggest his psychological state (‘knocked out, flattened’), the interpolated final chorus positively surprises us by a momentary echo of Sophocles’s closing lines: ‘Let us all go together, after praying the sea-nymphs to come as saviours of our home-coming’: ‘The sea-nymphs in the spray / Will be the chorus now’.62

So the answer to the question posed in my first paragraph can only echo Bentley on Pope’s Iliad: a splendid verse-play, Professor Heaney, but you must not call it a version of Sophocles’s Philoctetes. Yet Pope, despite his obvious departures from Homer’s style and spirit, did at least usually make serious efforts to follow his poet’s text, and showed signs of genuine respect for it. No comparable feeling can be inferred from The Cure at Troy, for which Sophocles’s tragedy seems to have served mainly as a kind of literary knacker’s yard, a handy source of raw material for a modern Muse. No doubt Shakespeare was equally ruthless in his use of
literary sources – but at least he did not subtitle his *Comedy of Errors* ‘a version of Plautus’s *Menæchmi*’.

Heaney’s *Cure at Troy* is a most distinguished example of a current trend in the exploitation of classical literature. Here I do not simply mean the tendency to compose original works like, say, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, that are clearly adapted from classical ones. Such works merely carry on an ancient tradition exemplified by Virgil’s use of Homer in the *Aeneid*, or Milton’s use of both those poems in *Paradise Lost*. Nor do I mean the utmost freedom in translating classical works, when the underlying purpose is evidently to make those works more accessible to modern readers, or to bring out new meanings that can legitimately be found in them. How far such freedoms are acceptable in particular cases must always remain a matter of dispute. But any such translation can be defended by a genuine intention to keep ancient masterpieces available for the understanding and appreciation of a modern public; and this type of ‘version’ (once a synonym for ‘translation’) has a long and respectable history too, with Chapman’s Homer as an early representative. The relevant question here is whether the translator’s mind is primarily focused on the original classical work, or on something quite different.

That is why Matthew Arnold can be forgiven for some strange aberrations in his theory and practice of translation. When, for instance, translating a famous passage of the *Iliad*, where the Trojan horses stand by their chariots, ‘waiting for the dawn’, Arnold remarks without a blush: ‘I prefer to attribute this expectation of Morning to the master and not to the horse’. And he is even cheerfully prepared to expurgate one of the most characteristic features of Homer’s style, the formulaic compound epithet: in one case for the somewhat inadequate reason that Francis Newman’s quite accurate translation of *tanupeple*, ‘trailing-robed’, ‘brings to one’s mind long petticoats sweeping a dirty pavement’. But at least Arnold is here intent on reproducing ‘Homer’s general effect’, even at the cost of not being ‘verbally faithful’ to his text.

By contrast, a recent collection of articles, *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, confirms the existence of numerous ‘versions’ that use Greek tragedies primarily for purposes of political expression. In other words, these versions are quite unconcerned either with ‘verbal faithfulness’ to their originals, or even to their ‘general effect’. Greek tragedies are approached, not as historical masterpieces in their own right, but as means to the end of Irish protest. This seems to be the sub-genre to which the *Cure* naturally belongs, though Heaney himself specifically resists that classification: ‘In other words, while there are parallels, and
wonderfully suggestive ones, between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland, the play does not exist in order to exploit them. The parallels are richly incidental rather than essential to the version. Despite this disclaimer, The Cure gives no indication of any particular interest in the play that Sophocles wrote, or of the slightest respect for it. Nor is Arnold’s defence of aiming to reproduce the ‘general effect’ of his original available to his successor in the Oxford Chair of Poetry, who shows no obvious wish to be even generally faithful to Sophocles.

Does this matter? Poor Sophocles is in no position to sue for infringement of copyright or defamation of character; and for many decades now it has been tacitly accepted by publishers, theatrical producers, radio, television, and film dramatizers, and nearly all reviewers that famous dead writers are fair game for every kind of misrepresentation. What difference can it make to them now? None whatever. But may it not make some small difference to present and future generations of readers? Total ignorance of Greek is now the norm, but might not the general public be given a little more protection against the effects of that ignorance? We are increasingly protected by trade description laws against such things as genetically modified ingredients in what we eat and drink. But how about what we read? It would be a sad thing for anyone to go through life supposing that in reading the Cure he has virtually read the Philoctetes. Still more so if, unaware of the modifications silently introduced, he should contemplate using the Cure as the basis for writing and publishing his own ‘new version’ of the Philoctetes. Surprisingly enough, that hypothesis is not pure fantasy, for writers of new versions are no longer expected to work from the original. It is now thought perfectly in order for them to work from previous translations, improving them in point of poetry, drama or idiom to suit current taste. In the course of a few literary generations one can picture this licence generating a very strange vista of ‘versions’, each based on its predecessor, and stretching further and further away from the text and character of every famous ancient work. It is surely high time we agreed on some minimum standards of authenticity for any so-called version of a classical work before, in Arnold’s phrase, ‘we are all in the dark’ – not the dark that Arnold then feared, ‘the drab of the earnest, prosaic, practical, austerely literal future’ but a new type of dark age in which literal, or even faithful, translation becomes almost a term of contempt, and no work of classical literature is ever read, seen or respected as it is in itself, but only as rewritten by later poets exclusively preoccupied with the subject-matter and poetic diction of their own impoverished times.
Notes


14 Heaney, *The Cure*, p. 43.


18 *Philoctetes*, line 974.


20 Heaney, *The Cure*, p. 81; *Philoctetes*, line 1470.

21 *Philoctetes*, lines 1409–44.


25 Philoctetes, lines 169–76.


27 *Philoctetes*, lines 1–2.

28 Heaney, *The Cure*, p. 3.


34 Heaney, *The Cure*, p. 8; *Philoctetes*, lines 88–94.


37 Philoctetes, lines 183–5, Sophocles: Philoctetes, ed. Webster, p. 83.
38 Heaney, The Cure, p. 13; Philoctetes, lines 188–90.
39 Philoctetes, lines 256–9; Heaney, The Cure, p. 17.
40 Heaney, The Cure, p. 18; Philoctetes, lines 298–9.
47 Heaney, The Cure, p. 27; Philoctetes, lines 501–6.
49 Heaney, The Cure, p. 28; Philoctetes, line 510.
50 Heaney, The Cure, p. 28; Philoctetes, line 520.
51 Heaney, The Cure, p. 47; Philoctetes, line 876.
52 Heaney, The Cure, p. 48; Philoctetes, lines 890–1.
53 Heaney, The Cure, p. 34; Philoctetes, lines 631–3.
54 Heaney, The Cure, p. 51; Philoctetes, line 935.
56 Philoctetes, lines 676–9; Heaney, The Cure, p. 37.
57 Heaney, The Cure, p. 49; Philoctetes, lines 900–3.
58 Heaney, The Cure, p. 51; Philoctetes, lines 927–9.
60 Philoctetes, lines 1113–15.
63 Iliad, viii, 565; Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, I: p.160.
64 Iliad, xviii, 385; Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, I: p. 158.
In the introduction to his 1999 translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney recalls experiencing a thrill of recognition when he encountered, in the glossary to his student edition of the Old English poem, the verb *polian* ‘suffer’, familiar to him as ‘the word that older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up’. Its appearance on the first page of his translated text – ‘he knew what they had tholed’ (line 15) – amounts to an assertion of cultural identity, the more emphatic since it is substituted for another, synonymous, dialect survival. ‘Tholed’ translates *drugon*, past tense of *dreogan*, which might have rung an etymological bell in the ear of a Scot who knew how to ‘dree his weird’. Iconic examples of the Scots-derived Irish dialect of Heaney’s childhood stud his translation, often similarly disengaged from any specific Old English parallel. Of others mentioned in Heaney’s Introduction, ‘hoked’ for ‘rooted about’ (of a raven, line 3026) has no Germanic parallel; ‘graith’ is paralleled in Old Norse and Middle English, but not Old English. Heaney improvises a compound, ‘war-graith’, for the poet’s coinage, *grygeatwe* ‘terrible armour’ (l. 324). The Celtic ‘bawn’ is used of Hrothgar’s and Hygelac’s halls ‘for reasons of historical suggestiveness’, appropriately enough since standard English offers few options for a structure that is both a fortress and a home (castle?). It has personal resonance too, recalling ‘Mossbawn’, the family farm in County Derry where Heaney grew up, often symbolizing rootedness in his poetry. Appropriate in a different way is the use of ‘brehon’ – ‘an ancient Irish judge’, according to the *OED* – for the sinister courtier Unferð (line 1456), since it translates the even more opaque Old English *pyle*.

Personal association also informs the rendering of the conventional Old English opening *Hwæt!* – a semantically empty clearing of the throat – with a magisterial ‘So’. This reminds Heaney of the slow dignified
utterance of his Ulster relatives, the ‘big-voiced scullions’, in whose idiom “so” operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention’. He had characterized them in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ (Field Work, 1979), calling on Old English poetic techniques:

Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground.5

The accretion of agent nouns without syntactical connection and the alliteration of ‘haycocks and hindquarters’ prefigure the association Heaney makes between rustic dignity and what he calls the ‘foresquareness’ of the language of Beowulf.

Heaney’s invocation of family values, like his recourse to dialect, signals his claim to ‘consider Beowulf to be part of my voice-right’.6 This personalization distinguishes the modern poet, for whom the individual voice is paramount, from the Anglo-Saxon, who worked not only anonymously but with an idiom that was the reverse of personal, a generalized poetic vocabulary that achieved suggestiveness by mining its own internal resources, stretching the semantics of existing words or combining them into new compounds. There is a fruitful shock in the poem’s use of the word aglæca, usually meaning ‘wretch, monster’, for the hero himself as well as for Grendel and the dragon, comparable to but different in kind from the shock Heaney devises in combining the earthy and the non-standard with the formal, often the Frenchified: ‘treacherous keshes’ (line 1359); ‘a ring giver of rare magnificence’ (line 1486); ‘when honour dictates / that I raise a hedge of spears’ (lines 1834–5). Heaney also exploits the poetic potential of compounding, a practice fundamental to lexical expansion in Old English, especially prevalent in its poetry. Besides reproducing familiar compressed periphrases such as ‘ring-giver’ (line 35) for lord and ‘bone-cage’ (line 1445) for body, he coins new compounds in the same vein, like ‘wallstead’ (line 76), and exploits the surviving currency of compounding in modern English with the colloquial ‘comeback and armlock’ (line 748), a free rendition of he onfeng hrae / inwitpancum ond wid earn gesæt. Less felicitous is the ‘head-clearing’ voice (line 497) attributed to the scop in Heorot.

Heaney has consciously imitated Old English vocabulary before, influenced by poets such as Hopkins and Auden who revived Old English techniques. In North (1975) he reflects on his academic experience of the
language in an exploration of the myths and rituals of the past in relation to more recent Northern Irish history:

In the coffered
riches of grammar
and declensions
I found bân-hûs,
its fire, benches,
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while
in the roofspace.7

The compound banhus (‘body’) occurs twice in Beowulf (lines 2508, 3147), rendered literally both times by Heaney as ‘bone-house’: ‘flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house, / burning it to the core’. Here the consumption by flame of the dead hero’s body on his funeral pyre echoes the ultimate destruction by fire of the hall Heorot, alluded to early in the poem. To Old English poets the human body was a dwelling, animated by the spirit for the span of a lifetime. ‘Bone Dreams’ alludes self-consciously to language, the ‘coffer’ in which such relics are ‘found’, as an artefact to be temporarily reanimated by the ‘soul’ of the poet’s consciousness.

Heaney stirs other ingredients into his linguistic brew: non-standard usages not exclusive to his own dialect, such as ‘wean’ (for child) (line 2433), and ‘bothies’ (line 140); colloquialisms: ‘shifting himself’ (line 139), ‘less of his blather’ (line 980); and archaisms, often consciously echoing academic vocabulary: ‘torque’, ‘dam’ (for Grendel’s mother), ‘minstrel’. Registers are judiciously modulated; the Beowulf poet’s tendency to weighty generalization, particularly when it occurs in dialogue, is rendered in a plain-speaking, colloquial mode recalling the gravitas of the ‘scullions’ (lines 287–9):

Anyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure
of two things: what’s said and what’s done.

This unsentimentally upright voice conveys the vein of overt piety, most explicit in Beowulf in the condemnation of the Danes’ pagan rituals; a reminder, even in the poet’s own time, of the distance between his
Christian consciousness and the limitations of his characters’ pagan world-view. Heaney transposes the poet’s perspective to his own place and time by suggesting the idiom of a provincial preacher (lines 175–88):

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed offerings to idols, swore oaths that the killer of souls might come to their aid and save the people. That was their way, their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge of good deeds and bad, the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World, was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul in the fire’s embrace, forfeiting help; he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he who after death can approach the Lord and find friendship in the Father’s embrace.

More ornamental poetic language is concentrated – as in the Old English – in rare passages of natural description, such as this beautiful account of a sea-voyage (lines 1905–13):

Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl, sail-ropes were tightened, timbers drummed and stiff winds kept the wave-cроссер skimming ahead; as she heaved forward, her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant, a lapped prow loping over currents, until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline and familiar cliffs. The keel reared up, wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.

For the climactic combats with monsters Heaney chooses a lush, to my ear over-hetic, melodrama (lines 122–5):

greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men from their resting places and rushed to his lair, flushed up and inflamed from the raid, blundering back with the butchered corpses.
Heaney treads a fine line between antiquarian formality and modern demotic, preserving the alterity of an alien time and place, while insisting on the universality of the poem’s themes. His use of plain language in affective passages is superbly controlled, as in the hero’s last speech to his nephew and follower, Wiglaf (lines 2813–16):

‘You are the last of us, the only one left of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away, sent my whole brave high-born clan to their final doom. Now I must follow them.’

Contrastingly, though, passages of multi-syllabic language best catch the aspect of the poem perhaps hardest for modern sensibilities to grasp, its stately formality, particularly in extended passages of static dialogue. Here is Hrothgar, gazing on Grendel’s dismembered claw, visible token of Beowulf’s heroic prowess (lines 928–42):

‘First and foremost, let the almighty Father be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd can work His wonders always and everywhere. Not long since, it seemed I would never be granted the slightest solace or relief from any of my burdens: the best of houses glittered and reeked and ran with blood. This one worry outweighed all others – a constant distress to counsellors entrusted with defending the people’s forts from assault by monsters and demons. But now a man, with the Lord’s assistance, has accomplished something none of us could manage before now for all our efforts. . . .’

Here the sturdy ‘scullion’ sententiousness (‘the Heavenly Shepherd / can work his wonders always and everywhere’) modulates into an idiom in which Grendel’s ravages, although their horror-comic aspect peeps through in the polysyndetic ‘glittered and reeked and ran with blood’, are filtered through dignified abstractions, conveying the consciousness of the court: ‘solace’, ‘relief’, ‘assault’, ‘assistance’. The same speaker recalls that ‘Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance’, captured by the Old English in a curt half-line: *he me apas swor* (line 472).
The vocabulary of law and government in English was indelibly changed in 1066; the dignity of office represented by Hrothgar, and present throughout the aristocratic discourse of the poem, can now only be conveyed through the Latinate and abstract.

Heaney’s mixed diction has been approved as ‘part of that variegated, elaborate diction that marks all epics’, and a hint of the Homeric is perhaps a legitimate choice for a twentieth-century translator. But this ‘epic’ element does not represent the original idiom of *Beowulf*, as J. R. R. Tolkien pointed out in his discussion of the difficulty of rendering the specialized diction of Old English poetry:

Personally you may not like an archaic vocabulary, and word-order, artificially maintained as an elevated and literary language. You may prefer the brand new, the lively and the snappy. But whatever may be the case with other poets of past ages (with Homer, for instance) the author of *Beowulf* did not share this preference. If you wish to translate, not re-write, *Beowulf*, your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day that the poem was made. Many words used by the ancient English poets had, even in the eighth century, already passed out of colloquial use for anything from a lifetime to hundreds of years. They were familiar to those who were taught to use and hear the language of verse, as familiar as *thou* or *thy* are to-day, but they were literary, elevated, recognized as old (and esteemed on that account). . . . This sort of thing – the building up of a poetic language out of words and forms archaic and dialectal and used in special senses – may be regretted or disliked. There is none the less a case for it: the development of a form of language familiar in meaning and yet freed from trivial associations, and filled with the memory of good and evil, is an achievement, and its possessors are richer than those who have no such tradition. It is an achievement possible to people of relatively small material wealth and power (such as the ancient English as compared with their descendants); but it is not necessarily to be despised on that account. But whether you regret it or not, you will misrepresent the first and most salient characteristic of the style and flavour of the author, if in translating *Beowulf*, you deliberately eschew the traditional literary and poetic diction which we now possess in favour of the current and trivial.
In 1940 it was possible to speak of ‘the traditional literary and poetic dic-
tion which we now possess’; the imperative ‘to translate, not rewrite’ has
since been superseded – at least among those not concerned with teach-
ing or learning the original language – by the less hard-line view that
every translation must of its nature be a new creation. Tolkien’s target
was the neo-Germanic avoidance of Romance and Latinate vocabulary
that renders the 1895 translation of William Morris, in the words of
Helen Phillips, ‘doomed . . . by its luxuriant archaisms’. Heaney’s strat-
egy is ‘the building up of a poetic language out of words and forms
archaic and dialectal and used in special senses’, but he builds it anew,
and grounds it in the ‘current and trivial’ to urge the poem’s claim to
speak to the translator’s own contemporaries.9

One function of Heaney’s wide-ranging diction is to accommodate
the stringent alliterative demands of the Germanic ‘long line’, which
he meets more conspicuously than most modern verse translators. He
explains the conventions in his introduction, apologizing for a degree of
deviation in his own practice:

In general, the alliteration varies from the shadowy to the substantial,
from the properly to the improperly distributed. Substantial and
proper are such lines as

‘The fõrtunes of wár  fávoured Hróthgar’ (line 64) . . .

Here the caesura is definite, there are two stresses in each half of the
line, and the first stressed syllable of the second half alliterates with
the first or the second or both of the stressed syllables in the first half.
The main deviation from this is one that other translators have
allowed themselves – the freedom, that is, to alliterate on the fourth
stressed syllable, a practice that breaks the rule but that nevertheless
does bind the line together:

We have héard of those prínces’ heróic campáigns (line 3) . . . .10

To the purist the irregularity is significant. Tolkien explains how alliter-
ation welds together two half lines into the long line, the metrical unit
ubiquitous in early Germanic poetry: ‘The main metrical function of
alliteration is to link the two separate and balanced patterns together
into a complete line. For this reason it is placed as near the beginning of
the second half as possible, and is never repeated on the last
lift. . . . Delay would obscure this main linking function; repetition by
separating off the last word-group and making it self-sufficient would
have a similar effect.’11
Alliteration on the last stress upsets the delicate compromise in the construction of the long line, which functions as a single unit as well as a balance of two equal units. The occasional transgression notwithstanding, Heaney skilfully combines the alliterative constraint with that of the caesura dividing each line into two balanced halves, achieving a defined yet flexible style that sustains the poem throughout its 3000 lines. As he implies, he uses more emphatic alliteration for particular effects, notably to represent the monsters. See, for instance, Beowulf's description of Grendel after their fight (lines 975–7): ‘He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain, / limping and looped in it.’ Heaney exploits the surviving taste in English for alliterative idioms to embed this unfamiliar verse form in the reader’s consciousness: ‘cold comfort’ (line 973), ‘laid down the law’ (line 29). But what really makes it work is his management of the metre. He avoids the dull thud of the much-derided ‘ten timorous trothbreakers together’, immortalized in John R. Clark Hall’s prose translation of 1911 – reminiscent, Tolkien said, ‘of the “two tired toads that tried to trot to Tutbury”’12 – although Heaney’s rendition is if anything more strongly alliterative:

the tail-turners, ten of them together.

This line exactly echoes the cadence of the Old English:

tydre treowlogan  tyne ætsomne. (line 2847)

Heaney’s version draws weight and dignity from the strong caesura that divides the syntax into the appositive juxtaposition all-pervasive in Old English poetic style. He consistently respects this caesura, so that each line achieves the balance of two halves (whether or not ‘correctly’ bound by alliteration) that is the foundation of the metrical unit, the ‘long line’. Heaney more often achieves this metrical consistency by treating the syntax of the original comparatively freely. Old English poetic syntax is often both tortuous and full of loose, if suggestive, connections. By the technique known as ‘variation’, strings of synonymous phrases, not always semantically parallel, echo and substitute for each other over the course of a sentence, while grammatical inflexion allows a flexibility of word order impossible to reproduce in the less clearly marked modern language. The following passage (lines 1455–72), literally rendered with a line-by-line translation alongside, is followed by Heaney’s version to demonstrate his redrawing of syntactical structures to achieve
transparency and fluency, while respecting the overriding demands of alliteration and caesura:

Næs þæt þonne mætost mægenfultuma
þæt him on þearfe lah þyle Hroðgares;

was þæm hæftmece Hrunting nama;
þæt wæs an foran ealdgestreona;
ecg was ieren, atertanum fah,

ahyrded heafoswate; næfre hit æt hilde
ne swac manna Ængum þara þe hit mid mundum
bewand, se ðæ gryresiðas gegam dorste,
folcstede fara; næs þæt forma sidd,

þæt hit ellenweorc æfman scolde. Huru ne gemunde mægo Ecglafes
eafþes cræftig, þæt he ær gespræc
wine druncen, þa he ðæs wæpnes onlah
selran swerdfercan; selda ne dorste

under yda gewin ældre geneþan,
drihtscype dreogan; þær he dome forleas,
ellenmærdum. Ne wæs þæm oðrum swa,
syðpan he hine to guðe gegyred ðæfe.

That was not the least of mighty aids
that in his need lent him the spokesman
of Hroðgar;

was of the hilted sword Hrunting the name;
that was alone foremost of ancient treasures;
the blade was iron, with poison-stripes
marked,
hardened with battle-blood; never it in
battle failed

of men any who it with hands encircled,

he who dreadful ventures undertake dared,
on the battlefield of foes; that was not the
first time

that it a deed of bravery perform must.

Indeed, did not remember the son of Ecglaf
in might strong, what he had earlier said
with wine drunk, when he the weapon lent
to a better swordsman; himself he did
not dare

under the waves' tumult his life risk,
nobility behave; there he glory lost,
courage reputation. It was not for the
other so,

after he himself for battle equipped had.

And another item lent by Unferth
at that moment of need was of no small importance:
the brehon handed him a hilted weapon,
a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,
anyone who had fought and faced the worst
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time
it had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
could hardly have remembered the ranting speech
he had made in his cups. He was not man enough
to face the turmoil of a fight under water
and the risk to his life. So there he lost
fame and repute. It was different for the other
rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Heaney maintains the carefully indirect structure of the first long
sentence, but welds stronger, and now more natural, links between the
half-line units that in Old English are built up incrementally: ‘ecg wæs
iren, atertanum fah, ahyrded heaposwate’ becomes ‘The iron blade with
its ill-boding patterns had been tempered in blood’. The repetition of
‘anyone’ in the second sentence clarifies an awkward transition in Old
English from the dative plural ‘ængum’ to the nominative singular ‘se þe’
that, syntactically, varies it – but, in the process, loses the allusion to the
many users that have partaken in the sword’s long history. Translating
‘folcstede fara’ as ‘gap of danger’, incidentally, reflects Heaney’s con-
cern to give Beowulf’s fights with his supernatural foes a metaphysical
edge, where the Old English poet likens them to battles against human
foes on a conventional battlefield. The order of clauses in the sentence
juxtaposing Unferð’s loan of the sword with his drunken boasts is
reversed so that the narrative event is foregrounded; the poet’s omniscient
claim about Unferð’s state of mind is replaced with the supposititious
‘could hardly have remembered’; and the implications of the repetitive
phrases ‘aldre gene þan, drihtscype dreogan’ are spelt out in ‘he was
not man enough’. Much that Old English listeners could deduce, from
allusions that their cultural grounding in the traditions of this poetry
made familiar, is spelled out, and the incremental weight built up by the
syntactic repetition of varied phrases, often bounded within the half-line,
is replaced by the modern preference for clear semantic links between
syntactical elements and more varied sentence structure. But the verse
resists the pressure to modernize itself into prose, and this is largely a func-
tion of rhythm. The caesura is constantly preserved however natural the
cadences Heaney achieves, sometimes but not always with the assistance
of alliteration.

For Tolkien the construction of the poem’s every line in two balanced
halves, fundamental to the metre (of this and every other Old English
poem), was essential to a system of binaries pervading the poem at every
level of its construction, and also defining its meaning:13

This ‘parallelism’ is characteristic of the style and structure of Beowulf.
It both favours and is favoured by the metre. It is seen not only
in . . . lesser verbal details, but in the arrangements of minor passages
or periods (of narrative, description, or speech), and in the shape of
the poem as a whole. Things, actions, or processes are often depicted
by separate strokes, juxtaposed, and frequently neither joined by an 
expressed link, nor subordinated. The ‘separate strokes’ may be single 
parallel words . . . or sentences . . . . On a larger scale: the strife of the 
Swedes and Geats in the later part of the poem is dealt with in separate 
passages, describing prominent incidents on both sides that are not 
worked into a narrative sequence. Finally, Beowulf itself is like a line of 
its own verse written large, a balance of two great blocks, A + B; or like 
two of its parallel sentences with a single subject but no expressed 
conjunction. Youth + Age; he rose – fell. It may not be, at large or in 
detail, fluid or musical, but it is strong to stand: tough builder’s work 
of true stone.14

Tolkien’s emphasis on the poem’s binary structure has been accepted by 
generations of critics since his seminal address to the British Academy in 
1936. Tolkien’s lecture, ‘Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics’, rightly 
celebrated by Heaney as the first critical account to assume that ‘the 
Beowulf poet was an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back-
formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology’,15 
develops the conception of the poem as ‘a balance, an opposition of 
ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description 
of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of 
the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, 
first achievement and final death.’ Essential to this pervasive system of 
contrasts, Tolkien argues, is the perspective that the conversion of 
England to Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries gave the 
poet on the ancient beliefs of the pagan Germanic heroes of the poem: 
‘One does not have to wait until all the native traditions of the older 
world have been replaced and forgotten; for the minds which still retain 
them are changed, and the memories viewed in a different perspective: 
at once they become more ancient and remote, and in a sense darker. . . . Those 
days were heathen – heathen, noble, and hopeless.’ According to this 
account, the pessimism built into the time frame of the narrative, ensur-
ing that youthful triumph is ultimately overturned by the inevitable 
decay of old age (a key word in the poem is edwenden ‘reversal’, denoting 
the overturning of imperfect human expectations), is overlaid with a 
sense of the doom of a whole culture, superseded by the new faith that 
revealed the spiritual limitations of the old.16

Heaney’s approach to Beowulf adds another layer to this contrast of 
perspectives. His mixed vocabulary reveals his determination to preserve 
the ‘pastness’ of the poem, at the same time rooting it in a modern 
idiom and one that reflects the dialectal distinctness of his own origin.
The same is true of its themes. He stresses the universality of the poem’s analysis of the inevitability of human violence, noting that what at first appears tribal and antiquated in a world of increasingly impersonal global powers – the identity of national boundaries with those of kin, the origin of national conflicts in personal or family vengeance, pursued over generations – reflects the contemporary reality not only of his own Northern Irish milieu, but of countless petty wars in the Balkans and elsewhere that were prominent in the news when the translation was published in 1999:

The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her keen is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy, dignity and unforgiving truth.

In a broadcast interview marking the turn of the millennium, Heaney referred again to the Geatish woman’s lament, adding:

At the end of the second millennium I would say [Beowulf] is especially relevant because it takes nothing for granted. It understands that small wars will constantly break out, that borders are going to be invaded. The word ‘genocide’ was not invented then, but the slaughtering of enemies on a racial and tribal basis – a lot of that occurs in the poem. So, if one wanted to give a second millennium ‘spin’ to the thing, you could say that it is about facing up to the reality of human aggression, to the political problem of living with strong neighbours. . . . You watch documentaries and news programmes and that gives you data and it gives you the basis for a structured response, but usually you’ve no structure except outcry and what Beowulf has, I think, is a structured, adequate way of facing the atrocious.17

The ‘adequacy’ of the poem’s response to a violent and chaotic world can be located in its dignity and balance, at the level of metrical structure and in overall theme: Tolkien’s ‘balance of ends and beginnings’, the cyclical framing of the poem in the funerals of the two great saviours, Scyld Scefing and Beowulf. Its ‘truth’ is perhaps largely to be found in its pessimism, a superstructure built by the Christian Anglo-Saxon poet on the
foundations of older, pagan notions of fatedness, but well fitted to the more secular millennial mood of the end of the twentieth century. In the worldview of *Beowulf*, all human achievement is transitory, the destruction of the great hall called Heorot anticipated in the very moment of its completion (lines 77–85):

> And soon it stood there, 
> finished and ready, in full view,
> the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
> he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
> Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
> and torques at the table. The hall towered,
> its gables wide and high and awaiting
> a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
> but in time it would come: the killer instinct
> unleashed among in-laws; the blood-lust rampant.

Shades of Kosovo and Rwanda, though, lead the translator to elide what is specific and characteristic to the social context of the poem in his quest for the universal. In these lines ‘the killer instinct unleashed’, ‘blood-lust rampant’ suggest an innate savagery, precariously reined but bound to burst its fetters in time. The original poet’s reference is to the equally destructive, but more socially evolved imperatives of feud: *ecghete* ‘sword-hate’ will awaken between ‘oath-swearers’ (*apumsweoran*, father- and son-in-law linked by the oaths of a marriage contract) after deadly hostility.

The same criticism could be made of Heaney’s treatment of the fights against the ‘monsters’, Grendel and his mother and the dragon. These Heaney relates to the sphere of human conflict in the poem as ‘[t]hree agons – three struggles in which the preternatural force-for-evil of the hero’s enemies comes springing at him in demonic shapes; three encounters . . . in three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night-house, the infested underwater current and the reptile-haunted rocks of a wilderness.’ This accurately represents these encounters as tests, and affirmations of the courage and skill of the individual hero, but flattens and blurs the contrasts between the three challenges, and their specific relevance to the social fabric created in *Beowulf*. They have been interpreted as ‘criticisms of elements intrinsic to the Germanic pagan warrior [class]: its aggression, vengeance, and love of gold’. Grendel and his mother are more equivocally presented in the Old English, their feelings and motivations disturbingly
close to the human. As Grendel advances on Heorot (lines 710–39) his consciousness and intentions are repeatedly mentioned:

(Then from the mountain under the misty slopes Grendel came walking; he bore God’s wrath; the evil-doer intended, in that high hall, to entrap one of the human race. He advanced under the sky to where he knew the wine-hall to be, the gold-hall of men bright with plates of gold. It was not the first time he had sought out Hrothgar’s home; never in his life, before nor after, did he meet worse luck, harsher hall-thanes. Then to the hall came the warrior, deprived of joys.)
The door, fastened with forged bands, sprang open when he touched it with his hands; the one intending evil, when he was swollen with rage, swung open the mouth of the hall. Quickly after that the fiend trod on the decorated floor, went with angry mind; from his eyes shone an unlovely light, just like fire. He saw in the hall many warriors, a band of kinsmen sleeping together, a crowd of young warriors. Then his mind rejoiced; the terrible monster meant to separate, before day came, someone’s life from his body, now that the expectation of a feast had come to him. It was not at all fated for him to be able to partake of any more of humankind that night. Mighty, the kinsman of Hygelac looked on to see how the evil-doer intended to proceed with the hostile attack. The monster had no intention of delaying that. . . .

Compounding the inevitable loss of the ambivalence between human and non-human in translating terms like manscâda (’criminal’), aglæca (’monster, warrior’), and dreamum bidæled (’deprived of joys’), a poetic commonplace in representations of exile, Heaney emphasizes the comic-book horror of the scene, ignoring the balancing awareness of thoughts and feelings that underlie the monstrous in the Old English:

In off the moors, down through the mist-bands
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men raced forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it until it shone above him, a sheer keep
of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar’s dwelling – although never in his life, before or since, did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders. Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door turned on its hinge when his hands touched it. Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open the mouth of the building, maddening for blood, pacing the length of the patterned floor with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light, flame more than light, flared from his eyes. He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping, a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors quartered together. And his glee was demonic,
picturing the mayhem: before morning
he would rip life from limb and devour them,
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night
was due to change, his days of ravening
had come to an end.

Mighty and canny,
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
for the first move the monster would make.
Nor did the creature keep him waiting. . . .

Heaney himself points out that Grendel’s potential humanity, as a
descendant of Cain, excluded from the communal comforts and security
of the mead-hall, is a reminder of the ‘exclusions at the centre of the
conflict and drama of the Anglo-Saxon poem: Hrothgar’s hall, like an
English protestant fort in Ireland, keeps “the dispossessed natives at
bay”, Grendel here representing the excluded, always threatening a
return’.19 The parallel with the Irish fort is alluded to in the word ‘bawn’,
but Heaney’s poem prefers to highlight Grendel’s less human qualities as
embodiment of evil.

Human response and social meaning are swamped by hectic violence
in the depiction of Grendel’s mother too. She is shy compared with her
predator son, only leaving her watery fastness under the compulsion of
vengeance, but fleeing as soon as her lightning raid is discovered
(1292–3): ‘The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out, / in mortal
terror the moment she was found’. The word ‘hell-dam’ is Heaney’s inno-
vation, rendering nothing stronger than heo ‘she’, again reducing social
and emotional realities to one-dimensional monstrosity. Helen Phillips
comments,

Heaney cannot resist the temptations (and they must have been
strong) to turn this murderous feminine monster who rises from a mere
into one of his own ‘bog-queens’, or destructive mother-goddesses. She
becomes a bestial but frightening manifestation of disgust and
sexualized frenzy. The appellations foreground her femaleness and
denigrate her: dam, hag. For the Anglo-Saxon poet her gender seems of
only incidental interest: appellations stress either her fierceness or her
role, a dignified and quasi-legal one in this society, as avenger of
murdered kin. She is like an honourable male warrior, serving her kin.20

Some would argue, on the contrary, that the poet is extremely
interested in the monster’s gender: that his use of masculine forms for
her, and emphasis on her adoption of the masculine role of avenger, is parodic. In a poem full of women passively victimized by the ravages of family feud, a female aggressively taking active revenge is monstrous. But this should not deny Grendel’s mother the dignity and sense of loss that Heaney’s more visceral representation takes away from her.

Heaney’s reduction of the particularities of Germanic heroic culture shows his determination to find in this alien and forgotten world the universal elements that will resonate in a modern, mechanized, literate culture as well as reflecting the specifics of his individual background. We may suspect that he was drawn to Beowulf by the very marginality he considers an obstacle to the modern reader:

Readers coming to the poem for the first time are likely to experience something other than mere discomfiture when faced with the strangeness of the names and the immediate lack of known reference points. An English-speaker new to The Iliad or The Odyssey or The Aeneid will probably at least have heard of Troy and Helen, or of Penelope and the Cyclops, or of Dido and the Golden Bough. These epics may be in Greek and Latin, yet the classical heritage has entered the cultural memory enshrined in English so thoroughly that their worlds are more familiar than that of the first native epic, even though it was composed centuries after them. Achilles rings a bell, but not Scyld Scēfing. Ithaca leads the mind in a certain direction, but not Heorot. The Sibyl of Cumae will stir certain associations, but not bad Queen Modthryth.

This may overestimate the familiarity of modern readers with Achilles and the Sibyl of Cumae, but Beowulf has never been part of the cultural mainstream, as Helen Phillips remarks: ‘Even in its original historical context, Beowulf made only an indirect statement about its, and its readers’ English identity, and it subsequently failed to establish itself in English literary consciousness during the post-Anglo-Saxon centuries.’ Heaney exploits this strangeness, using the resources of his own provincial, non-standard linguistic heritage to decentralise the poem further from the orthodox. He respects, even celebrates the antique and alien in Beowulf, but infuses it with a life drawn from the concerns of his own time and the idiosyncrasies of his own cultural background, as the Anglo-Saxons represented the soul inhabiting the ‘bone-house’ of the human body.
Notes


4 This word, occurring only in *Beowulf*, has inspired much scholarly speculation, especially in light of the meaning of the name Unferd (‘un-peace’, strife). According to Klaeber (1950, p. 149), ‘The *pyle* has been variously described as a sage, orator, poet of note, historiologer, major domus, or the king’s right-hand man.’ His Glossary adds ‘spokesman’ and ‘official entertainer’ to this list.


10 Heaney, introduction, *Beowulf*, pp. xxviii–xxix. Note that in the second line cited – and elsewhere in the poem – the visual experience of modern readers suggests an alternative, and ‘correct’, alliterating pattern on *h*, of which Heaney may or may not have been aware. The Anglo-Saxon audience, experiencing the poem aurally, would not have recognized alliteration on unstressed syllables, such as the *he*- of ‘heroic’.


13 Heaney identifies (instinctive?) familiarity with this structure in his earlier verse, implying that, like his familiarity with dialect words of Old English origin, it belongs to his linguistic heritage: ‘I had noticed . . . that without any conscious intent on my part certain lines in the first poem in my first book conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics. These lines were made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables – “the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging. I look down . . .” – and in the case of the second line there was alliteration linking “digging” and “down” across the caesura. Part of me, in other words, had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start’ (introduction, *Beowulf*, p. xxiii).


15 Heaney, introduction to *Beowulf*, p. xi.

16 Tolkien, ‘Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936), pp. 245–95; Heaney’s reference in his introduction to
‘the appositional nature of Old English syntax’ (p. xxix) suggests his familiarity with the currency of this terminology in academic debate.


18 Heaney, introduction, Beowulf, p. xii; Phillips, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Beowulf’, p. 266.


Nor can one readily say what decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist.

(W. G. Sebald)

I travelled to a mystical time-zone

(Morrissey)

‘Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps’, we are informed by ‘The First Kingdom’, five poems into the first third of Station Island (1984). The primary reference here is to the attitudes and habits of the country people among whom Seamus Heaney grew up in Derry, and this vision of the past is characteristic of the newly cold eye evident in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ section of the book. The backward rote might even be a more general problem. R. F. Foster records a flight of fancy entertained by A. E. in 1914, in which a book of Irish history, steadily improving through the centuries, turns out to have been bound backwards. At least that book was encouraging while it lasted. In a glummer view, what the past has to show is mourning and misery, defeat and betrayal, wrongs to be remembered, Stephen Dedalus’s ‘tale like any other too often heard’. A good deal of Heaney’s work entertains such a relation to the past, imagining it as dead weight, buried guilt or vice versa. In this essay, however, I want to explore some of the other figurations of the past in Station Island.

In Station Island, observes Neil Corcoran, the 45-year-old Heaney enters a changed relation with past time, sounding a note unheard in all his previous investigations. Part 1 of the volume, he proposes, sustains ‘a sad note of diminishment and loss, a sense of transience and of the perilous
fragmentariness of memory. . . . [T]he pathos attaching to what has disappeared is one of the essential marks of these poems: they are, I think, Heaney’s first real exercises in nostalgia.” The uses of nostalgia in literature, let alone life, may be underestimated. The word has something of a bad name and few defenders; it connotes a degree of delusion. Nostalgia is the sweet flip of sour ‘false memory’: less harmful, but still a falsification. Perhaps. But what Corcoran describes sounds more interesting than that, and not a condition to be shaken off too swiftly. The notion that Station Island entertains new feelings about, new representations of, the past – that it is a book of time and memory – will be a starting point in this chapter, in which I want to isolate certain modes of retrospective imagination and the particular ways they become realized in the form of lyric poetry. Time is everywhere in the pages of Station Island – its first, retrospective words are ‘There we were’ (SI, p. 13) – but it is not always a matter of mishaps.

To think about the past in Station Island is immediately to be drawn to its importance in the title poem. I will come to this relationship toward the end of the chapter, but before doing so I wish to focus at length on certain lyrics from Part 1 that have received less sustained attention. They allow us to develop a more varied sense of the workings of memory in Heaney’s writing. This context enhances the effect of the key conceits of ‘Station Island’. The first two parts of the volume, I propose, form a breviary of memory, raids upon the articulate past undertaken with varying tools and effects. Station Island in this respect looks both ways, back and forward in respect to the rest of Heaney’s career.

**stream through the eye**

Station Island commences in ‘The Underground’, an environment which is for Heaney both mythically laden and intriguingly modern: ‘a draughty lamplit station / After the trains have gone’ (SI, p. 13). No train passes, either, in the course of ‘The Railway Children’, later in the volume (SI, p. 45). ‘The Underground’ sets the volume's opening note of retrospection with a memory of the 1960s. ‘The Railway Children’ takes us perhaps two decades further back, if we try to place it in autobiographical years, for we are indeed in a childhood world:

When we climbed the slopes of the cutting  
We were eye-level with the white cups  
Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

The third line of each of the first two tercets wraps up its stanza of memory more briskly than the more characteristic Heaney quatrains of
'The Underground'; the tetrameter imposes a rhythm more relentless than the running pentameter of that poem. The formal difference signals a shift in the mode of memory, from narrative to observation, from the movement and return of ‘The Underground’ to a more static and compressed rendering of the past. For where ‘The Underground’ opens the volume with hurtling urgency – ‘in the vaulted tunnel running’, ‘Honeymooning, moonlighting, late for the Proms’ – ‘The Railway Children’ is less a poem of action than it first appears; its first three words give us as much dynamism as we will get from this poem’s narrator. It is telling that ‘When’ should be the inaugural word in this memory piece. This poem establishes no particular past; rather it gestures in the broadest possible four-letter term at pastness, at . . . that time. ‘When’ means ‘Then’. ‘We’ is likewise unspecific, recalling Helen Vendler’s account of the prominence of anonymity in Heaney’s poetry.8 The subject of the poem (‘we’) is not Seamus Heaney, but ‘The Railway Children’. ‘When we climbed’ also implies that what is recorded here is a recurrent act, not a one-off. ‘When we had climbed the slopes of the cutting . . .’ – the pluperfect formula would describe a singular occasion, the moment when the fruits of climbing became apparent. ‘When we climbed’, though, denotes a general condition, a habitual affair – or better, perhaps, an open-ended action, a sense that juvenile adventures are not over but still alive. The poem lives in such a coexistence of now and then. ‘We’ are gone – ‘children’, after all, and no child wrote this poem – but ‘we’ are also the only human subjects of this text.

‘The Railway Children’ describes not action but observation. Its energy is spent on the work of looking and of thinking. One aspect of this poem is seeing as a child sees: ‘We were eye-level with the white cups / Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires’. ‘Eye-level’ looks like an adjustment to a child’s point of view, but perhaps it would apply to anyone, scrambled up to the top of a railway cutting. The ‘sizzling wires’, though, register the buzz of a young perception: when they sizzle, we may imagine, so in a way does their observer – something Michael Parker notes. He also understands the ‘white cups’ as instances of the ‘child-like images and diction’ through which the poem ‘recreates beautifully a child’s eye of the world’.9 More surprisingly, he places in the same category the next image:

Like lovely freehand they curved for miles
East and miles west beyond us, sagging
Under their burden of swallows.
'Lovely' has its childishness – it is too voluptuous a word to gain regular admittance to an adult poetic vocabulary. But ‘lovely freehand’ is more refined and is indeed a metaliterary image – the latest in a long train of them from Heaney, for whom poetry has often talked about writing while talking about other things. There is a level of artfulness to this second tercet that transcends the voice of its purported subjects. The enjambment of ‘curved for miles / East and miles west’ is as powerful an effect as anything in the text. The first line heads in one direction, landing on ‘miles’, its final stress. But both rhythm and sense are surprised with the next line, indeed the next syllable:

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/ x / / x / x / x
East and miles west beyond us, sagging.
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The shift in rhythm brings a brief sense that we have reversed direction: and the meaning of the words, too, is playfully shifting from the expectations with which the previous line ended. ‘[T]hey curved for miles’ seemed like a self-contained statement, but is now revealed as the uncompleted portion that the stanza’s second line fleshes out with its compass points. This momentary stumble, set up for the reader’s benefit, just about manages to correspond to the swing of attention from East to West, the suddenly redirected gaze sending that initial ‘lovely freehand’ spiralling off in the opposite direction.

The poem’s sense of youthful freedom is thus an intricately constructed matter. And this duplicity applies to the intellectual content that enters in subsequent stanzas:

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We were small and thought we knew nothing
Worth knowing. We thought words travelled the wires
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
Each one seeded full with the light
Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves
So infinitesimally scaled
We could stream through the eye of a needle.
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Lovely free hand, indeed. There is no mistaking Heaney’s deployment of his lyric abilities here, as he redescribes raindrops as ‘shiny pouches’, ‘seeded’ with the expansive light that carries across the run-on-line to the list of its sources. Strictly, though, something appears awry in these lines. ‘We were small’ looks like an adult’s view of a child’s size. ‘[A]nd thought we knew nothing / Worth knowing’. These railway children are
modest folk. Perhaps a child can know a few things (they know how to get to, and get up, the cutting; they know where the telegraph wires go, and seem to know that they are a means of communication), but not think them worth knowing. Perhaps they know, or suspect, that what’s worth knowing is yet to come. But then, what about the following lines?

We thought words travelled the wires
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
Each one seeded full with the light . . . .

Here we have quite a thought, a better one than many railway adults could manage faced with a row of telegraph poles. Heaney operates a double bluff here. The children’s notion of the telegraph is naïvely flawed (‘words travelled the wires’ in raindrops, indeed), but then again, it is (that word again, whether theirs then or his now) lovely; and maybe their explanation is not so naïve. Certainly words are travelling the wires, and we do not have many better images for them than do the railway children. What does not quite buzz true, though, is the children’s initial disavowal of knowledge; if they have such elaborate notions of words, water and light, it is strange to lay claim to ‘nothing / Worth knowing’. Those words protest a little too much for selves who think of themselves as ‘So infinitesimally scaled’. Perhaps Heaney has given ‘The Railway Children’ one too many different layers of consciousness, making innocence and experience, childishness and eloquence coexist a tad too closely in the poem’s tight tercets. The poet of remembrance is caught between the ideal of enacting the past in its own terms and the opportunity to reflect on it in the language of the present.

a sleigh of the mind

Certain other lyrics in Station Island are more explicit than ‘The Railway Children’ about the difficulties of memory. ‘An Ulster Twilight’ (SI, pp. 38–9) is a notable instance. It begins in the present tense:

The bare bulb, a scatter of nails,
Shelved timber, glinting chisels:
In a shed of corrugated iron
Eric Dawson stoops to his plane

At five o’clock on a Christmas Eve.

The first half of the first quatrains is a matter of scene-setting, proceeding via carefully defined details. Each of the first four objects noted in that first
couplet possesses its own adjective or qualifying description (‘scatter’). The line ‘Fretsaw, auger, rasp and awl’ suggests a parallel between the rhythmic regularities of work and poem. The sense is of a present scene crowded with things and motion. Yet in the third quatrains the tense shifts:

A mile away it was taking shape,
The hulk of a toy battleship,
As waterbuckets iced and frost
Hardened the quiet on roof and post.

‘A mile away’ is a relative term: away from where? Presumably from where we came in, that ‘shed of corrugated iron’. But this reading does not adequately get at Heaney’s meaning. As the poem proceeds, it emerges that the ‘toy battleship’ is the object and product of Eric Dawson’s craft, which is handed over to ‘a peering woman’ (the narrator’s mother, we may assume) in a ‘parcel’ in the fifth stanza. As a result, not only does the third stanza witness a change in tense, but also it becomes a spatial switch-point, the scene of an unannounced shift in the location of the poem’s voice. What was, implicitly, ‘here’ now becomes ‘there’. This shift adds ironic substance to the question that interrupts the narrative at the start of the fourth stanza:

Where is he now?
There were fifteen years between us two
That night I strained to hear the bells
Of a sleigh of the mind and heard him pedal
Into our lane

At this point, beyond the local detail of the poem’s narration, different times and perceptions meet. The significance of the first line is flagged by its curtailed character: it is only two stresses, half a line, and properly demands a pause before the reader proceeds to Heaney’s further reflections. ‘Where’ – the sense of place – is, as we have just seen, already afloat in this poem. But the question opens on to a still larger sense of disorientation, a loss of the ability to locate with any certainty this figure from memory. The question is rhetorical, almost instinctive (almost, in fact, a cliché), not answerable within the scope of this poem. But ‘An Ulster Twilight’ still wants to establish a kind of ‘where’, even if it is the where of then rather than now. We plunge immediately back, then, into the past, to ‘That night’. The steadily accumulating details of the following stanza, recording Dawson’s actions in precise sequence (‘Into our lane, get off at the gable, / Steady his Raleigh bicycle’), read like an
exercise of memory, a mnemonic labour seeking to benefit from the poem’s steady metre and recognizable rhymes. The pendulum of poetic form is here an aide-memoire.

In the middle of the sixth stanza, however, the poet’s voice breaks through again, speaking in a time different from that of the remembered events:

Eric, tonight I saw it all
Like shadows on your workshop wall,
Smelled wood shavings under the bench,
Weighed the cold steel monkey-wrench
In my soft hand, then stood at the road
To watch your wavering tail-light fade . . .

For the first time in the poem, past and present are brought together in these lines: the past is envisaged within the metalinguistic frame of the present. We move from the past as ‘given’ to memory as action – as a series of actions, in fact, a sequence of sensory relations that the narrator establishes to the object world of the past. Not only smell but touch figures as a major trigger of memory; to ‘weigh’ in hand the monkey-wrench is to take the weight of the past, to cop hold of the scene. But still the privileged sense, at start and finish, is vision: ‘I saw it all’. The seventh stanza carries a powerful sense of entry into the past, with the poet figuring as a kind of interloper into the carpenter’s shed, a latecomer who picks over its traces as in an interactive museum.

But in truth this recovery of the past is slightly overweening. The narrator does not merely receive a flashback to a perspective like his own (watching the bicycle light recede), but spreads into Eric Dawson’s too, taking unproblematic command of the vanished scene. The line ‘Like shadows on your workshop wall’ suggests an interestingly partial vision, a projection that only approximates the real, a shadow-play of memory not to be mistaken for Dawson’s substance. Yet this note of qualification is overridden by ‘I saw it all’, as the visionary poet reconstitutes the past. This return of the past is arguably too little blemished by memory’s gaps and absences. ‘To remember’, writes Peter Nicholls, ‘is . . . not simply to restore a forgotten link or moment of experience, nor is it unproblematically to “repossess” or re-enact what has been lost.’ Against this, ‘An Ulster Twilight’ shows an excessive optimism about the work of memory. The ‘sleigh of the mind’, advancing too emphatically, may also be a sleight of the hand.

Heaney’s poem is a kind of thanksgiving for the carpenter’s lonely work on the toy, and it ends on a delicate note. Should poet and
carpenter meet again, he reflects, their conversation will be deliberately uncontroversial, ‘all toys and carpentry’, rather than risking the problematic matter of ‘Your father’s uniform and gun’. The poem reflects on the personal and the political, and how one may seek to tiptoe around the other; the retrospective frame of reference, unlike the ‘backward rote’ bemoaned in ‘The First Kingdom’, offers less treacherous ground than the contemporary. In that sense, as well as in the wistful act of remembrance at its centre, ‘An Ulster Twilight’ is nostalgic: it calls to mind and conversation a time that is less problematic than the present. The poet is unashamed, though, of the recourse to innocence:

But – now that I have said it out –
Maybe none the worse for that.

‘It’ is the most indeterminate word here. The formula in which it appears has something of the same quality – albeit murmuringly private rather than resoundingly public – as Yeats’s ‘I write it out in a verse’. The act of enunciation is significant in itself, and leaves speaker and auditor in a different place. Does ‘it’ mean the delicacy that Heaney has just described (‘now that I have admitted to the reason for our nostalgic small talk, I’m not sure it’s such a bad thing’); or does it refer to the whole business of the poem (‘Now that I have recalled in full the night you made me the toy, I think it not such small talk after all’)? There is a final ambiguity here apt enough to the twilight in which the conversation occurs – not that it does, for like the rest of this poem, it is a conjuring, an act of projection. The tender care with which Heaney brings the poem to a close surpasses the incautious flights of memory it has witnessed.

**where I’d imagined I might be**

By way of contrast, something more complex is afoot in ‘Remembering Malibu’ (SI, pp. 30–1). Here memory explicitly collides with the imagination it has supplanted:

The Pacific at your door was wilder and colder
Than my notion of the Pacific
and that was perfect, for I would have rotted
beside the luke-warm ocean I imagined.

Heaney here holds two memories in mind at once: his memory of Malibu and his quite different memory of how he expected Malibu to
be. ‘Wilder and colder’ than a false expectation, though, remains an imprecise description. Heaney twists his way into further nuance:

Yet no way was its cold ascetic
as our monk-fished, snowed-into Atlantic;
no beehive hut for you
on the abstract sands of Malibu –
it was early Mondrian and his dunes
misting towards the ideal forms . . . .

A two-pronged process is at work here. On one hand, the Heaney of ‘Remembering Malibu’ is an epistemological realist, who holds to a truth of Malibu: a reality all the more insistent for the way it defied his expectations of it. Part of the impulse of the poem is toward a faithful rendering of the place. Yet Heaney approaches this via analogy and allusion. The ‘beehive hut’ is perhaps meant to recall the destination of the speaker of Yeats’s ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, who plans to build ‘a hive for the honey bee’ alongside his ‘small cabin . . . of clay and wattles made’.12 But in any case, Brian Moore did not occupy that hut; no, ‘it was early Mondrian and his dunes’, an artistic reference point, followed apparently by a Platonic one in those ‘ideal forms’. It is impossible, writes Nicola King, ‘to imagine or formulate memory and its operations without the use of metaphor’.13 It is also impossible, at this point, for Heaney to describe his memory of the Malibu shore without the use of allusion, the suggestion of similitude between the real (and the unreal, the way Malibu turned out not to be) and some other work of art.

The more pressing contrast in the poem, though, is between the American and Irish coasts:

I was there in the flesh
where I’d imagined I might be
and underwent the bluster of the day:
but why would it not come home to me?

At this point the poem discovers its ultimate theme: the frustrating relation between the remembered shore of California and the familiar one of Ireland. Heaney once again asserts uncompromisingly the reality of the past – ‘I was there in the flesh’ – even with its tricky accompaniment of imagination, ‘where I’d imagined I might be’. (So far in this poem, reality has diverged from, rather than confirmed, imagination.) Yet the crux lies in the equivocal line ‘but why would it not come home to me?’
In one sense the line suggests ‘why would it not come home with me?’ Why, the futile question runs, can I not bring ‘the bluster of the day’ from Malibu back to Ireland, where ‘Atlantic storms have flensed the cells on the Great Skelling’? The line thus bemoans a pain of separation: to repeat Corcoran’s phrase, ‘the pathos attaching to what has disappeared’. But the line also subtly asks, ‘Why did it not hit home in me?’ The absence is not only in the world, but in the speaker, who has been slightly less transformed by Malibu than he would wish:

the steps cut in the rock

I never climbed
between the graveyard and the boatslip
are welted solid to my instep.

There are, it turns out, three tenses in the poem: the past (Malibu) and the pluperfect (the prior imagination of Malibu ‘where I’d imagined I might be’), but also, for the first time, the present (‘are welted solid’). This line is tricky: through its repeated enjambments it turns out to comprise a single statement, making the reader stumble back after sense. And it is difficult: there is apparent perversity in the assertion that the steps the speaker never climbed are ‘welted solid’ to him. But the overall meaning is that the Irish coastal scene, not the American, is imprinted on the poet’s body. The enduring depth of local influence is a characteristic Heaney theme, one to be alternately celebrated, cursed, and accepted in the unreeling ambivalence of his poetic career. The speaker of ‘Station Island’ itself will broach the grouse: ““I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming”’ (SI, p. 85), and the Sweeney of ‘The First Kingdom’ offers his own brand of disdain for the land of his upbringing (SI, p. 101). The poet of ‘Remembering Malibu’ is less vociferous, but his sentiment is related. He wants to forget the foot’s existing imprint:

But to rear and kick and cast that shoe –
beside that other western sea
far from the Skellings, and far, far
from the suck of puddled, wintry ground,
our footsteps filled with blowing sand.

The present, far from offering a superior vantage on memory, is stuck in the envious ‘suck’ of Irish ground. Freedom is located in the past. Ireland’s shore reminds the narrator of California’s, but also of the gap
between the two. And there is thus an irony about Corcoran’s notion of nostalgia, if applied to ‘Remembering Malibu’. Nostalgia’s etymology implies an ache for home, a familiar and safe world glimpsed in the past and set against a troubling present. But the poet of ‘Remembering Malibu’ aches from home, for a surfeit of the homely, the ‘suck’ of the overfamiliar. His nostalgia would lead him away from home.\(^{15}\)

**Undead grains**

In reading these poems from Part One of *Station Island*, we have encountered a range of strategies for the representation of the past, and observed the difficulties that Heaney encounters in rendering memory’s action. But the volume also offers two other major approaches to the past that deserve recognition in this context. One, heavily characteristic of Heaney, may be called the archaeological. Its definitive application, as Bernard O’Donoghue among others has noted, is in *North*.\(^ {16}\) The motifs here are of drilling, descent, the recovery of figures from a buried past – and of, in Declan Kiberd’s loose words, a ‘sense of poetry as a dig, and of the poem as something lifted out of a boggy consciousness’.\(^ {17}\) This figuration is virtually an *idée récée* of Heaney’s project, as exemplified in poems from ‘Digging’ onward. But it finds new instances in *Station Island*.\(^ {18}\)

If at times – not least in ‘The Railway Children’ – the volume seems to look forward to the poet’s late preoccupation with an imagery of light and air, at others it retains a still characteristic terrain of earth and stone. ‘Sandstone Keepsake’ is one case in point, finding a poet turning in his hand the ‘chalky russet / solidified gourd, sedimentary / and so reliably dense and bricky’, lifted from ‘a shingle beach at Inishowen’ (*SI*, p. 20). So, more emphatically, is the sequence that immediately follows, ‘Shelf Life’. Here a whole miniature library of objects is catalogued, and each one turns out to cathect a distinctive set of experiences. The model of time here is indeed ‘sedimentary’. Whereas the lyrics we have looked at enact memory as a transient action from the present, the archaeological Heaney gives the impression that the past is stored up in things, quietly embedded and embodied in fragments of matter. Thus the ‘Old Smoothing Iron’ seems to contain five stanzas’ worth of domestic history, returning on command in a kind of short documentary film (*SI*, pp. 21–2), and the ‘Granite Chip’ (*SI*, p. 21) has a spiky political history, in Michael Parker’s phrase, ‘petrified within it’.\(^ {19}\) ‘The Sandpit’ exemplifies a like principle of matter’s retention of history:

\[
\text{a spadeful of sand, a handful of gravel are bonded and set to register}
\]
whatever beams and throbs into the wall.  
Like undead grains in a stranded cockle shell.  

(SI, p. 54)

Matter’s ‘registration’ of event here resembles the fate of the brick in the final poem of ‘The Sandpit’, in which a workman’s transient feelings and situation at one moment of the building process are magically transmitted to the stuff he works on, ‘sent . . . / into the brick for ever’ (SI, p. 55). ‘What The Brick Keeps’, Bernard O’Donoghue aptly observes, is ‘overground archaeology’. Other substances also figure as transmitters of memory in Station Island. Among the objects of ‘Shelf Life’ (SI, pp. 21–4) is the ‘Iron Spike’, a fragment of American railroad that inflicts Heaney with especial poignancy:

What guarantees things keeping  
if a railway can be lifted  
like a long briar out of ditch growth?  
I felt I had come on myself  
in the grassy silent path  
where I drew the iron like a thorn  
or a word I had thought my own  
out of a stranger’s mouth.

Here is Station Island’s most plaintive cry at transience, and the experience drives Heaney’s language upward to a Yeatsian rhetorical question. The poet is then immediately driven to make a strange identification between himself and the spike: ‘I felt I had come on myself’. This feeling of correspondence is partly based on his sense of threat at the sheer scale of the alteration: if a railway can be obliterated, then what chance of endurance has the human subject? The fate of the spike also seems to teach Heaney something of the fate of the self. The latter turns out to be less clear than he thinks, much more open to misappropriation – like the ‘word I had thought my own’ that can be discovered in a stranger’s mouth. Time becomes a field of alterity, a process of hitherto unsuspected obliviousness to human projects, liable to lead them to unintended consequences. The spike is in this sense a memento mori.

Intriguingly, the registration of the past in the railway spike is not so much a given as Heaney’s work would often have it appear. He introduces the object to us with the thought that it is

So like a harrow pin  
I hear harness creaks and the click  
of stones in a ploughed-up field.
But this is a misreading, an error resulting from interpreting the world too much in one’s own established frame of reference. There is almost a note of self-parody in the way that Heaney’s first response to a shard of American railway is to think for the umpteenth time of the kind of rural Irish scene in which he grew up. In fact, the momentary misconstrual illustrates Heaney’s own subsequent observation of the past’s liability to misappropriation, to winding up in ‘a stranger’s mouth’. The link between time and object in ‘Iron Spike’ is not quite the process of automatic storage and release sometimes intimated by Heaney. It involves interpretation, and the poem ends by seeking to fill hermeneutic gaps: where are the ‘sledge-head’ and the ‘sweat-cured haft’ of the spike’s primal scene? The poet desires to read time in a handful of iron, to reconstruct like Sherlock Holmes a vanished context around the fragment of evidence available. But answers seem elusive. ‘Ask the ones on the buggy’, he advises himself, but they are the last people who can be asked. The past’s residue suggests a shadowy world (‘like shadows on your workshop wall’) that will not speak. It is in ‘Station Island’ itself that this shadowy world adopts a voice.

like a heatwave

Fragments of material culture from the past also surface in the title poem. In Section III the narrator envisions an object from family history, emerging from the ‘active, wind-stilled hush’ that has enveloped him:

A seaside trinket floated then and idled in vision, like phosphorescent weed, a toy grotto with seedling mussel shells and cockles glued in patterns over it, pearls condensed from a child invalid’s breath into a shimmering ark, my house of gold that housed the snowdrop weather of her death long ago.

(SI, 67)

The return of the grotto bears an echo of ‘The Sandpit’: ‘undead grains in a stranded cockle shell’ (SI, p. 54). The grotto, too, is dead – not only lost in the past, but intimately associated with death – yet somehow ‘undead’, possessed of an unlikely life. In its ‘seedling mussel shells / and cockles’, and more clearly in the ‘pearls condensed from a child invalid’s breath’, the living has been frozen, solidified into an object of memory. This process is also implied in the way the grotto ‘housed the snowdrop
weather of her death’. Weather is a figure for the organic, the quick and changing (for the temporal, indeed, *le temps*), but it has been ‘housed’, given roof and location. The object has offered Heaney a home, a site of storage, for the atmosphere of his relative’s death; he remembers, as a child, ‘stowing away’ and ‘foraging’ for its precious emotional contents.

Yet we should also remember the evanescence of this object, which remains, in ‘Station Island’, a thing of recollection. It is never quite solid: it ‘floated then and idled / in vision, like phosphorescent weed’, a shimmering keepsake rather than ‘reliably dense and bricky’ sandstone (*SI*, p. 20). Where in the earlier lyrics Heaney conjures the past by gripping a solid object in his hand, in this poem the object is itself a conjuration, emerging into the memorial frame that the pilgrim has just established for it: ‘an active, wind-stilled hush, as if / in a shell the listened-for ocean stopped’ (*SI*, p. 67). The relic, like the memory it prompts, is not only temporal but temporary. In ‘Station Island’ the archaeological object becomes the virtual object. And this encounter with the virtual is, in the end, the most distinctive of *Station Island*’s modes of memory.

In its interest in ghosts, *Station Island* was prescient. Ten years on, spectres would come to the forefront of academic discussion, as one of the privileged cultural metaphors of the 1990s. Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994) was the premier text pushing this revival of interest, with its insistence on the inherence of spectrality in the seemingly solid world. Several commentators took Derrida’s cue and developed new theories of the unsuspected importance of ghostliness in areas like science, philosophy, literature – or indeed memory.21 By 2003 Andreas Huyssen, a leading theorist of memory and the museal, could look back and observe that the ‘master-signifiers of the 1990s’ had been ‘the abject and the uncanny . . . which have to do with repression, specters, and a present repetitively haunted by the past’.22 One of Derrida’s more salutary reminders is of the temporal indeterminacy of ghosts, their ability to come from future as well as past in order to shake and shape the present. The ghosts of *Station Island* exemplify this with odd precision: if they feel like visitants into the intellectual milieu of the next decade, they are also, of course, revenants from the literary past. The poet’s encounters with the dead are inspired by Dante’s in the *Divine Comedy*, and the term most often applied to Heaney’s ghosts, though absent from ‘Station Island’ itself, is the Dantesque ‘shade’. Heaney himself has called them ‘shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world’.23 Each of the shades has its own specific meaning and context – personal, political or both. I want finally
to reflect on the alternative relation to the past that the title poem offers the volume.

The shades of ‘Station Island’ are a peculiar combination of the firm and the fugacious figures. In one sense they, like the grotto of Section III, are evanescent figures. The murder victim of Section VII arrives as ‘a presence / entering into my concentration // on not being concentrated’, and after he has spoken ‘he trembled like a heatwave and faded’ (SI, pp. 77, 80). The priest of Section IV emerges from ‘Blurred swimmings as I faced the sun’ (SI, p. 69). These figures appear suddenly, say their piece and vanish. But in another sense, during their apparitions, they are also insistently solid, down to the priest’s finickily described ‘purple stole and cord / or cincture tied loosely, his polished shoes / unexpectedly secular beneath a pleated, lace-hemmed alb of linen cloth’ (SI, p. 69).

There are differences among the shades in this respect – William Carleton, even if he seems unable to see Heaney’s car,24 is more continually solid than several of the figures on the island itself – but all of them represent a kind of impossible presence, a manifestation of the absent. We might say that in this book of memory they literalize memory, transforming it from a fraught process of recollection to a startlingly complete recovery. For the ‘archaeological’ Heaney, the past is coded in fragments of matter, to be read back from its residues; for the ‘spectral’ Heaney, the past is with us at a stroke, startlingly rematerialized in all its colours and accents. ‘Station Island’ thus represents a hyperbolic version of the book’s consistent interest in the past: it posits a land of the dead in which the past is, in effect, alive.

In this sense, the tension between past and present that characterizes the other lyrics has dissipated. The memorial effort of ‘The Underground’ (‘Retracing the path back, lifting the buttons’), ‘An Ulster Twilight’ (‘Where is he now?’) or ‘Iron Spike’ is no longer necessary: the past is coming back of its own accord. But by the same token, in another sense, there is more tension than ever. In ‘Remembering Malibu’, remembering is a problem because of its difficulty (‘why would it not come home to me?’). In ‘Station Island’, remembering is a problem because it is unavoidable: the past is unquiet. Where the poet of ‘The Railway Children’ casts a line back into childhood, the pilgrim of ‘Station Island’ is pulled back into the past – into several pasts, some of them his own, some distant. The poet is afflicted by a systematic bout of involuntary memory – or better, involuntary history, an eruption of anamnesis from the political unconscious as well as the personal word-hoard. On Station Island the time, in one of Derrida’s favoured phrases, is out of joint; the present is accosted by a past it has not chosen to
summon. ‘Remember everything’, says Carleton (SI, p. 66). The instruction is redundant.

**echo soundings**

Remember everything? The poem’s last advice is different in emphasis: ‘Let go, let fly, forget’ (SI, p. 93). Structurally and emotionally, Heaney needs his spectral Joyce to point, not back to 1904, but forward to a future of ‘echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements, / elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea’ (SI, p. 94). ‘Station Island’ thus closes on a note of flight and future promise, which indeed flaps forward to the airborne scorn of *Sweeney Redivivus*. Yet *Station Island* as a whole is unmistakably preoccupied with the past, in the different ways we have observed here; and this preoccupation is resumed in Heaney’s later work. To take one example, *Seeing Things* (1991), a book full of reminiscence, may be said to enlarge the spectral perspective of ‘Station Island’, in a manner suggested in its recollection of Hardy, ‘at parties in renowned old age / When sometimes he imagined himself a ghost / And circulated with that new perspective’.25 The poem that opens its first part, ‘The Journey Back’, is in part a journey back to the hauntology of ‘Station Island’: ‘Larkin’s shade surprised me. He quoted Dante . . .’26 There is surely comedy in this line. ‘Larkin’s shade surprised me’: well, yes . . . it would. But then, perhaps the surprise really springs from hearing Larkin quote Dante; from the incongruity of the action, rather than the presence of the shade? (‘Heaney’s shade surprised me. He quoted Bowie.’) The author of ‘Station Island’, we may reflect, is not one to be surprised by a shade. And the author of *Station Island* is not one to forget.

**Notes**

3 S. Heaney, ‘The First Kingdom’, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 101. Subsequent references to this volume will be signalled in the text by *SI* followed by page number.


12 Yeats, ‘The Lake of Isle of Innisfree’, *Collected Poems*, p. 35.


18 Even the title of the opening lyric, ‘The Underground’, echoes Heaney’s geological model of time, though the poem’s model of memory is closer to the evanescence of the other lyrics discussed in this essay. Its greatest interest lies in the urban modernity of its setting, so uncharacteristic of this instinctively rural writer.


24 SI, p. 64. It is easy to neglect the strangeness of this encounter, in which a man born in 1794 is glimpsed in the driving mirror of a car in the early 1980s. Heaney spares us the scene that ought logically to ensue, in which Carleton asks Heaney what on earth the contraption is; it is as though he can see the pilgrim but not his vehicle. Or do the shades possess a posthumous omniscience? One of the nicer collisions of past and present comes when Joyce, ‘out there on the tarmac among the cars’, ‘hit a litter basket / with his stick’ (SI, p. 92).


‘The cure by poetry that cannot be coerced’: Text, Canon and Context in Seamus Heaney’s Electric Light

Ruben Moi

In his 1904 poem, ‘The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water’, W. B. Yeats, the Irish Nobel Laureate of 1923, mediates between the positions of the artist as a young man and venerated poet in a nation poised for independence. With grand confidence and somewhat less equivocation, Seamus Heaney’s eleventh volume of poetry, Electric Light (2001) – the second after his Nobel Prize in 1995 – negotiates with many of the same concerns as Yeats’s memorable lyric. Heaney, who celebrated his sixty-second birthday in the year that Electric Light was published, holds the most prestigious position on the global stage of poetry and balances his preoccupations with canonical self-awareness.

The Nobel Committee awarded Heaney the prize ‘for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past’.1 In Electric Light Heaney continues his meditations on aesthetic values and moral profundity. In the poem ‘Out of the Bag’, for example, Heaney calls attention to ‘the cure / By poetry that cannot be coerced’.2 This line captures the redemptive powers and restive force of poetry – two concerns that have informed much of his work’s ethos. In addition to the socio-political impositions upon poetry that the medical and suppressive connotations introduce, the verse also implies a strong self-awareness of the many canonical, critical and theoretical pressures to which the new poetry of a Nobel Laureate will be submitted. Take, for instance, the scathing judgement of Heaney’s stature offered by the novelist Robert McLiam Wilson: ‘He’s fucking eminent . . . . The cause of alternative voices is not damaged, it is destroyed’.3 This remark comes from Wilson’s iconoclastic essay, ‘The Glittering Prize’, which offers a concise
purview of the many critical approaches to Heaney. Assessments like this one are inducements to explore how Heaney negotiates his own position in literary history and on the arena of contemporary writing and to what degree *Electric Light* also incorporates new movements in his poetry. That is the focus of this chapter.

Conscientious questions of aesthetic autonomy and social relevance have continued to inform Heaney’s creative and critical idiom throughout his career. *Electric Light* also engages with the many demands of personal responsibility, aesthetic dedication and social relevance, and the volume secures Heaney’s celebrated position. In familiar fashion the book’s title and its first poem establish a connection with his previous volume of poetry. ‘Postscript’, Heaney’s dialogue with Yeats in the final poem of *The Spirit Level* (1996), speaks of ‘earthed lightning’. That book’s title, with its ambiguous connotations of the mundane and the marvellous, achieves a resonance in the poems, which take up concerns of the transcendence of man’s measured time on earth. With a universal scope of place and time, *Electric Light* meditates upon the wonders of birth and commemorates with admirable lambency the loss of personal friends and famous writers.

Virgil’s *Eclogues* offer frames for reflection on civil war and pastoral retreat, two of the dominant tropes throughout Heaney’s poetry. Shakespeare’s plays provide stages for a more ludic enactment of solemn subject-matter, and the many allusions to *Macbeth* could be read alongside Paul Muldoon’s recent collection of essays, *To Ireland, I* (2000), as a canonical recontextualization of the importance of Irish and Scots writing in the Western canon. ‘In a language that can still knock language sideways’ (*EL*, p. 73), to borrow Heaney’s words in praise of Ted Hughes, *Electric Light* appears as a canon-building project in which Heaney also revisits and renews his own writing. However, there is a sense that this volume does not generate the same sheer force as some of his previous work. The exigencies of art, life and death come across with more immediate apprehension when read against the inferno of the Troubles. As though from a global perspective, the lyrics reflect the stance of a concerned universal activist who advocates established human rights principles. With less incumbent socio-political pressures, artistic preservation becomes a dominant mission.

The many strands of reminiscence and renewal are confluent in the very first poem of *Electric Light*, ‘At Toomebridge’, which circulates with alacrity many typical features of Heaney’s poetic. The River Bann meanders through the poem with Yeatsian influence, with ambivalent associations of vital force, cultivation and conflict. The lines cross the linguistic
lands, semiotic swirls and political grammar of his previous poetry just as they function as a delta for new departures. The final verses run:

Where the checkpoint used to be.
Where the rebel boy was hanged in ’98.
Where negative ions in the open air
Are poetry to me. As once before
The slime and silver of the fattened eel.

(EL, p. 3)

The poem functions as a poetic parasite on Nationalist grounds, historical events and Heaney’s own poetry. Toome is situated in the Bann valley, one of the oldest inhabited areas in Ireland, and the site of many archaeological finds. During the 1798 rebellion, Roddy McCorley was hanged there, and the story has figured as a standard song of freedom since Ethna Carberry (1866–1902) set the words to a traditional air. Throughout history, as today, the place has been one of the important ports of the fishing industry, yielding tons of eels every year. As Heaney argues in *The Place of Writing* (1989): ‘The work of art ... involves raising the historical record to a different power.’6 The imagist sketches in ‘At Toomebridge’ primarily revisit his own poetry – most notably, perhaps, the progenital ‘Waterfall’ from his debut collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), the roots of ‘Bann Clay’, and the inspirational tone in ‘The Given Note’, both from his second volume, *Door into the Dark* (1969). Likewise, the life cycle of eels provides Heaney with a naturalist template for his stylistically protean ‘A Lough Neagh Sequence’ (*Door into the Dark*). This seven-poem series moves through proverbs, legends, realism, and visionary glimmers. The eels reflect the compulsions of human instincts and lithe creativity. The focus on specific locality in ‘At Toomebridge’ recaptures Heaney’s use in the 1970s of the *dinnseanchas* mode – an Irish tradition of poetry dealing with place names – notably in ‘Toome’? This multi-layered poem presents lambently the place’s specific historical and topographical features with a classical mythological backdrop, but it also revels in the phonetic relish of its name, an indulgent artistic insouciance that might also be a shibboleth in a place of cultural differences, something Heaney examines in the poem ‘Broagh’ from *Wintering Out* (1972). By comparison ‘The Toome Road’, from *Field Work* (1979), tends to be too explicit in the way it portrays the violation of territory by incursion of armed cars into rural fields. In the poem from *Electric Light*, the line ‘Where the checkpoint used to be’ (EL, p. 3) goes beyond military roadblocks to include the many interrogations into
poetic morphology, socio-political syntax and modernist paradigms of *The Haw Lantern* (1987), just as the mention of ‘ions in the open air’ catches the new and levitated mood of *Seeing Things*: ‘So long for air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten’.

The combination of the homonymous tomb and the idea of spanning in Toomebridge uncovers how the verses connect with its ancestral history. The autotextual depths of this particular personal helicon enable Heaney to renew the creative powers of his original sources and add a dimension of erudite sophistication to his popular accessibility. This literary introspection coalesces with a novel nerve in his poetry. While in *The Haw Lantern* the many linguistic features mainly served diverse metaphorical purposes, in *Electric Light* they frequently constitute performative acts and associative play. This linguistic turn could certainly be an artistic response to recent post-structuralist philosophy and deconstructive practice, but Heaney manages to combine the many excessive elements of such ideas with poetic sobriety. The repetitive titular enjambments give rhythm and flow to the verse and enact the disruptions and continuities of historical development. The accent lies on concord and future as the reiteration of ‘where’ concedes any interrogative mode to the conjoining of disparate times and places, and the many clauses of manner and comparison undermine complete sentences and signal several new beginnings. Subtle sound distribution and lexical free-play supplement conventional rhyme to suggest that meaning and coherence are to be found in submerged, and often overlooked, details. In addition Yeatsian half-rhymes (‘earth’, ‘air’ and ‘eel’, as well as ‘Bann’, ‘be’ and ‘before’) are truncated to alliterative connectivity to suggest compromise and renewal in traditional positions. In a poem that concerns retrospection and renewal it makes sense that ‘ion’ and ‘air’ depart with electric elevation from the thematically expected ‘eon’ and ‘heir’ that are retained by absent rhymes. A similar transition in time and meaning is emphasized in the way ‘the continuous present’ moves from defining the grammatical form of ‘come pouring’ to the ever-flowing waters of the Bann. These shifts from the expected to the imaginative suggest innovative change based upon familiar conditions and thus represent at the level of poetic creativity the many current issues of a community in transition and set the mode for the ambivalence of absence and presence in many of the book’s vivid elegies.

Together with the succeeding ‘Perch’ and ‘Lupins’, ‘At Toomebridge’ appears as the first leaf in a trifid petal of the natural splendour, historical events, and national sites of Northern Ireland. These poems resurrect
previous tropes and techniques in Heaney’s poetry, for example in the way ‘Perch’ relates to ‘Trout’ and a whole range of similar poems.10 ‘Perch’ also offers specimens of the characteristic trait that Philip Hobsbaum termed ‘Heaneyspeak’11: “grunts”, little flood-slubs, runty and ready (EL, p. 4). ‘Lupins’ similarly grows out of the many poems at the end of Door into the Dark (1969) that celebrate various features of Irish topography. Whereas the uncertain status of the many abrupt clauses in the first poem signals incompleteness and beginnings as much as endings, the erect syntax of the lupins is ablaze with vital integrity and inexorable probity: ‘They stood. And stood for something. Just by standing. / In waiting. Unavailable. But there / For sure. Sure and unbending. / . . . And even when they blanched would never balk’ (EL, p. 5). In a sense these flowers, ‘seed packets to begin with’, develop from the poetic soil of the controversial ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ from Door into the Dark. Possibly the note of indomitability resonates too much with the self-congratulatory political voices of the present. The relentless also indicates a personal element of resistance to the many pressures upon the Nobel Laureate as the reiteration of the present continuous exudes endurance, and ‘erotics of the future’ (EL, p. 5) vibrates with exciting promises. The syntax and vocabulary buttress the spiky and colourful plant’s function as a metaphor for artistic versatility and stamina. The neo-Romantic strain captures Heaney’s implicit belief in transcendent literary value and his championing of this quality against theoretical revaluations.

Although Heaney refuses to let theoretical doctrines dominate his Leavisite stance, he obviously responds to recent modes in poetics. An early instance of veiled remonstrance against theoretical impositions can be detected in the ironic twists of ‘Making Strange’ in Station Island (1984). Here Heaney appropriates the concept of defamiliarization from Russian Formalism. In Electric Light, Heaney’s reservations about theory become vociferous, as in ‘On His Work in the English Tongue’, his elegy for Ted Hughes, which defends the artistic against contextual interference. Hughes’s work has endured many attacks, significantly from militant feminists and scandal-searching journalists, something that the release of Birthday Letters (1998) exacerbated. For Heaney, though, such negative critiques represent a notorious case of articide on the altar of theoretical predetermination and prurient biography. Heaney’s apologia counters Hughes’s critics by celebrating his artistic achievement and defending his long reticence on personal matters: ‘Passive suffering: who said it was disallowed / As a theme for poetry?’ (EL, p. 62). Hughes’s personal tragedies are mythologized through comparisons with King Hrethel’s
familial sorrows in *Beowulf*. Similarly, by placing them in the context of the Dantesque underworld of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’, Heaney manages to effect a successful mythologization of Hughes. The word ‘Pounded’, which begins line 4, may allude to Ezra Pound as another case in which the artistic has been inextricably entangled with the personal and political. The opening of Heaney’s commemorative poem is charged with pugilist polemics:

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Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
Not past a thing. Not understanding or telling
Or forgiveness.

But often past oneself,
Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs
In language that can still knock language sideways.
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*(EL, p. 61)*

The intemperate recriminations are not addressed specifically to the detractors of Ted Hughes; rather, the invectives respond more generally to the many ‘posts’ in the field of literary theory and philosophy: post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-humanism. These recent reorientations are refuted on the grounds that the traditional human values of rationality, narrativity and atonement outlast such intellectual trends. The poem indicates that such cognitive hermeneutics should be separated from the intimate relations of personal creativity and individual interpretations.

Despite these reservations, the play in the poem on ‘post’, ‘past’, and ‘pounded’ signals the incorporation in the book of innovative features that ensue from recent theories and contemporary poetry. The frequently conspicuous linguistic performativity is enhanced by word-play that destabilizes fixed meanings and testifies to the rhythms of renewal. The coinage ‘po-ethics’ (*EL*, p. 55), for example, which features in Heaney’s ‘gloss’ on W. H. Auden – one of the ‘Ten Glosses’ sequence – suggests at once Italian rivers, theoretical torrents, multiple abbreviations and scatological humour. The word is applied to the watershed in commitment and quality that occurred in Auden’s poetry after he moved to America, against which Heaney advocates: ‘the definite rings of genius rang in his voice’ (*EL*, p. 55). By analogy the term ‘po-ethics’ could also be read as a defence of the collection’s recuperation of Italian art from Virgil to the Renaissance, as a humanist stay against the subjection of standard values to critical scrutiny. In a wider context the pejorative neologism might pose a standard critique of the relativizing of traditional ethics by intellectual sophistry – a response to the ubiquity of Derridean...
deconstruction and the other fashionable postmodernist critical approaches. One notices how ‘Ten Glosses’ moves quickly beyond Auden, ranging from translations of traditional Irish epigrams via the gospels and Shakespeare to Owen: it has breadth and variety, and it comes across as a casual and high-spirited exercise in canonical observation. Other acts of rearguard protection can be detected in the not infrequent use of oppusitums; ‘unbending’, ‘undarkening’, ‘unhoused’, ‘unforgotten’, ‘unbelonging’ (EL, pp. 5, 9, 26, 48, 79). In their conceptual reversal and constructive denial, these terms participate in certain post-modernist procedures. The simulation of deconstruction by an old rhetorical figure might illustrate the view that there is little new in much recent post-modernist playfulness.

Still, some aspects of Electric Light promote the mode of linguistic undecidability, hermeneutic deferral, the amplified constructions of ‘text’ and the intellectual detachment that are features of contemporary theory. The tripartite ‘Red, White and Blue’ plays on the multiple connotations and cross-cultural associations of colours. The Loose Box’, a formally mixed poem, teases out the title’s many meanings but gives more shape than significance to its own arena of artistic freedom and stable confinement. ‘The Border Campaign’, a trisected sonnet with a three-line envoy from Beowulf written for Nadine Gordimer, conlates the facts, fiction, form and frontiers of South-African apartheid, the IRA’s border campaigns of the late 1950s, juvenile sports clashes, and Grendel’s incursions on Heorot.

The collection also contains snippets of unusual serio-comic procedures. Heaney balances his implicit tenets with disarming self-irony. ‘Your bogs were summer bogs’ (EL, p. 19) introduces with amusement a new perspective on the much discussed ‘bog poems’ in Wintering Out and North. The ventriloquist quip in ‘Glanmore Eclogue’, ‘Meliboeus would have called me “Mr Honey”’ (EL, p. 26), responds with ambivalent humour to his own mellifluous mastery and his frequent celebration of marital bliss and bucolic reverie – most prominent in the sonnet sequences ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ in Field Work and ‘Glanmore Revisited’ in Seeing Things – and the propagation of these qualities as one of the most valid functions of art, not least in the context of violence and suffering. This strain in his poetry that on occasions has precipitated compunctions is now a mere matter of elegant commentary. Whether this self-irony is a concession to the spirit of the age or a premeditated revaluation, it imparts a note of complacency that also risks reducing the strength of his present and past poetry. It has the dual affect of refreshing, but also undercutting, the sober and solemn stance and subject-matter. The congenial jokes also detract and contribute to the poet’s Nobel status. The colloquial
undercutting of the official status contributes positively to the portrayal of a public man in a position where the popular banter is based upon acquired prestige.

‘Glanmore Eclogue’, ‘Virgil: Eclogue IX’ and ‘Bann Valley Eclogue’ constitute the direct references in the book to the Roman author of epic and poetry. Canonical classical figures such as Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Dante have of course provided important stimulus to writers in Ireland as elsewhere, but of these four Virgil tends to be the least prominent in Heaney’s poetry and perhaps in contemporary Irish writing at large. Together with Muldoon’s exploitation of the *Aeneid* in *Hay* (1998), Heaney’s recourse to Virgil hints at aesthetic reorientation and contextual changes. Highly artificial and metaliterary, and with the relation of the world of song to the world outside as a central concern, the *Eclogues* are well attuned to Heaney’s idiom in the aftermath of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the wider perspective of the *Aeneid* suggests a transference of focus from Homeric war hymns to new beginnings. As such Heaney’s eclogues also refract his previous choice of Agamemnon’s tragedy as a post-Trojan myth for cease-fire settlements in the ‘Mycenae Lookout’ series in *The Spirit Level* and mollify that sequence’s introspection and internal violence.

‘Glanmore Eclogue’ casts Heaney in the role of Tityrus, a probable mask for Virgil himself in the classic pastoral, the farmer who won reprieve from dispossession. To some extent Virgilian voices function as Heaney’s subjective correlative in this collection, just as the mythological Irish bird-king, Sweeney, has done previously. For most of his life Virgil wrote his poetry in a context of civil war, and the dislocation of farmers was a recurrent imperial measure. Virgil based his pastorals on the work of his acknowledged master, Theocritus, whose *Idylls* he frequently represents as allegories of contemporary events while still retaining a personal intimacy of love relations. Virgil’s latinizing of Theocritus also involved the aesthetic principles of the great Alexandrine poet-critic Callimachus. The parallels to Heaney are evident and they involve pastoral praise, poetry contests and political debate. ‘Bann Valley Eclogue’ presents the themes on a grandiloquent note:

> Bann Valley Muses, give us a song worth singing,  
> Something that rises like the curtain in  
> Those words *And it came to pass* or *In the beginning*.  
> Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil  
> And the child that’s due. Maybe, heavens, sing  
> Better times for her and her generation.
Based on Virgil's prophetic millenarianism and encomiastic birth poem, Eclogue IV, Heaney counterpoints many of his earlier grim visions with an auspicious poetic prospect that reverberates with biblical miracles and Yeatsian gyres and prayers. The descent of Apollonian order in the poem indicates a global perspective by engulfing urban divisions, Northern Ireland and Israel: ‘the old markings / Will avail no more to keep east bank from west’ (EL, p. 11). Heaney’s translation ‘Virgil: Eclogue IX’ undermines this grandeur by reintroducing the theme of dispossession and questioning the powers of art: ‘But songs and tunes / Can no more hold out against brute force than doves / When eagles swoop’ (EL, p. 31). Finally, ‘Glanmore Eclogue’ introduces more mundane matters in colloquial terms and pedestrian prose:

But now with all this money coming in
And peace being talked up, the boot’s on the other foot.
First it was Meliboeus’ people
Went to the wall, now it will be us.
Small farmers here are priced out of the market.

(EL, pp. 35–6)

The thinly veiled issues of the Celtic Tiger, peace dividends and EEC relations in the vernacular verses counteract the foregoing poetic afflatus and balance the artistic and the actual. The poem ends on the pastoral note in a ‘song for the glen and you’: ‘The lark sings out his clear tidings. / Summer, shimmer, perfect days’ (EL, p. 37).

The texts and contexts of Virgil set in motion many enabling similarities with Heaney’s, but also a few paradoxes. The pastoral poems range from the nostalgic dream for (the rebirth of) a utopian past to contemporary reality, but the classical framework diverts much of its potential energy like a lightning rod. Previously Heaney has often pitted his pastoral elements against the great English poets and plantation administrators of the English Renaissance, Wordsworthian escapism or the progressive industrialism in Hardy, to charge the poles of the poetic and the political. In this respect the recourse to Virgil appears as a less controversial method in which the conservation of the classics becomes the overriding task. The intimations in both Virgil’s and Heaney’s eclogues of the great epic of the Augustan empire, the Aeneid, also strike discordant notes. Whenever did Heaney give voice or praise to the victor? Despite the inescapability of his Catholic background, and the hostility this has caused in some camps, it is exactly the continuous mediations of his prose and poetry that characterize his art. ‘Two buckets were easier carried
than one. / I grew up in between’, says the persona in *The Haw Lantern*’s ‘Terminus’, capturing Heaney’s *via media*. Heaney’s continuous mediations risk blandness, but in a highly charged field where the extremes lay claim to the middle, they always constituted a radical position. Nevertheless, there is in this book’s ecumenical embrace a sense that Heaney has chosen sides, as he has moved from acting as the internal negotiator of multiple pressures to advocating a general message of peace, reconciliation and classicist art. Looking back on the history of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as on the history of his own art, Heaney presents his encomia at a stage of maturity and peace, and the visionary fashioning of an undifferentiated world order might suggest why he also ignores the homosexual features of Virgil’s cycle.

Airy brilliances glimmer in the many forms of natural, human and technical light, and perhaps these incandescences are no more radiant than in ‘The Clothes Shrine’. ‘Light white muslin blouses / On a see-through nylon line’ (*EL*, p. 27) wave like white flags in a domestic scene of peaceful harmony as an interior version of the public experiences of the lovers in ‘Red, White and Blue’, and as a contrast to ‘chimney flakes flecking the air, carbon-dotting the white / Wash on the line’ (*EL*, p. 56) of industrial and belligerent Belfast in the later ‘Colly’, the penultimate piece in ‘Ten Glosses’. With recollections of the familial bonds and the sequestered scene in ‘Sunlight’ (*North*) and the fifth sonnet in memory of Heaney’s mother in ‘Clearances’ (*The Haw Lantern*), the refined garments exude intimacy and dedication in the ‘drag of the workaday’ (*EL*, p. 27). A simile brings in the myth of St Brigid’s air-drying her cloak upon rays of sun to bestow divine blessing and beautify the partner. Several feminine rhymes address the textual gender balance. Despite what feminist critics might say about the conventional scene, it envisions the possibilities of familial felicity in the domestic sphere and thus might be seen to refract Heaney’s and fellow poets’ public engagement and to reflect a more optimistic notion in Northern Ireland. Previously in Heaney’s work, the craft of masculine professions – farming, fishing, thatching, divining – has represented the art of poetry, to which lineage this poem adds a feminine touch. The blouse shapes the poem’s visual form, breezy trimeters, and light mood, but more than attending to the technical skill of turning the line, this poem pegs the problems of dressing the line. In this case the line could be interpreted as the poet’s intuitive sketch of the poem’s structure, but the image also underlies the relevancies of ancestry and communication and weaves, perhaps too obviously, the many seams of text and texture. The laundering is also linguistic. With Heaney’s earlier politicization of linen and the strong
association of the material with Ulster’s flax industry, the choice of ‘muslin’ and ‘nylon’ may not be accidental as it brings in a wider world and new fibres. The 17 verses uncover the clothesline hidden in the title and cleanse ‘The Clothes Shrine’ from associations of darkness and death. Connotations of gloom are eclipsed by the poem’s heliotropism; conversely, the title’s sense of the holy sanctifies the inner chambers of conjugal life. Similarly, a glide of monosyllabic and alliterative chimes – ‘shrine’, ‘line’, ‘shine’, ‘sun’, ‘air’ – contributes to lift the sombre spell. The suppression of ‘shrink’ in these relations possibly intimates volition not to recoil from themes and tropes that might be considered private, sexist and naïve, or from a metaphysical inclination in an era of post-modernist desublimation. As a finish the penultimate line’s cliché renovation from excuse or contempt to illumination and lightness in ‘made light of’ suits well the renewal of linguistics, love and daily tasks and bears traces of the author’s self-conscious gaiety.

The élan vital of the three first nature poems, the revitalization of classics, and the renewal of dead language appertain to the two consistent themes of life and death. These dual drives give shape and significance to the book as the first section concentrates on elegies and celebrations of vital forces, and the second offers a set of eulogies. Heaney’s subtle treatment of the themes, however, defies such facile bifurcation. In subject-matter, form, and allusions many memento mori underlie the elevated mood, just as the commemorations bring life to the deceased. Heaney frequently captures these complexities with zest and gravity. Nevertheless, the importance dedicated to such perennial themes as the joys and griefs of man’s short span on earth borders on both senses of the pathetic, and the poems that delve into these deep concerns on a less spectacular scale might be the most successful.

With its sober celebration of childbirth and the healing powers of classical myth and individual memory, ‘Out of the Bag’ initiates these different strands. The cycles of seasons and life are interwoven into the four sections, of which the first portrays with child-like mystery the birth of the young persona’s sibling by the hands of Kerlin, the family doctor. In relaxed rhythms and easy idiom, the narrative offers the quotidian miracle that also represents the marvels of poetry and spiritual revelations. With a Platonic sense of midwifery, the poem also contains recuperations of the sanguinary chill of North and the sombre introversion of Door into the Dark, and grass from the sanctuaries of the ancient healer god at Epidaurus, Asclepius, is sent to friends who undergo chemotherapy. The account of memories ends on a dialogic moment of familial union and generation: ‘And what do you think / Of the new wee baby the doctor brought us all / When I was asleep?’ (EL, p. 10).
‘Sonnets from Hellas’ also constitutes a chronotopographical tour de force of salutary verses, and it makes much sense that a collection of poetry concerning birth and commemoration returns to the European cradle of culture in the polished form of the Renaissance. The cycle records visits to famous places in Greece – most likely from Heaney’s own vacation there at the time when he was announced as the 1995 Nobel Laureate – and resounds with his infallible rhythms and melodies, as well as his capacity to see the sublime in the secular. ‘Into Arcadia’ returns to the fields of Pan and the mythical setting of Theocritus’s *Idylls* and Virgil’s *Eclogues*. The coalescence of pastoral themes and sonnet form recalls the period in English literary history when Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton excelled in the genres. Heaney’s mastery of myth and metrics makes for impressive reading: ‘It was opulence and amen on the mountain road’ (*EL*, p. 38). The spiritual buoyancy of the first line meets with a farmer’s practical irrigation (lines 3–5) known from Hesiod’s *Works and Days*; the golden apples of myth have been ‘raunched and scrunched’ on the road by cars, and the couplet ends with a fantastic temporal vision: ‘And then it was the goatherd / With his goats in the forecourt of the filling station / Subsisting beyond eclogue and translation’ (*EL*, p. 38). The apprehension in art of such moments reveals Heaney’s imaginative gift and talent for transportation of daily trivia into sublime poetry. This ability is admirable stilnovisti without the emotional anguish of personal love. In these sonnets dominated by the love of art and the metamorphoses of the mundane to the miraculous, Athena – the patroness of arts, crafts and the Greek capital; the personification of wisdom and Greek goddess of war – is a natural feature of the persona’s ‘favorite bas-relief’ (*EL*, p. 41). The limpid lyrics and soft music revel in a hedonistic savouring of food and phonetics, and the aesthetic form and classical framework control with epiphanic quality the persona’s expression of ineffable inner joy. The shifts between spiritual and the sensual exude enchantment and transportation to which the author’s close friends also contribute. Heaney’s host in Hellas, Dimitri Hadzi, as well as Robert Fitzgerald, Harvard classicist and translator of Homer, and Sean Brown, the victim of sectarian murder, take their natural place in this pantheon.

Of the several elegies some lack in novelty and lustre. Many of those remembered are fairly familiar – even canonical – figures, not only in Heaney’s oeuvre, but also in most homes with bookshelves, and at times the unsurprising listing of names or choice of form are not indicative of Heaney’s usually high standard. The pat tic of trochaic rhetoric in ‘Audenesque’ is so close to the final stanzas of Auden’s elegy for Yeats that the title’s self-conscious mannerism does not quite legitimate the
expository posture and superficial portrait of Brodsky (whose memory the poem celebrates) as impeccably light-hearted. The conceit of ‘The Bookcase’ is more woody than witty, the litany of great writers more listless than lustrous. ‘Ten Glosses’ read like a variegated catalogue of canon building. Heaney’s multi-stylistic flair is rarely, but is sometimes, unextraordinary.

In contrast, “‘Would They Had Stay’d’” appears as a lyrical masterpiece of commemoration. The titular quotation from Macbeth invokes admirably a magic moment of a childhood memory – ‘startlers standing still on fritillary land’ (EL, p. 68) – as symbolic of canonical lines from Scottish companions. By its vernacular sympathy, the lines include the spirit of friends and family, and they embrace the Scottish writers Norman MacCaig, Iain MacGabhain (Ian Crichton Smith), Sorley MacLean and George Mackay Brown. In this eulogy it is extremely fitting that some of the missing lines from the titular quotation contextualize commemoration within the philosophical, historical and political. Macbeth: ‘Into the air, and what seemed corporeal melted, as breath into the wind. Would they had stayed’. Banquo: ‘Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner?’13 The repercussions from Macbeth infuse the loss of Heaney’s friends with a sense of tragic despair, heroic stature and national resistance. Certainly, Heaney has brought new light to Scottish, Irish and Eastern European poets in his former prose and poetry; perhaps that is a reason why the celebration of some of the same names in this volume does not contain the same dynamism. The memorial stanzas are at their best when the verses cross the many lines of life, land and literature, and when Heaney canonizes new names. The balancing in this poem of Scottish writers with Shakespearean centrality, Yeatsian allusions and Virgilian pastoralism, poetic versatility and forceful singular voice, suggests vistas for future canons.

Whereas the volume starts with a shamrock of nature vitality, it ends on a triptych of human terminality. ‘Sruth’, ‘Seeing the Sick’ and ‘Electric Light’ present invigorating portraits of the dying and the dead with lyrical beauty and memorable profundity. A salvaging buoyancy flows in ‘Sruth’, which takes its title from the Irish for ‘stream’. ‘Sruth’ connects directly with the water imagery of the opening poems and echoes ‘The Clothes Shrine’ as well as ‘A New Song’ from North. The connotations of time, age and place of the anachronistic word from an endangered language suit the commemoration of an old Irish woman who died of cancer. ‘The bilingual race / And truth of that water’ (EL, p. 77) declares the linguistic fluency of the Anglo-Irish and celebrates this salubrious feature
of national topography, as in a similar vein, ‘dishabillis’ conflates French, English and Gaelic audio-visual currents. The poem touches upon conventional female representations of Ireland. ‘Your head in the air’ and ‘Those sky-maiden haunts’ allude to the Spéirbhean, the skywoman of the aisling tradition. Her habiliment of seasonal transformation revokes Cathleen ni Houlihan: ‘Neck-baring snowdrops – // Like you at the sruth – // First-footing the springtime, // Fit for what comes’ (EL, p. 78). The personal cleansing appears against the mythical backdrop of the washer of the ford, a covert reminder of female restitution of peace and innocence after a period of war and bloodshed. Nevertheless, the personal compassion outshines literary conventions in the memory of cancer-suffering Mary O Muirthe. Mary’s appellation for care visits to the younger persona enhances the composure with which she tackles her fraught situation, and the elegy serves her memory more than political or mytho-poetic purposes.

The transformation of inauspicious vibrations to written arts in the first poem – ‘negative ions in the open air / Are poetry to me’ (EL, p. 3) – reaches its apex in the volume’s final and title poem, ‘Electric Light’. The vibrant commemoration of a close maternal relative displaces the opening poem’s summary celebration of the rebel. The poem also illustrates how Heaney holds out against any contemporary school of thought that questions the redemptive powers of poetry, the values of classicist aesthetics, or family tradition. The tercets record a child’s fascination for the light switch and the wireless and eulogize with classical allusions the old woman’s familial words and care that in the persona’s memory endure the thrills of technology:

Candle-grease congealed, dark-streaked with wick-soot . . .
The smashed thumb-nail
Of that ancient mangled thumb was puckered pearl,
Rucked quartz, a littered Cumae.
In the first house where I saw electric light,
She sat with her fur-lined slippers unzipped,
Year in, year out, in the small chair, and whispered
In a voice that at its loudest did nothing else
But whisper.

(EL, p. 80)

The solid compounds and metric fortitude reflect the woman’s rectitude as the resourceful synonyms bear witness of her strength, and the gothic
description of the candle and thumb imbues her memory with the horror of a young child’s imagination, posing a counterpoint to the child’s later thrills with new technology. Allusions to the Cumaen prophetess function as a reminder of old age and death, a personalization of the ‘Sibyl’ of Field Work, who is asked to predict the uncertain future of a bomb-ridden society: ‘What will become of us?’ The account in Ovid’s Metamorphoses of Sybil, who was granted longevity but not continuous youth, lingers with the qualms of old age, and the recourse to this myth parallels Heaney’s translation of Chapter 6 of Virgil’s Aeneid as an epigraph to Seeing Things. In that book ‘The Golden Bough’ combines the panorama of the modernist mythic method with Heaney’s personal tribute to his father who had just died. The present poem portrays personal endurance and mixes the movement of memory with linguistic prowess in the way the purgatorial standstill is further emphasized by the appositional and static syntax that contains no main verb. The unmentioned Sibyl also appears in the crone’s whisper, ‘Urgent, sibilant / Ails’ (EL, p. 80) and the sibylline sound and structure. The many voices – the young child and mature commemorator, the old babysitter, the discursive interjection and intertextual elements – incorporate cultural commemoration but also augment the memory of the maternal relative as she surpasses these digressions.

The final stanzas of ‘Electric Light’ present in retrospect the child’s domestic safety and avid play with the light switch and the wireless, but finally draw the lines with Heaney’s persistent chthonic element that was signalled in his debut poem, ‘Digging’ (Death of a Naturalist) – the employment of the ground as a metaphor for memory and a topos for personal, national and canonical roots.

Electric light shone over us, I feared
The dirt-tracked flint and fissure of her nail,
So plectrum-hard, glit-glittery, it must still keep
Among beads and vertebra in the Derry ground.

(EL, p. 81)

The Heraclitean flux and uncertain undulations of the two first poems are laid to rest in the final conclusion. Dark memories and familial shadows penetrate the illuminations of modern technology. These shifts indicate that Heaney’s electric light is to be found in the dark corners of culture and memory. ‘Compose in darkness. / Expect aurora borealis / in the long foray / but no cascade of the light’ commands the unidentifiable voice of ‘North’. Despite the novel linguistic turns in Electric Light, Heaney
stands firm in his ethical conviction and will not be coerced by the pressures of literary theories or social metamorphoses. At a time when the gaudy and garish of contemporary culture flicker and flash everywhere, it is still the canonical currents and personal memory that ensure valuable insight: the recovery of Virgilian verse in the era of semiotic play, the profundity of *Beowulf* and Shakespeare in the age of ‘reality’ television, the sacred personal memory of family in an ‘open’ society. Heaney’s poetic power is admirable, and *Electric Light* shimmers with vision and the ‘nostalgia for world culture’ that Heaney calls upon in his recent translation of *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, it would come as no surprise, as Robert McLiam Wilson’s patricidal article evinces, if many a younger writer, critic or reader will judge Heaney’s poetry to be still backwater.

**Notes**

2. S. Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 7. Subsequent references to this volume will be signalled in the text by *EL* followed by page number.
12 For Heaney’s self-recriminations, see, for example, the ‘Station Island’ sequence in *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984, pp. 61–97, and the deliberations on ‘Song and Suffering’ in the essay, ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker’, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. ix–xxiii.
14 For a feminist critique of conventional feminine figures in Heaney’s poetry, see P. Coughlan, “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney’, *Seamus Heaney*, ed. M. Allen, pp. 185–205.
15 See S. Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999), pp. xxv–xxvi. In an empirical quest for the roots and use of the word ‘thole’, similar to Stephen Dedalus’s for ‘tundish’ in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Heaney writes in his vindication of the Anglo-Saxon epic: ‘What I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with *thole* on its multi-cultural odyssey was the feeling that Osip Mandelstam once defined as a “nostalgia for world culture”. And this was a nostalgia I didn’t even know I suffered until I experienced its fulfilment in this little epiphany. It was as if, on the analogy of baptism by desire, I had undergone something like an illumination by philology. And even though I did not know at the time, I had by then reached the point where I was ready to translate *Beowulf*.’
Seamus Heaney loves literary allusion, in part no doubt because of the times, in which assertive intertextuality and collage are fashionable or obligatory, in part no doubt because critics have urged him to break away from traditional self-contained lyric-narrative, in part no doubt because of his honourable personal and political preoccupation with his own art, and in part no doubt because he grew up as a student of literature, to become a teacher and a bespoke critic as well as a poet. These may be reasons rather than motives for individual allusions. In ‘Alphabets’ (*The Haw Lantern*) he is ironic about allusion as he imagines his adult self grown up to lecture in a wooden O: ‘He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves’,¹ but this is an unusual deprecation, and as a rule neither self-criticism nor amusement show themselves in the literary references that are lavishly scattered in his lectures, published criticism and poetry.

In *Station Island* the poet-penitent-pilgrim is interviewed by several ghosts, including that of Joyce, who arrives in the final section (p. xii). He is physically identifiable by height and bad eyesight, and his sudden appearance is startling but shows little inwardness with Joyce’s art, life or character. Joyce dauntingly patronized his distinguished fellow Irish poet, Yeats, regretting that his senior was too old to benefit from his advice. Heaney’s mentor speaks sharply (like William Carleton and other tutors) but without Joycean wit, irony or invention, offering obvious good advice in simple, everyday phrase, often cliché: ‘Keep at a tangent’, ‘let fly’, ‘The main thing is to write / for the joy of it’, ‘Take off from here’, and ‘swim / out on your own . . .’. (Heaney revised the poem, and amongst other changes for *New Selected Poems, 1966–87*, he cut out one cliché, ‘get back in harness’, and the reference to Joyce as ‘Old father’.) There are Joycean allusions, to the tundish episode in *A Portrait of*
the Artist as a Young Man, to Ulysses, and Finnegans Wake, for instance, ‘voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers’, and ‘signatures’, but though the visitation is abrupt and spooky, like most of the others, the message is not strikingly worded, and the absence of idiolect is conspicuous because of Joyce’s own varied powerful mimicry. Heaney praises Joyce’s ‘voice’, ‘like a prosecutor’s or a singer’s’ – but ‘and’ might be better than ‘or’? – and elaborates compliment, action and dramatized advice:

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cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite
as a steel nib’s downstroke, quick and clean,
and suddenly he hit a litter basket
with his stick, saying, ‘Your obligation
is not discharged by any common rite.
What you do you must do on your own.
The main thing is to write
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust
that imagines its haven like your hands at night
dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast’.2
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The language springs into sensual life with this last brilliant breast-simile, which is all Heaney, hotly savouring sight and touch. (In the piercingly erotic ‘A Dream of Jealousy’ (Field Work) the dreamer asks a woman in the presence of her jealous rival to show him the purple star of her breast.)

The invocation does not strongly imagine Joyce. It is not dialogue but monologue. The interesting word ‘narcotic’ fits into Heaney’s music, his dramatic onomatopoeia of agitated, angry, startling advice, active assonance and alliteration – mimic, litter, quick, hit, tick, basket – but isn’t right for the great wide-awake wide-awakening innovator. When I wrote to ask Heaney about ‘narcotic’, he replied courteously that he was thinking of Joyce’s recorded voice (musically trained) reading Anna Livia, ‘a bit entrancing’, and accepted that Joyce’s writing ‘voice’ was not narcotic and that he had laid himself open to some confusion. He does: the sound’s good, sense less clear. Anna Livia lulls Finn’s and the river’s story to an end as Liffey enters sea, but the effect on a reader is far from soporific, and the other words in that descriptive list – ‘cunning’, ‘mimic’ and ‘definite’ – denote the writing, not speaking, voice. It is loose writing, category-confusion. But it is not just one word: looked at as a whole, this invocation of Heaney’s Irish ancestor is a far cry from Joyce himself, who wrote for himself but was brilliantly attentive to
other genius, engaged in two-way imitation in the true Renaissance sense. Heaney made more room for Joyce's shade in an earlier poem 'Traditions' (Wintering Out), which ends with a re-imagined Leopold Bloom answering Shakespeare's Irish MacMorris; as in Ulysses he stands up to Dublin's Citizen-Cyclops for Joyce's wonderful reversal of heroic militancy and chauvinism:

And sensibly, though so much later, the wandering Bloom replied, 'Ireland', said Bloom, 'I was born here. Ireland'.

'The Railway Children' (Station Island) is one of Heaney's revivals of imaginative childhood. Its children climb a railway cutting, to see the world from an odd angle, with the creative strangeness of an innocent eye:

We were eye-level with the white cups Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires. Like lovely freehand they curved for miles East and miles west beyond us, sagging Under their burden of swallows.

The poet's fresh image, 'Like lovely freehand', has a joyfulness that licenses adult aptness, before it makes room for the child's strange deep creativity, its intuitive conceptual grasp made in sharp physical seeing:

We thought words travelled the wires In the shiny pouches of raindrops, Each one seeded full with the light Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves So infinitesimally scaled We could stream through the eye of a needle.

This fine poem seems to me oddly presented and represented by its title, which inevitably refers us to E. Nesbit's classic children's story, without relevance of narrative, genre, style or subject, distracting the reader to question the choice. This reference is the more inexplicable because of the climactic allusion to the gospel-writer's 'Christ's poetry', the eye-catching simile. In this Heaney rewrites and assimilates the pious rich man's inability to enter the kingdom of heaven, re-imagining a story the
child would know, and for the child’s eye, with novelty, wit and fresh beauty. This allusion is reworked and answered, in a true conversation of texts and authors. (Heaney is good with Biblical images and stories, perhaps because he is dealing with translation and has no problem of assimilating style? He returns to this parable in later poems, including ‘The Rain Stick’ (The Spirit Level), which repeats the raindrop image in a nice self-allusion.) Why does the title risk an inert introduction for a poem that ends so superbly?

The poem says ‘We were small and thought we knew nothing / Worth knowing’, which bridges the skywriting conceit and the child’s odd clear vision of carrier-pouches. I don’t think children deprecate their imagination like this, and perhaps Heaney says so in order to mark creative growth. When Auden puts down Yeats’s desire to be a golden bird in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, joking that Nannie would call this ‘a story’, the critic in the younger poet is perhaps too literal-minded for the older poet, and perhaps I am being too literal-minded now. But even if faithfully recalled, the children’s intellectual modesty seems wrong for this poem, going against the reason, observation and creativity proved and celebrated in those seeded shiny purses. The poet perfectly creates or recreates or remembers – imagination is a daughter of memory – a child’s images, then betrays that imagination the poem imagines. The poem could have been, perhaps wanted to be, Heaney’s version of Wordsworth’s ‘Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood’, or Dylan Thomas’s ‘Fern Hill’, but the disclaimer, like the inappropriate and modest title, doesn’t show faith in the poem. There is a similar disclaimer of wisdom in another poem about childhood, ‘The Real Names’ (Electric Light). Here too the past is recalled strongly and tenderly, but its acting schoolboys are vividly and affectionately revived only to become ‘moon-calves, know-nothings’. Heaney admires Wordsworth, but he is not Wordsworthian about the child in these voiced judgements.

There is another adopted title (repeated in the poem) in ‘The Ministry of Fear’ (North), and though I’m not keen on such borrowings in which either lender or borrower loses and the lender doesn’t have a say in the transaction, Graham Greene’s unnerving novel or ‘entertainment’ as he called The Ministry of Fear is certainly relevant, grimly so. But it is upstaged in political urgency, robbed of bibliographical ascendancy, and though there are thematic links, the borrowed title, as ‘The Railway Children’ introduces the wrong genre and register, is an unnecessary and inept appropriation, a bit lightweight for such a grave poem.
I feel more strongly about the next example. There is appropriation but nothing weak about the powerful title of ‘Strange Fruit’ (North), one of the Glob-Bog series. Its title is taken from the famous Southern song about lynching, passionately sung by Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, and links one terrible murder and cause with another. The physical imagistic link of the song title with the shrunk, dark preserved head of the body in the bog is horribly apt, and stressed by the repeated ‘prune’ metaphor in the poem. The borrowing may have been motivated by Heaney’s use of the old ritual murder to image homeland racial atrocities, but though this makes it understandable, I don’t think it justifies it.

The desire to keep moral company is sympathetic, but I first read and still reread the poem with shock and distaste, feeling that the original title and text, even more unbearably apt than the borrowing, and getting there first, should not be bracketed, not compared, not historicized, not generalized, but left alone with their prior congruity and incongruity, their individual agonized imagery of perversion and denaturing, undistracted.

The third Glanmore sonnet (Field Work) alludes to William and Dorothy Wordsworth, its pastoral interrupted by a woman’s voice after the speaker names the writing brother and sister:

. . . ‘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 . . . ?’

Why the demurral? Why not compare? The demurral emphasizes the comparison, but leaves poetic reasons unclear. A critic’s reason might be that the poem’s thought-feeling supplies insufficient context and reason for the introduction of Dorothy and William Wordsworth. There is nature, nature’s education, loving couple in a cottage, pastoral retreat from north to south, like one of the Wordsworths’ moves, even hedgerows — the poet speaks of his Hedgeschool — but nothing strikingly Wordsworthian in the language, feeling or characters. What might be the woman’s reason? After she interrupts the poem she is interrupted too, and we are left to guess meanings. She might mean that the Wordsworths are too illustrious or homely or brother-and-sisterly for this comparison. Or that they are not sexy enough — though they were. Is it a modest refusal? Or a less than modest occupation that recognizes and dodges immodesty?
In ‘Glanmore Eclogue’ (Electric Light), a poem modelled on Yeatsian and perhaps Virgilian eclogue and pastoral, there is one of Heaney’s frequent Yeatsian allusions:

POET
A woman changed my life. Call her Augusta
Because we arrived in August, and from now on
This month’s baled hay and blackberries and combines
Will spell Augusta’s bounty.7

But we know the real reason has less to do with August than with Yeats, and the calendar reason and roundabout reference to Lady Augusta Gregory look coy. The real Augusta must be Ann Saddlemyer, who once owned the cottage in Synge country and rented it to the Heaneys, and who is recognized in the poem by personal gratitude and praise for her knowledge of the region and her work on Synge, the Melibeous of the poem. She is a Yeats scholar too, but the naming of Yeats’s patron and hostess seems gratuitous.

I feel a similar unease when reading ‘A Peacock’s Feather’ (The Haw Lantern) when the writing guest in a ‘green court’ thinks ‘I might as well be in Coole Park’, and a Yeatsian echo treads its heavy grand intrusion into the delicate gentle celebration of new birth, house and family. The writer claims to level off his ‘cart-track voice to garden tones’8 for the baby’s sake – but Coole garden tones? A pity, as the peacock’s feather drifts into the poem with such bright soft casualness.

An allusion to Wyatt has been admired9 in the tenth Glanmore sonnet (Field Work) beginning ‘I dreamt we slept in a moss in Donegal’. After a compound allusion to several love-stories – Lorenzo and Jessica, a cold climate, and Diarmuid and Grainne – a dream within a dream offers another, introducing a personal memory by a quotation from Wyatt’s famous poem that begins ‘They flee from me, that sometime did me seek’. Heaney quotes the words spoken to the forsaken speaker by one who sought and fled: ‘how like you this?’ Here too I feel disquiet and distraction. Though this allusion claims kinship in erotic tenderness, adopting the deliberated solicitation and sexy performative ‘this?’ of the woman (perhaps Anne Boleyn) in Wyatt’s poem, for Heaney’s first-night memory, her words seem reduced to an intimate knowing offer of recognizable quotation. They come from such a particular love-lament, so political, so personal, so once sweet, so bitterly revived, so hopelessly desirous, so changed, so lost, their passion so dangerous and precarious, not to do with dreaming but cruel waking, that it shouldn’t be adopted
for a poem whose memory and dream are so much simpler, past and present so sweet, ending so happy: ‘The respite in our dewy dreaming faces’. Such a delighted smooth lyric could afford to leave Wyatt’s alone, with its emotionally and rhythmically rough lack of respite, its harsh ending: ‘But since that I so unkindly am served, / I fain would know what she hath deserv’d’.

In both these borrowings what suffers most is the host art, which may never again be read or heard in its independence. T. S. Eliot – and others – teach us to see how new genius changes ancestral voices, but this isn’t always for the good of the ancestor. Breaking of bounds may be consciously or unconsciously the second poet’s purpose; he may want another’s text to break the limits and unity of his form. But he may break it for the original too, which has no say in the matter, and which he sometimes neglects as he borrows. The borrower may suffer too. Some allusions are more interfering than others, and though the Heaney poem may not lose by the quotation, it may be diminished for a reader who knows Wyatt, who is distracted by a sense of parasitism, and provoked to invidious comparison. Perhaps I am exaggerating this sense of interference, which obviously varies from reader to reader, but to me the allusion seems blunt and insufficiently sensitive. I am moved and taught by many of Heaney’s poems, but I don’t want to be reminded of him when I listen to Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ or when I read Wyatt, each so particular and profound in passions and politics.

Heaney’s elegy for Joseph Brodsky, ‘Audenesque’ (Electric Light) uses the trochaic metre and quatrains of the third section of Auden’s ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, but the structural pastiche brings out differences between the laments. Heaney is lamenting a friend and fellow poet, and his poem is one of private memory, warmly nostalgic. Auden’s is a hard act to follow; his elegy does so many things at once. He writes a poem that attaches itself grandly, lightly and affectionately to the great traditions and rituals of English literary elegy, in which Milton, Gray and Shelley profoundly reflect on their art, though without Auden’s imaginative close attentiveness to the dead life. He writes a public elegy in a personal voice, less concerned than Milton and Gray with his own lot, but writing about the other is a way that richly implies the fullness and individuality of the writing self. He engages wit, intellectual subtlety, irony and sympathy to confront, praise and criticize Yeats’s life, ideas and poetry, in his own profound nonchalant way, writing it all in that hard-to-define emotional medium – affection for someone you know only as an artist. He imagines a deathbed, then seizes that moment when a life becomes death, the famous man becomes only the famous
man, in his perfect quotable phrase, ‘he became his admirers’. He generalizes and preaches about poetry and politics in his own witty music. He imagines sympathetic weather as dark cold day, invokes political dread of 1939, ‘In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark’, and echoes Yeats’s words and feeling in passionate apostrophe, ‘Still persuade us to rejoice . . .’. Auden writes a tombeau in which self is subdued to the other, though it is clearly a poet arguing about poetry and politics, and assuming the company of poet as fool – ‘you were silly like us’, right for Yeats the believer in fairies, ghosts and blueshirts, and the writer of ‘Lapis Lazuli’, as for Auden, good at seeing the joke against himself. The poet is using his full range of powers to celebrate and define another’s. Heaney’s poem seems slight beside this; its anecdotes of jokey companionable drinking and affectionate comitatus look in-group, a bit laddish, its punning simile praising two men cracking like whips inscribed by that gun-snug pen:

But no vodka, cold or hot,
Aquavit or usquebaugh
Brings the blood back to your cheeks
Or the colour to your jokes,
Politically incorrect
Jokes involving sex and sect,
Everything against the grain,
Drinking, smoking like a train.
In a train in Finland we
Talked last summer happily,
Swapping manuscripts and quips,
Both of us like cracking whips . . .

The connections of time, place and weather justify structural pastiche, but the links are slight, the rhymes and rhythm less varied and less fun than Auden’s brilliant modulations, the allusions private and exclusive, the critical intelligence less fully engaged with the subject of poetry. The ‘esque’ of the title may disclaim ambitious imitation but risks comparison.

Heaney’s Audenesque poem hasn’t much to do with Auden, and neither has Section 6 of ‘Ten Glosses’ (Electric Light), a brisk biographical précis of Auden’s ‘Oxford and Iceland and Spain and Berlin and Freud’, ‘Marx and the Thirties[,] . . . New York and Chester and God’, ‘retrenchment, libretti, martinis, the slippers, the face’. These compliments are pretty general, applicable to many writers: ‘He was barker of stanzas, a
star turn, a source of instruction, / And the definite growth rings of genius rang in his voice’. The tone is light but such unpointed praise invites comparison with Auden’s tombeaux and homages, which so brilliantly condense life, style or thought, which are so particular, unforgettable and self-identifying: ‘Deliberately he chose the dry-as-dust, / Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer’; ‘he would have us remember most of all / to be enthusiastic over the night’; ‘Master of nuance and scruple’, ‘Who opened such passionate arms to your Bon . . . ’; ‘He has a name like Billy and is almost perfect / But wears a stammer like a decoration’.13 How well Auden understood his fellows, proposing sympathetic judgements of character, history, idea and language, with wit, humour and a reader’s love. This is close reading, dialogue, the real star turn.

‘Audenesque’ contains a small reminiscence of Dylan Thomas, not a poet Heaney whole-heartedly admires: ‘(Double-crossed and death-marched date, / January twenty-eight.)’. This improves one of Thomas’s heavy puns, ‘double-crossed my mother’s womb’, from ‘Before I Knocked’, but it seems an unmotivated recall, though unlikely to be accidental since Heaney quotes it in ‘Dylan the Durable’. Some allusions like this one remain on the surface, lightly, modestly, like idle quotation in literary company, and perhaps my objections to some of them are pedantic. In Heaney they sometimes make an unassuming bibliography of influence and taste like the poem ‘The Bookcase’ (Electric Light) where the style and content of other authors are not the point: the books and records are items in a nostalgic poem about a domestic collection, sacred relics in personal history. In ‘The Bookcase’ Thomas is heartily called by his first name (as in his essay ‘Dylan the Durable’) and represented by a loud voice, whiskey and slang: ‘Dylan at full volume, the Bushmills killed. / “Do Not Go Gentle.” “Don’t be going yet”’14 – the final Irishism gratuitously finishing off a not very ingratiating allusion, but the whole poem light-handed.

A writer Heaney consistently appropriates rather than appreciates is Thomas Hardy, of whom he speaks with admiration. One of his longest literary allusions is a reference to the tragic and strongly feminist novel Tess of the d’Urbervilles. Heaney revives his first memorable response in ‘The Loose Box’ (Electric Light), and his early reading, which he says was formative, is introduced by one of his own puns, not a very good one, but then Auden says good poets love bad puns:

Stable child, grown stabler when I read
In adolescence Thomas dolens Hardy –
Not, oddly enough, his Christmas Eve night-piece
About the oxen in their bedded stall,
But the threshing scene in *Tess of the D’Urbevilles* –
That magnified my soul. Raving machinery,
The thresher bucking sky, rut-shuddery,
A headless Trojan horse expelling straw
From where the head should be, the underjaws
Like staircases set champing – it hummed and sluggèd
While the big sag and slew of the canvas belt
That would cut your head off if you didn’t watch
Flowed from the flywheel. And comes flowing back,
The whole mote-sweaty havoc and mania
Of threshing day, the feeders up on top
Like pyre-high Aztec priests gutting forked sheaves
And paying them ungirded to the drum.
Slack of gulped straw, the belly-taut of seedbags.
And in the stilly night, chaff piled in ridges,
Earth raw where the four wheels rocked and battled.¹⁵

Heaney’s memory takes over the threshing, in more ways than one. The poet inserts his italicized Latin between the novelist’s given and family names, but his version, which may or may not elide his reading with his actual farming experience, ignores the way in which the book and the passage are dolorous.¹⁶ And what can he mean by ‘magnified my soul?’ The machine age was imaged as masculine, powerful and aggressive by Hardy’s personal and historical imagination, and Heaney re-presents its destructiveness excitedly but somewhat less critically, because of the removal of the women characters, especially Tess, who spoke her own secular magnificat earlier in the novel but is rendered incapable of it in the threshing scene. Heaney can’t mean that he is moved by Hardy’s compassion, or he wouldn’t obliterate the heroine, one so thoroughly imagined with a particular gender, psyche, class and time, the woman ‘feeder’ whose energy is made cruelly instrumental by the man-made man-managed steam-threshing machine. The person of Tess, on the machine, exhaustedly binding and passing the sheaves, a painfully conscious automaton and instrument, and Marian her slightly less suffering occasional replacement, are transformed by Heaney’s simile to pyre-high energetic Aztec priests, who are more like Hardy’s engineer who serves Pluto, ‘fire and smoke’. Tess is reduced and reified again, only a name slightly mispelt (as ‘of the D’Urbevilles’ instead of ‘d’Urbervilles’) in a quoted title in a poem bristling with male heroes – Patrick Kavanagh,
Heracles, Atlas, and Michael Collins at their ‘boy-deeds’. (The god in Hardy’s scene is Pluto.) Hardy’s original machinery is rewritten by Heaney’s guttural muse as monstrously destructive and raving – ‘raving’ was Hardy’s word for the thresher’s hum – but without its women victims. The elision of the fictional scene with Heaney’s memory of threshing is fascinating, but how can the first response be revisited, and unrevised, as a magnification of soul? ‘Oddly enough’, indeed, because it’s a locus classicus, historical and literary, something every student knows, and Heaney was a student and teacher of the English Literature syllabus.

Two neighbouring sonnets in ‘Lightenings’, one of the sequences in Seeing Things, are also interesting to Hardy readers. The first, ‘vi’, has a good straight simple beginning, ‘Once, as a child, out in a field of sheep / Thomas Hardy pretended to be dead’ followed by powerful imagery of ‘sniffed-at, bleated-into, grassy space’ and a creative child mind, to become more creative, ‘His small cool brow was like an anvil waiting / For sky to make it sing the perfect pitch / Of his dumb being’. Wonderful simile for song and power and strike, that brow-anvil, explained and followed by a biographer’s leap from child pretending to man dying. The poem sums up art and life’s sorrows, imagining for the dead man: ‘a ripple that would travel eighty years / . . . to be the same ripple / Inside him at its last circumference’. The next sonnet ‘vii’ is a revision of this one, all wittily parenthesized, quoting a congenial ‘ewe-leaze’: ‘(I misremembered. He went down on all fours, / Florence Emily says, crossing a ewe-leaze. . . .)’. Heaney discovers that Hardy did not pretend to be dead, or lie on his back amongst the sheep, and this sequel-poem tells of Hardy on all fours, feeling ‘less alone’ as he sees the sheep’s witless eyes and panic. He includes a couple of other details – about Hardy in society, and imagining himself a ghost – in a tender little biographical narrative in which ‘the flock’s dismay’ makes the continuity, and the theme. The modest parenthesis sounds relaxed, easy but careful: we can see Heaney verifying the facts in the biography that Hardy ghosted for his second wife, in between sonnets. However, Heaney’s verification was sketchy and his scholarly correction inventive. He is misremembering again: Hardy did go down on all fours, but he also pretended to eat grass, to see what the sheep would do. What they did was not look witless or panicky or dismayed, but ‘gathered around in a close ring, gazing at him with astonished faces’. Hardy’s experiment in empathy is odder and more interesting, about the behaviour of human being and sheep, than Heaney’s version.
Heaney's correction is complexly inaccurate, because in fact the first sonnet wasn't entirely inaccurate but a misremembering and also a confusion of two stories. The boy Hardy did once lie flat on his back on the ground, looking at the sun through the gaps in a straw hat on his face, and though he didn’t start off by miming death, he rose feeling that he didn’t want to grow up. It has been suggested to me by Michael Baron that Heaney’s first version of Hardy’s prone reflections may have been suggested by what Coleridge called a hooked atom, the account in Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal of how she and William lay close together in a sheep-field, and William imagined death: ‘sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth and just to know that our dear friends were near’.19 Perhaps not two but three striking stories about the imagination, linked by proneness, stillness and sheep, were rewritten. A poem isn’t a thesis, and the errors in fact aren’t errors of poetry, but the source-muddled allusion reduces Hardy and promotes a stereotype.

In ‘The Birthplace’ (Station Island) Heaney writes more personally, using Hardy’s erotic nature and Nature as a nest for a warm sly anecdote, he and his love linked antithetically to Hardy’s less satisfied couples. He also recalls reading The Return of the Native, saying Hardy had ‘no need to invent’, then introduces a corncrake who ‘verified himself’ and ‘roosters and dogs, the very same / as if he had written them’.20 I can’t remember corncrakes or roosters in the novel, but if there are they are less important to it than glow-worms, adders, heathcroppers and a heron seen by Mrs Yeobright before she collapses. Heaney names the novel and praises the novelist but emphasizes his own happy associations with the birthplace. His image of Hardy the realist is followed in the later poems by Thomas dolens Hardy, railer against the universe. Hardy acts as the negative to Heaney’s positive, his morbidity simplified to be the stark opposite of Heaney’s life-affirmation and celebration, with their philosophical roots in Rome and literary roots in Leavis’s Cambridge.

Hardy said he was temperamentally responsive to tragic experience, but he knew there was a world elsewhere, and recognized otherness. He saw those sheep as astonished not panicky or witless or dismayed or making him feel less alone with proleptic sorrow. Of course he is dolorous, but there is more than doleur in his memoirs, his poems, his novels, his animals, at times even his people. Heaney’s dolorous realist lacks the real Hardy’s empathetic impersonalizing imagination, which does need to invent and can see and make the world strange. Heaney knows about ostrananie, as he demonstrates in ‘Making Strange’, but in ‘Lightenings’, though affectionately, he makes Hardy’s life and imagination too simple,
neat, and predictable, failing to see so failing to re-create Hardy's strangeness.

In these four poems memories of Hardy are elaborated at length. But as with the Dylan Thomas references, brief allusion's often the name of the game, and brevity compounds casualness. There is a reference to *The Tempest* in ‘Would They Had Stay’d’ (*Electric Light*) whose title quotes Ferdinand’s response to Prospero’s spirit masque, but very selectively, responding only to the pleasant melancholy of recollection, without a nod to Shakespeare’s metaphysical in-joke about the ending of revels, Prospero’s power and the superiority of his magic spirit-theatre and company to the Globe, and all the larger rippling resonance of revels ending. There is a diminishing of the wild terrible Lear quotation ‘Here’s two on’s are sophisticated’ for the academic reminiscence of ‘The Ministry of Fear’ (*North*), and an echo of Henry James’s favourite Gallicism ‘*mon vieux*’ in ‘The Gaeltacht’ (*Electric Light*), where I suppose it is humorously misplaced – in the last place you’d expect to find James – but how different from Auden’s beautifully placed ‘Bon’. Heaney has a taste for sprinkling foreign words about, appropriately in religious or political contexts, but sometimes jokingly and heavily, as in this last example, and in ‘Known World’ (*Electric Light*) where a ‘*de haut en bas*’ describes a nod to the air stewardess, and ‘Out of the Bag’ (*Electric Light*) where the repeated ‘*poeta doctus*’ is perhaps another in-joke. (Of course Heaney’s Latin, like his Gaelic, must come to his hand and mind less self-consciously than they may strike a reader.) ‘Chekhov on Sakhalin’ (*Station Island*) is moving biographical compression, important for Heaney’s own life, but though it mentions avoiding thesis and getting the ‘right tone’ it gives no sense of Chekhov’s amazing lightness and nuance in his form-and-heart-breaking plays and stories.21 There is a light vague friendly tribute to William Golding in ‘Parable Island’ (*The Haw Lantern*), which has little to do with the writer of *Pincher Martin* or *Lord of the Flies* except that it is about parables and an island.

In one of the elegies for his father, ‘Seeing the Sick’ (*Electric Light*), which begins ‘Anointed and all, my father did remind me / Of Hopkins’s Felix Randal’, the connections are strong: elegy, farm-work, strong bodies, holy dying, priest and son, reverence and praise.22 The comparison works; then it is withdrawn and replaced by contrast, a focus on difference, the frail body, and a memory-image that dismisses literary allusion as unnecessary or inapposite, ‘None of your fettled and bright battering Sandal’. (There was none of it in Felix’s death either, as his poem insists, knowing it is lost with youthful energy.) The contemplation of Hopkins is not the point, I take it: Felix is there as a transient support,
a sufficient literary vehicle to be removed, to make room for the tenor, the real thing, the thing itself. Certainly the eroticism of Hopkins's radiant praise of male body and power is not particularly recalled, and the quotation somehow sounds as if it is wanting to differ from Hopkins more than it does. But the very openness and the slight awkwardness of this allusion make it work, for an elegy where self-conscious literariness and tentative unassimilated reference sound genuinely grief-stricken.

Hopkins comes into ‘Station Island’ too, in the fifth section, where verse smoothly accommodates his prose, ‘For what is the great / moving power and spring of verse? Feeling, and / in particular, love’, assimilating what Heaney calls ‘the rubbed quotation’, keeping and praising the rhythm of Hopkins, as a scrupulous commonplace-book memory. Similarly, ‘Singing School’ (North), which has epigraphs from Wordsworth and Yeats, includes ‘Fosterage’, dedicated to the teacher and writer Michael McLaverty, and quoting Katherine Mansfield, ‘I will tell / How the laundry basket squeaked’, and, indirectly, Hopkins, in allusions gratefully attributed to McLaverty: ‘“Poor Hopkins!” I have the Journals / He gave me, underlined, his buckled self / Obeisant to their pain. He discerned / The lineaments of patience everywhere . . .’

Heaney’s literary criticism contains some distracting or superficial allusions like those in the poetry as well as many necessary reasoned cross-references and comparisons, the nuts and bolts of scholarship. In ‘Learning from Eliot’ a discussion of Eliot and Dante is overloaded with Yeats: ‘Dante, in fact, belonged in the rag-and-bone shop of Eliot’s middle-aging heart, and it was from that sad organ, we might say, that all his lyric ladders started’. This quotation simplifies and cuts down the meanings and self-allusion in ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ and doesn’t add much, except more metaphor, to the comment on Eliot. Hopkins and his Windhover seem redundant to a comment on ‘The Darkling Thrush’ in ‘Joy or Night’: ‘Hardy, in spite of his temperamental inclination to focus his attention upon the dolorous circumstances, for once allowed his heart in hiding to stir for that particular bird’. The Hopkins allusions in the poems work, but this is a highly inappropriate image for Hardy’s apprehensive, delicate approach to hope, its appropriation confirmed as Heaney piles Yeats on Hopkins: ‘We might say that Hardy, at this moment, experienced what Yeats says he experienced in the writing of A Vision: he too was simply overwhelmed by miracle whilst in the midst of it’. Unpersuaded first by Hopkins and the falcon, then by Yeats and A Vision, I do not think being ‘overwhelmed’ and by ‘miracle’ is what Hardy is talking about in: ‘I could think there trembled through / His happy good-night air / Some blessed Hope whereof he
knew, / And I was unaware’. The ‘for once’ before the Hopkins quotation is not quite right either: there are many Hardy poems imagining or trying to imagine or imaginatively stating a failure to imagine, with tender generosity and humility, the life of the phenomenal world outside himself and other than himself, in bullfinches, skylarks, dumbledores, chrysanthemums, Gabriel and Bathsheba, Emma Hardy, Shakespeare, Keats, Swinburne and Barnes. If Heaney means that for once Hardy is allowing himself to hope, that’s also less than fair: Hardy more than once allows for a space between his self-conscious temperamental inclination and observed otherness and difference. Hopkins’s rapturous identification with a Christ-like and Christ-dedicated powerful swooping handsome bird of prey came into Heaney’s mind at some stage in this response, but it obstructs the way Hardy so tentatively celebrates his aged, frail, gaunt, ecstatic thrush.

There is the quick reversal used somewhere of Brodsky, ‘About suffering he was never wrong, the young master’, Geoffrey Hill’s ‘indomitable Englishry’, and the ‘scrupulous meanness’ of Larkin. Larkin’s dread of extinction, like Hardy’s dolour, is something Heaney, buoyant in celebrating celebration, finds unsympathetic, and the wrenched quotation from Joyce, whose meanness was impersonative and whose disbelief was thrillingly remorseful, is distracting. Worst of all, though Heaney admires Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night’, I think he describes it rather cheaply as ‘the green fuse addressing the burnt-out Case’.

Such appropriation of other writers’ words, in criticism and poetry, is perhaps connected with a lack of empathy in non-literary areas or aspects of the poetry, a weakness in appreciating certain other imaginations or presences, except for those close or congenial, and even these aren’t always separated from their observer. In his poems there are deer, seen by several people, including two or three writers, but no fallow deer invisible outside the human dwelling. There are pithily symbolic hawthorn and tender anthropomorphic widgeon, but no daddy-longlegs and moth dropping in to smudge a poet’s text and tease him out of allegory. We have Sweeney the poet, lover, exile, nature-dweller and singer, but he is as sane as his rational author, quite unlike Thomas’s sex-crazed mad-brain lovers in the asylum or his drunken ark-hacking Noah. The poetry of friendship warmly invokes Heaney’s admiration for Ted Hughes, Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Deane, but they are sketchy compared with Yeats’s figures, public and private – Swift, Maud Gonne, Augusta Gregory, his father, Synge, O’Casey – vividly individualized and mythologized too, in condensed images and big poems. Heaney’s public
naming is a different poetry, less dramatic, less empathetic, less free-standing and impersonalized. His literary allusion belongs to its personal lyricism and personal narrative, not often achieving or even attempting dialogue and sometimes, in the case of Tess and Hardy’s sheep and thrush, misreading and misappropriating.

There is a sense in which all quotation and assimilation of other texts and authors is appropriation, but there is a kind of allusion that is too generous to be called appropriative, which essays a dialogue between the self and another, imagining or re-imagining another artist’s imagination. It may be direct or indirect quotation, mention, or imitation. It often takes the traditional forms of homage or tombeau. It may be admiring, or jealous, or both. Harold Bloom has made us conscious of the ambivalence and anxieties of influence, and there are allusive poets whose allusions are fully aware of such jealousies. In ‘To William Wordsworth’, for instance, Coleridge responded to his friend’s first recitation of The Prelude in a loving, admiring and rueful address that assimilates Wordsworthian images to his own reflective blank verse, in one of the saddest and most generous poetic imitations. Dickens, also admiring and emulative, develops a wide range of Shakespearean allusion, from hilarious jokes about Hamlet the troublesome adolescent (A Christmas Carol), Hamlet’s aunt and Micawber’s father (David Copperfield), to deeper allusions like David Copperfield’s fragmentary recall of sonnets about jealousy and love and oblique echoes of Hamlet’s preparation for his death – ‘If it be not now, yet ’tis to come’ – in Ham Peggotty. Matthew Arnold’s dialogue with Horace and others, including a master who taught him Latin, in ‘Yes, in the sea of life enisled’, was revealed by Kathleen Tillotson as a complexly rooted, assimilated and motivated allusion, an address to the past articulated by a poet who was a passionately intelligent scholar and critic. In Joyce’s diverse recreations of Homer, playful and seriously critical, the reader follows a pattern of likeness and unlikeness that is the armature of a novel, but suddenly thrills to recognize Hades in a Dublin cemetery caretaker and faithful Penelope in Molly Bloom. In lighter vein, Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ is a witty, funny, fluent and elegant imitation of Byron’s wit, fun and fluent elegance, which is enjoyable in itself and speeds us back to Don Juan. Dylan Thomas’s story ‘Who Do You Wish Was With Us?’ reveals itself, by parallel and quotation, as his subtle memory of ‘The Dead’, which re-imagines Joyce’s famous ending and his recognition of the painful nurture of empathy, in which telling is turned to listening, forcing the recognition of otherness, and in the end, of the mutuality of death.
Samuel Beckett was less reverent in his transformation of Joyce's serious snow to rain-finale for a Dublin 'Wet Night' in *More Pricks than Kicks*, where he also fools about with Dante, but wonderfully reverent of Yeats's open-ended soul-making for 'The Tower' in '. . . but the clouds . . .'. And of course there are Eliot's quotations in *The Waste Land*, where heterophony is functional, fragments against ruin, but whose allusions to Shakespeare, Marvell, Goldsmith, Kyd, de Nerval, whoever, are thematic, structurally adroit, and go deep.

Such allusion represents the topos at its most richly imaginative, in pre-modernist and modernist literature. There is one fine example of it in Heaney. A quotation from Vaughan's poem ‘Friends Departed’, ‘all gone into the world of light’, is thoroughly developed and assimilated in poem xliv of ‘Squarings’. (This is in Section 4 of the second half, also called ‘Squarings’, in *Seeing Things*) Vaughan’s words and thought and feeling form part of the poem’s deep structure and trajectory of feeling. Heaney takes Vaughan’s first line minus its first words – ‘They are’ – for his beginning, puts it in italics, changes its exclamation mark to a question mark, and follows it with ‘Perhaps’, because he is less certain than Vaughan, not certain about his response, and because he is reading as well as writing, writing about reading: ‘All gone into the world of light? Perhaps . . .’. The ‘Perhaps’ attaches itself to the first line, as well as to the second, which draws attention to the act of reading lines: ‘Perhaps / As we read the line sheer forms do crowd . . .’. Heaney is asking what we see when we read Vaughan and gives more than one answer. In the questioning and pondering, the allusion is assimilated, vigorously set to work, making a poem attentive to its predecessor, a frank and dynamic meditation on another poet and poem, fully aware of its revision, re-vision being the point:

```
All gone into the world of light? Perhaps
As we read the line sheer forms do crowd
The starry vestibule. Otherwise
They do not. What lucency survives
Is blanched as worms on nightlines I would lift,
Ungratified if always well prepared
```

For the nothing there – which was only what had been there.

Then the poem changes the fishing image, and truncates the Vaughan quotation, keeping text and allusion in play together: ‘Although in fact it is more like a caught line snapping, / That moment of admission of
All gone . .’. The second quotation snags Heaney’s line to give an alternative reading, ‘All gone’, without light. Admirable, especially in Seeing Things, which is exquisitely respondent to its title like Yeats’s crafted books, is Heaney’s adaptation of Vaughan’s light imagery. In ‘Friends Departed’ this develops from the metaphor of heaven’s ‘world of light’, continues in a simile of stars on a gloomy hill, figuring the memory of dead friends, gives way to a metaphor of Death, the jewel shining in the dark, and imagines an image where the restrained Vaughan is at his most startling and ‘metaphysically’ bizarre:

If a star were confin’d into a tomb,
Her captive flames must needs burn there,
But when the hand that lock’d her up gives room,
She’ll shine through all the sphere.31

Heaney rises to these star-words too, in ‘The starry vestibule’, which beautifully remembers Vaughan’s enclosed tomb and expansive room. It is allusion at its most imaginative and least obvious, taking us back to reread the poem with him, closely, to ponder its meanings with him. This is imagining another writer’s imagination. That other writer is quoted, assimilated and left, in that shift from starlight to the phosphorescence of hooked bait on nightlines, also metaphysical and bizarre, and from eternity to mortality.

As well as embodying Vaughan, self-consciously but deeply, the poem imagines a ‘nothing there’ that, perhaps less consciously, seems to echo Wallace Stevens. In his poem ‘The Snow Man’, Stevens uses a snow scene to articulate his repeated theme of withdrawing imagination yet using it to recognize otherness and metaphysical emptiness, with minimal self-projection. His bare scene must be perceived by the passive ‘mind of Winter’, which takes in ‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’. Heaney mentions Stevens in The Redress of Poetry, and it is hard to imagine him writing a book called Seeing Things without having Stevens somewhere in mind.32 The ‘Squarings’ poem seems to allude to him directly, as the speaker prepares ‘For the nothing there – which was only what had been there’.33 Nothing can be imagined and has been experienced, a nothing that is seen without seeing nothing that is not there. This is said in the doubled simile, the lack of a catch and the snapped rod, both imaging, without the metaphysical portentousness of a Stevens poem, negatives that can apply to any absence, from a god’s to any loss or failure or frustration or death, sightings of ‘the nothing that is there and nothing that is not there’. Heaney’s empathy works here for
the action and gear of fishing and for the dead poet remembering his
death. The lucky pun on ‘line’ – Heaney’s line of text links with
Vaughan’s line of text and the fishing-line – sounds a fond intimacy in
a winning bit of homonymic play. Vaughan’s unphysical imagery is
beautifully incorporated with the physical and psychological fact of
night-fishing, as the luminous tiny physical worms startlingly replace
the luminous expansive spiritual stars, and the fisherman’s patience
takes over the exercise of meditation. The story begins as illustration and
simile, to swell into a metonymy that asserts itself not as vehicle but as
new tenor, one poet’s phenomenon responding to another’s numen. It
respects its volume’s title Seeing Things, whose literal meaning is shad-
owed by its vernacular irony and opposite meaning, imagining things
that are not there. Seeing what’s there and seeing what’s not there are set
together, like eternity and extinction. The angels of Vaughan’s heaven
square, Stevens’s post-metaphysical necessary angel.

The rendered action of fishing makes Vaughan, explicitly, and
Stevens, implicitly, Heaney’s. The good fisherman, like the poet, like
Stevens, must entertain the idea of loss as well as gain. And perhaps
somewhere behind this poem, which starts with conscious quotation
but plumbs deep, is Yeats’s crafty crane from ‘The Three Beggars’, think-
ing ‘maybe I shall take a trout / If but I do not seem to care’, squaring faith
and experience.34 The first section of Seeing Things was ‘The Golden
Bough’, the Hades of whose second poem contains the shade of Larkin,
perhaps more ironically and appropriately than I first thought, before
reading the rest of the book where visions of something and visions of
nothing are squared.

The less-than-fully-presented Joyce of ‘Station Island’, the experi-
enced mentor who moved from self-lyric and autobiographical narrative
to negative capability, inventing Leopold and Molly Bloom as well as
Stephen Hero, was less Joyce than an alter ego telling Heaney what he
wanted to hear, as he advised the pilgrim, to strike his note, swim out on
his own, and fill the element with signatures on his ‘own frequency’.
What Heaney does with Vaughan is admirable, but exceptional in his
work up to now. His reminiscences of other writers, often inattentive to
their frequencies and signatures while naming them, rhyme, as he said,
to see himself. His allusions are a habitual part of serious self-history and
self-projection. The imaginations of other writers, like Yeats’s ghosts,
bring him metaphors for poetry, in what is often a one-way traffic.
Heaney’s empathetic imagination shows itself most creatively with
objects and people in action, and his literary allusions do not often
deeply probe other texts and other writers. But they can: with Henry
Vaughan and Wallace Stevens he holds a conversation, conscious and subconscious, imagining other visions and languages as well as holding his own at its most solid and active, to make both self and other articulate and strange.

Notes

5 In Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), Michael Parker contrasts what he sees as Thomas’s self-centred images of childhood with Heaney’s celebration of adult power, which he finds self-effacing. He ignores the vision and storytelling of Thomas’s creative children and adults, in poems and short stories (as Heaney also tends to do) and the complications of Heaney’s choice of certain powerful heroes.
9 For instance, T. C. Foster, Seamus Heaney (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1989).
11 Heaney occasionally has a touch of the macho swagger he finds in some of Thomas’s poetry, I think rightly in certain parts but not ‘In the White Giant’s Thigh’. This part of the Thomas essay is not reprinted in finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001 (London: Faber, 2002). I am aware of harping on Thomas in this essay, but he seems to be under-appreciated and sometimes patronized by Heaney.
16 In the essay ‘Joy or Night’, he speaks of Hardy’s focus on ‘dolorous circumstances’ (Finders Keepers, p. 151).
20 Heaney, ‘The Birthplace’, *Station Island*, pp. 34, 35.
22 Heaney, ‘Seeing the Sick’, *Electric Light*, p. 94.
23 Heaney, ‘Station Island’, *Station Island*, p. 73; Heaney, ‘Fosterage’, *North*, p. 71.
27 I have discussed this story’s relation to ‘The Dead’ in *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).
29 I refer to many allusions, of course not all, which Heaney makes to modern English literature, and exclude references in many forms, to Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Italian, Spanish and Russian authors.
30 Heaney, ‘Squarings’, *Seeing Things*, p. 98.
32 After writing this, I find that H. Hart in ‘Seamus Heaney’, *British Writers: Retrospective Supplement I*, ed. J. Parini (New York: Scribner’s, 2002), interestingly suggests that Heaney changed his mind about Stevens, sometime in the late 1980s: ‘Once wary of Wallace Stevens’s philosophical “mind of winter” and its tendency to view the world abstractly, Heaney now embraced it’. (But I don’t agree about the mind of winter implying abstraction.)
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