



Heaney, Seamus. *Human Chain*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. 89 pp.

The latest collection of poems by Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain*, is predominantly characterized by a craftsman who is honing language. Contrary to the ordinary view that poetry is the art of powerful feelings, the volume shows that a careful linguistic experimentation may capture moments of partial reconciliation between psychological states and historical circumstances. This is possible due to intellectual maturity which stems from a “late style” form of art.

It is important to remember, then, Theodor Adorno’s words characterizing Ludwig van Beethoven’s later work:

Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. (Adorno 564)

This definition could also describe the artistic sensibility shown by Heaney in his last book. Falling back on ethical positions as formal experimentations, Heaney’s poetical choices and tensions are contingent on a physical reality, which constantly reminds the artist of his perishable condition. In *Human Chain*, echoing Adorno’s words, there is a bodily aesthetics that transforms harmony “into the dissonance of its suffering” (*op. cit.*). The poetical subjectivity, in this sense, turns into a creative force, which unites irreconcilable realities in a discourse that questions clichés of identity, national belonging and ethical responsibility.

Throughout twenty nine poems, *Human Chain* represents a poetic revision of a lifetime. Due to the non-judgmental evocation of places and figures of the poet’s childhood, the first five poems of *Human Chain* transform the clichés of the past into something unsettled. The unusual metaphors and the difficult verses force, simultaneously, the poet to reconsider his life and work, and the reader to rethink his or her involvement with the verse. Thus, these poems form a little interlude that presents a contradiction: the vanishing nature of life and the supposedly eternal nature of literature. This revision reaches its highest point with the sixth poem, “Chanson d’Aventure”, in which the poet, in an ambulance on the way to hospital after suffering a stroke, is forced to reflect on death.

The continuation of the bodily aesthetics is seen in poems dedicated to religious and biblical motifs. For instance, the poem “Miracle” transforms one of the cures performed by Jesus Christ into a mythical acknowledgement of the ones who supposedly

carry the crippled to his presence. In the biblical passage (John 5, 1: 16), there is no reference such men, but in Heaney's poem, they "have known him all along/ and carry him in" (17). If on the one hand the poet praises their strength and endurance, on the other hand, he questions their faith and belief in Jesus Christ. This antithesis does not let the poem surrender to an easy interpretation of the gospel, and forces readers to review their own personal opinions, be they Christian or Agnostic. The following poems, "Human Chain" and "The mite box" also question religious and ethical values with the presence of a collective attitude of food sharing and the "widow's mite" tale. The common theme of these poems is the importance given to the body, since the poet's human condition is compelling him to reflect on its fragile state.

In the next poems of the book, there is a symbolical attempt to recapture simple epiphanies of every-day life. Nevertheless, instead of conveying a sense of wholeness and completion, the pieces are consumed by skepticism and doubt. Poems like "The Wood Road" and "Derry Derry Down", which recollect the traumas of the Northern Irish Civil War, are placed side by side with "A Herbal" and "Riverbank Field", which are more lyrical attempts at intertextuality with "Herbier de Bretagne" by Eugène Guillevic and "Aeneid" by Virgil. Due to the paradox created by distressing memories and poetical impulses, the poet implies that poetry is not able to offer a safe haven from the distresses of life. Instead, it brings anguish and questions.

Another revealing characteristic of *Human Chain* is the preference for long poems subdivided into smaller subsections. Similarly to his Dantean "Station Island" (*Station Island*, 1984), this multiple structure allows the poet to exercise artistic freedom to develop concepts and ideas. Similarly, its power stems from the internal conflicts and contradictions they pose. The poem "Wraiths", dedicated to Ciaran Carson, "Sweeney Out-Takes", for Gregory Corkus, "Hermit Songs", for Helen Vendler and "Lick the pencil" play with the double-edged sword nature of art. With images ranging from ghost-like figures, mythical tales, medieval allusions and personal memories, these poems confirm Heaney's awareness of the passage of time. It is as if, due to the multiplicity of the past, a single poem would not be able to capture its complex and varied nature. Furthermore, the poems in homage to family and friends also reflect an emotional attachment to certain memories that still remain in his life.

The last poem of *Human Chain*, "A Kite for Aibhín", dedicated to his granddaughter, concludes the revisionary tone of the volume as a whole. Inasmuch it is a continuation of the poem, "A Kite for Michael and Christopher" – his own sons – the poem seems to be rehearsing an earthly detachment. While in the poem for Michael and Christopher, Heaney urged them to "stand in here in front of [him]/ and take the strain" (231), here the poet cannot hold it any longer:

The longing in the breast and planted feet
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
Until string breaks and – separate, elate –
The kite takes off, itself alone, windfall (85)

With this enigmatic image of the kite, Seamus Heaney finalizes his last collection. Although the poem ends in an incantatory note, suggesting perhaps a new beginning, the control he had in “A Kite for Michael and Christopher” is not present anymore. Thus, at the same time windfall indicates good fortune, it is also alone, hinting to solitude and mystery. Thus, this ambiguity challenges himself and his previous work, promoting uneasiness with the passage of time

“Late style”, in Heaney’s poetry, is a standpoint that forces poet and reader to reconfigure their own positions in face of life’s eternal questions. It is also a reexamination of the living past. His memory is revisited in the light of a mature subjectivity, whose understanding is not simplistic, but littered with contradictions and paradoxes. Adorno also claimed “late works are catastrophes” (Adorno 567). However, here, the catastrophe for the poet is not the end of his life, but rather, the end of writing itself.

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Works Cited

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