

Seamus Heaney, 1939-2013

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Abstract: *Seamus Heaney explores the historical and cultural origins of his native territory. His poems link to its landscape in loving recreations of activities and customs and in troubled assessment of sectarian divisions. Poetry becomes a means of redressing wrongs, of balancing opposing tensions. The question of the poet's responsibility and of the value of poetry itself becomes central. Ultimately he must be true to himself, have freedom to express himself, and live in the republic of his own conscience.*

Keywords: *Seamus Heaney; contemporary Irish poetry; poet's responsibility.*

Seamus Heaney never lost touch with his rural origins. His early poetry, in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), recovers a past animated by the crafts and skills of the farming community. Some poems evoke mystery at the heart of the craftsman's work: within the dark centre of the forge the blacksmith hammers out a fantail of sparks; in the hands of the diviner the forked hazel stick plunges unerringly towards the hidden source; his father's accuracy with a horse-drawn plough is exemplary.

At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly. (*Selected Poems* 8)¹

Admiring the work of thatchers, turf-cutters, sowers, and harvesters, and remarking their pride in work done well, he reveals what he values. As the thatcher goes about his work, so does the poet.

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple

For pinning down his world, handful by handful. (15)

Death of a Naturalist concludes with “Personal Helicon”, a poem about the pleasures derived from exploring wells – “I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells/ Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss”; about musical echoes – “Others had echoes, gave back your own call/With a clean new music in it”; and about why he writes – “I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (11). The placing of “Bogland” at the end of *Door into the Dark* not only confirms the imaginative depths of the poet’s chosen world, but in its flowing definitions anticipates the style of poems in the next collection. Contrasting the American imagination, that lifts to the far west, with the Irish imagination, that “concedes to/Encroaching horizon”, “Bogland” accepts the limits within which the Irish artist works. But because the heritage is rich, such constriction is not defeating.

They’ve taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up,
An astounding crate full of air (22)

The bogs of Ireland, once known as places of danger and decay, preserve and purify.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.

...
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before
The bog holes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless (22-23)

The confident, fluid grace of this poem intensifies its declaration of faith in Irish sources. W.B. Yeats had memorably declared, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Believing otherwise, Heaney affirms that the Irish psyche hoards experience; the heritage is not inferior; the history is layered. For him, “The wet centre is bottomless”, the imaginative possibilities unlimited: “Our pioneers keep striking inwards and downwards.”

In *Wintering Out* (1972), his third collection, Seamus Heaney’s mimetic ritualising imagination explores the historical and cultural origins of his chosen ground and in the linguistics of its place-names reads evidence of sectarian conflict and colonial dispossession. Many poems are written in Bogland’s spirit of playful confidence. In “Oracle”, the speaker is the nameless one, inhabitant of natural objects, in the hollow trunk of a willow tree, its listening familiar:

small mouth and ear
in a woody cleft,
lobe and larynx
of the mossy places (34)

The poems are chords of attachment to the landscape; the auditory imagination, which he later described as “that feeling for word and syllable reaching down below the ordinary levels of language, uniting the primitive and civilized associations words have acquired”, (*Preoccupations* 81) delights in the music of its saying.

The tawny guttural water
spells itself: Moyola
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale
in the utterance,
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists
through vowels and history. (*Selected Poems* 32)

“Fodder”, “Anahorish”, “Toome”, “Broagh” take soundings among the place-names of the locality in which he was raised, and reveal its divided heritage – Catholic and Presbyterian, nationalist and loyalist. Even poems which are not about that division or its violent consequences are coloured by it; the human image is often that of the outcast, of those who suffer or who feel socially excluded. His liberating break-through to such richly varied reading of landscape had been strengthened by his discovery in 1969 of the account by the Danish archaeologist, P.V. Glob in his book, *The Bog People*, of the customs in early Iron Age Northern Europe by which young men were ritually sacrificed to Nerthus, goddess of the earth, to ensure good harvest. He was attracted by the similarities between what happened in Northern Europe and what had begun to happen again in Northern Ireland. The endemic divisions now took more visible shape in bombings, murders, punishments, hunger-strikes, a cycle of killing and counter-killing that would persist and press in upon his work, demanding that he should voice nationalistic grievances and suffering. In “The Tollund Man”, one of several poems about the bog people, he adopts the persona of the pilgrim.

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap (39)

The Catholic poet “could risk blasphemy” by imploring this “saint” of the bogs to bring peace to Northern Ireland. Just as Catholic saints are venerated for their triumph over

the dissolution of the flesh, so these bodies have been preserved and made beautiful in Danish bogs. Savagery has been transmuted. Like Christ, another sacrificial victim who rose and was transfigured, they have survived burial and risen in a new light. The poem equates one kind of violence with another, the vegetation ritual of the past with the possibility of renewal in the present. The resemblances are painfully clear.

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home (40)

Faced in *North* (1975) with the horror of “each neighbourly murder”, Heaney declares “we pine for ceremony/customary rhythms” (66). The poem thereafter provides assuaging images – “temperate footsteps”, “purring family cars”, “sommabulant women” tuned to the “muffled drumming” of “ten thousand engines” (66-67). The funeral’s “slow triumph” towards the megalithic tombs of the Boyne links Northern Ireland with that ancient, mythological place. When the mourners return to the North their grief, the poem says, has been eased. As part of that assuagement, Heaney recalls the portrayal of Gunnar’s triumph over death in *Njal’s Saga*. Just as his brothers responded to him, so the people in the poem respond to its images of their people.

imagining those under the hill

disposed like Gunnar
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon (67-68)

In death, Gunnar has been liberated from vengeance. In art, in the saga and the poem, discord has been transmuted. By transforming death, violence, and grief through the beauty of language, the poet comforts his people and eases their suffering. But he must retain his independence. In “North” the Viking dead instruct him.

‘Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light’. (70)

That advice counters Viking hatred and internecine strife with the mysteries of poetic composition; the associations of hoard, barrow, and lengthy incursion are turned towards aesthetic creation. Other poems in *North* delight in linguistic and imaginative association. “Kinship”, in its fluid quatrains of dissolving line, simile and image, characteristic of many of these poems, is a love poem to what “Bogland” claimed. These richly suggestive poems are acts of empathetic imagining; in one fluid action Heaney imagines and creates, becoming what he describes. The most sensuous poet in English since Keats, at the same time as he writes about public violence, Heaney writes about private peace and the celebrations of belonging. Such deeply imagined poems, which are found at all stages of his career, resist intellectual analysis and retain their mystery. “Sunlight”, the first of two poems in *North* called “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication”, is like a painting by Vermeer: in its play of light and shade, its sunlit space, its familiar domestic task of making bread.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose’s wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitened nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith’s scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin. (63-64)

In *Field Work* (1979), poems interrogate the poet’s role in the midst of continuing violence. “What will become of us?” “Our island is full of comfortless noises” (109). What is the value of poetry? What is its function? The answer is conveyed more by image and metaphor than by the expression of hope. In “The Toome Road” the poet

meets the armoured convoys of British soldiers; they are on his road. In the elegies for dead friends Heaney looks more directly at sectarian murder, without the mythologizing procedures of *North*. When he describes the assassination of his cousin, in “The Strand at Lough Beg”, he concludes with words of comfort and blessing:

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud (114)

In a similar gesture Virgil wiped Dante’s face at the beginning of the *Purgatorio* and the figure of the Italian poet is present throughout *Station Island* (1984), the next collection, in which there are many encounters with those killed by violence in Northern Ireland.

The troubled voice in *Field Work* is heard more directly in *Station Island*, which begins with poems that question the value of poetry itself. In the title poem, an account of the poet’s pilgrimage to Lough Derg, he is challenged through a series of encounters with figures and incidents from the past. The murdered cousin, for example, accuses Heaney of confusing 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’. (203)

Another victim vividly relives his assassination and thereby confronts the poet’s “circumspect involvement”. Heaney replies: “Forgive the way I have lived indifferent” (200).

“I hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming”. (205)

He wants to atone, to reveal in the poem’s drama how he has been touched by events. But he also wants to assert his rights as a poet. By doing the pilgrimage, he hopes to clear his conscience and earn the right to be free. James Joyce, whom he encounters at the end of the pilgrimage, advises him:

'Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
with signatures of your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea' (212).

and provides the answer the pilgrim-poet seeks.

Poems about Sweeney in the *Sweeney Astray* section of *Selected Poems* illumine the truth of that admonition. Through the figure of this Irish king who fled to the forest and made poetry out of his isolation and separateness, Heaney celebrates poetic freedom. *Sweeney Astray* (1983), a version of the Irish story, *Buile Suibhne*, may be read he has said "as an aspect of the quarrel between the free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation" (viii). Sweeney runs free of the crowd, bound neither by state nor church. He represents Heaney's understanding that poetry should be rare and strange, not dutiful and communal.

I was mired in attachment
until they began to pronounce me
a feeder off battlefields

so I mastered new rungs of the air
to survey out of reach
their bonfires on hills, their hosting. (216)

A number of poems in *The Haw Lantern* (1987) are analogies and parables for the poet's necessary independence. In "From the Frontier of Conscience", first there is the inspection by the soldiers – "subjugated, yes, and obedient". Then there is the recreation of the experience in poetry and the freedom that brings. "And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed" (236). In the *Haw Lantern* (1987) and *Seeing Things* (1991) Heaney lives even more strongly and securely in the republic of his own conscience. He is not tied to the quotidian. Invisibles shimmer, appear, disappear. The spirit world, in all its meanings and manifestations, is the secret, shifting, luminous, sometimes fearful, apprehended subject. In a poem in "Squarings" the "visible sea" seems empty when scanned, but once you turn your back on it "Was suddenly all eyes like Argus's". And when you looked again it felt

Unterspased still, and yet somehow vacated

As if a lambent troop that exercised
On the borders of your vision had withdrawn
Behind the skyline to manoeuvre and regroup. (*Seeing Things* 107)

The speaker turns his attention to what is there when things are observed in exact, luminous vision. The language deals with reality, but also with absent reality, or a reality that existed in the past, like the chestnut tree that was: “Its heft and hush became a bright nowhere,/A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for” (*Selected Poems*, 253). Beyond silence, beyond the visible, but not beyond retrieval and not inferior to what is within the immediate compass of the poet’s senses. The marvellous also lives within the ordinary – in a spinning wheel, in slides, in rides on a swing, in lying on cut logs, in letting go and coming back, as Aeneas did, enriched and strengthened: “whatever is given//Can always be reimagined” (29). This, too, is a pilgrimage “Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves”. Contrasting views of reality are placed side by side within poems, and from one poem to its companion. The balancing and pairing, the steadying equations are a measure of the poet’s own equilibrium. He stands at the still centre where the carpenter’s spirit level comes to a halt, poised between competing attractions: “In apposition with/Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim” (80). In seeing things he may cross from one state of being to another, may see clearly what is there, may also imagine what is not there or what has been there. It is his recreation that is important. The vision of reality that poetry offers should, Heaney declares, be transformative, not just a mirroring of actualities.

That transformative power is present throughout *The Spirit Level* (1996). “A Sofa in the Forties” joyfully recreates a childhood game, when the children knelt on the sofa and imagined they were in a train.

First we shunted, then we whistled, then

Somebody collected the invisible
For tickets and very gravely punched it
As carriage after carriage under us

Moved faster, *chooka-chook*, the sofa legs
Went giddy and the unreachable ones
Far out on the kitchen floor began to wave. (*The Spirit Level* 7)²

In the transformative power of the children’s imaginations what is ordinary and real becomes what is extraordinary and unreal; in the process the imagined seems more real. In tune with this spirit of lift and movement, the poem has a rich freight of sound and rhythm. It credits marvels and makes them creditable. Through the power of the poetic imagination and skill, our spirits, too, are moved and lifted. We participate in the childhood game, happily acknowledging its truth to remembered experience. The child’s invention also transcends shortcomings – “the insufficient toys” (7) – and that, for Heaney, is another of poetry’s values: the redressal of disappointments. Man’s capacity for play that both releases and sustains runs through these poems; so, too, does the sense of poetry’s stabilizing power. In “Keeping Going”, Heaney’s brother performs as

a piper; for sporrán, a whitewash brush, for bagpipe, a kitchen chair upside down on his shoulder. But it is his ability to pretend, to enact, and to revel in so doing that is supreme.

Your pop-eyes and big cheeks nearly bursting
With laughter, but keeping the drone going on
Interminably, between catches of breath. (10)

The performance is primary. And it is that capacity that the poem affirms in comparing the early memory of fun and frolic with the contemporary bomb and bullet. The whitewash brush now cleans away the marks of an assassination.

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood
In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot
Where his head had been, (11-12)

Finally, Heaney addresses his brother – “you have good stamina./You stay on where it happens.” He keeps up appearances, laughing and waving; it is another, redemptive performance. In the past he was the Pied Piper in the kitchen, but now “you cannot make the dead walk; or right wrong”, (12), but he is able to endure.

Heaney faces the dark, writing specifically and with a more earthy voice about evil and ugliness. The boyhood home had its fear and dread, its brimstone threat. There were few moments when “the soul was let alone” (11). The violence that happened later made real what had been intuited. The reckoning is level-headed and sobering. “Good tidings” amount to no more than this principle:

This principle of bearing, bearing up
And bearing out, just having to

Balance the intolerable in others
Against our own, having to abide
Whatever we settle for and settled into

Against our better judgement. (17)

Finding the right balance, being equal to what happens, is important. When the saint in “St. Kevin and the Blackbird” is kneeling with his arms outstretched and one arm out through the window of his narrow cell, a blackbird nests and lays eggs in his palm. He is moved to pity, “finding himself linked/Into the network of eternal life” (20), he has to hold his hand out until the young are hatched, fledged and flown. Heaney’s interest comes in the questions: What was it like? How did it feel? Is he self-forgetful or in agony all the time? It is another balancing.

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?

Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
"To labour and not to seek reward," he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird

And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. (20-21)

The poems in *The Spirit Level* are rich with Heaney's unmistakable language, truly imagined, vibrant in rhythm, with an exuberant strength and playful delicacy of tone. In "The Swing" there is another metaphor for balance and equation, for letting go and coming back, for seeing "Light over fields and hedges, ... like a nativity/Foreground and background"; the swing itself is "A lure letdown to tempt the soul to rise" (48). His language contains the observed realistic detail and the revealed beauty in the altered perspective, "the bright rim of the extreme" (61).

In the past, Heaney has imagined the poet's freedom through the figure of Suibhne in *Sweeney Astray* and in *Station Island*, flying through the forests of Ireland, unattached to social or political issues. Now, in *The Spirit Level*, he examines the issue of artistic freedom and the responsibilities of the artist in a different mode. Images of flight and self-delight, lyrical rhythms, while not entirely absent, give way to a more weighted style. In addition the structure of "A Sofa in the Forties" for all its light rhythms and of "Keeping Going" is weighted. In the latter, blank verse, rhymeless lines, and shifting tableaux give the poem a different feel from the Sweeney poems. The result in each case is a solid piece of work and a gravity of manner that restrains the singing line. These poems are counter-weights to life's dark realities. A different view of the relationship between the circumstances within which the poet exists and the degree of distancing with which he writes is found in the longer autobiographical poem, "The Flight Path". This is a reflective measuring by the poet, as he bears up in the complex life he has grown into as an international figure flying from one side of the world to another, journeying back and forth from the Republic to Northern Ireland, suffering social and political pressures. The poem's six part structure encompasses this life, sets it out in segments, beginning once again in a childhood game as his father makes a paper boat for him and in the child's breast "A dove rose" in response. Then "Equal and opposite" (22) comes Heaney's lifting response to a jet flying overhead as he stands at the doorway of his cottage in County Wicklow. Section three sketches out his journeying; section four brings him to an encounter with an IRA activist who bluntly demands, "When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/Something for us?" The poet is firmly dismissive: "If I do write something,/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself." (25).

The longest poem in this collection, “Mycenae Lookout”, is more directly focused and serves as another counter-weight to the war in Northern Ireland. Through the figure of Clytemnestra’s Watchman, looking out for the fires that would signal the end of the ten-year Trojan War, Heaney provides a figure for his own witnessing of the twenty-five-year war in Northern Ireland. The Watchman’s empathetic response mimics both the poet’s agonised witnessing and the actuality of violence, vengeance, and suffering. The self-accusing voice of the Watchman, who failed to speak out and thereby who feels he has connived in horror and betrayal, recalls similar moments of self-accusation in Heaney’s poetry and prose. “Mycenae Lookout” offers imaginative parallels for Heaney’s existence, suspended between the needs of his artistic conscience and the needs of his suffering people. Now, during the 1994 cease-fire, he can examine that state of balance in which he stood as the fulcrum, fluid, responsive, sustained in the scales, achieving through the poetry imaginative states of equilibrium and freedom. At the same time, as “The Flight Path” makes clear, the spirit level can represent a point of almost unendurable tension; only the imagination can bring a releasing fluidity. *The Spirit Level* may be read as an *apologia* for Heaney’s maintenance of a balance between artistic integrity and social/political reality.³

Heaney’s insistence through the years on the poet’s freedom is in itself indicative of the strain under which he has worked. While he has always emphasised poetry’s unforeseeable, untrammelled spirit, its freedom to be itself, he knows it should also be socially responsible. It must be true to what is negative and at the same time have an affirming force. If individual poems cannot register the complex figuring Heaney describes in his essays, “Mycenae Lookout”, by invoking the destruction of the Trojan War, achieves the magnitude and scale needed to balance against comparable events in Northern Ireland. In the figure of the Watchman Heaney reveals not an indifferent witnessing, but a keenly empathetic participation. Within our individual selves, Heaney says, we can recreate two orders of knowledge, the poetic and the practical; each form of knowledge redresses the other; the frontier between the two may be crossed. In *The Spirit Level* Heaney follows through on ideas which have been developing in the two previous collections, *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*. Although it embodies philosophical and poetic truth, *The Spirit Level* does not lose its self-delighting inventiveness. The aesthetic and the ideological are interfused and balanced. Out of that fusion Heaney’s affirmation of the value of poetry and the role of the poet rises to a confident demonstration of what poetry can do.

Seamus Heaney writes about poetry with persuasive force, in a prose style that is figurative and supple. *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978* (1980) has accounts of his years on the farm and in Belfast. Other essays deal with poets who have influenced him – Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose accentual, consonantal music he once imitated; Patrick Kavanagh, who confirmed the validity of rural life as subject matter; Wordsworth in whom he noted the relationship between “the almost physiological operations of a poet composing and the music of the finished poem”(61). Just as *Preoccupations*

responds to subjects that are found within the early poetry, so *The Government of the Tongue* (1988) takes up issues which have permeated *North*, *Field Work*, and *Station Island*. Here, too, the question of poetry's right to exist concerns him. Does it not betray suffering? Should one write lyric poetry at a time of grief? His considerations of literary figures who have responded to suffering answer these questions: Anton Chekhov's drinking cognac within sounds of the convicts at work represents the poet's right to his gift; Osip Mandelstam's metaphor for *The Divine Comedy* as a vast beehive makes the point that poetry is determined not by ecclesiastical or philosophical ideas, but by the intuitive swarming within the poet's subconscious. In poets who have resisted political repression, Mandelstam, Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, Heaney presents those whose espousal of poetry before politics ratifies what he himself has expressed. Their ideal of plain, anti-lyrical poetry, responsive to reality, using parable to outsmart censorship and oppression comes close to what he does in *Field Work*. He argues for the self-validating singularity of poetry. "Station Island" resembles Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin. Both are rituals of exorcism; both achieve psychic and artistic freedom. Both writers face the horror, show themselves deeply moved, but with equal firmness, unflinchingly show themselves obedient to their consciences as writers. Lyric utterance, in other words, is a form of radical witness. The ungoverned tongue is its freed tongue.

The Redress of Poetry. Oxford Lectures (1995) studies a variety of poets, such as W.B. Yeats, Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Bishop, John Clare, Oscar Wilde, Dylan Thomas, and believes that the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it. Heaney has always been attentive to the mystery of creativity, the intimate, hidden processes by which poems rise to the surface of the consciousness, the connection between a given, instinctive language and the language acquired by reading and education, and the actuality of composition in which, he says, a personal force is moved through an aesthetic distance. Its vision of reality should be transformative.

In the last three collections – *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010) – Seamus Heaney's poetry is relaxed, wide-ranging, and often drawn from memory, but not strong as in the previous collections. He returns to the district in which he was born and circles outward to places he has been in his varied life. He revitalises what he has often animated in the past – farm implements, household objects, individuals, family, friends, particular figures and places, such as the Tollund Man and Glandore in County Wicklow. Poems in these late collections resonate with earlier work; the style is flexible, the voice quietly humorous, aware of destruction and menace during the Second World War when they built an aerodrome near his home, the sectarian upheavals in Northern Ireland, and the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. The sledgehammer pulverises what it strikes. He writes once again of the relationship between the living and the dead but finds solace in the natural world. The topics are familiar – farm activities, Anahorish School, the butcher's shop. He writes with his customary ability to find the right illuminating words and to suggest latent threat.

Red beef, white string,
Brown paper ripped straight off for parcelling
Along the counter edge. Rib roast and shin
Plonked down, wrapped up, and bow-tied neat and clean
But seeping blood. (*District and Circle* 33)

The poet is at ease with his imaginative contexts and excited by the rich possibilities of language put to poetic use. Many autobiographical poems recall events and people within a short radius of his home, in Wicklow or abroad. He writes translations from Latin and Irish, elegies for Philip Larkin, Joseph Brodsky, Ted Hughes, and others. The Tollund Man becomes a spokesperson for the poet, his passion for life, his sensuality.

My heavy head. Bronze-buffed. Ear to the ground.
My eye at turf level. Its snailskin lid.
My cushioned cheek and brow. My phantom hand
And arm and leg and shoulder that felt pillowed
As fleshily as when the bog pith weighed
To mould me to itself and it to me
Between when I was buried and unburied. (56)

He relishes physical presence: “I saw it all/and loved it at the time” (59). The poem runs freely: “My eyes were on stalks” (64). The final poem in this collection, “The Blackbird of Glanmore,” invokes the blessing of the bird, the security and continuity of place and the memory of his little brother who was commemorated in an early poem, when a bird sat on the roof like a bad omen.

On the grass when I arrive,
Filling the stillness with life,
But ready to scare off
At the very first wrong move.
In the ivy when I leave.

It's you, blackbird, I love (75)

In *Human Chain*, Heaney returns to the congenial twelve-line poem, once again focuses a chosen scene exactly – a woman carrying hot ash to the pit, the smell of cigarette butts in his father's suits, attending a wake, the birth of a grandchild. “I had my existence. I was there./Me in place and the place in me” (43). He writes of the horror and the pity of violent deaths during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

And what in the end was there left to bury
Of Mr. Lavery, blown up in his own pub
As he bore the primed device and bears it still

Mid-morning towards the sun-admitting door
Of Ashley House? Or of Louis O'Neill
In the wrong place the Wednesday they buried

Thirteen who'd been shot in Derry? Or of bodies
Unglorified, accounted for and bagged
Behind the grief cordons: not to be laid

In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot
Fired over on anniversaries
By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled (56)

Aware of age and infirmity he still writes short, musical lyrics, personal narratives, nature poems, descriptive poems and elegies. The Heaney persona is engaged, a lively, shrewd and wise observer of the chain of human life, of memories that do not die and can be recreated. He has, as he said recently, been surprised by memory.

As I age and blank on names,
As my uncertainty on stairs
Is more and more the lightheadedness

Of a cabin boy's first time on the rigging,
As the memorable bottoms out
Into the irretrievable,

It's not that I can't imagine still
That slight untoward rupture and world-tilt
As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed (84)

Comparisons between Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats are inevitable, but the two poets are very different in their use of language, choice of subject, and the framing of a persona. From the beginning Heaney created realistic pictures of rural life whereas Yeats turned his Sligo homeland into a romantic otherworld; Heaney portrayed real workers in a recognizable landscape, Yeats created dream figures in a mystical land, Heaney dealt with people and events in a straightforward manner, Yeats turned event and person into symbols and abstractions. Heaney developed an easygoing, adaptable persona, Yeats adopted a magisterial role. In the horrors of the First World War and the violence of the Anglo-Irish War and Civil War Yeats foresaw the destruction of civilization; Heaney drew parallels between savagery in early Iron Age Europe and in the Viking period and the violence done in his own province during the Troubles.

Younger poets in the early years of the Twentieth Century found it hard to emerge from Yeats's shadow. From the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) Heaney has been an importance presence in Irish poetry, but he was greatly influenced by Patrick

Kavanagh, who showed that one could write well about local matters. Heaney's decision to do likewise has been inspirational for poets like Peter Fallon, Thomas McCarthy, and Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin, Michael Longley, the young Paul Muldoon, Paul Durcan, and Dennis O'Driscoll. Heaney used up a whole vocabulary of rural existence that younger poets have been careful to avoid nor can they imitate his appropriation of sacrificial customs from elsewhere. His delight in the natural world has been particularly influential as may be seen in the work of Peter Fallon, Dennis O'Driscoll, Michael Longley, and others. Similarly, his attachment to the work of poets from outside Ireland, from Eastern Europe and America has deepened a tendency already there and is a natural outcome of Ireland's participation in European affairs and world affairs. Ireland has become multicultural. The old isolationist Ireland, together with its restrictive puritanism, has vanished.

Kavanagh's dictum that Gods make their own importance became in Heaney's thinking a belief in the transformative power of poetry, and this idea has permeated the work of other poets such as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paul Muldoon. Future observers may find it strange that his poetry reflected so little of life in southern Ireland at a time when there were significant developments in politics and the Catholic Church, serious corruption in financial institutions, widespread unemployment, massive emigration, and widespread clerical sexual abuse.

While he has been the outstanding poet of his generation, his style, choice of subjects or persona never dominated, and he was not alone. Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague continued to produce work of high quality. In his own time, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, John F. Deane, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paul Durcan, Dennis O'Driscoll, and others developed distinctive voices. Major novelists and dramatists were at work: in the novel William Trevor, John Banville, John McGahern; in drama Brian Friel, Thomas Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness, and Marina Carr. The literary scene had many strong presences in Heaney's time whereas in Yeats's there were only a few other figures, none of whom had his stature. Because of this richness Heaney did not have a dominant influence on younger writers. Rather his unmatched skill, fruitful word hoard, great intelligence, and civilized mind encouraged and stimulated those who came after him. Superb lyricist, Heaney wrote with a natural exuberance and *joie de vivre* that was both attractive and inspirational. He was a humane presence.

Notes

- 1 Subsequent references are given in the text. In "'We pine for ceremony': Ritual and Reality in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney (1965-1975)", *Studies in Seamus Heaney* (1987: 47-64); rpt. in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1992: 67-86), I have discussed developments in Heaney's work. The first part of this essay has been drawn from my article "Spaten und Wasserwaage: Seamus Heaney's suche nach Herkunft und Gleichgewicht" (1996: 49-67).
- 2 Subsequent references are given in the text. In 1995 Heaney also published Jan Kochanowski's *Laments* (London: Faber & Faber), translated by Seamus Heaney and Stanislaw Baranczak.

- 3 I have discussed the impact of the Troubles in Northern Ireland on Heaney's work in "Seamus Heaney and the Gentle Flame", *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, eds Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), pp.37-53.

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