

# 'UNROOFED SCOPE'?: HEANEY IN THE NINETIES

Rui Carvalho Homem

For the reception of Seamus Heaney's poetry, the 1990s began amidst expectations of change. Many of the poet's more attentive readers made no secret of their belief that some aspects of his writing and of the fashioning of his poetic self which had been prominent throughout the seventies and eighties had by then overstayed their critical welcome. On his part, and in a number of consecutive statements (as in a September 1990 interview), Heaney himself acknowledged a change in his outlook and his poetic ambitions which he characterized as a growing interest in 'the poetry of clarity and plain statement', 'a poetry of window glass' rather than of 'stained glass'. He further stated his belief 'that the pleasures of the language itself and the sportiveness of inventing and just the simplicity of being whatever your volitions and impulses are - that they're enough to be going on with'<sup>1</sup>. On the same occasion, Heaney associated the change in his writing with, on the one hand, 'a slight sense of eeriness and airiness' derived from 'flying on aeroplanes back and forth across the Atlantic'; and, on the other hand, the experience of 'getting a bit older'<sup>2</sup>.

In the context of Heaney's carefully designed and self-explained *oeuvre*, such statements about a new mood heralded, in fact, a new book - and were accompanied by the appearance, in several periodicals, of poems whose epistemological, representational and moral universe was to be perceived as different. When *Seeing Things* came out in 1991, the visionary element, which loomed among the implications of the title, was supported by reference in the blurb to the way in which the poet was 'ready to re-imagine experience and "to credit marvels"', and thus to mingle 'the ordinary and the transfigured'. Reviewers would also, understandably, highlight the extent to which *Seeing Things* stood out for its difference, Michael Hofmann calling it 'a departure in style, tone and purpose'<sup>3</sup>, Lachlan MacKinnon declaring '*Seeing Things* [to be] a particular pleasure (...) because in it Heaney has learnt not to sound like himself'<sup>4</sup>, and Peter Levi's ecstatic appraisal of this new book by his successor as Professor of Poetry at Oxford ending on the statement: 'It is as if our minds had been refurnished'<sup>5</sup>.

A note common to many of these statements was relief that Seamus Heaney now seemed to have left behind some of those aspects of his writing which had become Heaneyspeak - whether they were the spade-and-bog, basic rural scope of reference which had been one of Heaney's hallmarks from his poetic *début* with *Death of a Naturalist*; the Jungian conjurings of earthy and inner darkness inaugurated with *Door into the Dark* and feeding into the mythopoeic treatment of history which culminated in the first part of *North*; or, above all, the long-entertained dilemmas on the poet's artistic and political responsibilities, which had, though in varying forms, extended from the second part of *North* through the poetry of the late seventies and into the eighties, duly supported by elaborate, even if indirect, justification in the volumes of essays. On the poet's conscience pains, Patrick Crotty would declare, in his review of *Seeing Things*:

Gone is the conflict (...) between poetry's imaginative and civic responsibilities: the underlying engagement with history (...) has now simply been broken off. (...) it is good to see him dispense with the breast-beatings about poetic accountability<sup>6</sup>

And some of the other aspects mentioned above would be the object of one of the most radical characterizations of the change in Heaney's poetics, proposed by John Wilson Foster - in a statement memorable no less for its clear-cut quality than for its discreet but pervasive irony:

To telegraph the shift: poetry's proper element is no longer seen as earth but as air; poetry is no longer a door into the dark but a door into the light; it must climb to its proper light, no longer descend to its proper dark. (...) The Hughesian raid into darkness, the troubling secrecies underfoot, rich opacities of sound, rootedness: these that brought Heaney his fame are to be subjected to a Copernican revolution, a shift from earth's centrality.<sup>7</sup>

This passage occurs, not in a review, but rather in an essay with the title 'Heaney's Redress'; but its major difference vis-à-vis the statements quoted above is that this one is dated 1990, one year before *Seeing Things* - and, in fact, it locates the 'new' features it describes in Heaney's work of the 1980s, deriving its title from that of Heaney's inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1989. This very fact will support the contention, which will prove central to this essay, that, however appealing it may be, Foster's phrase 'a Copernican revolution', with its implication of a complete break with a previous and incompatible model, actually misrepresents a shift which is gradual, carefully negotiated, and conducive to strategies of writing and representation in no way mutually incompatible with those which they balance rather than simply supersede. (It is only fair to say the phrase in

question does little justice, to begin with, to Foster's perceptive and discriminating essay, alert as it is to subtlety, rather than intent on the clear-cut and the simplistic). It will thus be my purpose to trace some of the ways in which an apparently sudden, 'revolutionary' shift is in fact a long-prepared transition; I will further argue that not only are some of the features of change already discernible in collections previous to *Seeing Things*, but that both this collection and Heaney's most recent, *The Spirit Level* (1996), contain much that bears out a concern with continuities, with affording the reader the comforts of the expected, rather than exclusively producing the shock and the excitement of the new.

The initial stage for developing this argument will have to be, however, the recognition of some of those 'things-to-be-seen' in Heaney's 1991 collection which support the perception of its difference. At their most obvious, they take the form of evanescent moments of illumination, or of the experience of being translated from the dimension of material and objective existence into that of insubstantial being and unlimited space. Perhaps one should, in this respect, take up one of the definitions of its title which the sub-sequence 'Lightenings' proposes at its very end, bringing into play both the homophonous *lightning*, with its implication of the sudden production of light, and the alternative meaning of the release of a burden:

A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares  
With pure exhilaration before death –  
The good thief in us harking to the promise! <sup>8</sup>

In another poem, a brief ice-skating episode can be represented as involving  
A farewell to surefootedness, a pitch

Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves.

("Squarings, 3.Crossings, xxviii", ST 86)

And, in yet another poem, the experience of crossing a serene landscape on a train journey can be described as a switch into another dimension, an altered perception of time being concomitant with that suddenly different awareness of space:

Air spanned, passage waited, the balance rode,

Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store  
Witnessed itself already taking place  
In a time marked by assent and by hiatus.

('Squarings, 2.Settings, xiv', ST 70)

Passages such as these could no doubt be read in the context of what Ken Robinson, in a 1992 article, chose to call 'Putting Words to Wonders' - a study of the transcendent or 'non-relational' moment, characterised by an apparent suspension both of time and of any clear separation of subject and object, which Robinson considers in its philosophical lineage as well as in literary representations especially from the Romantics to the Moderns:

I am concerned with poets (largely, but not exclusively, Romantic and post-Romantic poets) who share the conviction that spots of time have a peculiar significance. For such poets these paradoxical moments are not simply an escape from but a transcendence of the workaday. They constitute a special form of being (...) or a special form of knowledge which is neither rationalist nor empiricist. <sup>9</sup>

Seamus Heaney is not among the poets considered in Robinson's article, but several poems in *Seeing Things* could have been designed to illustrate his point, in particular the evocation in 'Markings' of teenage football matches played at dusk, sensorial perception soon becoming indistinguishable from mental representations, imaginative impulse, dream images or intimations of a transcendent nature:

Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field  
As the light died and they kept on playing  
Because by then they were playing in their heads  
And the actual kicked ball came to them  
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard  
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass  
Sounded like effort in another world...  
It was quick and constant, a game that never need  
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,  
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness  
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.

("Markings", ST 8)

The limit beyond which an altered, time-abstracted perception takes place is characteristically imprecise, and the notion that one emerges from such moments with the awareness of a spatial, and not just temporal, alterity is also made explicit; in Robinson's words, 'Once we come to ourselves after such moments, we seem to have been elsewhere'<sup>10</sup>. Likewise, the following poem, dealing once more with recollections of football-playing, is pervaded by the indistinction between subject and object peculiar to the 'non-relational moment' - to quote Robinson once more, 'whilst they are happening the subject is not aware of himself as subject or of the object as object'<sup>11</sup>:

Was it you  
or the ball that kept going  
beyond you, amazingly  
higher and higher  
and ruefully free?

(‘Three Drawings. 1.The Point’, ST 10)

And this sudden indistinction will be followed, within the same poetic triptych of which this was the first poem, by the experience of dissolution in space, again characteristic of the 'non-relational moment'<sup>12</sup> - in this case, through an allusion to an episode in Nordic mythology, as an instance of expansion within a liquid and uncontained environment:

The hole he smashed in the boat  
opened, the way Thor's head  
opened out there on the sea.  
He felt at one with space,

unroofed and obvious -  
surprised in his empty arms  
like some fabulous high-catcher  
coming down without the ball.

(‘3.A Haul’, ST 12)

Something that stands out in Heaney's representations of the experience of release or liberation which may, to some extent, set it apart in the literary lineage of the 'non-relational moment', is the fact that it is so often rooted in ordinary circumstances - Heaney's ability to produce the uncommon out of the common finding indeed its clearest demonstration in *Seeing Things*. That ability, which already points towards my general argument of the basic compatibility of 'old' and 'new' Heaney, finds a particularly emblematic instance in 'The Pitchfork', a poem ostensibly about one of those farm implements which, *par excellence*, stood for the earthy, unidyllic rurality upon which so much of this poet's early popularity was based. But the significance of the pitchfork and the contexts from which it can derive its meaning are broadened and diversified when other objects are juxtaposed with it, from a javelin, ready to be held and thrown by warrior or athlete, to the farm implement's technological antithesis in the form of a space probe. It will be indeed as space probe that the pitchfork will be abstracted from the bounds of finite space and represented on a cosmic journey in which emptiness, light and silence complement one another. The eyesight which gave it this shape is redirected from the thrust and threat which the image of the javelin involved to its benign counterpart on that 'other side' the probe might reach; whether the allusion is to an intergalactic contact or to an intimation of a divine presence is ultimately irrelevant or deliberately undecided:

an other side  
Where perfection - or nearness to it - is imagined  
Not in the aiming but the opening hand.

(‘The Pitchfork’, ST 23)

These are the closing lines of the poem, and it cannot be accidental that the opening lines of the following poem juxtapose an empirical realization of the physics of centrifugal and centripetal forces with the metaphysics of ascribing them to an insubstantial intervention:

There's a shadow boost, a giddy strange assistance  
That happens when you swing a loaded basket.  
The lightness of the thing seems to diminish  
The actual weight of what's being hoisted in it.

(‘A Basket of Chestnuts’, ST 24)

The conflation of the opposite qualities of 'lightness' and 'weight' seems, in fact, to loom large enough in Heaney's creative design at this stage for it to become one of the *leitmotif* of *Seeing Things*, signalling the reformed continuity of such persistent and varied themes of his work as the telluric vs. the celestial, the objects and circumstances characteristic of domestic life, and the transgenerational continuum seen at its clearest in the form of family legacies. The balanced representation of earth

and sky could be found in one of the poems of 'Lightenings', when, looking at the pools of stagnant water in a quarry, which mirrored the starry sky - 'all that cargoed brightness' - against the hardness of that ground, the poet asks:

could you reconcile  
What was diaphanous there with what was massive? ('Squarings, 1.Lightenings, x', ST 64)

With its closing line, the same poem would further associate this opposition with that between the auditory and the visual: 'Shield your eyes, look up and face the music' (ST 64) - the colloquialism of the closing words conveying the boldness of deflecting the sight from its previous telluric fixation to the contemplation of space, and the music standing in this case for the visual attraction of the stars (with a possible allusion to the music of the spheres as well).

It is at this point inevitable to remember the overwhelming role played by the auditory in earlier phases of Seamus Heaney's poetry, in that it was both the preferred sense for the poetic subject to know the reality he gave a voice to, and the medium in which many of the rhetorical effects peculiar to Heaney's first volumes - onomathopoeia, alliteration, assonance, the whole range of phonetically based devices - became manifest. Heaney's essays would also insist on the auditory as a decisive poetic factor in poetry's genesis as also in its reception (with reference in particular to Eliot's concept of 'the auditory imagination'<sup>13</sup>) - culminating, in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, in the maxim: 'A sin against the ear is the poetic equivalent of the sin against the Holy Spirit'<sup>14</sup>. But in *Seeing Things* the auditory emphasis is indeed to be refashioned, and the subtlest and at the same time most emblematic sign of that shift and its implications is the 'replacement', in another poem of the sub-sequence 'Lightenings', of Heaney's famous phrase 'the music of what happens'<sup>15</sup>, which very clearly established the link between writing and the level of fact and event, by 'the music of the arbitrary', to which Heaney would add, a few lines below, the injunctions: 'Improvise. Make free' ('Lightenings, v', ST 59).

The shift to light and vision would converge with the already mentioned theme of the domestic in 'The Skylight', one of the sonnets in 'Glanmore Revisited', a sequence explicitly concerned with the poet's return to the rural retreat which he had celebrated in the original 'Glanmore Sonnets', in *Field Work*. But the dimension of experience and the poetic representation against which this sonnet pits both itself and the new poetic attitude is actually previous to that - it could refer back to a poem like 'Storm on the Island', in *Death of a Naturalist*<sup>16</sup>, and its celebration of the domestic as a cosy dark core, closed off from the world, lit only by the *focus* of the hearth; as Heaney now acknowledges (significantly in the past),

I liked it low and closed,  
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof  
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,  
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.

The sestet brings with it the change into the light and the open air, and the unequivocal sense of release and of the miraculous, of life renewed:

But when the slates came off, extravagant  
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.  
For days I felt like an inhabitant  
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy  
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,  
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

("Glanmore Revisited, 7.The Skylight", ST 37)

The same willingness to convert from the heaviness of materiality and an attachment to the ground to the 'lightness' of a new look on the ordinary will be represented in 'The Settle Bed'. The title is descriptive of an object which concentrates the themes of the domestic and of the family legacy (it has been inherited by the poet), an object which, at the outset, stands for the weight and the solidity of that which has been made to stand still, defining its space, rooting itself in a definitive manner. But these qualities, which determined so much of Heaney's writing in previous books, are now to be combined with, and partially transcended by, the leap from a perception of the material to the free and delirious working of the imagination, which can take in the image of a shower of beds, as well as produce a *dictum* which cannot be overvalued:

to conquer that weight,  
  
Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven  
Like some nonsensical vengeance come on the people,

Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is given

Can always be reimagined

(ST 28-9)

It will not prove difficult to find an occasion to return to this maxim, but for the moment I would like to concentrate on one of the reasons provided by Heaney himself for the prominence of a reconsideration of the home-and-family theme in *Seeing Things*: the poet's awareness of ageing, of a post-paternal moment in which children have left and, most importantly, the previous generation has already died. Heaney has been explicit - notoriously so in a 1995 interview<sup>17</sup> - about the connection between the emotional shock of the death of his parents, and the consequential awareness of being now in the front line of the passing of generations, and a renewed willingness to consider the spiritual dimension, although no longer within the conventional framework of belief provided by the Catholicism of his youth. In *Seeing Things*, the death of the poet's father occupies a pivotal position in the structure of mutual dependence and justification in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are placed<sup>18</sup>. The father is evoked, in fact, both in the rural and domestic environment in which he appeared in previous collections, and in fabulous or mythical/literary contexts - of which an oblique instance is provided by Heaney's version of a passage of the *Aeneid* with which the volume opens, a translation in which the quest for the father is refracted through Aeneas's quest in a place in which the sibyl's voice echoes 'With sayings where clear truths and mysteries / Were inextricably twined' ('The Golden Bough', ST 1). The same source will be alluded to in 'Man and Boy', a poem which reenacts the relationship between father and son which Heaney had celebrated in 'Follower' (DN 24-5), but now in an imaginary and insubstantial manner, a manner which is also symmetrical to the episode in which Aeneas and Anchises flee from Troy (*Aeneid*, Book II):

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

(ST 15)

Heaney's proneness to represent ghostly counterparts to ordinary objects or circumstances will understandably be manifest also in the most explicit deathbed poem in *Seeing Things*, when the dying father's hand movements are construed as the search for an object emblematic of the Irish rural male - an object which gives the poem its title, 'The Ash Plant', its ghostly presence signalling the father's shift from presence to absence, described as 'go[ing] light with light' (ST 19).

Finding the mystical in the quotidian, juxtaposing presence and absence, recognising the self in the broadest possible context of the passing of generations from life into 'light': this is then what a number of poems in *Seeing Things* are about, the poet not hesitating to represent an epiphany as 'a judge who comes (...)/ In a pillar of radiant house-dust' ('Squarings, 4.Squarings, xlv', ST 105). This closing line is, in fact, equivalent to answering 'everywhere' when faced with the question asked in another poem: 'Where does spirit live?' ('Squarings, 2.Settings, xxii', ST 78). But this is the stage of my argument at which I have to point out that, if these are prominent characteristics in *Seeing Things*, so were they in at least a part of Seamus Heaney's previous book, his 1987 *The Haw Lantern*<sup>19</sup> - in particular in the much-quoted sonnet sequence prompted by the death of the poet's mother. (After all, in *Seeing Things* Heaney dates his ability to acknowledge the marvellous from before he turned fifty

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty

To credit marvels.

(“Fosterling”, ST 50)

- an age he reached in 1989). The very title of the sonnet sequence, 'Clearances', relates to the repeated representation of an absence which is filled in by the poetically fruitful consequence of the mother's presence in the poet's memory and emotional identity. It is true that these poems in *The Haw Lantern* on the death of one parent may seem to contrast with those in *Seeing Things* on the death of the other parent, to the extent that there is in the former a stronger presence of the element of recollection of jointly lived moments. But it does not even take a particularly careful reading to realize that the prospective and visionary representation of the possible forms of an elsewhere, which we have associated with the death of the father, is a fundamental part of the imaginative design of 'Clearances':

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.

(‘Clearances, 7’, HL 31)

This is how the very moment of death is represented, and the impulse to transcendence also finds a confirmation in the imaginary first moment of an afterlife, when the mother meets her closest ancestor in an elsewhere whose sameness with home is countered

only with the pun in the closing line:

It is Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead,  
Where grandfather is rising from his place  
With spectacles pushed back on a clean bald head  
To welcome a bewildered homing daughter  
Before she even knocks. 'What's this? What's this?'  
And they sit down in the shining room together.

(‘Clearances, 2’, *HL* 26)

As to the aftermath as experienced by the poet, the final sonnet will find a correlative for the mother’s death in the felling of a chestnut tree which had once stood by the old family home - a chestnut tree which, as Heaney reveals in *The Government of the Tongue*, he associates with himself, because it was planted in the year of his birth (*GT* 3). The sonnet begins by recreating the image of the empty-fertile place, with two lines whose imaginative importance is indicated by the fact that they are already a self-quotation (of ‘Station Island III’<sup>20</sup>) -

I thought of walking round and round a space  
Utterly empty, utterly a source

(‘Clearances, 8’, *HL* 32)

- and ends with a description of an afterlife, ostensibly the chestnut’s,  
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,  
A soul ramifying and forever  
Silent, beyond silence listened for.

(*HL* 32)

Who could deny that, four years *avant-la-lettre*, this poet was seeing things?

The advantages of retrospection should, of course, be qualified by a *caveat* against the temptation to construe the development of the poet’s work as all design and coherence, denying any role to chance, the fortuitous and the arbitrary. Nonetheless, it has justifiably become a critical truism that Heaney’s work has, from a very early stage, repeatedly included the concern with mapping ahead, the ending of each collection usually defining a direction which the following volume will confirm. As I began by pointing out, part of the reception of *Seeing Things* was insistent on the opposite - i.e., on the new and the unforeseeable. And yet some of its most prominent thematic features and modes of representation can be dated back to such relatively early concerns as Heaney’s late-1970s explicit refusal of ‘any more doors into the dark’, longing rather for a ‘door into the light’<sup>21</sup> - or even to the alternative posed by ‘Hercules and Antaeus’, the closing poem of *North Part I*, between the winner, ‘sky-born and royal’ and the defeated, ‘the mould-hugger’<sup>22</sup>. While it is true that in that poem a sympathy for the defeated was the keynote, it could also be an attempt to put a full stop to the involvement with earth and the dark which had found its culminating point in the first part of the book - and provide a link, through Hercules’s triumph, with the rationalised, explicitly ‘political’ confrontation with the matter of the Troubles in *North Part II*. But retrospection does indeed work wonders - see how, from the vantage point of *Seeing Things*, Elmer Andrews has convincingly commented on ‘Hercules and Antaeus’, making it sound like a poem of the later volume:

Poetry becomes a kind of lift-off, away from the first kingdom, the holy ground, into the realms of airy vision. (...)

Heaney attempts to free himself from the ground he once treasured. He stresses the need for transfiguration.<sup>23</sup> Rather less convincingly, Andrews adds that ‘Beginning in the imbalance of violence and loss, the typical *Field Work* poem struggles towards imaginative transcendence’<sup>24</sup> - a statement which may leave out all those poems which end on a note of ominousness, repression or atrocity, no less typical of *Field Work* than those which represent release, *potentia* and fruition. But Andrews is surely right as to the presence of the wish, the longing for release from the constraints both of a civic conscience and of modes of writing which threaten to perpetuate themselves. In characteristic Heaneyesque design, that longing had been implied (as Michael Allen pointed out in 1988<sup>25</sup>) in the very last poem in *North*, ‘Exposure’, with its ultimate sense of the personal and political environment of the poet’s writing having made him miss a phenomenon of beauty and the creative opportunity it might have afforded,

The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
The comet’s pulsing rose.

(‘Singing School, 6.Exposure’, *N* 73)

- a poem whose importance in Heaney’s work would be confirmed by being one of the few poems to be quoted in full in his Nobel Lecture.

The volumes following this moment in Heaney’s work will, indeed, include some memorable instances of light, brightness

and fruition; however, rather than the celebration of release, what they represent is a protracted reiteration of longing for it, a perpetual deferral of its achievement. The first poem in *Field Work*, 'Oysters', actually enacts the frustration of a moment of sheer pleasure by the irruption of the poet's consciousness of history as violence and abuse - prompting an anger which is self-directed, phrased as a frustrated desire for 'light', and conducive to a hedonistic determination of the creative stance:

And [I] was angry that my trust could not repose  
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom  
Leaning in from sea. I ate the day  
Deliberately, that its tang  
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb.

(FW 11)

But the self-determined art which this closing formula stands for, and the forceful rephrasing of the *carpe diem* motif in the phrase 'I ate the day', will at best find an intermittent continuity throughout a collection which ends with Heaney's version of the 'Ugolino' encounter in Dante's *Inferno*, and its themes of treason, imprisonment, starvation, and horrific retribution.

The dantesque would prove an obvious mode for the continuity of Heaney's concern with poetic and civic responsibilities before violence and suffering, and the poet's resulting penitent stance, notoriously so in the title sequence of *Station Island*. But it also provides some of the references for a poem like 'Sandstone Keepsake', in which the poet half-cherishes, half-resents the independence of his 'free state of image and allusion', and of a harmlessness made obvious when the guards on the watchtowers of an internment camp pay little attention to this evening stroller on a nearby beach, 'a silhouette not worth bothering about./ (...)/ and not about to set times wrong or right' (SI 20). The emotional and ethical complexities experienced here will struggle to be resolved with a Joycean sanction in the twelfth and final station of the penitential sequence, Heaney highlighting Joyce's scepticism as to (in Seamus Deane's words) 'the possibility of maintaining one's integrity as an artist while being involved with a community's enterprise'<sup>26</sup>, and also his mistrust of mind-blurring expiations. Heaney's revisions of this poem for the *New Selected Poems* would prove enlightening as to the general direction of his concerns in the latter half of the 1980s, the liberating drive of the injunctions ascribed to the 'Joyce' persona receiving an increased emphasis - as a few examples may show: 'what you must do must be done on your own' becomes 'what you do you must do on your own', reserving the sense of necessity for individual isolation in the act of writing, rather than promoting an understanding of the creative act as itself compulsory; an imperative such as 'get back in harness', which, even if directed strictly at a writerly commitment, could seem to collide with the sense of poetic freedom, is simply eliminated; and the description of the creative consequences of the poet's conscience pains as 'a waste of time', with its purposive implication that time must always be well 'spent', is simply replaced by its description as 'old whinges', a thing of the past and of no account. Heaney thus projects his will for freedom from any bounds extrinsic to a self-determined poetic *praxis* onto the voice of an unquestionable cultural hero of those very areas of criticism and the intelligentsia which would necessarily question the feasibility of such an emancipation. He would later be explicit about his pained awareness of expectations which, though rather vaguely described, could be those resulting from the juxtaposition of a traditional nationalist agenda with a theory-fuelled disbelief in the possibility of language ever allowing for stable and absolute meanings:

the very vocabulary has become untrustworthy, undermined by our awareness of its collusion with all kinds of secluded ideologies, based (depending upon your suspicion) upon gender or *imperium* or, indeed, subversion; and from this acknowledgement of language's duplicitousness arises a doubt about the very possibility of ever pronouncing the authentic persuasive word.<sup>27</sup>

This 1989 statement came at a time when the search for strategies of writing which would somehow be a compromise between a never unrelinquished sense of civic duty and the poet's growing distrust of the explicit had recently produced the well-known civic allegories in *The Haw Lantern*, rather obviously connected with the attraction for the oblique political writing of (pre-1989) east-European poets celebrated in *The Government of the Tongue*. Heaney's habit of self-justification had already, in one of his 1988 Richard Ellmann lectures published as *The Place of Writing*, given rise to a suggestion of how a politically aware writing could persist in our days:

these commitments (...) may not so much have disappeared from poetry as refined their means. Instead of tribal celebration we have a lyric irony; instead of earthy certitudes, we have visionary metamorphoses.<sup>28</sup>

This makes clear how civic allegories like 'From the Frontier of Writing', 'From the Republic of Conscience' or 'From the Land of the Unspoken' can anticipate the 'credit' given to 'marvels' in *Seeing Things* - and, as their titles immediately suggest, the link is a metapoetic one. It is true that a poem like 'From the Frontier of Writing' offers the reader of its first stanzas the rather annoying feeling of the *déjà-lu*: there we have again the harassment at the roadblock, its victim resenting it as much as his own passivity before such abuse. But halfway down the poem the evocation of such circumstances is found to serve an ulterior purpose, as an analogy to the poet's approach to writing. And, besides or beyond the moment of intimidation, the experience of

writing offers the gratification, within its demanding borders, of an ever-renewable release: 'And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed' (*HL* 6) - a release which in *The Haw Lantern*, as Terence Brown commented some years ago, often follows instances of scrutiny and judgment<sup>29</sup>.

The allegorical rendering of a civic conscience is thus combined with the assumption that lyrical discourse has to comprise perceptions which cannot be reduced to the rational - and this turns such poems into preliminary stages to the intimations of transcendence and the marvellous in *Seeing Things*, a direction characteristically pointed to in the closing line of one of the last poems in *The Haw Lantern*: 'All I believe that happened there was vision' ('The Disappearing Island', *HL* 50). But the way towards the 'new' 1990s liberated mood in Heaney's work can also be read as decisively assisted by the first performances and the publication in 1990 of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney's version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*<sup>30</sup>. As refracted commentary on the Northern-Irish predicament and on his own position in relation to it, Heaney's text foregrounds the allegorical possibilities of the plight of a man stranded on an island by companions who cannot bear his unhealable wound and his ensuing cries of pain, a man who is nonetheless in possession of a much-coveted weapon which makes him the object of a continued enticement and attempted deceit. The option for drama as a means for the representation of the civic and the political is 'naturally' sanctioned by its generic definition as 'one of the most social of all art forms'<sup>31</sup>, 'the theatre [being] the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself'<sup>32</sup> - a possibly more adequate form and space for self-dramatizations than the private and subjective framework of the lyric. As Alan Peacock, among others, has convincingly argued, Heaney may have found in a bifurcation of his literary *praxis* a solution to what, within a single generic possibility, threatened to perpetuate itself as conflict:

Possibly, this successful assumption of a public, dramatic voice (...) has freed Heaney, to an extent, to seek (...) resolutions in the private and familial sphere in his non-dramatic poetry. Certainly the latest volume, *Seeing Things*, is more concerned with personal vision and personal history than with larger political, civic and historical issues.<sup>33</sup>

I will return to the issue of private experience further on - but I would like, for the moment, to pay some attention to the (indeed, mitigated) forms in which 'political, civic and historical issues' can find a place in *Seeing Things*. To begin with, Heaney first employed the phrase *seeing things* in a context which proposed it as the attitude which would supersede a self-concerned brooding, when, in *The Cure at Troy*, the man who had long tended his wound becomes the object of an injunction: 'Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things' (*CT* 74). And indeed *Seeing Things* is not characteristic for wound-licking, although that does not mean the poet will suddenly and radically discard concerns whose socio-historic relevance persists, or ignore the whole course of his ethical and aesthetic *Bildung*, which so continuedly found a consequence in his writing. The difference is that such concerns will now appear in a background of representation or allusion at times recognisable only by all of those on whose complicity a poet who has always invested so strongly in continuities can, after his eighth book of poems, legitimately count.

Thus, when in the opening version from the *Aeneid* Aeneas addresses the Sibyl with the words

No ordeal, O Priestess,  
That you can imagine would ever surprise me  
For already I have foreseen and foresuffered all  
(“The Golden Bough”, *ST* 1)

it is inevitable Heaney's readers will get a hint of the self-lacerations in previous volumes. Likewise, when in 'Markings' the poet recollects the making of teenage football teams -

And then we picked the teams  
And crossed the line our called names drew between us  
(*ST* 8)

- there is a strong probability we may think of the divisions created by names as they were described in a 1975 poem like 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' (*N* 59). And will it be possible not to recall the difficult balances akin to previously much insisted upon dilemmas when the subject in 'Casting and Gathering' describes himself as kept still by contrary forces?:

I trust contrariness.  
Years and years go past and I do not move  
(*ST* 13)

Examples could be legion, and they would include the straightforward account of driving behind a military truck, or the yet disturbed recollection of once having taken part with a friend in a civil rights demonstration followed by police repression and by an awkward escape to the car; as also, in a much more subtle register, and as an instance of an attempted new, more nonchalant self-ironical mood, a poem about climbing the Capitol. Such a *locus*, to the extent that it is the seat of a great power,



produces a temptation by pride which alludes to Christ's temptation on top of the Temple (*Matthew 4:5-6*), somewhat balanced by a consciousness of privilege:

We climbed the Capitol by moonlight, felt  
The transports of temptation on the heights:  
We were privileged and belated and we knew it.

But this experience of elation promptly leads to invective against a classicizing sort of writing, construed in the image of that American public architecture for which the place in question is the topmost example - an invective which resonates with the poet's possible dissatisfaction with his own bardic and academic institutionalization, directly leading to a wish for a pristine plainness:

Then something in me moved to prophesy  
Against the beloved stand-offishness of marble  
And all emulation of stone-cut verses.

'Down with form triumphant, long live,' (said I)  
'Form mendicant and convalescent. We attend  
The come-back of pure water and the prayer-wheel.'

All this is reduced, however, to its quixotic dimension by a condescending other voice which, frustrating any hierophantic expectations, superimposes on all previous considerations the imperative banality of bodily needs, in a near-Bergsonian deflation of sublime pretensions<sup>34</sup>:

To which a voice replied, 'Of course we do.  
But the others are in the Forum Café waiting,  
Wondering where we are. What'll you have?' ( 'Squarings, 4.Squarings, xxxviii', *ST*98)

This humourous, self-deflationary tone is, in fact, one of the most appealing elements of newness about *Seeing Things*, pervading the different registers and thematic areas of the book. It can therefore be found directed at the poet's self-acknowledged 'Masquerade as a man of property' in one of the 'Glanmore Revisited' sonnets ('5.Lustral Sonnet', *ST*35) - the purchase of the cottage apparently embarrassing the (in many respects) *soixant-huitard* poet who now finds himself in the shoes of a bourgeois owner. And it also comes to characterise the self-representation of the middle-aged poetic subject as husband and father. The vignettes of young married bliss with children sleeping next door, which had been typical of earlier Heaney, now give place to a mildly humourous analogy with Odysseus and Penelope as ageing couple in a post-paternal moment which better allows for an emotional recollection of the roots of a joint existence ('Glanmore Revisited, 6.Bedside Reading', *ST*36). And retrospection can also involve reconstruing much earlier moments along the lines of the 'middle aged' perspective, as is the case in 'A Pillowed Head', a poem evocative of the birth of a child who, described as a girl and as not being the first, the usual biographical implication allows us to identify as the third and last of the Heaneys - biography also making us realize that parents described as 'this time' 'clear-headed' and 'self-possessed', because 'older' (*ST*38), would still be in their early thirties.

Rather than attempting to make each poem true to the emotional framework of any one recollected moment as it was lived, Heaney seems with such strategies to be intent on living up to his own dictum 'that there should be a correspondence between the maturation of a sensibility and its methods of expression at different stages'<sup>35</sup>. This is a passage from one of his Oxford lectures collected as *The Redress of Poetry*, and the final stage of this essay will be partly taken up with the ways in which this volume embodies the poet's preferred self-assessment, and his clues for the development of his poetic work. This may sound like a simplistic understanding of the correlation between criticism and poetry, but one should bear in mind that a characteristic of Heaney's writing, both poetic and critical, from the beginning of his career, has been its 'perfect fit', its remarkable integration - a possible demonstration of Eliot's remark that

When the critics are themselves poets, it may be suspected that they have formed their critical statements with a view to justifying their poetic practice.<sup>36</sup>

This was immediately noticed about Heaney when his first volume of critical essays, *Preoccupations*, came out in 1980, prompting Edna Longley's remark that 'his criticism is (...) absolutely a poet's criticism, his poetry's criticism'<sup>37</sup>. And the 'poet as critic' would himself admit that

On the whole the poets who appear in my prose (...) are people who are part of my memory. (...) I suppose my criticism is some form of autobiography.<sup>38</sup>

*The Redress of Poetry* will then no more than confirm what *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue* or *The Place of Writing* had already made obvious - that, in spite or on top of being enlightening studies of Marlowe, Merriman or MacDiarmid, of Clare, Larkin or Yeats, Heaney's essays are fundamental instances of self-reading in which a deliberate guidance of his reader's perspective should not be excluded. In the 'Introduction' to these Oxford lectures the poet is in fact more candid than ever before about the way in which they 'grew out of' the transitions in his poetry between *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things* - although his awareness of this is presented as an *a posteriori* realization.

As Donald Davie noticed in his review of *The Redress of Poetry* - possibly his last review - the aspect of Heaney's writing which is more strongly endorsed by these essays is the 'change (...) in his own poetry', the fact that 'his poems have become, in a word, more transcendental'<sup>39</sup>. In fact, even a cursory reading of *The Redress of Poetry* will not fail to notice the assertion, still in the 'Introduction', that these lectures are determined by their author's 'trust (...) that a reliable critical course could be plotted by following a poetic sixth sense' - a trust which will be made verbal in passages such as the following:

Just because (...) [this] poetry abounds in actualities, just because it is as full of precise delightful detail as a granary is full of grains, does not mean that it is doomed to pile up and sink down in its own materiality. On the contrary, that which is special and unique about it is its lambency, its skim-factor, its bobbing unencumbered motion.

[The poem's] real subject is the uncanny. The watergaw, the faint rainbow glimmering in chattering light, provides a sort of epiphany, and (...) [the poet] connects the shimmer and weakness and possible revelation in the light behind the drizzle with the indecipherable look he received from his father on his deathbed. But how the poem sounds is probably more important than what it sees. What constitutes the true originality here is the combined sensation of strangeness and at-homeness which the words create. (...) that double sensation of sure-footed homecoming and light-headed expedition which only the highest poetry achieves.

What is at work in this most original and illuminating poetry is the mind's capacity to conceive a new plane of regard for itself, a new scope for its own activity.<sup>40</sup>

This is Seamus Heaney on (respectively) John Clare, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Yeats - but it could easily be a description of aspects of *Seeing Things* identified above: the balancing of the concrete and the ethereal, the leap from sensorial perception to spiritual intimation, with a parent's death as a catalyst of such mixed knowledge, the general yearning for the 'Unroofed scope' of the first poem in the sequence 'Squarings' ('Squarings, 1.Lightenings, i', *ST* 55).

The Nobel Lecture would be the topmost occasion for these emphases to find a worldwide resonance; whilst it is true that it was determined by a much broader purpose of assessment of a whole career, describing it in all its phases in terms which allow his more attentive readers to recognise a long string of quotations or glosses of specific poems, it characterised the present point of arrival (with dual reference to a feeling of elation before the Nobel-awarding ceremony and to the current stage of his poetry) in the following words:

the platform here feels more like a space station than a stepping stone, so that is why, for once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air.  
I credit poetry for making this space-walk possible.<sup>41</sup>

But it also implicitly defined an inclusive principle for the way in which the celebration of release would relate to the previous emphases in his work, at the end of the poet's account of his moral and aesthetic development:

Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in despite 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.<sup>42</sup>

The 'as well as' construction in this sentence, together with the attention required by the continuities underlined above, should contribute to qualifying an exclusive insistence on 'change' in accounts of how Heaney's poetry enters the nineties.

This is the point at which the question (finally) arises: to what extent does Heaney's most recent collection, *The Spirit Level*<sup>43</sup>, confirm or deny the expectations we have been defining? The very title seems to propose an ironic conflation of the material and the transcendental, since it names a tool associated with manual labour - whilst reminding Heaney's readers of the extent to which his poetry of the nineties places itself at the level of the spirit. A level whose prominence in the volume can be instanced by 'Saint Kevin and the Blackbird', a poem whose underlying legend Heaney gave an account of in his Nobel lecture, precisely as an example of 'the changed orientation' in his work. The saint's decision to stay 'immobile for hours and days and nights and

weeks' so as not to disturb the hatching of a bird's eggs, accidentally laid in his outstretched hand while he was praying, is described as 'true to life if subversive of common sense', a dictum which Heaney declares to try and adopt for his poetry of the nineties<sup>44</sup>. It is not only in this broadly defined dimension of the scarcely believable and the mystical, though, that 'Saint Kevin and the Blackbird' proceeds with the representation of transcendence as we identified it in *Seeing Things*, but also in some very specific processes, such as the rooting of the transcendental in the sensorial and the biological - when the 'warm eggs' and the bird's body in the saint's hand cause him to '[find] himself linked / Into the network of eternal life' - or the dissolution of identity in a 'non-relational moment' construed also as a figment of an unfettered imagination:

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,  
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he? (SL 20)

But, in *The Spirit Level* the moment of transcendence can also occur in poems remote from the mystical register, as is the case with the perception of 'a wind-swept brightness' (SL 34) as part of a moment of vision in 'Mycenae Lookout' - a sequence whose orientation is more ostensibly historical, archaeological (and, by implication, political).

In fact, something which stands out in some of the poems in *The Spirit Level* is how the thematic and representational emphases which made out the case for the difference of *Seeing Things* do not necessarily take the foreground when they share the poetic space with those features with a much longer presence in Heaney's writing. Continuity is, indeed, the overall theme of a poem like 'Keeping Going', pervaded by memories of family life and of a shared childhood on the farm, with its chores and appertaining sensations:

The whitewash brush. An old blanched skirted thing  
On the back of the byre door (...)  
(...)  
Buttermilk and urine,  
The pantry, the housed beasts, the listening bedroom. (SL 10-11)

This could be, at a first reading, the universe of *Death of a Naturalist* back again with a vengeance - but also with some obvious differences of perspective: the intervening decades in the poet's cultural and experiential outlook entail a different valuation of what life can be for those who (unlike him) stayed on, enduring not only an (implicitly) monotonous and hard life, but also the explicitly instanced atrocities of the Troubles - 'My dear brother, you have good stamina./ You stay on where it happens.' This is balanced, in a complex manner, with the ability to retrieve from memory some of those happy moments which left particularly strong marks, and re-live them with a sense of wonder, close to an elated pastoral nostalgia, signalled by an interrogative manner:

all that worked like magic.  
Where had we come from, what was this kingdom  
We knew we'd been restored to? (SL 10)

One may, of course, also wonder whether, if one excludes the rhetorical interrogative manner and a totally different prosody, this recollection of whitewashing on the farm is all that remote from the sense of the marvellous in a *Death of a Naturalist* poem like 'Churning Day' (DN 9-10). And something similar (even in the use of interrogatives as a mark of the poet's wonder) could perhaps be said of the recollection of a 'journeyman tailor' in the poem 'At Banagher', whose 'touch has the power to turn [clothes] to cloth again' (SL 67), when compared to the also special powers of itinerant rural wonder-workers in early Heaney poems, the 'grasp' of 'The Diviner' (DN 23) or the 'Midas touch' of a 'Thatcher'<sup>45</sup>.

As hinted above, the 'murderous' can share the same poetic space with the 'marvellous', and both 'Keeping Going' and 'Two Lorries' do precisely that, evoking the ordinary and orderly routines of close relatives in their rural quotidian side by side with the extraordinary mayhem of sectarian killings and bombings: whitewashing on the farm, with its imprint of retrospective wonder, vs. the whitewashing of a blood-spattered wall in the centre of town, 'That morning like any other morning' (SL 12); the lorry that used to deliver coal to the farm,

And the last delivery. Oh, Magherafelt!  
Oh, dream of red plush and a city coalman  
As time fastforwards and a different lorry  
Groans into shot, up Broad Street, with a payload  
That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes...  
After what happened, I'd a vision of my mother,

A revenant on the bench where I would meet her  
In that cold-floored waiting-room in Magherafelt,  
Her shopping bags full up with shovelled ashes. ('Two Lorries', SL 13-14)

The quiet account of the killing of unsuspecting victims, the disturbing conflation of the ashes of domestic comfort and the ashes of destruction, even the experience of meeting 'revenants', would not significantly distance these poems either from elegies like 'Casualty' or 'A Postcard from North Antrim' in *Field Work* (19-24), or from the 'dream encounters with familiar ghosts' in the title-sequence of *Station Island* (61-94). As before, the difference is above all rhetorical, the exclamations in the passage above adding themselves this time to the already mentioned interrogative manner: 'which lorry / Was it now?' (SL 14).

These are then poems in which the effect of *pathos* increases with the juxtaposition of public atrocity and private memory, in familiar settings. But *The Spirit Level* includes poems which retrieve Heaney's already tried-out strategy of displacing the familiar onto remote places and times - or rather, if one prefers, of allowing the reader to take a clearer look at the familiar by recognising it in the remote. And if, as a strategy for representing familiar atrocity, this goes back past *Seeing Things* to find its antecedents in *The Cure at Troy* as in other translations of the late 1970s and the 1980s, in the civic allegories of *The Haw Lantern*, and ultimately in the mythopoeic design of *North*, the accompanying self-representation of the poetic subject as a site of uncertainty, anguish and ill-defined guilt was supposed to have been overcome with the shift from (in the words of Neoptolemus in *The Cure at Troy*) 'wound-licking' to 'seeing things'. The *persona* in 'His Dawn Vision', the third poem in the sequence 'Mycenae Lookout', describes himself as dominated by the sense of a less-than-adequately-fulfilled duty and of a distance, both physical and moral, from the political rhetoric of those on whose behalf he watches a territory,

Agog, alert again, but far, far less

Focused on victory than I should have been -  
Still isolated in my old disdain  
Of clagues who always needed to be seen

And heard as the true Argives. Mouth athletes,  
Quoting the oracle and quoting dates,  
Petitioning, accusing, taking votes. (SL 33)

And in 'The Watchman's War', which opens the same sequence, the equally isolated sentry is haunted by the inevitability of his position and identity - 'My sentry work was fate, a home to go to', 'I balanced between destiny and dread' - and, above all, overwhelmed by the nightmarish horrors of a war cheered by others:

Some people wept, and not for sorrow - joy  
That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy,  
But inside me like struck sound in a gong  
That killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong  
It brought to pass, still augured and endured.  
I'd dream of blood in bright webs in a ford,  
Of bodies raining down like tattered meat  
On top of me asleep - and me the lookout  
The queen's command had posted and forgotten,  
The blind spot her farsightedness relied on. (SL 29)

One would surely, before such a poem, feel tempted to reverse the oracular pronouncement of that reviewer of *Seeing Things* who declared in 1991:

Gone is the conflict (...) between poetry's imaginative and civic responsibilities: the underlying engagement with history (...) has now simply been broken off. (...) it is good to see him dispense with the breast-beatings about poetic accountability<sup>46</sup>

But shouldn't one also recognise that, to the extent that poems such as these are ascribed to the voice of well-defined *personae*, they partake of a dramatic quality, allowing us to validate the notion of a splitting of purposes and modes of enunciation in Heaney's work, between the lyrical and the dramatic, as had been suggested by the different registers of *The Cure at Troy* and *Seeing Things* at the beginning of the nineties? The affinities between the poems last quoted, which take Homer and Aeschylus for an enabling background of reference, and the authorial design (or the translating strategy) behind *The Cure at Troy* are

obvious - the Classical reference providing a remote analogy through which a suggestion of proximity can be both surprising and effective. In fact - as if to allow us better to recognise the affinities between the postulation of dramatic *personae*, and that other search for 'a cunning middle voice' (*SI* 32) which translation can also become - 'The Watchman's War' was first published in a college journal in the Autumn of 1995<sup>47</sup> together with a translation, in this case not from Latin or Classical Greek, not from the Mediterranean, but rather from an Anglo-Saxon, northern source which had already attracted Heaney on previous occasions: a version of a passage from *Beowulf*, inevitably filled with elated violence and massive slaughter.

Quotation, translation, allusion, glosses of several kinds: the more his own reputation grows and brings him ever closer to the status of a 'classical reference', the more the tendency to refer to others, rooted in his long-manifested concern with exploiting the re-sources of literary memory, seems to come to the fore in Heaney's writing. And this from a poet who has also long been the most visible representative of a tradition characterised for being inherently intertextual - as several prominent critics of Irish literature have insisted<sup>48</sup>: what better model for the understanding of literary production and reception than that which allows for the coexistence of all dualities and contradictions? As Michael Riffaterre puts it,

intertextuality enables the text to represent, at one and the same time, (...) conventions and departures from it, tradition and novelty, (...) the already said and its negation or transformation.<sup>49</sup>

But something that we suggested above about Heaney's criticism - that it amounted in a fundamental way to a persistent self-reading - can also apply to the relationships his poetry maintains with literary memory. This notion that poetic reference to others may above all be a way of leading us to read him in the work of those others would obviously require a much longer critical argument and a more careful demonstration than the final moments of this paper will allow for - but one single example may at least point in the required direction. I quoted above a few lines from 'The Watchman's War', a poem explicitly placed under the aegis of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, cited in an epigraph. Those lines include the watchman's self-description as 'the lookout / The queen's command had posted and forgotten' - words which a careful reader of Heaney's will remember from a poem in the 'Sweeney Redivivus', third part of *Station Island*, as the opening line of 'In the Beech': 'I was a lookout posted and forgotten' (*SI* 100). Which means that words found in a 1995 Seamus Heaney poem, ascribed to a *persona* with a Classical Greek background, are a self-quotation consisting of words originally put, in a 1984 poem, in the mouth of another *persona* (Sweeney), as part of the consequence for the poetic consciousness of the work of producing, between the early 1970s and the early 1980s, the translation of a medieval, middle-Irish epic which Heaney published in 1983 as *Sweeney Astray*. Internal intertextuality, or self-textuality, can thus be found to be central to the larger intertextual drive of Heaney's poetry, largely as an inescapable consequence of its carefully designed development - a consequence of all the continuities of which this paper may have highlighted only a small part. Eliot, whom Heaney is particularly keen on quoting with reference to the poet's ability to assess and shape his or her work, defined the difference between major and minor poets as depending on

whether a knowledge of the whole, or at least of a very large part, of a poet's work, makes one enjoy more, because it makes one understand better, any one of his poems.<sup>50</sup>

Well before the 1990s, Seamus Heaney managed to achieve a remarkable unity for his work which rests on the necessity of its internal coherence and of its permanent re-creation, producing in a few decades the conditions - and the authority - which Harold Tolver, in *The Past that Poets Make*, envisaged as feasible at the end of a long poetic career:

By the time a poet has a lifetime of composing behind him, one of the layers that the past presents him is his own personal accomplishment, which (...) must be broken down into elements and recombined as the imagination now dictates.<sup>51</sup>

And the poet himself has produced a critical description of this process, when, commenting on the work of another Irish poet, he resorted to a biological analogy and spoke of 'the necessity for constant self-digestion as the condition of self-creation' (*PW* 59). On our part, we would end by quoting again from a poem in *Seeing Things*, in order to suggest that for Heaney's poetry, as it reaches its third decade with itself as a fundamental given,

whatever is given

Can always be reimagined

(*ST* 29)

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2. Wilmer 82. The outlook of the ageing man has been for some years one of Seamus Heaney's favourite self-descriptive features, apparent even before he turned fifty, as attested by Hugo Williams's sardonic citation, in connection with Heaney's appearance at the time he won the Whitbread Award for *The Haw Lantern*, of 'Craig Raine's theory (...) that Irishmen turn into their fathers earlier than we do' (Hugo Williams, 'Freelance', *TLS* (January 29 - February 4, 1988) 110).

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5. Peter Levi, 'Scythe, Pitchfork and Biretta', *Poetry Review* 81:2 (Summer 1991), (12-14) 14.
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7. John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991) 173, 188.
8. Seamus Heaney, 'Squarings, 1. Lightenings, xii', *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991) 66. Hereafter cited as *ST* followed by page numbers.
9. Ken Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders', *Essays in Criticism* XLII:4 (October 1992), (299-319) 299.
10. Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 299.
11. Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 300.
12. See Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 302-3.
13. 'What I call the 'auditory imagination' is 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, seeking the beginning and the end' (T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), (London: Faber, 1980) 118-19).
14. Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 24 October 1989* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990) 8; this passage would be excised from the collected Oxford lectures published as *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995). For Heaney's earlier statements on the auditory imagination, see: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980) 81-2, 150; *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988) 148-9 (hereafter cited as *GT*, followed by page numbers); 'Learning from Eliot', *Agenda* 27:1 (Spring 1989), (17-31) 20, 26, 27.
15. Seamus Heaney, 'Song', *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979) 56; hereafter cited as *FW* followed by page numbers. This line became even better known in recent years since Helen Vendler made it the title of her 1988 collection of essays *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P.). The phrase 'the music of what happens' is not, however, originally Heaney's - it comes rather from a Gaelic text which Austin Clarke had already taken up in the last stanza of 'The Hippophagi': 'Could self have learned / In woody, ferny glen to choose / With Fionn the music of what happens' (Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 235).
16. Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966) 38. Hereafter cited as *DN* followed by page numbers.
17. Interviewed by Maggie Parham at the time he was made 'Companion of Literature' by the Royal Society of Literature - published in Portuguese translation under the title 'Seamus Heaney: Criação e Consciência', *Expresso* (14 de Outubro de 1995) 92-5. In 1991, interviewed by Blake Morrison, Heaney had declared: 'The most important thing that has happened to me in the last ten years is being at two death beds' (Blake Morrison, 'Seamus Famous: Time to be dazzled', *The Independent on Sunday* (19 May 1991) 26).
18. On the various images of the father, in Heaney as in the work of other Northern-Irish poets, see Edna Longley, "'When Did You Last See Your Father?': Perceptions of the Past in Northern Irish Writing 1965-1985', Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988) 88-112.
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26. Seamus Deane, 'Joyce the Irishman', Derek Attridge (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1990) (31-53) 35.
27. Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (1990) 5.
28. Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing: The Inauguration of the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989) 50. Hereafter cited as *PW* followed by page numbers
29. Terence Brown, 'The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue', Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (182-92) 187.
30. Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (London: Faber, 1990). Hereafter cited as *CT* followed by page numbers.
31. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 271.
32. Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (London: Abacus, 1976) 98.
33. Alan Peacock, 'Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer', Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (233-55) 245; see also, for a converging but less developed suggestion, Patrick Crotty, 'Lyric Waters', *The Irish Review* 11 (Winter 1991-92), (114-20) 119.
34. Cf. a passage in Henri Bergson's famous essay on laughter in which it is declared: 'Est comique tout incident qui appelle notre attention sur le physique d'une personne alors que le moral est en cause. (...) Aussi le poète tragique a-t-il soin d'éviter tout ce qui pourrait appeler notre attention sur la matérialité de ses héros. Dès que le souci du corps intervient, une infiltration comique est à craindre. C'est pourquoi les héros de tragédie ne boivent pas, ne mangent pas, ne se chauffent pas.' (Henri Bergson, 'Le Rire', *Oeuvres* (Paris: P.U.F., 1963) 411-12).
35. Heaney, *Redress* (1995) 140.
36. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* 29.
37. Edna Longley, 'Heaney - Poet as Critic', *Fortnight* (December 1980), (15-16) 15.
38. Randy Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney: An Interview', *Salmagundi* 80 (Fall 1988), (4-21) 14.
39. Donald Davie, *Poetry Review* 85:3 (Autumn 1995), (38-40) 38.
40. Heaney, *Redress* (1995) xiii, 78, 107-8, 121, 159-60.
41. Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (The Nobel Foundation 1995) 3.
42. Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* 9.
43. Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996). Hereafter cited as *SL*, followed by page numbers.
44. Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* 9.
45. Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber, 1969) 20.
46. Crotty, 'Lyric Waters' 117.
47. Seamus Heaney, 'The Watchman Remembers - from *Mycenae Wavelengths*', *College Green* (Dublin: Trinity College, Autumn 1995).
48. Edna Longley, Terence Brown and Robert F. Garratt have been amongst the most vocal in this respect.
49. Michael Riffaterre, 'Compulsory reader response: the intertextual drive', Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester and New York: Manchester U.P., 1990), (56-78) 76.
50. T.S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?', *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), (London: Faber, 1979), (39-52) 49-50.
51. Harold Toliver, *The Past that Poets Make* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1981) 172-3.