Heaney, Catholicism and the Hauntological: The Later Poetry

Heaney, o catolicismo e a espectrologia: A poesia tardia

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Abstract: *This article looks at Catholicism in Seamus Heaney's later poetry through the philosophical lens of Jacques Derrida's work. The theoretical focus of the article is allied to Derrida's notion of hauntology from* Spectres of Marx. *During his youth Heaney was a firm believer in Catholicism but as he grew older his faith began to diminish. However, even though he moved to a more secular mode of belief the presence of Catholicism constantly returns to haunt Heaney's poetry up until his final collection* Human Chain. *This repetition and return of Catholicism hints at the hauntological as the past sutures itself within Heaney's thinking and poetic output.*

Keywords: *Hauntology; Heaney; Virgil; Catholicism; Spectrality.*

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa o catolicismo na poesia mais recente de Seamus Heaney através das lentes filosóficas da obra de Jacques Derrida. O embasamento teórico do artigo alia-se à noção de espectrologia de Derrida presente em* Espectros de Marx. *Durante sua juventude, Heaney acreditava firmemente no catolicismo, mas à medida que envelhecia, sua fé começava a diminuir. No entanto, embora tenha assumido uma crença mais secular, a presença do catolicismo retorna constantemente para assombrar a poesia de Heaney até sua coleção final* Human Chain. *Essa repetição e retorno do catolicismo sugerem a espectrologia à medida que o passado se sutura no pensamento e na produção poética de Heaney.*

Palavras-chave: *Espectrologia; Heaney; Virgil; Catolicismo; Espectralidade*.

This article will look at the extent to which Catholicism haunts Heaney's poetry and thinking, with a particular focus on his later poetry. My approach to reading his poetry is allied to Jacques Derrida's thinking on spectrality, specifically his notion of hauntology in *Specters of Marx*. Firstly, I will outline the philosophical and theoretical standpoint that will inform my reading of Seamus Heaney's poetry and then move towards a discussion of Catholicism in his

ISSN1518-0581 | eISSN2595-8127 | DOI 10.37389/abei.v23i1.192584

Received: 22/01/2021 | Accepted: 05/04/2021

later poetry. Catholicism is a constant feature of Heaney's work from as early as his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966. Throughout the decades that followed and right up until his final collection of poetry, *Human Chain* in 2010, Catholicism is an ever-haunting presence in his poetic output. Andrew Auge has commented that "no Irish writer since James Joyce has more openly acknowledged the influence of Catholicism upon his work than Seamus Heaney. Raised in a devout Catholic family in rural County Derry, Heaney grew up in an atmosphere thoroughly steeped in religion" (108). In his recent study of Heaney's poetry entitled *Seamus Heaney and the End of Catholic Ireland*, Kieran Quinlan outlines that Heaney's loss of faith and move towards a more secular mode of belief as he grew older was one that was without bitterness.

Quinlan comments that from the 1960s onwards, the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland was beginning to wane, growing in pace over the last two decades. He suggests that Heaney's dealings with religious loss

> . . . are without bitterness and even reproach, more an acknowledgment of the evolving human journey than a condemnation of earlier obscurantism. If James Joyce's rejection of the faith was once a template for Heaney's own choices – and it was never quite such – then Heaney's later visions have more of a Yeatsian eclecticism about them (3).

Catholicism holds a major place in Heaney's poetry and is something that he never casts away. In an interview with Frank Kinihan, he speaks of the almost haunting presence that Catholic symbols and imagery hold over him. He comments that "the specifically Irish Catholic blueprint that was laid down when I was growing up has been laid there forever" (408), so despite his move towards secularism, the haunting aura of his Catholic upbringing and education is formative of his thinking throughout his life.

Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology is an ideal way to approach the presence of Catholicism in Heaney's work. The etymology of the word hauntology can be traced to ontology as in French phonology the words *ontologie* and *hauntologie* sound strikingly similar as the French pronunciation of the 'h' in *hauntologie* is silent and therefore sounds like *ontologie*. In this linguistic slippage, Derrida noticed that ways in which notions of being and presence are haunted by notions of absence and non-presence as both words begin to intersect (haunt) each other in terms of pronunciation and meaning. Ontology is related to concepts and notions surrounding being and existence, and when Derrida probes such notions, he determines that existence is merely a trace of hauntings from the past that influence the present moment. He argues that "*to be* . . . means, for the same reason, to inherit" (Derrida 67) and so when we inherit from the past in all its varied shapes and forms, we become haunted by it.

Existence is a trace of hauntings and literary texts are no different. In *Specters of Marx Derrida* discusses hauntology using the spectral figure of the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to suggest that the past can intrude upon the present and shape the future. For Derrida, the spectre leaves and returns bearing information from the past to haunt and influence the present and future.

However, the spectre is not a physical being, it has a non-present presence. Instead, it can be recognised by the traces that it leaves on the present rather than in any physical form. He suggests that "a ghost never dies, it always remains to come and to come-back" (Derrida 123) and in this sense the contemporary moment is never stable as it is always given to the past: "a spectre is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (11). Inheritance is a key feature of hauntology in Derrida's thinking in that "we inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it" (68) and, in his line of thought, we inherit from spectres of the past. Once we are exposed to any given line of thought or idea then it remains within our unconscious with the ability to return at any undetermined point in the future. When this information returns – the voice of a ghost as ontological certainty is removed in favour of the hauntological with this destabilisation allowing for the past to suture itself within the present – we are given to anachronism. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott accurately suggest that

> . . . what Derrida's use of spectrality indicates is the idea that history *in general* is produced and made manifest only through the spectral iteration of those texts. Texts break with their context as soon as they leave their author to be grafted into other chains of signification quite happily without ever losing the ability to signify. (15)

This is especially relevant to the haunting place of Catholicism within Heaney's poetics and thinking. Heaney inherited his Catholic sensibility during his childhood at St. Columb's College and at home, and later on at Queen's University, Belfast, and these past inheritances never lose their ability to signify his Catholic heritage even if in his later poetry he turns towards Virgil and Ancient Greece in order to understand the contemporary moment. Catholicism is a constant touchstone for Heaney in terms of word choices and imagery throughout the collections and conforms to Derrida's thinking on the hauntological – it was inherited in the past and now returns to reanimate itself within the present of Heaney's poetry and our reading of it, albeit in a new form that signals something new without breaking from the past.

Heaney's upbringing as a Catholic as well as receiving a Catholic education at boarding school has a deep influence upon his poetry. In his book of interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, he speaks at length about the formative influence that Catholicism had on his life as

a young boy at St. Columb's College in terms of the rituals, traditions, and practices associated with the faith:

> For five years we had an annual religious knowledge exam, and at the same time we were living the liturgical year in a very intense way: a Latin Mass every morning; aware, from the missal, of the feast day and the order of the feast; going to confession and communion; alert to the economy of indulgences; offering up little penitential operations for the release of the suffering souls in purgatory (Heaney & O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* 38).

When he went on to attend Queen's University Belfast, he still adhered to and practiced his faith. He has commented that he attended mass and visited the chaplaincy while at university, and that his religious faith acted as a way of meeting others: "the Catholic chaplaincy existed first and foremost in order to keep the students in touch with their religious practice" and that "the chaplain held these weekly 'sodality meetings', as they were called – homily, prayers and benediction" (44).

The spectres that influence Heaney's works are not solely Catholic, Northern Irish inheritances, but instead are of many traditions. Heaney has often spoken and written of being in-between the two traditions in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British, nationalist and unionist, as is demonstrated in "Terminus" in *The Haw Lantern*, for example. He has also suggested in "The Sense of Place" from *Preoccupations* that his inheritances are "half-pagan, half-Christian" (*Preoccupations* 133) and I would argue that the sense of Christianity here acts as a way of pluralising notions of identity, as is such a key component of so much of his work. Identity in his poetry is often blurred and heterogeneous and so when he mentions that his influences are half-Christian, he incorporates both Catholicism and Protestantism into his sense of self, into the heritage of Northern Ireland. These religious and cultural spectres that Heaney encountered during his youth in rural County Derry return to haunt and complicate his process of thinking on notions of place, identity and faith. He is also indebted to the spectral inheritance of pagan (pre-Christian), Norse cultures that haunt his local area as "on Aughrim Hill, between the school and the lough, somebody had found an old sword, deemed to be a Viking sword, since we knew those almost legendary people had sailed the Bann a thousand years before" (133).

These hauntings are not only important in the context of his upbringing in Derry but also in his turning towards wider, older European cultures and texts such as those of Virgil in the later works which again sees an imbrication of the pre-Christian and the Christian, a rhyming of the past with the contemporary. Derrida would suggest of these spectral inheritances that existence is a trace of hauntings and that "one never inherits without coming

to terms with [*s'expliquer avec*][1] some spectre, and therefore with more than one spectre" (Derrida 24). In this sense, Heaney's inheritance of the multiple identities to which he was exposed during his youth come to be manifested in the present of his writing – there is a sense of plurality constantly at play especially in terms of his blending of classical allusions and Catholic imagery in the later poetry. When these inheritances do return then it is the voice of a ghost that we encounter, the spectral is at work as the present of Heaney's writing is given to anachronism as we read the contemporary moment in terms of both Catholic and pre-Christian signifiers.

Throughout Heaney's writing career there are ample examples of his engagement with Catholicism from as early on as "Blackberry Picking" in *Death of a Naturalist* as Gail McConnell so aptly draws our attention towards. McConnell suggests that "if 'Digging' is Heaney's manifesto, 'Blackberry-Picking' is his article of faith" (McConnell 80) because "the blackberry has both flesh and blood: these are the gifts of the sacrament of the Mass. Picking and eating the blackberries, then, describes not only a moment of childhood pleasure or sexual revelation, but a sacred act – potentially, an act of devotion. The blackberry is the sign of grace" (82). We also see the strong Christian associations with Dante's *Inferno* in *Field Work* and especially through possibly Heaney's most sustained dealing with Catholicism in the "Station Island" sequence. *Field Work* was published in 1979 and *Station Island* in 1984 and what is most interesting about these dates is that, according to Gail McConnell, when Heaney took up a position in Carysfort College in 1975 he was in "transition" (62) from being deeply devotional towards a more secular mode of belief:

> Mass, Confession and the doctrines of the Faith were 'part of the texture of growing up'. Indeed, these remained part of the texture of his adult life through his teaching career in the Catholic education system north and south of the border, particularly at Carysfort where, though undergoing transition, 'The wimple and the veil were much in evidence' (*SS* 229).
>
> Admiring and absorbing Ted Hughes's mythopoetic method, Heaney has never sought to distance himself from the Catholic theology in which he was immersed from an early age, seeing in its structures mythological potential. This is, of course, quite different from writing 'devotional' poetry. (McConnell 62)

In the context of the later poetry, it is rooted in Catholicism and classical literature's mythological and mythopoetic potential and the imbrication and intermingling of these myths creates a simulacrum of ghosts that are both familiar and Northern Irish, but very much rooted in the pre-Christian.

There is a constant repetition and return at work within Heaney's poetry as he circles back on old images, memories, and events of his life and the same can be said for the place of

Catholicism. This sustained return of Catholicism again finds a place in the later poetry even though in *Seeing Things* the poet moves towards a world-based viewing of the world instead of one that is purely religious. However, he still structures the "Squarings" sequence in his own variation of *terza rima*, which Dante used in his *The Divine Comedy* – a text of deeply visual and thematic Christianity. Bernard O'Donoghue has commented that "Heaney uses Dante as a Classical Christianity, employable as an expressive myth in the same way that the modernists had used Arthurian legend or Homer" (O'Donoghue 250). This has much to do with Heaney pluralising notions of identity within his poetry as it does with his engagement with the spectral, it offers a renewed version of the present moment. From the outset of the "Squarings" section, we see Heaney begin to question the sense of a Catholic afterlife deeply and openly, especially in the final two tercets of "Lightenings", Section I:

> And after the commanded journey, what?
> Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown.
> A gazing out from far away, alone.
>
> And it is not particular at all,
> Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round.
> Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind. (*Seeing Things* 55)

The beginning of the "Squarings" sequence opens this renewed vision of the world and the eschatological ponderings that are redolent of so much of the later poetry. Eugene O'Brien aptly suggests that "in 'Squarings', the focus is more on the utterance as something which is material, in the letters and words of language, but which is also numinous in terms of concepts, ideas and imaginings" (O'Brien 132). Much of the later poetry, especially that of *Human Chain*, mediates on the death of friends and family but also death in a personal sense. Heaney's reference of a "particular judgement" (*Seeing Things* 55) refers to the Christian belief of The Last Judgement, but the poet himself relinquishes his belief in Catholic resurrection when he notes that "there is no next-time-round" (55).

That being said, Heaney is extremely aware of other traditions and cultures in his work and a large portion of the later poetry is spent dwelling on the possibility of an afterlife, not in a Catholic, Christian sense of entering the gates of Heaven but rather by crossing the river Styx with Charon through the prism of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI. This is not to say that Heaney believed that he would encounter an underworld journey in the afterlife but rather that he begins probing other possibilities in a poetic sense in the later works, as seen in his passage down to the Virgilian underworld at the start of *Seeing Things* in "The Golden Bough" and through a Dantean crossing in the final poem of the collection, "The Crossing". Part I of

Seeing Things ends with the poem "Fosterling", a sonnet that ends with Heaney acknowledging that he must follow the light:

> So long for air to brighten,
> Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten. (50)

In John's Gospel the light is what God embodies:

> When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it' (*Bible* 110).

The light that ends "Fosterling" connects with the "winter light" (*Seeing Things* 55) of the opening line of "Lightenings I" in Part II and the unroofing of the thatched cottage lets in the light in both a physical and Catholic sense, but also connects the light of Catholicism with the dark earthiness of Heaney's upbringing with this new light also hinting at new beginnings, new visions of the world and his place in it. Light also plays a role in terms of the political landscape of Northern Ireland as Stephen Regan so aptly draws our attention towards:

> In the later poems, especially those written after *Electric Light* (2001), light is cast on a host of theological and eschatological mysteries, and inspires the poet's visionary apprehension of final things. All of these processes of light, from the glimmerings of poetic imagination in the moment of composition to the equation of light with political freedom and philosophical understanding. (Regan 323)

The imagery that was prevalent throughout the earlier works return to haunt the later works even as Heaney himself acknowledges that this awakening to the light is not singularly a Catholic one through the conviction that there is no afterlife – it signifies much more as Regan keenly draws us towards in his study of the poetry (323). In *Stepping Stones*, Dennis O'Driscoll poses the question to Heaney if there is a connection between his Catholic beliefs and his non-belief in an afterlife at the start of "Squarings". His response is telling of the way in which these Catholic beliefs and imagery, or spectres, consistently return to haunt his writing: "but it's also firmly grounded in a sensation of 'scope', of a human relation to the shifting brilliances' and the roaming 'cloud-life'. It's still susceptible to the numinous" (*Stepping Stones* 319). Essentially, in the later poetry Heaney is scoping classical literature and older European cultures in order to understand the present moment though very often these explorations are tinged

with Catholic symbols and images. He universalises images and language from all of the different traditions and cultures that he has been exposed to and chooses which ones suit his own personal and poetic needs. In this sense, even as he underwent the process of secularisation, the ghosts of the past still haunt his imaginative output as these hauntings are but "the structure of inheritance" (Derrida 68).

In the later poetry, Heaney widens the scope of his mythical undertakings. Up until this point while he had looked towards Scandinavia, Sweeney, Ancient Greece and Dante to understand his time and place, he begins to move towards Virgil. In *The Spirit Level*, he looks towards Greek mythology in "Mycenae Lookout", but Virgil holds a significant place in the later poems. Virgil's writings are pre-Christian, but Heaney was introduced to them in school by a Catholic priest Father Michael McGlinchey – once again a mingling of pre-Christian and Christian inheritances. Kieran Quinlan comments on this sense of Heaney probing other possibilities, of mining other truths and suggests that Heaney wanted to show from as early as his bog poems "that there had been people in Ulster six thousand years ago – that it was limiting to see everything simply in terms of the Orange vs Green of the last few hundred years; in other words, Heaney sees himself as the inheritor of past faiths and a portal to future ones" (Quinlan 172). This is an important point that is being set out by Quinlan. Heaney's inheritance of older cultures and traditions is a key component of the poet's work and his thinking on identity, place and faith. His sense of faith is not limiting, instead faith and culture are plural and open to reworking. By drawing on older cultures and myths Heaney is enabled to view the present from many different angles instead of a singular, trenchant vision of that moment. Heaney notes of coming to *Aeneid*, Book Six, the schematics for so much of his mediations on life, death and the afterlife in the later poetry that:

> I was lucky too in the teacher I had during my senior years: Father Michael McGlinchey, who loved the language and had a feel for the literary qualities of the texts especially Virgil. One of our set books was Book Nine of the *Aeneid*, but I always remember him repeating at different times, 'Och, boys, I wish it were Book Six' – which gave me an interest in that book long before I ever read it. (*Stepping Stones* 296)

In "Bann Valley Eclogue", from *Electric Light*, Heaney is again haunted by Catholicism, as he offers a variation on Virgil's fourth eclogue. He first appeals to the Muses, a classical practice, but the Catholic element is fused with this in the phrases "*And it came to pass*" and "I*n the beginning*" (*Electric Light* 11), drawn from the New and Old Testaments respectively. "*And it came to pass*" draws us towards the New Testament and specifically Luke's Gospel, Chapter Two, where we see the birth of Jesus. Heaney also mentions an "infant birth / And the flooding away of the old miasma" (*Electric Light* 11) in the poem which hints at the birth of Christ but

also the sense that the sins of old will be washed away through the baptism that takes place within the poem:

> the old markings
> Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.
> The valley will be washed like the new baby (11)

If in the context of Virgil's poem, the presence of the baby does not symbolise Catholicism, how could it be given that it was written before Christ? Heaney is aware of this, but by inhabiting and translating Virgil's work he is engaging with the spectres of Virgil's text and time, and also his own. Derrida has commented on the nature of translations in the context of their hauntedness and suggests that "translations themselves are put 'out of joint.' However correct and legitimate they may be, and whatever right one may acknowledge them to have, they are all disadjusted" (21). Through the act of translation, the contemporary poem that Heaney creates is one that destabilises the present moment as we shift between the past and present – we find ourselves in the haunted present as we encounter ghosts of the classical and Catholic past in the present moment. In reading the poem, the multiplicity of interpretations that exude from it bear witness to the hauntological as ontological certainty is thrown off kilter as the spectres of Heaney's time and place meld and combine with those of Virgil's.

There is the sense in the poem that Heaney is referencing a hope that in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement a new future of peace is now possible between the two sides of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland which are themselves divided by the Bann river in a geographical sense. The "east bank from west" does not only conjure the image of division and fighting in Northern Ireland but also the disagreement between Israel and Palestine relating to ownership of the West Bank and their separation by the river Jordan. It is in this river where Christ was baptised, and this strengthens the Catholic hauntings that reside within the poem, as in a contemporary reading of it we may interpret the birth of the child in terms of Christ who would rid the sins of the past. Instead of a singular, concrete meaning Heaney's work offers pluralised notions of identity and faith and the birth of a child in both poems is an interesting facet of this pluralisation. In Virgil's original it is understood that the child that was hoped for was the offspring of Marc Anthony and Octavia and this is a safe assumption considering the time in which Virgil was writing and the pre-Christian elements to it. However, Christians have reread this birth in Virgil's poem with Dante, whose poetry Heaney is also deeply drawn towards, believing that Virgil had prophesised the birth of Christ. The binding together of both interpretations is possible in this work and the connection between the pre-Christian and Christian references hints at the fluidity of belief and myths that embodies much

of the later poetry. Michael C.J. Putman also reinforces this Catholic dimension in his reading of the "noon-eclipse" (*Electric Light* 12):

> Heaney mentions an eclipse which took place on August 11, 1999, and which obviously made a profound impression. But its citation, especially because the poem is so full of classical allusions, also brings to mind the eclipse that took place in May, 44 BCE, after the murder of Julius Caesar. Since we find much language from the Old and New Testaments in this poem as well, Heaney would no doubt have us also recollect the eclipse, described so powerfully in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, at the death of Christ when darkness descends at noon over the earth (Putman 12).

Here Putman acknowledges the Irish, classical, and Catholic elements that reside within the poem. The eclipse, for Heaney, not only links the classical poetry of Virgil with his own version of Eclogue IV but also, once again, pre-Christian / classical and Catholic worlds together. When writing of Simon Armitage's poetry Katy Shaw has commented that it "is haunted by an ontological dualism in which the past regularly intrudes on the present" (26) and I would argue that the same applies to Heaney's work. By dealing with Virgil's Eclogue IV, the contemporary moment is being read in the context of the past and in turn destabilises the present as we read the poem in terms of both time frames – we are, as Derrida notes quoting Shakespeare, "out of joint" (Derrida 21). This is further reinforced by Heaney mentioning Romulus in the poem. Romulus, after whom Rome is named, killed his brother Remus with this brotherly killing obviously being deeply symbolic for Heaney in relation to the sectarian violence enacted in Northern Ireland.

However, the hauntological illusions and allusions multiply here as this presence of Romulus has a dual meaning. It can easily be interpreted as the pre-Christian founder of Rome or to Saint Romulus – that second century Christian martyr, also Roman, who publicly defended Christians who were being persecuted and tortured. So, in the same place, Rome, and the same name, Romulus, Heaney intertwines pre-Christian and Christian symbols into the poetry which pluralises notions of identity and faith within the poem. The poem does not have one singular influence behind it, but instead is haunted by the various spectres and influences that haunt Heaney himself. Even though Heaney moves towards the classical work of Virgil in the later poetry to understand the present, he is still haunted by his Catholic imagination.

While Heaney moved towards a more secular mode of belief, the presence of Catholicism in his writing and psyche is a haunting presence. In "Out of this World" from his 2006 collection *District and Circle*, a poem in memory of his friend and fellow poet Czeslaw Milosz, he writes:

> Like everybody else, I bowed my head
> during the consecration of the bread and wine,
> lifted my eyes to the raised host and raised chalice,
> believed (whatever it means) that a change occurred. (*District and Circle* 47)

Heaney had attended the funeral of his friend in Poland and partook in the ceremony of the event. He similarly writes of a trip to Lourdes where, as a young man, he brought back "one plastic canteen litre / On a shoulder strap (*très chic*) of the Lourdes water" (49) in the second part of "Out of this World", "Brancardier". So, while Heaney had obviously moved to a more secular mode of belief by this time, he still does not renounce Catholicism especially in terms of its rituals and symbols. He still adheres to the rituals and traditions of Catholicism without steeping himself in the teachings of the faith. Gail McConnell comments that "Catholicism presents Heaney with a means of representing poetry as both a labour *and* a gift: personally crafted and divinely given; simultaneously made and found" (72) and the act of writing, and the place of Catholicism in it, gives him the paraphernalia to craft his work.

When we get to the final collection of poetry, *Human Chain*, we see Heaney in old age contemplate the afterlife and death. These contemplations are addressed in many poems in the collection such as "A Kite for Aibhín", "Had I not been awake", "Chanson d'Aventure", and "The Riverbank Field" for example. However, for the purpose of this article I will focus on "Loughanure" and the "Route 110" sequence. Section I of "Loughanure" is dedicated to the memory of Heaney's friend, the painter Colin Middleton, who died in 1983. The memory and return of his dead friend in the poem conjure thoughts of the afterlife in terms of classical mythology in Section II and what Catholicism might tell him about death and the afterlife in Section III. Section II brings about a questioning of the afterlife and draws us towards the sense of revival where, after death in battle, Er was revived nine days later and told tales of his afterlife journey. Er tells of meeting immortal judges who decide on the fate of the dead, whether they go to the sky (the good) or into the earth (the bad), depending on the life that they led on earth. The section ending with Heaney musing on Orpheus choosing "rebirth as a swan" (*Human Chain* 62) brings about the sense that an afterlife can be achieved, it can be attained even if only in an imaginative sense in the present. Heaney is searching the myths of the past for some sort of solace and consolation as he enters old age here through the lens of classical myth and in Section III we are led to the poet searching more contemporary beliefs through what Catholicism can offer in terms of an afterlife and renewal. The opening line of Section III of "Loughanure" poses an important question and one that is carefully considered by the poet:

> And did I seek the Kingdom? Will the Kingdom
> Come? The idea of it there,
> Behind its scrim since font and fontanel,
> Breaks light or water. (*Human Chain* 63)

In this section of the poem, we find strong Catholic hauntings with the presence of light and water being important factors to consider here. Obviously, the reference to a Kingdom refers to the Kingdom of Heaven but the idea of it being blurred by the scrim since baptism, "font and fontanel" (*Human Chain* 63), suggests that there has always been an uncertainty or unknowing in terms of his own beliefs. The idea of an afterlife being behind a scrim, a light translucent type of gauze often used to hide actors on stage in theatre as they wait to be revealed, is an evoking image. It is suggestive of a shaded view of the afterlife in a Catholic sense, that it has been distorted in some ways since baptism and especially since Heaney turns to wider, older European examples of afterlives in his work. There is no certainty to an afterlife as it remains hidden behind the scrim with the possibility that it may appear, or may not. By placing a discussion of Catholicism alongside classical myth in the sequence, Heaney is probing the historical and cultural foundations of how humans deal with death; he is searching for solace as he enters old age and after having suffered a stroke in 2006 and by probing these other cultures and texts it opens a plurality of possibilities that may shed some light on the afterlife.

The solace that he seeks is not purely Catholic but one that is heterogeneous and fluid as both older and more contemporary modes of belief offer him ways in which to consider his time on earth and what is to come to us all, death. The light and water that we see at the beginning of the poem reflect the imagery that is deeply important to his later poetry. Light is ever present from *Seeing Things* onwards in terms of eschatology and the brighter future in store for Northern Irish politics after the IRA ceasefire of 1994, addressed in "Tollund" in *The Spirit Level*, and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It can also be looked upon as the light of God in a Catholic sense. The presence of water in the later poetry often sees mediations on life and death for the poet; it is reflected as something that must be traversed in order to cross over into the underworld or into an afterlife of some sort as we see in "The Riverbank Field", for example. It is also something that signals rebirth as we see in "Crossings' XXV" in *Seeing Things*: "Let rebirth come through water'" (*Seeing Things* 83). For Heaney, Catholic symbols, language and imagery also conjure notions of the afterlife and renewal in the context of classical myth, both are intertwined and connected in his synthetic imagination. He chooses elements from each that offer some form of consolation and reassurance as he considers death and we are again given to anachronism as the past intrudes upon the present yet again.

Jodey Castricano, drawing on Derrida's work, comments that "a text, Derrida would say, 'lives on'. It also means that when it is signed by the other, or 'translated', a text 'comes back' in a certain way" (16). The place of myth in the poetry demonstrates this sense of coming back, as does the infusion of Catholicism in the later poetry. The last two stanza's then draw us back towards Catholicism as Jesus Christ is conjured in the context of Michelangelo's "The Last Judgement' where we see 'his inverted face contorting / Like an arse-kisser's' in some vision of the damned" (*Human Chain* 63). What is interesting here is that this image of Christ and notions of The Last Judgement are reflected on through the prism of art and not through biblical references. This allows for a further connection between Section II and III in the sequence as Heaney considers notions of judgement, passage and renewal in terms of classical literature in Section II and through Catholic art in Section III – art is the prism through which an afterlife can possibly be attained.

When we move to a discussion of Heaney's seminal "Route 110" sequence, placed as the centre poem in *Human Chain*, we see the comingling of Catholicism with classical mythology in the form of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI. In "Route 110", Heaney traces important events and moments throughout his life, which in turn mirror Aeneas' journey through the underworld in search of his father Anchises in Book VI. In this sense, time becomes unhinged and given to the hauntological as we read the poem in terms of Heaney's life, but we are ever aware of the classical journey that he is undertaking: translations and the spectres that we encounter through them bring about a "disadjustment of the contemporary" (Derrida 123). These spectres of Heaney's life culminate in, and return to haunt, his final collection of poetry and he notes that "there's one Virgilian journey that has indeed been a constant presence and that is Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs of Book VI have been in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father" (Heaney and O'Driscoll 389).

What is important to recognise in this sequence is that it is haunted by many elements of Heaney's past in terms of memory and the return of the dead but also by the end of the sequence a movement towards an afterlife. As has been the case with much of Heaney's poetry, especially in the later works, the unsteadiness of his allusions offers multiple interpretations and so when we reach "Route 110", the central poem to *Human Chain*, we again see a shading of fixed meaning in favour of the heterogeneous. In the sequence Heaney is transported, in a metaphorical sense, by Charon the ferryman to the land of the dead in this instance and not by Saint Peter. While Heaney does find comfort in his "used copy of Aeneid VI" (*Human Chain* 48), purchased in Section I and which ultimately gives birth to his procession through

memory, in Section IV he visits Italy, the home of Virgil but also the Roman Catholic Church and it is interesting to note that it is in a chapel that he finds comfort:

> Hotfooting it with tanned expats
> Up their Etruscan slopes to a small brick chapel
> To find myself the one there most at home. (51)

Etruria, the ancient civilisation in Southern Italy that was later conquered by the Romans, is a place where Heaney is most comfortable in and one that is deeply classical. The sense that he is "most at home" here is telling of his comfort in the classical world and his fondness for it but the presence of the chapel does conjure notions of a more contemporary deity. This may not be the case as this place of worship may relate to more classical, elemental gods but the fact that Heaney is going to a wedding there is all the more telling of the contemporary context of the place. The hauntedness that this place embodies again destabilises the present moment as we read it in terms of the classical and the contemporary – Heaney's fusion of place and time desynchronises any fixed present in favour of absent presences as the ghostly, haunting classical allusions lurk in the shadows of this twenty-first century poem.

Once we move towards Section V we see a haunting of the earlier poetry in the later works. The Catholic imagery and language in "Blackberry Picking" returns in this section in the scene of the McNicholls' kitchen where we find "a votive jam pot on the dresser shelf" (52). Despite pots of jam residing on the windowsill being a predominant practice in many Irish countryside houses, for Heaney's synthetic imagination these pots exemplify a Roman practice. An Irish scene borrows from past Roman examples, which indicates that the Italian spectres of the past still reside within Section V and that these are reinforced by a Catholic hauntology of ritual and devotion to deities both local and universal. We also see the oat stalks being wrapped in tinfoil "to give the wee altar a bit of shine" (52).

In the earlier poem "At a Potato Digging", also from *Death of a Naturalist*, we see Heaney mention an "altar of sod" (*Death of a Naturalist* 18) in a mingling of the natural world with the religious and this occurs again in "Route 110" through the mingling of oats on the "wee altar" (Human Chain 52). It is fitting that the imagery we see in the first collection returns to haunt what would be Heaney's final collection of poetry, though the poet would obviously have been unaware of this at the time.

This speaks to an overall sense of cohesion within his poetry, but also reinforces the hauntedness of it. His work is not only haunted by spectres of the past in terms of inheritance from outside the self, it is also very much haunted by itself as themes, issues and images return throughout the many collections. The sequence's indebtedness to Catholicism returns in

Section VII when we see Heaney asking to be absolved of sins in the form of trespassing on his neighbour's land, "and absolve me thus formally of trespass" (54) and by Section X the realisation of impending death is signalled by the "final whistle" (57), in relation to both the football match and life itself. For Heaney, death will not result in resurrection as in Virgil's text where those who spent one thousand years in the underworld were granted new bodies to return to the surface. Instead, in the final section of the sequence Heaney arrives with his "thank-offering" (59), in the form of a "bunch of stalks and silvered heads" (59) with the silvered nature of the stalks resembling the "elysian silvered" (46) willows that we see in "The Riverbank Field". There are allusions here of an afterlife not in the context of Catholicism but in terms of classical myth and ultimately this afterlife will be achieved in the form of a grandchild. Dennis O'Driscoll questioned Heaney on whether he feared death or not, and Heaney's response is extremely telling in the manner of which the binding force of his early Catholic learnings would have shaped his belief:

> Certainly not in the way I'd have feared it sixty years ago, fearful of dying in the state of mortal sin and suffering the consequences for all eternity. It's more grief than fear, grief at having to leave "what thou lovest well" and whom thou lovest well. (*Stepping Stones* 472)

His resurrection within the poem will not be a Catholic one either in the sense of gaining an afterlife in heaven, but instead is through the birth his grandchild, Anna Rose, at the end of the sequence. He describes her as "earthlight" (*Human Chain* 59), which is symbolic of the darkness and earthiness of the earlier poetry and the light and airiness signalled by much of the later works. It can also be looked upon as a turn to the spectral in that the spectres of Heaney's life, and his absence, will now continue to exist in the most beautiful way in his grandchild's presence upon this earth. Overall, "Route 110" does go a long way in steeping the final collection in Catholic hauntings and rituals while Heaney at this stage of his life had settled into a secular mode of belief. However, Derrida notes that

> . . . it is a proper characteristic of the spectre, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the revenant may already mark the promised return of the spectre of living being. Once again, untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary (Specters of Marx 123).

What can be certain is that the living past of Heaney's Catholic upbringing and beliefs live on throughout his poetry through the act of spectrality.

In conclusion, Heaney's later poetry demonstrates the haunted and anachronistic nature of his writing. The poet's constant reading of the contemporary moment through the

lens of wider, older European cultures and texts, especially in terms of classical literature such as Virgil's, showcases a transmission of ghosts into the present moment of Heaney's writing and our reading of the poetry. Indeed, when we consider Heaney's turn towards Virgil and his mixing of Catholicism with these older, more elemental beliefs and literature in terms of contemporary violence in Northern Ireland, in the context of old age, and in the larger context of impending death and the possibility of an afterlife, we can see that his Catholic sensibility and his appreciation of classical literature offer him the paraphernalia to address and find some sort of solace in terms of the future. When Heaney turns to these inheritances, when he turns to the past in order to understand the present and future, the poetry is given to the hauntological as time is in flux because we know that he is referring to the present moment, he is talking about his own life and circumstances but through the slanted, hauntological lens of ghosts of the past that reanimate this act of spectrality each time that we, as readers, turn to Heaney's work.

Notes

1 Explaining onself to.

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