

Seamus Heaney: Forcing the English Lyric.

I am intrigued by a lesser key moment in Seamus Heaney's poetry. It is at the end of "Station Island", a poem which, by following in the steps of both the pilgrims at Lough Derg and Dante, brings a pre-programmed tension to bear on its final resolution (liberation, resurfacing, necessarily self-administered, the ending of the fast, the feast, the charged spirit). After the spirited exhumations and the relentless self-probing of the long poem, Heaney issues a licence to himself to thrust this resolving role onto Joyce. Not only that he may meet Joyce publicly but that he may represent this ghost also, and also named, that he may speak his voice. The immediate crisis of rupture that is to be addressed is precipitated at the centre of the poem, where Heaney remains unabsolved by the ghost of a murdered friend:

"Forgive the way I have lived indifferent -
forgive my timid circumspect involvement,"

I surprised myself by saying. "Forgive
my eye," he said, "that's all above my head."
NSP 122

which leads to a series of progressively more severe accusations, initiated by a relative "for the way you white-washed ugliness", and culminating in self-denunciation:

"I hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming."
NSP 128

It is perhaps fitting that the resolution of the poem should take the form of absolution from the literary messiah himself, but his appearance at this point in this poem, gives him a heretofore unacknowledged, although apparent, centrality in Heaney's personal cosmology.

Heaney's Joyce says to Heaney:

"Your obligation
is not discharged by any common rite.
What you do you must do on your own.

The main thing is to write
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust
that imagines its haven like your hands at night

dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.
You are fasted now, light headed dangerous.
Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,

so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget.
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note."

It was as if I had stepped free into space
alone with nothing that I had not known
already (...)

"The English language
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires

rehearsing the old whinges at your age
That subject people stuff is a cod's game,
infantile, like this peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide its time to swim

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

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.”

NSP 133-4

This spirit is, like each of the poem's apparitions, fused or confused with Heaney's own. While the sketch of Joyce had been as faultlessly bare and precise as Cesar Abin's caricature, the voice, the instigation of the quotes, is necessarily charged with a near impossible task: that of representing two distinct creative voices in one. For the first three stanzas this stretched voice is reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus' diaries, i.e. advice to oneself, which happens to fit Heaney's mode quite well¹, particularly “what you do you must do on your own” is almost transcribed. Words such as “cultivate”, “work-lust”, “haven” and the “hands” that knew “nubbed treasure” in *North*, inscribe Heaney into the appropriately oblique metaphor of Joyce's masturbation. Palimpsest informs the passage, creating a consistent blend of signatory styles and vocabularies that tends or attempts to blur the distinction between the two writers. Noticeably, when the import of the words approximates Joyce, the language, the constitution, the tone remain firmly Heaney; “raking at dead fires” “subject people stuff”, “doing the decent thing”. On the other hand the touches of Joycean play have Heaney's aural structures and country cunning about them: “echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements, elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea”.

But to read this as a happy blend of difference would be optimistic. The first real shock is the explicit advice “And don't be so earnest”; as though Joyce were to have forgotten Wilde, and abandoned irony - I cannot hear this line in Joyce's voices. Rather than ironic, this sentence is oxymoronic in the fullest sense. At the very moment of attempted departure from the tendencies of his own poetry (earnestness), Heaney is dragged back to earth by those very poetic imperatives (as though the admonition to “Let go, let fly, forget” were *projected* onto Sweeney alone, by virtue of necessity). The passage would be laughable if it attempted to be light. It succeeds because Heaney's trademark: relentless sincere self-analysis dominates as always. It is paradoxical that it also fails for this reason.

It is not only the subordination of adopted style to established style that disturbs me here however, it is also the oppositions that are concealed beneath the singular voice. Heaney's Joyce's “fill the element with signatures on your own

¹ Heaney also comments on the coincidental significance of his birthday, April 13, being the day that Dedalus notes the autonomy of his Irish English through the word “tundish”. Synchronicity figures regularly in Joyce's work also.

frequency” picks up Joyce's own vocabulary: “Signatures of all things I am here to read” is Dedalus' thought on Sandymount strand². The contrast is stark. Joyce's constant movement as an artist, his variety of signatures, is attributable to this desire to read. Beside it, the need to sign everything appears defensive at best. On the other hand, the effect of Joyce's work *was* to leave his signatures on all things, although they are difficult to read and impossible to fake³. The shift that Heaney brings about from Joyce's austere receptiveness at a distance to immanence, through to Heaney's self-absolution through a transcendental invocation of the artist, relies on this historical validation of Joyce's body of work. Where Joyce's stand was taken in the face of the conventional, Heaney invokes that which has become conventional in order to rest a troubled conscience. But in doing so he goes much further: “the English language belongs to us” appropriates the linguistic alienation of a fictional character and appears to collate it with a nationalist rhetoric of decolonisation. It is precisely through Joyce that we receive an English language that belongs to no-one.

Heaney had outlined his indebtedness to the “Holy Feast of the Tundish” often:

Stephen feels excluded from the English tradition, which he senses as organic and other than his own. His own tradition is linguistically fractured. History, which has woven the fabric of English life and landscape and language into a seamless garment, has rent the fabric of Irish life, and effected a breach between its past and present and an alienation between the speaker and his speech.⁴

What had seemed disabling and provincial is suddenly found to be corroborating and fundamental and potentially universal... Stephen now trusts what

² Joyce 45.

³ Joyce's heritage appears to be haunted by a remarkably well documented “anxiety of influence” factor in succeeding artists from Flann O'Brien through to Burgess and Nabokov.

⁴ Heaney (1978) 35. The passage continues in a vein reminiscent of the “Citizen” in *Ulysses*: “Whether we wish to locate the breaking point of Gaelic civilisation at the battle of Kinsale and the Flight of the Earls in the seventeenth century or whether we hold out hopefully until the Jacobite dream fades after the flight of the Wild Geese, there is no doubt that the social, cultural, linguistic life of the country is radically altered, and the alteration is felt by the majority of Irish people as a kind of loss, an exile from an original whole and good place or state.” Cf. “Our harbours that were empty will be full again, Queenstown, Kinsale, Galway, Blacksod Bay, Ventry in the kingdom of Kerry, Killybegs, the third largest harbour in the wide world, with its fleet of masts of the Galway Lynchés and the Cavan O'Reillys... And will again, says he, when the first Irish battleship is seen breasting the waves with our own flag to the fore...” (Joyce 354).

he calls "our own language" and in that trust he will go to encounter what he calls "the reality of experience." But it will be his own specific Dublin experience, with all its religious and historical freight, so different from the English experience to which he had heretofore stood in a subservient relationship.⁵

The *agent* of history, which acts simultaneously on and between two countries in diametrically opposed ways (and casually genderizes both, through the worn active/passive trope; cf. the poems "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and "Act of Union"), and the "historical freight" both forget Stephen's "nightmare from which I am trying to awake" and extrapolate his *non serviam* onto a pre-fabricated national historical rhetoric which is much more in keeping with Heaney's early archaeological agenda⁶. Likewise the shift from "our own language" to "belongs to us" is the difference between the recognition of validity of a local language ("Irish English"), and the investment of that language with a purpose⁷. Every artist in any language must make the language his own. That the trope by which Joyce achieves this can begin to appear as an acceptable *national* procedure points rather to bankruptcy than inheritance⁸.

However, it would not be correct to read Heaney's appropriation of Joyce through the simple filter of his expressed "tribal" loyalties, and to insist that his poetry operates in the furtherance of nationalist causes would definitely be inappropriate to its general thrust. It is rather Heaney's continued *fidelity to his own experience* that allows his poetry to *retain* such a flavour long after the explicit political engagement of *North* had been superseded. For *its authenticity of expression*, this experience relies on constant measurement against the predetermined and therefore *fixed* criteria of childhood memory, and its correspondent clannish claims.

If we consider Heaney to be opposing Joyce we get further. The etymological investigations that he undertakes in *Wintering Out*, channelled through this same "tundish", mark a decisively individual move⁹. Where Joyce advances to the

⁵ Heaney (1983) 6.

⁶ Interestingly a similar shift has taken place within the criticism of these literatures: the continual recycling of the "ale, Christ, master, home" passage from *Portrait*, (which is, in any case, less original Joyce, than Joycean originality applied to the theme of the Revival) and its significance in Heaney, conceals a personal rupture with a tradition of opposition.

⁷ This move is analysable in terms of the Marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value.

⁸ I am also thinking of the persistency of the debate surrounding "Irish literature", which returns to passages such as this in order to re-inscribe, as a preliminary gesture to analysis, writers from the island into the dated terms of imperialist colonialism.

⁹ see Stan Smith, *The Distance Between*. in: Corcoran 96-122.

frontier of Indo-European and indeed global, correspondances, Heaney sets out in the other direction, towards rupture in a time before Ernest Jones had established an idea of larger linguistic kinship. The tensions between Anglo-Saxon and Irish become battles of linguistic authenticity in poems such as "Toome", "Broagh", "Anahorish", and "Birthplace", and Heaney's dogged revival of antiquated Anglo-Saxon makes History itself the battlefield:

Our guttural muse
was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition.
WO 23

Likewise, if the "inner emigré" is more than a little consciously opposed to Joyce the young international "exile", it would appear that Heaney's celebrated traditionalism is equally opposed to Joyce's innovation. Joyce's exile is itself the embodiment of keeping at a tangent (both in relation to the subject matter of his work and in terms of his regular skirting around the artists and movements on "mainland" Europe), and only his absolute consistency in this keeps it from the unholy dustbin of "juvenilia". Heaney has become so thoroughly planted in the soil designated as "Irish" that it is impossible to read his tenures at either Oxford or Harvard as "exile" in the sense that has become peculiarly associated with Irish writers - framed in such a way as to be read solely in terms of place *left*¹⁰. In Heaney that focus shifts. Moreover it takes place at a time when professional mobility has become such a norm that it would barely warrant comment if it weren't for the persistence of the debate surrounding *locus* in Irish writing. Heaney's movement is so natural in the context of decades of steady economic emigration, that it throws doubt, on the other hand, over the extravagant rootedness with which his poetry has established itself. The celebrated inner emigré "feeling every wind that blows" begins to look a little more romantic after his Nobel Prize. His later poetry returns often to the idea of *coming* home, as opposed to Derek Mahon's "going home."

Joyce is also to blame if a poet's earlier writing becomes suspect due to the course of that poet's career, through consciously having moulded a life's work into a singularity, (a much more concrete tower than Yeats' more ad hoc construction),

¹⁰ Whether this sense can be usefully maintained in any case is doubtful. Another of Joyce's bastard children (see also "epiphany", "parallax") that has outgrown its genes, due to its easy adaptability to schematization.

with which Joyce most fully challenges the writer to be an artist. And it is precisely this early manifesto approach that is inherited, not just by Heaney, but Longley and Muldoon also. Clearly Joyce's project "to create in the smithy of my soul the unforged conscience of my race" does not become Heaney's "the squat pen rests; snug as a gun. I'll dig with it," Longley's "(I embody bed and breakfast)" or Muldoon's "by my broken bones I tell new weather" without serious mediation. Yet I would argue that at the heart of each lies an assertion of poetic intent that cannot be measured on its own, but rather exists in constant tension with the succeeding work of the writer, and with the consistency of identification between the stated poetic self and the public poet himself. The remarkable thing about Joyce's assertion is how it retains the full flavour of idealist youth through a lifelong application of its terms, and so conserves its integrity while undergoing sufficient stress to leave it almost entirely changed by the end of the *Wake*. Perhaps this is what is meant by "sea-change". Although in Heaney's case certain ruptures take place (particularly after *North* and *The Haw Lantern*), the poetry does continue, autonomously, to fulfill its stated ambition, although the focus often changes. The centre which holds his work together is *authenticity*.

MY TRUST COULD NOT REPOSE.

When Christopher Ricks identified Heaney as "the most trusted poet on these islands" in a review of *Field Work*, he brought a focus onto a little debated central hinge in Heaney's work and poetry generally. Authenticity, that is *fidelity* to subject matter (a commitment to the limited power of words to indicate things), and a *unity* between source and text, is peculiarly resistant to analysis, as opposed to either irony or persona. Criticism of both the Frankfurt school and the postmodern debate have bracketed the notion, precisely because it can never be definitively indicated¹¹, and it is in the face of this that the mechanisms with which Heaney nevertheless puts it in place as an organising principle demand examination.

MacNiece contended that since poetry must be honest, it will, in an impure age, be impure. Yet the consistency of Heaney's poetry is resident more than anywhere else in the precision of his language. His poetry is a poetry of texture, a language of resonance. It has even been called "oblique", and in fact much of the poetry of

¹¹ The old aesthetic argument in its most recent manifestation has eulogized first "authenticity" (Benjamin), and hot on its heels, "reality" itself (Baudrillard). Beside these, Heaney is unreadable, unless a return to local contexts places these theorists into an area of reduced reference.

North is basically unapproachable without background information. It is also noteworthy that *North* is Heaney's most publically acclaimed selection, and represents, even by his own admission, a certain coming-of-age¹². *North* is also the crucible of "the troubles", a subject sufficiently impure that poetry should smell of rot (which in *North* it frequently does). But Heaney's strategy is less to reflect the honesty of the age than to distil it in the still of his personal historical epiphany.¹³

Heaney's work is riddled with personal admissions. "I've no spade to follow men like them." "I knew that if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it." "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing." These, from *Death of a Naturalist*, attempt a unity of theme and poet. As such they perform a classic poetic *resolution*, not simply of the poet and his environment (potatoes, frogs, blackberries and wells), but also of the world and poetry, and, significantly, of past and future. Each poem has three movements: the past is posited, as childhood familiarity and/or rural tradition; a rupture with that past is presented (through metonymy "I have no spade" or metaphor: in "Death of a Naturalist" the onset of maturity or experience becomes "The great slime kings were gathered there for vengeance"); and finally a renewed continuity is proclaimed through the medium of poetry, which will stand only on its performance in the future through the mediation of the invoked poetic subject, Heaney himself. The last of these, "Personal Helicon", performs this routine more explicitly, moving from

As a child they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

to

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

NSP 14

¹² In an interview with Seamas Deane, quoted in: Longley 140.

¹³ Yet it is also *North* that Edna Longley attacks for its *insincerity*, or at least a certain artificiality concerning that which before had been "genuine".

The poems are essentially dialectical, and their final resolution is indeed a synthesis. This contrasts with Blake's *Songs* which deals with the same subject matter, but leaves the two in a state of permanent revolution, finally unknowable to each other. In this poem, the "big-eyed Narcissus" is not superseded, but rather given an *image* more appropriate to his agent - that of the poet. The poem's confession of this masking process arrests what would otherwise be a poetry of the mask.

Two factors make Heaney's resolutions remarkable. Firstly his approach to the past: tradition and childhood, which arguably constitute the oppositions that break in maturity (child adjusting to tradition, gaining an awareness of the past etc.), are dealt with as interchangeable phenomena, constantly flowing into each other, and constantly exchanging metaphors (digging; well; bog). Secondly, the locus of resolution of the dialectical elements is in the poet himself (not *poetry* or *history per se*). This would lead to a thoroughly personal poetry if his metaphors were not continually attracting larger societal and political implications, as metaphors must, and as Heaney no doubt intends (this becomes more explicit in *Wintering Out*). As such, he places tremendous pressure on himself in his early poetry to act as a midwife between past and future; to perform the continuity he has invoked, and thus fulfill the poetry itself. The *truth* of the poetry, and by extension its authenticity, exist only in constant tension between its utterance and its assimilability to further utterance *from the same source*. In this way *Death of a Naturalist*, the title of which already describes both a rupture and a summation of that rupture, is a blueprint or manifesto rather than a simple collection

THE OTHER: LOVEMAKING OR A STRANGER'S WEEPING?

Whether a society of conflict without apparent resolution necessarily engenders a poetry of conflicts and resolutions remains a starting point for criticism of contemporary poetry from the North of Ireland, and an issue to which Heaney has referred directly. Given that the primary conflict in Heaney's immediate vicinity is centred on constructs of race and religion, one might expect these societal constructs to be the locus of resolution. In fact Heaney describes exactly this process taking place in the poetry of Wordsworth, caught between his "nationalism" and his "revolutionary sympathies" with France, but it is not this opposition he understands to be resolved:

It is another truism that the work of art is salutary in these circumstances, and we can easily see how the composition of *The Prelude* was, in itself, part of the symbolic resolution of a lived conflict. Wordsworth admits an inner conflict between those powers and hopes which landed him at the impasse he describes. The poem is diagnostic, therapeutic and didactic all at once.¹⁴

The “lived conflict” immediately becomes an “inner conflict”, and its resolution apparently belongs rather to the field of psychotherapy than social ill. The crucial difference is that Wordsworth finds himself *on both sides*, and therefore his personal struggle is also a meeting-place for two conflictual constructs. The poets that Heaney discusses in the above essay share an analogy with this only in so far as they experience a very different tension; that between engagement and extrication, which leaves the political poles themselves untouched.

Although “The Other Side” is notable for its “imaginative entry” into the Protestant psyche¹⁵ - the other “tribe” in Heaney’s cosmology, it is equally notable for being the only poem to do so, and it is interesting to see what exchange takes place there. Exchange is the key word, because the poem posits borders and situates them as possible thresholds. The question is whether it can overcome the thorough othering of its title and the system of dichotomies that it immediately puts into place to illustrate or support this estrangement: “lea” - “fallow”; “our scraggy acres” - “his promised furrows”; “his fabulous, biblical, dismissal” - “our small lanes”. Despite the stereotyped emphases on diligence and Old Testament vocabulary (staples also of a long tradition of English writing), the protestant neighbour is allowed to rise above cliché, especially in the sympathetic closing image, waiting for Heaney’s family to finish their prayers:

He puts a hand in a pocket

or taps a little tune with the blackthorn
shyly, as if he were party to
lovemaking or a stranger’s weeping.
NSP 42

“Blackthorn” again contrasts the ash plant of Heaney’s father, Stephen Dedalus, and later Heaney himself¹⁶, but it is the alien-ness of the Rosary that is most striking.

¹⁴ Heaney (1984) 143.

¹⁵ Longley 201.

¹⁶ see “I.I.87” in *Seeing Things*.

This estrangement does not simply stem from the sense of invaded intimacy but from the nature of the prayer itself and its contextualisation; the physical, emotional and even phonetic “femininity” of the Catholic rite as against “his brain” - “a whitewashed kitchen/ hung with texts, swept tidy/ as the body o’ the kirk”. Heaney’s uncharacteristic use of Ulster Scots here, with its hard consonants, serves further to emphasise the “patriarchal dictum”. This picks up the undercurrent of competition that permeates the poem; from its opening we have the idle poet child, “I lay where his lea sloped to meet our fallow, nested on moss and rushes”, attentive, on the border, unresponsive to the judgemental neighbour; “my ear swallowed”, “he prophesied ... then turned away”. The traditional Calvinist opposition to artistic expression is here doubled by the poet’s use of the neighbour as material for poetry, not only now, but then also: “For days we would rehearse each patriarchal dictum”, but there is a key to the competitive air at the centre of the poem, when their rehearsal

faltered on a rut -
 “Your side of the house, I believe,
 hardly rule by the book at all.”

NSP 41

Is this “faltering” the pain at the insult, or the recognition of an implicit truth in the undisciplined (and unproductive) Catholic? “Rut” would seem to indicate a frustration at the inflexible nature of the dismissal. Despite the neighbour’s direct communication with the Catholic family (one of Heaney’s surest moments of colloquial reproduction: “A right looking night (...) I was dandering by/ and says I, I might as well call.”), they are struck dumb by an inhabited sense of inferiority - “the gag of place” of *North*¹⁷. Both sides speak within ritual - the Protestant biblically or through cliché, the Catholic more so: in rehearsal, “the moan of prayers”, and of course poetry - and these rituals conceal two essentially different value-systems, both hinging on the nature of *production* and *discipline*, one of which not only has cultural superiority (“the book”), but also a demonstrable sense of its own worth (compare: “next season’s tares”). Self-reference to the medium of poetry is, as ever, the culmination of the poem, and when Heaney introduces himself into the poem it is within the framework of produced and disciplined communication (poetry), and as a ghost in his own frustrated childhood memory: “But now I stand behind him/ in

¹⁷ “Whatever you say say nothing” in: N 59.

the dark yard, in the moan of prayers". It is now the neighbour who stands at the threshold, bordered on either side, as it were, by Heaney, and once again the poem focuses on the transmission of the inherited past into the future:

Should I slip away, I wonder,
or go up and touch his shoulder
and talk about the weather

or the price of grass-seed?
NSP 42

Given the complexity of fertility of the land throughout this poem I don't believe the ultimate question can be read simplistically as a symbol of "the cost of fundamental growth and change"¹⁸, attractive as it is to do so. Notably communication does not actually take place in the poem, nor could it given its retrospectivity. Furthermore, since the apparent agenda for future engagement with "the other side" is never taken up in Heaney's poetry (the title becoming even more uncomfortable as the only reference in Heaney to the "psychic frontier") the question appears to be either unanswerable or rhetorical. Therefore it seems possible that Heaney's chosen fertility - presented in terms more feminine, more cyclical, more inclined towards preservation ("we have no prairies" begins "Bogland", the first of the "bog poems" which surround this poem chronologically) than transformation - the discipline of poetry, is deliberately contrasted with, and attempts to reverse the cultural importance of, the "grass-seed" so central to the neighbouring ethic. The resolution is of past guilt - unproductivity is mediated through femininity. Heaney's resolutions are often closer to absolutions.

North famously continues this project with a thorough feminisation of the his native Irish, Catholic root,¹⁹ and a personal identification with this root that borders on necrophilia. The conflict that emerges is entirely unallegorical with the Wordsworthian dilemma:

¹⁸ Longley 201.

¹⁹ As in "Bog Queen"; at the time of writing the bog poems Heaney describes the political situation as follows: "to some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and goddess". Heaney (1980) 56.

I always thought of the political problem... as being an internal Northern Ireland division. I thought along sectarian lines. Now I think that the genuine political confrontation is between Ireland and Britain.²⁰

HEANEY'S SUBJECT AS SUBJECT.

The "I" of Heaney's poetry seems familiar, in both senses: we recognise its poetic precedent, and in time we begin to feel acquainted with it. Both senses matter. As the authenticity underpinning sensation and experience, its closest relative would appear to be Wordsworth, rather than Yeats, Auden, Larkin or Hughes. Neither Kavanagh nor MacNiece, who are both fond of this "I" of authentication, use it with anything of the finality of origin that both Heaney and Wordsworth do²¹. For each of them the poetry constantly refers back to its speaking subject for assurance, and as the reader gets to know this speaking subject so she or he can identify and authenticate the poetry. As Heaney's body of work continues to develop it is still this "I" that informs the poetry (even in the Sweeney translations, where he consciously usurps the "I" of another). This is often the case even when "I" does not appear. In "Alphabet" (*The Haw Lantern*), for example, a third person narration is adopted by the poet; "He understands he will understand more when he goes to school." This is maintained until the 15th stanza, where the "he" abruptly changes subject, "As from his small window the astronaut sees all he has sprung from", and is then replaced with the first person, "or like my own wide pre-reflective stare..."²². The sense that the subject has been repressed all along is justified, the poem is given its final affirmation. Heaney's "I" truly is the root from which all else grows, it draws things unto itself and then signs them.

And this signature is also the performance of the poetic resolution. "I" stands between two realities and unites them. This puts a tremendous pressure on the

²⁰ quoted in: Longley 168.

²¹ It is to Wordsworth that Heaney is most often compared, and he acknowledges his debt frankly and often.

²² It is also interesting that this poem has a particular background - it was commissioned by a Harvard fraternity. For once, the child really is the universal child, and maybe this is what holds his identity at bay throughout, until the stamp of authenticity marks it.

subject and on Heaney himself, to continue the consistency and the development of this subject. The two realities may be any of the possibilities I have already outlined, but finally, over time, they become the familiar and the unfamiliar, or perhaps the assimilated and the to-be-assimilated (the movement from “sectarian lines” of thought to “Ireland and Britain” is paradigmatic here). In this context it is interesting to look at “Making Strange” (*Station Island*):

I stood between them,
the one with his travelled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,

and another, unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

Then a cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, “Be adept and be dialect,
tell of this wind coming past the zinc hut,

...

Go beyond what's reliable
in all that keeps pleading and pleading,
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how bold you were

when I visited you first
with departures you cannot go back on.”
A chaffinch flicked from an ash and next thing
I found myself driving the stranger

through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at that same recitation.

NSP 106

Note the familiar pressure on the subject, the emphases on the known and unknown, the final clumping for the familiar, the admixture of the national and personal histories. The voice (Sweeney's) which interpolates in "Making Strange" has a number of ghostly predecessors (Heaney's father, "The Other Side") but becomes a marked feature of his poetry in the poem "North", where in an epiphany (sic) he is given advice from the "ocean-deafened voices" of Ireland's viking invaders:

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

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle.
Trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known".

N 20

It is in this form, advice from the past, that voices recur in Heaney's poetry from *North* on. By "Making Strange" this past has become three-fold: his own; Ireland's mythological past (inscribed in Sweeney) and the autonomous history of his poetry (Sweeney's residence in Heaney).

Heaney describes *North* as follows "I'm certain that up to North, that that was one book; in a way it grows together and goes together."²³ The past has grown in complexity since *Death of a Naturalist*, from a child's rural environment to specific instances of Irish and European history, and the organic inheritances of etymology. The ruptures are now historical ruptures, which is how the British colonial presence now appears in Heaney. In fact it is only in this context of *rupture* that the idea of continuity between the viking invasion and Ireland in the present could be said to make sense.

²³ Longley 140.

Thor's hammer swung
to geography and trade,
thick witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behindbacks
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

N 20

Despite its local context, this is actually an *archetype* of colonialism, and just as the Bog Poems work images of tribalism, punishment and martyrdom into archetypes²⁴ ("a saint's kept body"), everything that previously had been latent in Heaney's poetry is metamorphosed in *North*. The voice of resolution that had addressed its past is now re-addressed with clarity and assurance, and no longer requires metaphor, but speaks itself, from the archetype of continuity - "the word-heard" - like a vast echo. A monumental history, in every sense, now focuses on the attentive and absorbant subject, who alone can carry its significance to its revelation.

North appears to be a meta-resolution of the problematic established in *Death of a Naturalist*, and as such freezes the terms of Heaney's poetry. Within the structure of the book as it is published, a meta-dialectic also appears. The book's two parts then represent a conflict of styles for the transmission of the poetic self/subject, and the subject of the poetry is in fact "I", the subject.²⁵

History is also frozen in *North*. The reach from childhood norms to Universal forms, but, even more, the need for authentic experience for an authentic subject, leads to a plethora of preserved historical imagery whose connection to the present is little more than allegorical, but whose allegory with the present tends towards arbitrary archetypes of violence. Once again the connection pivots on the experiencing subject: "*I can feel* the tug of the halter at the nape of her neck" (my italics); "I first saw his twisted face in a photograph"; "I push back through dictions, Elizabethan canopies. Norman devices..."; "I returned to a long strand"; "I step through origins"; and the focus:

²⁴ *ibid.* 160.

²⁵ In this context, Blake Morrison's investigation of the conflict between the *vers donnés* and the *vers calculés* in Heaney is interesting. See Morrison 53.

My words lick around
 cobbled quays, go hunting
 lightly as pampooties
 over the skull-capped ground.²⁶
 N 24

Using this form of the subject not only returns us to a former tradition of poetry, but in doing so recreates the dichotomies between self and world with the word as mediator, that much of the thrust of high modernism (and not least Joyce) had sought to defuse through a *transgression* of the linguistic limits of the subject. In Heaney, as in Wordsworth, the self finds itself constantly at the locus of dichotomies between art and politics, love and death, memory and history, surface and depth, which it must either suffer or resolve or both. As the motor of poetry it may generate continually exploitable tensions, but risks the inescapability of its own terms. Both occur in the bog poems of *North*.

In every sense, the bog poems bring to Heaney's work the gravitas they require to ground their subject. However, experience *per se* has been replaced by experience as such. A tracing of the bog poems is also an investigation of increasing subjectivity *vis á vis* images. The epiphany of "North" is entirely imagined, unlike the frogs of "Death of a Naturalist", and a new ground for authenticity is required to arrest a concurrent alienation of the poet.

This is where personal admission really comes into its own in Heaney. The nature of these now become self-accusatory as well as self-dynamic:

I who have stood dumb
 when your betraying sisters,
 cauled in tar,
 wept by the railings,

who would connive
 in civilised outrage
 yet understand the exact
 and tribal, intimate revenge.

N 38

²⁶ from "Punishment", "The Grauballe Man", "Bone Dreams", "North" (cf Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey") and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" respectively.

This controversial ending to "Punishment" has been accused of self-abnegation by Edna Longley and Ciarán Carson ("artistic, not political, fence-sitting", "offering his 'understanding' of the situation almost as a consolation"). Blake Morrison writes:

pity is off-set by his understanding for the motives for judicial punishment... it is a courageous piece of self-analysis, acknowledging what he calls elsewhere "the persistence of what appear to be anachronistic passions"²⁷.

It seems that the price to pay to create a poetry grounded enough to deal with the impurity of the Northern Irish situation, is the sacrifice of the transforming power of the artist, even within himself. The *authenticity* of his reaction and transcription of that reaction alone is offered as the public artist. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Heaney begins to retreat from such direct engagement with the political and historical following North, but the pattern of rupture and resolution remains in place through this shift, and even becomes thematically incorporated in poems such as "Oysters"²⁸. The essentially *confessional* feel of this voice precipitates a continuing movement into Catholicism in Heaney's poetry, which is also perfectly in keeping with the extrapolation of memory onto an ahistorical world. (It will be necessary to return again and again to childhood memory, as Heaney proceeds to do in both *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*, to maintain the authenticity of the poetry.) This precipitates a general emphasis on conscience probing (the successful Catholic) that remains (through its own modifications) the voice of authenticity in Heaney's poetry up to *Seeing Things*. The confessional invites self-flagellation, and promises forgiveness and redemption in return.

²⁷ Morrison 64.

²⁸ Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,
The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome:
I saw damp panniers disgorge
The frond-lipped, brine-stung
Glut of privilege

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

Here the reflex to relate things colonially is arrested by the reflex to trust to yourself.

Field Work is a careful extrication of the poet from the burgeoning *inheritance* of political history. In its place, a superficially simpler, actually more complicated, interrogation of his relation to politics comes into being in poems such as "Triptych", "Casualty", and certain of the "Glanmore Sonnets". One feels, in a poem such as "The Toome Road" - "How long were they approaching down my roads/ as if they owned them?" - as in "The Other Side", that the entire constitution of this self is bound to its political situation; that there is a symbiotic dependency at work here that can only *appear* oppositional, but never achieve it. The growing issue of *responsibility* reveals a more appropriate "other": the man of action. The poet who "confused evasion and artistic tact" regarding his political situation, feels himself more and more to be a political (and, through a continuing motif, always mediated by violence, sexual) *voyeur* - a motif introduced in "Punishment" which is picked up again in "The Skunk" and "The Guttural Muse". Poetry becomes the site of an "apology for poetry", that is to say, a confession of poetry, and its own absolution. "Station Island" devotes itself to this theme.

DIOGENES THE CIVIC.

It is apparently in the face of this "authentic" Heaney that Richard Brown produces his reading of a tongue in cheek poet in his essay "Bog poems and book poems"²⁹, where his emphases fall on the plethora of puns and allusions, but most of all on the public Heaney, who in his essays and lectures continually exposes the means of manufacture of his poetry. The argument for a postmodern Heaney is patently redundant, relying as it does on the very dubious notion of a postmodern period than a postmodern attitude, which Heaney does not exhibit. However, consider this "traditional" poet, this locus of the "timeless" struggle between responsibility and art, functioning also as authority on current world poetry; Harvard and Oxford professor; the exemplar of poet as professional in a world of irrefragable specialisation; an admirer furthermore of the irrepressibly playful (and authentically postmodern, pardon the oxymoron) poetry of Paul Muldoon. The individual thus positioned is either absolutely transparent or hopelessly opaque. A poem such as "Exposure" is unthinkable from this locus. A paradox of high exposure is that rather than coalescing, the personal and the public become *essentially* divided: one ceases to be either the lone investigator, experimenting with

²⁹ Corcoran 58-81.

one's social being, or the representative of "gagged" culture, measuring on one's own pulse the heart of the street. The speaker in this position cannot speak simply: public statement becomes opinion; private self-analysis. In Heaney's case, the self having been the *burden* of the poetry throughout the relocation of the poet by the poetry, successive readings are necessarily pointed towards a search for the new locus of authenticity in line with the poet's altered public status. The axes of his poetry have become that of the fixed relation between the self and authenticity and that of the moving relation of the self through its career (i.e. "poetic development").

In a BBC interview, Heaney responded to the comment that *Seeing Things* marked "quite a departure" for him, with the remark "It was about time I started writing poetry"³⁰. It is a final acknowledgement of the role of "poet", a flaunting of the transcendence of conflict, hidden beneath modesty. Whatever conflict had taken place as the speaker's ground shifted ("the line between panic and formulae" as it appears in "The Mud Vision"), takes place in his previous collection *The Haw Lantern*. If *North* delivers a resolution to the meta-conflicts of Heaney's previous works, *The Haw Lantern* does the same with regard to the later works. It comes on the one hand as a series of postcards and records from frontiers, republics and islands, caught between physical and metaphorical as the writer tentatively steps from familiar ground, and, on the other hand, like a last plea for the voice of representation, the unfamiliar and uncomfortable first person plural. An instance of the first is "From the Frontier of Writing" (the title's invitation to the avant-garde is immediately assaulted, superficially, by the pentameter):

The tightness and nilness round that space
when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
its make and number and, as one bends his face

towards your window, you catch sight of more
on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
down cradled guns that hold you under cover

and everything is pure interrogation
until a rifle motions and you move
with guarded unconcerned acceleration -

a little emptier, a little spent

³⁰ with Fintan O'Toole on *The Late Show*, Nov 1991.

as always by that quiver in the self,
subjugated, yes, and obedient.

So you drive on to the frontier of writing
where it happens again. The guns on tripods;
the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating

data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.

And suddenly your through, arraigned yet freed,

...

past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.

NSP 184

The allegory is blurred by the finer definition of its tenor, but even without the throw-back to "The Toome Road", the frontier of the pioneer is clearly dismissed, almost cynically, particularly in the false universal *you*, and the internal alignment of "arraigned yet freed" with "subjugated ... and obedient". The sense is rather that too many have been here before; the mapping is complete and patrolled, but whether the agent is the *superego*, publishers, government or the media is not clear. A poem that invites a number of readings is already a surprise in Heaney's work, and the next surprise is the pervading sense of passivity ("the car stops"; "suddenly your through") moving towards complicity ("out between/ the posted soldiers") permeating the familiar antagonism. For contemporary poetry delineates the frontiers of writing even if it is anti-avant-garde, if it is in fact consolidating a border rather than extending a horizon. "Quiver in the self" (pun?) meets "data about you" to produce implicitly the public figure, the data-based poet of a societal curriculum. The scrutiny is that of a receptive and critical audience as well as of the poet in response to that audience. The political accusations of *North* finally meet with the self-accusations that have dogged his poetry ever since, to produce a synthesis of complicity, the self "spent" like a gun, the vehicle (poem) "guarded", the "posted soldiers" "flowing" into the "polished windscreen" of Heaney's

perfected style. (The poet in the car becomes an increasingly common metaphor for the self in the poem from *Field Day* on).

The quasi-fictional setting for this investigation is significant in other of these poems also; “The Republic of Conscience”, “The Disappearing Island”, and create an appropriately ambiguous context for the growing fictionalisation of an increasingly documented life. It is perhaps not surprising that the poems in *The Haw Lantern* which re-attempt a community spokesman, “The Mud Vision”, “From the Canton of Expectation”, are less convincing. The title poem, “The Haw Lantern” achieves a more subtle unity of the two, by its *recognition*, at last, that the scrutinizer, scrutinized and absolver all originate politically only in so far as they originate in the poet himself - “Diogenes/ with his lantern, seeking one just man” (Heaney is both of these men). The haw lantern, with

its bonded pith and stone,
its blood-prick, that you wish would test you and clear you,
its pecked-at ripeness that scans you, then moves on.
NSP 197

becomes the ideal model for Heaney's poetry of scrutiny, accusation, and absolution. But here it is two-way: it recognises its own constructed systems, which is a far more appropriate authenticity than the increasingly forced expiations of guilt that were becoming a worn trademark rather than a genuine investigation. Poetry here moves decisively away from the grand statement and becomes instead

a small light for small people
wanting no more from them but that they keep
the wick of self-respect from dying out,
not having to blind them with illumination.
NSP 197

The sonnet sequence “Clearances”, returns like so much of Heaney's poetry, to death, the very frontier of authenticity. However, the mood is set more by the painstaking recalling of childhood, in a different mood from that of his early poems, an unmetaphorical attempt at fidelity to memory, which intimates the tone of his next, most recent but one, volume *Seeing Things*.

The translated passages which flank the poems of this volume, one from Virgil, one from Dante, are so immediately resonant with Heaney's opus (visiting the father in the underworld; crossing into Hades as a “just man”), so thoroughly Heaneyfies

the epic poets, that it is hard not to see them as playful tests of the reader's eligibility: the guards at the borders. Indeed the book gives us what we expect along both axes of Heaney's work: the fixed relation between self and authenticity remains in place, the moving relation (the "new departure") takes us into the next stage of that quest: memory. In a way it seems inevitable that a morally untroubled, aesthetically unembarrassed return to the past (as indicated in "Personal Helicon") should dominate at some point in Heaney: if the self is concerned about its authenticity it must examine itself politically; if it is concerned with *preserving* authenticity (trademark) it must focus ever more inward, towards a horizon beyond challenge. In neither case can it avoid the basic dichotomy, once in place. However once a poet can unproblematically reproduce his own authenticity he is far down the road to irony, wherein all such sharp categories begin to dissolve. It is in *Seeing Things* that Heaney finally takes his own advice in Joyce's mouth to stop being so earnest, or rather, learns the importance of being Seamus.

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