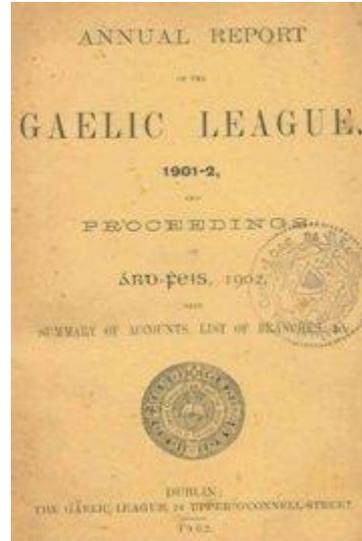


“Taking Flight: Landscape and Imagination in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney”



An Ulster farmhouse



The Gaelic League was established in 1893 to preserve the Irish language.



The Common Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)



Ancient Irish passage-grave with its corballed roof. (Boyne)



Mad Sweeney at Drumcolg



Following his Nobel Prize Award in 1995, Heaney drove a Mercedes-Benz which he called his “brazen car” in a comical allusion to Yeats’s poem about the ancient Irish king Fergus who “rules the brazen cars ...”. The model is a favourite of wealthy Irish farmers.

Irish Signposts

(bilingual nation)



Ireland: one country – two cultures?

- The great majority of people in Ireland only spoke Irish up to the mid-19th century.
- The “English conquest” of Ireland in 1172 was carried out by Anglo-French Normans.
- English began to be imposed by law in Ireland after the Protestant Reformation.
- Under colonial rule, Irish became a “badge of inferiority” connoting poverty and ignorance.
- After the Great Famine (1845-49), the Irish rapidly shifted to English spurred by economic necessity and the faltering prestige of Irish.
- In 1893, a the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge) was formed to revive the Irish language.
- In 1913 the League became officially identified with the aim of national independence.
- In 1922 Irish was politically endorsed as the language of the Free State and later the Republic of Ireland (declared in 1948).
- In 1984 Irish ceased to be a compulsory in the Irish School Leaving Certificate Exam; in the 1990s it ceased to be compulsory for Civil Service posts either.
- In 2003 the Irish Language Act confirmed that all Government documents must be published in both languages – the Irish version being the primary one for legal purposes.
- Today, more Chinese, Polish, Latvian, and possibly Romanian is spoken in Ireland than Irish (only 1.8% use Irish at home).
- The “cupla focal” (“a few words”) is spoken by most politicians though both the present and the last President of Ireland are fluent speakers (McAleese, Higgins).
- In Northern Ireland the Irish language enjoys “parity of esteem” under the Belfast Agreement (1998).
- The debate about compulsory Irish in Primary Schools continues in the Republic today.

Language distribution in Ireland



Celtic languages in Europe



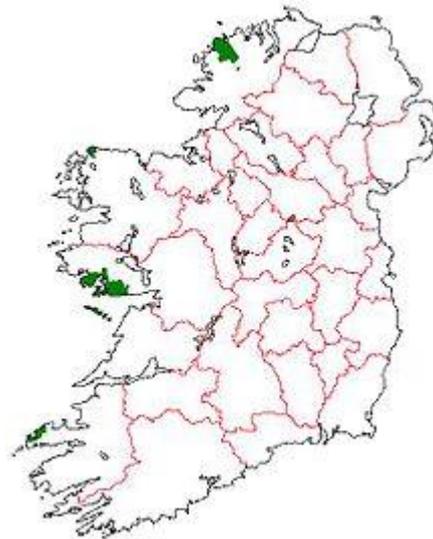
1635 - Irish-speaking Ireland



Irish-speaking areas, 1871



Irish-speaking areas, 1926



Irish-speaking areas, 2007

Once the dominant language-group of Europe, the Celtic family dwindled over centuries under pressure from early westward migrations, then under the influence of the Roman Empire, and finally as the result of the centralising policies of modernising states such as France and England.

In Ireland, the social and economic marginalisation of the Irish language was counter-balanced by a movement to reinvest it with social and cultural value in the 20th century. "Language politics" remains a hot subject today.

Irish landscape as ‘manuscript’ ...

We have seen that Seamus Heaney quoted his Irish fellow-poet John Montague on landscape and language:

‘The whole of the Irish landscape, in John Montague’s words, is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read.’ (Heaney, “The Sense of Place” [1977], in *Preoccupations*, London: Faber 1980, pp.131-49; p.132.)

In fact, he was quoting from “A Lost Tradition” – a section of a long poem called *The Rough Field* which Montague had worked on for ten years before publication in 1972:

‘All around, shards of a lost tradition: / From the Rough Field* I went to school / In the Glen of the Hazels. Close by / Was the bishopric of the Golden Stone; / [...] Scattered over the hills, tribal / And place-names, uncultivated pearls. / No rock or ruin, dun or dolmen / But showed memory defying cruelty / Through an image-encrusted name. [...]

The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read, / A part of our past disinherited; / But fumbled, like a blind man, / Along the fingertips of instinct.

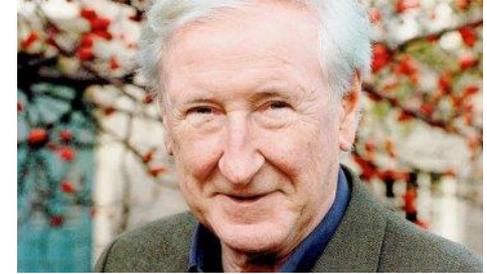
The Rough Field [IV: “A Severed Head”; poem 2]

*Montague’s title refers to Garvaghey, the townland where he was born – a place-name that means “rough field” in Irish (i.e., Gaelic). This is the main trope of the whole poem, which argues for the primacy of the native language as an index of local meaning and national experience and treats its loss as a mark of cultural fragmentation.

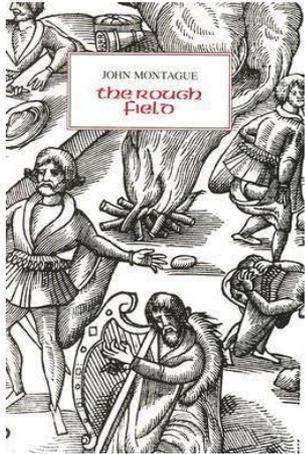
“A Grafted Tongue”, in *The Rough Field*

Sect. IV: “A Severed Head” [poem 5]

Montague’s collection *The Rough Field* (1972) deals with the brutal colonial conquest of Ireland in the 17th century – but also with no-less brutal “grafting” of the English tongue into Irish heads effected in Irish schools during the second half of the 19th century when post-Famine Ireland largely gave up its native language and adopted English for reasons of economic survival.



John Montague, 1929-



The Rough Field, 1972

*My emphasis. Montague has a stammer which he here attributes to the “language shift”, but elsewhere to a traumatic family life in childhood.

Dumb, bloodied, the severed head now chokes to speak another tongue.
(As in a long suppressed dream, some stuttering garbled ordeal of my own.)

An Irish child weeps at school repeating its English. After each mistake the master gouges another mark on the tally stick hung about its neck like a bell on a cow, a hobble on a straying goat.

To slur and stumble in shame the altered syllables of your own name:
to stray sadly home and find the turf-cured width of your parents’ hearth
growing slowly alien:

In cabin and field, they still speak the old tongue. You may greet no one.
To grow a second tongue, as harsh a humiliation as twice to be born.

Decades later that child’s grandchild’s speech stumbles over lost syllables
of an old order.*

(1972; rep. *Collected Poems*, 1995, p.37.)



“Seanachie”, by
Hugh Thomson
(1886-1910)



Late-16th c. Irish
poets (or *filidh*)

The Irish Story-tellers (or *seanachai*)

Common traits of the Irish story-teller

- Often a traveller who exchanged food and shelter for evenings of oral story-telling from long-practiced memory;
- Assumed the right to enjoy the privileges of the ancient profession of Irish poets (or ‘filidh’).
- Possession of a repertoire of traditional – and virtually unchanging – narratives
- Teller of tales explaining place names in Ireland in terms of events mythically associated with them (*dinnseanchas*)
- Enjoyed personal fame for feats of memory and – sometimes – for notorious personal behaviour
- Occasional originality but more often complete fidelity to sources.

The *seanachai* were the bearer of oral tradition. They jealously claimed the authenticity of their versions of tales and publicly competed with other story-tellers to establish their credentials in this respect. Gaelic culture was thus intensely conservative – and, as such, reflected the dominant attitude of native Irish culture – a “backward look” towards a lost state of cultural integrity.

“*Pléaráca na bPollan [Pollan Revels]*” – a song preserved in oral tradition and transcribed by P. J. Dowling in *Hedge-schools of Ireland* (1933).

*Éireoidh mé ar maidin is rachaidh mé chun aonaigh,
Tá mé ’mo chodladh is ná dúisítear mé.
Ligfidh mé le bradóig go bhfuil mé ar na daoraidh,
Tá mé ’mo chodladh is ná dúisítear mé.*

I’ll rise in the morning and go to the fair,
I’m asleep and don’t waken me.
I’ll pretend to the girl that I’m in a mad fit,
I’m asleep and don’t waken me.

*Níl seascan bog baite ni dit a bhfuil poóg ann,
Aniar ó Bhéal Trá go h-Ard na Cuileann Trá
Nach mbímse seal sínte ar maos is mé ag ionfairt ann,
Tá mé ’mo chodladh is ná dúisítear mé. [54]*

There’s not a marsh or a swamp or a bog-hole,
Across from Beltra to the height of Cullentree,
That I won’t be steeped in and footing in,
I’m asleep and don’t waken me.

[...]

[...]

*Cluinfear mo cheol mo ghlór is mo challán ann,
Carna mionna mór ar nós mar bhéadh dragan ann,
Chá dtéann tost ar mo scóig, ach ag ól, go rabh maidin
ann,
Tá mé ’mo chodladh is ná dúisítear mé.*

My singing and shouting and noise will be heard there,
Heaps of big curses as if ’twas a dragon,
My throat will not silence, except while drinking, till
morning,
I’m asleep and don’t waken me.

[...]

[...]

*Chan fhágfaidh mé aon deor i soitheach a dearn cupaire,
Ó thoigh Bhillí Bháin go teach Éamonn Chonnachtaigh,
Caithfidh mé an oiche le h-Éamonn i gClocharna.
Tá mé ’mo chodladh is ná dúisítear mé.*

I won’t leave a drop in any vessel ever a cooper made,
From Billy Ban’s to the tent of Éamonn the Connachtman,
Then I’ll spend the night with Eamonn in Cloghema,
I’m asleep and don’t waken me.

Note: According to the story-teller Charles McGlinchey (*The Last of the Name*, 1986), the poem is by Denis O’Donnell (d.1778), but the musical historian W. G. H. Flood writes of “ample evidence” for a version as old as 1645 which was printed in 1653. (Grattan, *History of Irish Music*, 1905.)

Heaney's response to the Irish-language tradition

'We have to retrieve the underlay of Gaelic legend in order to read the full meaning of the name and to flesh out the topographical record with its human accretions. The whole of the Irish landscape, in John Montague's words, is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read.' ('The Sense of Place' [1977], *Preoccupations*, Faber 1980, pp.131-49; p.132.)

"Not to learn Irish is to miss the opportunity of understanding what life in this country has meant and could mean in a better future. It is to cut oneself off from ways of being at home. If we regard self-understanding, mutual understanding, imaginative enhancement, cultural diversity and a tolerant political atmosphere as desirable attainments, we should remember that a knowledge of the Irish language is an essential element in their realisation." (Signed statement, c.1987.)

'I have been writing poems out of history. It is [a] hump we live off. I have my tap root in personal and racial memory. The Famine, the '98 Rebellion, things like that have surfaced in my imagination and they are a living language there.' (Quoted in James MacKillop & Maureen Murphy, eds., *Irish Literature*, Syracuse 1978, p.380.)

'I wanted to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before ... and make it still an English lyric.' (Quoted in Neil Corcoran, 'One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back', in *The Chosen Ground*, 1992, p.213.)

A signed statement

<http://www.magherafelt.gov.uk/pages/index.php?id=456>



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Seamus Heaney

Anahorish, Broagh, Toome and Castledawson

Heaney's response to the cultural ideology of the Irish language-revival movement was to revisit the place-names of his childhood and to find in them a deeper significance as matching the characteristics of the place itself - and therefore *belonging* to it in a way that its English counterpart didn't.

"Anahorish"

My 'place of clear water,'
the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass

and darkened cobbles
in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
of consonant, vowel-meadow,

after-image of lamps
swung through the yards
on winter evenings.
With pails and barrows

those mound-dwellers
go waist-deep in mist
to break the light ice
at wells and dunghills.

—from *Wintering Out* (1972)

"Broagh"

Riverbank, the long rigs
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford.

The garden mould
bruised easily, the shower
gathering in your heelmark
was the black O

in *Broagh*,
its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
hard to manage.

—from *Wintering Out* (1972)

"**Toome**": 'My mouth holds round the soft blastings, / *Toome, Toome* / As under the dislodged // Slab of the tongue / I push the into a souterrain / Prospecting what new // In a hundred centuries // Loam, flint, musket-balls, / Fragmented aware, / Torcs and fishbones / Till I am sleeved in.' (Quoted by Mark Hughes, UG Essay, UUC 2002.)

The Politics of Place-names

The study of place-names is called *toponymy* in English. The Old Irish word *dinnseachas* has a different scope of meaning: it primarily deals in, memory and fable, legends and myths associated with a given a place in literary and oral tradition.

“A New Song”

I met a girl from Derrygarve
And the name, a lost potent musk,
Recalling the river's long swerve,
A kingfisher's blue bolt at dusk

And stepping stones like black molars
Sunk in the fjord, the shifty glaze
Of the whirlpool, the Moyola
Pleasuring beneath alder trees.

And Derrygarve, I thought, was just:
Vanished music, twilit water -

A smooth libation of the past
Poured out by this chance vestal daughter.

But now our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts
To flood, with vowelling embrace,
Demesnes staked out in consonants.

And Castledawson we'll enlist
And Upperlands, each planted bawn -
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass -
A vocable, as rath and bullaun.

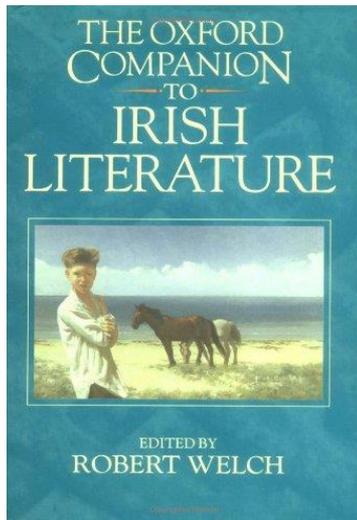
—from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)

The place-name “Derrygarve” derives from “oak grove” (*doire/garbh*) in Irish. Here the imaginative legacy of traditional Irish place-names is contrasted with the apparent banality of place-names bestowed on Irish places by the English colonists who settled them – typically involving their own family names (‘Dawson’), or simply describing their physical location (‘Upperlands’). All of these place-names – Irish and English - are to be found in the part of Co. Londonderry/Derry* where Seamus Heaney grew up.

*The name of Derry and the county in which it stands is a matter of political dispute with the result tht it is widely known as “Stroke City” - i.e, Derry/Londonderry. (A “stroke” also means a piece of political chicanery.) During the early 17th century, when Ulster was “planted” with English and Scots by James I, tracts of land were granted to the London Guilds to develop as English towns. Thus Derry became Londonderry in a blatant expression of the colonial connection - and hence the dispute between unionists and nationalists as to its proper name. Derry was formerly Gaelic *doire* meaning ‘oak-grove’. Oaks are associated with early Celtic religion and – most famously – with their priestly caste the Druids. To the Southern ear, “Londonderry” always sounds oddly alien.

Ancient Irish poetry as a game-changer

Here we come to Heaney's most elaborate intervention in the art of linguistic politics – his translation of the old Irish *tale Buile Shuibhne* (“The Frenzy or Madness of Sweeney”) which contains some of the finest ancient lyric poetry in the language – arguably in the world. Let's see first what a standard reference-work tells us about Sweeney:



Oxford Companion to Irish Literature, ed. Robert Welch (1996)

Buile Shuibhne [Frenzy of Sweeney] is a 12th-century text found in three extant manuscript copies which have survived in Ireland from the 17th century. A nature poem attributed to Sweeney – a historical Gaelic king - is preserved in the monastery of St. Paul, Karnten, in Austria.

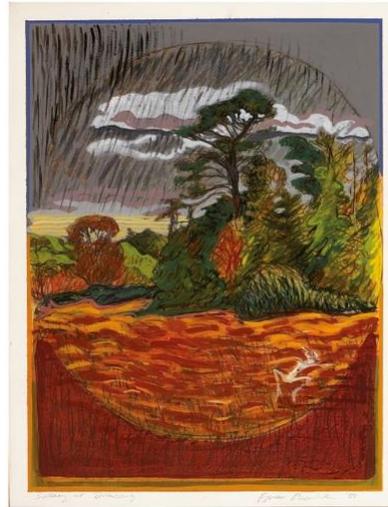
Sweeney's madness (or 'frenzy') is brought on by the battle of Mag Rath (anglic. Moira) - a 7th-century event of great importance in the early Irish history. Cursed by a saint called Rónán, Sweeney flees naked into the wilderness where he hops from tree to tree, bemoaning his fate and celebrating nature in haunting lyrics. After many travels he reaches the monastery of St. Moling where 'he was destined [...] to end his life [...] and to be buried'.

"The Frenzy of Sweeney" is the principal Irish example of the Wild Man tale-type and has attracted several modern Irish writers and painters interested in the themes of nature-love, social transgression and mental derangement, as well as poetic inspiration — notably Flann O'Brien in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and Seamus Heaney in *Sweeney Astray* (1983).

Sweeney in modern Irish art



Sweeney in a Yew Tree



Sweeney in Glen Bolcan



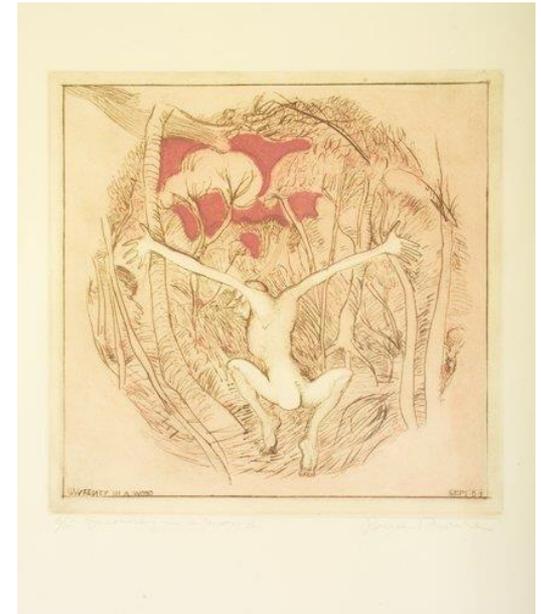
Sweeney Descending



Sweeney over Drumcong



Brian Bourke, 1936-



Sweeney in a Wood (etching)

Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (1983) - Extract

Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish (Derry: Field Day 1983):

'[...] Sweeney kept going until he reached the church at Swim-Two-Birds on the Shannon, which is now called Cloon-burren; he arrived there on Friday to be exact. The clerics of the church were singing nones, women were beating flax and one was giving birth to a child.

It is unseemly, said Sweeney, for the women to violate the Lord's fast day. That woman beating the flax reminds me of our beating at Moira.

Then he heard the vesper bell ringing and said:

It would be sweeter to listen to the notes of the cuckoos on the banks of the Bann than the whinge of their bell tonight.

Then he uttered the poem:

I perched for rest and imagined
cuckoos calling across water,
the Bann cuckoo, calling sweeter
than church bells that whinge and grind.

Friday is the wrong day, woman,
for you to give birth to a son,
the day when Mad Sweeney fasts
for love of God, in penitence.

Do not just discount me. Listen.
At Moira my tribe was beaten,
beetled, heckled, hammered down,
like flax being scutched by these women.

From the cliff of Lough Diolar
up to Derry Colmcille
I saw the great swans, heard their calls
sweetly rebuking wars and battles.

From lonely cliff-tops, the stag
bells and makes the whole glen shake
and re-echo. I am ravished.
Unearthly sweetness shakes my breast.

O Christ, the loving and the sinless,
hear my prayer, attend, O Christ,
and let nothing separate us.
Blend me forever in your sweetness.

Continued ...

Remarks: Heaney's Sweeney is a bird-like creature who "perches" in trees and despises human society, preferring the sights and sounds of the wilderness areas populated only by cuckoos, stags and wolves. His contempt for the "clerics" is particularly marked. The story suggests that he is reaching an accommodation with the Church in his last days, but in reality his Christian feelings are connected with his love of nature in a way that seems to by-pass the ecclesiastical establishment. He therefore remains a subversive figure on the literary landscape, one whose ludicrous ideas and uncivilised demeanour combines with real spirituality in both pantheistic and Christian contexts.

Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (1983) - Extract

[Heaney tells story of death of Sweeney from a spear-wound at the hands of a jealous husband - a swineherd called Mongan - and Sweeney's poem on offering repentance to St. Moling and his clerics on his deathbed:]

There was a time when I preferred
the turtle-dove's soft jubilation
as it flitted round a pool
to the murmur of conversation.

There was a time when I preferred
the blackbird singing on the hill
and the stag loud against the storm
to the clinking tongue of this bell.

There was a time when I preferred
the mountain grouse crying at dawn
to the voice and closeness
of a beautiful woman

There was a time when I preferred
wolf-packs yelping and howling
to the sheepish voice of a cleric
bleating out plainsong.

You are welcome to the pledged healths
and carouse in your drinking dens;
I will dip and steal water
from a well with my open palm.

You are welcome to that cloistered hush
of your students' conversation;
I will study the pure chant
of the hounds baying in Glen Bolcain.

You are welcome to your salt meat
and fresh meat in feasting houses;
I will live content elsewhere
on tufts of green watercress.

The herd's sharp spear has finished me,
passed clean through my body.
Ah Christ, who disposes all things, why
was I not killed at Moira?

Then Sweeney's death-swoon came over him and Moling, attended by his clerics, rose up and each of them placed a stone on Sweeney's grave.' (Rep. in *Opened Ground*, 1998, pp.191-28; here pp.194-95; 206-08.)

Remarks: Heaney sticks pretty closely to the "old-fashioned English crib" (i.e., prose translation) made by J. G. O'Keeffe for the Early Irish Texts series in 1913 which he is using. In doing so, he reflects the oddity of the translation-language of his source without actually quoting it. Sweeney sounds mad and strangely sane at the same time, just as his English sounds both "broken" and poetic. On his death-bed, he seems to repent of his former preference for nature over religion but does not actually convert (or re-convert) to orthodox Christianity or seek the sacraments associated with a "good" Christian death. He therefore remains a pagan presence in the Christian literature of Ireland and his anti-clericalism has an infectious ring to it. While the translation is not overtly comical, it displays a witty alertness to the insurmountable problems of translation between different languages and cultures. Heaney also exploits the act of translation to develop his own poetic language – itself containing elements alien to the familiar English lyric which render it more effective.

Sweeney Astray (1983) - Heaney's rationale

At the height of the “Troubles”, Heaney wrote the following for an American audience sympathetic to Irish nationalism, but also determined to support a peaceful settlement of the conflict rather than a perpetuation of the armed struggle.

“*Sweeney Astray*” would make a unionist audience aware that *Ulster was Irish*, without coercing them out of their cherished conviction that it was British.

Also, because it reached back into a *pre-colonial Ulster* of monastic Christianity and Celtic kingship, I hoped the book might complicate that sense of entitlement to the land of Ulster which had developed so overbearingly in the Protestant majority, as a result of various victories and acts of settlement over the centuries [...].

I simply wanted to offer an indigenous text that *would not threaten* a Unionist (after all, this was just a translation of an old tale, situated for much of the time in what is now Co. Antrim and Co. Down) and that would fortify a Nationalist (after all, this old tale tells us we belonged here always and that we will remain unextirpated.)’

(Seamus Heaney, ‘Earning a Rhyme’ [lect. at Boston College], in *Poetry Ireland Review*, 25, Spring 1989, p.96; rep. as *Do.*, in Rosanna Warren, ed., *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*, Northwestern UP 1989, pp.13-20.

Further explanations ...

In this account, written for an Irish audience – no less nationalist but perhaps more interested in Heaney-as-poet - Heaney is more intent on describing the literary aspects of the poem and its relation to his own imaginative life.

‘Sweeney is anti-heroic, traumatized, in love with the actual, surviving by keeping close to the minimal nurtures and consolations of the earth. He has also awakened from the nightmare of power politics and is attempting to remake his soul. He is a figure of what the Irish poetic imagination has been through and while my original attraction to his story sprang from a relish of the natural magic in many passages of melancholy sweetness

I also recognized in Sweeney himself an “objective correlative” of the poet. I first began to work on the material in Wicklow in 1972 when my identification with the Ulsterman sheltering in woodlands was at its most immediate. Since then I have tried to make this work more objective, more in tune with the clean shape of the original.’

Heaney’s preface to a reprinting of the poem “Woman, picking the watercress ...” from *Sweeney Astray* [extract], printed in in *Ireland and the Arts*, ed. T. P. Coogan [Special Issue of *Literary Review*] (London: Namara Press 1984), pp.152-56; here pp.152-53.



In 2005, when he was recovering from an illness, Heaney revisited Glanmore – the cottage where he had written *North* (1975) and a first version of “Sweeney Astray”. In “The Blackbird of Glanmore” he takes a ‘bird’s eye view’ of his own life at a moment when its end seems both possible and imminent. The blackbird comes as an omen which the poet does not reject.

“The Blackbird of Glanmore”

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

It’s you, blackbird, I love.

I park, pause, take heed.
Breathe. Just breathe and sit
And lines I once translated
Come back: “I want away
To the house of death, to my father

Under the low clay roof.”

And I think of one gone to him,
A little stillness dancer –
Haunter-son, lost brother –
Cavorting through the yard,
So glad to see me home,

My homesick first term over.

And think of a neighbour’s words
Long after the accident:
“Yon bird on the shed roof,
Up on the ridge for weeks –
I said nothing at the time

But I never liked yon bird.”

The automatic lock
Clunks shut, the blackbird’s panic
Is shortlived, for a second
I’ve a bird’s eye view of myself,
A shadow on raked gravel

In front of my house of life.

Hedge-hop, I am absolute
For you, your ready talkback,
Your each stand-offish comeback,
Your picky, nervy goldbeak –
On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave.

—from *District and Circle* (2006)

SOME COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND A CLUE

1. What is the role of the blackbird in the poem?
2. Who says “I never liked yon bird”, and why? (‘Yon’ is an archaic word for ‘that one over there’ (adj. – like Portuguese *aquele*)
3. Does the poet agree? If not, why not?
4. What is the bird actually doing? What does the poet think he is doing?
5. What about the car? (Is it a ‘signifier’ for anything?)
6. What is “the low clay roof”? Find a synonym for “house of my father” in this context.
7. What is the mood of the poem?
8. Do you think the poem is Romantic or Modern or some combination of these?
9. Say something about the form of the stanzas and the structure of the poem as a whole.
10. Identify any words that carry special meaning or which form obstacles to the interpretation of the poem for you, the reader (i.e., difficult *lexis*).

The illustration shows another bird – this time, the painter Louis le Brocquy’s version of the “Morrigan” for Thomas Kinsella’s modern translation of the 7th century Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*). In Irish – and, more generally, in Celtic - mythology, the “Morrigan” was a crow-like female goddess who presided over war and death. In popular tradition, a mysterious old woman called the banshee (i.e., ‘fairy woman’) was believed to wail (or cry) outside a house when a member of a family living there about to die.

