

Seeing Things: Religion and Modernity in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney



"Noli timere" - Heaney's last words to his wife were texted.



Photo by Mariana Cook

"Blessed be the *pacemakers*"

—Heaney's witticism about a cardiac device fitted in 2006 as related by Paul Muldoon at his funeral service. (*Peace-makers* is the scriptural expression!)



St Patrick's Purgatory – traditional place of
for Irish Catholics pilgrimage



Mural painting by Maser which appeared
in Dublin shortly after Heaney's death

In this lecture we will look at:

- The relationship between poetry and metaphysics
- The history of religion and community in Ireland
- Heaney's development as a poet and as a thinker
- Our own thoughts on the spiritual sense of his poems

Various poems and poem-collections by Heaney to be discussed include “Sweeney Redivivus”, *Station Island*, “Clearances”, *Seeing Things*, *The Spirit Level*, and *Human Chain*. All poems quoted here are also available on the *RICORSO* website at <http://www.ricorso.net> > Classroom > Heaney > Selection.

Aims & objectives

The overall aim of this lecture is to describe the cultural conditions of Heaney's literary creativity and to identify the most important points of intellectual and artistic originality in his poetic achievement.

Noli timere

And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. (Matthew 14:26-27.)

The “last words” of Seamus Heaney to his wife while he awaited a heart operation in hospital were, “Noli timere” – a phrase from the Latin (Vulgate) version of the Bible which she and he would have recognised both as to its literary meaning , ‘Don’t be afraid’, and its scriptural association with Jesus.

This does not mean that Heaney was modelling himself on Christ. In part, at least, it was a witticism–like “peacemakers”/“pacemakers” in another context–but he probably did mean to imply more than that she need not fear for him at present. In any case the phrase has a profoundly consolatory ring as suggesting that there is no need to fear death at all, or even that there is some kind of redemptive grace to be found in the midst of loss if he should die on the operating table.

In the event, Seamus Heaney died before he reached the theatre and his son Michael afterwards made the wording of his final message public (presumably with his mother’s permission). Since then it has gone around the world while, in Ireland, it has assumed almost messianic significance suggesting that a poet can perform a task which the Catholic Church has become increasingly incapable of performing. (“The end of art is peace”, as Heaney once wrote.)

Bible studies

There are actually two instances of the phrase 'nolite timere' in the *Gospel According to St. Matthew*. The first occurs when Jesus walks on water at the Sea at Galilee and reassures his fearful disciples (Chap. 14). The second is when an angel appears to Mary and her sister to tell them that Jesus has risen from the dead. (Chap. 28).

Matthew 14:

And they seeing him walking upon the sea, were troubled, saying: It is an apparition. And they cried out for fear.

et videntes eum supra mare ambulantem turbati sunt dicentes quia fantasma est et prae timore clamaverunt

And immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying: Be of good heart: it is I, fear ye not. (Matt. 14, 26-27; King James Translation, 1611.)

statimque Iesus locutus est eis dicens habete fiduciam ego sum nolite timere (Matt. 14, 26-27; Vulgate of St. Jerome.)

Matthew 28:

And the angel answering, said to the women: Fear not you: for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ((Matt. 28, 5; King James Translation 1611.

respondens autem angelus dixit mulieribus nolite timere vos scio enim quod Iesum qui crucifixus est quaeritis (Matt. 28,5; Vulgate of St. Jerome.)

Note: *Noli* is the singular, *nolite* the plural of the Latin imperative mood: Heaney has adapted the phrase for a single person, and shown a little classical scholarship in the process.

But it is not his last words that we are concerned with here – it is the significance of his work as a whole. In this we find a constant quest to replace traditional forms of spirituality with a new, sustainable sense of the dignity and magnitude of the human spirit and its place in the living universe.

Such a quest is metaphysical by definition in so far as it refuses the limitations of materialism in the obvious sense. But is it a genuinely spiritual quest? Does ‘spirit’ not mean that which survives death in the sense of personal ‘afterlife’ or a collective ‘hereafter’ in a Christian ‘heaven’, ‘limbo’, or ‘hell’? It is a question that Heaney asks in “Settings, XXII”:

Where does spirit live? Inside or outside

Things remembered, made things, things
unmade?

**What came first, the seabird’s cry or the soul
Imagined in the dawn cold when it cried?**

Where does it roost at last? On dungy sticks
In a jackdaw’s nest up in the old stone tower

Or a marble bust commanding the parterre?

How habitable is perfected form?

And how inhabited the windy light?

[...]

(Set questions for the ghost of W.B.)

Note: “W. B.” Is William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet and spiritualist to whom any literary discussion of metaphysics inevitably turns at some point in Ireland. “Set questions” implies an examination – perhaps for the priesthood?

Seeing Things (1991)

“Where Does the Spirit Live?” Heaney’s Metaphysics

In 1999 the poet’s wife Marie published an anthology called *Sources: Letters from Irish People on the Sustenance of the Soul* (1999). In the Preface she remarks that ‘[m]any of the correspondents expressed difficulties in defining what “spiritual” meant’, while ‘others admitted disquiet and an understandable reticence about disclosing such deeply private matters’. The only one to make a stab at it was her husband—though wisely, perhaps, he did not attempt to define *spirit* itself:

‘Spiritual sustenance’, mean[s] whatever sustains the spirit, supports it from below, maintains its vitality and reinforces its sense of its own validity. What sustains is more returnable to, less surprising, less intense, more tried and chosen. In fact, it can sometimes seem that your sustenance ends up choosing you rather than the other way around.’

Here Heaney reiterates the theme and technique of *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). In common with that intransitive use of *sustain*, the striking phrase ‘more returnable to’ displays a neologising impulse to be met with frequently in those collections, as in lines describing quayside water in “Squarings”: ‘Ultimate / Fathomableness, ultimate / Stony up-againstness’ which **mark Heaney’s desire to capture something of the liminal and the numinous in sensory experience. The search for essences amid such qualities reveals a determination to see the physical and spiritual as ultimately dependent on each other. [...]** There is a distinct analogy with sexual union, too, when he writes about ‘the feeling of a gap closing and at the same time, equally and paradoxically, of a space opening’, before adding finally: ‘[i]t seems at those moments that we are made for illumination’.

Religion in Ireland

Ireland is traditionally regarded as a 'religious' country. To grasp the reasons for the close identification of Ireland with Catholicism, it is necessary to look at Irish history.



From passage graves ...

- Pre-historic religion (burial mounds, mythological gods, &c.)
- Arrival of Christianity from Britain with St. Patrick (432 b.c.).
- Norman invasion and gradual shift from monastery-centred Celtic Christianity to parish-centred Roman Catholicism (1169).
- Anglican Protestantism becomes the state religion of Ireland after the English Reformation (1529).
- Religious wars in Ireland result in passing of the Penal Laws against Catholics (1692, &c.).
- Catholic priests minister to the people at “mass rocks” and other hiding-places.
- “Relief” from Penal Laws gradually given to richer Catholics in the 18th century.
- Catholic Emancipation won by mass-democracy organised by Daniel O’Connell (“The Liberator”), 1829.
- Regime of Puritan Catholicism (“Jansenism”) established in Ireland after the Great Famine, 1845-49.
- Catholicism confused with the aim of national independence and virtually established as ‘state religion’ in Independent Ireland (1922).



... to rosary beads

“Romantic Ireland”



Celtic crosses monastery of Clonmacnoise (9th c.)



“Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife, 1170”
by Daniel Maclise, 1854.



“Meeting on the Stairs”,
by F. W. Burton, 1864



St. Patrick's Purgatory – an Irish pilgrimage known to Dante.



Aloysius O'Kelly's “Mass in Connemara” (1884)



“The Mass-rock” – worship
under Penal Law (18th c.)

The Great Irish Famine, 1845-49

In the 19th century Catholicism became exclusively identified with the lower class – i.e., “native” Irish – living under the thumb of Protestant landlords. The Penal Laws and other colonial mechanisms ultimately led to the Great Irish Famine of 1845-49 during which the population fell from 8 million to under 4 million in four years. The Great Famine changed Irish life in several lasting ways.

- Emigration – only elder sons and young women with marriage prospects remained in the country.
- Clericalism - the Catholic Church underwent a “devotional revolution” involving strict religious “observances” (i.e., mass, confession) and sexual abstinence.
- Marriage practices – the proportion of married persons in Ireland remained lowest in Europe between 1850 and 1950.
- Nationalism – anti-English feeling and a policy of national independence became widespread.
- Emergence of the priest and the “strong farmers” as dominant social figures.
- Paternalism – a strong adherence to dogmatic ideas and a strong resistance to radical ones.
- Amnesia – a tendency to “forget” the famine and the society that preceded it, as well as the way in which current land-owners had gained their property.

Note: The famine was caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, a bacteria which destroyed the potato crop upon which, together with butter-milk, the Irish population were largely dependent in 1845.

The Famine in pictures



Deaths from typhus exceeded those from starvation.



British theorist thought the famine was a natural “correction” to Irish population excess, and aid was limited to profitable undertakings.

Ironically, the Choktawee Indians in American sent more money as aid than Queen Victoria.

The extent of suffering in the Irish Famine was reported in the London newspapers by artists such as by James Mahony.



The “workhouse”



Protestant groups contributed food but often with “proselytising” motives and those who accepted it were called “souters” – thus overheating sectarian differences.

Catholic triumphalism

After Irish Independence in 1921, the new government set about creating a Catholic state. Divorce and contraception were outlawed and remained so for more than fifty years. Irish politicians bowed to Irish bishops and routinely assured the Pope of their obedience. The “confessional” state reached its zenith in 1932 when the 21st Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin.



Clerical procession in Dublin,
1932



President De Valera with Papal Nuncio
and Dublin Archbishop J. C. McQuaid



Catholic Mass held on O'Connell St. Bridge
at the heart of Dublin



“Arrest Cardinal Brady”:
Eucharistic Congress, 2012

A Poet's Religion

Heaney's subsequent remarks on the effect of his parent's deaths during the 1980s:

'There was a sense of an almost formal completion. But also a recognition that nothing can be learned, that to be in the presence of a death is to be in the presence of something utterly simple and utterly mysterious. **In my case, the experience restored the right to use words like *soul* and *spirit*, words I had become unduly shy of**, a literary shyness, I suppose, deriving from a misplaced obedience to proscriptions of the abstract, but also a shyness **derived from a complicated relationship with my own Catholic past**. In many ways I love it and have never quite left it, and in other ways I suspect it for having given me such ready access to a **compensatory supernatural vocabulary**. But experiencing my parents' deaths restored some of the verity to that vocabulary. **These words, I realized, aren't obfuscation**. They have to do with **the spirit of life that is within us**.' Interview, *The Paris Review*, 75, Fall 1997 - available [online](#).)

Blake Morrison has written: 'His later poems make room for everyday miracles and otherworldly wisdom. ... For Heaney, there were marvels enough in this world, and never mind the next. Ordinary objects and places - a sofa, a wireless, a satchel, a gust of wind, the sound of rain - were sanctified. His Catholicism ran deep: in his teens he made pilgrimages to Lough Derg and Lourdes, and he thought of writing as a sacred act: "When I sit opposite the desk, it's like being an altar boy in the sacristy getting ready to go out on to the main altar." Religion taught him reverence but the gods of the hearth were what he revered – the den-life he had known as a child. He kept coming back to it and finding new things, or seeing the same things in a new light.' (*The Guardian Review*, 7 Sept. 2013.)

Heaney after *Sweeney Astray* (1983)

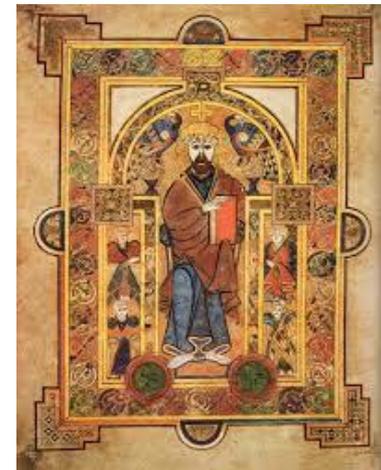
Heaney's translation of the Early-Irish lyrics of "mad" King Sweeney gave him a subversive edge as well as tuning his lyric style to what he called the 'steel-pen exactness' of the Gaelic originals. Of *Sweeney Astray* (1983) he said in interview, 'I no longer wanted a door into the dark - I want a door into the light ... I really wanted to come back to be able to use the first person singular to mean me and my lifetime.'

Following the historical excavation (viz., "digging") of Irish consciousness in the bog-poems of *North* (1975), Heaney re-focused his career with an aerial series called "Sweeney Redivivus" in *Station Island* (1984). Here the line between character and poet is often indistinct since the theme and treatment is distinctly modern while the subject-matter and style are pointedly archaic.

"The First Gloss"

Take hold of the shaft of the pen.
Subscribe to the first step taken
from a justified line
into the margin.

—from "Sweeney Redivivus", in *Station Island* (1984)



The Book of Kells (c.800)

Here Heaney makes one of his occasional revisits to the 'pen' theme of "Digging" (*Death of a Naturalist*, 1966). It is pertinent that the Irish scribes who recorded Sweeney's lyrics made their manuscripts using primitive pens in a monastic *scriborium*. (We will meet yet another pen later on.) Justified bears two meanings – the use of a ruler to make a margin and the state of righteousness or warrant of good cause.

“The Cleric”

I heard new words prayed at cows
on the byre, found his sign
on the crock and the hidden sill.

[...]

Next thing he was making progress

through gaps, stepping out sites,
sinking his crozier deep
Into the fort-hearth.

**If he has stuck to his own
cramp-jawed abbesses and intoners**
dippling round the enclosure,

his Latin and blather of love,
his parchment and scheming
in letters shipped over water -

**but no, he overbore
with his unction and orders
he had to get in on the ground.**

History that planned its standards,
on his gables and spires
ousted me to the marches

of skulking and whingeing.

Or did I desert?

Give him his due, in the end

**he opened my path to a kingdom
of such scope and neuter allegiance
my emptiness reigns at its whim.**

—From *Station Island* (1984)



St Patrick's Shrine

The voice is that of Sweeney bemoaning the invasion of his territory by priests – but the poem can also be read as Heaney's expression of disdain for priests and formalised religion. In this way, he recruits the anti-clericalism of the older poet for distinctly modern purposes

“In Illo Tempore”

The big missal splayed
and dangled silky ribbons
of emerald and purple and watery white.
Intransitively we would assist
confess, receive. The verbs
assumed us. We adored.

And we lifted our eyes to the nouns.

Altar-stone was dawn and monstrance noon,
the word ‘rubric’ itself a bloodshot sunset.

**Now I live by a famous strand
where seabirds cry in the small hours
like incredible souls**

And even the range wall of the promenade
that I press down on for conviction
hardly tempts me to credit it.



Text printed in red is called “rubric”

Comment: Again, the “I” in the poem is Sweeney – but the things narrated are more like the Catholic observances of Heaney’s childhood, from which he is now turning away. The “range wall” and “promenade” are distinctly modern.

—from “Sweeney Redivivus”, in **Station Island** (1984)

Note: The title – meaning “in those days” – refers to days when “we” (the Irish) still faithfully went to Mass.



St. Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg

In his long poem "Station Island" set on St. Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg Heaney carefully measures up to the previous Irish writers who visited that pilgrimage – William Carleton and Patrick Kavanagh – but also to a number of men who have died in the Northern Troubles and whom he fears that he has failed.

In the end, he takes advice from the ghost of James Joyce who tells him "The English language / belongs to us ..."

Elsewhere Heaney identifies Joyce with the idea that 'Irish Catholic provincialism must be liberated into the secular freedoms of Europe.' ("Frontiers of Writing", in *The Redress of Poetry*, 1995, p.201.)

"Station Island"

Sect. XII

[...] **'The English language belongs to us.** You are raking at dead fires,

a waste of time for somebody your age.

That subject people stuff is a cod's game, infantile, like your peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.

When they make the circle wide, **it's time to swim**

out on your own and fill the element

with signatures on your own frequency,

echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

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

The shower broke in a cloudburst, the tarmac fumed and sizzled. As he moved off quickly

the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk.

—From *Station Island* (1984)

“A given note”

‘I didn't set out to avoid allegory and myth. Those modes are forever available, and I'd hate to cut myself off from them. It's more that the “Squarings” were **a given note. An out-of-the-blueness.** The first one came through unexpectedly, but feeling as if it had been preformed. [...] I'd been working for weeks in the National Library in Dublin and on the day I finished, in the library, the first words of the first poem in “Lightenings” came to me, as if they had been embossed on my tongue:

“Shifting brilliances. Then winter light / In a doorway, and on the stone doorstep / A beggar shivering in silhouette. // So the particular judgment might be set ...” (*Seeing Things*, 1991)

I felt exhilarated. **The lines were unlike what I'd been writing.** So I just went with it. The excitement for me was in a pitch of voice, a feeling of being able to make swoops and connections, being able to get into **little coffers of pastness, things I had remembered but never thought of writing about.**'

(Interview with Henri Cole, *The Paris Review*, 75, Fall 1997 - available [online](#).)

Note: “Squarings” is one a poem-sequences in *Seeing Things* (1991) which includes the sub-divisions “Settings”, “Lightenings”, “Crossings”, and “Squarings”— examples of which can be found on the Ricorso website's Heaney [pages](#). The more-or-less dictionary standard gerunds (i.e., *-ing*) are essential to the poems' way of 'finding out' new aspects of perceptual experience on an almost liminal plane.

“Clearances”, VIII

**I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source**
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
I heard the hatchet’s differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of **what luxuriated**
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
Deep-planted and long gone, **my coeval**
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for.

—from *The Haw Lantern* (1987)



In “Clearances”, Heaney began to explore the space created by the departure from positive myth. The poetry he now writes has much to do with absence – things which seem marvellous because they are so natural and often things whose presence is defined by invisibility and imminence rather than the immediate sensory evidence. This is the space of the imagination in its character as an aspect of ordinary perception rather than as a literary faculty.

Note: This is the last of a sonnet series dedicated to the poet’s mother, “VIII”.

“Markings” (from *Seeing Things*, 1991)

I
We marked the pitch: four jackets for four
goalposts,
That was all. [...] And then we picked the teams
And crossed the line our called names drew
 between us

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

II
You also loved lines pegged out in the garden,
The spade nicking the first straight edge along
The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly
To make the outline of a house foundation,
Pale timber battens set at right angles

For every corner, each freshly sawn new board
Spick and span in the oddly passive grass.
Or the imaginary line straight down
A field of grazing, to be ploughed open
From the rod stuck in one headrig to the rod
Stuck in the other.

III
 All these things entered you
As if they were both the door and what came through
it.
They marked the spot, marked time and held it open.
A mower parted the bronze sea of corn.
A windlass hauled the centre out of water.
Two men with a cross-cut kept in it swimming
Into a felled beech backwards and forwards
So that they seemed to row the steady earth.

Comment: Everyone who has played football as darkness encroaches knows this sensation but the verbal formula for it given here is uniquely Heaneyesque. The poem is named on the same principle as “Squarings” but comes earlier in the same collection. This raises the question whether it was actually *written* earlier – a supposition which would makes Heaney’s interview account (previously examined) seem a bit misleading.

“Squarings”

xlvi

Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
Convert to things foreknown;

And how what's come upon is manifest

Only in light of what has been gone through.

Seventh heaven may be

The whole truth of a sixth sense come to pass.

At any rate, when light breaks over me

The way it did on the road beyond Coleraine

Where wind got saltier, the sky more hurried

And silver lamé shimmered on the Bann

Out in mid-channel between the painted poles,

That day I'll be in step with what escaped me.

The paradoxical idea that 'absence is the highest form of presence' can be applied to temporal phenomena as easily as to physical ones. As Heaney says of Thomas Hardy – who pretended to lie dead in a field as a child – 'he experimented with infinity.' (*Opened Ground*, 1998, p.362.)



View from University of Ulster
Common Room (my snapshot)



The Bann Estuary (Co. Londonderry)

“Fosterling”

At school I loved one picture’s heavy greenness -
Horizons rigged with windmills’ arms and sails.
The millhouses’ still outlines. Their in-placeness
Still more in place when mirrored in canals.
I can’t remember never having known
The immanent hydraulics of a land
Of *glar* and *glit* and floods at *dailigone*.
My silting hope. My lowlands of the mind.

Heaviness of being. And poetry
Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans
The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten,
Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.

—from *Seeing Things* (1991)



Windmills in the Lowlands
(Holland) by unknown artist

Note: *Glar*, *glit* and *dailigone* are words in Ulster English – the idiom of Heaney’s childhood. Tinkers are itinerant tin-smiths. To ‘tinker’ is to make or fix something using informal tools or ‘handy’ materials – what the French call *bricolage*.

“Postscript”, from *The Spirit Level* (1996)

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of **a flock of swans**,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and **capture it**
More thoroughly. **You are neither here nor there,**
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.



Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare



The Burren's "flaggy shore", Co. Clare

This much-loved poem by Heaney captures the moving power of Irish scenery, but also describes the swans which are a recurrent feature of Irish myth and poetry. In common with many other of his poems, it involves a car and could be called a “drive-by” poem. The imperative mood has the effect of transforming his experience into everybody’s. ‘Capture *it*’ refers to the whole scene as picture, memory and revelation [my italics.]

“Crediting Poetry”: Heaney’s Nobel Address

In his Nobel Award speech at Stockholm on 7 December 1995, Heaney gave an account of his life between the ‘three rooms of a traditional thatched farmstead’ where he was raised and his ‘space-walk’ on the Nobel platform. He began by mentioning that Stockholm first became known to him on the dial of the old ‘wireless’ radio which was his only contact with the outside world during childhood. In what follows, he balances the ideas of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, and finds a place to state his belief in the sustaining power of poetry.

‘I [...] got used to hearing short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from the BBC to Radio Éireann, from the intonations of London to those of Dublin, and even though I did not understand what was being said in those first encounters with the gutturals and sibilants of European speech, **I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world.**

This in turn became **a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival - whether in one’s poetry or in one’s life - turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination**, and it is that journey which has brought me now to this honoured spot. And yet the platform here feels more like a **space station** than a stepping stone, so that is why, for once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury **of walking on air.**

I credit poetry with making this space-walk possible. [...]

He goes on ..

I credit it ultimately because poetry can make an order as true to the impact of the external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago. An order where we can at last grow up to that up to that which we stored as we grew. [...]

I credit poetry, in other words, both for being itself and being a help, for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference, between the child gazing at the word "Stockholm" on the face of the radio dial and the man facing the faces that he meets in Stockholm at this most privileged moment.

I hope I am not being sentimental, or simply fetishising - as we have learned to say - the local ... **Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems,** even if we have terrible proof that pride in the ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, **our vigilance** on that score **should not be displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous, *per se*.**

On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and the **travelworthiness** of such goods should encourage us to **credit** the possibility of **a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space.**

The form of poetry

Heaney's Stockholm lecture concludes with the assertion that:

The form of the poem [...] is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's **credit**: the power **to persuade the vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it**, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, insofar as they, too are an earnest of **our veritable human being**.

"Crediting Poetry: Nobel Award Address" [1995], rep. In *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber & Faber 1998), p.467.

Elsewhere, he says similarly:

When a form generates itself, when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures, it is already **on the side of life**. When a rhyme surprises and extends the fixed relations between words, that in itself protests against necessity. When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it **opts for** the condition of **overlife**, and **rebels at limit**.'

"Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin" [30 April 1990] in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber 1995; NY: Farrar, Straus & Giraud 1995), p. 158.

A Note on “Overlife” and “the Orphic Effort”

There is no such word as “overlife” in English - but we can understand what Heaney means by it all the same. He is clear playing with neighbouring words (‘after-life’, ‘overview’) in order to find a term which conveys the possibility of transcendence.

He means that poetry, because it is a way of ‘seeing things’, of ‘crediting’ our experience and intuitions, is always a rejection of nihilism and a refutation of the view expressed by that arch-pessimist Philip Larkin who wrote in his famous poem “Aubade” about ‘the sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always’.

[...] Being brave

Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.

(“Aubade”, in *Collected Poems of Philip Larkin*, London: Faber & Faber 2001; read this poem [online](#).)

According to Heaney, Larkin’s “Aubade” fails to ‘hold the lyre up in the face of the gods of the underworld; it does not make the Orphic effort to haul life back up the slope against all odds.’ (“Joy or Night”, in, 1995, p.158.)

(The younger Irish poet Paul Muldoon has written about what the Irish addiction to what he calls ‘old whine in new bottles’ – a pun on *wine/whine*.)

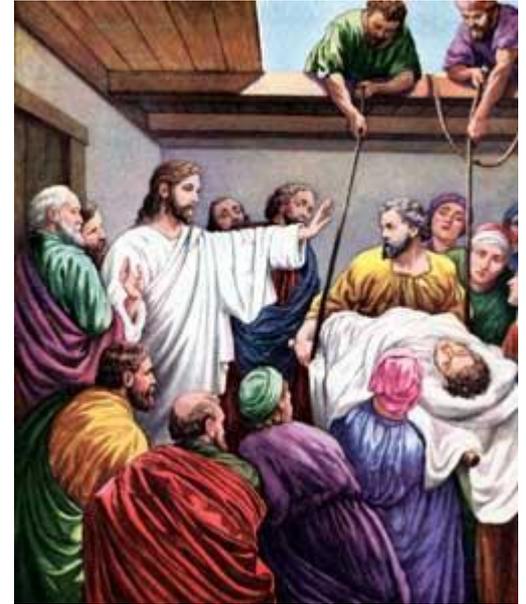
“Miracle”, from *Human Chain* (2010)

Not the one who takes up his bed and walks
But the ones who have known him all along
And carry him in –

Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop
 deeplocked
In their backs, the stretcher handles
Slippery with sweat. And no let-up

Until he’s strapped on tight, made tiltable
And raised to the tiled
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait

For the burn of the paid-out ropes to cool,
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity
To pass, those ones who had known him all along.



“Take up your bed and return to your own house.” (Mark, 2, 1-12.)

Heaney’s stroke occurred at the 80th birthday party of the famous Irish playwright Brian Friel. Heaney was among friends – those who had always known him – and it was they who carried him downstairs from a bedroom. In writing his testimony to them, he harked back to the scene of the scriptural man whom Jesus healed from paralysis – a scene which Heaney had already explored in “The Skylight”, as we have seen.

“The Conway Stewart”

“Medium,” 14-carat nib,
Three gold bands in the clip-on screw-top,
In the mottled barrel a spatulate, thin

Pump-action lever
The shopkeeper
Demonstrated,

The nib uncapped,
Treating it to its first deep snorkel
In a newly opened ink-bottle,

Guttery, snottery,
Letting it rest then at an angle
To ingest,

Giving us time
To look together and away
From our parting, due that evening,

To my longhand
“Dear”
To them, next day.



Heaney receives a fountain-pen as a gift from his parents as he leaves home to take up his scholarship place in a boarding school in Derry – where his life as a gifted student will begin after a period of deep homesickness. All the rest is history!

“Guttery” and “snottery” are neologisms turning the English words *gutter* (a drain) and *snot* (*nasal mucus*) to onomatopoeic purposes, and the whole chapters the immediacy and the unspoken pathos of the gift itself.

Poetry & Transcendence

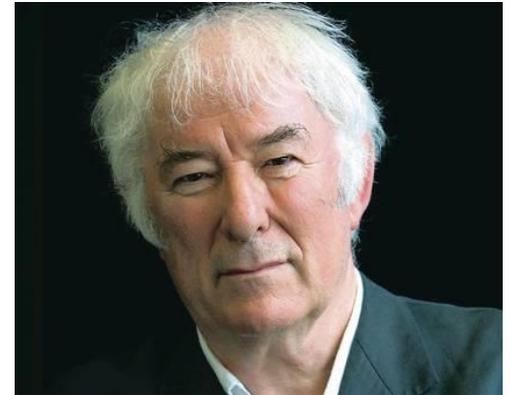
Heaney: 'Poetry is a ratification of the human impulse towards transcendence [...] to the extent that poetry is a pay-off for all the duplicities of language and disappointments of reality, it can also be said to be a form of redemption.'

(In Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, London: Faber 2008).



"Head of Seamus Heaney"
by Louis le Brocqy

'I have begun to think of life as a series of ripples widening out from an original center. In a way, no matter how wide the circumference gets, no matter how far you have rippled out from the first point, that original pulse of your being is still travelling in you and through you, so although you can talk about this period of your life and that period of it, your first self and your last self are by no means distinct.' (Interview, in *Paris Review*, Fall 1997 – available [online](#).)



Heaney at 70 (*Belfast Telegraph*)

Translating Heaney: Poetry Workshop



After the lecture-period in the final session, the students were asked to form three work-groups and to translate either Section I or II of Heaney's poem "Uncoupled" (see next page).

The poem recalls and commemorates the poet's parents as they appeared to him in incidental memories recaptured from childhood and now seen in long retrospect with a new appreciation of their unassuming worth.



Each group sought to find the right words and phrases for each line and stanza while paying attention to the overall sense of the poem.

Particular attention was given to the quiet sacralisation of the mother viewed as a saintly figure walking in 'procession' through the farm without ceasing to be in any way distinct from the woman that she was in the everyday context of a hard-working rural life. It is this additional imaginative strand which raises the poem above mere nostalgia for the lost scenes of childhood.



In such ways, Heaney manages to combine utter fidelity to the givens of experience with a sense of its metaphysical significance. And this



is the defining mark of Seamus Heaney's poetry.

“Uncoupled”

In *the Human Chain* (2010), Heaney added two concisely written poems which occupy the final position in the series of his frequent retrospections on the child’s view of his parents which provide the subject of many earlier poems. The task for the class is to take either of these (or both) and translate them into Portuguese verses which convey the sense and impact of his stanzas – noting that each poem is a single sentence framed as a question though devoid of a question mark. Go for it!

I
Who is this coming to the ash-pit
Walking tall, as if in a procession,
Bearing in front of her a slender pan

Withdrawn just now from underneath
The firebox, weighty, full to the brim
With whitish dust and flakes still sparkling hot

That the wind is blowing into her apron bib,
Into her mouth and eyes while she proceeds
Unwavering, keeping her burden horizontal still,

Hands in a tight, sore grip round the metal knob,
Proceeds until we have lost sight of her
Where the worn path turns behind the henhouse.

II
Who is this, not much higher than the cattle,
Working his way towards me through the pen,
His ashplant in one hand

Lifted and pointing, a stick of keel
In the other, calling to where I’m perched
On top of a shaky gate,

Waving and calling something I cannot hear
With all the lowing and roaring, lorries revving
At the far end of the yard, the dealers

Shouting among themselves, and now to him
So that his eyes leave mine and I know
The pain of loss before I know the term.

The Translations

“Uncoupled/Separadas”

I

Quem é esta a caminho da pilha cinzas.
Caminhando altiva, como se estivesse em uma procissão.
Portando diante de si uma gaveta esguia e usada.

Recém retirada de baixo
Da lareira, pesada, cheia até o topo
Com poeira esbranquiçada e flocos ainda faiscando.

Que o vento está soprando em seu avental,
em sua boca e olhos enquanto ela prossegue
Inabalável, mantendo firmemente seu fardo horizontal

Mãos em um firme aperto dolorido ao redor da maçaneta
Prossegue até que a perdamos de vista
Onde o caminho gasto dobra por trás do galinheiro.

“Uncoupled”/“Desacompanhado”

I

Quem é essa vindo ao poço de cinzas
Caminhando altiva, como em uma procissão
Carregando a sua frente uma pá

Recém tiradas de baixo
Da fornalha, pesada, cheia até a borda
Com poeira branca e brasas ainda faiscando

O vento está soprando dentro de seu avental
Dentro de sua boca e olhos enquanto ela continua
Inabalável, mantém seu fardo horizontalmente

[...]

“Uncoupled”/“Desatrelados”

I

Quem é esta, vindo ao cinzeiro do fogão
Caminhando erguida, como em uma procissão
Conduzindo em sua frente uma fina chapa
Recém tirada de debaixo do braseiro
Cheia até a borda, pesada
Com poeira esbranquiçada
E fragmentos cintilantes e ainda ardentes
Que o vento sopra em seu avental,
Em sua boca e olhos,
Enquanto ela prossegue, inabalável
Mantendo firme o seu fardo horizontal.
Com as mãos apertadas, dolorosamente
mantidas
Ao redor do cabo de metal,
Ela prossegue até que a percamos de vista
Onde o caminho, tão familiar
Dá a volta por trás do galinheiro, no quintal.

“Desatrelados” [cont.]

II

Quem é este, não muito maior que o gado
Trabalhando a seu modo, ele vem ao meu lado
Através da caneta.

Seu cajado em uma mão erguida, apontando
Uma vara de quilha na outra, chamando
Na direção em que estou empoleirado,
No topo de um portão oscilante.

Acenando e chamando
Algo que eu não posso ouvir,
Devido aos mugidos e rugidos
E aos caminhões acelerando
No outro extremo do terreno.
Os negociantes gritam entre si,
Gritam para ele.

E então os olhos seus
Deixam os meus
E eu conheço a dor da perda,
Antes mesmo de conhecer o termo.

Reading notes

The following notes provide an outline “plot” of each poem in “Uncoupled”, with some key words explained in each context. You can check the translations against these notes.

The theme of *loss* through death and *recovery* through poetry unifies this distych of elegiac poems. Each takes the form of a single extended question—“Who is ...”—though without a question mark since the question is really the rhetorical means of framing a point-by-point description as if poet and reader were looking at a photo or a family film.

- The mother is removing the ashes which have gathered overnight in the kitchen range (or stove) and dumping them in an “ashpit” in the farm-yard (behind the “hen-house”).
- She walks upright because it takes good balance to manage the “pan” of ashes in the open air and because its “knob” (or handle) is so hot (hence her hand is “sore”).
- Her progress is implicitly compared to a figure in a religious procession, and hence suggests a saint – as she is in a special sense.
- The “we” in the penultimate line is both the writer and the reader as if viewing a photograph but also her other children (hence a family poem) and—more widely still—the children of all the mothers “lost to view” with time.

In the second poem, the father is shown holding up a boiled sweet (“a piece of keel”) which he has bought for his son at a cattle-fair. Inaudible in the noisy crowd, he is momentarily distracted by other farmers around him. In that moment he is “lost” to his young son for the first time.

A commentary

Heaney's poem revisits his parents as they seemed to him at remembered moments of childhood—'spots in time' or 'epiphanies', to use the literary terms most often associated with this kind of recall. Heaney treats of each parent separately in their traditional work-place, thus making a kind of diptych in the manner of a religious shrine, even if the actual content of the poem (or poems) is entirely secular.

The 'uncoupling' of the parents referred to in the title honours their separate lives but also implies a 'coupling' elsewhere. In vernacular terms they are indeed a *couple* (i.e., *namadorados*) and, of course, the very couple that generated him, their eldest son, through marriage, conception and childbirth—all of which remain hidden to the child caught up in the givens of his own perceptual world.

The description of his parents ordinary bearing is marked by naturalistic details that confer the simplicity of figures in a classic Dutch painting on them. At the same time they are treated with an almost religious reverence and, for this reason, the most language which heralds their materialisation—first in fact and now in memory—is biblical in tone.

For some readers the rhetorical question "Who is ...(?)" strongly evokes the biblical verse "*Who is she that comes forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?*" (Song of Solomon 6:10). In traditional exegesis, this is regarded as a prophesy of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Hence the first poem is infused with a sense of religious reverence as can be seen from the repeated words "procession" and "proceed" used to describe the mother's stately bearing as she performs the most ordinary of daily tasks.

—I am indebted to Vitória Maria Avelino da Silva Paiva for the suggestion about the "Song of Solomon". (B.S.)

Irish Literary Studies (UFRN): The Class of 2014



[Good-bye for now!]