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'In Step With What Escaped Me':

The Poetry Of Seamus Heaney

By Peter Sirr

Two years ago I was driving along a country road near Strokestown in County Roscommon. It was dark and I was slightly nervous because I didn't know the road well and I was looking for the local secondary school in whose assembly hall Seamus Heaney would be giving a reading. Suddenly out of the darkness loomed a huge ash tree on whose branches I could make out a large cardboard sign with the words 'Seamus Heaney' in luminous paint and an arrow pointing to a lane on the right. The improvised sign, the reading that followed to a packed and enthralled audience, and the excitement afterwards, testified to a popularity and a rapport with readership and audience very unusual even in a country which grants occasional notice to poets and poetry. John Banville caught this aspect well in the foreword he wrote to the edition of Seamus Heaney that the *Guardian* issued in its *Great Poets of the 20th Century* series in 2008. 'Few poets find a way into the inner ear of the multitude,' he said. Banville's point was also that it's unusual for a poetry of this order to insinuate itself into the public affection, a poetry that offers complex witness to the physical and psychical disturbances of violence at the

same time as lyric celebration of the familiar, poems than can be, as the poet himself has put it, 'odd as odd and hard and contrary'.

The poems the *Guardian* chose to publish that St Patrick's Day reinforce that point: 'The Tollund Man', for instance, – an iconic, emblematic Heaney poem from *Wintering Out* which connects an Iron Age sacrificial victim with a lost, unhappy contemporary reality and does this with a language that is chiselled, deliberate and strange even as it implicates us in its intimacy. Or a poem like 'The Toome Road', which marks out the poet's territory as it registers the intrusion of armoured cars 'camouflaged with broken alder branches' – there are whole worlds in that poem, real, spiritual, mythological, a kind of material possession of habitat and human imprint and potential rupture – reminding us that this is how Heaney works, by operating across several layers, by inhabiting the different domains of the possible, by reconfiguring the familiar, as in the title poem of the recent *District and Circle* where a journey in the London Underground is as much a journey into the poet's own past, as much an exploration of the district as of the wider circle. The strap-hanging figure in the underground train, 'well-girded, yet on edge,/ Spot-rooted, buoyed, aloof,/Listening to the dwindling noises off' is the poet performing his delicate balancing act on the 'flicker-lit' threshold of past and present, life and death.

So it shouldn't surprise us that his recent work sees the poet testing the old sources again and subjecting them to the pressure of experience and craft. From the outset Seamus Heaney was a poet of extraordinary materiality: the visible world swarmed in to be reconstituted in dense stacks of language – those processions of thickly textured nouns and adjectives, that lust for exactitude, for a language that answered the demands of memory and clanged with the force of hammer on anvil. *District and Circle* is full of the physicality and richly textured responsiveness that announced itself forcefully in *Death of a Naturalist*, the poet's first volume, published in 1966 by Faber and Faber.

What is it about this poetry that appeals to so many and that has, from the outset, earned itself critical acceptance and admiration of a kind rarely seen, establishing a consensus perhaps best summarised by Christopher Ricks when he called Heaney 'the most trusted poet of our islands'? Part of the appeal, certainly, lies in the subject matter. Heaney's consistent imaginative attention to his rural County Derry upbringing affords many readers the sense, perhaps, that the life he expresses is part of a collective life of the spirit, the life of an Ireland that belongs to our sense of the past. The verbal gifts that he brings to bear on his subjects give the work a sensual presence and an appeal to what Eliot has called 'the auditory

imagination' that is hard to resist, in the way that Wordsworth, Hardy or Ted Hughes are hard to resist. There is the rich variety of the work: the poems of nature, the love poems, the poetry of memory, the translations, the essays. And yet, from the very beginning, a current of unease runs through the work, a sense that poetry, for all its aesthetic compensations, may not be enough, that the poet is poised, uncomfortably, between 'politics and transcendence', between realism and celebration or between 'the atrocious' and the counterlife of imaginative faith.

Heaney famously signed his early poems 'Incertus', the uncertain one, as if he didn't quite believe his own gift, but an uncertainty principle is built into the work from the start, a kind of duality between affirmation and doubt, imaginative freedom and constraint, that in itself becomes part of the drama of the poetry. The poetry conducts a constant dialogue with itself, weighing itself in the balance, subjecting itself to forensic analysis. The narrative of Heaney's poetic career runs parallel to the political disintegration of Northern Ireland and the ensuing violence, and the uncertainty principle is closely linked to the poet's struggle to come to terms both with the violence itself and the poet's response to it. Heaney has had to bear the weight of public expectation – an expectation as ill-defined as it was pervasive – that poetry should somehow answer to violence, division, rupture, that the

poet speaks out of the public domain, that his voice must somehow be representative.

Heaney was not alone in this, of course. His was an extraordinarily gifted generation of poets, and his Northern contemporaries included Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, while following close behind came Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, all of whom developed their own strategies for writing out of a divided society. Fruitful contradictions are at the heart of Seamus Heaney's work in other ways. To understand Heaney it is necessary to appreciate the complexity of his situation – on the one hand the background as a rural, Catholic nationalist, on the other a powerfully intense relationship with the English language and its poetry tradition. The complications and tensions come gradually into focus. The early work offers a first flourish of the gift, a laying down of the world of childhood in dense, heavy textures. The first thing you notice is the intense physicality and natural finesse of the language:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland...

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
(*'Death of a Naturalist'*)

That's what poems like 'Blackberry Picking', 'Death of a Naturalist', 'Churning Day', 'The Early Purges' do – they weave a strong gauze of sound as they recreate the sensations and rhythms of a farm childhood, as they look for a language that matches the bountiful and yet threatening natural world, that sets it down with a kind of absolute finality. The vision of nature is both realist and numinous – the sense of energies about to break through, or the sense of an alternative configuration of energy, a world near yet remote.

If they often have a monumental quality or the quality of still lifes where the objects seem to clamour themselves on the canvas, the scenes these early poems present are full of foreboding. The dominant images are of rotting, over-ripeness, slime, 'rat-grey fungus'. The early world that is recovered is presented in terms of high drama and subdued violence. The poems are also concerned with art and its making, the articulation of his own search for a distinctive voice. The very first poem is 'Digging', a self-conscious account of the vocation of art and a realisation of how that calling will separate him from the world that the poems evoke.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

The lines seem canonical now, but 'Digging' was a kind of initiation for Heaney; written in the summer of 1964 it was, he has said 'the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words...' and 'the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words: I felt that I had let down a shaft into real life'¹. It's a prophetic poem in that 'digging', in the sense of excavating, unpeeling layers of the past, is at the core of the work.

Looking back at *Death of a Naturalist*, what strikes is the confidence of the poems – the confidence of a writer possessing his material. The sense of a writer setting out his stall, testing and trusting his own voice, is most clearly articulated in the closing poem of the book, 'Personal Helicon', where the poet evokes the wells of his childhood and converts them into a metaphor for the act of poetry: 'I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing'. The book is remarkable for the extent to which early memory shapes and defines it. Throughout his work memory is a trigger and a release into a sense of doubleness, of the intersection of the ordinary and the mysterious which comes through strongly in a poem like 'The Diviner', whereas in 'The Forge' in *Door into the Dark*, an unnamed custodian of a profession that seems to border the real and the imaginary, goes about his business until

The rod jerked with precise convulsions,
Spring water suddenly broadcasting
Through a green hazel its secret stations.

Door into the Dark is still rooted in memory of the childhood world, and is full of the same intense physicality and observational precision. But if that world is seen for itself it also begins, in poems like 'The Forge', to ramify into symbol or allegory; the rich physical presence of ordinary objects acquire a spiritual density

All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.

There's a rhetorical reach in that opening line that echoes the declaration at the end of 'Personal Helicon'. Yet here it's a confession of ignorance, of being outside the mystery which is celebrated by the priest-like figure inside. The blacksmith at work in the darkness is a figure as imagined as real – the poet is on the outside, hesitant and speculative, hovering on the threshold.

Heaney has said that in his earliest poems he tended to turn away from the immediate tensions – sectarianism, underlying violence – of Northern Ireland in favour of the impulse to write a more personal kind of poem, with Ted Hughes as a strong influence: 'one part of my temperament took over: the private county Derry childhood part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part'². Yet one of the most striking poems in *Door into the Dark*, 'Requiem for the Croppies', is an explicit identification with his nationalist heritage. Written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, it returns instead to the 1798 Rebellion, and presents an image of continuity and resurrection through the voice of a dead 'croppy'

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley –
No kitchens on the run, no striking camp –
We moved quick and sudden in our own country.

The worsening political situation in the North meant that such explicit gestures became problematic and for nearly thirty years he didn't read it. If he has sometimes tended to read a reluctance to deal explicitly with the contemporary political situation as a suppression of part of his temperament, we need to remind ourselves that poetry doesn't easily

accommodate the kind of commentary sometimes expected of it, but we also need to pay due attention to the nature of his imagination. 'Requiem for the Croppies' is a powerful poem not simply because the poet is writing out his nationalist heritage but because he creates an unforgettable image of endurance out of the 'greatcoats full of barley'

Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

Heaney's world is now so familiar to his readers that it's important to understand the degree to which his poems map experiences that were not readily available in Irish literature³. He has talked of how, for instance, the poetry of Louis MacNeice still felt distant to him, made him feel that he was still 'up against the windowpane of literature'. The world of poetry and literature seemed remote from 'the world of state scholarships, the Gaelic Athletic Association, October devotions, the Clancy Brothers, buckets and egg-boxes where I had had my being'⁴. This is why Patrick Kavanagh was such a vital figure – he gave Heaney permission to trust his own experience, to make poems, as had Kavanagh, out of 'the unregarded data of the life I

had lived', and 'to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life'⁵. But much as Heaney's work has valued the specific data of his own background, he has always sought to go beyond the immediately available. *Death of a Naturalist* ended with an artistic statement that saw the poet firmly planted in his own territory, but the inspirational spring was also a prompt 'To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.' *Door into the Dark* again ends with the poet defining his imaginative ground, this time in opposition to another foundation myth, the landscape of American settlement: In 'We have no prairies/To slice a big sun at evening' there is the compelling territory of bogland, one of the heartlands of rural experience, soft, yielding, mysterious and preservative – always ready to offer up iconic emblems of the past

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up,
An astounding crate full of air.

By the time that his next book, *Wintering Out*, was published in 1972, Heaney's life had begun to change. He left Queen's University for a sabbatical year in Berkeley, California and, not long after he returned, he moved with his family to Wicklow and then Dublin. The books from this

period – *Wintering Out, North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979) are crucial. A deepening sense of the poet’s vocation is accompanied by the opening out of the poems’ perspectives with their forays into history and myth and also by a more charged sense of the poet’s role and responsibilities. This deepening and the troubled sense of the responsibilities of art in a time of violence were also characteristic of Heaney’s contemporaries:

Somewhere beyond the scorched gable end and the burnt-out
buses
there is a poet indulging
his wretched rage for order –
or not as the case may be; for his
is a dying art,
an eddy of semantic scruples
in an unstructurable sea.
(Derek Mahon, ‘Rage for Order’)

Initially *Wintering Out* seems to be a continuation of the conversation begun by the earlier books. The poems are prompted by archaeology, philology, the lore and lure of placenames on their borders of language: Anahorish, Broagh, Toome, Moyola. A new formal pressure is also evident: tense, four-

line quatrains, a sort of stubby enjambment, thickness of texture, a slowing down, syntactic complexity

He is wintering out
the back-end of a bad year,
swinging a hurricane-lamp
through some outhouse;

a jobber among shadows.
Old work-whore, slave-
blood, who stepped fair-hills
under each bidder’s eye....
(‘Servant Boy’)

The servant boy is a figure, maybe, for a colonial dispossession – landless, little regarded, a hiring ‘resentful/and impenitent’, and a sign that these poems are actively interested in a cultural recovery, in claiming a ‘hoard’. The poems that explore his home territory relish the music and original meaning of placenames as well as registering the substratum of the older language: the ‘anach fhíor uisce’ that lies beneath Anahorish or the ‘tawny guttural water’ of Moyola.

Landscape, language and history are intimately connected in these poems, and in them we can read the beginning of a certain kind of public poetry, as Heaney seeks ways to represent his own heritage imaginatively and to begin to cope with the fissures of a society now in deep conflict. The prefacing poem, which reappears as part of 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' in *North*, makes clear the context in which the work of the book proper is to be read; the poet sees the new internment camp from the road

and it was déjà-vu, some film made
of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up
on a wall downtown. Competence with pain,
coherent miseries, a bite and a sup,
we hug our little destiny again.
(For David Hammond and Michael Longley')

In fact the book is a long way from the kind of journalistic observation and closeness to event this implies. At its centre is 'The Tollund Man', the first of the Bog People poems initially prompted by Heaney's reading of P.V. Glob's study of the bodies of Iron Age sacrificial victims preserved in Danish

bogs. *The Bog People* had a profound impact on Heaney's imagination. The bog is the enabling image for this imaginative continuity with the past, and its continual leakage into the present. The first part of 'The Tollund Man' is a still life contemplation of the photograph and a sympathetic imagining of the man's death and fantastic preservation. The bog-goddess is seen in typically sexual, eroticised terms, demanding death but also providing a preservative afterlife:

Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body....

'kept body' is brilliant – kept in the sense of preserved, but also in the sense of a kept man. It is as the poem develops that it begins, uneasily, to encompass a contemporary reality. The 'winter seeds' in the Tollund Man's stomach sow an image of a recent murder, but the connection between the two is held in check by the tentative grammar of the gesture:

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

The poem isn't suggesting that the fate of the four murdered brothers is somehow the same as that of the sacrificial victim who died at Aarhus; nor, I think, does it satisfy itself with the suggestion that violence is stitched into the human fabric and that this blood obsession is what links us to this figure. But Heaney's imagination is to an extraordinary extent nourished by ritual – it finds itself through ladders of ritual, it is always

reaching for a kind of sacral framework. The Tollund Man is invoked through a kind of sexual-religious apprehension and his image, though an act of sympathetic imagining, calls up the flesh of the murdered men and causes the poet to realise them. The nuanced grammar continues in the concluding section as his imagination works a connection between the two worlds:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Should come to me – but not necessarily. This is a risky journey. The poet travels from uncertainty to assertion. Saying the names, he chants himself back in time until, suddenly, *here* is Jutland, the ‘man-killing parishes’. Again, the poem is not asking us to make an equivalence between the parishes of twentieth century Ireland and Iron Age Denmark; it is not an act of translation so much as a record of loss precisely because killing is human and therefore bleakly comprehensible. The risk of the poem is what lifts it from exercise. It’s a risk that all the Bog People poems take.

North pushes the discoveries of *Wintering Out* to the next stage. It is a more consciously northern book, more explicitly myth-making, and the template established by ‘The Tollund Man’ is re-used with conscious deliberation. ‘Punishment’ pushes the risk further, allowing a closer identification of poet and victim. The poet with his conscience, the ‘artful voyeur’, is as much the subject as the historical victim or her contemporary counterparts in his realisation that he would have cast ‘the stones of silence’

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.

This is a portrait of the artist as disengaged but comprehending, a combination of intimacy and distance replicated in poems like ‘Funeral Rites’, ‘The Grauballe Man’, ‘Kinship’. The distance comes from formal deliberation, the meshing of the historical and contemporary perspective, all creating an intimate kind of strangeness that was artistically necessary to Heaney.

There is another kind of detachment in these poems, connecting with their careful, ritualising gesture. The poems are highly conscious of the violent present but they are at pains to detach the poet from any kind of immediate response or partisanship or solution offering. When he faces The Troubles more directly, in poems like ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ or ‘Singing School’ the response is filtered through a self-conscious literary imagination mixed with ‘the famous /Northern reticence’. The actual events, and their reporting by the media seem to belong to another reality. The conflict is so internalised by those who live there, so buried in circumlocution and strategic banality that any articulation of it, in journalism and poetry,

strikes oddly. The poet sits self-consciously in the midst of this, testing his own reactions. The self-questioning reaches its climax in 'Exposure', where the poet, removed from the scene of the Northern conflict in rural Wicklow and waiting for a comet to appear that is part figure for some kind of liberating post-historical revelation, imagines a very different kind of fate, the poet as partisan, committed and engaged, 'a hero/On some muddy compound,/His gift like a slingstone/Whirled for the desperate.'

How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?

The poem might seem critical of the lack of a direct, absolute, pinnable-down position where the poet is 'neither internee nor informer' but an 'inner émigré, grown long-haired/And thoughtful; a wood-kerne/

Escaped from the massacre' but it doesn't posit a viable alternative. It is more an argument for a necessary artistic disengagement than an anxious apology, and the poem's ambiguous closing image suggests something else, a greater reality, a more powerful and demanding domain which may have been forsaken, 'The once-in-a-lifetime portent,/The comet's pulsing rose'.

Heaney returned to this poem in his Nobel acceptance speech, *Crediting Poetry*, remembering the background of 'listening to the rain in the trees and to the news of bombings closer to home - not only those by the Provisional IRA in Belfast but equally atrocious assaults in Dublin by loyalist paramilitaries from the north.' What he was longing for, he continues, 'was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism, a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology.'

Whatever the self-doubting hesitations of *North*, the poetry that became *Field Work* (1979) shows a renewed confidence and sure-footedness, and a buoyant belief in the power of poetry. Written mainly in rural Wicklow where the poet had moved with his family in 1972 to work full time as a poet and free-lance writer, the poems happily occupy a more intimate and reflective space than *North* or *Wintering Out*. They are poems of an artistic stocktaking that also engage with the new location. They allow marriage,

love, the domestic life to take centre stage, and the volume contains some of Heaney's finest love poems. The book can be read as a declaration of faith in art, and part of its strategy is putting a certain distance between the poet and the domain of public expectation.

Its opening poem, 'Oysters', offers a possible exit from the impasse suggested by 'Exposure'. It presents a scene of worldly sophistication, the self-aware poet enjoying seafood in a restaurant, 'Laying down a perfect memory/In the cool of thatch and crockery'. The language is rich and confident, as if to announce that this will be a book of conscious and confident achievement:

Our shells clacked on the plates.
My tongue was a filling estuary,
my palate hung with starlight:
As I taste the salty Pleiades
Orion dipped his foot in the water.

The poem's – and the book's – internal argument is between pleasure and responsibility, or between freedom and constraint. The anger that doesn't trust the 'Glut of privilege' pushes the poet into 'verb, pure verb' – a domain of active achievement, maybe, unencumbered by external

expectation. The pleasure enacted in language always exists in the shadow of a threat, but the poem can nonetheless be read as a statement of intent. And the poems do have a hard-edged flourish to them. They dispense with the mythic resonances of *North*; they are more firmly grounded in the real; and the elegies, for instance, don't seek to go beyond the lives of the mourned. 'After A Killing' offers a defiance, reaffirmation of life in the face of murder

And today a girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them.

'The Toome Road' shows a new directness, a 'pure verb' approach as it registers the intrusion of British armoured cars in the poet's territory – 'How long were they approaching down my roads /As if they owned them?' – but, for all that the poet might situate himself in his own tradition, there is a growing sense of the complication of the relationship between the poet and 'tribal' values, particularly in a poem like 'Casualty', an elegy for Louis O'Neill, a friend of the poet's killed by a bomb as he broke the curfew imposed by the Provisional IRA after Bloody Sunday. The poem celebrates the wayward individualism of the fisherman, 'Sure-footed but too sly,/His

deadpan sidling tact./His fisherman's quick eye/And turned observant back.' It also registers the communal funeral of the thirteen shot dead by the Paras. Yet the distinctiveness of the fisherman lay in his refusal to be subject to any bonds – 'he would not be held/At home by his own crowd' – and the poet clearly sympathises with his independent spirit. Even if the poem itself doesn't step outside the bond his unanswered question – 'How culpable was he/That last night when he broke/Our tribe's complicity?' – hangs uneasily throughout the book and suggests the limits of the common bond.

The detachment and the artistic self-placement are evident in the book's central section, 'Glanmore Sonnets' where the poet seeks a re-education in 'the hedge-school of Glanmore' where he hopes to catch 'A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter/That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:/Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,/Each verse returning like the plough turned round' or 'that moment when the bird sings very close/To the music of what happens'. Yet whatever the consolations of pastoral, and even if '*the end of peace is art*', the shadow of conflict is never far away. The psychic disturbances of the era of the bomb and the hunger strikes find an echo in Dante, in the grotesque image from the Inferno of Count Ugolino gnawing at Archbishop Ruggieri who had locked him up with his sons in a tower in Pisa and left them all to starve to death. Heaney's

choice of this scene reinforces our sense of it as in some sense echoing contemporary horror, and his insertion of specific Irish references – Ugolino gnaws at the archbishop who imprisoned him 'Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread' – has the effect of localising the horror. 'There's an almost sexual intimacy between Ugolino and Archbishop Roger, which seemed cognate with the violence and intimacy of Ulster,' he said in a conversation with Robert Hass. Dante becomes a haunting and enabling presence for Seamus Heaney at this point. The central sequence of *Station Island* (1984) is a kind of mini *Commedia* where the poet, like Dante, encounters the shades of the dead and must go through an ordeal of self-examination.

Heaney's career at this stage seems to vacillate between freedom and constraint. There's a sense of the poet setting aside some of the burdens of expectation in, for instance, *Sweeney Astray* (1982) his version of the medieval Irish poem 'Suibhne Gealt'. His choice of Sweeney comes partly from the fact that the maddened birdman who flees from the battlefield and takes to the trees offers a parallel for his own situation: 'insofar as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious political and domestic obligation.' The freedoms won in *Field Work* and in the gleeful

reinvention of Sweeney come under the interrogative glare of 'Station Island', which is structured as a visit to the penitential island of Lough Derg with its stations of the cross, black tea and wakefulness. The pilgrimage to the lake is a central locus of the Catholic experience in Ireland, a microcosm of the journey through experience to repentance and spiritual salvation. Lough Derg is also a much visited literary site, which is itself part of Heaney's subject – William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin wrote significant work inspired by it or, in Carleton's case reacting against it. Of all of them, Heaney's is the least concerned with the religious significance.

The place of pilgrimage is for Heaney a Dantesque purgatory, an opportunity to summon the ghosts of self-interrogation. Appropriately, two writers book-end the pilgrimage, William Carleton and James Joyce. The most compelling voices in the sequence are the ghosts of the victims of sectarian murder. In revisiting the moments of their deaths Heaney is confronting directly and uncomfortably the deaths themselves and his own responses to them. 'Station Island' creates a worrisome zone which continually seems to posit an impossible choice between action and art. The poet consistently refuses the pressure to be conscripted into service, and is also acutely aware of the artistic uselessness of the conflict: 'It is eternally distressing as a political problem, but as a stimulant to the imagination it is almost nil.'⁸ The

scrupulous resistance of partisanship or propaganda can, however, seem inadequate – the poet can seem to be 'speaking not with forked tongue, but with forked silence⁹.' But if 'Station Island' is conceived as a kind of final reckoning with the matter of the North, the ghostly voices offer little in the way of resolution. The most searing criticism comes from Colum McCartney, the poet's slain cousin who directly accuses the poet of having aesthetically prettified his death in the earlier elegy, 'The Strand at Lough Beg':

'You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
and saccharined my death with morning dew.'
(*'Station Island'*, VIII)

There's a certain relief at the poem's conclusion when the spirit of Joyce appears. His role on the poem is to offer a kind of artistic licence, a permission to fly free of the nets of social or political expectation, to 'strike your note'.

Heaney is at his strongest when he works with the kind of freedom his imagined Joyce counsels. We see something of this freedom in the third part of *Station Island*, in the poems voiced for Sweeney, who is himself a figure for the kind of imaginative escape Heaney seeks.

Take hold of the shaft of the pen.
Subscribe to the first step taken
from a justified line
into the margin.
(‘The First Gloss’)

The argument with himself is carried over into *The Haw Lantern* in poems preoccupied with judgement and testing. The book introduces a new vein of allegorical writing, poems like ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, ‘Parable Island’, ‘From the Republic of Conscience’, ‘From the Canton of Expectation’ and ‘The Mud Vision’. One of the most original and impressive poems in the volume, ‘The Mud Vision’ imagines a country much like Ireland which is afforded a once-off vision of release or possibility, something like the ‘comet’s pulsing rose’ in ‘Exposure’ which flourishes briefly and disappears, leaving in its wake a fierce sense of what might have been and may yet be

Our one chance to know the incomparable
And dive to a future. What might have been origin
We dissipated in news. The clarified place
Had retrieved neither us nor itself – except
You could say we survived. So say that, and watch us
Who had our chance to be mud-men, convinced and estranged,
Figure in our own eyes for the eyes of the world.

If these poems seem to be moving as far away as possible from the realm of the autobiographical, the emotional heart of that collection is ‘Clearances’, the sonnet sequence in memory of the poet’s mother, poems that are direct, poised and among the poet’s most moving. They return to one of the elemental purposes of poetry, to register a life, to try to enter the cleared space where a life has been, and they do it in a language as plain as possible:

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,

Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.
(‘Clearances 3’)

The central struggle in Heaney’s work has been ‘to make space in [his] reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous’¹⁰. We see this struggle again and again. *Seeing Things* (1991) offers a double vision, the things that are seen, witnessed, materially present, including the finiteness of life itself, and seeing things in the sense of the glimpsed, imagined, hoped for. It begins with Book VI of Virgil, the moment where the Sibyl of Cumae tells Aeneas that the journey back from the underworld will be impossible unless he brings Proserpina the golden bough, as if the gift of poetry, of ‘seeing things’ is the only way to secure a safe passage back. Much of the journey in this book is down into the past, with poems in memory of the poet’s father, and the ‘imagined perfection’ of things: the pitchfork, the settle bed, a leather schoolbag. But above all it is concerned with the clarity that releases the invisible from the visible, as when, in the title poem, he looks at a cathedral carving of John the Baptist

... Lines
Hard and thin and sinuous represent

The flowing river. Down between the lines
Little antic fish are all go. Nothing else.
And yet in that utter visibility
The stone’s alive with what’s invisible:
Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,
The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.
All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps
And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered
Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.

Seeing Things also contains ‘Squarings’, a set of forty-eight twelve-line poems in four sections, one of the freest, most adventurous and unpinnable down of his poems. The poems here are happy to remove themselves from the provable, the concrete, and dwell in the realm of the spirit, in ‘anglings, aimings, feints and squints’ or in one meaning of the word ‘lightening’: ‘A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares/With pure exhilaration before death...’ The poems work in a fast, instinctual procession of image and action, a series of ‘shifting brilliancies’, poem leading to poem by association. The looseness of the form and organisational principle allows Heaney’s instinctive gifts of ‘perfected vision’ to shine through. There is

in this later Heaney a conscious movement to ‘Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim’, an attempt to balance the earnest apprehension of the real and the visible with a kind of artistic floating or walking on air. Heaney’s poetry is never simply one or the other; there is a constant dialectic between them. The push to the airy clarity and brilliancies of ‘Squarings’ depends on the earth-bound mud visions, it’s the acknowledgement of the earthbound that prompts the desire for a transcendent exultation.

We see the two sides of the Heaney temperament clearly in *The Spirit Level*, the first collection after the poet received the Nobel Prize in 1995. ‘St Kevin and the Blackbird’, in which Kevin out of charity or empathetic excess allows the blackbird to roost in his hands and lets the eggs hatch, provides an image both of art – ‘since the whole thing’s imagined anyhow’ – and the self-forgetting artist who wants ‘To labour and not seek reward’,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river’s name.

On the other hand, the violence and unconsolated force of ‘The Mycenae Lookout’ suggest how readily the ideal is compromised by the brute force of reality. It tells the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and

Cassandra after the Trojan War, and the lookout might be taken as a figure for the poet, given short shrift by Cassandra ‘No such thing/as innocent/ bystanding’. The classical myth allows the poet to express some of the anger he felt in the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefire ‘at the waste of lives and friendships and possibilities in the years that had preceded it’. It’s as if the poem takes the opportunity of the cessation to shine the full glare of his torch on ‘That killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong’ which ‘still augured and endured.’

*

In some ways Heaney’s is a remarkably consistent work. The reach and ambition might grow from book to book but the poetry is faithful to the territory mapped out from the start, and each collection continues to circle obsessively round the source. Again and again, memory is the trigger that releases the poetry. Heaney is like a still life artist who needs to arrange the loved and familiar world so that it can shine back its power and strangeness. The later books all draw from the well of the past, and often revisit his own previous configurations of it, so that there is a constant dialogue with himself as poet. The poet twice revisits ‘The Tollund Man’ to measure the distance travelled since the first outing. In ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’,

in *District and Circle*, the strangely contemporary figure hovering over 'check-out lines, at cash-points, in those queues/Of wired, far-faced smilers.' is also a guardian-like figure come to release Heaney from his Parnassian obligations. He has described him as a kind of releasing revenant: 'He came again to remind me that lyric poetry was OK. The Tollund Man releases me into pleasure'¹¹. This is a theme of the later work, a sense of release out of obligation into an airier style, and a style, as he put it, less of stained glass than of plain window glass. *The Spirit Level* opens with 'The Rain Stick' and the instrument becomes the perfect image of joyful imagination: 'Who cares if all the music that transpires//Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?/You are like a rich man entering heaven/Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.'

The poems in these later books are also sharpened by their awareness of mortality. Part of Heaney's backward glance is a consolidation of faith in the face of obliteration, as in the memorable image in 'Clearances' of the felled chestnut tree which had been planted at his birth, 'its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,/A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for.' A persistent vein of elegy makes itself felt. *Electric Light* and *District and Circle*, in particular, are haunted by death; there are elegies for Czeslaw Milosz, Ted Hughes, George Seferis, and the superb 'The Lift' for his sister.'

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One of the difficulties of writing about Seamus Heaney is that inevitably you end up talking a lot about the themes and concerns of the work. This is fine on some levels; there is, after all, a distinct Heaney set of concerns, a distinct trajectory and narrative where each collection can be slotted, and because the work itself is highly reflexive the different stances and arguments are actually embedded in the poetry so that you could very easily only discuss the content and subjects. This can make it easy to miss what is truly valuable and unmissable. We don't go to poets for the whole story of their work; we rarely even go to poets for the specifics of what they say. We go because we are led by our ears, our instincts, because of the way a particular configuration of language operates on mind, heart, body and won't let us go. We go because a particular arrangement of lines seems so absolutely true and unimaginable in any other way that we want to look and listen repeatedly.

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket....

(From 'Mossbawn, 1. 'Sunlight')

I go back to this poem for the power of its images and their emotional weight, but also to admire the way the tight poise of the lines and how they break, for the verb 'honeyed' and the 'slung bucket'; and for the unforgettable concluding image of love

like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

Or I go back to a poem like 'Höfn' for its turbo-charged Anglo-Saxon pith:

The three-tongued glacier has begun to melt.
What will we do, they ask, when boulder-milt
Comes wallowing across the delta flats

And the miles-deep shag-ice makes its move?
I saw it, ridged and rock-set, from above,
Undead grey-gristed earth-pelt, aeon-scruff.....

Or again, I go back to 'Squarings' for the darting intelligence which, you feel, can snag anything and its sense of life zigzagging like a hare in and out of the known. '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 shivered on the Bann
Out in mid-channel between the painted poles,
That day I'll be in step with what escaped me.

Everyone will go back to their own poems for their own reasons; there is an astonishing richness of work to choose from. Again and again the poetry of Seamus Heaney discovers the release into pleasure that is one of the truest sources of all poetry, and if we attend to it we might learn, like the poet, to be in step with what escapes us.