“THE SOUL EXCEEDS ITS CIRCUMSTANCES”

The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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The death of Seamus Heaney in August of 2013 was the passing of one of the most revered literary figures in the world. Encomia to his life and art, his humility and generosity, his sense of the ethical and the aesthetic, have resounded throughout the global media. He has been that rare phenomenon, an artist who is popular among audiences as well as being studied to the very highest level within the academy. Indeed, he has been seen as a national poet, though the term has not been used as often as one might think, and there are reasons for this. Moynagh Sullivan notes that the “very notion of a national poet in Ireland initiates a crisis because it involves a denial of the boundary that separates the island” and that such terms need to be used with nuance and care as they involve “questions of nation and representivity” (2005, 451). Such have been the conditions within which Heaney was writing that people in Northern Ireland have felt “compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish” (P, 56), so issues of national, political, and cultural representivity have long been problematic in an Irish literary context.
Given the complex nature of identity in Northern Ireland, and given that this is no mere academic issue—some 3,600 people were killed over the thirty years before the peace process—it is all the more remarkable that Seamus Heaney was able to become so eminent a poetic voice in the anglophone world, and indeed in the world as a whole. Over fifty books and collections of essays have been written on his work, and a bibliography compiled by Rand Brandes and James Durkan (2008) includes some two thousand entries. To offer another collection of essays on his work would seem to be a task that is in need of justification, but in terms of the material covered in this book such justification is relatively easy. The vast majority of the published books deal with what might be termed Heaney’s early and middle poetry. Though his canon comprises thirteen complete collections, the last five have received comparatively little attention, and this is especially true of the final three books. This means that, while Heaney’s reputation remains secure, the style, progression, and development of his later work have not been widely analyzed, nor have the developments in tone, style, imagery, symbol, and allusion that can be seen to come to fruition in these books. In a sense, the standard view of Heaney is of someone almost frozen in time, as a type of static poetic presence who reached a certain poetic standard and then remained there. However, even at the level of practicality, this is an oversimplification.

The man who wrote Death of a Naturalist in 1966 was a lecturer in English at St. Joseph’s College of Education, in Belfast, and was someone who had left Ireland only to go on a trip to Lourdes and to work in a summer job in the passport office in London (SS, xxii). The man who wrote Human Chain, some forty-four years later, was a Nobel Prize winner and a former professor in Oxford and Harvard who was feted throughout the world and who had been a professional poet and academic for many years. Ongoing exposure to the work of other poets, and also to writings about the work of poets, would have been a strong influence on his development, and Heaney has long been one of the best critics and aesthetic thinkers writing in the anglophone public sphere. It is often forgotten that he has four weighty collections of essays on poetry and the aesthetic to his name: Preoccupations (1980); The Government of
the Tongue (1988); The Redress of Poetry (1995); and Finders Keepers (2002). This huge disparity in life and literary experience necessitates a detailed reading of his later poetry in order to come to some understanding of just how his work progressed and in what directions it developed.

It is the contention of this book that the later poetry of Heaney comprises some of the greatest collections of lyric poetry in the English language. It deals with structures of feeling and nuanced expressions of emotion, mood, attitude, and perspective, and it sheds clear light on what it means to be a human being in the Ireland, and the world, of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is also the work of a man who has grown older, who has seen more of the world, and who has thought about the feelings and experiences of his own life, his own country, and the role of poetry in such a life. As he has evocatively put it:

Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. The Divine Comedy is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfactory comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way. (RP, 7–8)

This is just one example of a very sophisticated theory of poetry and its role in the aesthetic, ethical, and political spheres in which people have their being. A “working model of inclusive consciousness” is a resonant phrase as a descriptor of the mode of being of poetry, and the idea that poetry “should not simplify” is embodied in much of Heaney’s later writing. This is a body of work that is in need of serious and sustained critical investigation, and this book will be the first step in this necessary academic task.
The ascription of the adjectives *early* or *late* to any writer's work is necessarily arbitrary, as the points of transition between one period and another are, by nature, permeable and subjective. In this book, the later Heaney is seen as comprising the following books: *Seeing Things* (1991); *The Spirit Level* (1996); *Electric Light* (2001); *District and Circle* (2006); and *Human Chain* (2010). Of course, the case could be made for taking the last three or four books instead, but as Geoffrey Bennington has put it, “Saying that there is no secure starting point does not mean that one starts at random. You always start somewhere but that somewhere is never just anywhere” (Bennington and Derrida 1993, 22). The starting point of this collection is that these later books can be grouped in terms of style, theme, approach, and intertextuality. They develop themes that were apparent in Heaney’s earlier work, but they also break with these themes in terms of addressing issues that are radically different from those of the earlier collections. It is possible to see the middle period as a type of hinge, or what Jacques Derrida might term a *brisure*, meaning a “joint” or “break” but also a “hinged articulation of two parts of wood-or metal-work. The hinge, the *brisure* [folding-joint] of a shutter” (Derrida 1976, 65), in that it is open to both the early themes of ground, soil, memory, and rootedness and the later themes of space, air, and literature. This middle section could be seen as a break from the earlier themes or as a point of articulation from these to the later ones, “as a *brisure* can indicate a crack or a break as well as a hinge or a joint” (Robert 2010, 29), but in either case there is agreement that thematic focus changes in the later books, and it is this change, and these books, that are the focus of our investigations in this study.

The chapters in this book are all written by acknowledged experts on Heaney’s work, from both sides of the Atlantic, and they combine the work of bright new scholars in the field with that of some of the pioneering figures in the area of Heaney studies. While Heaney’s earlier books are not examined here, they are a necessary context for understanding his later development. The later poetry of Heaney does not appear, fully formed, ex nihilo; it is preceded by his earlier work.

In this introduction, I briefly trace the trajectory of Heaney’s poetry from the early to the later books in order to bring out continuities and
discontinuities. Perhaps the most overt break in style, to use Helen Vendler’s (1995) term, is the shift from an artesian to an aerial imaginative structure. The earlier Heaney was someone who looked to the ground, both literal and metaphorical, to understand himself, his society, and his unconscious. In “Digging,” a poem that has been seen to have something of “the authority of an *ars poetica*” (D. Lloyd 1993, 21), Heaney spells out his artesian imagination and the direction in which his early poetry will be directed:

> But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.  
>  
> Between my finger and my thumb  
> The squat pen rests.  
> I’ll dig with it.  
>

* (DN, 14)

Critical commentary on the poem has recognized its importance in Heaney’s imaginative teleology. Andrew Waterman sees the poem as a personal artistic manifesto that claims continuities and analogues between Heaney’s own writing and the “manual skills and livelihoods of his forebears” (1992, 12). Neil Corcoran, having noted the centrality of the pen/spade metaphor, speaks of a “willed continuity between spade and pen” (1998, 51), while Elmer Kennedy-Andrews observes the poet celebrating the diggers’ “intimacy with the land” and sees Heaney as attempting to replicate this artesian experience in his writing as he “delves into his experience to produce poems” (1988, 38–39). Michael Parker suggestively argues that the “gun, like the pen, triggers feelings of unease. Its presence indicates that the young man’s duel with his father is not yet resolved, nor the struggle against competing cultural expectations” (2012, 330), suggesting a deeper familial tension at work in the poem.

This artesian aspect of Heaney’s writing was to become a thematic constant in his earlier books, with his physical digging becoming transformed into a metaphorical probing of the unconscious of the self. In the final poem of his first book, “Personal Helicon,” this connection between digging and writing is again foregrounded:
Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

(DN, 57)

Robert Butterell (1975, 48) cites the poem’s dedicatee Michael Longley in seeing the poem as “both credo and manifesto,” while Blake Morrison (1982, 19) sees the “narcissistic self-consciousness” that is clear from the closing stanza of the poem as an indication that “the business of writing is indeed a major theme of his work.” Elmer Kennedy-Andrews sees the core of the poem as enacting a version of Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, since here language disrupts the symmetry between the subject and the image, and since language in the poem, rather than describing a prior meaning, “is primary, and meaning, far from preceding language, is an effect produced by language” (1988, 25). In both of these poems, language is a seminal and forceful subtheme, and this will endure throughout Heaney’s poetry.

One could see the early Heaney as very much probing his “door into the dark,” and in North (1975) the darkness moved from the personal to the political as the Jungian ground of the bogs of Ireland morphed into a tribal unconscious which attempted to give voice to the atavisms that spawned a thirty-year conflict between notions of Irishness and Britishness, notions of republicanism and unionism, and notions of nationalism and loyalism. In this collection, Heaney, clearly aware of the complexities of the title, attempts to reconceptualize Northern Ireland in a far less binary manner. He locates the opening of the book in an imagined “North” that includes the world of the Vikings and Norse mythology. This gave rise to some criticism, with Edna Longley wondering about the connection between the “not very Nordic North of Ireland” and poems about “fertility rites and capital punishment in prehistoric Denmark” (1986, 159). A number of critics saw this book as mired in the past, with Heaney being termed a “laureate of violence” (Carson 1975, 183).

However, what Heaney was offering here was a reconceptualization of the Northern Irish situation. Rather than accepting fixed frames of identity from the Irish/British adversarial opposition, he suggestively
proposes a reinterpretation of that past in terms of another construction
that is also based on history. Viking invasions took place in Ireland over
a period of some four hundred years. These “neighbourly, scoretaking /
kills” (N, 23) came to raid and stayed to trade. Many Irish cities, Dub-
lin and Limerick, for example, were founded by the Vikings, and there is
much archaeological evidence of their presence in early Ireland. Their
pattern of intermarriage and interaction with the native Irish has many
similarities with that of the later Norman, and still later English, settlers.
In terms of their influence on a native culture, it seems, the Vikings have
as much right to be seen as seminal and originary as have the Catholic
nationalist and Protestant loyalist traditions. Clearly, for Heaney, “The
connection between language and reality is plural and in no way con-
fined to the nationalist republican paradigm” (E. O’Brien 2003, 135).

I would argue that the Viking theme provides Heaney with a lever
that will facilitate the process of “unrooting” his psyche from the “mem-
ory incubating the spilled blood” (N, 20) and of imposing some form of
plurality on the place, instead of allowing the place to be the ground of
his ideas. Magdalena Kay correctly points to a dichotomy in North when
she adverts to a choice Heaney must make between a desire for immer-
sion in identity and a more detached attitude to the signifiers of identity.
The speaker of the poems must choose between surrender and control,
“and these choices correspond to a metapoetic dichotomy between con-
ceptions of the poet as receptacle for inspiration (vates) and poet as cre-
ator (makar)” (2010, 88). For Kay, there is a subtler dialectic at work in
this book than was generally seen at the time.

The atavism voiced in North was something of a surprise in the Irish
public sphere of the time. Whatever feelings might have been expressed
in private, one of the linguistic consequences of the violence was, ironi-
cally, an overt self-censorship in middle-class Northern Irish discourse.
Rationally, in a public sphere that had grown increasingly politically
correct, the voices of atavism were seldom heard, and Heaney, as a poet,
parodied this in North: “One side’s as bad as the other, never worse”
(N, 57). However, in Part One of the book, Heaney speaks with the
voice of the unconscious and with a strong resonance of atavism and of
racial and sectarian embedded feeling. As Henry Hart maintains, what
makes Heaney’s “bog poems so ethically dubious are his personae who
identify with the romantic dead with nothing less than erotic passion” (1989, 404), and some of the language and imagery of these poems is stark in the extreme. Reading P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People* (1977) provided Heaney with sustaining metaphors for symbolizing the long-buried, but still potent, sectarian and religious hatred that erupted on the streets of Belfast and Derry in 1969.

These symbolic bog people allowed him to follow the Yeatsian example of writing in a public crisis by “making your own imagery and your own terrain take the colour of it, take the impressions of it” (Heaney 1979b, 13). This is precisely what Heaney does in his bog poems—he tells a truth about the Troubles in a way that is inclusive of the complicated different reactions of consciousness. This volume definitely does not simplify. Glob argued that a number of the Iron Age figures found buried in the bogs were “ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess” (P, 57). For Heaney, the notion of these people as bridegrooms to the goddess, as sacrifices that would ensure fertility in the spring, was symbolic of an “archetypal pattern,” and he tells of how the photographs in the book fused with photographs of contemporary atrocities in his mind.

Thus in “Punishment” he parallels the fate of the Windeby Girl, who was punished for adultery in Iron Age Germany by being bound, tied to a “weighing stone,” and drowned, with that of young Catholic girls who dated British soldiers and who were tied to railings and covered in tar. As Hart has noted, the poet expresses an almost erotic attachment to the Windeby Girl as he tells of how the “wind / on her naked front” blows “her nipples / to amber beads” (N, 37), and in the closing stanza he explains the reasons for his inaction, admitting that he is someone “who would connive / in civilized outrage yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge” (N, 38). In this poem, which serves as a synecdoche of the modus operandi of *North* as a collection, there is a split perspective: that of the rational, twentieth-century educated sensibility and that of an atavistic and emotional Jungian group identity. It is not a case of either/or but of both/and. Heaney contains within himself both perspectives, and the poems in this book, and indeed the collection as a whole, give clear voice to the different attachments that run through his consciousness.

Now that this book can be read at a temporal and political remove, as the violence in Northern Ireland has been largely, if not totally, ended
thanks to the peace process, this complex and nuanced perspective can be seen as offering as rounded an image as possible for the conflicted and contrary sense of political engagement and civilized distance that Heaney must have felt at this time. Richard Rankin Russell makes the telling point that critics have not accorded North the recognition that it deserves in “Heaney’s developing concepts of artistic fidelity and cultural reconciliation, instead focusing mostly on its at times divisive politics” (2010, 214). There is a fusion and an oscillation between conscious attitudes and unconscious pulsions, and interestingly, when speaking of the genesis of his poem “Undine” in Door into the Dark (DD, 26), Heaney explains the poetic thinking behind such a process. He stresses that it was the “dark pool of the sound of the word” itself that first spoke to his “auditory imagination” (P, 52), and he goes on to suggest how the sound of the word unites “primitive and civilised associations” and is almost a poem in itself: “Unda, a wave, undine, a water-woman—a litany of undines would have ebb and flow, water and woman, wave and tide, fulfilment and exhaustion in its very rhythms” (P, 53). What is interesting here is that for Heaney a poem is a structure of unification of the primitive and the civilized, of the unconscious and the conscious, and this notion of a mediation or transformational fusion of disparate discourses is at the core of his view of poetry as a discourse that “should not simplify.”

Citing Wallace Stevens, Heaney states that the nobility of poetry “is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (RP, 1), and this pressing can change the shape of that reality. Therefore, to read North politically is to do a generic disservice to poetry, a point tellingly made by Helen Vendler, who notes that “since no lyric can be equal to the whole complexity of private and public life at any given moment, lyrics are not to be read as position papers” (1998, 7). Heaney, through his poetry, was offering an imaginative response, as opposed to a political solution, to the stark reality of Northern Ireland during the dark years of violence.

Michael Molino would agree with Vendler’s position, as he states that between 1968 and 1972 Heaney developed a “polyphonic voice that displaced the political and cultural antagonisms endemic to his country and relocated them in a realm of reflexive, historical linguistics.” Molino goes on to note that Heaney’s writing at this time “circumvented the
political/poetic dilemma with a poetry whose vernacular problematic addressed old antagonisms in an innovative way” (1993, 181). This innovation was to become a central factor in Heaney’s aesthetic, and it would be further progressed in his next collection, Field Work (1979).

Writing about the deaths of real, contemporary people in Field Work allowed Heaney to discuss how death can affect the individual who has been exposed to it. Without the communal security blanket of tribal bonding, such violent deaths have a chilling effect on the individual. “The Strand at Lough Beg” refers to Colum McCartney, “a second cousin” of Heaney’s who was “shot arbitrarily” as he was “coming home from a football match in Dublin” (Heaney 1979b, 21). At the end of the poem, Heaney imagines himself washing the dead body with “handfuls of dew” and dabbing it “clean with moss” before plaiting “Green scapulars to wear over your shroud” with rushes that grow near Lough Beg (FW, 18).

Another elegy, “Casualty,” describes a fisherman, Louis O’Neill, who used to come to Heaney’s father-in-law’s public house in County Tyrone:

He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry.

(FW, 22)

As Daniel Tobin argues, the poem “recognizes that the individual’s freedom and compassion originate in an inner demand more powerful than the tribal call” (1998, 155), and this is a pivotal point in the development of Heaney’s aesthetic. Here is a rhetorical and ethical swerve from the funerals of the thirteen who were killed by the British army on Bloody Sunday, January 13, 1972, in the Bogside area, in Derry, and from the almost tribal reaction of nationalist Ireland:

Unrolled its swaddling band,
Lapping, tightening