Seamus Heaney

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In one sense Seamus Heaney needs no commentators: he is the most accessible of poets, giving pleasure by his rich sensuousness, his candour, the subtle rhythms of his celebratory voice. But if we settle for that we have left out a complexity which can give us other kinds of pleasure: the perception of his treatment of politics, of human beings in history; the appreciation of his awareness of the problems of being Irish, provincial, of coming close after Yeats, of trying to continue the Romantic enterprise of illuminating the ordinary in an ironic and unbelieving age. We might miss, too, the cost involved (perceived and paid) in celebrating at all when the society, the times, the attitudes of those for whom one writes are largely pragmatic, indifferent, materialistic and reductive.

Heaney himself has written and spoken well of his own sense of these complexities. In the Foreword to *Preoccupations*, his collection of prose pieces, he writes:

> I hope it is clear that the essays selected here are held together by searches for answers to central preoccupying questions: how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?[1]

Here he reveals the self-consciousness of the university-educated writer with his sense of the weight of literary tradition, and of the difficulty of writing honestly in language heavily compromised by political and commercial rhetoric and fantasy. He also reveals his belief in the connection between writing well and living well, rejecting, or at least questioning, Yeats's assertion that the poet can seek perfection of the life or of the work, but not both.

So I would begin by saying that while Heaney's poems are accessible they are also deceptively simple, with some of that slyness proverbially associated with the Irish ("Whatever you say say nothing"). Heaney's particular brand of Irishness must be remembered. He was born in Mossbawn, County Derry, Northern Ireland, in April 1939, to a Catholic farming family.[2] The eldest of nine children (the accidental death of one of his young brothers is referred to in the poem "Mid-Term Break"), he was sent away to

1 *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (Faber, 1980), p. 13.
2 I am indebted for information, and much else, to Blake Morrison's excellent *Seamus Heaney* (1982) in Methuen's *Contemporary Writers* series.

a Catholic boarding school in Londonderry and then went to the Queen's University, Belfast, where he took a degree in English language and literature. He taught school and University and spent a year as lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley. He later went on to live in the Republic of Ireland. He has thus moved away from the farming tradition of his ancestors, who had themselves long been in a special position as Catholics in a largely Protestant province. These are two important aspects of Heaney's detachment and his questioning relation to the world and to language. He didn't begin publishing poems until after leaving university and they first appeared in London periodicals like the *New Statesman* (1964) rather than in journals in Dublin, the natural mecca of Catholic intellectuals. As Blake Morrison points out, Heaney's literary education was very mixed: "Celtic legends, sectarian ballads and Catholic prayers . . . *Alice in Wonderland*, Biggles and *Treasure Island* . . . Yeats and Joyce but also Wordsworth and Hopkins . . . a specifically Ulster literature that includes *The Tain*, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice and John Montague as well as contemporaries like Michael Longley and Derek Mahon."[3]

Heaney has strong affinities with Wordsworth whose "earthiness" he takes rather more literally than the earlier poet himself did:

> And I imagine that the swing of the poet's body contributed as well to the sway of the voice, for Hazlitt tells us that 'there was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell.' The poet as ploughman, if you like, and the suggestive etymology of the word 'verse' is pertinent in this context. 'Verse' comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another. Wordsworth on the gravel path, to-ing and fro-ing like a ploughman up and down a field, his voice rising and falling between the measure of his pentameters, unites the old walking meaning of *versus* with the newer, talking sense of verse.[4]

This is the kind of connection Heaney himself tries to make in the poem "Digging": between the father's digging rhythms and his own poetic ones. For he opposes this "natural", physically work-related rhythm, to that of his other great precursor, Yeats, for whom "composition was no recollection in tranquillity, not a delivery of the dark embryo, but a mastery, a handling, a struggle towards maximum articulation."[5] Heaney rejects this notion of the writer's

3 *Seamus Heaney*, p. 14.
4 "The Makings of a Music", *Preoccupations*, p. 65.
5 *Preoccupations*, p. 75.

struggle for control over language for one which is both strongly in the Romantic tradition and also in harmony with ideas of modern structuralists like Saussure: the idea that language speaks through the writer not the other way about. Hence Heaney's emphasis on voice, not language. Heaney's location of himself as a writer: Catholic surrounded by sectarian strife; intellectual and farmer's son; Irish in the English language; celebratory poet in a society looking for quick and perhaps violent solutions; admirer of women and feminine grace in a Puritanical and sexually repressive country; is thoughtful and conscious. Easy and delightful as his rhythms sound, he is no warbler of native woodnotes wild.

It took Heaney quite a time to find and perfect his own voice. The poems in his first volume, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), both stake out his ground and echo other voices. He was very impressed by Ted Hughes's early volume *Lupercal* (1960): "Suddenly, the matter of contemporary poetry was the material of my own life. I had had some notion that modern poetry was far beyond the likes of me—there was Eliot and so on—so I got this thrill out of trusting my own background, and, I started a year later, I think."[6] And Hughes's voice and some of his attitudes are reflected in early poems like "The Forge".

The image and the language of digging and the image of divining (both water-divining and prophesying) are central to Heaney's search. Digging suggests the effort, the deftness and the intimacy of the farmer (as of the poet):

> Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
> Over his shoulder, going down and down
> For the good turf.
>
> (from "Digging")

The poet descends into himself and into his history, as the farmer descends into the bog, to find the buried treasure of his ancestral past, history miraculously preserved or, at the least, material to burn. And this source is, again miraculously, endless:

> Our pioneers keep striking
> Inwards and downwards,
> Every layer they strip
> Seems camped on before.
> The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
> The wet centre is bottomless.
>
> (from "Bogland")

6 Quoted in Morrison, p. 18.

In the volume *North* (1975), the first in which Heaney completely found his own voice, he organized the whole book in three sections. The first had two poems in dedication to and meditation on his birthplace Mossbawn, which may be a Scots–English word meaning "the planter's house on the bog" (from the Elizabethan English "plantation" or settlement of the Scots in Ireland) or since "we pronounced it Moss bann, and *ban* is the Gaelic word for white . . . might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster."[7] The second section (called Part I) was in "artesian" quatrains, narrow drill-like poems suggesting the sampling of the earth and of experience; and the third section was full of iambic pentameters, witty, conversational and rational, suggesting the harvesting and "placing" of these finds:

> Then Belfast, and then Berkeley.
> Here's two on's are sophisticated,
> Dabbling in verses till they have become
> A life . . .
> (from "The Ministry of Fear")

The whole volume had the metaphorical shape of identifying and naming the native place (ambivalently, in several languages, the name itself a history), drilling and digging for the past (governed by the luck and instinct necessary to find anything), and then the laying out and annotating of the finds. This is Heaney's metaphor for the poet's task.

Some of the earlier poems in which he considers this task are too explicit, too abrupt, to be quite successful. Of "Digging" he says, "It is a big navvy of a poem . . . There are a couple of lines in it that have more of the theatricality of the gunslinger than the self-absorption of the digger."[8] But he is right still to see the poem with affection because of the feeling it does give of connectedness, of "the revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself": these two, the personal and the cultural, he sees as indissolubly linked. Poetry for him is not self-expression but self-revelation by means of which the language expresses and makes itself in a particular culture and time. Heaney also links this poem, "Digging", with sexual initiation, tracing it back to something chanted on the way to school,

7 "Belfast", *Preoccupations*, p. 35.
8 "Feelings into Words", *Preoccupations*, pp. 43, 41, 42.

'Are your praties dry
And are you fit for digging?'
'Put in your spade and try,'
Says Dirty-Faced McGuigan.

and then forward to his sense of being initiated into "this poetry thing too."

Heaney tends to see poetry less in terms of male assertive sexuality, as Yeats did, and more in terms of female, receptive attitude. Though, obviously, the digging metaphor, linked as it is with his male ancestors (and in "Digging" with the gun), complicates this figure. Perhaps this is why he added the more passive figure of the diviner.

The shifts of time and the shifts of diction in "Digging" are typical of Heaney's complex perception. Looking out the window he sees his visions of the past, his father "where he was digging", "twenty years away"; his grandfather, "once"; himself a boy who carried him milk: these images, "Through living roots awaken in my head". It is typical that wet noises and mouldy smells are the triggers of these images. And just as the verse about Dirty-Faced McGuigan lurks behind the poem, so does the language of the family, "By God, the old man could handle a spade/ Just like his old man."[9] The language of poetry must embrace the language of everyday within its more openly rhythmical and formal structure. It must also speak for those who stay silent: for his mother and father mourning his brother in "Mid-Term Break":

I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

The sense of the processes of life and death is strong in Heaney. In "Follower", the detailed description of the father's skill in ploughing which the son envies and can never master, concludes with the image of the old man, his skill lost, who haunts the young one with his stumbling demand for love: an unmeetable demand because the weakness of the old is not equivalent to the weakness of the young.

9 "Learning's easy carried" and "The pen's lighter than the spade" were dark sayings his neighbours uttered as he went to and from school. (*Preoccupations*, p. 42.)

Heaney's poem links with the folk saying that when a father helps his son both laugh, when a son helps his father both weep. I do not find Heaney's treatment of this area sentimental. In this poem I think his attention to the details of the work, to how it is done and with what instruments, concentrates emotion away from the man and the boy: the man is absorbed in the ploughing as the poet is now absorbed in the writing: the poet can never carry his father on his shoulders (as Virgil's Aeneas carried his), and he has failed in his desire to become such a man. "All I ever did was follow". Stubbornness and a mixture of love, superiority, guilt and irritation are in the end of the poem. (It might be worth noting that "follower" initially suggests a maidservant's lover: as in the Victorian injunction, "No followers".) It was the boy who was "yapping" like a puppy: now the father's demand is more heavily insistent (if only in imagination) "and will not go away". Perhaps even the father's death will not remove the spectre of the son's inadequacy and guilt.

The importance of the woman in this forming of the man from the child is celebrated in "Poem (for Marie)" where Heaney offers his wife the images of his childhood attempts at order, always undermined, and expresses the trust he has in her love: "Love, I shall perfect for you the child"—"Love, you shall perfect for me this child". Though the poem speaks only of her perfecting him, this does not seem egotistical. He is offering the gift of himself in the slightly comic image of "the child/Who diligently potters." (It is the mixture of the Latinate "diligently" with the colloquial "potters" which deflates the image.) And he sees their marriage as her gift to him of possible perfection, and stability for both. The delicate cadences of the last lines, especially their use of pauses and repetitions, suggest great tenderness:

> Within new limits now, arrange the world
> Within our walls, within our golden ring.

Having mentioned before Heaney's interest in the history contained in words themselves, I would like to point out here his witty (and deflating) mixture in this poem of the Gaelic or Irish dialect word "clabber" for mud or, secondarily, curdled milk, and the French-derived "bastion" with its grandiose sense of fortification (of clay and mush). This kind of shift is frequent in Heaney's language: it is one of the ways in which he avoids the pompous and the sentimental, the traps of the professional "Irishman".

In "Feeling into Words" Heaney made an interesting distinction between craft and technique in the writing of poetry, a distinction

which makes more complex his apparent equation of digging and writing:

> Craft is what you can learn from other verse. Craft is the skill of making. . . . Technique . . . involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. . . . And if I were asked for a figure who represents pure technique, I would say a water diviner.[10]

The series of poems "Singing School", the homage to his poetic teachers which completes *North*, is a fine example of Heaney's conscious move from craft to technique. Wordsworth and Yeats are the fixed stars, but in between we glimpse Hopkins, Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Ted Hughes and the friends to whom some of the poems are dedicated. The poems articulate not only his attitude to poetry, but his attitude to Ireland, to politics, to language, to reputation, to the self. And they have that assurance and confidence which Harold Bloom in his review of *Field Work* rather grandly characterized as, "the authentic authority of becoming the voice of his people."[11]

> I am neither internee nor informer;
> An inner emigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful; a wood-kerne
>
> Escaped from the massacre,
> Taking protective colouring
> From bole and bark, feeling
> Every wind that blows;
>
> Who, blowing up these sparks
> For their meagre heat, have missed
> The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
> The comet's pulsing rose.
>
> (from "Exposure")

This is the climax of the series of poems. The series begins in a far more jokey voice in "The Ministry of Fear" with its remark about Patrick Kavanagh whose long poem, "The Great Hunger", and whose relation to his own place, Inniskeen, were so important to Heaney. Living in "important places" sounds like the Chinese curse about living in "interesting times" and overlooking "your Bogside" bears this sinister aspect out. Wordsworth's "act of stealth" in taking the boat on to the lake in *The Prelude* is matched with Heaney's throwing

10 *Preoccupations*, p. 47.
11 *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 February 1980, p. 137.

his biscuits over the fence in the fog. The beauty is not that of Wordworth's wild nature but the beauty of free language and ideas, and the almost-free love-making in the car. The terror is the terror of the priest's strap and the soldier's gun: the secret ministry of fear not frost. The movements of diction and rhythm in this poem, the shifts of assonance, the echoes of other poets' voices taken over finally into Heaney's own:

> all around us, though
> We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear

make a brilliant image of his own process of growing into technique and into himself.

It had to mean a growing away from too much "slap of soggy peat": an incorporation into the bog image of the Irish political terrors and of man's apparently inescapable inhumanity to man. This came, I think, through the extension of the range of "Bogland" to include the terrors of the poems in *North*: "Bog Queen", "The Grauballe Man", "Punishment", "Stranger Fruit", "Kinship", and also "The Tollund Man". These poems are connected with a book by P. V. Glob, *The Bog People* (Faber, 1969) which recounts, with the most striking photographs, the recent discovery of Iron-Age bodies preserved in the bogs in Jutland and thought to be the victims of religious fertility sacrifices. Heaney sees in these scapegoats figures like those in contemporary Ireland: women shaved, tarred and murdered for their association with British soldiers; men kneecapped and killed as offerings to religious bigotry:

> with the actual weight
> of each hooded victim,
> slashed and dumped.
>
> (from "The Grauballe Man")

His sense of physical detail calls them up to us:

> They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair
> And made an exhibition of its coil,
> Let the air at her leathery beauty.
> Pash of tallow, perishable treasure:
> Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,
> Her eyeholes bland as pools in the old workings.
>
> (from "Strange Fruit")

The fresh salty white butter of "Bogland" has become this human offering and exhibition, evidence of our endless complicity, our habitation in "the old man-killing provinces". What Heaney does in these poems is neither to condone murder as simply part of our

human inheritance nor to emphasize the sensational aspects so loved by the daily press and T.V. He tries to make us feel the particular horror he feels at each particular death, so that nothing is blurred or lost, neither the values of the community that demanded the murder nor the pain and degradation—and miraculous presence—of the victim. Everything is given its full weight.

This, I think, is one of Heaney's greatest strengths. This sense he gives of listening to the voices and letting them speak as fully as they can; of paying attention to the particularities of what is going on, without weighing them down with pathos or depair. He is not fashionably modernist or nihilistic, but he is no cheery homespun nature poet either. In "Personal Helicon", the last poem in his first volume (1966), Heaney wrote, "I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing", ironically pointing up the narcissistic self-serving aspect of writing. In the delicate poem "The Harvest Bow" in *Field Work* (1979), he wrote of the bow his father made:

> I tell and finger it like braille,
> Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,
>
> . . . that original townland
> Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.
>
> *The end of art is peace*
> Could be the motto of the frail device
> That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—
> Like a drawn snare
> Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
> Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

In this complicated sense of the inextricable relation between place, ancestors, symbolic object, spirit, literature, poem and poet we have an image of the difficulty Heaney has faced to find the music of his own particular voice, his own technique.

"The end of art is peace" are the words of that unfashionable nineteenth-century poet Coventry Patmore, quoted by Yeats in *Explorations* and quoted by Heaney in his epigraph to *Preoccupations*. The Yeats quotation concludes, "and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands."