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Seamus Heaney: Divisions and Allegiances

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by MAURICE HARMON

The poetry in Seamus Heaney’s first three collections—Death of a Naturalist (1966), Door into the Dark (1969), Wintering Out (1972)—seems to be a poetry of happy recovery in which the imagination repossesses a secure, familiar background. Deceptively, it transcends the divide that education and departure have made between the self that writes and the self that is written about. That need to create an imaginative world in between what was and what is, or between what is and what the imagination prefers, runs throughout Heaney’s career. In these early books he creates an attractive place with the materials of an actual place.

To speak of the early poetry only in terms of happy relationship is to miss the tensions out of which it grows. The creative consciousness works across a division between understanding and experience. The poet has been distanced from the things which were a natural part of his formative years. To miss the disruption and uncertainty caused by that loss, and the resulting need to discover and fashion an individual identity, is to undervalue the struggle from which the poetry comes. The poetry makes up for loss, refuses to be defeated, works out an attractive interpretation of the past and in the process commemorates a way of life and a Wordsworthian fostering by beauty and fear. It strengthens the connection, is self-strengthening and self-creating, a forging of values through a process of sympathetic reckoning. The poetry defines what he values in his former community and in that definition defines and demonstrates its own values—those of craft and of belonging, of being in touch with and true to a place, what it has produced and what it has gone through.

If we take “Digging” as the moment in which the poet first feels what he may do, we can take “Bogland” as the first direction-finder out of the familiar. “Bogland”’s idealised landscape ratifies what the imagination holds dear. The choice taken seems to exclude the road not taken, the one, in effect, Heaney actually took. The more successful he was in creating a viable past the more conscious he became of all that separated him from it. At the same time, the world that he took as his imagination’s domain in the mid-sixties was, within two or three years, afflicted by the recurrence of Northern Troubles. These, too, had to be faced; the signs of that coming storm could be read in the landscape.

Poems that take linguistic soundings read the landscape but also define its divisions between Planter and Gael, Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and
Nationalist. There is a legacy of injustice and fear. The poetry’s beauty of sound and shape substitutes but does not deny the dissonance of political division, dispossession, colonisation and loss. At the deepest level the poems fight back, saying that deprivation cannot, will not, deny the poet the fullest possible imaginative achievement. That claim is subtly presented, the more tellingly present for being conveyed within image, metaphor and sound. Resentment, nationalist hurt, and racial wrong are driving forces. Some poems evoke an ancestry beyond Tudor invasion and plantation. Some fire warning shots across the gates of the demesne. The Moyola poems are detonations underground, where rivers run deep. Their explosive power is all the greater for being so melodious. In these ways Heaney finds a resolution to the challenges of his background and culture, to the heritage of dispossession, to personal memories of injustice, and of being made to feel inferior, in a culture where one’s very name evokes a political-religious coloration. He also takes a political stand without being drawn into the rhetoric of politics. The poetry grows from his struggle with himself, from his discovery, acceptance and creation of his fated field.

If he was to accept his responsibility as a poet who was drawn, as “Bogland” makes clear, towards a full investigation of its layered, complex, divided nature, he would find a means by which to investigate it. Wintering Out (1972), as well as taking soundings, took stock. In its examination of heritage, he sides with the mound-dwellers, the last mummer, the servant boy who draws him into his trail. The servant boy knows the back doors of the little barons; he has developed a way of dealing with historical injustice; he keeps his patience and his counsel, is “resentful and impenitent.” Behind him lie the causes of his condition: plantations, poverty, starvation, the “geniuses who creep” in Spenser’s terrible account. Like the last mummer Heaney is “trammelled/in the taboos of the country,” picks his way through “the long toils of blood and feuding,” is adaptable and self-protective. The language anticipates the verbal landscape of North.

In the extensive investigation of how the self feels, and how the self responds to a situation that is in itself not simple, the poetry creates a variety of mirroring presences; not just the man hooped to his fields, not just the music-makers with their ears to the ground, but the servant boy, the mummer, the dispossessed. He is “snared” to the land he has composed habits for. He is “hooped,” “sleeved,” hides in the hollow trunk, Ireland is his nation, he speaks in a self-identifying way in a place where speech reveals who you are. He registers all of this, claims it all, acknowledges it all. He will not shirk or disguise both what attracts and what seems alien. The poems respond to the tug and pull of a divided heritage which he does not simplify; the more he explores it, the more richly and variously can it be realised. He can opt for an attractive reading of place names, since these verify what he is. He yields to a self-defining impulse: “I opened my right-of-way,” “I composed habits,” “I was ready to go anywhere,” “I might turn,” “I just make out,” “I cock my ear,” “I would question,” “I push into,” “I am sleeved.” In these projections of an investigative, identifying pioneer, he negotiates his way in the layered landscape. The servant boy is also the watching poet in “A
New Song." In "The Other Side," the dispossessed speak and observe: language both identifies and divides. On the other side the chosen people, the promised land, the Bible; on his side the poor land, the scraggy acres, the mournful rosary. There is, to be sure, a kind of farming community that can overlook these divisions, but what happens when that neighbour puts on the uniform of an armed B-Special, mans check points on the roads, interrogates, and asserts control? How does that experience affect the servant boy, the last mummer, the men with the memories of ancient wrongs of which this is just the immediate sign? In "The Constable Calls" the law is male, dominating, and frightening. The "Docker"'s fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic. There are more ways than one of keeping your independence. The navvy has not relented, he is plugged to the hard core. Heaney's road has more twists and dips to it, it accommodates a freer way of going. In the late sixties the hammer began to fall and has been falling ever since.

Poetry occurs somewhere between dreaming and thinking. Much that goes on is instinctive and unpremeditated. Poets trust secret tributaries that, at times, flow together, meeting and conspiring agreeably. Much of Heaney's water music is a tribute to the process. So are several poems in North (1975) which repeat the emphatic self-defining drive. What he needed and what he found was a metaphor to illuminate his accumulated awareness of the North's politics. Reading Glob's Bog People engendered an intellectual and imaginative scheme: a pagan religion comparable to Christianity, a myth of killing and resurrection, the images of Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, and others, more vivid than the images of Christ or the saints in the familiar texts; parallels between early Iron Age atrocities, and similar deeds carried out in Northern Ireland. The manner of writing poems which echoed with cultural, racial, and historical definition is replaced with a more explicit moral definition. The "we" and the "our" of poems that were admissions of happy belonging give way to a more troubled reflection on complicity as well as belonging. When the violence affects and involves your kith and kin, you are also involved, even though you never fire a shot. When your poetry responds to historical wrong you are involved. Ironically, because the poetic evidence of your sympathy is embodied in image and metaphor, those who would claim you as theirs and with whom you feel closely bound may be dissatisfied with what you write. "Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me." You also question yourself. To what degree and in what ways may you comment directly on political violence? Where does your responsibility to life end and your responsibility to art begin? What separates the two? You experience and suffer a dual loyalty. You may seek a solution to that division, but the solution is never clear-cut.

The poems in North look into the self, not out from the self. They are self-examining pilgrimages into the conscience. In rough outline they may be seen to animate a shifting drama of response, with different personae, different scenes. They animate his involvement. "I touch it again," "I wind it in," "I push back through dictions"... "re-enter memory," "I hold my lady's head like a crystal." "I unpin," "I unwrap"... "and see," "I reach past." Within the portrait of two cultures they enact a variety of ways in which to reflect both worlds, and
to use the two in mutually revealing exposure. They test the appropriateness of his reaction, release his delight in what works, remind him of the dangers in the comparison, recognise its evasive, voyeuristic aspects, and condemn what he does. “Funeral Rites” wills itself towards the slow triumph of the bonding, comforting funeral. It leads to the image of Gunnar in a state of blessedness beyond revenge, where the cycle of violence has ended. “North”’s epiphany is the savagery he has transcended. In a self-dramatising mime, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” identifies the poet as a moralist sniffing out corruption. He shows us the Vikings for what they are: hoarders of grudges, killers, gombeen-men. In “The Bog Queen,” the victim rises from the dark and speaks directly. “The Grauballe Man” inspects a victim so perfected that he does not seem to be a corpse. In “Punishment,” the most self-accusing of the poems, the empathetic imagination is even more intimate. “I would have cast...I the stones of silence.” “I would have stood dumb” and I

connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

In “Strange Fruit” the beheaded girl outstares atrocity and the poet’s stylised transmutation. “Kinship” celebrates the bog under its various aspects. “This centre holds.” “I grew out of all this.” He was also Hamlet the Dane, parablist, and so on. “Ocean’s Love to Ireland,” and related poems, give the historical background of possession and dispossession. He “deified” memories of his own life, but this is our land; we have savage ways, too. Even-handedly, scapegoat, victim, divided witness, the poet suffers, digests, and creates love and horror.

Heaney’s work, the poetry, the articles, interviews, reviews, essays, and uncollected poems, reveal conflict and uncertainty. There are inconsistencies and contradictions, what he says on one occasion qualified by what he says on another, the choices made in one book of poems qualified by options taken in another, perceptions in one section of a book qualified by perceptions in another. The poems enact and share a drama of decision and indecision. The poet writes to see himself, his situation and its possibilities, to open doors into the light of the rational imagination, as well as into the dark interior of the self. He reaches out in discovery and intuition, returns to what was already perceived and recovered, enters into it in a deeper exploration to feel renewed and newly validated. He is always a pilgrim back into the land of the self and its contexts, always a searcher after secret word-hoards who expands the sense of conflict and pain in the hinterland and in himself. He reenacts what has made him and in that reenactment finds himself. But it is not an uninterrupted, error-free line of development. It is inaccurate and unfair to draw over him, in misguided admiration, a chart of constant growth and development. Such praise leaves out the struggle through which and by which the poetry and growth take place.

In North by adopting the voice of the victim or by celebrating the redeeming processes of the bog, Heaney avoids stating directly and simplistically how he feels. He also releases language from the kind of inertness that a response to
immediate horror may induce. It is the bog queen who narrates her story; it is the Viking dead who become things of beauty. By analogy present horror is subsumed. The method sweetens savagery. Playful submission to the forces of the bog distances atrocity and produces the risen beauty. But the tone changes: the mother ground is sour with the blood of her faithful; we slaughter for the common good, shave the heads of the notorious, "the goddess swallows/our love and terror." The imagination digests whatever comes.

Whereas Part One of *North* creates a world beside the real world, mirroring it but apart, Part Two marks the presence of policemen, politicians, journalists, orange drums, sectarianism, and cute evasion. Its dates mark a personal sequence of confusion, uncertainty, fear, inferiorities induced by church and state, and the stirrings of individuality. There is the characteristic note of unease: "for all this art and sedentary trade/ I am incapable." The voice, too, wavers: it expresses communal irritation.

The poems lead on to "Exposure" where in wintery weather the poet questions his responsibility. This is self-definition of a kind not attempted before in all the placings of the mimetic self, the histrionic imagination cauled in history, or geography, or language. Instead of certainties it poses questions. How and why did he end up like this, both victim and witness, sharing Mandelstam's *tristia*? Now the Viking dead speak with forked tongues. The scales are balanced. The imagined hero stands for a simplicity that will not work in a complex situation. There is no place for the once-in-a-lifetime deed. But there are other virtues such as endurance, patience, precision, and wisdom in the face of sadness. And there is, as the poem itself demonstrates, as do *North*, *Field Work* and *Station Island*, the virtue of honest, balanced reckoning. This quietness is a strength because it says what all good poems say, that poetry has force by virtue of its own truth.

In 1974 Heaney said that the poet's function was not to help people to adapt to the Northern crisis or to overcome it. His role was to give a true picture of man's inhumanity to man, and for that he found the Icelandic sagas a good parallel, "dealing as they did with a tightly knit community, reciprocal feuding and murders which did not shock anyone too badly." The shock is absorbed through poetry, filtered in the imaginative treatment. Gunnar is a beautiful image, but the vengeance in fact continued. Art can create images of beauty to transcend and transmute blood and death. But that achievement is not a form of callous indifference. Just because the poems in *North* become objects of beauty, absorbing suffering and death, and just because he places one world beside another, does not mean that the poet does not suffer with the people. He is both Antaeus and Hercules. The experiences that punish them, the atrocities, deaths, imprisonments, violence, fear, frustration, also enter him. What he does is to digest and reuse this savage food, refusing to meet savagery with a brutal response. That would demean poetry and the poet. Instead, he creates things of beauty in the belief that beautiful objects satisfy and soothe.

*Field Work* (1979) has a cutting edge. The poems outline a world that has its

enduring simplicities and pieties, its solid beauty of object and task. But violence intrudes: soldiers patrolling where they do not belong, young men with guns on the hillsides, intimations of violence, questions of survival, the need for forgiveness and understanding: “the island is full of comfortless voices.” “Who’s sorry for our trouble?” “What will become of us?” Was the fisherman in “Casualty” culpable? “How perilous is it to choose/Not to love the things we’re shown?” “What is my apology for poetry?” Questioning is now a mode as well as a mood. The voice is close to the poet’s actual voice. The drama of self-perception is more intense. The artist-fisherman is true to impulses and allegiances that must not be overruled. In poem after poem the artist goes about his business. That justification has to be made in the face of conflicting pressures between art and life. For example, how should the poet have reacted when his cousin was shot?

Heaney was deeply troubled by the suffering and self-sacrifice of the hunger-strikers. They were victims as much as those in the early Iron Age. If he could react sympathetically to them, could he not react with equal sympathy to those nearer home? Might he be too scrupulous in refusing to get involved? He felt the urge to respond, but to do so, he argued, is to lose one’s mystery by being too openly part of a political situation. He was caught “between the urge to write lyric poetry, to make beautiful things that are comforting” and the parallel desire to “wreck that comfort” with the poet’s truth. But the truth of art is a different truth. Nevertheless, the demands on him cannot easily be pushed aside. Is he too self-conscious in his unease about the poet’s role in the circumstances? To shut out politics would in itself be a political statement. To write lyrics at a time of deep suffering may give the impression that it is not all that important. He looked at other poets.

Yeats took a stand. In “Easter 1916” he declared himself in relation to an event and a period. Dante placed himself within history, and addressed public events in a forceful way. The evidence showed that a poet could speak confidently out of a particular history and a particular set of circumstances. His personal dilemmas may be focused where history and the individual life intersect. Field Work brings the autobiographical self into immediate contact with particular individuals whose lives have been brutally and wastefully ended in a situation with which Heaney has always identified. The contact is on the level of kinship, shared experience and an intimate relationship with the common landscape. Tenderness and immediacy, plainness of language and feeling characterise these portraits of individuals fatally caught in the realities of history, in Heaney’s time and place.

Literature itself is a form of betrayal. At a remove from experience it substitutes fictions for experience and exposes what might prefer to be hidden. It can comment on politics without becoming directly involved. Again Yeats is an example. Being so aware of the causes and consequences of violence in the North, Heaney could easily feel guilty of evasion. In Station Island (1984) we

hear the doubting self. The dead accuse: “You confused evasion with artistic tact.” Heaney pleads: “forgive my timid circumstantial involvement” and judges “I hate everything/That made me biddable and unforthcoming.” At the same time he must be free, must have his own imaginative space, to fill as he will with the “trial pieces” of his art. That is the absolution he seeks.

Station Island reexamines forces, people, incidents, memories. In one frame after another it delineates moments of significant experience. Its series of encounters creates a complex, changing and developing drama of identification, involvement and assessment. “You have to try to make sense of what comes.” You have to “remember everything and keep your head.” Some are tender revisitings, some evoke known places or remembered objects; these are “refreshing.” Feeling and love are essential to the poet-pilgrim’s examination of things past and present: not flinty purpose, but compassion, sympathy and understanding, virtues appropriate to a pilgrimage, and to a poem. No longer assertive the “I” figure reviews, acknowledges, confesses. Confession is not just about guilt, or the burdens of poetic responsibility.

The accusing voices are deeply challenging. The murdered cousin, for example, subject of the Lough Beg elegy, brings forward the conflict between suffering and lyric poetry. The elegy concludes with a soothing ceremony: “I dab you clean,” “I lift you under the arms and lay you flat,” “I plait/Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.” The tone is direct and intimate. When Heaney wrote in pity, he did not express anger at the murder, nor did he voice the rage of a people suffering such outrage. Carleton could wield the knife of sectarian hatred, but Heaney will not wield the “unforgiving iron.” The agitated voice of the next victim relives love and terror, the horror of sectarian violence, his doomed walk to face his bare-faced killers. This death is not veiled in lyric song. The voice is ferocious. It confronts the poet’s “circumspect involvement.” The victim simply does not understand the poet’s choice and that makes the choice harder to justify.

Heaney responds: “Forgive the way I have lived indifferent.” Faced with the death of the archaeologist he admits another failure—the failure to comfort. Ironically, the poet who can provide solace in poetry cannot bring comfort to his dying friend: he felt “guilty and empty”; he had “failed an obligation”; is struck dumb. He was struck dumb also at the news of his cousin’s death; his feelings dried up. But the cousin dismisses such explanation, accuses him of confusing evasion with artistic tact, of whitewashing ugliness, of making death sweet with the saccharine of his poetry, and this also hurts. Faced with the figure of a Maze hunger-striker, Heaney repents a life that kept him “competent to sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.” He yields to feelings of disgust in confessional self-abasement.

i hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming.

But such vehemence goes against the grain of what he is. While he dramatises his hatred of all that made him what he is, he also accepts the way he is. The
accusations end here; recovery comes in the abyss of guilt and self-blame. He has gained insight, sees, understands and is absolved. He discovers, or has confirmed, “the need and chance/to salvage everything, to re-envision.”

I mouthed at my half-composed face
In the shaving mirror, like somebody
Drunk in the bathroom during a party,
Lulled and repelled by his own reflection.
As if the cairnstone could deny the cairn.
As if the eddy could reform the pool.
As if a stone whirled under a cascade,
Eroded and eroding in its bed,
Could grind itself down to a different core.
Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail
For they keep dancing till they sight the deer.

“As if,” “As if,” “As if”—there is no point to this sourfaced mood. “There is nothing to confess.”

The poem ends in images of the dazzling cup, St. John of the Cross’s absolving and confirming poem about love and beauty, the eternal fountain, full of light, unending, refreshing the world. “No other thing can be so beautiful.” Joyce’s admonitions confirm the importance of art and the poet’s right to freedom.

Is the pilgrim-poet deeply riven? Even to speak of encounters, confrontations, or purgation is to use a language that seems too dramatic for most of what takes place. Heaney likes to make poems “which are full of blessings and delights, which are celebrations, which in themselves are transformed, free things, which affirm that their one and only function is to be works which give delight.” But, at the same time, he was suspicious of giving pleasure. Station Island, he hoped, would redeem his right to write pleasurably.3

Both art and life bear upon the formation of the poet. In Station Island Heaney reveals his allegiance to both. The voices of the dead accuse him of connivance and evasion. Other voices urge him to steer clear of politics, to remember his duty as a poet. The poem shows that Heaney does not indulge complacently in lyric utterance while friends die and a people suffer. His is a “voice that might continue, hold, dispel, appease.” He can clear his conscience through the pilgrimage, by showing himself torn, challenged, and responsive to suffering. He has the feeling and love that Hopkins identified as the true source of poetry. Through the pilgrimage, in its enactments of challenge and response, he purges his guilt. He can face the accusations, can mime the suffering, can present himself as sympathetically involved, can, in short, face the challenges and thereby earn the right to be free. He is both responsive and responsible. He feels the need to justify what he does, in particular the writing of free, lyric poetry, at a time and in a place where people suffer and are not free. He demonstrates that he does not run away from reality. That justifies the poem’s conclusion. Poetry washes away the guilt.

and does so for all of us. It makes us, through the dramatic encounters, deeply aware of the very forces it transcends and transforms. We are unable to enjoy its lyric flight without being made deeply aware of the pain and the injustice. At the end of the journey Heaney arrives at a new level of consciousness. He has externalised his anxiety that in opting for poetry he failed his people, and has confirmed the redemptive power of poetry. We recognise honest self-questioning, reservations and tact in Yeats's "Easter 1916." We may recognise also the self-questioning, provisional assessments, renewed examination that go on throughout Heaney's poetry. He acts out what troubles him in a poetry of changing, subtle, dramatic self-revelation.

While the first part of Station Island contains poems of love and allegiance to familiar place and things, the last part, liberated through what the pilgrimage has achieved, flies into risk as the Joycean ghost advised. Sweeney flies high, runs free of the crowd, is not bound by kingdom or church, is pure artist writing his script. The figure of this Sweeney, already present in Sweeney Astray (1983), is an image of the self—away from the tribe, suffering separation and guilt, enjoying freedom. More ably and more complexly than we often realise Heaney plays the roles that are Sweeney-like, or rather uses Sweeney to accustom us to his own complex, unresolved situation. Part of our difficulty with Heaney is that he seems so familiar, so accessible, so able to assuage with his poetry, that we find it hard to be equally receptive to the complexity that troubles him. He does not seem to be a Hamlet, although he invokes him. He does not seem to be a Lear, although he frets upon the heath. He is more like Poor Tom, or the Fool, or Philoctetes with his wound and his bow in The Cure at Troy (1990), or Sweeney—comic in his cries and flutterings, tragically isolated in his treetop, the artist as victim, both insider and outsider. He ran free, "mastered new rungs of the air," Ariel and Sweeney, to escape. Several of these poems are confident and self-contained affirmations of his freedom. We are accustomed to the mimetic artist up to the end of North, less accustomed to the less self-conscious dramatising mode of the later books: "he belongs to a tribe whose dances never fail."

In The Haw Lantern (1987) and Seeing Things (1991) Heaney turns his attention in exact and exacting script to the alphabet of the original landscape. The haw lantern "is a small light for small people," the only requirement "that they keep the wick of self-response from dying out./not having to blind them with illumination." As Diogenes searched for one just man, poetry looks keenly in judgment and the poet, too, would be tested. He lives in the republic of his own conscience, can write his own similitudes. When he passes into the clarified space the language only seems to be about actuality. It is, in fact, a risen language like the description of the chestnut tree once where he was, but now gone, "Its

heft and hush become a bright nowhere./A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for.” Now he writes poetry of place with the materials of imagined spaces.5

In seeing things he may cross from one state of being to another. The familiar contains the preternatural. Poems find the marvellous in the ordinary, in spinning a bicycle wheel, in sliding, in the feints and aimings before shooting a marble, in letting go and coming back, as Aeneas did, enriched and strengthened. It is another kind of pilgrimage: to go “Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves.”

Different versions of reality are brought side by side within individual poems and from one poem to its companion. The aim of the poetry is to cross thresholds, to be beyond and here, to hold contrasting images at once. The balance and poise of the pairings are a measure of the poet’s own equilibrium. He sees what is there in the knowledge that “whatever is given/Can always be re-imagined.” He is ready to “credit marvels.” His injunctions are firmly grounded. “Make your study the unregarded floor.” “Sink every impulse like a bolt”... “Do not waver/Into language. Do not waver in it.” The drama of self-measuring and revelation goes on. The pre-eminence of art over life is reaffirmed.