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What is Heaney Seeing in Seeing Things?

by HENRY HART

When we call a poem “visionary” we usually mean that it contains things that are conspicuously fantastic to the ordinary observer. Blake’s poems are fervently “visionary”; William Carlos Williams’ are not. When Blake looked at the sun he saw angels crying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” When Williams looked at the sun he probably saw “a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea” (617). Because of Pound and the Imagist movement, most twentieth-century poets fear abstractions and feel compelled to focus closely on objects. But they also know that language mediates both things and ideas, transforming both into an artificial medium that is simultaneously abstract and concrete. In the word the world is both idea and object. Realizing that the visionary and the real are symbiotic rather than exclusive, Marianne Moore called for “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” (“Poetry”). In his most recent collection of poems, Seeing Things, Seamus Heaney calls for a similar synthesis of the imaginary and real, and repeatedly explores the dynamic relations between them.

As critics tirelessly point out, Heaney’s career has moved from a deeply visceral engagement with the earth and the historical bodies buried in it to a preoccupation with more transcendental matters. In the early poems from Death of a Naturalist to North, his feet are solidly planted in the bogs and potato drills of rural Ireland. In Station Island and The Haw Lantern he is more willing to make pilgrimage to other worlds inhabited by spirits and ghosts. If the visionary smacks of escapism for the younger Heaney—a culpable flight from past and present Irish troubles—for the older man it becomes a justifiable maneuver. Much of Heaney’s recent poetry and criticism is a kind of apology for the sort of vision and voyage that transcends the “complexities of mire or blood” (as Yeats phrased it in “Byzantium”) of Ireland’s sectarian strife. Patrick Kavanagh is one of his guides in this levitation. In “The Placeless Heaven,” an essay printed in The Government of the Tongue, Heaney empathizes with Kavanagh’s move from an early poetry that “is supplied with a strong physical presence and is full of the recognitions which existed between the poet and his place” to the later poetry in which “the world is more pervious to his vision than he is pervious to the world. When he writes about places now, they are luminous spaces within his mind” (4, 5). He also empathizes with Philip Larkin, the subject of an adjacent essay and of the first poem in Seeing Things, whose “unsettled quarrel [was] ...
conducted all through the mature poetry between vision and experience” (16). For Heaney the appeal of metaphysical visions and voyages is countered by a similar devotion to the quotidian.

Precedents for poetic visions and fantastic voyages abound in Irish literature. They go back to its origins. The bardic stories called Imramha, which supposedly date from the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., recount the stories of Bran, Maelduín, and other mythical characters who journey from ordinary realms into extraordinary ones. While Heaney could have used translations from these poems to frame Seeing Things, he chooses comparable stories from the Aeneid and the Divine Comedy. The two passages—the first describing how the Sibyl of Cumae instructs Aeneas to pluck the golden bough so he can descend to the underworld to see his father, Anchises, and the second describing how Virgil and Dante encounter Charon ferrying souls of the wicked in hell—act as a frame for the book. The two passages are “visionary” in the old sense; they depict voyages to the underworld of spirits and ghosts. But within this mythical frame are dozens of poems depicting very real events and very real objects from Heaney’s experience. The mythical and the empirical represent two poles or, to borrow a Yeatsean term, two “gyres” that pull and push Heaney’s antithetical imagination.

Heaney uses his framing device to stress a theme that has dominated his work: the productive coexistence of contraries. The worldly and otherworldly need each other like yin and yang. The mythical underworld is a place of creative contraries where dead and living, past and present, otherworldly and worldly merge. Throughout Seeing Things Heaney delves into the past to remember those (especially his father) who have died, just as Aeneas and Dante did. Playing against the grandeur of their classical, archetypal descents, however, are many poems that reveal such descents to be, at base, simple acts of memory. In memory, after all, time past and time present, like the dead and living, commingle. Again and again in Seeing Things Heaney offers remembrances of things past, and fastens on the tensions and resolutions at work in his own mind. The upshot of all this introspection and retrospection is not only a lyrical evocation of people, events, and “things” from Heaney’s past, but a kind of map of the dialectical relationship between contrary forces that make his memory so fertile. If Mnemosyne is his muse, he is determined in Seeing Things to reveal the paradoxes that make her produce.

The central drama of the mind that Heaney’s many scenes evince is between the burden of actual experience, whether present or past, and the imagination compelled to transfigure it. The antitheses of visionary transcendence and empirical facts are scored into Heaney’s title. In its colloquial form “seeing things” connotes visionary flight; it means a person is not seeing actual things but unreal things—like Yeats seeing fairies fluttering through the Celtic twilight. In its literal form, however, it means the opposite, that the person is seeing things that are actually there. This self-conscious concentration on memory, imagination, and perception, on the “eye, and ear—both what they half create, / And what perceive,” as Wordsworth put it in “Tintern Abbey,” is nothing new. It characterizes Romantics as well as post-Romantics, William Blake as well as Yeats,
T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Like his precursors Heaney is devoted to tracing a visionary dialectic. His poems demonstrate how the pressure of reality that threatens to eradicate vision also engenders it.

What distinguishes Seeing Things from books by predecessors, and from Heaney’s previous books, is both stylistic and thematic. Heaney harmonizes the heavy, earthbound “plop and slap” sound effects of his first books and the more subliminal, philosophical style of Station Island and The Haw Lantern, creating what might be called a “middle style.” While his long poetic sequence (48 sections of 4 tercets) called “Squarings” in some ways recalls the way he strung together “spots of time” in Stations (his sequence of prose poems), it is also a radical departure. As in many modernist sequences, the events and objects dwelled upon are arranged with apparent randomness. There is no ostensible plot or logical argument, only a flow of often disconnected associations.

M. L. Rosenthal’s and Sally Gall’s The Modern Poetic Sequence, which Heaney reviewed for The New York Times Book Review in 1983, no doubt encouraged him in the form the authors argue is “the modern poetic form within which all the tendencies of more than a century of experiment define themselves and find their aesthetic purpose” (vii). Heaney in his review takes note of the developments championed by Poe and Pound that led to:

a changing wind of sensibility that finally blows away chronological and rational ordering from long poems. It tilts them away from discourse and narrative and renders them amenable to the terms of praise recurrent in these pages—“centers of intensity,” “units of affect,” “progression of tonalities”.... They see Whitman’s defiant readiness to contradict himself as characteristic of the modern sequence, where the relationship of the poems “is like that within a planetary system: a process of tensions and countertensions, self-contained yet not rigid.” (“Common Bed” 3, 31)

Heaney’s sequence, as well as the poems collected in the first part of Seeing Things, repudiate traditional narrative order to map the tensions and countertensions at work in poetic memory. In theme and form he is working in a well-trodden Romantic and modernist arena, but his voice and his particular angle of vision are distinctly his own.

What is Heaney seeing and why is he seeing what he sees the way he does? A good poem to examine in beginning to answer this question is “Field of Vision.” The poem commences with an act of memory that recalls a particular woman in a particular place looking at particular things. Everything about the woman and what she sees is mundane, monotonous, even pathetic. For Heaney, however, she becomes an alter-ego, a type of down-to-earth visionary who by looking closely and constantly at ordinary reality ends up “seeing things.” Heaney’s recollection begins with humdrum casualness:

I remember this woman who sat for years In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead Out the window at sycamore trees unleafing And leafing at the far end of the lane.

Straight out past the TV in the corner, The stunted, agitated hawthorn bush, The same small calves with their backs to wind and rain, The same acre of ragwort, the same mountain.
Heaney’s alter-ego “never / Carried a spare ounce of emotional weight.” She refuses to be taken in by the spectacular dramas and melodramas—the sort of “visions” that wallow in emotion—on the television. Having sublimated all sexual and violent passions, she meditates with ascetic calm on the pastoral scene around her.

By using a well-known biblical phrase at the end of the poem Heaney suggests that the woman’s meditation is religious in its procedures and purposes, but he immediately undercuts this suggestion by emphasizing that what she sees is not supernatural but natural. Essentially she is a poet, not wholly a naturalist (Death of a Naturalist announced the demise of such types for Heaney), but one who looks at nature with the ability to make it strange. “Making strange,” a term Heaney borrowed from the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky for a poem in Station Island, is the goal of both Heaney and the woman:

Face to face with her was an education 
Of the sort you got across a well-braced gate— 
One of those lean, clean, iron, roadside ones 
Between two whitewashed pillars, where you could see

Deeper into the country than you expected 
And discovered that the field behind the hedge 
Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing 
Focused and drawn in by what barred the way.

The woman’s “education” could be supernatural and theological in its orientation. Heaney begins his penultimate quatrains with an echo of Corinthians where Paul describes that spiritual education which redirects a person away from “childish things” toward God: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face” (13: 11,12). But Heaney’s woman doesn’t see God; at least we aren’t told she does. She sees a common field behind a common hedge made “strange” by the power of her contemplative gaze.

Throughout Seeing Things Heaney dwells on what is seen as much as why it is seen the way it is. His poems continually draw attention to gates, thresholds, borders, limits, lines, doors, ceilings, roofs, circles, and squares. The situation he obsessively delineates is one where the mind comes up against a confining boundary, is checked by it, but then is stimulated to transcend it. In the end all of his forms of resistance and containment are resisted. To his dialectical mind, limits provoke sublimation and sublimity—journeys or visions below or beyond the threshold (as the etymology of sublime—sub-limen and sublimis—paradoxically indicates).

The last poem in Seeing Things is entitled “Crossings,” but most of the poems before it describe crossings as well—from boringly mundane reality to scenes made sublime by altered perception or poetic tropes. The repressive limits, as in Heaney’s other books, can be political, religious, psychological, literary, or an allegorical combination of these. They evince pain, ennui, or some other kind of blockage that challenges the mind to overcome them. Kant described a situation
similar to the one that reappears in Heaney’s poetry when, in *The Critique of
Judgement*, he pointed out that sublime experiences begin when overwhelming
natural phenomena check the mind’s ability to conceive of them, but then “raise
the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover
within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to
be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (111).
For Kant the meditating or envisioning mind, when suitably challenged, reduced
all seemingly omnipotent natural phenomena to concepts and declares its own
omnipotence. For Kant the reason was transcendent, divine. It was the seat of
sublimity.

While inheriting Kant’s ideas about the sublime from Romantic tradition and
its current expositors (Bloom, Weiskel, Eagleton, Hertz, and others), Heaney
puts his own “spin” on the old aesthetic concept. It’s tempting to use Robert
Lowell’s term from “Sunday Morning,” “the monotonous sublime,” to describe
Heaney’s particular brand of sublimity. But the sublime isn’t monotonous for
Heaney so much as motivated by monotonity, by the “vulgar commonplace”
referred to by Kant or the “ennui” that launched Baudelaire’s exotic voyages. For
Lowell the sublime was born out of oedipal power struggles and erupted in
pathological enthusiasm, mania, and violence. For Heaney it comes from a
quieter struggle and leads to a mellower transformation. He and his staring
woman in “Field of Vision” attain the sublime or the “distinctly strange” after
first being blocked by the “well-braced gate” and the monotony of “The same
small calves... / The same acre of ragwort, the same mountain.” In the end, they
triumph over commonplace checks to vision simply by pitting their meditative
powers against them.

Throughout *Seeing Things* Heaney illustrates his dialectical concept of limits
and sublimities, repressive occlusion and visionary release, with homely ex­
amples. Frequently he goes to boyhood sports to embody this subtle process. In
“Markings,” for instance, he recounts how he and his friends delimited a football
pitch: “And then we picked the teams / And crossed the line our called names
drew between us.” Already delimited by Catholic and Protestant identities, the
boys “cross” them by playing with and against each other. The game itself,
Heaney suggests, is a kind of acknowledgment of boundaries and rules that seeks
to transcend them. Like all good athletes, Heaney’s football players are “playing
in their heads,” so assured are they that their bodies will follow what their minds
dictate. Heaney asserts: “Some limit had been passed, / There was fleetness,
furtherance, untiredness / In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.” In their
hurried way, the athletes have attained a timeless, transcendental release from
the rules that restrict them. They have become another example of Heaney’s
down-to-earth visionaries. “Blessed be down-to-earth! Blessed by highs,” he
says in “Man and Boy.” He knows “our spirits must be lightly checked” by
earthly constraints for those spirits to yearn for unearthly releases.

“Damn braces: Bless relaxes,” Blake exclaimed in “The Marriage of Heaven
and Hell,” even while admitting, “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction
and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human
existence" (152, 149). Heaney's poems are testaments to the necessity of these oppositions. In "Casting and Gathering" he says "I trust contrariness" and exemplifies the idea with two fishermen on opposite banks of a river. One is severe and repressive; the other is laid-back and expressive. Heaney's point at the end, however, is that they are interchangeable: "I see that when one man casts, the other gathers / And then vice versa, without changing sides." In "Fosterling" he finds this "contrariness" illustrated in a picture of Dutch windmills. He speaks of "The immanent hydraulics of a land"—of the Netherlands, Ireland, but also the "lowlands of the mind"—in which pressure must be exerted downward for the water to move upward. The science of hydraulics is his metaphor for the dynamics of the visionary imagination. Repression, for Heaney as for Freud, leads to sublimation. An awareness of the heaviness or sinfulness of existence—he refers to the "picture's heavy greenness" and the "Heaviness of being"—sooner or later compels the mind to seek refuge in visions that transcend that heaviness. In "Fosterling" Heaney concedes that a propensity for the extraordinary was long in coming: "Me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels.... / So long for air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten." He also concedes implicitly that the lightening—one of his favorite words in Seeing Things—would never have come if he hadn't felt weighed down by the political, religious, and poetic "doldrums of what happens." He might as well say that Ireland, with its various oppressions and repressions, hurt him into poetic vision.

The title poem "Seeing Things" puts these "hydraulic" matters into more personal terms. For child Heaney, the boat ride to a church service has all the terror of a "crossing" of hell's waters. Nervous at first, when he gets in the boat he panics. This weight of fear (Heaney has always feared water) and a similar fear of sin encouraged by the Catholic church motivate Heaney's visionary transport. He could be envisioning one of those fabulous voyages commemorated in the Imramha or other Irish legends, although here the vision is characterized more by transcendental self-consciousness than by spectacular flight:

All the time
As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How risky we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.

At the end Heaney appears as a god loving himself and his comrades from a sublime altitude that, paradoxically, he and the others are doomed never to attain.

One of the most consistent metaphors Heaney employs to illustrate the dialectic of restraint and release, limit and sublimity, ordinary seesings and extraordinary seeings, is the house. At the end of "Glanmore Revisited," a sequel to Field Work's "Glanmore Sonnets," he and his wife represent the oppositions of repressive darkness and sublime lucidity in their argument over keeping their house roof closed or opening it with a skylight. The house could stand as a symbol
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for Heaney’s imagination. As he explains:

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.

Although the domestic scene Heaney describes appears hellish—dark, hot, claustrophobic—he considers cutting through the roof a kind of trespass. He wants to preserve the old boundaries, the old repressions, the old sense of sin. Then he changes:

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

The sense of extravagance and surprise that enters the house when the limits are breached is sublime. Heaney is uplifted, purged, and healed. Heavy, repressive occlusion has led to its antithesis—to an access of light and vision. The sky enters like grace, and while Heaney suggests that the dispensation is heavenly, that now he is “seeing things,” he also suggests that he is simply seeing the same old sky and the same old light—only now from a different angle.

The metaphor of the house as locus of self-containment and self-abandonment receives its fullest expression in the long sequence “Squarings.” The first section sets the familiar scene: “Shifting brilliancies. Then winter light / In a doorway, and on the stone doorstep / A beggar shivering in silhouette.” Thresholds (door, wall, roof) have all been breached, and now “brilliancies” are allowed to grace the ruminative beggar. Like the woman in “Field of Vision,” this alter-ego “gazing out” with “Unroofed scope” witnesses the common facts of existence but in a way that lightens or heightens them. What he sees is “Just old truth dawning.” Although this may not have the sublime impact of a traditional apocalypse, it is nevertheless a revelation, a dawning of “brilliancies.” And it comes about according to the sublime scenario Heaney has traced before: through a perception of limits and their overthrow. The “unroofing” at the end of this poem allows for new inspiration, for “Knowledge-freshening wind.”

The rest of the poem rings the changes on the dialectic of limits and sublimities. In the very next section Heaney declares with imperative force: “Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in. / Drink out of tin. Know the scullery cold, / A latch, a door-bar, forged tongs and a grate.” Sublimities need to be contained, just as limits are needed to impel them in the first place. Now Heaney calls for repression and asceticism, even while implying that these are stages rather than ends. They represent stations along his meditative way, his poetic process of
making and unmaking, confinement and transcendence. In this section he will command severely, “Relocate the bedrock in the threshold. / Take squarings from the recessed gable pane.” In the next section he shifts from the imperative to the interrogative before affirming once again the desire to transcend all limits. He returns to his metaphor of the game:

Squarings? In the game of marbles, squarings
Were all those anglings, aimings, feints and squints
You were allowed before you’d shoot, all those

Hunkerings, tensings, pressures of the thumb,
Test-outs and pull-backs, re-envisagings...

His visionary “envisagings” are conducted in “that space / Marked with three round holes and a drawn line.” They are confined by limits, but those limits abet rather than deter the final performance. Heaney ends the way he ended “Glanmore Revisited,” with a description of a visionary breach: “You squinted out from a skylight of the world.”

Like many modern poetic sequences, Heaney’s “Squarings” follows a rhythmic design more prevalent in music than in logical or narrative exposition. Motifs such as the house, the marble game, the boat journey, the dead father, and the visionary landscape recur as Heaney traces a process that is literary, religious, political, as well as psychological. Several early sections dramatize Thomas Hardy’s artistic origins as if they were Heaney’s. Playing dead in a field of sheep, Hardy supplicates the infinite: “His small cool brow was like an anvil waiting / / For sky to make it sing the perfect pitch / Of his dumb being.” Limited by his humble, rural background and his “dumb being,” Hardy challenges and transcends them in his writing.

For Heaney this access to the eternal has a Catholic resonance. In his eighth section he recounts a visionary event visited upon the monks of Clonmacnoise in ancient times that jibes with his own supernatural boat journeys as well as his new poetics. After the boat sighted by the monks above their oratory catches its anchor in the altar rails, one of the visionary crew climbs down to unfasten it:

“This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,”

The abbot said, “unless we help him.” So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

The story is charming but also reinforces Heaney’s theme of the relativity of perception. From our secular perspective, the praying monks are “marvellous,” otherworldly creatures; from the monk’s perspective the crew sailing over their oratory is “marvellous”; from the crew’s perspective the monks are the ones who are “marvellous.” Whatever is beyond known boundaries is sublime. The “Lightening,” the title of the first part of “Squarings,” underscores this sublime crossing from one realm into another. The last section places his definition of “lightening”—the “phenomenal instant when the spirit flares / With pure exhilaration before death”—once again in a religious context. It is comparable
to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, His breach of all worldly limits for the sublimities of heaven.

Heaney’s dialectic of containment and escape has political dimensions as well. In section xvi he returns to a familiar crux: the British occupation of Northern Ireland. What highlights his new rendition of old sectarian divisions is the way he describes them in simple terms of different (but also similar) visions. The soldiers in their trucks, “Their hands round gun-barrels, their gaze abroad / In dreams out of the body-heated metal,” seem as visionary as the poet and his numerous personae. Their transcendental, “out-of-the-body” gazes indicate that they are “seeing things” too. Nevertheless, “They still mean business in the here and now.” Heaney’s advice for himself is quite simple and has to do with a redirecting of vision: “So draw no attention, steer and concentrate / On the space that flees between like a speeded-up / Meltdown of souls from the straw-flecked ice of hell.” Heaney likes to paraphrase Robert Frost’s dictum that a good poem rides on its melt like a piece of ice on a hot stove. For Heaney composition depends on decomposition. Here he describes his escape from those political and religious boundaries that have made Irish history a hellish nightmare as if it were a poetic passage, a breaking down and breaking away from the past. “Melt-down,” a term usually used to describe imploding nuclear reactors, makes the political scene even more hellish and its poetic transcendence even more compelling.

In the elegiac sections of “Squarings” about his dead father, Heaney’s struggle to escape and transcend the past has an oedipal inflection. His father’s house is now a ghost house, haunted by imposing patriarchal limits that arouse from Heaney an ambivalent response. He respects limits but he also feels compelled to abandon them. “Be literal a moment,” he tells himself at the beginning of the poem, as if to pay homage to his father’s down-to-earth vision. Nevertheless, he leaves the literal, limiting confines of the house behind him. He tells himself again:

Recollect
Walking out on what had been emptied out
After he died, turning your back and leaving.

That morning tiles were harder, windows colder,
The raindrops on the pane more scourged, the grass
Barer to the sky, more wind-harrowed,

Or so it seemed. The house that he had planned
“Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know,”
A paradigm of rigour and correction,

Rebuke to fanciness and shrine to limit,
Stood firmer than ever for its own idea
Like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body.

Real house and planned house are confused here, just as the X-ray and the X-rayed body are confused. The vision and the envisioned seem one. In any case, both are “shrine[s] to limit.” Both are literal, ordinary. Son and father, like the
other antinomies in the poem, reach an oedipal resolution. But while Heaney respects his father's ideal of limits, in this poem and in many others he also announces his freedom from all such patriarchal strictures. Although some critics felt Heaney was not working at the top of his form in Seeing Things, the poems have a strong, cumulative effect. Like many modernist poems, and like the modernist sequence in general, they forgo conventional patterns of narrative and logic for a more musical, free-flowing discourse. The conversational clarity of many of the poems may disappoint those readers bent on pyrotechnic rhetoric. The style, however, fits the theme of harmonized contraries—of limits crossed, of the natural and supernatural wedded, of the confined infused with the sublime. Like his fictional predecessor Stephen Dedalus, Heaney flies over the nets of Irish religion, politics, literature, and self but primarily "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience" (A Portrait 228). He accedes to visionary flight but mainly to see the things of this world more truly and strangely. Seeing Things adds another chapter to the career of one of the most consistently skillful and engaging poets in the postmodern era.

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