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Discerning Dialogues in Field Work

by CATHARINE MALLOY

The various discourses in Seamus Heaney’s poetry resonate with the personal, social, ideological, and cultural issues heard of a specific historical time. These utterances, however, are not the utterances of a conventional lyric speaker whose voice is unitary. Because there is a continuous intrusion of dialogues orchestrated by the speaker, a polyphony of discourses is created which bears directly on the speaker’s perception of discourse as an informer.

This polyphony of discourses is itself variously informed: by religious and social customs and rituals; by other literary genres; by those saturated with ideologies from philosophies; and by those issuing from etymologies indigenous to the historical languages spoken in Northern Ireland. By applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism to Seamus Heaney’s poetry, it is possible to see not only that these discourses are multiple and varied, but that the dialogical utterances resonate with cultural, personal, and historical concerns. Although these utterances may be orchestrated by the speaker, they are never monologic.

Numerous critics of Irish Studies have evaluated the poetry of Seamus Heaney, but as far as I know there are no post-structuralist volumes on his work. Dillon Johnston, for example, connects well-known successors to Yeats (Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin and Louis MacNeice) to contemporary poets and, in his discussion, pairs Heaney with Kavanagh. His pairing casts historical light on Heaney’s work and demonstrates both his connection to, and his reaction against, the Irish literary tradition; Robert F. Garratt in Modern Irish Poetry situates the modern Irish poets within a framework bordered at one end by a sense of continuity felt by contemporary writers concerning writers who preceded them and at the other by modern writers’ “nonromantic aesthetic” (3); Blake Morrison, on the other hand, addresses Heaney’s “mediation between speech and silence” (17) in his early poetry, but lapses into biographical sources as illuminators to advance textual interpretation; Neil Corcoran’s fine study,

1. In The Dialogic Imagination dialogism is defined as “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the preexistence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue” (425).

2. Neil Corcoran’s biography parallels in some ways Heaney’s own personal artistic references in Preoccupations and includes, as do Heaney’s personal essays, major elements of the poet’s cultural inheritance. Corcoran,
Seamus Heaney, owes much of its explication of Heaney’s poems to biographical and historical sources and their effect on, or incorporation into, his verse. My approach draws from a major component of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of discourse in the novel, dialogism. I do not deny, however, the autobiographical and historical resonances in Heaney’s poetry, but these resonances, rather than being uttered by the monologic voice of the speaker, become known through the range of voices and frequent silences operating within the text, revealing the consciousness of the artist with its attendant historical and biographical connections. The plethora of voices available to him for orchestration integrate themselves into his texts. Both implicit and explicit voices are heard, dividing, rupturing, coalescing, battling, combining in ways that assist the reader and the poet to make meaning. The very issue with which Bakhtin concerns himself—that discourse is a phenomenon revealing a speaker’s relationship to his world—is a concept I find crucial in interpreting these poems. In order to relate his experiences, the speaker needs to be attentive to the many voices forming them; it is this dialogical process that also reveals aspects of the speaker himself.

In his classic work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929), Bakhtin compared the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and noted the important differences between Tolstoy’s controlling monologic voice and Dostoevsky’s independent “polyphonic” one (*TDI* xxiv). While the former demands close authorial supervision, Bakhtin noted, the latter allows for authorial liberation from the voices in the text and this results in a conversation of voices which retains its autonomy. In Heaney’s poetry various voices assist the speaker’s explorations, preventing monologic intrusion as they encourage dialogical resonances. This exploration permits the discourses within a text to speak for themselves—just as in Dostoevsky’s novels—and, therefore, to remain independent of authorial intrusion. Use of this theory acknowledges the plurality of discourses existing within a text and opens these discourses to a critical view that allows a reader to discern the relationship the discourses have to one another as well as to explore their relationship to the text as a whole. In addition, although the speaker’s voice may resonate within a text, it is heard together with the drama of other voices discernible there. It may be that the other voices are explicitly or implicitly nudged by the speaker, but there is no one authoritative voice that determines the texts’ themes.

Within the text, then, various discourses may imply, negate, or affirm any number of concerns. These concerns, heard through a polyphony of voices residing in each text, may be concerns with which the speaker is most intimately engaged. He may be challenged by these voices, he may be cajoled by them; he may be angered by them, saddened by them, puzzled by them. The discourses that provoke his response, however, are already culturally and socially inscribed and find their way into the text as a record of the ambiguous, reflective, speculative and resistant nature of language itself.

however, views Heaney as a preserver of his heritage despite his “silent awareness” of its religious and cultural division (*Seamus Heaney* [London: Faber and Faber, 1986], p. 16).
Because the speaker, the listener, the reader and the polyphony of voices are unavoidably part of these texts, the juxtaositions, tensions and ambiguities resulting from this pastiche of discursive activity invite an approach allowing for playfulness on the part of the reader. But in trying to identify the multiple voices in the text, the interpreter engages in a game that involves more than mere guessing. The many “languages” that are heard in Heaney’s texts resound like all language, with multiple voices echoing multiple meanings. It is the task of the reader, therefore, to “play” with these languages saturated with meaning(s). In such a reading engagement the reader attempts only to decipher meaning—not to determine it.

Discursive resonances abound in *Field Work* (1979), which, as the title implies, is excavatory. In this volume ground is “opened,” but it is not only the Irish earth that is being tilled, turned over, piled up, sliced down. Languages too accrue in the poems, inviting both speaker and reader to “till” their undulations. What the discourse reveals is not limited to the speaker’s utterance, therefore, but includes all the various and dissident languages operating in the text. Discourses address other discourses and, in the process, unleash language’s power to explore, reap, till, uncover the consciousness of the artist.

Heaney, as author, attempts to wield no authority in texts and prefers, rather, to let the poems yield whatever patterns may be discerned from the possibilities of discursive conflict. Heaney, in an interview, spoke about the “activity of the poem” and affirmed his position as nonauthoritative: “... a lot of what I’ve done has involved other voices, I know that myself, [but] whatever invention of voices occurs, whatever dialogic activity is in the poems, it has mercifully arrived on the hoof, as a momentary resolution of a problem of composition, with the possible exception, that is, of the poem, ‘Station Island,’ where I wanted various voices to be speaking.” While admitting that he wants other voices to be heard via the act of composition, Heaney does not, of course, control the multiple resonances of them; although he creates texts, the voices within them are autonomous: he does not control them. Heaney’s position contradicts that of Harold Bloom, who, when speaking of *Field Work*, stated that it “approaches the cunning stance of the strong poet, evasion” (138). Bloom, in referring to “evasion,” affirms authorial control rather than textual autonomy. Although in *Field Work* a deliberate, thoughtful—often dramatic—contemplation concerning the speaker’s choices occurs, it is not limited to, or by, his voice. Evasion suggests avoiding something, skirting the issue. Heaney’s speaker is not distinguished by evasion as much as he is distinguished by his autonomy to evade, or confront, address, explore, and recollect the many other autonomous voices in the text.

Because of the discursive collisions continuously jarring his chances for monologism, the speaker is forced to orchestrate the colliding discourses rather

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4. Heaney spoke with me in an interview at Harvard University in March 1990.
than to control them with his own utterance. What emerges from the tension in these poems is that often the artistic consciousness of the speaker is revealed by the activity of the ongoing discourses resulting from his voice in conversation with the other voices operating in the text. Heaney’s authorial position is not authoritative; rather, it is conversational.

Often the speaker’s voice is reticent rather than strident: reflective, yet wandering toward some type of answer or affirmation. Questions and doubts haunt him, frequently becoming the subject of the poems, as in “Oysters” and “An Afterwards.” In the former the speaker eats not only the oysters but the landscape and everything that surrounds him: “I ate the day / Deliberately, that its tang / Might quicken me into verb, pure verb” (FW 11). While he is with an Other, “toasting friendship,” he speaks to himself but also, it seems, to that guardian or Virgil or muse he needs to verbalize his aspirations. It is in the very act of addressing, either that Other or some further aspect of himself, that the poem is created. By taking in the day, he nourishes his creative gift, quickens the inchoate into poetry.

One of the themes in Field Work—that of boldly pursuing art on the one hand and shyly retreating from it on the other—emerges through the discursive variety heard within the scenes. Often the speaker is with, or recalls, an Other—person, place, event, thing—so the resulting impression he has of himself shifts from poem to poem because of the dialogues occurring within them and the nature of the consciousnesses that are engaging in the conversations.

With friends in “Oysters” he is “laying down a perfect memory” and eating the day “deliberately”; with his wife in “An Afterwards” he is “dedicated and exemplary,” on the one hand, “ambitious” and willful on the other. His attempts to be monologic may derive from the desire to control his destiny, but they are subverted by the other voices operating in the poem: “I have closed my widowed ears / To the sulphurous news of poets and poetry.”

What the dialogue suggests, however, is the speaker’s need to assert himself. Although he does not always succeed, he often attempts to take charge of the conversation. What the monologic attempts—and they can only be attempts—disclose are the tenacity of the speaker concerning his direction toward art: in this poem, where “she would plunge all poets in the ninth circle,” he is willful, unyielding.

It is no wonder the wife with whom he is conversing assumes the role of the long-suffering antagonist or that in her diatribe she reveals knowledge of her husband’s flaws. Ironically, however, her language underscores some of his most admirable virtues as well: “spurred,” “ambitious,” “unblunted,” “unclenched.” This language, rather than damning a husband, may be praising him. She does not say that he is ruthless; she does not say he is slothful; she does not say he is without focus or direction; she does not say he is a malingerer. What she does say is that her husband, in his way, is dedicated, strong-willed, implacable, unflappable. Is this a condemnation? Surely, a man who aspires “to a kind, / Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact” is not wicked. Although the wife questions the demands her husband’s poetic vocation has placed on the family, her language
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does not disguise the deep feelings she has for him; nor does it hide those characteristics of her husband that may be for her the most engaging.

For his part, while the speaker may feel regret because he did not often “come down laughing from [his] room” / [to walk] “the twilight” with her and the children, one senses this response disguises his guilt. He clothes himself with the canonical garb of church language, with the fire and brimstone words of “hell” as well as the “sin” of “backbiting,” and this assuages his guilt temporarily. By speaking about what his wife would do to poets—“she would plunge all poets in the ninth circle”—the speaker immediately conjures visions of Dante’s Inferno and further exploits his connection to Dante as poet as well as to the Florentine’s association with the traditional theology of the church: there is hell; there is sin; there is guilt. Because the ninth circle is the place for traitors of all kinds, it is suitable for the speaker who has been accused by his wife of betraying his family to pursue his artistic vocation.

And yet by asking whose life is “most dedicated and exemplary?” he attempts to avoid confrontational language. He employs the language of, perhaps, a schoolboy or first communicant in order to secure absolution from her. By admitting that his work may have taken him from his wife and children while also proclaiming his fidelity to them, he amplifies his own personal understanding of an “exemplary” life. Subsequently, his wife—by telling him he wasn’t the “worst”—dismisses him in a gently forgiving way and thereby frees him from having to say more. But while she leaves him in silence, and while one can almost hear the door slam when she says, “You left us first, and then those books, behind,” it is the listening husband with his lingering silence that forestalls resolution.

The religious terminology acts to focus the gravity of the marital situation, as well as to emphasize the poet’s unease about its possible fragmentation. What the religious implications of the language do is both give him a chance to reconcile himself to his wife—at least verbally—as well as ease his own guilt for abandoning her for his art. In addition, the literary allusion to Dante emphasizes the poetic vocations of both. The poem turns, therefore, on the congruence of several languages: spiritual, literary, and childlike; all report the spiritual connection of the poet to his wife, as well as their physical separation of the moment. The speaker, as poet here, may be using poetic language to absolve himself, but his wife employs literary language as well. By parodying his language she raises herself to his level, further confounding his perception of the betrayal for which he is accused.

The multifaceted point of view, as Dillon Johnston writes, is like the “parallactic drift of socalled fixed stars” that Leopold Bloom muses on,5 and

5. “These astronomical references and Bloom’s knowledge of the stars derive from The Story of the Heavens, a book in Bloom’s library by Sir Robert Ball, the Royal Astronomer of Ireland. Later, in ‘Ithaca’ Joyce transforms Ball’s complex term parallax into an elaborate concept by fusing with it certain reflections on time that are only secondary and accidental in Ball’s study. Bloom muses on ‘the parallax or parallactic drift of socalled fixed stars, in reality evermoving from immeasurably remote futures in comparison with which the years, three-score and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity.’ Bloom has paraphrased the ‘group-parallax’ method which Ball explains in Chapter 16 of his book. To parallax two senses of spatial relativity, an object will appear different to two simultaneous viewers or to one viewer at two times of day” (Johnston 35).
allows not only for “various narrative perspectives but specifically for the alternation between panoramic and approximate perspectives” (35). While Johnston emphasizes the writer’s position in a narrative, I maintain that it is parallax, together with the inherent dialogism in the text itself, that allows for various textual disclosures. While questions and doubts haunt the speaker about his artistic vocation by way of the dissident discourses operating in the text—even, at times, becoming the subject of the poems themselves, as in “Oysters” and “An Afterwards”—no single discourse makes a firm claim on him. What Heaney has said, speaking of the work of Yeats, may properly be said about himself, but with reservation: Yeats, as Heaney notes:

encourages you to experience a transfusion of energies from poetic forms themselves and proves that deliberation can be so intensified that it becomes synonymous with inspiration; he reminds you that art is intended, that it is part of the creative push of civilization itself, that it convinces by the deep note of certitude registered in the proclamation itself. (P 110)

The art intended as an artifact in Yeats’s poetry relishes its place in the poetic form enclosing it; the art intended in Heaney’s poetry, although shaped and formed by verse and stanza, relinquishes its adhesions to form and invites art’s freest expression by unleashing all the voices within it. Although art may be intended, what the discourses reveal may be unintentional; for, while art may be “part of the creative push of civilization itself,” it also exposes multiple aspects of that civilization through the stratified discourses that engender it.

Unlike the speaker in Yeats’s poems, Heaney’s speaker is frequently influenced by an Other with whom he must contend, and with whom he may often disagree, as in “An Afterwards.” But discourses also enter Heaney’s poetry from the speaker’s consciousness by way, for example, of a recollected image. Recalling an image may activate other discourses. In the two-quatrain poem “Song,” for example, what seems to be simply the reporting of a recalled image becomes reporting with more serious resonances. From the opening line, “a rowan like a lipsticked girl,” the simile expands to include not merely a description of the tree. By including cartographic discourse—“the by-road and the main road”—the speaker assumes a position that suggests choice and difference and the tree functions as the other, the addressee. The rowan, separated from the alder trees “at a wet and dripping distance,” emphasizes the distinction between the two species of trees and prefigures the discursive distinctions that follow in the second stanza.

The “mudflowers of dialect” polarized against the “immortelles of perfect pitch” emanate from the tension explicit in the image of a “rowan” in its solitariness, its “lipsticked” artifice suggesting a continuous vigilance to achieve perfection. On the other hand, the alder trees standing “off among the rushes” present a very different image from the red-berried, showy rowan. While mutable nature provides the initial image for the poet in the first quatrain, art’s more lasting gift, the gift of words, emerges from the discursive tensions: botanical in the first stanza, linguistic in the second. Although not limited or enclosed by stanzaic framework, this discursive activity is most compellingly explored when the discourses between the two stanzas are juxtaposed to one another.
There is a sense of irreconcilability, a lack of resolution in this poem. Juxtaposing the “by-road” with the “main road” in the first stanza, and elocution with dialect in the second, the speaker urges the ongoing conversation within, and between, the stanzas. As he tries to reconcile the possibility in time (“that moment”) when an image (“the bird”) “sings,” his attempt to record “what happens” orchestrates the discursive tensions in this poem. There is a sense of being poised in midair hearing “the music” for a “moment” in the midst of all the conversations going on in the poem: the bird is singing, the speaker is attempting to record the event in his consciousness, and the language of “what happens” contributes to the ongoing discursive energy in the poem.

There is, as well, a sense of the separateness of the speaker, his uniqueness as a shaper and manager of words. The mystery of poetry writing assumes its place as the subject as a result of the tensions between the discourses; various thematic possibilities emerge enlightening the perception of the poet’s own artistic consciousness. There are possibilities that briefly offer him choices. He is able to see the distinction not only between trees but between dialects and poetic language; ironically, he, like the rowan, may be set apart in an artistic sense from the other members of the tribe “at a wet and dripping distance.” But the possibilities for different discourses to enter the poem lie precisely “on the borderline between [the speaker] and the other” (TDI 293), and it is the meeting of these various voices that gives rise to the discourses courting the speaker’s attention. In this case, the voice of the tribe and the voice of the poet are juxtaposed. The tree, although exemplifying the natural, becomes either tainted or enhanced by the adjective “lipsticked” and suggests the power the speaker wields with words. But his deference to “the moment” and his listening for the “music of what happens” question this power, for it encourages him to record what is, rather than what he would like something to be.

The ongoing drama of voices and silences operating in these poems in Field Work is open-ended and diverse. The discourses fluctuate because the speaker, in conversation with himself or others, often effects discursive shifts as he explores concerns that reveal his artistic consciousness. That the conversations may evolve from Heaney’s personal recollections does not necessarily mean the speaker’s memories will saturate the discourse. The variousness of the languages entering into his dialogues encourages exploration, as well as revelation, of the consciousness of this artist.

The value of Bakhtin’s theory for exploring Heaney’s poetry is significant. Using the theory of dialogism is in itself a dialogical process, for the theory resonates against and with the poetic discourse and illuminates the intertextuality between them. By interpreting Heaney’s poetry in this way, the theory may be understood more fully, and one can, therefore, see its efficacy through practical application. The dialogues between the poetry and the theory attest to the indeterminacy of discourse as well as to its ability to open possibilities for meaning.
Works Cited


