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## “O My Pablo of Earthlife!” Heaney’s Neruda and the Reality of the World

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### *Abstract:*

Does Seamus Heaney reject Pablo Neruda? That is the view of John Dennison, who argues that Heaney could not give full consent to Neruda’s “impure” poetry (Dennison 2015, 117). This essay seeks to challenge that interpretation. It does so by showing the poet’s engagement with Neruda’s “Towards an Impure Poetry” and contextualising the late poem, “To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaght-duff”, not only in the framework of its host volume, *District and Circle*, but in Heaney’s oeuvre. Tracing Heaney’s interrogations of the ontological status of phenomena the world beyond the self as a constituent part of the inner state of the writer, I suggest that he recognises the value of Neruda’s materialism earlier than he truly acts upon it. Selected poems illustrate the redevelopment of this materialism which culminates in the implacable naturalism of *District and Circle*. I also offer parallels between Heaney’s and Neruda’s understanding of death, similarities that provide further grounds upon which to see how the aging Derry man embraced the Chilean’s morally persuasive vision.

*Keywords:* Death, Heaney, Neruda, Phenomena, Sensation

In his 1985 essay “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych”, Seamus Heaney draws on this passage from Pablo Neruda’s “Towards an Impure Poetry”:

It is well, at certain hours of the day and night, to look closely at the world of objects at rest. Wheels that have crossed long, dusty distances with their mineral and vegetable burdens, sacks from the coalbins, barrels and baskets, handles and hafts for the carpenter’s tool chest. From them flow the contact of man with the earth, like a text for all harassed lyricists. The used surfaces of things, the wear that the hands give to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others – all lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be underprized. (Neruda 1961, 39)

But Heaney deleted the line “a text for all harassed lyricists”. The change earned the attention of John Dennison, who

described it as “neat doctoring” and a rejection of Neruda’s view: Heaney, committed to “a transcendental account of poetry’s moral function”, was “unable to conceive of history as other than a locus of defeat, denigration, violence, and death, his eliding quotation skipping over the contaminating analogy of used surfaces and a lyric poetry of attachment”. Neruda, by contrast, was totally committed to revelling in this “broken contingency of life” (Dennison 2015, 117). But this is oversimplification. We should take into account, for example, Heaney’s brief discussion of “Hercules and Antaeus” in 1981. He associated Hercules with the intellect and the pattern-making of Borges, which “is so different from the pleasures of Neruda, who’s more of an Antaeus figure”. As the Antaeus figure of that poem, Heaney’s remarks might allow us to infer a long-standing identification with Neruda. Other interpretations are available. Heaney may have been concealing his more arcane interests in textuality and material mysticism. In the early 1980s, Ted Hughes sent him a copy of Frances Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). Heaney would later use this as subject matter for *The Haw Lantern* (1987) and *Seeing Things* (1991), as well as part of the designing phase of his dustjackets and titles (Brandes 1998, 2008). The more prosaic reason is that the omitted line is less relevant to Heaney’s concerns. It detracts from the vivid description of our world, a reality we all share and not just one accessible to lyricists, harassed or otherwise.

Heaney’s essay recognized in Neruda a moral persuasiveness, and his conclusions suggests that he also recognized a challenge in this very authority: the declaration that the reality of the world should not be easily underprized “implies that we can and often do underprize it. We grow away from our primary relish of the phenomena that influence us in the first world of our being” (Heaney 1985, 31). Almost a decade later, the same passage was quoted again in Heaney’s 1993 essay “The Sense of the Past”. It was a further endorsement of the Chilean, and this time there are glimpses of even stronger spiritual conviction. What Heaney first tentatively called “moments ‘the reality of the world’ first awaken in us” (*ibidem*) become “archetypal moments, occurring in every life irrespective of intellectual, social or economic differences” (1993, 33). The pleasures of Neruda, then, are archetypal pleasures, the full recognition of the reality of the world with its accretions and retention of the past.

The sensations in which those pleasures are grounded are certainly in evidence when, in 2006, Heaney published “To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff” in his eleventh and penultimate major volume, *District and Circle*. The poem does not underprize the world; it is hypersensitive to it. Since 1993, Heaney had, of course, cast Neruda as a fundamentally political poet. In the *Paris Review* in 1997, he named Neruda in a category of writers who “share a specifically political understanding of the world” (Cole 1997). Two years after the poem was published, *Stepping Stones* reinforced this categorisation. Whereas Neruda’s was an issue-based work, Heaney aspired to the role of visionary-public poet, a role which he was careful to define: the “public poetry of the sort I value”, he told Dennis O’Driscoll, “springs from the poet’s inner state and gives vent and voice to a predicament as well as addressing the state of the poet’s world” (O’Driscoll 2008, 385). It is a subtle difference (and not entirely convincing), as Heaney conceded (*ibidem*). After all, Neruda’s work is implicated in this late poem’s expression of an inner state which holds a personal past accessed by sensation and recognises the ontological status of the world beyond the self.

But why, then, did it take Heaney twenty years to celebrate in poetry this aspect of Neruda which he so clearly considered an indispensable part of the human experience? This article seeks to address the question by placing the poem in the context of Heaney’s development. Implicit in his 1985 essay is the fact that he had indeed grown away from the primary relish of the world. This condition was always bound to happen when he had decided, at exactly the same

time, to actively divest landscape of its corporeality. Starting with the details of the poem, we can circle back to see how this occurs and trace the steady redevelopment and reconfiguration of materialism in Heaney’s poetics. And in returning to the objects at rest and the surfaces visible throughout *District and Circle*, there are also parallels between Heaney and Neruda’s understanding of death.

“To Pablo Neruda at Tamlaghtduff” describes the moment when Heaney eats crab-apple jelly, a gift from his friend Niall Fitzduff, who appears to have sourced his main ingredient from a tree at Duffs corner in Ardboe. The “home-truth Neruda” addressed at the end of the poem is a good fit for Fitzduff, an indigenous resident of Ardboe and deeply experienced community worker on a local and international scale (and like Neruda he is “round-faced”). Around the time the poem was written, Fitzduff was Commissioner of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development (2004-2007) and in the process of co-authoring an academic study entitled “How Did Northern Ireland Move Toward Peace?” (Fitzduff, Williams 2007)<sup>1</sup>. But perhaps the more pertinent fact is that he and his wife, the Irish-American academic Mari Fitzduff, spent a year researching community projects in South America in the 1970s (and were actually arrested in Argentina for cleaning drains alongside liberation-theology priests) (Stout 2019). Heaney evidently associates Fitzduff’s work and travels in South America with the work and travels of Neruda.

Yet, if the poem conveys any kind of political message, it is in the oblique and philosophical way in which we tend to recognize *as* politics the importance of personal experience. This is symbolized in Heaney’s oeuvre by the Antaeus figure with whom he identifies Neruda. In an earlier discussion of the politics of “Hercules and Antaeus”, in 1977, Heaney told Seamus Deane how he regretted how the poem lent support to his contemporaries’ tendency to let the rational win out too much, especially when there is “always the question in everybody’s mind whether the rational and humanist doom which produced what we call civilisation in the West should be allowed full command in the psyche, speech and utterance of Ulster” (Deane 1977, 67). Like Heaney and the rest of us, Fitzduff would probably always defend the place of rational humanism. But poetry is a different matter. When Heaney began to put his literary house in order and published *Opened Ground* in 1998, he included in the section for “Death of a Naturalist” the uncollected 1996 poem “Antaeus”, in which he admits: “I cannot be weaned off the earth’s long contour” (Heaney 1998, 16). He thus credited the pull of atavistic pieties. The profane perfection of mankind is the aim of this writer, whereas Fitzduff’s role lies somewhere closer to that of the “righter” (Heaney 2009).

So when Heaney lays claim in the second stanza of the poem to *his* Neruda (“O my Pablo of earthlife!”), there are good reasons to believe that he is also alluding to something beyond these suggestive political connotations which suit Fitzduff’s profile and the Chilean poet. As well as the epithet “earthlife”, the exclamatory “O” and possessive “my” reflect a more fundamental, erotic attachment to the world of phenomena. The taste of the jelly brings the speaker’s mind and body back to Heaney family home in the Tamlaghtduff district of Bellaghy. Formally, the

<sup>1</sup> Fitzduff has had several roles. He was the Community Development Officer with the Community Relations Commission from 1970 until 1974, and he was a researcher with the Community Development Review Group in the late 1980s. He worked for the Rural Community Network (NI), which was established in 1991. From 1996 to 1999 he was a Board Member of Combat Poverty Agency and a member of National Economic and Social Forum 1999-2003 in the Republic of Ireland. He was a member of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Stakeholder’s Forum and a member of the Government Voluntary & Community Sector Forum. Fitzduff was also involved in the establishment of the Civic Forum for NI. And he established and ran a woodcraft business for 14 years and has been involved in a range of voluntary projects in Ardboe, Co. Tyrone, where he was born and still lives.

poem bursts into life after the exact moment of taste is recounted. The mind recalls the tree at Duff's corner in Ardboe, but the ooze of jelly on the tongue stirs memories of a cardinal point in the first world of being (Tamlaghtduff). When the "unflowery" tree in Ardboe becomes the "corona / of gold" in Bellaghy (2006, 64-65), it begs to be read next to the moment when Neruda's "lemon tree's yellow" blooms into "barbarous gold":

... a clotting of acids  
brims  
into the starry  
divisions:  
creation's  
original juices,  
irreducible, changeless,  
alive (Neruda 1961, 235)

And the way in which Heaney evokes the feeling of taste – his eyes are "on stalks" (Heaney 2006, 65) – recalls the surrealism of "Ritual of My Legs". In that poem, Neruda compares his legs to stalks in order to conjure, with "infinite tenderness", the "brutish and lubberly" substance of a world where people travel "without thought for their bodies, barely aware of its vigors" (Neruda 1961, 71). Heaney's Neruda-act also stimulates memories and sensations of "foxgloves", transporting us back to the days of his debut volume *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). It is easy enough, moreover, to see parallels between Neruda's own early work and the revolutionary impact of Heaney's first book. Unlike his classmate Deane, who craved "ideas", Heaney wanted to "write about the sycamores" (Heaney 1975, 70). That early artistic principle is similarly honoured by this Nerudian sensuousness.

But this is a position at which Heaney arrives after years of intense spiritual enquiry. He came to distrust of the world of sycamores. More than a residual Catholic scepticism of worldly desires, Heaney expressed radical doubt about our ordinary perception and the actual reality at our fingertips. His work was not, as his blurb to *Seeing Things* claimed, always faithful to the "grain of things" (1991). Or perhaps it would be better to say the grain of things did not always earn the poet's faith. "Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" (1979, 58) was one of the ambitions of *Field Work*, but the palpable itself would soon give way to unsayable emptiness.

Traces of Heaney's doubt in empirical realities come in *Station Island*, published a year before "Place, Pastness, Poetry". On the run up to taking flight as the bird-man Sweeney in the third part of the book, Heaney challenges both his professed and proven attachment to Irish topography and his everyday perception of matter. A visit to Thomas Hardy's Brockhampton, in one case, forms the background to this new counter-narrative. Everywhere being nowhere, he speculates, no one can really prove one place more than another, and a range of displaced words denoting real things – "birthplace", "roofbeam", "whitewash", "flagstone", "hearth" – become like "unstacked iron weights / afloat among galaxies" (1984, 35). Other poems do still dwell on the historical and cultural aura of objects, such as a chip from Joyce's Martello Tower ("Granite Chip"). But materiality does not enjoy the same ontological primacy as it does in the earlier work or the more recent landscapes of *Field Work*. In the third poem of "Station Island", the speaker witnesses the decaying corpse of a family dog and subsequently imagines "walking round and round a space / Utterly empty, utterly a source" (68). In the closing stages of "Sweeney Redivivus", words and sensation are divested of meaning rooted in an accepted, embodied reality. The speaker recounts the loss of faith in the Latin phrases of Mass he recited as a child, and as a secularized adult, he walks under birds like "incredible souls" in flight over

Sandymount Strand, Heaney’s home ground since 1976: “even the range wall of the promenade / that I press down on for conviction / hardly tempts me to credit it” (118). The wear that the hand gives to the wall not only fails to lend attractiveness to the reality of the world but fails to convince the speaker of the world’s reliability – of which more later in connection with T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.

The trees of Heaney’s Neruda poem are rooted in his next period of development in the 1980s. But perhaps we should speak of the trees being *replanted*, like we see happening elsewhere in *District and Circle* (“Planting the Alder”). Heaney’s (re)visionary lecture on Patrick Kavanagh, in 1985, had changed his longstanding conception of the Monaghan poet – one focused primarily on geographical place as the only way to lend credence to messages of transcendence – to align with changes in his own spirituality which made the tree a symbol of rootlessness. Looking back, this is a paradox. Heaney’s endorsement of Neruda’s materialism was published in the same year as this endorsement of Kavanagh’s inner freedom. But as far as his main poetics are concerned, Heaney was no longer interested in the primary relish of naturalistic data. Instead, he fosters a metaphysical idealism: in the geographical place where a chestnut tree had been planted at Mossbawn to mark his birth in 1939, he now sees the “luminous emptiness” of a placeless, “imagined realm” (1988 [1985], 4). And the same felled tree becomes the ramifying soul in “Clearances”, where the final poem draws on the “utterly empty” source (1987, 32). “The Wishing Tree”, located in Ardboe like the crab-apple tree, is similarly uprooted to convey weightlessness (36). Each of these poems were collected in *The Haw Lantern*, contributing to the book’s central feeling of things melting from our grasp: substantiality, like the promenade walls, looked like it could only be credited when it is embraced *in extremis*.

Heaney’s Neruda poem also contains a reference to “our tree ascendant in Tamlaghtduff”, terms that recall Rilke’s “Orpheus”: “A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!” (Rilke 1949, 35). Heaney in fact used Rilke’s image as part of the major intellectual statements of his inaugural Richard Ellmann lectures in 1988, collected as *The Place of Writing* (1989). Heaney promoted the idea that the poetic imagination in its strongest manifestation imposes its vision upon the world rather than accept it from it. Heaney accepted potential criticisms of an absurd solipsism, but visionary fiction is praised (credited) because it demonstrates “inner grace” (Heaney 1989). “The Settle Bed”, in *Seeing Things*, thus held that “whatever is given / Can always be reimagined” (1991, 29). And elsewhere in that volume, Heaney gleefully cleaves to the Heraclitean dictum: “Everything flows, even a solid man” (85). Moral persuasiveness, in these terms, lies in the transcendental imagination of enlightenment which, by its very nature, underprizes the ordinary way of looking at things (and people) with their own unique histories.

In 1989, Heaney’s Oxford lectures – published as *The Redress of Poetry* in 1995 – would continue to promote this idea of poetry as a transcendent counterweight to the heaviness of being. His poetry would remain committed to an enlightened understanding of emptiness and flux, but we can see in the wake of *Seeing Things* the reinstatement of a sturdier, Nerudian-like materialism. The crab-apple jelly of Ardboe which Heaney would spread so generously has a precursor in “Damson”, the distinctively tactile poem from *The Spirit Level*. Its historical contexts of the Second World War aside, the poem cooks up the smell of damsons “simmering in a pot. / Jam ladled thick and steaming down the sunlight” (1996, 16). Like *Death of a Naturalist*, the quality of this smell is presented almost in synaesthesia. It is not surprising that Gail McConnell has associated the poem with “Blackberry Picking” and read it in her chosen contexts of the Eucharist. After Henri de Lubac (via Hans Urs von Balthasar), McConnell claims that the poem enacts a “perpetual reactualisation”, one which, like the Eucharist, is not simply a remembrance of something in the past, but the continual manifestation of the Body

of the Lord and his Sacrifice, in the same fashion that Scripture is less a question of history than the form and utterance of God's Word uttered unceasingly (McConnell 2014, 104). This is admittedly obscure but it is still helpful, because it works equally well in terms of the human body and its access to a timeless personal past.

Like the eyes on stalks, "Damson" is also conscious of its grounding in the body: the bricklayer's wound is in "glutinous colour fifty years ago" – a weird omen from the past to be experienced in the present – and it is also "weeping with the held -at-arm's-length dead / From everywhere and nowhere, *here and now*" (Heaney 1996, 16. My italics). Everywhere may be nowhere, as the Hardy poem conceded years earlier, but the poem attests to the way in which bodily sensation stores memory for future access. In this way, the heaviness of being *is* the transcendent counterweight. The representation of an inner state of beatitude in *The Spirit Level* – the kingdom of God within – takes on and values this common sense of the world "out there". We should understand that everything flows, but poems such as "The Rainstick" or "The Gravel Walks", which rehearse the idea of private beatitude, increasingly gesture to the unknowable otherness of the physical world without having to undermine the ordinary perception of it.

It is this metaphysical value of visible realities which continues to deepen as Heaney gets older. His next volume, *Electric Light* (2001), provides yet another reading of Kavanagh. He comes full circle to the first set of values. "The Loose Box" is in thrall to Kavanagh's love of "any talk about / The properties of land". Heaney is not asserting the superiority of rural environs, but rather physical properties of any kind which ground us in the world are welcomed as proof of our "inner restitution" (2001, 14). This is a far cry from 1985 – unless, of course, we see that it reflects not the Kavanagh lecture, but the values of Neruda embraced by "Place, Pastness, Poems".

Indeed, further objects are requisitioned from the world to validate the principles of the latter essay. A poorly built crib of Jesus' birth becomes the objective correlative of early religious doubts. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* anticipates the feeling of horse carts in Tamblaghtduff, bringing up old sensations of farming logistics "in the stilly night, chaff piled in ridges, / Earth raw where the four wheels rocked and battled" (16). The ambush and assassination of Michael Collins at Béal na Bláth in 1922 becomes the archetypal moment: *in extremis* Collins thinks of a trapdoor in the hayloft of his own childhood farm. "True or not true", Heaney avers, there is an "underworld of understanding", one which is more important than official dates of the newspaper reel (*ibidem*). It is almost verbatim of his gloss on Neruda – the personal past is not determined by calendar-dates or any clear time-scale but a "dream-time" learned by sensation (1993, 34).

And thanks to his contemporaneous translation of *Beowulf* (1999), these poems enjoy a wider, rich frame of reference within a volume steeped in the tragic and pathetic air cherished by Neruda in his contemplation of impure poetry. Heaney makes room, at Yeats's expense, for passive suffering in a picture of the soul rooted in the locale, a realist view of things reinforced by the book's concluding scene of Milltown graveyard in Magherafelt, where the fingernail of Heaney's maternal grandmother shines perpetually "among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground" (2001, 81). "Known World" insists on this tragic disposition ("That old sense of tragedy going on / Uncomprehended, at the very edge of the usual"). So the state of beatitude in *The Spirit Level* (1996) continues to take into account the private, subjective self and its contact with the external world, and it increasingly leans towards the latter for truth and meaning.

Earlier doubts in the *quidditas* of the range wall at Sandymount Strand are also alleviated by *Electric Light*. "Vitruviana" takes us back to Dublin for another look, and the speaker's view

draws upon Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. The present tense evokes the movement of light bathing the strand, and the claim to have an ability to “connect / Some bits and pieces” (53) gestures to Eliot's “Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” in “The Fire Sermon” (Eliot 1975, 70). Those lines are about Eliot's mental exhaustion in October 1921, and they are also linked with the subsequent references to the Buddhist text which teaches us to forsake the fleeting pleasures of the physical world (Warren 1896, 351-353). Heaney, though, feels energised by love of the flesh. He sees things with his underworld of understanding. The aesthetic realisation of bodily sensuality and being in space are a result of intense focus on the material world: he recalls being in the pool at Portstewart where he stood like a Vitruvian man, “buoyant to the fingertips” and “tickled by the steel-zip cold meniscus” (Heaney 2001, 53). The metaphysical geometry gestures beyond – but does not exist independently of – the immediate phenomenological experience.

In the second section of the poem, in which Heaney and his schoolmates do star jumps at football training, the deathly and self-denying crucifixion painting of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* is casually transformed into a pleasurable, tactile memory, with the spiritual dimension glimpsed in the lines piercing the saint's palms. The Aristotelian world of the deep pool is framed by the Platonic one, but now it is penetrated by it. In the third section of the poem, the speaker draws on the Proteus episode of *Ulysses*, where Stephen Dedalus walks on Sandymount Strand: “Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes” (Joyce 1922, 31). It is a departure, in this context, from Eliot's Buddhism. As a whole, the visionary perspective embodies an attraction to the point where, in Heaney's terms, the “visible and invisible meet”. As Heaney said of Felim Egan, the dedicatee of the poem, one part of the artist is “in love with geometry and the symmetrical ideal represented by Leonardo's diagram”, but another part is “all eyes for what is actually there in front of him” (Heaney 1999). But above all, the metaphysical dimension is rooted in “the exquisite ache that the physical world induces” (1992).

This is the lineage extended, I think, by the exquisite ache and inner restitution of “To Pablo in Tamlaghtduff”. But the poem is also seamlessly embedded in the omnipresent materialism and historical world of *District and Circle*. The “imagination seems not only to press against reality”, as Peter Campion has observed, “but to plunge it in a cleansing solution. The world shines up from these pages with refreshed particularity and tactile exactitude” (Campion 2006). It is a mature vision available to everyone and not just to harassed lyricists. But this is where we press up against another reality: like Neruda, Heaney is a special individual with a special sensibility. Setting out the terms of “Place, Pastness, Poetry” and charting the objects of this volume would not have given an adequate sense of the years of spiritual labour upon which the vision of the book is based. Heaney was, as John Montague said, “a mystic of the ordinary” (Montague 2013). In this connection, Heaney and Neruda each make materialism play a *role* in their artistic visions. And watching the hand that moves over the surface of objects in *District and Circle*, its role in the book is to serve the understanding and representation of death.

Heaney, like Neruda, also revels in the contingency of life in a calculated way. The first object of *District and Circle* is the turnip-snedder which absorbs and articulates the seasons under the watch of the omniscient creator: “This is the way that God sees life” (Heaney 2006, 1). The poem conveys, as Heaney said of Hardy's “Channel Firing”, the “patient God's eye view of all things, war included, as a cyclic pattern, a pattern seemingly demonstrated by history to be inevitable like seasonal labour” (1985, 44). War dominates the historical consciousness of the book. “To Mick Joyce in Heaven” and “Edward Thomas on Lagan Road” refer to the British army forces of the Second World War, while “Anahorish, 1944” records the influx of American

soldiers to Northern Ireland. “Anything Could Happen” is an allegory of the 9/11 assault on the World Trade Centre in New York, and “The Helmet” contains the sweat and blood of the rescue mission. The sledgehammer of *A Shiver* is the object which carries the reality of the Iraq war. Heaney reflected on the poem’s meaning:

[...] I think it wasn’t just a physical sensation I was trying to get at. It was about the full exercise of merciless, violent power. It was a poem written after Iraq. There were no Iraq references in it, but it is about the sense of transgression you have when you utterly, mercilessly use a sledgehammer, even when hitting a dead post. There’s a kind of unrestrained fury, an unforgiving brutality to it that I wanted to get. So I think that you can transmit sensation but hopefully suggest and effect a consequence as well. (Heaney 2010)

The unstacked weights that were once afloat in the galaxies are being hammered down. But the balance has shifted to let us see “unforgiving brutality”. Hull-thick, this is a world that cannot be “reimagined”. Perception of the eternal flux, or the Romantic transcendent, is of no consolation. Heaney’s friend Rand Brandes has neatly summarized this grim landscape of the book: “There is no end in sight, no revelation, no resurrection or rebirth, just meaningless filling the vacuum of space. Even the innocent participate (without irony) in their own demise”. In this mechanical universe, ruthlessness and revenge “rule the endless darkness of the animus” (Brandes 2016, 337). If the attractiveness of the world should not be underprized, the blind callousness of it is hard to take. And on this evidence, we may have been better off talking about parallels between Heaney and the Neruda who yells “come see the blood / in the streets!” (Neruda 1961, 113).

But absolute materialism, this violence of nature red in tooth and claw, and absolute emptiness, the eternal flux and timeless moment of enlightenment, are two sides of the one coin – namely, absolute omnipresence, a state of being reserved for God. We cannot pretend to be liberated in either way from human consciousness, as Heaney recognized in another context (O’Driscoll 2008, 200). Heaney’s coordinates of history, power and war in the volume make up one dimension of reality – the biological and physical. The other dimension is spiritual, the part of him which recognizes that these things do not have inherent existence. So the surfaces of the world cannot be *overprized* without equally severe costs. Heaney sees the death guaranteed by life through the lens of his spiritual explorations, and in this regard there are parallels between Neruda’s and *District and Circle*’s sophisticated perspective on mortality.

Neruda derived the following reflections from his reading of the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo, for whom, in Neruda’s view, “metaphysics is intensely physical”:

If on being born we begin to die, if each day brings us closer to an already determined limit, if life itself is a pathetic stage of death, if the very instant of budding forth advances toward the decay of which the final moment is the only culmination of its passage, aren’t we integrated with death in our daily life, aren’t we a perpetual part of death, aren’t we then the most audacious part, the part that has already left death? Is the most mortal thing the most vital? (Neruda 1968, 14)

This metaphysical view is embodied by “The Blackbird of Glanmore”, the last poem of *District and Circle*. Under the eye of the resident bird, Heaney has a moment of reflection in the car which leads to an onrush of memories. Lines from Sophocles about craving death and union with the father precede the image of the “little stillness dancer” Christopher, Heaney’s younger brother who was immortalised by “Mid-Term Break” from *Death of a Naturalist*. Christopher’s tragic death, we now learn, was foretold by a woman who read the world by omens. There are myriad allusions to suggest that the Glanmore blackbird is the symbol of death. The aerial view of the poet recalls the

biblical image of *Seeing Things*, where we see the “bare, bowed, numbered heads” of children on a boat, as well as the portrait of the near-death experience of Heaney’s father, “his ghost hood imminent” (in the yard afterwards) witnessed by the son who watched him through the house window (Heaney 1991, 16-18). The calm atmosphere of acceptance is informed by a familiar image from Zen Buddhism: the poet sees himself as a shadow on the “raked gravel” of his Glanmore cottage. But when he claims to love the blackbird, Heaney commits himself to death in Shakespearean terms: “I am absolute for you” (2006, 76). Brandes located this allusion for us: in the opening scene of Act III of *Measure for Measure*, the Duke encourages the imprisoned Claudio, who seeks clemency, to imagine death as better than life: “Be absolute for death” (Shakespeare 2008, 2072). As Brandes has informed us, Heaney probably knew this passage was open at Ted Hughes’s deathbed. It is a poignant detail, but Brandes surely mischaracterizes Heaney’s attitude when he claims that the poet is “rejecting the passage from Shakespeare” (Brandes 2016, 342). It is a positive acceptance of death, of the disappearance of the mind which enacts that acceptance, hence Heaney’s response aligning with Claudio’s: “To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And, seeking to die, find life” (*ibidem*). And we should recall another spiritual principle from the Kavanagh lecture of 1985: “abandonment of a life in order to find more abundant life” (Heaney 1988, 12). That same year, as we have seen, Heaney had paradoxically heeded Neruda’s warning not to underprize the world. In this closing poem of his penultimate volume, Heaney meets both challenges and transcends them into a single, vital thought of perpetual death integrated with daily life.

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