

## Seamus Heaney's Revelation of Self Through Community

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Don't shun your ancestors' customs, they're part  
of you the way your blunted talent  
sheathes the swift blade made them so sharp.  
Cathal Ó Searcaigh<sup>1</sup>

Seamus Heaney's poetry has always displayed a great deal of self-awareness with regard to identification with family and ancestry. In recent years the poet has readily discussed early attachments and identification processes when interviewed about his artistic sources<sup>2</sup>. These attachments feed into Heaney's creative process and his aesthetic outlook in general, to such an extent, that self, parents, ancestry, and community appear as interdependent elements in the poetry. As Heaney puts it, «Poetry is born out of the watermarks and colourings of the self. But that self in some ways takes its spiritual pulse from the inward spiritual structure of the community to which it belongs»<sup>3</sup>. Whether or not the idea of a 'spiritual structure' in a community is accepted as a reality, it cannot be denied that poetry is the product of a self which is the product of a community. Heaney is not the only modern Irish poet to acknowledge the role which community plays in the creative process. For example, Thomas Kilroy challenges the widespread view that «literature is the product of an individualistic mind», and questions the popular association of «the act of writing [...] with a transcending of the ordinary, everyday social facts of existence»<sup>4</sup>. A psychoanalytical approach to literary criticism, in which the theory of Object Relations is applied to determine the key attachments influencing the poetry, offers fresh opportunities for interpreting Heaney's work. In particular, a study of how the poet has internalised a sense of ancestry and community and how strongly he identifies with these sources reveals much about his view of self identity.

D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) suggests that the 'object' is fundamentally a symbol of the union between mother and child, and states that «the use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things»<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, he theorises that, «to use an object the subject must have developed a *capacity* to use objects. This is part of the change to the reality principle. [...] The development of a capacity to use an object is another example of the maturational

process as something that depends on a facilitating environment»<sup>6</sup>. All individuals relate to certain objects as part of the process of identity formation, but the environmental conditions play a vital role in determining what becomes of these objects. The first object is usually the mother (many psychoanalysts including Melanie Klein suggest it is the breast<sup>7</sup>) but as Winnicott explains, each individual develops a personal pattern for relating to the «first “not-me” possession»<sup>8</sup>. However, only the individual whose early environment is stable and consistent (for example through ‘good-enough’ mothering) can start to use the object. According to Winnicott, the capacity to *use* an object «is more sophisticated than a capacity to relate to objects» and this results in «a world of shared reality»<sup>9</sup>. In a number of Heaney poems, it is obvious that he is not only *relating* to his objects, but internalising them despite their sense of ‘otherness’, and *using* them for his creative purposes. When one critic relates Heaney’s use of the words «boundaries», «old division», and «displaced», purely to socio-political issues, he misses a major opportunity to understand how the poet’s aesthetic endeavour is linked to his early personal experiences<sup>10</sup>.

A glance through the contents page of *Seeing Things*<sup>11</sup> indicates that Heaney identifies with and uses particular objects from childhood as the subject of many poems, for example, in *The Pitchfork* (p. 23), *The Biretta* (p. 24), *The Settle Bed* (p. 28), and *The Schoolbag* (p. 30). However, one of the best examples of Heaney’s object use in relation to exploring attachment and/or division is *Terminus* in *The Haw Lantern*<sup>12</sup> (p. 4). In this poem Heaney uses familiar objects from childhood to emphasise the pluralistic nature of his home environment, where modern industrialisation co-exists with nature and a traditional rural lifestyle:

When I hoked there, I would find  
An acorn and a rusted bolt.

If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney  
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting  
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought  
I would have second thoughts?

Rather than simply representing an image of contrast, difference, and ‘other’, the poet uses the ambiguities to illustrate how he has, in a sense, destroyed any opposing forces relating to the objects, by balancing them and reconciling them within himself:

Two buckets were easier carried than one.  
I grew up in between.

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.  
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

The result of focussing on seemingly disparate objects is balance, harmony and the use of the object to achieve a highly successful (perhaps 'typically' Heaney-esque) aesthetic effect. 'Object' and 'Other' can be used as interchangeable terms in this context and it should not be forgotten that the first object is usually the person (male or female) who mothers the infant. The child's experience of early mothering dictates all future dealings with 'others' or 'objects', including those encountered and/or identified with in adulthood. Winnicott outlines the typical sequence of events as follows<sup>13</sup>:

1. Subject relates to object
2. Object is found by subject
3. Subject repeatedly destroys object
4. Object survives destruction
5. Subject can use object.

The first two steps are regarded as essential stages in the search for self and are linked directly to the female element of mothering and to identity formation:

[I]t is here, in the absolute dependence on maternal provision of that special quality by which the mother meets or fails to meet the earliest functioning of the female element, that we may seek the foundation for the experience of being<sup>14</sup>.

The word «destroy» as used in step three of Winnicott's sequence may seem harsh, but his commentary reveals that in the non-literal sense, this is a natural process. There is a positive value in destructiveness, which allows an individual to attain a mature psychological appreciation of the Other:

This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object; that is, an object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control. [...] a world of shared reality is created which the subject can use and which can feed back other-than-me substance into the subject<sup>15</sup>.

Common examples of this destructiveness might be a child's rebellion against a parental figure, an early move away from the family home, or the enactment of some other form of rejection. In Winnicott's theory, it is only when the subject recognises that the object has survived the destruction (step 4) that true love for the object as a separate being in a world of shared reality, can begin. Only when «continuity of care»<sup>16</sup> is present, can the subject move on to step 5 of the process, whereby he/she can start to *use* the object. If this theory is applied to Heaney's poems which represent the mother, it can be seen that when he figuratively 'destroys' the ever-present and nurturing mother

figure by seeing her as Other (for example, in *Clearances* in *HL*, p. 24, and *Two Lorries* in *The Spirit Level*<sup>7</sup>, p. 13), he can move on to *using* her as a source for his creativity. This pattern which is formed in childhood and begins with the mother figure, is repeated throughout life (providing the environment is a nurturing one), and provides a benchmark for how the mature adult deals with other people in his/her life. In Heaney's case, 'object use' feeds into his creative work and surfaces in poems referring to other 'objects' and other 'others', both female and male.

In some of Heaney's poems, for example, in *Station Island*<sup>8</sup> (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), and *Seeing Things* (1991), Winnicott's words which describe «the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object» and «a world of shared reality» ring true<sup>9</sup>. In these collections, Heaney writes about Others in a mature and sophisticated manner, whilst using his own deep identification with the Other, to produce poetry which is original and thought-provoking. It could be argued that some of Heaney's earlier work does not display this level of maturity with regard to the Other, but self-identification issues certainly surface and resurface throughout his long writing career.

Heaney's process of identification relies a great deal on his sense of ancestry and community. The following discussion defines ancestry as the personal history of an individual and this incorporates family members, shared memories and inherited identities. Community refers to the local context and encompasses Heaney's identification with his home territory and the people who occupy that locale, as opposed to any broader sense of the term, for example, nationalist community, which is so often applied in a Northern Irish context. It is worth noting that Heaney's attitude to nationalism is reflected in his identification with Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen<sup>20</sup>. The discussion reveals how Heaney's moderate nationalism can be compared to Tone's «concentration of affection for the land in which you live and the people with whom you share it»<sup>21</sup>. In Heaney's case, this affection extends not only to ancestors, whose influence seems ever-present in the poet's close-knit family, but also to the wider community around the Mossbawn farm and rural County Derry.

## 1

### Attachment to ancestry and the wider community

Heaney's early poetry presents the reader with a detailed personal interpretation of his roots and ancestry. Poems such as *Ancestral Photograph* (*Death of a Naturalist*<sup>22</sup>, p. 15) and *Mossbawn* (*North*<sup>23</sup>, p. 8) identify the poet as belonging to cattle-breeding, Ulster farming stock who still follow the traditional «calendar customs» (*N*, p. 10). Similarly, the descriptive lyrics in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), for example *Blackberry Picking*, *Churning Day*, and *At a Potato Digging*, chronicle a pastoral lifestyle, which the poet presents

as his inheritance. Many of the poems in *Door into the Dark*<sup>24</sup> (1969) also reflect the gritty realism of growing up on a farm whilst there is evidence of the poet's respect for his rural roots, for example, in the prophet-like description of the magic done by the craftsman with «his Midas touch» in *The Thatcher* (*DD*, p. 8). However, the poet is constantly aware of progress and change in such a community and is equally aware of his enterprise, which, although recording his genealogical inheritance, is also «Closing this chapter of our chronicle» (*DN*, p. 16). There is perhaps ambiguity in Heaney's choice of title for his second volume of poetry, *Door into the Dark*, which is dedicated to his father and mother. Some of the poems in this collection could be said to have distinctly negative connotations<sup>25</sup>. Poems such as *Night-Piece*, *Gone*, *Dream*, and *The Outlaw* certainly contain a sense of what has been lost, left, or even rejected, and at times the reader may detect a sense of the poet's entrapment in this community. Closely witnessed farm life, for example in *Turkeys Observed*, *Cow in Calf*, and *Trout* (*DN*, pp. 26-28) becomes oppressive, and perhaps if Heaney had confined himself to this limited community as a source, his poetry would have become oppressive too. Heaney's identification with his ancestral roots does not remain static or restricted however. Later poems such as *Making Strange* (*SI*, p. 32) explore issues of ancestry and identification by describing the unsettling collision between the poet's roots and his present life:

I stood between them,  
 the one with his travelled intelligence  
 and tawny containment,  
 his speech like the twang of a bowstring,  
 and another, unshorn and bewildered  
 in the tubs of his Wellingtons,  
 smiling at me for help,  
 faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

The poet clearly sees himself as the link between his well-travelled, educated visitor and the practical, down-to-earth Irish farmer. The apparent clash of culture and heritage is highlighted by the poet's position between the two men and their two different worlds. In assuming the role of translator, the poet becomes aware of his own strangeness, both to his early self and his later self as it were. As ancestral roots and the past infringe on his present, an opportunity for reflection on the nature of self identity is afforded.

In a 1984 lecture, Heaney referred to «two definite ways of being touched by the influence of the past»<sup>26</sup>. The first produces instinctive childhood responses to the past which «amplify and consolidate the sense of belonging to a family and a place», and the second, according to Heaney, involves «those images which widen this domestic past into a community or a national past»<sup>27</sup>. On the one hand, Heaney recognises childhood attachments as essential to the formation of identity, but there is a sense that the consolidation of belonging may graft the individual to one people and one place. On the other hand, that

other past which «is not just inhaled naturally from our given environment but which is to some extent imposed, and to some extent chosen», is what Heaney sees as contributing to the development of the individual and «to our status as creatures conditioned by language and history»<sup>28</sup>. This is the sense of the past which binds communities together but also allows the individual to broaden his/her horizons. However, the poet's concept of the co-existence of domestic/unconscious ancestral influence, and the more conscious/chosen identification with a wider shared ancestry, is not particularly straightforward. Tension created by the interaction of early innate attachments and later identification with influences outside the family, is apparent in much of Heaney's work. For example, *The First Kingdom* and *The First Flight* from *The Spirit Level* (1996) deal with the often debilitating effects of ancestry and the need to break away and free oneself from early attachments (*SL*, pp. 101-102). Whilst satirical in tone, *The First Kingdom* presents an image of stubborn and inflexible family members (*SL*, p. 101):

Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps,  
 bad harvests, fires, unfair settlements,  
 deaths in floods, murders and miscarriages  
 [...]
 They were two-faced and accommodating.  
 And seed, breed and generation still  
 They are holding on, every bit  
 as pious and exacting and demeaned.

Even this tribe's morality is transformed into a defect, «holding on, every bit / as pious and exacting and demeaned». There is an overriding sense of the need to escape all this in *The First Flight*, and it has been suggested that the poet «discovers a new kingdom to explore – the kingdom of imagination»<sup>29</sup>. But this poem also contains ambiguity, as it suggests that while freedom may be fearful, a sense of belonging can also restrict personal development: «I was mired in attachment» (*SL*, p. 102). Since Heaney recognises the limitations of attachment to the purely personal definition of ancestry, his work seeks to encompass the wider definition, which involves a sense of a shared communal cultural identity. One trope, which allows the poet to focus on this second definition, is the image of the land itself as an ancestor or begetter.

## 2

### Land and communal belonging

In *Kinship* (*N*, p. 40) Heaney defines the bog as archetypal earth mother, a begetter or source, and uses the phrase, «I step through origins» to describe a

walk over familiar land. The soft, giving, wateriness of the bog contrasts with the hardness of the cobblestone, which Heaney described as an inheritance from his great-grandmother, in *Clearances* (*HL*, p. 25), and the blackness of the turf in *Kinship* is an interesting link to the poet's mother. In both *Clearances* and *Two Lorries* (*SL*, p. 13) she is associated with coal, a fossil fuel, and is often portrayed as earth-bound, for example, in *The Swing* (*SL*, p. 48). It has been observed that from early on, Heaney «has tended to see the landscape as female. It is a feared and fecund mother; also, an insatiable lover»<sup>30</sup>. In *Kinship* the female goddess image located at «the vowel of the earth» may be read as the central source of human creation and the spring of life, «This centre holds /and spreads», but Heaney's image of motherhood and female ancestry also suggests it can be a destructive force. Not only is the offspring compared to a weeping willow, but the land itself conceals a violent past (*N*, p. 45):

Our mother ground  
is sour with the blood  
of her faithful,

they lie gargling  
in her sacred heart  
as the legions stare  
from the ramparts.

[...]  
report us fairly,  
how we slaughter  
for the common good.

Heaney switches from the «I» of the first few stanzas to «we» and «us» and «our» by the end of *Kinship*, and in doing so, taps into Ireland's communal heritage of trouble and violence. Ancestry in this sense is a double-edged sword – maternity mingles with slaughter, and the goddess who «swallows / our love and terror» (*N*, p. 45), may be compared to a mother who is prepared to sacrifice her sons. This unsettling image/myth of motherhood parallels Heaney's often ambivalent (although less ferocious) representation of his own mother, for example in *Clearances* (*HL*, p. 24). In *Kinship*, Heaney's ravening goddess invokes the Irish patron goddesses, Banba, Ériu, and Fódla. This mythical triumvirate is not uncommon in Celtic mythology and folklore and has been described as giving «life to the land and people. She preserves them from misfortune, injury and danger. In her fiercest aspect, she is a warrior goddess wreaking havoc and death on intruders»<sup>31</sup>.

A similar image of the fundamental human connection to the land occurs in *Land* (*Wintering Out*<sup>32</sup>, p. 21). In this case, the farmer listens to the land

as he would listen to an elderly relative telling a story, but as he lies down in order to hear the land «drumming» back, it snares him with «an ear-ring of sharp wire» and thus, traps or enslaves him. This rather sinister notion of an unequal alliance between land and farmer is close to Kavanagh's «man on a hill whose spirit / Is a wet sack flapping about the knees of time»<sup>33</sup>. This differs from the views of contemporary Irish poets, who have been described as displaying an «at one-ness with his or her place and people»<sup>34</sup>. A good example of this attempt to express unity, is Cathal Ó Searcaigh's *Umblaigh/ Submit*, which aligns the land with «your ancestors' customs» and emphasises the connection between the poet's farming heritage and writing:

Open your eyes and look around  
at the boar-mountain tamed by the plough.  
This labour of love earned your kind  
a harvest each year.  
[...]  
Bend like your fathers' fathers to land-worship  
and work like you were born to this heirloom.  
The harvest will be yours: every field a poem<sup>35</sup>.

This is reminiscent of Heaney's *Digging* (*DN*, p. 3) and the spade/pen/gun analogy: «Between my finger and thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it» (*DN*, p. 4). However, *Kinship* and *Land* both posit more primeval, violent images. In identifying the land with the mother/ancestor and acknowledging the far-from-comfortable human relationship with it, Heaney reflects Freud's theory of the ambiguity inherent in the child/parent relationship and «highlights the way family relationships can be a burden as well as sustaining»<sup>36</sup>.

It has been suggested that the use of names and the association of the self with a proper name, although a questionable occupation, is a vital step in identification processes<sup>37</sup>. Place name poems such as *Anahorish* and *Broagh* (*WO*, pp. 16, 27) allow Heaney to explore a sense of identity in relation to land and language but he also uses his family surname to undertake the same enterprise in the highly personal *Alphabets* (*HL*, p. 1). The poet makes a point of linking 'Heaney', which the plasterer writes on the gable end of the new family home, to his own development as an individual identity, uniquely different from other family members. However, Heaney also frequently undertakes the naming of everyday objects and believes that «objects which have been seasoned by human contact possess a kind of moral force» and «transmit the climate of a lost world»<sup>38</sup>. Whilst objects observed as a spiritual link to ancestors may be a common poetic trope, for Heaney, they often trigger the exploration of the inevitability of ancestral influence on self identity. The poem *Shelf Life* (*SI*, p. 21) illustrates how the poet internalises the spiritual nature of an object and uses it as a symbol for defining self identity.



## 3

## 'Transitional objects': sensing the past

*Shelf Life* (*SI*, p. 21) could be renamed '*Self Life*' because the poet uses the physical appearance of individual objects on shelves as a prompt, which leads to identification with different experiences, memories and inheritances amounting to a whole life. The title's pun may acknowledge the transient nature of identification processes and attachments as a life progresses. The objects described are a mixture of ancestral hand-me-downs and personal keepsakes, and are used to link the dual influences of ancestry and the creative impulse to write. Of the six objects mentioned in the poem, five seem connected by virtue of the hardness of their substance, that is, the granite chip, the old smoothing iron, old pewter, the iron spike, and the stone from Delphi. The sixth, the snowshoe seems incongruous but is associated with the act of writing, being a symbol of the impulse which allows the poet to hunt for the right words in his 'drift-still' room of a head. The cerebral nature of the poet's working life is represented by the elusive nature of the snowshoe (*SI*, p. 24):

The loop of a snowshoe hangs on a wall  
 in my head, in a room that is drift-still:  
 it is like a brushed longhand character,  
 a hieroglyph for all the realms of whisper.  
 [...]  
 The loop of the snowshoe, like an old-time kit,  
 Lifts away in a wind and is lost to sight.

The incongruity between the description of the snowshoe and the other, more concrete objects in *Shelf Life*, emphasises the poet's inner struggle to balance the disparate influences in his life. In short, the concrete objects can be read as symbols: the granite chip is the «Calvin edge in my complaisant pith», the smoothing iron is associated with the archetypal mother figure (*SI*, p. 21), the old pewter represents humble beginnings (*SI*, p. 22), and the iron spike recalls the poet's farming heritage. The stone from Delphi could refer to both Heaney's 'escape' from the North to the South of Ireland (*SI*, p. 24), and his 'escape' via education, to the wonders of the classical world and its literature.

Such a reading emphasises the dualities of Heaney's particular slant on his Irish identity and, characteristically, each symbol/object seems to embody pluralistic meaning. For example, the stone from Delphi carries all the associations of the sacred oracular stone of the ancient classical world. In the essay *Mossbawn*, Heaney describes the water pump outside the back door of his family home in County Derry as his «*omphalos*» and he suggests that «all children want to crouch in their secret nests»<sup>39</sup>. This womb-like image focuses on the individual at the centre of the world and this is very much in keeping with other literary uses of Delphi. For example, Rousseau mused: «"Know Thyself" at the Delphi Temple was not such

an easy precept to observe [...] I felt fused as it were with all beings and nature»<sup>40</sup>. Heaney's recall of his childhood self getting lost in the pea-drills and hiding in a beech tree or «the close thicket of a boxwood hedge [...] the throat of an old willow tree» prompts him to describe himself as «a little Atlas shouldering it all, a little Cerunnos pivoting a world of antlers»<sup>41</sup>. Like Rousseau, the poet fuses the developing individual self with the universe but the Rousseau quotation draws attention to the alleged inscription on Apollo's Oracle of Delphi temple. The full inscription, «Know thyself and thou wilt know the universe and the gods», extols the virtues of self-discovery and this is surely why Heaney includes this reference in *Shelf Life*. The poem primarily identifies objects which relate to the poet's complex sense of identity. Of course this is a process which all individuals can empathise with as all efforts to clearly define a 'core' self are fraught with complications and may ultimately lead to ambiguity and paradox.

In *Shelf Life* Heaney associates two objects in particular with his parents. The old smoothing iron is representative of the poet's mother and her possible resentment of domestic labour. The poet at first internalises the object (it is part of himself), and then externalises it by using it as a symbol for ambivalence towards work (including writing) in general (*SI*, p. 22):

like a plane into linen,  
like the resentment of women.  
To work, her dumb lunge says,  
is to move a certain mass

through a certain distance,  
is to pull your weight and feel  
exact and equal to it.  
Feel dragged upon. And buoyant.

The paradox is that hard work can burden and uplift at the same time. The object associated with the poet's father is the iron spike, found by a railway track in the United States, which resembles a harrow pin from his plough harness. This is where Heaney takes the opportunity to link the objects to the self, «I felt I had come on myself» (*SI*, p. 23). The poet, who has left behind his roots and rejected the traditional work of his father, travels the world and comes upon himself in an unexpected, yet enlightening way. It is an epiphanic moment in which the inner and the outer worlds «fuse» as Rousseau suggested. Heaney returns to the harrow pin as a symbolic object in *District and Circle*<sup>42</sup> (2006), where he uses it to illustrate his father's practical, down-to-earth personality (*DC*, p. 23):

Let there once be any talk of decoration,  
A shelf for knick-knacks, a picture-hook or – rail,  
And the retort was instant: 'Drive a harrow-pin'.

It is ironic that *Shelf Life* refers to the sort of «knick-knacks» Heaney's father would have disapproved of, and emphasises the poet's attachment to objects, which not only have some sentimental value, but possess the power to stir and clarify. For example, duality is suggested by Heaney's use of the phrase, «unshowy pewter», which not only represents the poet's practical ancestors, but is also described in a simile aligning it with the natural world, «doleful and placid as a gloss-barked alder» (*SI*, p. 22). The link between ancestry and self identify is clarified when Heaney reveals a childhood memory of hiding from his family in a misty landscape (*SI*, p. 23):

Glimmerings are what the soul's composed of.  
Fogged-up challenges, far conscience-glitters  
and hang-dog, half-truth earnest of true love.  
And a whole late-flooding thaw of ancestors<sup>43</sup>.

In other words, the mature, reflecting poet has a clearer understanding of how his identity has been formed and more importantly, is willing to credit the role of his parents and ancestors. In this poem, they are elevated above the status of any British tradition suggested by the granite chip from the Martello Tower, which «I keep but feel little in common with» (*SI*, p. 21). However, «keep» is significant because the poet seemingly insists on being reminded of the «Calvin edge in my complaisant pith» and the 'punitive' nature of the granite chip which, when it speaks, says, «*You can take me or leave me*» (*SI*, p. 21). On the other hand however, the granite chip may also be a reminder of the Martello Tower's association with Joyce, whom Heaney credits as a guide and literary ancestor in the title poem of *Station Island*. In *Shelf Life*, the objects are directly associated with the poet's sense of identity, but this identity is never simplistic or clearly definable. Instead, it is pluralistic, complex and perhaps even fluid and changeable. In *The Settle Bed*, Heaney suggests that «whatever is given / can always be reimagined» (*ST*, p. 29), therefore, no-one need be restricted by their ancestral past or their inheritances. Each individual can decide to internalise and identify with whatever objects he/she chooses.

In *The Sense of the Past* Heaney refers to Carl Jung's autobiography and draws the idea from it that, «unconscious forces operating at the very centre of our being incline us to associate spirit with object»<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, the poet suggests that «a community's sense of its attachments and its fortunes will be directed and to some extent determined by the selection of exhibits in its museums»<sup>45</sup>. Everyday objects from the past are linked to an ancestral psychic inheritance which Jung describes as the collective unconscious. The Serbian poet Vasko Popa has also touched upon the unconscious links between ancestors and self in the poem *In the Village of My Ancestors*. Popa represents his awareness of familial collective unconscious in a dream where, «Unknown old men and women / Appropriate the names / Of young men and women

from my memory»<sup>46</sup>. Like Heaney, the poet emphasises the influence of the dead ancestor on the living poet and describes a permanent attachment, which binds one to the other. For Heaney, this attachment is expressed in his poetry through images such as the aunt in *Sunlight* (*N*, p. 9), or the great-uncle in *Ancestral Photograph* (*DN*, p. 15), but also with reference to objects associated with the person such as his father's stick or the eclectic collection in *Shelf Life* (*SI*, p. 21). However, despite Heaney's belief in unity or even some kind of harmonious psychic or spiritual connection with ancestors, the poetry often refers to his personal awareness of the mature individual's inevitable detachment from family, particularly parents.

## 4

## Darkness, detachment, and self discovery

Some critics have pointed to detachment in Heaney's poetry, and this is usually linked to his exploration of the binarisms inherent in the Northern Irish political situation, or his struggle with an inconsistent personal allegiance to his community<sup>47</sup>. However, this sense of detachment can be just as productively interpreted in the light of the poet's relationship with his parents. Heaney's identification with D.H. Lawrence is explicit in *Clearances* where he refers to «our *Sons and Lovers* phase» (*HL*, p. 30) to describe his early relationship with his mother. There are parallels between Heaney's *Door into the Dark* volume with its dedication «For my father and mother», and Lawrence's use of darkness as a metaphor for Paul Morel's recognition of detachment from his mother. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul and Clara discuss the difference between the old tribes who chose either to live in the dark woods or in light open spaces: «Yes, you *do* feel like one of the open space sort – trying to force yourself into the dark – don't you?»<sup>48</sup>. This theme is continued throughout *Sons and Lovers* in the characterisation of Paul Morel who tries to separate himself from his mother, «[h]e would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her»<sup>49</sup>. Lawrence's ideas are reflected in Heaney's attempts to describe the 'other' lifestyle which is actually that of his mother and father, and *Door into the Dark* seems to reveal a world from which the poet must detach himself.

It would be a mistake however to read 'darkness' as an undisputed negative concept in Heaney's work. For example, in *In Gallarus Oratory* (*DD*, p. 10), the ancient beehive structure is described as «a core of old dark walled up with stone», but also as «the heart of the globe». The confined, womb-like structure is a place of self revelation which offers release and a kind of rebirth for the community as they leave the darkness for the light, and see «The sea a censer and the grass a flame» (*DD*, p. 10). This seems to be in keeping with the fact that, «the pure concept of darkness is not, in symbolic tradition, identified with gloom – on the contrary, it corresponds to primigenial chaos» and a «path leading back to the profound mystery of the Origin»<sup>50</sup>. This

may help explain Heaney's association of darkness with origins and sources. But another association of darkness may also be relevant. Christian mysticism since Augustine has stressed «contemplation and the unitive state» and «emphasized darkness and obscurity»<sup>51</sup>. In Samuel Beckett's plays darkness is often stressed, and then replaced by light, as in Heaney's *In Gallarus Oratory*<sup>52</sup>. It has been noted too that «second only to darkness, silence is the metaphor most often used by the mystic to indicate the presence of the divine», and the Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of «the dazzling dark of the welcoming silence»<sup>53</sup>. This is very relevant to Heaney's poetry where silence is often emphasised, for example, in *Clearances*, with reference to his metaphysical response to his mother's death: «A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for» (*HL*, p. 32). Derek Mahon has used the expression «dazzling dark» to make a link between his generation and their ancestors:

And we have come,  
Despite ourselves, to no  
True notion of our proper work,  
But wander in the dazzling dark  
Amid the drifting snow  
Dreaming of some

Lost evening when  
Our grandmothers, if grand  
Mothers we had, stood at the edge  
Of womanhood on a country bridge  
And gazed at a still pond  
And knew no pain<sup>54</sup>.

It may be worth noting that Mahon's identification with his female ancestors may not be a positive process, as the bridge which inspired this poem, was used by Edvard Munch in his somewhat disturbing painting *The Scream*. In any case, the darkness metaphor seems in keeping with Heaney's attempts to connect with his parents and his native community in *Door into the Dark*.

The title of *Door into the Dark* appears in the first line of *The Forge*: «All I know is a door into the dark» (*DD*, p. 7). That door leads to origins, ancestry, mystery, and memory, which Heaney uses as sources from his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* to his latest, *District and Circle*. The «big-eyed Narcissus» who admits «I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing» in *Personal Helicon* (*DN*, p. 46), also states that «memory has never ceased to be an active principle [...] When I hear the word “latch” or “scullery” or “chimney breast” I don't know whether they're dreaming me or I'm dreaming them»<sup>55</sup>. The words act as triggers in the same way as the objects in *Shelf Life* do. The recesses of the poet's mind contain links to origins, which although sometimes dark, alien and 'other', have nevertheless been internalised and are very much

part of the self. For this reason, words and images associated with childhood, early attachments, and ancestral inheritances, have continued to surface in Heaney's poetry over his whole career. Whilst there is a seeming obsession with oppositions and the act of balancing roots and learning, for example, in *Terminus* (*HL*, p. 4), there are often signs of a struggle with allegiance to community in Heaney's poetry.

In this context, it is relevant to note that one critic suggests that «Heaney becomes a postmodern poet» in the title poem of *Station Island* when he takes his leave of «the oppressive ends to which myth and ritual function in the family»<sup>56</sup>. Similarly, in his review of *Station Island*, Neil Corcoran interprets Heaney's «community» as «Catholic Ireland» and suggests that the poet's «painful attempt to extricate himself from religious and social forms» comes at «an unusually late age»<sup>57</sup>. What these opinions overlook is the fact that the volume was published in 1984, the year in which Heaney's mother died. Perhaps all the dualities and binarisms are re-interrogated in 1984, not so much because the poet suffers a 'crisis' as Corcoran suggests, but because the anticipated effects of the poet's candour were reduced in his mother's declining years. Heaney may have feared betraying his devout Catholic mother and his own particular ancestral line more than 'Catholic Ireland'. The close relationship between mother and son and the binding effects of a shared religion, as described in *Clearances*: «Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next / To each other» (*HL*, p. 30), comes to mind here. Melanie Klein has suggested that the painful experience of mourning a loved one can «sometimes stimulate sublimations» and can result in «a deepening in the individual's relation to his inner objects, in the happiness of regaining them after they were felt to be lost ("Paradise Lost and Regained")»<sup>58</sup>. Heaney's return to the subject of his ancestry and roots may be more a result of the subconscious human process of mourning and coming to terms with loss, than any conscious effort to extricate himself from family and community ties. A good example of this is *The Blackbird of Glanmore* (*DC*, p. 75), where the poet returns to the subject of his young brother's death in 1953. Heaney first dealt with the tragedy in *Mid-Term Break* in *Death of a Naturalist*. The difference between the two poems can, perhaps, be explained by Klein's theory on a «deepening» of the individual's relation to his/her inner objects.

The critical tendency, indeed temptation, to constantly link Heaney's work to political unrest in the North of Ireland and his Catholic background in that context, usually ignores the influence of attachment issues in the field of the creative arts. For example, there is often an element of personal guilt or «the troubled conscience of the achiever»<sup>59</sup> in Heaney's references to his parents and ancestors. The poet has remarked that he attributes some of his ambivalence to the act of writing to thoughts about «the generations [...] rural ancestors – not illiterate, but not literary»<sup>60</sup>. Furthermore, when one critical view of Heaney's poetry, «[h]is doors into the dark have not illuminated the

Catholic Irish subconscious»<sup>61</sup>, is scrutinised from the perspective of attachment theory and Object Relations, it appears vaguely ludicrous. Any poet who attempts to illuminate the subconscious of a large portion of his/her country's population, which inevitably contains much diversity, has arguably chosen an over-ambitious task. No poet can illuminate anything but his/her personal history, which in turn reveals attachments to parents, wider family, ancestry, and inherited and chosen communities. The poems discussed here illustrate how ancestry and community play vital roles in Heaney's poetic attempts to reveal a sense of the self. In general, the poet has apparently internalised his identification with previous generations, and as a result, elucidates a very positive and harmonious interaction between past lives (theirs) and present lives (his). This may be attributed to a spiritual belief in the unity of all being and a continued commitment to the belief that the self is formed, as Heaney put it in 1977, from «the inward spiritual structure of the community to which it belongs»<sup>62</sup>. For Heaney, whose early attachment to individuals and objects from childhood can be traced in every published collection to date, that community is invariably the first experienced community of the family farm at Mossbawn and the surrounding area of rural County Derry.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> C. Ó Searcaigh, *Umblaigh/Submit*, in Id., *Out in the Open*, Clo Iar-Chonnachta, In-dreabhán 1997, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Heaney's essay *Room to Rhyme*, University of Dundee Press, Dundee 2004; J. Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, Salmon Publishing, Moher 2002, and BBC Radio Ulster's, 17 April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> S. Deane, *Unhappy and at Home: Interview with Seamus Heaney*, «The Crane Bag», 1, 1977, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> P. Connolly (ed.), *Literature and the Changing Ireland*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 1982, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, London 1971, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> See for example M. Klein, *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms*, in P. Du Gay, J. Evans, P. Redman (eds.), *Identity: A Reader*, Sage, London 2003, pp. 130-143 and D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, cit., p. 11, where the author suggests that «the word "breast" is used, I believe, to stand for the technique of mothering as well as for the actual flesh. It is not impossible for a mother to be a good-enough mother (in my way of putting it) with a bottle for the actual feeding».

<sup>8</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, cit., pp. 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> N. Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London 1998, p. 236.

<sup>11</sup> S. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, Faber and Faber, London 1991. Henceforth referred to as *ST*, followed by the page number.

<sup>12</sup> S. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, Faber and Faber, London 1987. Henceforth referred to as *HL*, followed by the page number.

<sup>13</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> S. Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, Faber and Faber, London 1996. Henceforth referred to as *SL*, followed by the page number.

<sup>18</sup> S. Heaney, *Station Island*, Faber and Faber, London 1984. Henceforth referred to as *SI*, followed by the page number.

<sup>19</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> See for example J. Hobbs, *United Irishmen: Seamus Heaney and the Rebellion of 1798*, «The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies», 2, 1995, pp. 38-43. Hobbs refers to Heaney's «little-known» radio drama, *Munro* (1969), which celebrates the heroism of two Protestant leaders of the 1798 Rebellion. Heaney reviewed Thomas Pakenham's *The Year of Liberty* about the 1798 Rebellion in *Delirium of the Brave*, «The Listener», 27 November 1969, pp. 757-758.

<sup>21</sup> H. Butler, *In the Land of Nod*, Lilliput, Dublin 1996, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> S. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, Faber and Faber, London 1966. Henceforth referred to as *DN*, followed by the page number.

<sup>23</sup> S. Heaney, *North*, Faber and Faber, London 1975. Henceforth referred to as *N*, followed by the page number.

<sup>24</sup> S. Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, Faber and Faber, London 1969. Henceforth referred to as *DD*, followed by the page number.

<sup>25</sup> It is recognised that darkness is not necessarily always negative and this will be discussed later.

<sup>26</sup> Lecture to the Friends of Monaghan County Museum, 1984, published as *The Sense of the Past*, «Ulster Local Studies: Journal of the Federation for Ulster Local Studies», 20, 1985, pp. 108-115. The quote is from p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> E. Kennedy-Andrews, *The Spirit's Protest*, in Id. (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1992, p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> E. Kennedy-Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Icon Books Ltd, Cambridge 2000, p. 120.

<sup>31</sup> R. Anderson, *Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Growth and Divination*, Three Rivers Press, New York 2000, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> S. Heaney, *Wintering Out*, Faber and Faber, London 1972. Henceforth referred to as *WO*, followed by the page number.

<sup>33</sup> P. Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger*, in W.J. McCormack (ed.), *Ferocious Humanism: An Anthology of Irish Poetry from Before Swift to Yeats and After*, J.M. Dent, London 2000, p. 195.

<sup>34</sup> F. Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2000, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> C. Ó Searcaigh, *Umhlaigh/Submit*, cit., pp. 56-57. Elsewhere however, Ó Searcaigh acknowledges that his generation is breaking tradition, «Like everyone else, I swap customs / for street cred and newer gods» (C. Ó Searcaigh, *For My Father*, in Id., *Out in the Open*, cit., p. 143).

<sup>36</sup> E. Kennedy-Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, P. Bourdieu, *The Biographical Illusion*, in P. du Gay, J. Evans, P. Redman (eds.), *Identity: A Reader*, cit., pp. 301-302.

<sup>38</sup> S. Heaney, *The Sense of the Past*, cit., p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, Faber and Faber, London 1980, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> J.J. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776), cited at <[www.wisdomportal.com/EnlightenmentNews.html](http://www.wisdomportal.com/EnlightenmentNews.html)> (07/2010).

<sup>41</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> S. Heaney, *District and Circle*, Faber and Faber, London 2006. Henceforth referred to as *DC*, followed by the page number.



<sup>43</sup> Edna Longley has remarked that the last stanza of *Old Pewter* «epitomises as well as summarises» *Station Island's* contents. See E. Longley, *Old Pewter*, «The Honest Ulsterman», 77, 1984, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> S. Heaney, *The Sense of the Past*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> V. Popa, *In the Village of my Ancestors*, from the volume *Homage to the Lamé Wolf*, Oberlin College Press, Oberlin OH 1987, reproduced at <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-the-village-of-my-ancestors/>> (07/2010).

<sup>47</sup> See for example C. Carson, *Escaped from the Massacre?*, «The Honest Ulsterman», 50, 1975, pp. 183-186 and N. Corcoran, *Heaney's Joyce, Eliot's Yeats*, «Agenda: Seamus Heaney Fiftieth Birthday Issue», 1, 1989, pp. 37-47.

<sup>48</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1992, p. 280.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 464.

<sup>50</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> H.L. Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, The Pennsylvania State UP, London PA 1981, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Baldwin refers particularly to Beckett's trilogy, *Malone, Molloy Dies* and *The Unnameable*.

<sup>53</sup> H.L. Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> D. Mahon, *Girls on the Bridge*, at <[www.english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/girls/html](http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/girls/html)> (07/2010). Mahon published a different, shorter version in *Selected Poems*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 2000, p. 109.

<sup>55</sup> J. Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, Salmon Publishing, Moher 2002, p. 85.

<sup>56</sup> A. Davies, *Seamus Heaney: From Revisionism to Postmodernism*, in E. Kennedy-Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> N. Corcoran, *Heaney's Joyce, Eliot's Yeats*, cit., pp. 42-44. Heaney was 45 when *Station Island* was published.

<sup>58</sup> J. Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1986, pp. 163-164.

<sup>59</sup> T. Paulin, *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays 1980-1996*, Faber and Faber, London 1996, p. 178, with reference to Thomas Hardy as socially mobile but guilty.

<sup>60</sup> J. Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*, Faber and Faber, London 1981, p. 63. Heaney's interview was conducted in 1979 for «The London Magazine».

<sup>61</sup> J. Simmons, *The Trouble with Seamus*, in E. Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, cit., p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> S. Deane, *Unhappy and at Home*, cit., p. 62.

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