

Visions and Revisions: Seamus Heaney, ‘Foreign’ Poetry, and The Problem of Assimilation

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Abstract:

This essay considers the unusual position of Irish and Polish cultures and how it correlates to the construction of lyric subjects that appear unassimilable to dominant postcolonial literary-critical paradigms. Translation and assimilation become crucial concepts when understood in relation to attempts to take inspiration from foreign sources, especially when such attempts do not accord with typical patterns of influence. These concepts, however, only reveal their utility when they are grounded. The problem of assimilation is here considered in reference to debates over the Eastern European influences behind Seamus Heaney’s volume *The Haw Lantern*, which reveal the cultural pressures brought to bear upon a well-known poet whose work challenges dominant assumptions about the proper idiom of the Anglo-American lyric.

Keywords: comparatism, Ireland, margins, poetry, Poland

Czesław Miłosz, the great Polish poet and spokesman for the twentieth-century’s ills, famously insisted that there are two Europes: on the one hand, “members of the family [who are] quarrelsome but respectable”, and on the other, “poor relations” (1988, 2). The former is considered the ‘better’ Europe; the second is considered ‘worse’. Oddly, however, the passionate defence of “poor relations”, which we call postcolonial studies, often ignores the anomalous position of Europe’s margins, such as Miłosz’s Poland. Granted, these margins are not easy to theorize. Neither is the status of another “poor relation” on the other side of the continent: not only is Ireland self-divided but the extent of its decolonization is up for debate. These countries are quintessentially liminal, if one can allow this oxymoronic construction: located in the culturally central continent of Europe, they are in a peripheral relation to that continent.

These concepts of centre and periphery, colonizer and colonized, have been interrogated so extensively in the past few decades that there is little point in re-treading this theoretical ground. Yet there still remains a sense that comparative projects must be founded on the basis of recognized, recognizable similarity, that they must proceed amongst members of the same nuclear family, as it were. This remains true almost three decades after James Clifford famously noted the problematic character of novelty and difference in the twentieth century: "One no longer leaves home confident of finding the radically new [...] Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, [and] the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth" (1988, 14). Comparatists must bear in mind that similitude and difference themselves are not necessarily defined by nationality; likewise, many kinds of difference may require an act of cultural translation. The difficulty of 'translating' experience and intention within a divided culture such as that of Ireland is a major theme of post-independence writing.

Recent Polish literature also reveals that the locality of culture may not be unified. We must be careful of our terms in identifying patterns of influence, because the cultural discourse of identity often reproduces the confining matrix of identification that it strives to subvert. The effort to separate inside from outside, periphery from centre, is especially challenging in a country whose canonical writers are often *émigrés* and exiles. In order to compare two formerly colonized countries like Ireland and Poland, we must attend to the possibility of mobile and transnational influence and to the possibility of writing against one's own tradition. At the same time, the sort of trans-nationality that obtains here is one bounded by a particular type of historico-cultural experience. It is the experience of countries that have long been politically peripheral, yet in many ways, symbolically central. Now that postcolonial studies have waxed and waned in popularity, perhaps one can indulge in a bit of provocation by pointing out the limitations of the post-colonial label itself.

The postcolonial identity of Ireland and Poland should not be conceptualized as a solid structure but a process of self-imagination. Their national self-images have been formed in response to political upheavals and to the experience of subjugation, not absolutely; meanwhile, the problem with any experience-centred knowledge claim is that it may carry with it the assumption of a whole, stable subject. Yet the Irish historical experience since colonization is one of fracture and instability. Different portions of the population experience history, and conceive of their nationality, in different ways; this may be said of any country, yet the postcolonial label depends upon a conceptualization of boundaries that unify those within as well as exclude those outside them, so that the postcolonial subject becomes itself a fantasy of coherence. Yet subjects can also be formed across civilizational and linguistic borders, through acts of translation that are mappable but often unforeseeable.

Meanwhile, twenty-first-century postcolonial (or perhaps we should say post-postcolonial) studies continue to interrogate and often dismantle the field's foundational demarcations. In 2004, David Chioni Moore asked if it was possible to theorize a silence in the field, which appeared reluctant to consider the post-Soviet as postcolonial; his analysis usefully examined the difficulties inherent in such a project, yet ultimately awakened a desire for it (2005, 514-538). More recently, Neil Lazarus has decried the reliance on three worlds theory and the north-south optic (*pace* Robert Young) to ground the field, as these conceptualizations do not fit the situation of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, nor are truly necessary for understanding colonialism (Lazarus 2012, 120-21). Likewise, the monolithic concept of 'the West' (versus 'the rest') needs nuanced dismantling: as Eastern Europeans have always known, one cannot metonymically associate the many countries of Europe with the colonizing West any more than one can associate Ireland or Scotland, at the far geographic west of Europe, with imperial power.

Polish critics have also considered the viability of using postcolonial discourse to describe their historic-cultural situation, with mixed results. Well aware that this discourse was fashioned in the Anglo-American academy, they are often quick to highlight the ways in which their own history does not fit the main postcolonial paradigm¹. This paradigm can usefully inspire us to stretch or modify it, and to speak of countries such as Ireland and Poland in the same breath, but it may also obscure other parallels – cultural, literary, religious – that can and must be made between the two countries. It can, in the Polish context, force a critical view of Soviet Communism, and focus attention upon the paradigm shift that took place after the Iron Curtain fell; but is this enough? Perhaps it is. The Irish case for postcolonial status is less novel than the Polish, as Ireland's experience more closely fits the model of settler colonialism, and numerous scholars (Stan Smith, David Lloyd, even Edward Said) have considered its viability. As contemporary Irish literature shows us, however, civil discord can result from this very issue, as the degree to which Northern Ireland can be considered colonial or postcolonial (after the Good Friday Agreement) continues to fuel contention. Perhaps the historical experience of Eastern European nations and the historical experience of Ireland can indeed be spoken of with reference to colonialism, yet the benefits of asserting postcolonial status may also seem dubious. At best, such shared status will allow literary and cultural comparisons to proceed more confidently, which would indeed be a benefit.

¹ See, for example, the work of Hanna Gosk, Dariusz Skórczewski, Ewa Thompson, Myroslav Shkandrij, German Ritz, Andrzej Nowak, and Włodzimierz Bolecki, who acridly remarks that postcolonial studies work from stereotypes of minority groups (Bolecki 2007, 8).

There may also be more precise ways in which literature from the so-called margins of Europe can be studied comparatively. They must involve a critical look at what we desire to extract, and the voices we expect to hear issuing, from those margins. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the domain of literary influence, a seemingly private matter that is often taken for a public, even ideological, one. The problem of positionality can be seen as the potential for comparison, but we must also reckon with the difficulty of expanding a field thought to be stable. Seamus Heaney, Ireland's most famous contemporary poet, is well aware of the fact that his own poems have been criticized for depicting the sort of modest, earthy, family-bound farm life that metropolitan consumers wanted to hear described by Irish writers. Heaney points up the extent to which the geographical and cultural 'margin' is seen as the bearer of a certain type of socio-political value. Writers from the margins are called upon to express themselves in ways that make political and cultural sense to others, and this involves the assumption of literary influences that also make sense. One may choose a condition of glorious nonconformity, but then one runs the risk of untranslatability and of claims that the foreign influence or the work itself is actually unassimilable.

There must be a way in which writers from the 'worse' parts of the world, as Miłosz dubs it, can refuse to be either a packaged commodity or an unreachable other insisting on its irreducibility to any system of value. Perhaps one way to do so is to recalibrate the concept of the margin itself, which has become conceptually over-fetishized. Perhaps Heaney can show us a way that the influence of Europe's other margin can result in a sense of liberation, of being, albeit perversely, untethered, given new expressive scope. A significant amount of creative and intellectual potential is opened up when we move away from the turf wars being fought over the ontological and political status of 'margins' and, instead, attend to voices that beg us not to place them too firmly in any one locality. The lyric need not be viewed as a genre necessarily and permanently rooted in a geophysical locale, but as one allowing for a transnational flow of influence and, at times, seeking deracination. The poet of such a lyric has to carefully negotiate distances – the distance between present and past, between individual and collective, and between local and cosmopolitan. The appropriate balance will find a midpoint that invalidates the irreducibility of these dichotomies.

Our conceptual labels for such transnational balancing acts often euphemize the very real problems that a writer encounters in her or his effort to mediate recognizable subject positions. The fact is, certain subjects are more welcome in literary and scholarly milieux than others, no matter how well we may speak of them theoretically. The mixed reception accorded to Heaney's volume *The Haw Lantern* (1987) illuminates the pressures and counter-pressures brought to bear upon an individual writer who chooses to employ a new poetic idiom and takes on a dubious type of transnational influence. The problem appears to

be that the lyric subject here appears unassimilable – and assimilation remains a major goal of critical commentary and literary reviewing.

Certain reactions to the volume are surprisingly negative: “What has happened to Heaney? It is as though James Joyce let him off the hook when he told him at the end of *Station Island* ‘to fill the elements with signatures on your own frequency’” (Allen 1988, 109)². Written well after Heaney’s famous ‘bog poems’ of *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), the volume’s consideration of history appears abstract and sometimes riddling, less centred upon one imagistic field than the much-praised *Field Work* (1979), while its predecessor and successor volumes – *Station Island* (1984) and *Seeing Things* (1991) – share a thematic focus on the insubstantial world of vision and abstract thought. This is where Heaney takes on possibly unassimilable influences and dares to express a new relation to the act of writing itself.

Allen’s words may be blunt but the opinion they express is common: those who view this volume as a glitch in Heaney’s developmental arc are far more numerous than those who laud its achievement. It explores a new relation to abstraction, a quality one would hardly associate with the early Heaney but which is often associated with contemporary poetry from Eastern Europe. So-called parable poems were commonly written during the Communist period to outwit the censor’s eye, until a particular style of allegorical, riddling, rather abstract poem came to be associated with Eastern European writing as a whole. A need to insist upon the division between truth and falsity, and between right and wrong, lends urgency to this poetry, which invests the communicative act with a gravity and necessity often missing from verse composed in more peaceful countries. At its worst, such poetry can be accused of ponderousness; at its best, it can offer a powerful and empowering mode that is very different from the grounded, empirical mode of writing most common in English-language verse. As Heaney’s poems allow themselves to play with concepts and states of mind, so this new mode enters his work, and is never entirely left behind. This is why *The Haw Lantern* must be seen as an opening – a ‘clearance’, perhaps – allowing new light to penetrate the density of Heaney’s poetry. He describes the novelty of this new mode of writing in visual terms: while the young poet identifies with a chestnut tree planted in the year of his birth, what happens later is different: “[...] all of a sudden, a couple of years ago, I began to think of the space where the

² Dennis O’Driscoll, meanwhile, focuses on the difference of Heaney’s own “frequency” from that of some salient Eastern European poets. His “general eschewal of irony or satire, traditional tools of the public poet”, separates him from poets such as Zbigniew Herbert or Miroslav Holub, while Heaney’s language has too much “density” to approach the “bare aesthetic” of poets such as Vasko Popa (2009, 59-60). This opinion, however, does not account for Heaney’s dramatic aeration of his typical “density” in *The Haw Lantern* or for the unusual type of irony present in these poems, which show that irony need not be conflated with satire.

tree had been or would have been [... and], in a way that I find hard to define, I began to identify with that space just as years before I had identified with the young tree" (1988, 3-4). This 'new place' is, to Heaney, 'all idea', an 'imagined realm' generated out of a concrete experience yet distinct from it. The way this place is defined will prove quite contentious.

This volume represents Heaney's fullest attempt to "aerate" (1988, 37) the linguistic texture of English-language poetry, thus rebelling against the concrete experiential paradigm dominating twentieth-century verse in English. The *daemonia* inspiring this attempt are the Eastern European poets Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, Miroslav Holub, and Osip Mandelstam. They represent a distinct group of influences that are radically different from that of Heaney's earlier exemplars, such as William Wordsworth, Patrick Kavanagh, and Ted Hughes³. These foreign poets allow him to pursue a highly complex relation to the abstract noun, which is usually associated with empty space and immateriality. Since this relation is in such stark contrast to the early work by which Heaney earned his fame, it is often glossed over as a blessedly short-lived setback to a happily rooted, placed, phenomenologically coherent developmental narrative. Yeats is also a figure who stands silent guard over Heaney's middle volumes, when the imperative to find images and symbols to express "our predicament"⁴ becomes crucial, and this Yeats is well matched by the Eastern Europeans. Surprisingly, however, Heaney does not attempt to place Miłosz's autobiographical work beside Wordsworth's influential *Prelude*, though Miłosz's Lithuanian forests and rivers are as stubbornly present in his work as Wordsworth's lakes and hills, and his young naturalist (a term frequently used in his translated work) is certainly as concerned with the development of his poetic faculties as Wordsworth's poet, and as troubled at the disjunction between Christian morality and biological amorality as the young Heaney. The relevance of folk custom, in particular, to so-called rational (a term always held in abeyance by Miłosz) ethics is particularly apposite to Heaney's work. Why, then, does Heaney's 1980s work represent such a rupture? Part of the reason is that Heaney himself dichotomizes these poetic mentors, implying that their influences are mutually unassimilable or untranslatable. Such a view, however, is belied by the poetry itself.

Alphabets, the original working title of *The Haw Lantern*, emphasizes its exploration of different approaches toward writing (see Brandes in O'Donoghue 2009, 19-36): the summoning and evacuation of physical

³ My book, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe* (2012), considers the influence of Eastern European poets upon Heaney in detail and considers the cultural and political values associated with Eastern European poetry during this period as well as Heaney's particular interest in this poetry. This essay's focus is, necessarily, much narrower.

⁴ Bernard O'Donoghue aptly points out that this often-quoted phrase is Heaney's equivalent to Yeats's "befitting emblems of adversity" (2009, 9).

presence in “Clearances” (Heaney 1987, 31-32), the use of concrete allegory to explore an immaterial state characterized by absence (“From the Frontier of Writing”, “The Spoonbait”, “The Haw Lantern”), and the use of abstract parable, which dominates the volume (“Parable Island”, “From the Republic of Conscience”, “From the Land of the Unspoken”, and others). Writing in these different alphabets proves to be a challenging exercise, but one that Heaney sees as ‘necessary’. Later, he looks back on the seventies and eighties as a time of excessive self-abnegation:

What I was longing for was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism [...] for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect [...] Attending insufficiently to the diamond absolutes. (Heaney 1998, 452-458)

The monastic image effectively metaphorizes a psychological state Heaney seeks to escape. His “diamond absolutes” hearken back to the heroes of *North’s* “Exposure” (1975, 32-33) – Ovid, Osip Mandelstam, the Biblical David – and the longed-for “active escape” (Heaney 1998, 452) from relativism summons Czesław Miłosz via “Away from it All” (Heaney 1985, 16-17) a figure who analyzes his own precarious balance between contemplation and active participation in history (16), and speaks out against the perils of relativist thinking. Active escape from relativism is, of course, not the same as active participation in history (whose goals and triumphs are often relative), and what Heaney reveals in this passage from his Nobel acceptance speech in 1995 is his longing for a transcendent rather than a participatory condition, for the ‘absolute’ ideal that Miłosz seeks and justifies throughout his life, and his erstwhile doubt that he could reach it. In other words – contrary to virtually every opinion on the topic – Heaney is asking the Eastern Europeans to show him an active, salvational escape from relativism, so that he may glimpse the “diamond absolutes” proclaimed in their poetry, ‘not’ to demonstrate how active participation in history may take place in poems. “The Haw Lantern” imagines a universal and absolute test of conscience, metaphorized through a hawthorn twig’s “blood-prick that you wish would test and clear you, / its pecked-at ripeness that scans you, then moves on” (from *The Haw Lantern* 1987, 7). It assesses the individual, whose flinch externalizes his fear of judgment. The inevitability of failing this test, however, is universal. The poem’s claims upon us should not be diminished by a strictly local reading, even while critics such as William Scammell decries the poem’s very symbolic, abstract quality: “With ‘bonded pith and stone’ and ‘the blood-prick’ [...] the preacher mounts the lectern [...] When symbol usurps fact or fails to mesh with the literal, disbelief raises a basilisk eye” (1987, 42-44). The symbol, however, self-consciously exits the factual domain and undoes itself in

the process. It destabilizes its symbolic heft and even its status as metaphysical emblem, as Vendler reads it (1988, 68-69). It taunts the gazer – object of the haw lantern’s test – to confront his own desire for purity: in the words of another poem, “Who wanted the soul to ring true / And plain as a galvanized bucket / And would kick it to test it?” (“Two Quick Notes”, Heaney 1987, 16). One answer is unstated yet crucial: the reader or listener wants to believe in the equivalence of the object world and the world of spirit, so that the soul can indeed ring true to its metaphorical equivalent. Poem after poem wishes for an absolute ideal to ring true to a culpable, imperfect speaker. Meanwhile, Heaney’s focus on objects in earlier volumes has metamorphosed into a focus on the object’s inability to fully contain the metaphorical resonance that constitutes the true subject of the poem.

The manner in which Heaney responds to the diverse influences of the Eastern European poets here is by no means straightforward. Jay Parini’s criticism that *The Haw Lantern* suffers from “the oracular mode Heaney has cultivated to some degree in recent years”, and his concomitant belief that “the less ambitious his undertaking and more narrow the focus of the poem, the wider the implications of what he writes are likely to be” (1988, 71), belies the real source of critical dissatisfaction: namely, Heaney’s attempt to write in what he sees as an Eastern European style, which involves an “oracular mode” and a broad focus. The strongest pieces here, however, surely maintain as tight a focus as any of his early work. Neil Corcoran even sees the untranslatability of Eastern European “cultural freight” as a benefit: “A wily neutrality [...] seems to be one of the impulses behind his recent interest in parable poetry and in the relative invisibility, the lack of specific ‘cultural freight’, on offer in poetry in translation” (1989, 45). The “wily” quality of parable becomes more straightforward if we consider his parable poems as risky acts of cultural comparatism. These acts lead certain critics, such as Gerald Dawe, to question whether Heaney’s “imaginative contexts” (2007, 248) are plausible. Such questioning is not surprising. *The Haw Lantern* takes a large step away from the British and American territory that is familiar to Heaney. The volume compels its readers to recognize that “imaginative contexts” may, in fact, be borrowed from other cultures even while specific “freight” may remain untranslatable. Their exotic distance may be illusory if we consider their vital role in stimulating meditations and metaphorizations that are inspirational for Heaney.

Heaney’s critics are, however, to some extent encouraged by the poet himself, who concedes that the subject-matter of *The Haw Lantern* could not sustain him forever: “My unconscious, and indeed my aesthetic sense was saying [in 1991] that this subject was now exhausted [...] and] you couldn’t go on about it artistically” (Heaney in Murphy 2000, 89). ‘Going on’ in the moral-political vein would be ponderous and dangerously Romantic – not in the manner of Wordsworth but in the manner of Messianic nationalism, which has poisoned the soil of Ireland as well as of Eastern Europe. It would create

a modern martyrology about the Troubles that would threaten to dam the living stream of history; Yeats, another exemplary presence, knew how hearts with one purpose alone become dehumanized by their single-mindedness. Yet is this really what Heaney ‘does’ in *The Haw Lantern*? Let us take a poem ostensibly about the Troubles, “From the Frontier of Writing”, as an example.

“Everything is pure interrogation” (l. 7) after the initial shock of stopping at a roadblock, until “it happens again”:

And suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed,
as if you’d passed from behind a waterfall
on the black current of a tarmac road

past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen. (Heaney 1987, 6)

It is simplistic and reductive to call this ‘a Troubles poem’. A secondary layer of meaning is revealed by its analogies, both successful and thwarted: the poem’s tercets are neither in *terza rima* nor blank verse, nor are they slant-rhymed, as are many of the volume’s poems. Its final image is analogical to that of “A Daylight Art”: “Happy the man [...] / whose nights are dreamless; / whose deep-sunk panoramas rise and pass / like daylight through the rod’s eye or the nib’s eye” (Heaney 1987, 9). Indeed, several poems of this volume echo each other. In this case, soldiers become shadows flowing like the waterfall of the preceding stanza, in contrast with the “deep-sunk panoramas” of the happy man who always practiced the right art, whose visions rise and recede “like daylight” through the pen of the “arraigned yet freed” writer or through the rod of the (Yeatsian?) fisherman. Both poems start in history and end in a dematerialized moment of transcendence just this side of mystical vision. Their changes correspond to a shift in pitch and diction, as the chatty “you’re through, [...] you’d passed” traverses the slow assonance of “posted soldiers flowing” into liquid shapelessness, the very image of structure turning into its opposite. This may be as close to an inversion of the self-inwoven simile (see Ricks 1984, 34, 51-58) as we can find in Heaney’s work.

Critiques of *The Haw Lantern* turn on the opposition of abstraction to concreteness as well as the question of proper influences. Michael Allen thinks Heaney’s parables reveal the desiccation of his youthful creativity and invoke a “trendy aesthetic morality” that produces “slight” poems (1988, 109-110), implying that the concrete and autobiographical is the proper home of poetry. Heaney’s aim, meanwhile, is opposite to this: in the winter of 1979, he calls for poetry to “connect the prose and the passion, the world of sensibility with the world of telegrams and anger. Connect the literary action with an original justifying vision and with the political contingencies of the times.

The usual response to Forster's imperative now seems to be something like a shrug of the debilitated poetic shoulders" (1981, 646; the article was originally a 1979 conference presentation). The struggle for the right of poetry to link vision with "contingencies of the times" is a struggle against debilitation of intent, of narrowness and cynical apathy.

Heaney is taking on the influence of poets who engage both worlds through a focus on the spirit, what Derek Walcott calls "the terrain of the abstract noun" (1996, 147). His "trendy aesthetic morality" reveals his participation in a mid-century fashion for Eastern European writing (see Heaney in Brandes 1988, 10), but he insists that the influence goes much deeper than this: "When I read, even in translation, the poetry of the Poles, I find sub-cultural recognitions in myself which are never called up or extended by English poetry" (see Heaney in Brandes 1988, 10). They have to do with the groundedness of Eastern European poets' moral examinations, which are rooted in their socio-political realities, in Catholicism, and in the "truth-seeking dimension of poetry", which demands fuller exposition than the current practice of "dwelling upon a privileged moment of insight or joy" allows (see Heaney in Brandes 1988, 10).

Heaney struggles to define the language of the parable poems, jumping from neologism to anecdote, because he would only feel completely confident inhabiting this kind of language in *Seeing Things* (1991). This broadly acclaimed volume is inversely grounded (with its roots in the air, as it were) in Heaney's parable poems of *The Haw Lantern*. Its prototype poem, "Parable Island", drops an ironic wink at its own effort:

[...] you can't be sure that parable is not
at work already retrospectively,
since all their early manuscripts are full

of stylized eye-shapes and recurrent glosses
in which those old revisionists derive
the word *island* from roots in *eye* and *land*. (Heaney 1987, 11)

This does not readily summon the Eastern European poets who are the ostensible sources of such "pseudo-translation" (Heaney in Brandes 1988, 18). Instead of addressing politics seriously, the poem gently mocks the very triumphal etymologizing that marked Heaney's early toponymic poems. Instead of the "hill of clear water" tenderly described in "Anahorish" (Heaney 1972, 16) or the recalcitrant phoneme of "Broagh" (Heaney 1972, 27) that created a linguistic community of its own, we see an obdurate nation of people who "yield to nobody in their belief / that the country is an island" (1987, 10). They glory in their false etymologies and mythologies, thinking that "some day" – but not now – they will "mine the ore of truth" (1987, 10). Retrospective parable, indeed: the poem is not a sustained meta-commentary on

Ireland (Smith 2005, 19) but a parody. “Those old revisionists” (1987, 11) are not to be trusted, and their absurd etymologies are merely subjects of fun. The effect is a poem both riddling and parodic, mocking its own anthropology because it is empty at its centre.

Empty centres abound in *The Haw Lantern*. They are not, however, indicative of an evisceration of significance or a waning of belief in immanent meaning – just the contrary. They serve as ideals, while their representational function has been whittled down to a minimum. Thus they cannot simply be viewed as effects of epiphany, as Edna Longley implies, dubbing these moments “sublimated deracinations” and intimating that they seem forced, as evidenced by the declarations that accompany them (“clearances that suddenly stood open” or, *pace* Eliot, “the light opened in silence”) (Longley 1988, 79). She clearly prefers more grounded verse. These visions, however, do not always deracinate, but anchor the concrete moment in a system of abstract ideals that are as real as earthly phenomena:

The arrow whose migration is its mark
Leaves a whispered breath in every socket.
The great test over, while the gut’s still humming,
This time it travels out of all knowing
Perfectly aimed towards the vacant centre. (Heaney 1987, 22)

These lines, ending the brief “In Memoriam: Robert Fitzgerald”, echo the more celebrated “Clearances” (Heaney 1987, 24-32) sonnets upon the death of Heaney’s mother, which move from utterly specific, concrete memory to the sense (not quite assertion) that “The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep” (Heaney 1987, 31). Fitzgerald, translator from the Greek, remains unnamed because the actual man is the “vacant centre” toward which this evocation aims itself. These lines do not describe an epiphany: the arrow travels “out of all knowing”. The gods do not make themselves manifest. We do not achieve knowledge or recognition, but something different from both – pure, evacuated vision. We see what we cannot know. Odysseus’ test becomes a metaphysical lesson rather than a simple act of revenge in Heaney’s description, so that the poem’s elegiac function is instrumentalized to serve its true interest in evoking a “perfection” that we can only know through vacancy. It is echoed by “The Pitchfork” in *Seeing Things*. Again, an object is aimed toward a vacant space, yet the viewer learns a further necessity in the later poem:

[... he] has learned at last to follow that simple lead
Past its own aim, out to an other side
Where perfection – or nearness to it – is imagined
Not in the aiming but the opening hand. (Heaney 1991b, 23)

This is fundamentally the same speaker as in the earlier poem, only he has been led further toward the “other side” of knowledge. The qualities of this “other side” are opposite to the young Heaney’s world of spades and butter-churns and tinsmith’s scoops. It is not merely death and “The Pitchfork” is not an elegy. Whereas *The Haw Lantern* sometimes uses the occasion of death to contemplate this realm, *Seeing Things* often disposes of the elegiac occasion altogether. The “other side” is one where “perfection” is re-imagined in terms of dematerialization, not substance. It awakens Heaney’s impulse, present for many years before *The Haw Lantern* (see “Exposure” in *North*, 1975), to explore the *via negativa*, the apophatic. For Heaney, the issue is metaphorizing the apophatic as a mode of knowledge. To be metaphorized, it must summon the concrete in order to evacuate it⁵. Yet Heaney is less interested in absence *per se* than in an exploration of ideals, in states that are beyond knowledge or types of perfection that defy the empirical imagination.

John Desmond attempts to show that Heaney’s aesthetic is based upon a belief in “a transcendent metaphysical order that is the ultimate source of meaning in his work” (2009, 2-3), which has its roots in his reading of Yeats and Miłosz. The word “metaphysical”, used frequently by these poets’ Polish critics, is used less frequently in English, and Desmond’s reclamation of the term is welcome, even while Heaney keeps his feet firmly on the ground in his expository work and never allows himself to write the philosophically discursive essays that Miłosz does or to construct an elaborate Yeatsian theosophy. Nor does he speak of good and evil as unabashedly as the Manichean Miłosz. The metaphysical is, however, an important realm for Heaney, one that must be recognized in order for poetry to get off the ground. The immateriality at the heart of *The Haw Lantern* summons certain orders of thought – the metaphysical, and value – the ethical.

Heaney’s poetry, however, still maintains a phenomenological basis, and this is why his ontological and ethical allegories are slightly undercut by an ironic voice that recognizes their unverifiability: “Our unspoken assumptions have the force / of revelation” (“From the Land of the Unspoken”, 1987, 19). This is why, in “From the Frontier of Writing” (Heaney 1987, 6), Heaney must see the invisible in terms of the visible. This is why both visible and invisible realms are meticulously delineated in poems such as “Clearances” sonnets 7 and 8, in which the death of the poet’s mother and the felling of a chestnut tree cause “clearances” and “nowheres” to suddenly stand open (Heaney 1987, 31-32). They allow us to see the invisible, with absolute precision, as a gap in the concrete world. Such poems can only be called epiphanies in a loose

⁵ Helen Vendler captures the difficulty of analyzing this stage of Heaney’s writing when she notes that it is difficult to trope “the invisible” when it is not seen in religious terms as God or heaven (1996, 38).

sense of the word because they remain guided by phenomenology more than epistemology⁶. Heaney does not show us what the act of clearance allows us to know. He can only gesture toward what it allows us to see.

Time after time in both *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*, physical objects are lifted into the air, either rising into the ether or falling back down to earth: trees, pitchforks, settle beds, and bicycle wheels are lifted out of their obdurate physicality and turned light as feathers. A hint of ‘nonsensical’ humor often accompanies the metamorphosis, yet there are far-reaching conclusions to be drawn from such acts of “clearance”, aeration, and re-vision, as in “The Settle Bed”:

[...] whatever is given

Can always be reimagined, however four-square,
Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time
It happens to be. You are free as the lookout. (Heaney 1991b, 29)

If *Seeing Things* enters ‘the marvellous’ unapologetically, earlier poems pave its way, with their awkwardness and humour offering an apology for their bizarre transfigurations. The visionary realm, though, is always available to us, the poet affirms. This poem offers a parable more concrete than those of *The Haw Lantern*, yet it helps to retrospectively explain the technique inaugurated by the previous volume: summoning the visionary realm will always entail an awkward reimagining, even if the object in question is not “hull-stupid”, while the act’s deliberateness will push it beyond the awkward and into the numinous. This may serve as a counter-example to Yeats’s work. The spirit world is not summoned through oneiric visions but through conscious scrutiny of “plank-thick” phenomena. Such phenomena are also frequently summoned in the work of the Eastern European poets who inspire Heaney.

Stan Smith holds that Heaney starts to retreat from his previous “density of metaphor” in *The Haw Lantern*, opting instead for the “cooler” procedure of simile, which neatly sets apart tenor and vehicle (Smith in Allen 1997, 241). A glance at *The Haw Lantern*, however, proves that most poems are still built around a central metaphor. “Density”, though, is a word well chosen, because as several poems question, query, or spread out their central

⁶ For a counter-opinion, see Jonathan Allison’s “Seamus Heaney and the Romantic Image”, in which he offers three various definitions of epiphany – by Ashton Nichols, Northrop Frye, and Meyer Howard Abrams. They are all, to him, applicable to Heaney’s work, even though Nichols’ secular definition differs considerably from Frye and Abrams’ definitions, which employ religious language (“the oracular”, “revelation”). Allison does not find these views incompatible, nor does he ascertain exactly what is revealed, or what message the oracle carries down to the poet at such moments, though his comparison of definitions is quite useful. See Nichols 1987, 12-28; Allison 1998, 184-201.

metaphors (such as “From the Frontier of Writing”, discussed above), their figurations become acutely self-conscious. They do not indicate a Romantic desire to overcome the dualism of spirit and object. Instead, such metaphors call attention to their own inorganicism, their constructedness. This is the least visible but most pervasive effect of Eastern European poetry upon Heaney’s work. It is a form of irony, albeit a subtle one, and is capable of creating a modicum of imagistic awkwardness: “[...] we say / The soul may be compared / Unto a spoonbait” (Heaney 1987, 21). Such irony registers a distance toward the object, whether or not it is introduced by a simile; it highlights the work of the poet’s mind upon the substance of the poem.

The task of *The Haw Lantern* is to avoid the single-mindedness that may result from attention to a merely uninspired reality, but also to eschew the grandiosity of the vatic register. Heaney tries to assimilate a different, indeed “foreign”, mode of writing by inscribing an awareness of difficulty, even strain, into his work, at the same time as he asserts the essential translatability of an Eastern European idiom. Translatability may signal potential assimilability, but also, importantly, may not. One mode of writing may be translated into another without fully naturalizing its idiom. Moreover, it is dangerous to view either assimilability or naturalization as indices of quality or literary success – Heaney’s achievement should not be judged by his ability to efface all traces of foreignness from the very foreign idiom of Eastern European writing. Nor should it be judged by our scholarly ability to justify it in the first place: the poetry, always comes first, its claims upon us not homologous to the claims of theoretical arguments which may or may not justify its conceptual bases. Perhaps seemingly unassimilable modes of writing do not need theoretical benediction, as it were, but can remain important and influential for each other while resisting full assimilation. In this exceptional volume Heaney shows himself to be an awkward visionary, a self-conscious celebrant of the *via negativa* who seeks perfection in a “vacant centre” (Heaney 1987, 22), dematerialized and ideal. Its beauties cannot finally be explained in historic-political terms even while the possibility and even necessity of comparatism across the margins of Europe remains powerful and potentially inspirational.

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