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Seamus Heaney's Prose: Preoccupying Questions

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Abstract

This essay examines Seamus Heaney's prose writings, wherein he discusses poetry as a mode of knowledge, which can explore the fractured aspects of identity and can shed light on aspects of what it means to be human. Heaney's own theorisations of poetry are explored, specifically in terms of poetry and politics and poetry as a complicated response to difficult political and social situations, through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Levinas.

To say that Seamus Heaney's work is academically popular would be an understatement. There are, to date, some thirty books completely devoted to the study and analysis of his writing, and to list the number of articles and chapters on Heaney would probably be a book-length enterprise in itself. Given that Heaney is a Nobel Prize winner, as well as being one of the most popular poets currently writing in English, and given that he reaches a global audience, then this profusion of academic attention should come as no surprise. However, what is surprising is that, in all of these books, there is not one which is devoted to the study of his prose writings, and this is remarkable as these offer an insight into many of his central concerns.

In terms of reading Heaney's essays in this light, I would offer his own practice as a useful paradigm. In *The Government of the Tongue*, he discusses the work of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, and as

befits one whose academic rite of passage was undergone when ‘practical criticism held great sway’,¹ there is a close, in places line-by-line, examination of passages from three works by Herbert. These are *Barbarian in the Garden*, *Selected Poems* and *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*. What is interesting, in the context of this discussion, is that *Barbarian in the Garden* is a collection of prose writings, ‘ten meditations on art and history which masquerade as travel writing’.² Heaney does not see these essays as a metalinguistic gloss on the poetry; nor does he see them as separate in terms of thematic concerns from Herbert’s poetry; rather does he see them as another enunciation of the thematic, aesthetic and ethical imperatives that ground Herbert’s work.

The same standards can be applied to Heaney’s own beginnings as a prose writer. In the foreword to *Preoccupations*, he makes the following points:

All that I really knew about the art was derived from whatever poetry I had written, and from those poets who had helped me to write it. I had a half-clarified desire to come to poetic terms with myself by considering the example of others, and to try to bring into focus the little I knew....I hope it is clear that the essays selected here are held together by searches for answers to central preoccupying questions: how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?³

In this quotation, Heaney outlines the *raison d’être* of the essays in the book. I would make two points about this assertion. Firstly, it demonstrates the centrality that Heaney ascribes to his prose writing, seeing it as a meditation on art and poetry, as a coming to terms with his own voice through a consideration of other poets, what he terms, borrowing from Auden, ‘breaking bread with the dead’.⁴ From the outset, this is no piecemeal series of disparate essays and reviews; instead it is a bringing ‘into focus’ of his concerns about the notion of ‘art’. In short, he is attempting to develop some theoretical precepts about art and poetry, what one might tentatively term, an aesthetic theory.

Secondly, this quotation attests to the teleology of his project, namely the ‘searches for answers’ to those central preoccupying questions which are cited above. He begins using the personal pronoun, first person singular: ‘[a]ll that *I* really knew about the art was derived from whatever poetry *I* had written and from those poets who had helped *me* to write it. *I* had a half-clarified desire to come to poetic terms with *myself*’ [*my italics*]. It is clear that Heaney himself, and his work, are both the subject and object of this search for answers. His writing will focus on his own work, and on the work of others in terms of how they have helped him to come to poetic terms with himself. Interestingly, though, the second part of the quotation demonstrates the deictical progression from the personal to the general, with the teleological object of the searches for answers now becoming ‘the *poet*’, and *his* [*sic*] relationship with voice, place, literature and society: ‘how should a *poet* properly live and write? What is *his* relationship to be to *his* own voice, *his* own place, *his* literary heritage and *his* contemporary world?’ [*my italics*].

In short, what is attempted in his various prose pieces is nothing less than a theory, or epistemology of poetry in particular and writing in general, what Bernard O’Donoghue calls, speaking specifically of *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney’s *ars poetica*.⁵ I would argue that such a project is the result of the ‘searches for answers’ that have set in motion his prose writings in the first place.

Underwriting all of these concerns, or preoccupations, is the ongoing attempt to bring into focus some form of theorization of poetry, to take up some form of critical distance so as to better understand the mode of knowledge that is operative within poetry and which, by extension, is operative through poetry in terms of the socio-political sphere. What emerges in these essays is a sophisticated approach to poetry, an approach which grants the internal laws of language and aesthetics which are applicable within the domain of poetry, but which at the same time demonstrates a growing awareness of the

need to reconcile what he terms 'lyric celebration',⁶ and its concomitants 'the phrase or cadence which haunts the ear and the eager parts of the mind',⁷ with the demands of 'an ethical imperative which 'the poet may find as he exercises his free gift in the presence of the unfree and the hurt'.⁸

If poetry is to be of value, he notes, it must avoid the 'consensus and settlement of a meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket'.⁹ The problems with such a view of poetry are that the very complexity and ambiguity that are part of the force of poetry are denied and etiolated. If the security blanket of a consensual meaning is seen as something to be avoided, perhaps the best way to proceed is not by throwing off the blanket altogether, but instead, to examine more closely the weft and weave of the textile of the blanket so as to bring out the intersections, joins and interfusions that create the blanket in question.

In terms of such a weave, the mode of its creation is that of a loom with a shuttle which moves back and forth creating the solidity of the blanket through the intermeshing of the skeins of threads. This metaphor is relevant to Heaney's own theoretical processes as in his earlier writing, the dialectical cut and thrust of poetry is a major theme. In *Preoccupations*, for example, one of the main discursive strategies that Heaney undertakes in his discussion of texts or their socio-political contexts, is the uncovering of binary oppositions. Neil Corcoran notes what he calls a 'tendency to over-schematic or even specious binary thinking',¹⁰ and seems to see it as a type of defect in Heaney's writing.

For Heaney, however, the notion of poetry as a mode of knowledge is one which partakes of multiple perspectives, as evidenced in his polyglossic enunciation of different voices in *North*. To write about the experience of Northern Ireland, without succumbing to sectarian atavism is, of necessity, to inhabit some form of binarism. Such binarisms however, are used dynamically and constructively, as opposed to statically, to create the complex weave of interconnections and intersections which are the results of

his searches for answers. This becomes clear when we look at the primal binarisms that define Northern Ireland – Catholic and Protestant; nationalist and unionist; republican and loyalist; Irish and British. To put it another way, what Corcoran is describing may be imagined as the security blanket which was adduced earlier in our discussion; a simple covering device with little complexity attached, on first sight. However, Heaney will demonstrate that woven material can also embody the complexities of identity and dialectical thought.

In *Among Schoolchildren* Heaney spoke about a great-aunt of his, Catherine Bradley, and about an example of her school needlework, from 1843. This included the following verse, embroidered on her ‘sampler’:

Ireland as she ought to be
Great glorious and free
First flower of the earth
First gem of the sea

The embroidery beneath this verse was of a shamrock, the traditional symbol of Ireland, but ‘squeezed to the right of the verse’ were the words ‘God Save the Queen’.¹¹ Here the prevalence of binarisms in Heaney’s thought is embodied on a piece of Ulster linen. Is the imperative here, stressing how Ireland ‘ought’ to be, inclining to the notion of being free of British influence, as signified by the shamrock, or else of being free as part of the union between Great Britain and Ireland, as signified by the rubric ‘God Save the Queen?’

Throughout this pamphlet, and in *Place And Displacement*, Heaney stresses the bifurcation of ideologies and identities that have marked his growth. From learning about Jane Austen, Tennyson and Lawrence and from attending sherry parties at the house of a professor in Queens University who

hailed from Oxford, to acting with the Bellaghy Dramatic Society, playing a United Irishman and Robert Emmett, we see someone who is being influenced by both the Irish and English aspects of Ulster culture. In many cases, such binarisms were expressed in antagonistic tones of self and other, or us and them. For Heaney, as he puts it, the exposure to aspects of both cultures, brought about an uncertainty in terms of cultural and ideological identification.

The physical oscillation between weekly exposure to ‘the elegances of Oscar Wilde and the profundities of Shakespeare’,¹² and the weekend, with its religious devotions in the chapel, and acting as *fear a’ tigh* (master of ceremonies) at the GAA *ceilidhs* has its psychological and identificatory effect in a number of questions which are broadly coterminous with those preoccupying questions with which we began our discussion. Heaney asks:

Was I two persons or one? Was I extending myself or breaking myself apart? Was I being led out or led away? Was I failing to live up to the aspiring literary intellectual effort when I was at home, was I betraying the culture of the parish when I was at the university.¹³

The preconditions which set up this questioning are defined in terms of spatial and temporal oscillations. Temporally, he spent the weekdays of term at Queens University studying English literature and becoming enculturated into the middle-class, literary, cultured ethos that is connotated by ‘sherry parties on the Malone Road’. At ‘weekends and during the holidays’ he was immersed in Catholic, rural, Gaelic, nationalist social and cultural *mores*. Spatially, he oscillated between city and country, Belfast and Bellaghy, the academy and the parish. This physical movement, constituted in time and space, serves as a paradigm for the psychological and cognitive motion of what one might term Heaney’s epistemology of poetry. It informs statements which see the poet as being ‘displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable’.¹⁴

This progression from physical movement to dialectical cognition is a feature of *Digging*, the opening poem of *Death of a Naturalist* and the first poem where he felt his ‘feelings had got into words’.¹⁵ Here the experiential practice of digging into earth becomes transformed into an epistemological paradigm of an artesian imagination as well as of an unearthing of new experiences through the process of upturning the givens of the surface so as to create ‘opened ground’, in terms of ideas and world views.

Hence, his dialectical relationship is the defining factor in his epistemology of poetry in that it allows him to set up transformative and transgressive structures which he sees as answering his own complex position in terms of the knowledge or truth-claims of poetry. Instead, such binarisms, as we will see, are part of a dialectical mode of thought which is ethical in its mode of operation. To be affected by each position is to acquire some form of negative knowledge inasmuch as one can see that neither position has a monopoly on truth or right, and also that one has some form of ethical responsibility to this other; it involves a responsibility to the thought of the other.

Ethics, in the sense of the word as used by Emmanuel Levinas, envisions a sense of responsibility to the other, to forms of alterity which are outside the self as a primary facet of human discourse. Jacques Derrida has made the point, in *Of Spirit*, that the origin of language is responsibility,¹⁶ in the sense that to speak is to speak to someone else, to assume a responsibility of addressing some other person. In a binary opposition, something is defined in terms of the other, and as such, can be placed in an ethical context by taking note of the differences and connections between self and other. It is what Heaney terms the notion of ‘needing to accommodate two opposing notions of truthfulness simultaneously’,¹⁷ the very condition which has been emblematically rendered in Catherine Bradley’s

embroidery sampler, where ‘two value systems, which now explode daily, are lodged like dormant munitions’ on one piece of Ulster linen.¹⁸

I would suggest that Heaney’s writing will dislodge these positions so as to bring out the etymological sense of ‘munition’ as both a fortification (‘*munitio-onis*’) but also its cognate term ‘muniment’, meaning a document entailing rights or privileges. Two sets of fortified rights and privileges are exactly what is signified by the shamrock and the slogan on the sampler, and both have munimental designs on the notion of ‘Ulster’ in that piece of Ulster linen. By dislodging these fortifications, Heaney is, symbolically, bringing these documents into dialectical interaction. It is worth keeping in mind that the term ‘dialectic’ originates from the Greek ‘*dialektos*’, meaning discourse or conversation, and the sampler is a mimetic example of this process in Heaney’s epistemology of writing, as he sets up an oscillation between the two positions found on this piece of Ulster linen, an oscillation that parallels his physical oscillation he underwent at university.

The proper adjective ‘Ulster’ is significant here. In *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry in Northern Ireland*, delivered in 1984, Heaney makes it clear that to be a writer in Ulster is to be very much in two minds, to be ‘in two places at once’, to be aware that he or she belongs to a place ‘that is patently riven between notions of belonging to other places’.¹⁹ This view of place as inhabited by oppositions pulling in different directions places an obligation, or responsibility on the writer to delineate the positions – ideological, social, political and cultural – of his own grouping (self) and that of the ‘other’ in a place where the whole population are ‘adepts’ in the ‘mystery of living in two places at one time’.²⁰ To define the identificatory parameters, the muniments, of each group is not as simple as it might first seem, as there are complex equations and intersections which are both mutually exclusive and at the same time, mutually intertwined. These notions form parts of the weave that his dialectical *mentalité* will outline.

Ulster, as he notes, is just such a complex series of threads in this weave. As he puts it, the nationalist will ‘wince at the Union Jack and “God Save the Queen” as tokens of his place in the world’, but for the unionist, with whom the nationalist conducts his daily life, these emblems have ‘pious and passionate force’.²¹ Heaney goes on to demonstrate the further complex imbrications and dualities of identity in Northern Ireland:

The fountainhead of the Unionist’s myth, springs in the Crown of England, but he has to hold his own in the island of Ireland. The fountainhead of the Nationalist’s myth lies in the idea of an integral Ireland, but he too lives in an exile from his ideal place. Yet while he has to concede that he is a citizen of the partitioned British state, the Nationalist can hold to the physical fact of his presence upon the Irish island, just as the Unionist can affirm the reality of political realm of the United Kingdom even as he recognizes the geographical fact that Ireland is his insular home.²²

Here we don’t see Corcoran’s notion of schematic binaries at work; instead we see the careful delineation of a complex series of oppositions which are placed in an evolving structure which attempts to set up some form of dialectical conversation between them. There is a careful weighing of the nuances of each position, seen in terms of its similarity with the other side of the equation. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, the presence of the other ‘before whom we stand helps to break up our own bias and narrowness’,²³ and this can be seen as part of Heaney’s searches for answers.

In *Mossbawn*, an early essay in *Preoccupations*, he points out the genesis of his awareness of different types of poetry that influenced him, beginning with rhymes from his schooldays featuring a character called Neddy McGuigan or Dirty-Faced McGuigan who ‘pissed in the Quigan/ The Quigan was hot/ So he pissed in the pot’, as well as more ideologically centred rhymes: ‘Up the long ladder and down the short rope/ To hell with King Billy and God bless the Pope’ (the answer to this being ‘Up with

King William and down with the Pope'). Here, the sectarian divide is captured in what might be termed subcultural poetry, but interestingly both traditions are set down together. Indeed, the rhythmic and prosodic similarity of the two couplets sees both traditions as placed in a mutually defining, if antagonistic, structure, with King William being defined in contradistinction to the Pope, and vice versa. The same mutuality of definition is clear from the other two poems quoted, one suggesting that 'Paypishes' (Catholics) should be 'cut in two' with the answering verse suggesting that it is 'red, white and blue' which should be 'torn up in two'.²⁴

We seem to be back in the weave of Catherine Bradley's sampler here, with the binarisms being sketched out in bold lines of difference, and the memory of the poet oscillating between them. In this case, we might, perhaps, agree with Corcoran's criticism of the flatness of the binary opposition, and the over schematic nature of the verses. Here, there seems to be no sense of dialectical interaction between the two. This is because these rhymes are separate from the present tense of the voice of the essay. The 'I' describing these poems is not involved in any of them; they are remembered from a distance, and serve as signifiers of a childish sense of rhyme, which merely enunciates the sense of the group to which the rhymester belonged. There is no sense of responsibility or adjudication between the positions; each set of rhymes delineates the security blanket of each tradition. To paraphrase an earlier comment from *The Redress of Poetry*, this type of poetry is *not* 'a working model of inclusive consciousness'; here, this type of poetry *does* simplify.

In an essay entitled 'Christmas, 1971', a more complex interaction is foregrounded by the voice of the poet himself as the *locus* of the interaction. Writing about the role of the artist in the face of the political confrontation in Belfast in 1971, Heaney again sees the situation in terms of binaries, but now, we see a far more dynamic structure of thought, as well as a more ethical concern with the correctness of the choices being made. He says that he is 'fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony

and injustice, swung at one moment by the long tail of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror'.²⁵ Here, the physicality of the original oscillation between cultural and ideological poles is restated in the verb of motion 'swung'; the poet is struggling to control these forces of 'race and resentment' as opposed to those of 'pity and terror', as they 'swing' him from one to the other, seemingly unable to control the pendular motion.

Perhaps the most important words in this passage are 'continuous adjudication'. The interaction of active and passive voices in this passage outlines the complexity of the struggle that is ongoing within the culture, and within the poet. There are two levels involved here. Firstly, he is involved in continually adjudicating between agony and injustice, and the nature of the stated weariness is that while attempting to exercise the cognitive faculty of judgement, he is also (and here we see the second level) being 'swung' by events over which he seems to have no control, the external political and violent actions in Belfast in 1971.

Heaney's metaphor of being 'swung' by the 'long tail' represents the atavistic, visceral emotions that were rife in Belfast at this time. Members of Heaney's own community were slaughtering for the 'common good', even as he was writing, and this internecine violence, itself both caused by, and creative of, a binary opposition, foregrounded questions about the nature and function of art. The issue under adjudication appears to be that seminal preoccupying question: 'how should a poet properly live and write?'.²⁶

The etymology of 'adjudicate' helps to clarify the issue at this point. Stemming from the Latin '*judicare*', the original composite was '*jus*' (law) and '*dicere*' (to say), the word highlights Heaney's difficulty in continually attempting to 'say the law' of proper aesthetic, ethical and political action in the face of a violent contemporary context. Of necessity, such adjudication will be dialectical, it will

create a *locus* for the enunciation of the concerns of self and other without necessarily succumbing to the atavisms of either group. As he puts it, the locating of one's identity in 'the ethnic and liturgical habits of one's group' is all very well, but for that group to 'confine the range of one's growth' and 'to have one's sympathies determined and one's responses programmed' by that group, is clearly a 'form of entrapment',²⁷ an entrapment whose consequences are enunciated in the lines already cited from *Kinship*, and whose prevalence is clear from the 'swung by the tail' metaphor.

His adjudication on this issue is first spoken in an essay aptly entitled 'Feeling into Words', where he teases out the different roles for a poet who is attempting to 'properly live and write'. He points to a crucial period when the 'original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel' was 'initiated again' in the Summer of 1969, in Belfast. In this context, the epistemology of the texts of poetry became clear and consisted of becoming a 'search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament'. The performative nature of this activity, a 'search' as opposed to a destination, resonates with his original 'searches for answers', and is qualified directly in terms of what such symbols and images should *not* be:

I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish. I do not mean public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity—although there is nothing necessarily unpoetic about such a celebration, if one thinks of Yeats's 'Easter 1916'.²⁸

The difficulty Heaney has with both of these epistemological positions is that they both demand a suspension of the faculty of adjudication, and of the notion of searches for some form of intersubjective truth. In both of the above positions, poetry is very much in the service of the actual; it functions as, at best, reportage, and at worst, as a sort of poetic licence for the barbarities of sectarian hatred.

In the first of these, poetry is attenuated in that it must maintain the note of lamentation which precludes any spontaneous joy or creativity on the part of the writer. As he puts it in *The Government of the Tongue*: ‘art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it’.²⁹ Liberal lamentation is of necessity, *post factum*, it is dependent on the actual material situation of politics and violence. In this sense, it is mimetic of one of the meanings Heaney suggests for his resonant title *The Government of the Tongue*, where the tongue is governed by the quotidian, where one is told to govern one’s tongue, with the implication of a ‘denial of the tongue’s autonomy and permission’ [*italics original*]. Here, ironically, liberal lamentation, a lamentation that seems to achieve a position of transcendence with respect to the sectarian atavisms of race and resentment, actually allows such atavisms to dictate the nature of such liberal discourse.

For a poet or writer, such an epistemology can leave poetry in a ‘relatively underprivileged situation, requiring it to take a position that is secondary to religious truth or state security or public order’.³⁰ As we have seen in the introduction, such a simplification of writing and reading are the very attenuations that Heaney wishes to avoid, as they in no way facilitate any complex searches after answers. This attenuated view of poetry suggests that answers must be in response to events, and hence, will be dictated by those events. Similarly, such an position excludes any mythological dimension to poetry. As Heaney demonstrated in *North*, an exploration of the mythos that underwrites sectarian constitutions of identity can be a powerful tool in the unpacking of such identities. Heaney sees the role of writing as more than such an event-driven response which must be belated with respect to actuality.

The second position with which he takes issue is that of poetry as a celebration or execration of resistance or atrocity. Such a position places the poet firmly within his or her group or mythos. Here

the hortatory or execratory role of the poet consists in articulating the monological vision of the tribe or group, without any notion of different perspectives or different standpoints. This monocular vision, which is at the core of *Kinship*, is creative of the subjectivities of the group. It is a vision which achieves the entrapment of consciousness already noted, as the growth of the individual is canalized by the ethnic and liturgical vision of the group. Such a position of immanence removes any power of critique from the writer, and also attenuates the complexity of any political or identificatory conflict. It denies any notion of dialectical complexity in terms of the relationship of the 'I' to the 'we'. Writing about the poetry of Osip Mandelstam, and the memoir of his life, *Hope Abandoned*, written by his wife Nadezhda, Heaney cites her views on the notion of the 'we', the community. She notes that the relationship between the 'we' and the 'I' is dialectical and fluid: [t]o find its fulfilment, the 'I' needs at least two complementary dimensions: 'we' and – if it is fortunate – 'you'.³¹ These dimensions external to the 'I' yet also connected to it, define a notion of subjectivity that is central to Heaney's notion of the function of art.

The importance of this complexity and plurality of vision that Heaney associates with poetry is underlined by his return to this image of the 'I' and the 'eye' in *The Redress of Poetry*. In an essay entitled 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', he is writing about Yeats's poem *The Cold Heaven*, and sees in this poem a 'sense of answerability, of responsibility' and goes on to add that 'the "I" of the poet as a first person singular, a self-knowing consciousness, is brilliantly and concretely at one with the eye of the poet as a retina overwhelmed by the visual evidence of infinity and solitude'.³² Here again, the conflation of the subject with vision is central to Heaney's aesthetic epistemology. Answerability and responsibility to the other are central to his notion of the constitutive vision of poetry. This dialectic between 'I' and 'eye' is an example of the rhetorical figure of a metalepsis, the creation of an effect through a remote cause. For Heaney this metaleptic structure allows him to express the complexity of vision that poetry can bring about. As I

have already noted, such an epistemology is the very antithesis of simplistic and attenuating notions of subjectivity. To 'see' is to see the other, to create the 'I' with these objects of vision in mind is to act ethically. In this sense, Heaney's notion of art is broadly similar to that of Emmanuel Levinas who sees art as a 'relation with the other'.³³ Hence, to speak for one's own group, is to adopt a monocularity of vision which, in turn, leads to a monological notion of subjectivity.

Hence, Heaney's denial of the validity of these two different methods of providing 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament' is an example of litotes in that through describing what these images and symbols should not be, he is gesturing very much in the direction of what he sees as the correct or proper images and symbols. He agrees that there is a profound relation between 'poetic technique' and 'historical situation'.³⁴ However, he refuses to allow the former to become either dependent on, or subservient to, the latter. Heaney's epistemology of poetry will attempt to avoid these attenuations and entrapments:

I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.³⁵

The shape of his field of force, or constellation, is hinted at in his essay on Osip Mandelstam, where he cites approvingly Mandelstam's notion of the purity of poetry as being like making Brussels lace, an activity which involves 'real work' but whose 'major components, those supporting the design, are air, perforations and truancy'.³⁶ Here, the dialectic of presence and absence, the importance of the shadow as well as the substance, are stressed. The similarity with Derrida's articulation of all communication being achieved through difference and the trace is clear. Derrida sees language as functioning through an 'economy of traces', and in an interview with Julia Kristeva, goes on to explain his view of a 'new

concept of writing' wherein 'no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present'. In other words, the elements of the system are structurally dependent on elements which are never 'simply present or absent', and are the results of an interweaving between presence and absence.

It is this 'interweaving, this textile', which produces the 'text'.³⁷ It is ironic that, via Derrida, we are now back in the realm of Catherine Bradley's sampler, and the oscillatory imagery of the loom as it creates the Ulster linen of her sampler. As already noted, this is far from the security blanket of oversimplistic meaning; this weaving, this text(ile) is redolent of the dialectical structure which he has been constructing. Hence, Heaney's Brussels lace describes a similar economy in that what is present is supported by 'air, perforations and truancy'. It is in the interstices of this economy, this field of force, that Heaney sees the force and efficacy of poetry.

Writing at the conclusion of the title essay of *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney is discussing the 'paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general',³⁸ and muses on the efficacy of poetry. He says in one sense, the efficacy is 'nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank'; however, in another sense he sees its efficacy as 'unlimited' and goes on to cite the metaphor of Jesus' writing in the sand – 'in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed' – as an example of the status or force of poetry. Quoting from Chapter Eight of John's Gospel, he cites Jesus' writing, in the face of the scribes and Pharisees who were accusing the woman caught in adultery. He sees poetry as analogous to this writing, a 'break with the usual life but not an absconding from it'. This notion of a break brings us back to the interstices of the field of force, those airy trauancies of Brussels lace which were just as important as the designs which they supported. In terms redolent of Derrida's notions of difference and the trace, Heaney speaks of the epistemology of poetry as paralleling the writing in the

sand which is ephemeral in the extreme. As he puts it, poetry does not promise a solution to either 'accusing crowd' or 'helpless accused':

Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.

This is what gives poetry its governing power. At its greatest moments it would attempt, in Yeats's phrase, to hold in a single thought reality and justice.³⁹

Here, we see different, but parallel statements about the field of force. Poetry can be the space through which reality and justice can operate, not overtly in the political sphere, but in terms of influencing the writer and the reader; he goes on to describe poetry as 'more a threshold than a path' and sees it as one which is 'constantly approached and constantly departed from', and which effects reader and writer by the experience of being 'at the same time summoned and released'.⁴⁰ The oscillatory nature of this dialectical movement demonstrates the complexity of the forces acting on both reader and writer.

In his 'writing in the sand' metaphor, Heaney was discussing these very notions of efficacy and inefficacy; on the one hand, he sees that poetry doesn't stop tanks; on the other, it may alter the mindset that is sending in those tanks. Ironically, it is the very ephemerality of poetry, the writing in the sand, that gives it any sense of lasting force, it is 'the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality'.⁴¹ However, the force is microcosmic as opposed to macrocosmic; it has no direct effect on the political, but it has the effect of altering the individual consciousness of both writer and reader. In terms of the relationship between writing and politics, he sees the 'purely poetic force of words' as 'the guarantee of a commitment which need not apologize for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating'.⁴²

In *Crediting Poetry*, his Nobel lecture, Heaney exemplifies this point by recalling how, in 1976, a minibus full of workers was stopped at Kingsmills, near Bessbrook in County Armagh at a bogus checkpoint. The occupants were lined up at the side of the road, and were asked ‘any Catholics among you, step out here’. Heaney notes that, since the majority of the group were Protestants, with a single exception, the presumption must have been that ‘the masked men were Protestant paramilitaries about to carry out a tit-for-tat sectarian killing’.⁴³ He goes on:

It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness, but he did make a motion to step forward. Then, the story goes, in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don’t move, we’ll not betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong to.⁴⁴

The man did step forward, but was thrown aside to watch the execution of the ten Protestant workers, murdered by ‘presumably, the Provisional IRA’.⁴⁵ Heaney notes that, in the face of such atrocity, we are ‘rightly suspicious of that which gives too much consolation in these circumstances’.⁴⁶ However, if art is to be of ‘present use’, then its redress must take account of both the hand that gripped its other, as well as those which murdered their others. Heaney’s field of force hopes to credit the ‘marvellous’ as well as the ‘murderous’,⁴⁷ but always within a context that respects our responsibility to the other. Jacques Derrida has made the point that literature is that genre wherein ‘license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can’.⁴⁸ For Heaney, and his notion of poetry, we could perhaps add to this: license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can, *and everything he should*.

He credits poetry both for ‘being itself and for being a help’,⁴⁹ as well as redressing the socio-political, Heaney’s searches for answers will take into account the restorative relation of poetry to the self, and of poetry to the development of a fuller consciousness of our humanity.

Endnotes

- 1 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose: 1968-1978*, London, Faber, p. 13.
- 2 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings*, London, Faber, 1988, p. 55.
- 3 *Preoccupations*, p. 13.
- 4 *Preoccupations*, p. 14.
- 5 Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, 135.
- 6 *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 12.
- 7 *Preoccupations*, p. 61.
- 8 *Preoccupations*, p. xviii.
- 9 *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 122.
- 10 Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, first published in 1986, London, Faber, 1998, p. 230.
- 11 Seamus Heaney, *Among Schoolchildren*, Belfast, Queen’s University, 1983, p. 6.
- 12 *Among Schoolchildren*, p. 7.
- 13 *Among Schoolchildren*, p. 8.
- 14 Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement*, Grasmere, Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1985, p. 8.
- 15 *Preoccupations*, p. 41.
- 16 Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1989, p. 132.
- 17 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, London, Faber, 1995, p. 4.
- 18 *Among Schoolchildren*, p. 6.
- 19 *Place and Displacement*, p. 4.
- 20 *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 190.
- 21 *Place and Displacement*, p. 4.
- 22 *Place and Displacement*, p. 5.
- 23 Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Text and Interpretation’, translated by Dennis J. Schmidt and Richard Palmer, 1981, pp. 21-51, in Diane P. Michelfelder, and Richard E. Palmer (eds) *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 26.
- 24 *Preoccupations*, p. 25.
- 25 *Preoccupations*, p. 30.
- 26 *Preoccupations*, p. 31.
- 27 *Place and Displacement*, pp. 6-7.
- 28 *Preoccupations*, p. 56.
- 29 *The Government of the Tongue*, 94.
- 30 *The Government of the Tongue*, 96.
- 31 *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 76.
- 32 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, London, Faber, 1995, p. 149.
- 33 Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989, 143.
- 34 *Place and Displacement*, p. 7.
- 35 *Preoccupations*, pp. 56-57.
- 36 *The Government of the Tongue*, p.84.
- 37 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Translated by Alan Bass, London, Athlone, 1981, p. 26.
- 38 *The Government of the Tongue*, p.107.
- 39 *The Government of the Tongue*, p.108.
- 40 *The Government of the Tongue*, p.108.
- 41 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 1.

- 42 *Place and Displacement*, p. 7.
- 43 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 18.
- 44 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 18.
- 45 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 18.
- 46 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 19.
- 47 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 20.
- 48 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 37.
- 49 *Redress of Poetry*, p. 11.