

# *Connecting Bits and Pieces - Seamus Heaney: Electric Light*

*Review essay by Eugene O'Brien*

'Connecting Bits and Pieces: Review essay on Seamus Heaney: *Electric Light* in *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, Volume III, Numbers 1 & 2, pages 139-146.

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## **5 keywords**

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## **Abstract**

This review essay examines the recurrence of different themes in Seamus Heaney's Collection *Electric Light*. It retraces influence of T.S. Eliot in the book and also the ongoing preoccupation with classical references. The book looks again at different themes from the Heaney canon, but sees them in a new light.

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*Electric Light* has been the subject of a number of reviews since its publication, many of which can be seen to damn the book with faint praise. John Carey, one of Heaney's strongest critical supporters in the past, has made the point that this is Heaney's "most literary collection to date – which may disconcert his admirers," and he goes on: "caring about life, especially primitive rural life, rather than literature has always seemed a hallmark of his poetic integrity" (35). Such a reading is quite a commonplace among Heaney criticism, and it seems to me that it is stuck in a sort of critical time-warp as it misses the growing surety of tone, theme and allusive range that is the hallmark of Heaney's later poetry. Has this view taken any cognizance of the Heaney who can allude to over twenty authors in *North*, or who can say "I swim in Homer" (*Seeing Things* 36), or who can imaginatively inhabit the Troy of Agamemnon, Cassandra and Clytemnestra (*Spirit Level* 29-37), or who can translate *Beowulf* by way of a point of entry through the idiomatic English of South Derry? Indeed I would argue that what connects the later books is a thematic and allusive *nexus* of classical imagery, translations from Irish, Anglo-Saxon and

Greek, an increasing focus on the present and future, as opposed to the past, and a concentration on the personal as opposed to the communal, developments synopsised in the line: “Me waiting till I was fifty / To credit marvels” (*Seeing Things* 50), are the common threads which connect his later books of poetry.

*Electric Light* is a book which revisits many of Heaney’s old topics and themes but in a manner which complicates and deepens the psychic material and which considerably enhances the Heaney canon. Given the early use of place names in his poetry, and given the specific use of “Toome” in *Wintering Out*, the opening poem, “At Toombridge” is almost a *recherche du temps perdu*, as he revisits the earlier poem where the sound of the word conjured up images of the Irish past “loam, flints, musket-balls”, and saw him imaginatively immersed in “bogwater and tributaries / and elvers trail my hair” (26). In the new poem, the river is seen as the “continuous present” while the past is no longer mythological but quantifiable. He refers to where “the checkpoint used to be” and to the “rebel boy” who was hanged in 1798, but goes on to stress the new importance of “negative ions in the open air” which are “poetry to me.” This is an important point as it is the negative and the present that will be the inspiration of this book, as opposed to the “slime and silver of the fattened eel” which were inspirations “before” (3).

This concentration on the present and the future, at the expense of the past, extrapolates from a thematic movement in the later books, as he focuses on the “music of what might happen.” It becomes a recurrent *topos* throughout the book, as he speaks about the “everything flows and steady go of the world” (4), or the “erotics of the future” (5) or “a span of pure attention” (54). The book embraces the ordinary, endowing it with a significance of memory and hindsight. Thus, he can speak of the courting days of himself and his wife Marie, in a poem entitled “Red, White and Blue”, a title which immediately raises expectations of a political subtext, suggesting the colours of the British Union Jack, but which here, eschews the political in favour of the personal, referring to three different coloured clothes worn by his

wife, Marie, at different stages of their life together. The touch here is just right, remembering a description of her walk “She’s like a wee pony”, and of his own irritated reaction to such a description:

I love the go and gladsomeness in her,  
Something unbroken, her gift for pure dismay  
At shits like you. (28)

The second section is a birth poem, recalling the less-successful “Act of Union” in North. here, in common with other fathers of his time, was not present at the birth. The location of the hospital, next to a swimming pool is caught by the phrase “banshee acoustic” while the extended metaphor of the speaker as a knight-errant reaches a bathetic climax as he pictures “the Knight of the White Feather turning tail” (29). The unsentimental and wryly mocking note of this conveys a sense of ease as he recalls all aspects of his past life, without the need to over-dramatize or sentimentalize the birth of his child. The final section recalls a young Heaney and Marie, hitchhiking in the Republic of Ireland, meeting a “*veh*” British couple who were admiring the “gate-lodge and the avenue/At Castlebellingham”, and this memory stirs a memory of Marie in “a Fair Isle tank-top and blue denim skirt”, calling her a “Boticelli dressed down for the sixties” (30).

This image, a syncretism of Irish and classical is a synecdoche of the main thrust of this book – the fusion and interaction of Irish and European culture. Oddly enough, this European dimension, flagged by an unusually large amount of literary and linguistic allusion, brings Heaney full circle in terms of his own poetic development. In an essay entitled “Learning from Eliot”, delivered as the *Cheltenham Lecture* in October 1988, Heaney spoke of his early experiences of the work of Eliot. He saw the *Collected Poems* as the “first adult book” he owned, but rather than being an inspiration, the book represented Heaney’s sense of “distance” from the mystery of literature. The early Heaney was

stylistically and culturally far removed from Eliot, and yet in this book, the polyglot allusiveness of “The Waste Land” hovers *hauntologically*, to use Derrida’s term, over Heaney’s writing. Indeed, there is a sly homage to the Wasteland in “Vitruviana”, where, Eliot’s lines from “The Fire Sermon”:

On Margate Sands  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing. (74)

find an allusive analogue in Heaney’s:

On Sandymount strand I can connect  
Some bits and pieces. (53).

The title of this poem is similarly allusive, referring to the style of Vitruvius, a Roman architect and writer of the first century BC, whose book *De Architectura* was later influential in the development of Renaissance architecture. It is this process of influence and mutual transformation that is at the core of the book.

Indeed, one could go so far as to say that it is this construction of a series of intercultural and interlinguistic connections that is the underlying imperative of this book. In terms of such allusiveness and cultural intertextuality, it is worth examining the number of foreign words, phrases, literary allusions and generally cosmopolitan references that are to be found studded throughout the poems. A casual glance reveals references to Asclepius (7); Epidaurus (8); Hygeia (9); Virgil (11); Grendel (18); El Greco (22); Lycidas, Moeris (31) as well as a pantheon of modern English, American and European writers—Friel, Dante, Auden, Wilfred Owen, Ted Hughes, Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, Zbigniew Herbert, George MacKay Brown...the list goes on. Linguistically, we see snatches of Latin: *poeta doctus* (7);

*miraculum* (8); *carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens* (11); *pacatum orbem* (12); *rigor vitae* (14); *in medias res* (24); Macedonian: *Nema problema* (19); German: *ja* (23); French *de haut en bas* (23); Italian: *Godi, fanciullo mio; stato soave* (26) and Irish: *cailleach; Slieve na mBard, Knock Filiocht, Ben Duan* (43).

In addition to this cosmopolitan range of literary and linguistic allusion, there is also a strain of reference to other languages and literatures running through the titles of the poems, as a glance at the “Contents” will reveal: “Montana”, “The Little Canticles of Asturias”, “Virgil: Eclogue IX”, “Sonnets from Hellas”, “Arion”, “Vitruviana”, as well as a series of elegies for writers from different traditions: “On His Work on the English Tongue” (Ted Hughes); “Audenesque (Joseph Brodsky); “Would They Had Stay’d” (a series of British poets); “Late in the Day” (David Thomson), as well as a series of elegies for friends who had died.

Perhaps the key thematic element of this book is the fusion of this cosmopolitan and polyglossic range of reference and allusion with the remembered experience of a poet from an Irish culture. Thus, in “Out of the Bag”, the family doctor who delivered all of the Heaney children, Dr Kerlin, is described in terms of how he appeared to the young Heaney. Given the traditional Irish reticence about matters sexual and gynecological, the fiction was maintained that “All of us came in Doctor Kerlin’s bag”, and the accurate adjectival description of the doctor’s ministering has all the hallmarks of Heaney’s earlier style. However, in describing the doctor’s eyes, Heaney uses the adjective “hyperborean”, and this word is the hinge, or in Derridean terms, *brisure*, upon which that fusion of Ireland and Classical Europe is achieved. The term refers to a member of a race of people who in Greek mythology lived in a land of sunshine and plenty beyond the north wind, worshipping Apollo, and this connection is furthered in the second section where poetry and medicine are also connected:

*Poeta doctus* Peter Levi says  
Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called *asclepions*)  
Were the equivalent of hospitals

in ancient Greece. Or of shrines like Lourdes,  
Says *poeta doctus* Graves. Or of the cure  
by poetry that cannot be coerced. (7)

This cure by poetry was reinforced at Epidaurus where Heaney realized that:

...the whole place was a sanatorium  
With theatre and gymnasium and baths,  
  
A site of incubation, where ‘incubation’  
Was technical and ritual, meaning sleep  
When epiphany occurred and you met the god... (8)

It is such epiphanies that allow the oneiric connection in this poem between Doctor Kerlin, Aesclepius and Hygeia, his daughter; between Bellaghy, Epidaurus and Lourdes; between medicine, sleep and poetry; between dream and reality: “The room I came from and the rest of us all came from/Stays pure reality where I stand alone” (9).

Such epiphany can also be found in his version of Virgil’s Eclogue, entitled “Bann Valley Eclogue” (one of three such eclogues in the book). Interestingly, the term derives from the Greek “*eklegein*” meaning “to select”, and as I have intimated, such a process of selection and combination is at the core of the aesthetic imperative of this book. It is another birth poem in a book which seems very conscious of the

preciousness of birth, both physical and metaphorical. In a poem that has echoes of Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter", Heaney hopes to "sing / Better times for her and her generation." It is as if his "cure by poetry" is being slightly coerced in the presence of Virgil. In this colloquy, the voice of Virgil, a *spectator ab extra* on the Northern Irish political situation, posits the cure of poetry, as "whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves/Earth mark, birth mark." Here, he might be back in the territory of *Wintering Out* and *North*, where he spoke, in part, as the voice of his tribe, the *vox loci*. But now, the voice of Virgil suggests a connection between the individual birth and the future:

But when the waters break  
Bann's stream will overflow, the old markings  
Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.  
The valley will be washed like the new baby. (11)

It is an optimistic forecast, one reined in by the voice of the poet, who warns: "your words are too much nearly" (12). Keeping in mind the meaning of "eclogue", art can choose to look forward or backward, and here the movement is definitely towards an "erotics of the future" as Virgil wishes that the child will "never hear close gunfire or explosion" (12).

This nexus of allusion and quotation places the mature Heaney squarely within a pan-European and world poetic tradition, and this placement develops a movement that has been gradually progressing through his work from the beginning. His desire to locate himself, and extension, notions of Irishness, within a broader, outward-looking frame of reference achieves its telos in this book. After the first four books, he made the comment that, he was now looking for a door into the light, and here, the light is electric, technological, symbolic of the advances made in Ireland, advances which he parallels with a growing sense of ease at our Europeanness (*pace* the recent "no" vote in the Nice Treaty referendum – a

vote which had a lot of other causal factors). This book exudes an intersection of Irish and European cultures, and explores the interstices of the effects of this cross-cultural pollination.

We conclude with the title poem, as for Heaney, titles are usually over determined with respect to their significance within book. Electric light was brought to Ireland through the Ardnacrusha Power station, built just after the Irish Civil War, in collaboration with the German engineering firm Siemens. The radical change that this brought to both urban, but especially rural Ireland, was transformative, though this hindsight vision does not allow for the very real fear that change can bring with it. The fear of change is caught in his fear of the woman and her “voice that at its loudest did nothing else/But whisper” (80). It is the adult Heaney who can retrospectively see the old woman’s house as “a littered Cumae” and speak of her “sibylline English” which is the current that leads him to on a journey, physically through Belfast Lough to England, and specifically Southwark, a place which though strange, is seen as familiar in the metaphor “Moyola breath by Thames’s ‘straunge strande’ ” (81). Electric light allows us to see in the dark, to see where we could not see before, to see things anew. *Electric Light* symbolizes such a new perspective as personal, cultural and political events are seen through the alembic of other cultures, literatures and languages in such a way as to see them anew. Home will never be the same again:

If I stood in the low backed chair, I could reach  
The light switch. They let me and they watched me.  
A touch of the little pip would work the magic.

A turn of their wireless knob and light came on  
In the dial. They let me and they watched me  
As I roamed at will the stations of the world. (81)

Ironically, the actual image of electric light that is most significant here is that of the radio dial, which

allows Heaney to experience the different languages and cultures of the world, a process about which he has spoken so eloquently in his Nobel Prize lecture *Crediting Poetry*, and a process, which I would argue, is developed more fully in this book:

Now that the other children were older and there was so much going on in the kitchen, I had to get close to the actual radio set in order to concentrate my hearing, and in that intent proximity to the dial I grew familiar with the names of foreign stations, with Leipzig and Oslo and Stuttgart and Warsaw and, of course, with Stockholm. I also got used to hearing short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from BBC to Radio Eireann, from the intonations of London to those of Dublin, and even though I did not understand what was being said in those first encounters with the gutturals and sibilants of European speech, I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival - whether in one's poetry or one's life turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination, and it is that journey which has brought me now to this honoured spot. And yet the platform here feels more like a space station than a stepping stone, so that is why, for once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air. (2-3)

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