

*‘Sunk past its gleam in the meal bin’: The Kitchen as Source in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*

This article will examine the use of food, and especially food as cooked in a kitchen, as a symbolic trope in the writing of Seamus Heaney. It will address the kitchen as a *locus amoenus* of comfort, warmth and positivity in a strand of Heaney’s work. It will suggest a correlation between the kitchen as an agent of transformation, and the poem as a similar transforming agency of the raw materials of what Yeats might term ‘the foul rag and bone shop of the heart’ (Yeats 1965, 357). It will analyse Heaney’s complex use of food as an ongoing symbolic trope, and will trace one particular strand of this trope, specifically that of comfort, security and positive transformation, across a number of poems in his *oeuvre*. It will also suggest that Heaney’s focus on food as a symbol is another example of his firm location as a poet in the European aesthetic tradition, and parallels will be drawn between his use of food and similar ideas of other aesthetic thinkers on the same topic. Much of Heaney’s work looks at the body as an agent of knowledge about the self, and food as a somatic staple develops a symbolic energy in his writing, as it stands in synecdoche for images of hearth, home and security.

‘In a Peacock’s Feather’, a poem from *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney addresses his new goddaughter with the *optatio* that ‘now your life is sleep and food’ (Heaney 1987, 38), and the suggestion is that this is an optimal state of being for a young baby. The ability to process food is one of the seven characteristics that define whether an organism is alive or not. The ability to transform food into energy is essential for all life: without it, we die. However, food is not just a biological need, though of course it begins as this in every life. Sigmund Freud pictures a ‘happy, satisfied child nursing at the breast’, and while this is primarily for nourishment, the baby will continue sucking even when sated:

The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed sexual. (Freud 1939, 385)

The fact that the child will keep sucking after the breast is gone, and will indeed sometimes suck its thumb as a substitute suggests that there is an almost autotelic pleasure derived from the oral act itself: 'an excess beyond what is needed (food) to what is desired (the sensual enjoyment of the breast)' (Thurschwell 2009, 45). So for Freud, the whole process of desire, that engine of human progress and advancement, as well as of unhappiness, can be traced to food. Food as sustenance is replaced symbolically by food as oral pleasure, and one can immediately see how gastronomy and fine cuisine can be traced to this process of substitution. The real breast is replaced by the imagined or hallucinated breast and this, in turn, leads to a series of substitutions, all attempting to recapture that lost sense of fullness, plenitude and satiation:

With weaning the breast is lost, and there follows an endless chain of substitutions which begins with sweets, ice lollies, chewing gum, progresses to all kinds of food and drink, and then on to other substitutes such as cigarettes, kissing, gin and tonic, Stilton cheese, *Château-Neuf du Pape*. (Easthope 1999, 72-73)

For each person the list is different, and with the pleasure of eating comes an inevitable lack, as none of these can ever recapture that lost sense of plenitude and fullness.

The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, developed this point more fully, noting that it is that gap between fulfilling the need, but still engaging in the action, that is the birthplace of desire in the young child; for him, desire begins to ‘take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need’ (Lacan 2006, 689). Lacan distinguished between the ‘triad of need, demand and desire’ (Nasio 1998, 89), but it is significant that it is the bodily need that comes first. Indeed, one might see psychoanalysis as that paradigm of knowledge that places the body, the corporeal part of our identity, so long relegated by religion and philosophy to adjunct status in terms of our identity, at the very centre of our identity. That food is the engine that sets in motion the process of desire is no accident, because it is central to our bodily life and being. It is also a paradigm of transformation, as food becomes transformed into energy and this will be seen as central to Heaney’s aesthetic and poetic thinking. Just as the human body process food and produces energy and the life force; so, poetic creation takes the stuff of ordinary life and produces words, images and ideas that are fully reflective of what it means to be human. Lacan developed the Freudian idea of desire as somatic into the whole area of language, and Heaney’s symbolic use of food and the kitchen develops this progression.

Because the human being is a creature for whom symbols are central, a *homo significans* as it were (Barthes 1972, 218), then clearly food has a significant place in our cultural lives as human beings as well, and it is the cooking of food that is significant from a cultural and mythical perspective. In this discussion, the kitchen as the place where this transformation takes place is a central focus of analysis; it is also the place that is most associated with warmth and comfort in a home, and the poems that will be discussed focus on these very positive associations between food, writing and human comfort and pleasure.

This is not to suggest that all of Heaney’s use of food as a symbol is nourishing and warm: just as there is a *Heimlich* strain of food symbolism in his writing, so also is there an

*Unheimlich* one. One need only mention poems such as ‘Blackberry Picking’, with its ‘rat-grey’ fungus on the stored fruit (Heaney 1966, 20) or ‘For the Commander of the *Eliza*’, where the starving famine-victims call for food in the Irish language: “‘Bia, bia, / Bia”” (Heaney 1966, 34), to demonstrate the darker strain of food symbolism that can be traced through his work. A number of political poems, looking at Northern Ireland, also use food, so central to human survival, as a symbol of privation, control and need. In *Field Work*, food becomes a symbol of colonization. In ‘Oysters’, for example, he speaks of the ‘glut of privilege’, and how the oysters were ‘alive and violated’ (Heaney 1979, 11). Interestingly, Heaney has spoken of how this poem, along with some others in *Field Work*, took him ‘to the bottom of something inside myself, something inchoate but troubled’ (Heaney and O’Driscoll 2008, 195), and in ‘Ugolino’, where he sees two figures ‘On top of other, one’s skull capping the other’s, / Gnawing at him where the neck and head’ (Heaney 1979, 61), this sense of the inchoate and trouble is clear. The people involved are Archbishop Roger and Count Ugolino. The Archbishop had imprisoned Ugolino, his former ally, along with two of his sons, Gaddo and Hugh, and two of his two grandsons, Brigata and Anselm, in a tower where ‘all five starved to death’ (Parker 1993, 261). In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, they are locked together for eternity, with Ugolino gnawing at Roger’s head ‘As if it were some spattered carnal melon’ (Heaney 1979, 61): as *Unheimlich* an image of food as I have seen.

In ‘Damson’, from *The Spirit Level*, there are ‘weird’ associations made between the ‘damson stain’ seeping through ‘a packed lunch’, and ‘tacky blood’ on a bricklayer’s knuckles (Heaney 1996, 15). In ‘The Nod’, from *District and Circle*, implicit sectarian demarcations on a Saturday evening are lent a sense of menace in ‘Loudan’s butcher shop’ by the ‘seeping blood’ from a ‘Rib-roast and shin’ (Heaney 2006, 33). The more overt dangers of sectarian interactions have also been associated with food in *Station Island*, as the chemist William Strathearn, ‘killed by gunmen pretending to seek medicine for a sick child’ (Vendler

1999, 54), recalls ‘the stale smell / of cooked meat’ (Heaney 1984, 79) just before he is killed. However, this essay will focus, not on the negative associations of staleness and blood that is a strain in Heaney’s work, but rather on the idea of the kitchen as a place of transformation, where disparate ingredients are fused into something warm and nourishing, and this somatic warmth is transposed into an aesthetic warmth in Heaney’s work.

Transformation, of course, is at the core of art and of poetry, and Heaney has always been fully aware of this, as food, with all its symbolic associations, has been a central symbolic trope throughout his writing. Thus, when he writes about the dedicatees for his first book of prose, *Preoccupations*, and about the friends, Seamus Deane and Thomas Flanagan, whose conversation, cognition and company have helped to sharpen his ideas on poetry and its place in the world, his metaphorical train of thought is interesting. He tells of how their ‘conversation, their writings and their formal lectures’ have given him ‘food for the thought that nurtured much of what follows. Indeed in one or two places it appears entirely undigested’ (Heaney 1980, 14). This is more than just a turn of phrase as throughout Heaney’s work, food, cooking, and transformation have been significant tropes and themes.

‘Food for thought’ suggests an intrinsic connection between physical and psychic nourishment, and as Freud and Lacan suggest, very often one derives from the other. Hence, Heaney’s recording of his early introduction to the work of T. S. Eliot is instructive. That Heaney has a strong affinity with the work of Eliot has long been clear. Michael Cavanagh has noted that ‘Eliot is the closest thing Heaney has to a literary father’ (Cavanagh 2009, 74). Certainly there are connections between the two, and in an Anglophone context, there can be little doubt that Eliot is very much a mentor figure, both practically, in that both writers are published by Faber, and also at a theoretical level, as they have both written at length about poetry and poetics, and both have been strongly influenced by Catholic and European thinking and culture. Eliot is certainly a seminal influence on Heaney concerning the

relationship between poetry and thought, and indeed, one can detect an *homage* to Eliot in Heaney's *Electric Light* collection. He saw Eliot's *Collected Poems* as one of the 'first "grown up" books' that he owned (Heaney 2002, 26), but rather than being an inspiration, the book represented Heaney's sense of 'distance from the mystery of literature' (Heaney 2002, 18).

Heaney tells that he was in 'the middle' of his own life before he began to 'to grow up to T. S. Eliot', but goes on to add that 'the story necessarily starts far earlier' (Heaney 2002, 26). He tells how in 1955, one of his aunts offered to buy him some books when he was 'fifteen or sixteen' years of age, and he requested Eliot's *Collected Poems*, which he describes as one of the first 'grown-up books' that he owned:

It arrived in a food parcel from home, and it had an air of contraband about it, because the only reading matter we were permitted, I am shocked to recollect, was what the sparsely stocked college library held, or what our course syllabi required. (Heaney 2002, 26)

This is another case of 'food for thought', as he digested Eliot's thinking throughout his career, and his later works demonstrate some strong influences.

In this remembrance, food for the body and 'food for thought' arrive in the same parcel, and across his work in general, Heaney foregrounds the value and nature of food in terms of comfort, warmth and love. He tells us how as a child, the kitchen was very much the heart of the house, with the 'kettle kept on the boil. Stewing. Baking. Scones on the griddle at a certain time of the day', and the smells and sounds of breakfast: 'porridge, bread and butter mostly, maybe a boiled egg – but that was more for my father' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 12). Clearly, cooking, food and the kitchen as a warm, womb-like place, are significant points

in Heaney's poetic mapping of selfhood. The kitchen, as the locus of the preparation of food, as the social hub of the family, where meals were occasions of meeting and communication is significant in his poetry and prose, but above all, it stands as a symbolic and spiritual metaphor for the creative mind: it is an image of how the transformation of the raw into the cooked, and of matter into energy, becomes symbolic of how experience is transformed into poetry, and how disparate sensations, images and events are transformed into aesthetic wholes, a process that has long been a seminal trope in Heaney's poetic thinking.

This is made clear from his Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*, where he speaks about his early home in Mossbawn. He tells how his earliest memories of family life, an 'intimate, physical, creaturely existence', involved being in bed, and hearing 'the night sounds of the horse in the stable beyond one bedroom wall mingled with the sounds of adult conversation from the kitchen beyond the other' (Heaney 1995a, 9). The kitchen here was a comforting receptacle of the sounds of adults in conversation; it was a place of warmth and security. Of course, it was also, and this is highly significant, the place where the local met the universal, and where a different form of energy and communication entered into his life. He tells of how an 'aerial wire', which was attached to a chestnut tree outside, swept down:

in through a hole bored in the corner of the kitchen window, right on into the innards of our wireless set where a little pandemonium of burbles and squeaks would suddenly give way to the voice of a BBC newsreader speaking out of the unexpected like a *deus ex machina*. (Heaney 1995a, 10)

Here could well be the origin of that phrase 'food for thought', as the kitchen is the place where the wideness of the world entered the mind of the young boy in Mossbawn.

Five years later, in 1998, in a television documentary entitled ‘Something to Write Home About’, Heaney again spoke about his remembrance of the kitchen in Mossbawn, and the way in which it functions in his poetic thinking as a polysemic and resonant symbol. He tells of how, in this kitchen, there was a cement floor, and he explains that one of his first memories ‘is the feel of its coldness and smoothness’ under his feet. He describes removing the boards from the bottom of his cot in order ‘to step down to the actual floor’ (Heaney 2002, 52). For him, the touching of the floor of the kitchen is a moment of retrospective sublime connectedness with the world:

At any rate, I’ll never forget that contact of warm skin and cold floor, the immediate sensation of surprise; and then something deeper, more gradual, a sensation of consolidation and familiarity, the whole reassuring foundation the earth coming up into you through the soles of your feet. It is like a knowledge coming home to you. I was holding on to the rail of the cot but it could have been the deckrail of the world. I was in two places at once. One was a small square of kitchen floor and the other was a big knowledgeable space I had stepped into deep inside myself, a space I can still enter through the memory of my warm soles on the cold cement. When my feet touched the floor, I knew I was on my way somewhere, but at the time I could not have said exactly where. Nowadays I would say it was to poetic discovery. (Heaney 2002, 52)

In a sense, this symbolic reading of the kitchen mirrors Freud’s ideas of a ‘concept on the frontier between the somatic and the mental’ (Freud 1915, 112), and so, the kitchen is very much a *locus amoenus* for Heaney, as it allows him connectedness with the earth, as well as access to the air – it is the ultimate point of security and departure for his poetic thinking and



writing. For Heaney, poetry has the ability to speak aspects of the unconscious, and the somatic, and as such, it is both food for thought, and a way of connecting body and mind. The book and the food parcel might seem like a happy coincidence, but as Freud would have it, there are no accidents (Frieden 1990, 30), and I would suggest that for Heaney, food and cooking and the kitchen are touchstones of comfort and security and that sense of plenitude of which Freud spoke. For Freud and Lacan, knowledge is a syncretism of conscious and unconscious discourses. As we will see, much of Heaney's own work probes the interstices of the rational and the irrational; the logical and the emotional; the conscious and the unconscious.

Indeed, it is this warmth and sense of normality that we see in the beginnings of *North* as the framing poems speak of a domestic ritual in terms of scone-making and seed cutting, both strong signifiers of food as a source of comfort and as a paradigm of normality:

‘Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication for Mary Heaney’

1. ‘Sunlight’
2. ‘The Seed Cutters’ (Heaney 1975, 5)

These poems are dedicated to Heaney's aunt, Mary, with whom he had a very special bond. She was his father's sister and she lived with the family (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 5). Heaney tells Dennis O'Driscoll of his memories of her on her bicycle going to the local shops to Gribbin's in Anahorish, or Kealey's at Hillhead ‘for sugar, tea, bacon, lard, self-raising flour, dried fruit’ (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 6), once again expressing affection through signifiers of food. His fondness for his aunt is clear in his interviews, and he makes the point that her ‘domain was more yard and dairy, milking and baking’ (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 6). He also describes a kitchen garden, where his aunt Mary ‘used to work at growing

vegetables' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 8), further locating her within the paradigm of food and home and security.

It is through this metonymic structure of the purchase, growing and preparation of food that the holistic and informing remembrance of Mary Heaney is created, developed and sustained in these poems. In a Freudian sense, her persona is created through the associations and metonymic aspects that have been part of what he terms her 'domain'. Interestingly, there is no real descriptions; there is no verbal picture of her at all – she is called into being through her actions and through her connection to the growing, preparing and cooking of food. On the next page of the interview, Heaney is asked about the names of products that he remembers, and what he produces could almost be termed a secular litany as he lovingly catalogues food that he can remember being prepared by his mother and his aunt:

Colman's mustard, in powder form, say; Camp Coffee – liquid 'essence of coffee', with a wonderful illustration on the label of a British officer in full regalia, kilt and all that, being served his coffee by an Indian batman. HP sauce. Tate and Lyle's Golden Syrup in broad round tins. Biscuits: Arrowroot and Rich Tea, a great luxury when buttered. Saxa Salt and indeed Carrick Salt, from Carrickfergus. The Carrick Salt packet used to have this great illustration of a woman running after a hen, trying to throw salt on its tail – the belief being that salt on the tail would halt a hen in flight. (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 6-7)

The semiotic significance of these remembered names, shapes and smells, as associated with both his mother and his aunt, conjure up all sorts of benign and secure memories. They serve as signifiers of his sense of the past, and for Heaney, the personal past is conjured up by these flavours and by the master tropes of warmth and food preparation. Terence Brown has said

of Heaney in 'Sunlight' that his writing is 'heavy with the imagery of the actual world' (Brown 1996, 64), and throughout the poem, images of food and cooking are all-pervasive: the pump in the yard 'heated its iron, / water honeyed', while the sun stood 'like a griddle cooling' against the 'wall / of each long afternoon' (Heaney 1975, 8). Speaking about her baking, he has made the telling point that it was 'as much a rite as a job, certain utensils being brought out, certain vessels being called for, certain ingredients being prepared, the stove stoked, the griddle heated' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 172). He goes on to remember his aunt in terms of her role as provider and grower of food:

So, her hands scuffled  
over the bakeboard,  
the reddening stove  
  
sent its plaque of heat  
against her where she stood  
in a floury apron  
by the window. (Heaney 1975, 8)

This is more than a simple remembrance; it is a phantasy. Anthony Easthope, in *Poetry and Phantasy*, describes phantasy as follows: It 'specifies an imaginary scene or narrative, in which the subject is present. The scene must be altered or disguised, and this alteration or disguise helps to fulfil a wish for the subject' (Easthope 1989, 19). That these lines from 'Sunlight' are a phantasy is clear from two of the rhetorical tropes used in the poem, the first being the suasive swerve in the simile from a 'wall', which is a spatial construction, to the 'afternoon', which is a measure of time. The fusion of the two makes it clear that this is an

imagined scene. Far from being a remembrance, or a recollection, this is a creation of a psychic *locus amoenus*, of a place that will provide a form of comfort and security, and the constant references to cooking and food provide a somatic and bodily dimension to the scene, one which makes the poem all the more powerful. This phantasy is made clearer by the notions of space and temporal duality in the following lines:

here is a space  
again, the scone rising  
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love  
like a tinsmith's scoop  
sunk past its gleam  
in the meal-bin. (Heaney 1975, 9)

The two clocks refer to the real time of the scene, the time needed for the scones to be transformed from their ingredients to the finished product, and the time of phantasy, an imagined messianic time wherein Mary Heaney still presides over the kitchen, the yard and the garden, as an image of plenitude and comfort and fullness. The term 'space' is also significant here as it refers to that sense of self-awareness that he got when his feet touched the floor of the Mossbawn kitchen, it is a correlative of the 'big knowledgeable space I had stepped into deep inside' himself (Heaney 2002, 52), of which he spoke in 'Something to Write Home About', and it is a space remembered, but transformed, as he thinks of the rising scone in the kitchen. Perhaps that knowledge is that poetry will outlast violence and that

while violence and feuding are part of human history, so too are the sustaining rituals of food preparation and community.

There is critical consensus that this poem, and ‘The Seed Cutters’, are outside of the timeframe of the rest of the book. For example, Heather Donoghue sees the seed cutters as being ‘outside time’ (O’Donoghue 2009, 193); Edna Longley sees the poem as occupying ‘a truly timeless zone’ (Longley 2001, 90); while Neil Corcoran notes that the poem remains ‘as it were, outside the frame of *North*’ (Corcoran 1998, 99). However, I would disagree. What is at work here is the congruence of ritual across time, and the sense that these ‘calendar-customs’ (Heaney 1975, 10) of seed cutting and scone-making will endure just as other ones have endured. What Breughel, ‘hundreds of years away’, and Heaney, in the contemporary present, are describing is the consistency of human endeavour, and the enabling power of both food preparation and ritual. The people in the cornfield, the kneeling seed-cutters, have the intense focus of the artist, as they note that the:

... tuck and frill

Of leaf-sprout is on the seed potatoes

Buried under that straw. With time to kill

They are taking their time. (Heaney 1975, 10)

The symbolic signification here is that, despite the violence that follows in the other poems in the book, the preparation of food for the future is a sustaining ritual and it will outlast the violence of both Iron Age Europe and contemporary Northern Ireland. The use of the possessive pronoun in the concluding line ‘with all of us there, our anonymities’ (Heaney 1975, 10), speaks to the continuities of human desires – both those of violence and those of nourishment and collective connection.

In many of Heaney's poems, the kitchen is seen as just such a bridge between a real time and an imagined, more expansive time, where the desire to return to a womblike feeling of plenitude is granted by the aesthetic structure of the poem. In 'Churning Day', in *Death of a Naturalist*, the key transformation of the milk into butter, where 'cool porous earthenware / fermented the buttermilk', takes place in the pantry. However, the 'hooped churn' once it has been scoured with 'plumbing kettles' 'stood then, purified, on the flagged kitchen floor' (Heaney 1966, 21), and once again the kitchen is a place where food is made and where transformation occurs. It is a place rife with the smells tastes and sensations of the butter, and like 'Sunlight', images of change are captured through light: 'gold flecks / began to dance' (Heaney 1966, 21) and the curd looked like 'coagulated sunlight' which was 'heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl' (Heaney 1966, 22). In a world haunted by images of sectarian violence, these images are wholly sustaining, and indeed, even when addressing aspects of the sectarian situation in Northern Ireland, the kitchen, again, is a symbol of healing. Describing a Protestant neighbour in 'The Other Side', from *Wintering Out*, Heaney says that:

His brain was a whitewashed *kitchen*  
hung with texts, swept tidy  
as the body o' the kirk.

### III

Then sometimes when the rosary was dragging mournfully on in the *kitchen*  
we would hear his step round the gable [*my italics*]... (Heaney 1972, 35)

Here, the binary opposition of Catholic/Protestant, and of unionist/nationalist, is somewhat deconstructed by comparing the mind of the other to that place of comfort and home in

Heaney's aesthetic – the kitchen is the point of contact, the Derridean *brisure*, which offers connection and place of mutual understanding to the two traditions. It is important to note that Heaney's own political position was coloured by the interpersonal relationships and much more subtle lines of religious and ideological demarcation that he would have seen in County Derry as a child, and this essay does not address the macro-issues of Northern Irish politics, but rather those of the local and the intimate.

It is not just in terms of the Northern conflict that the kitchen is seen as seminal. In *Field Work*, in the 'Glanmore Sonnets', he writes about the period when they with their young family, lived in Glanmore County Wicklow. He recalls the words of Horace to describe the situation '*vivitur paruo bene*. You can live well on a little', noting that their rent was low, and outgoings were small, and he and his wife, having both grown up in the country, wanted their children to experience 'memories of hedge backs and hayfields and an open fire' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008, 151), in other words an environment redolent of Mossbawn. Here, the kitchen is again seen as a womblike place of safety in contrast to the dangers outside: 'Outside the kitchen window a black rat / Sways on the briar like infected fruit' (Heaney 1979, 41)

Writing about the author Thomas Hardy, in *Station Island*, in a poem called 'The Birthplace', Heaney once again locates the kitchen at the core of Hardy's writing, as it provides that sense of 'this worldness' as well as allowing for transformation and change, two processes which are at the core of the aesthetic experience. Having spoken about the simple 'deal table' and the single bed 'a dream of discipline', Heaney goes on to describe the kitchen again as a place of light and transformation:

And a flagged kitchen downstairs, its mote-slants  
of thick light: the unperturbed, reliable

ghost life he carried, with no need to invent. (Heaney 1984, 34)

The manner in which food becomes energy is once again a paradigm for the transformation of sensation, feeling and the body into a language that transmutes the material into the aesthetic, while at the same time retaining the psychic force of the material through phantasy: the oxymoron of ‘thick light’ is typical of an anaphoric pattern in his work where light is used to signify such change. Here the ‘flagged kitchen’ is the transformative place wherein a ‘ghost life’ is born. In ‘A Sofa in the Forties’, from *The Spirit Level*, once again, the kitchen is a site of a process of alteration which could be seen as a metapoetic parable whereby the sensations of thickness and solidity are transformed into something light and airy. Heaney recalls his brothers and sisters and himself kneeling on a sofa, ‘eldest down to youngest, / Elbows going like pistons, for this was a train’, and the invention is ratified by ‘the unreachable ones’, who are ‘far out on the kitchen floor’ and who ‘began to wave’ (Heaney 1996, 7).

In his last book, *Human Chain*, Heaney again privileges the kitchen as a special place in the home; as a place of transformation. In the fifth section of ‘Riverbank Field’, he is making connections between classical mythology and the lore of his own early life. The influence of the classical period on his work has been ever-evolving, and here, he makes comparisons between the signifying and symbolic value of Venus’ doves with some pigeons owned by his neighbours in the County Derry of his childhood:

Venus’ doves? Why not McNicholls’ pigeons

Out of their pigeon holes but homing still?

They lead unerringly to McNicholls’ kitchen

And a votive jampot on the dresser shelf. (Heaney 2010, 52)



The oxymoron of ‘votive jampot’ fuses the classical with the local in a very concrete manner. It is as if the swerve from the mundane to the mythological is sanctioned by the votive jampot in the kitchen, and by the fact that the kitchen is a place of transformation and transfiguration; as well as the preparation of food, it is also, as we have seen, a place that is conducive to ‘food for thought’, and this is developed in perhaps his most famous poem, one which was chosen as Ireland’s favourite poem in the RTE ‘Poem for Ireland’ competition in 2015.

His third poem from the sequence ‘Clearances’, in *The Haw Lantern*, makes a further symbolic use of food as a symbol of something transcendent, and once again, this is located in a kitchen. This time, ‘while all the others were away at mass’, Heaney and his mother would peel potatoes together in preparation for the Sunday dinner. It is like a ritual with the peeling of the potatoes and dropping them ‘gleaming in a bucket of clean water’. Their connection is wordless as ‘little pleasant splashes / From each other’s work would bring us to our senses’ (Heaney 1987, 27). It is a ritual that is grounded in the sense of ‘this-worldness’ of which he spoke in ‘The Birthplace’. He and his mother inhabit that space of knowledge about themselves and about their relationship; it is a relationship which is not a verbal one, but rather, like that of Mary Heaney, can be phantasized through the actions they did, and the things which they had in common. It is an example of ‘a knowledge coming home to you’ of which he spoke earlier, and the passive voice here is interesting, as it is as if the poet is a passive receptor of that knowledge, like the ‘anonymities’ of which he spoke of in ‘The Seed Cutters’. The ritual of food preparation, is another example of that ‘space’ which is ‘deep inside’ himself, and which he sees as the source of poetic discovery (Heaney 2002, 52). One could, following Maurice Blanchot, see the kitchen as emblematic of the space of literature for Heaney. Blanchot notes that:

In the world things are transformed into objects in order to be grasped, utilized, made more certain in the distinct rigor of their limits and the affirmation of a homogeneous and divisible space. But in imaginary space things are transformed into that which cannot be grasped. Out of use, beyond wear, they are not in our possession but are the movement of dispossession which releases us both from them and from ourselves. (Blanchot 1982, 141)

The kitchen in a significant strain of Heaney's poetry, I would argue, becomes just such an imaginary space where things, emotions, relationships are all subject to transformation. This space accesses the unconscious, the spiritual, that which is at the very edge of language and rational understanding, and it is the space of literature, the space of poetry and the space of the aesthetic. The space in question is an openness to the other of language and the unconscious, and in a manner redolent of the space in 'Sunlight' where love is compared in simile to the 'tinsmith's scoop' which is 'sunk past its gleam / in the meal-bin' (Heaney 1975, 9), it is something that cannot be seen, but which can be sensed and known. Some part of the scoop is visible, possibly a wooden handle, but the gleaming metal part is now covered by the meal into which it has been plunged. He knows it is there, it is connected to the handle and with effort can be uncovered, but now it is 'sunk' in the meal bin, and its 'gleam', while invisible, is still felt and known, even if it cannot be seen; it is 'that which cannot be grasped' and the act of sinking it beyond its gleam is 'the movement of dispossession which releases us' (Blanchot 1982, 141). It is a version of the transcendent in the immanent, and at the end of this poem, he contrast this poetic sense of the transcendent with what might be called the socially sanctioned one.

In another sense, it is an image of silence, as indeed is the whole poem. In a conversation with Dennis O'Driscoll in 1993, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Heaney spoke of this poem in terms of silence:

All poems, in a sense, are born out of infancy. *Infans*, the Latin word, means unspeaking, and the infant is the unspeaking one. So all good poems have been gathered in silence and have moved from the unspoken need to the luck of getting spoken right. So, the first poem I want to read is about the silence in the kitchen where I was *infans*. I imagined it from the point of view of the infant in the cradle.  
(Heaney 2003, 3)

The silence of the image of the scoop and of the baking and the afternoon is that of that inner space of which he has spoken, that space of literature, and this space is also to be found in the poem from 'Clearances'. This is because the imagined location of the speaking of the poem is the death-bed of Heaney's mother, and this imagined scene can be situated in the light of Freud's discovery of 'unconscious phantasy and symbolism', which gave a 'new perspective and new depth to the understanding of the supreme symbolic expression of phantasy which is art' (Segal 1991, 57). In this imagined scene, another example of phantasy, he is looking at the priest, giving the last rites to his mother, as she lies dying; he remembers the scene in the kitchen:

So while the parish priest at her bedside  
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying  
And some were responding and some crying  
I remembered her head bent towards my head,

Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives -

Never closer the whole rest of our lives. (Heaney 1987, 27)

The slightly disparaging vernacular which is used to describe how the priest performed the ritual, going ‘hammer and tongs’ at the prayers for the dying, is in sharp contrast to the remembrance of the poetic speaker, which is silent, calm and spiritual. Here, the sense of ‘knowledge coming home’ is clear as he remembers their silent closeness, as they are preparing the food together, as their ‘fluent dipping knives’, like the baking of Mary Heaney, bring them a sense of empathy with each other, an empathy that is beyond words ‘never closer the whole rest of our lives.’

For Heaney, the language of poetry is something that has a special form of knowledge, and Heaney suggests this as he speaks about how when writing poetry, ‘you’re after something just at the edge of your knowledge, so you’re in a much more improvisatory frame of mind (Heaney and O’Driscoll 2008, 448). The edge of knowledge is the range of the unconscious where words, thoughts, images, and emotions come to the consciousness rather than being actively summoned: ‘a kind of waiting for the right word to fill the space’ (Heaney and O’Driscoll 2008, 448). As has been seen in this essay, that space is a form of poetic discovery; it is created through actions, associations, things and feelings, and in this essay, the focus of all of these has been in the area of food, and the locus is the kitchen, that place of transformation.

Emmanuel Levinas has said that if art ‘consists in substituting an image for being, the aesthetic element, as its etymology indicates, is sensation. The whole of our world, with its elementary and intellectually elaborated givens, can touch us musically, can become an image’ (Lévinas 1989, 134). This is true of the poems which have been studied, as images of food, sensation and action have fused together to form a verbal music of transformation and

connection. In a parallel context, Jacques Derrida quotes Aristotle in stressing the fundamental quality of touch, which ‘may well exist apart from the other senses’, but without it, ‘no other sense would exist. As has been noted, all animals possess this sense, which is also the sense of nutrition’ (Derrida 2005, 24), and in the poems we have examined, these twin senses of touching the world, as a way of foregrounding its ‘this-worldness’, as well as of the transforming of matter into energy through cooking and eating, combine to produce a poetic form of knowledge which offers a real sense of purchase on the world, and on relationships. Art, as Freud has said, allows us access areas of knowledge which are not open to other modes of discourse, and poetry can provide a nourishment for that part of our minds which seeks a knowledge that is at the very edge of language, which can only be found in what Blanchot has described as the space of literature

Heaney is very much aware of the pervasiveness of language, and of the need to fuse the rational with the somatic in order to achieve some form of real knowledge and truth. Heaney has always stressed that poetry should be ‘a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify’ (Heaney 1995b, 8), and his working model of inclusive consciousness includes the unconscious dimension of language, a point on which he is very clear in all of his writing about the nature of poetry. In this sense, he is close to Martin Heidegger’s view of poetry as a vehicle which can unconceal things which were hitherto hidden; for Heidegger, poetry, or creative literature, is ‘nothing but the elementary emergence into words, the becoming-uncovered of existence as being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger 1982, 171-172).

In his book, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger cites a late poem of Friedrich Hölderlin, in which occurs the phrase ‘poetically man dwells’, which becomes the subject of the final essay in the volume (Heidegger 1971, xiv). Heaney has shown that, by looking at images of food and nurturing poetically, a new form of dwelling can occur: a dwelling that is

alive to all of the nuances and unspoken realities of life and connection that, like the scoop in the meal bin, we know are there, but find it impossible to speak about. Giorgio Agamben says, there is an experience of language ‘for which we have no words, which doesn’t pretend, like grammatical language, to be there before being’, and he terms this ‘the language of poetry’ (Agamben 1995, 48). It is an experience of language as other, as a form of communication that we cannot understand, even though we know it is signifying on some level. It is an alternative understanding of language, a feeling, a sensation, of difference through language; it is a conceptual displacement from any claim that our own language is the only way in which to speak or say the world. For Heaney, imagery of food in preparation, and especially of the place of that preparation, the kitchen, allows the [unvoiced to be voiced and aspects of feeling and sensation to be accessed through language: it is, in Blanchot’s terms, the creative space of literature.](#)

Poetic language has an ability to express and access aspects of experience that are silenced in normal discourse, as it belongs ‘neither to the day nor to the night but always is spoken between night and day and one single time speaks the truth and leaves it unspoken’ (Blanchot 1982, 276), and in his discussion of the centrality of food and the kitchen, Seamus Heaney has managed to voice some of these unspoken truths. His ongoing use of the kitchen as a transformative place which parallels that of poetic creation is a sustained trope in his writing. For Heaney, food and food for thought, cohere in a significant number of poems, and we can thank his aunt for sending him that parcel of food, which included Eliot’s *Collected Poems*, as this seeming serendipity gave rise to a strong symbolic strand in his writing where the space of literature is a space where ‘scones’ rise outside of normal time, and where love sinks ‘past its gleam / in the meal-bin’ (Heaney 1975, 9). Of course this is only true of a strand of his poetry, and there is an essay to be written about the more troubling and negative associations of food in his work, but notwithstanding this, the positive

connections between food, the kitchen and poetry cannot be gainsaid. The somatic fullness and plenitude associated with food, and the *Heimlich* associations of the kitchen, what he has called ‘the silence in the kitchen’ is the place where this strand of poetry begins for him; it is the space of poetry, and it allows his work to access aspects of thought and language outside of normative discourse and it allows him to begin the process of ‘Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable’ (Heaney 1979, 58) which has been the aim of his writing from the beginning. The ‘silence of the kitchen’ has been a very productive silence.

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