

## Introduction: Eugene O'Brien

The death of Seamus Heaney in August of 2013 saw the passing of one of the most revered literary figures in the world. Encomia to his life and art; his humility and generosity; his sense of the ethical and the aesthetic, have resounded throughout the global media. He has been that rare phenomenon, an artist who is popular among audiences as well as being studied to the very highest level within the academy. Indeed, he has been seen as a national poet, though this term has not been used as often as one might think and there are reasons for this. Moynagh Sullivan makes the point that the “very notion of a national poet in Ireland initiates a crisis because it involves a denial of the boundary that separates the island,” and that such terms need to be used with nuance and care as they involve “questions of nation and representivity” (Sullivan 2005, 451). Such have been the conditions within which Heaney was writing that people in Northern Ireland have felt “compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish” (*P*, 56), so issues of national, political, and cultural representivity have long been problematic in an Irish literary context.

Given the complex nature of identity in Northern Ireland, and given that this is no mere academic issue – some 3600 people were killed over the thirty years before the peace process – it is all the more remarkable that Seamus Heaney was able to become so eminent a poetic voice in the Anglophone world, and indeed, in the world as a whole. There have been over fifty books and collections of essays written on his work, and a bibliography compiled by Rand Brandes and James Durkan includes some 2000 entries (Brandes & Durkan, 2008). To offer another collection of essays on his work would seem to be a task that is in need of justification, but in terms of the material covered in this book, such justification is relatively easy. The vast majority of the published books deal with what might be termed Heaney’s early and middle poetry. Despite his canon comprising thirteen complete collections, the last

five have received comparatively little attention, and this is especially true of the final three books. This means that, while Heaney's reputation remains secure, the style, progression, and development of his later work has not been widely analyzed, nor have the developments in tone, style, imagery, symbol, and allusion that can be seen to come to fruition in these books. In a sense, the standard view of Heaney is of someone almost frozen in time, as a type of static poetic presence who reached a certain poetic standard and then remained there. However, even at the level of practicality, this is an over-simplification.

The man who wrote *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966, was a Lecturer in English at St Joseph's College of Education, in Belfast, and was someone who had left Ireland only to go on a trip to Lourdes, and to work in a summer job in the passport office on London (SS, xxii). The man who wrote *Human Chain*, some forty-four years later, was a Nobel Prize winner and a former professor in Oxford and Harvard, who was feted throughout the world, and who had been a professional poet and academic for a long number of years. The ongoing exposure to the work of other poets, and also to writing about the work of poets, would have been a strong influence on his development, and Heaney has long been one of the best critics and aesthetic thinkers writing in the Anglophone public sphere. It is often forgotten that he has four weighty collections of essays on poetry and the aesthetic to his name: *Preoccupations* (1980); *The Government of the Tongue* (1988); *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and *Finders Keepers* (2002). This huge disparity in life and literary experience necessitates a detailed reading of his later poetry in order to come to some understanding of just how his work progressed, and in what directions it developed.

It is the contention of this book that the later poetry of Heaney comprises a body of work that is among the greatest collections of lyric poetry in the English language. It deals with structures of feeling and nuanced expressions of emotion, mood, attitude, and perspective and it sheds clear light on what it means to be a human being in the Ireland, and

the world, of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is also the work of a man who has grown older, of a man who has seen more of the world, and of a man who has thought about the feelings and experiences of his own life, his own country and about the role of poetry in such a life. As he has evocatively put it:

Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. *The Divine Comedy* is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfactory comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way. (*RP*, 7-8)

This is just one example of a very sophisticated theory of poetry and its role in the aesthetic, ethical, and political spheres in which people have their being. A “working model of inclusive consciousness” is a resonant phrase as a descriptor of the mode of being of poetry, and the idea that poetry “should not simplify” is embodied in much of his later writing. This is a body of work that is in need of serious and sustained critical investigation, and this book will be the first step in this necessary academic task.

In the work of any writer, the ascription of the adjectives “early” or “late” to their work are necessarily arbitrary, as the points of transition between one period and another are, by nature, permeable, and subjective. In this book, the later Heaney is seen as comprising the

following books: *Seeing Things* (1991); *The Spirit Level* (1996); *Electric Light* (2001); *District and Circle* (2006) and *Human Chain* (2010). Of course the case could be made for taking the last three or four books instead but, as Geoffrey Bennington has put it: “saying that there is no secure starting point does not mean that one starts at random. You always start somewhere but that somewhere is never just anywhere” (Bennington & Derrida 1993, 22). The starting point of this collection is that these later books can be grouped in terms of style, theme, approach, and intertextuality. They both develop themes that were apparent in Heaney’s earlier work, but they also break with these themes, in terms of addressing issues that are radically different from those of the earlier collections. It is possible to see the middle period as a type of hinge, or what Jacques Derrida might term, a *brisure*, meaning a “joint” or “break” but also a “hinged articulation of two parts of wood- or metal-work. This hinge, the *brisure* [folding-joint] of a shutter” (Derrida 1976, 65) is open to both the early themes of ground, soil, memory, and rootedness, and the later themes of space, air, and literature. This middle section could be seen as a break from the earlier themes, or as a point of articulation from these to the later ones, “as a *brisure* can indicate a crack or a break as well as a hinge or a joint” (Robert 2010, 29), but in either case, there is agreement that there is a change in thematic focus in the later books, and it is this change, and these books, which are the focus of our investigations in this study.

The chapters in this book are all written by acknowledged experts on Heaney’s work, from both sides of the Atlantic, and they combine the work of bright new scholars in the field with that of some of the pioneering figures in the area of Heaney studies. While our focus is on the later books, and while the earlier books are not being examined here, nevertheless they provide a necessary context which needs to be rehearsed if there is to be a complete grasp of the context and development that is seen in the later Heaney. The later poetry of Heaney does not appear, fully formed, *ex nihilo*; it is preceded by his earlier work.

In this introduction, I will briefly trace the poetic trajectory to these later books, as whether they are seen to develop, or break with, aspects of his earlier work it is necessary to plot out the early co-ordinates of this journey before looking at the later ones. Perhaps the most overt break in style, to use Helen Vendler's term (Vendler 1995) is a movement from an artesian to an aerial imaginative structure. The earlier Heaney was someone who looked to the ground, both literal and metaphorical, to seek to understand himself, his society and his unconscious. In "Digging," a poem which has been seen to have something of "the authority of an *ars poetica*" (Lloyd 1993, 21), Heaney spells out his artesian imagination, and the direction in which his early poetry will be directed:

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it. (*D*, 14)

Critical commentary on the poem has recognised its importance about Heaney's imaginative teleology. Andrew Waterman sees the poem as a personal artistic manifesto, which claims continuities and analogues between Heaney's own writing, and the "manual skills and livelihoods of his forebears" (Waterman 1992, 12). Neil Corcoran, having noted the centrality of the pen / spade metaphor, speaks of a "willed continuity between spade and pen" (Corcoran 1998, 51) while Elmer Kennedy-Andrews observes the poet celebrating the diggers' "intimacy with the land," and sees Heaney as attempting to replicate this artesian experience in his writing as he "delves into his experience to produce poems" (Kennedy-Andrews 1988a, 38-39). Michael Parker suggestively argues that the "gun, like the pen,

triggers feelings of unease. Its presence indicates that the young man's duel with his father is not yet resolved, nor the struggle against competing cultural expectations" (Parker 2012, 330), suggesting a deeper familial tension at work in the poem.

This artesian aspect of Heaney's writing was to become a thematic constant in his earlier books, with his physical digging becoming transformed into a metaphorical probing of the unconscious of the self. In the final poem of his first book, "Personal Helicon," this connection between digging and writing is again foregrounded:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
 To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
 Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
 To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (*D*, 57)

Robert Buttel cites the poem's dedicatee Michael Longley in seeing the poem as "both credo and manifesto" (Buttel 1975, 48), while Blake Morrison sees the "narcissistic self-consciousness" that is clear from the closing stanza of the poem as an indication that "the business of writing is indeed a major theme of his work" (Morrison 1982, 19). It is Elmer Kennedy-Andrews who sees the core of the poem as enacting a version of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, as here, language disrupts the symmetry between the subject and the image, and rather than describing a prior meaning, in the poem, language "is primary, and meaning, far from preceding language, is an effect produced by language" (Kennedy-Andrews, 1988b, 25). In both of these poems, language is a seminal and forceful sub-theme, and this will endure throughout Heaney's poetry.

One could see the early Heaney as very much probing his "door into the dark," and in *North* (1975), the darkness moved from the personal to the political as the Jungian ground of

the bogs of Ireland morphed into a tribal unconscious which attempted to give voice to the atavisms that spawned a thirty-year conflict between notions of Irishness and Britishness; notions of republicanism and unionism; and notions of nationalism and loyalism. In this collection, Heaney, clearly aware of the complexities of the title, attempts to recontextualize Northern Ireland in a far less binary manner. He located the opening of the book in an imagined “North” which includes the world of the Vikings and Norse mythology. This gave rise to some criticism, with Edna Longley wondering about the connection between the “not very Nordic North of Ireland” and poems about “fertility rites and capital punishment in prehistoric Denmark” (Longley 1986, 159). A number of critics saw this book as mired in the past with Heaney being termed a “laureate of violence” (Carson 1975, 183).

However, what Heaney was offering here was a recontextualization of the Northern Irish situation. Rather than accepting fixed frames of identity from the Irish / British adversarial opposition, he suggestively proposes a reinterpretation of that past in terms of another construction that is also based on history. Viking invasions took place in Ireland over a period of some four hundred years. These “neighbourly, scoretaking / killers” (*N*, 23) came to raid and stayed to trade. Many Irish cities, Dublin and Limerick, for example, were founded by the Vikings, and there is much archaeological evidence of their presence in early Ireland. Their pattern of intermarriage and interaction with the native Irish has many similarities with that of the later Norman, and still later English, settlers. In terms of their influence on a native culture, it seems, the Vikings have as much right to be seen as seminal and originary as have the Catholic nationalist and Protestant loyalist traditions. Clearly, for Heaney, “the connection between language and reality is plural and in no way confined to the nationalist republican paradigm” (O’Brien 2003, 135).

I would argue that the Viking theme provides Heaney with a lever which will facilitate the process of “unrooting” his psyche from the “memory incubating the spilled

blood” (*N*, 20), and of imposing some form of plurality on the place, instead of allowing the place to be the ground of his ideas. Magdalena Kay correctly points to a dichotomy in *North*, when she adverts to a choice which Heaney must make between a desire for immersion in identity and a more detached attitude to the signifiers of identity. The speaker of the poems must choose between surrender and control “and these choices correspond to a metapoetic dichotomy between conceptions of the poet as receptacle for inspiration (*vates*) and poet as creator (*makar*)” (Kay 2010, 88). For Kay, there is a subtler dialectic at work in this book than was generally seen at the time.

The atavism that is voiced in *North* was something of a surprise in the Irish public sphere of the time. Whatever about feelings expressed in private, ironically, one of the linguistic consequences of the violence was an overt self-censorship in middle-class Northern Irish discourse. Rationally, in a public sphere that had grown increasingly politically correct, the voices of atavism were seldom heard, and Heaney, as a poet, parodied this in *North*: “One side’s as bad as the other, never worse” (*N*, 57). However, in part one of the book, Heaney speaks with the voice of the unconscious and with a strong resonance of atavism and of racial and sectarian embedded feeling. As Henry Hart maintains, what makes Heaney’s “bog poems so ethically dubious are his personae who identify with the romantic dead with nothing less than erotic passion” (Hart 1989, 404), and some of the language and imagery of these poems is stark in the extreme. Reading P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People* (Glob 1977) provided him with sustaining metaphors for symbolizing the long-buried, but still potent, sectarian and religious hatred that erupted on the streets of Belfast and Derry in 1969.

These symbolic bog people allowed him to follow the Yeatsian example of writing in a public crisis by “making your own imagery and your own terrain take the colour of it, take the impressions of it” (Randall 1979, 13). This is precisely what Heaney does in his bog poems – he tells a truth about the troubles in a way that is inclusive of the complicated



different reactions of consciousness. This volume definitely does not simplify. Glob argued that a number of the Iron Age figures found buried in the bogs, were “ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess” (*P*, 57). For Heaney, this notion of these people as bridegrooms to the goddess, as sacrifices which would ensure fertility in the spring, was symbolic of an “archetypal pattern,” and he tells of how the photographs in the book fused with photographs of contemporary atrocities in his mind.

Thus he parallels the fate of the Windeby Girl, in “Punishment” who was punished for adultery in Iron Age Germany by being bound, tied to a “weighing stone,” and drowned, with that of young Catholic girls who dated British soldiers and who were tied onto railings and covered in tar. As Hart has noted, there is an almost erotic attachment to the Windeby girl, as he tells of how the “wind / on her naked front” blows “her nipples / to amber beads” (*N*, 37), and in the closing stanza, he explains the reasons for his inaction, admitting that he is someone: “who would connive / in civilized outrage yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge” (*N*, 38). In this poem, which serves as a synecdoche of the modus operandi of *North* as a collection, there is a split perspective: that of the rational, twentieth century educated sensibility, and that of an atavistic and emotional Jungian group identity. It is not a case of either / or, but of both / and. Heaney contains within himself both perspectives, and the poems in this book, and indeed, the collection as a whole, give clear voice to the different attachments which run through his consciousness.

Now that this book can be read at a temporal and political remove, as the violence in Northern Ireland has been largely, if not totally, ended thanks to the peace process, this complex and nuanced perspective can be seen as offering as rounded an image as possible for the conflicted and contrary sense of political engagement and civilized distance that Heaney must have felt at this time. Richard Rankin Russell makes the telling point that critics have not accorded *North* the recognition that it deserves in “Heaney’s developing concepts of

artistic fidelity and cultural reconciliation, instead focusing mostly on its at times divisive politics” (Russell 2010, 214). There is a fusion and an oscillation between conscious attitudes and unconscious pulsions, and interestingly, when speaking of the genesis of his poem “Undine” in *Door into the Dark* (*DD*, 26), Heaney explained the poetic thinking behind such a process. He stresses that it was the “dark pool of the sound of the word” itself that first spoke to his “auditory imagination” (*P*, 52), and goes on to suggest how the sound of the word unites “primitive and civilised associations” and is almost a poem in itself: “*Unda*, a wave, *undine*, a water-woman—a litany of undines would have ebb and flow, water and woman, wave and tide, fulfilment and exhaustion in its very rhythms” (*P*, 53). What is interesting here is that for Heaney, a poem is a structure of unification of the primitive and the civilized; of the unconscious and the conscious; and this notion of a mediation or transformational fusion of disparate discourses is at the core of his view of poetry as a discourse that “should not simplify.”

Citing Wallace Stevens, Heaney states that the nobility of poetry “is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (*RP*, 1) and this pressing can change the shape of that reality. Therefore, to read *North* politically is to do a generic disservice to poetry, a point tellingly made by Helen Vendler, who notes that: “since no lyric can be equal to the whole complexity of private and public life at any given moment, lyrics are not to be read as position papers” (Vendler 1998, 7). Heaney, through his poetry was offering an imaginative response, as opposed to a political solution, to the stark reality of Northern Ireland during the dark years of violence.

Michael Molino would agree with Vendler’s position, as he states that between 1968 and 1972 Heaney developed a “polyphonic voice that displaced the political and cultural antagonisms endemic to his country and relocated them in a realm of reflexive, historical

linguistics,” and he goes on to note that Heaney’s writing at this time “circumvented the political / poetic dilemma with a poetry whose vernacular problematic addressed old antagonisms in an innovative way” (Molino 1993, 181). This innovation was to become a central factor in Heaney’s aesthetic, and it would be further progressed in his next collection *Field Work* (1979).

Writing about the deaths of real, contemporary people in *Field Work* allowed Heaney to discuss how death can affect the individual who has been exposed to it. Without the communal security blanket of tribal bonding, such violent deaths have a chilling effect on the individual. “The Strand at Lough Beg” refers to Colum McCartney, “a second cousin” of Heaney’s who was “shot arbitrarily” as he was “coming home from a football match in Dublin” (Randall 1979, 21). At the end of the poem, Heaney imagines himself washing the dead body with “handfuls of dew,” and dabbing it “clean with moss” before plaiting “Green scapulars to wear over your shroud” with rushes that grow near Lough Beg (*FW*, 18).

Another elegy, “Casualty,” describes a fisherman, Louis O’Neill, who used to come to Heaney’s father-in-law’s public house in County Tyrone:

He was blown to bits  
 Out drinking in a curfew  
 Others obeyed, three nights  
 After they shot dead  
 The thirteen men in Derry. (*FW*, 22)

As Daniel Tobin argues, the poem “recognizes that the individual’s freedom and compassion originate in an inner demand more powerful than the tribal call” (Tobin 1998, 155), and this is a pivotal point in the development of Heaney’s aesthetic. Here there is a rhetorical and

ethical swerve from the funerals of the 13 who were killed by the British army on Bloody Sunday, on January 13<sup>th</sup> 1972, in the Bogside area, in Derry, and of the almost tribal reaction of nationalist Ireland:

Unrolled its swaddling band,  
Lapping, tightening  
Till we were braced and bound  
Like brothers in a ring. (*FW*, 22)

In many ways the perspective of part one of *North* was from the inside of that ring as Heaney tried to give voice to the intensity of tribal and sectarian feeling that was a fact of life in Northern Ireland. The focus on the individual is programmatic here, as Heaney here is gradually bringing his aesthetic lens to bear on the individual, and it is on the individual consciousness and indeed unconscious that his later books will focus.

This probing of individual experience can be traced to the elegies in *Field Work*, and the facticity of a life ending becomes more central than the politics of the *polis* or the community. He expressed this point clearly in *The Government of the Tongue*:

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. (*GT*, 107)

Heaney's later poetry will be a sustained exploration of this singularity of experience, and the increasing number of poems about individuals, and elegies on the deaths of the famous and those known only to the community within which they lived, are a metonym of this increased concern for the lived, human life in all of its complexity, nuance, and value. From this point onwards, as Bernard O'Donoghue avers, "Heaney's writing is increasingly linked to this kind of self-commentary" (O'Donoghue 2009, 5).

In *Field Work*, there is also a change in the type of stanzaic structure and rhythm that is used. There is a more self-conscious sense of the structure of the line and of experimentation with different poetic forms in this book, with the "Glanmore Sonnets" standing out as a set piece which places Heaney firmly within the English and European poetic traditions, by his use of this most poetic of constructions. Tobin notes that "the sonnets are little fields where art and nature inform each other," because "just as the world becomes transfigured through its connection with art, so art itself becomes fully empowered through its connection with the earth" (Tobin 1998, 156).

His point is well taken, as poetry as a form of communication between self and other is enunciated in the opening line: "Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground" (*FW*, 33). Seeing Glanmore as a "hedge-school" (*FW*, 34), Heaney finds time to write about himself and his rural surroundings. We have already noted his view that it was the similarity between Glanmore and Mossbawn that allowed him to write about the place in which he was living. Here, it is on personal and marital growth that he can concentrate, going on to implicitly compare himself and Marie, his wife to "Dorothy and William" Wordsworth (*FW*, 35), and to discuss the etymological associations of "boortree" and "elderberry" (*FW*, 37). This poem heralds a preoccupation with language in all of its variety, a preoccupation that registers the difference between this and his "first place," Mossbawn (*P*, 18).

Like Wordsworth, his reaction to nature is mediated through language, and indeed, the very fact that Wordsworth and Dorothy, while brother and sister, are mentioned as a literary couple implies that this response to nature will be literary in tenor and in tone, seeing a cuckoo and corncrake, for example, at twilight as “crepuscular and iambic” (*FW*, 35). Indeed, he places himself and Marie in the context of other literary couples in the final sonnet: “Lorenzo and Jessica in a cold climate / Diarmuid and Grainne waiting to be found” (*FW*, 42). These couples, one Shakespearian from *The Merchant of Venice*, and the other Irish from the *Fiannaíocht* cycle of tales, serve to foreground the literary nature of their rural idyll. The gradual movement from poems of earth and myth to poems which have an intertextual relationship with works of European literature was begun in *North*, and has been continued in *Field Work*. The effect of this referencing of the word as opposed to the physical world is to recontextualize references to territory, a point that has been made by Andrew Auge, who, following the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, speaks of a nomadic style of writing which attempts to deterritorialize language. This style of writing no longer attempts to “be saved by culture or by myth” but instead take on the more difficult struggle involved in “transferring one’s allegiance from the familiar pieties and identities of the past to the unknown and as yet unimagined possibilities of the future” (Auge 2003, 270-271).

Auge correctly identifies Heaney’s change of poetic stance, a process which comes to full fruition in the later books. It could be signalled in the second terms of the following progression: from earth to air; from “we” to “I”; from myth to imagination; from experience to literary allusion; from English vernacular to classical frame of reference; from Ireland to the world; from politics to ethics; and from past to future. The later books will focus on the second terms of these binaries, as they immerse themselves in the literary and poetic contexts within which the author has himself been immersed in a lifetime of writing, thinking and feeling about the word and its effects on the world, and vice versa.

The ever-increasing range of classical references in Heaney's work is a stylistic trope that is seen at its strongest in the later Heaney, and this is typified by his extensive use of the elegy in these books. This is a classical genre, and one which can often seem overburdened with its classical and literary inheritance. However, as Heaney has noted in terms of inheritance: "whatever is given / / Can always be reimagined" (*ST*, 22), and his own reimagining of this genre in his later books is based on a fusion of the classical and the familial and local inheritances of his own experience. Meg Tyler sees Heaney's inheritance as enabling rather than disabling because it provides "him with distance from the 'significance' of his work. His rural ancestors have freed him from the noose that seems to hover above the heads of those writers burdened by the past" (Tyler 2005, 134). By working in tandem with the classical tradition of Greece and Rome in these books, Heaney is using literary versions of the past to proclaim a more optimistic future. His decision "to work within institutionalized forms in English and Latin poetry is, in a way, a decision to work against meaninglessness or nihilism" (Tyler 2005, 170).

In *Station Island*, his questioning of the role of art in a political situation, and by extension of the role of the aesthetic with respect to the political, is being teased out all the time, and the consistent references to Dante underscore this questioning process. Whereas in *North*, he used his art to utter the concerns of his tribe, in this section, he will attempt to transform that consciousness through a focus on his own growth. This will be the driving force behind the central sequence of this book, namely the poems that comprise "Station Island" itself. In this sequence, the self is haunted by ghosts, memories, spectres, images from both his personal and his literary and historical contexts:

The central section of *Station Island* – which is much the longest single volume of Heaney's – shares the volume's title, describing a Dante-influenced purgatorial

pilgrimage to Lough Derg in County Donegal, a demanding penitential programme that Heaney undertook three times when he was young. The question of guilt is obviously central here as the narrator / poet encounters figures from his own past life and the literary past. (O'Donoghue 2009, 6-7)

The mode of pilgrimage allowed Dante to use the journey metaphor to catalogue changes and developments in himself; for Heaney, this would prove to be a potent symbolic avenue through which he could explore the “typical strains which the consciousness labors under in this country....to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self” (Todorov 1988, 18-19) In his doorway into the dark, he probed the givens of history and the past; in his doorway into the light, he can choose and create the spectral figures of a personal aesthetic history.

These ghosts to act as mirror images or refractions of aspects of his own personality, and they engage him in a dialectical series of conversations which urge him to focus more on the singular than on the plural. Thus Simon Sweeney, who is a combination of “a traveller” and a neighbour of Heaney’s called “Charlie Griffin,” who is remembered as “roaming the hedges with a bowsaw, cutting branches and dragging them home for firewood” (SS, 240), urges Heaney to “stay clear of all processions” (SI, 63). The second ghost is the writer William Carleton, who had written *The Lough Derg Pilgrim* in 1828. Heaney notes that he was one of the possible guides through the whole sequence, and his reasons for this are significant:

he was a cradle Catholic, a Northern Catholic, a man who had lived with and witnessed the uglier side of sectarianism, but still a man who converted to the Established Church and broke with “our tribe’s complicity.” (SS, 236)



In this way, Carleton embodies the individual who is guilt-stricken and torn between personal and communal demands. Heaney, in Section I, has Carleton call himself a “traitor,” and give the advice that “it is a road you travel on your own” (*SI*, 65), terms which illustrate the guilt associated with leaving a communal identity. Carleton’s advice to the poet is to “remember everything and keep your head” (*SI*, 66). Patrick Kavanagh, a poet who had exerted a strong early influence on Heaney, and who also wrote about Lough Derg, appears in Section V. His comment is similarly scathing: “Forty-two years on / and you’ve got no farther” (*SI*, 73), and all three figures voice Heaney’s frustration that parts of his psyche have not yet outgrown the societal and religious givens of his culture.

As the sequence comes to its climax, another literary specter gives the final piece of advice. As Stephen Regan has observed, it is “James Joyce rather than Dante who provides artistic sustenance,” and it is the arch individualist himself who “tells the poet, ‘What you must do must be done on your own’, and all the signs are that Heaney has since reaffirmed his belief in lyric intensity and concentration” (Regan 2007, 21):

Keep at a tangent.

When they make the circle wide, it’s time to swim

out on your own and fill the element

with signatures on your own frequency. (*SI*, 93-94)

Perhaps the most important aspect of this sequence is that it allows Heaney to speak through the personalities of others; through these encounters with different ghosts he is able to give

voice to doubts and uncertainties using these personalities, and the focus has firmly turned to the individual self and to the experience and agency of that self.

In his next book, this focus is more overt. The epigraph to *The Haw Lantern* demonstrates the transforming power of language: “The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves. / Us, listening to a river in the trees” (*HL*, vii). This image is more complex than it seems on first reading: does he mean the sound of wind in the trees is like a river, or does he mean that the rustling of the leaves in the riverbed is like a river in the trees, or does he mean both at the same time? In a book where presence and absence interact in a dialectical fashion, and where there are a number of ponderings on the nature of selfhood and of agency, this epigraph sets the tone, as it develops the ghostly images of the “Station Island” sequence.

Here, the notion of the “I” that we saw being unfolded or unwound in the last books is further developed as different aspects of his individuality are afforded “second thoughts” (*HL*, 4), an image from the poem “Terminus,” where the complexity of identities that cohere in his own selfhood are expressed in the telescoped line: “Baronies, parishes met where I was born” with the juxtaposition of the British political term “baronies” with that of the Irish Catholic “parish.” For Heaney, selfhood and identity, like the image of the riverbed in the trees reflecting the one on the ground, are complex and reflective and refractive of different contexts of socio-political identity: “I grew up in between” (*HL*, 5).

In his essay, “From the Frontier of Writing,” he eschews the use of the “I” in a manner which makes it very different from an analogous poem in *Field Work*, entitled “The Toome Road.” In both poems there is an encounter with the British army, but in “The Toome Road,” there is a palpable antagonism: “How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?” (*FW*, 15). Here, place is seen in terms of a dialectic of ownership; however, in the latter poem, the focus is on: “The tightness and nilness around that space” (*HL*, 6). Instead of the certainties of place, here there is the “nilness,” but also the undefined

nature of “space”: it is hard to quarrel about the ownership of “nilness,” and it is as if the idea of space has cleared out all of the possessive antagonism of the earlier poem.

Another nil space is found in the sonnet sequence “Clearances,” which deals with the death of his mother. In the emblematic third sonnet, he speaks of how, while “the others were away at mass,” he recalls himself and his mother peeling potatoes in “silence”: “I was all hers....Never closer the rest of our lives” (*HL*, 27). In Sonnet Seven, his mother’s death is described in terms of its effect on those in the room with her:

That space we stood around had been emptied  
 Into us to keep, it penetrated  
 Clearances that suddenly stood open.  
 High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (*HL*, 31)

Here, in his mother’s death, the importance of space and absence as sources and as necessary aspects of identity are made clear. Heaney’s own pure change is very much that sense that presence is connected with absence, and that place is haunted by space. In the final sonnet of this sequence, he speaks of a chestnut tree which had been planted in the year he was born by his aunt Mary, whose “affection came to be symbolized in the tree”; and whereas the rest of the garden was mature: “the chestnut tree, on the other hand, was young and was watched in much the same way as the other children and myself were watched and commented upon, fondly, frankly and unrelentingly” (*GT*, 3). What is most significant here is that the connections with the tree are all metaphors for the connection with his aunt; it is as if the tree is an organic symbol of the connection between them. The tree was subsequently cut down, and in this sonnet, he speaks of:

... walking round and round a space  
 Utterly empty, utterly a source  
 Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place  
 In our front hedge above the wallflowers. (*HL*, 32)

Rather than lamenting the absence of the tree, or feeling a sense of loss, instead, the speaker of the poem looks to that “pure change” of which the earlier sonnet spoke, as the “deep planted and long gone” tree, the poet’s “coeval” chestnut has transformed, but endured. The symbol of “deep planted” immanence has become transformed into a resonant symbol of the transcendent, as its “heft and hush become a bright nowhere, / A soul ramifying and forever. (*HL*, 32). The use of the word “ramifying” is significant, as while it suggests the complexities of the transcendent, or the subdivisions and extra consequences, etymologically, it derives from Medieval Latin “*ramificare*,” meaning, “to form branches.” So even in the “nilness around that space,” the original branches are both present and absent, with the images of the real foliage being spectrally mimicked by the imagined ones in the “bright nowhere” of the space of the tree. At this juncture, the tree “is transformed from a place that is written about into the space where writing takes place” (O’Brien 2002, 147): it is “utterly a source.”

Here the dialectic between the place of the rooted tree, and the space which it once had occupied, is a crucial trope of *The Haw Lantern*, as is indicated by the mirroring of the river and the trees in the epigraph. This book paves the way for what I term the later Heaney, where there is a more nuanced and complex relationship between issues of self and other; of text and context; and of ethics and aesthetics. The notion of the soul as branching ever outwards and engaging with complexities is an image that can act as a metonym for the poetic thought that is at work in the later books. In this collection, the chapters will look at how Heaney faces issues of mortality and of the desire for transience. They will examine the

style of these books and discuss how it is often both literate and literary, though at the same time remaining accessible and profound. His use of translation and his sense of what might be termed a ramified Irishness and transnational identity will be the focus of some chapters, while his specific sense of the numinousness of objects and of life as a gift will also be discussed, as will his highly complex sense of space and the spatial.

One of the interesting things about this collection is how so many of the writers involved see Heaney's work as transcending, to greater or lesser degrees, the mire of the political. A confluence of ideas here sees Heaney as a writer who, even in his earlier stages, was looking towards something transcendent and more ethically utopian. That is not to say that there will be a singularity of purpose in these chapters that look at his later writing, but there is a core which sees Heaney as stressing the literary over the actual and of always looking at the interstices and the positions of liminality and complexity in almost every situation. His use of literary reference in the later books is an example of this as he seeks literary avatars against whom he can bounce his own ideas and with whom he can enter into a form of aesthetic and ethical dialogue. In his later work, his fondness for Latin, and his ongoing literariness come to the fore, as the number of classical references to Greek and Roman literature multiply as the books develop

#### SECTION 1: HEANEY AND DEATH

The subject of death pervades *Human Chain*, and Andy Auge shows how Heaney's figurations of a posthumous existence in this book are evocatively indeterminate: a reflected shadow of a solar eclipse, a mote of dust adrift in a sacral space, a kite that breaks free and is declared a "windfall," or more overtly, "a not unwelcoming emptiness." Equally significant is how these poems undercut the rigid binary oppositions of life and death, presence and absence, being and nothingness. In that regard, the citations and transpositions of Bk. VI of

Virgil's *Aeneid*, most notably in the sequences "Album," "The Riverbank Field," and "Route 110," establish how the dead and the living, the past and future, and Aeneas concludes with a discussion of the image of Aeneas carrying his father Anchises, which is echoed in Heaney's frequent references to his father in his last debilitated days, serves as an emblem of what Jacques Derrida referred to as "survival," the obligation of the living to bear the dead within themselves.

Magdalena Kay looks at Heaney's and musings on death across a number of his later books. She begins by looking at his "Clearances," sequence in *The Haw Lantern*, and progresses to *Seeing Things*, which steps into the realm of emptiness and virtuality most deliberately. Although bookended by Dantean scenes, the volume explores underworlds and otherworlds in ways that are often abstract, unconventionally figurative, and sometimes riddling. Kay suggests that if the noumenal and absolute can only be accessed through the phenomenal and circumstantial, and if we accept a certain randomness to inform the process, then what is given can be endlessly reimagined—and reimagine Heaney does. Her reading of this process of reimagining culminates in the striking minimalism of "A Herbal," in which Heaney surprisingly rejects the abstract and mediatory function of symbol in order to insist upon the physical immediacy of image. This turn allows for an unusual relation to the realm of emptiness, one unburdened by pathos, in which what is usually ponderous becomes light as air.

Helen Vendler examines Heaney's treatment of death in his 1991 48-poem sequence entitled *Squarings*, later published in *Seeing Things*. Her reading traces the impetus for this sequence back to the fact that Heaney's parents have both died within two years: Margaret Heaney in 1984 (when the poet, born in 1939, is forty-five), and Patrick Heaney in 1986. In *Squarings*, the impact of those deaths has deepened to redefine their son's world. The parents are no less significant dead than alive; time has taken on in their absence a stasis from which

it cannot now recover. This chapter will analyse the sequence and will discuss its significance in the later aesthetic thought of Seamus Heaney. The world asks to be reconstituted anew, with vacancy and invisibility, rather than presence and solidity, as its atmosphere. Vendler concludes with a discussion of the “overture” to *Squarings*, its harrowing first poem, therefore confronts the moment after death (when, in Christian belief, the soul undergoes the “particular judgment”—the divine judgment on its individual life, consigning it to heaven or hell).

## SECTION 2: HEANEY’S LATER STYLE

In “The Golden Bough” Heaney translates from book six of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “So from the back of her shrine the Sybil of Cumae / Chanted fearful equivocal words and made the cave echo / With sayings where clear truths and mysteries / Were inextricably twined.” This translation incorporates the kind of self-referential elements that recur in Heaney’s later volumes—in particular the word *equivocal*. Michael Molino examines the use of the term *equivocal* (*aequi* [“same” or “identical”] *vocal* [“voice” or “sound”]) which has a complicated etymology that refers to a voice or sound interpreted in various ways. Molino sees this term as manifesting the performative opportunities of identical sound in which understanding and meaning varies with the hearing, interpretation, or predisposition of the listener. Heaney’s translation calls attention to greater possibilities for the listener rather than any limited intent of the speaker. For the poet, it is the difference between Sybil and Aeneas, from being the prophet forced to reveal a certain path to being one of many travelers seeking a world of possibilities.

Neil Corcoran’s chapter will characterise some features of “late style” in Heaney under the aegis of some theorising of the idea of “late style,” notably by Edward Said. It will examine some of Heaney’s critical essays and reflections in *Stepping Stones*, with a view to

establishing both his interest in the late style of other poets, and his sense of what constitutes late style and of what both its deficiencies and rewards might be. Crucial in this regard are his views of Wordsworth, Yeats and Eliot, as is the critical and poetic relationship between Eliot and Yeats which offers a view of lateness in poetry, and a style appropriate to it. Heaney's relevant accounts of Robert Lowell, Patrick Kavanagh, W. H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas are also considered. The chapter concludes on a discussion of Helen Vendler's view of the "breaking of style" in Heaney, suggesting rather a consistent remaking of it; and some of Derek Mahon's poem "Autumn Skies" addressed to Heaney, which appears to support this view.

Meg Tyler's chapter will explore the formal concerns and patterns in *District & Circle* and *Human Chain*. In *District & Circle*, almost two-thirds of the poems are sonnets, or approximate sonnets. In a few of these fourteen-line poems, Heaney upsets our rhyming expectations by placing some rhyming pairs at the beginning rather than at the end of the line. A Petrarchan rhyme scheme haunts "A Shiver," with the octave and sestet mirroring the contraction and release of the muscular system. This chapter will examine how this poem deconstructs the expectations of such almost physical release. In *Human Chain*, on the other hand, none of the poems is fourteen-lines long. The absence of the sonnet is pronounced, yet there are poems here, which could be seen to converse, subtly, with the sonnet tradition; the sonnet is the ground against which it can be seen. The chapter considers the ways in which Heaney's engagement with and avoidance of the sonnet form has changed over the years.

### SECTION 3: TRANSLATION AND TRANSNATIONAL POETICS

Fueling and enriching his own imaginative labors, translation has been at the core of Heaney's work, and has extended his reach and grasp in time and space, bearing him away from and back to his own spatial and temporal points of origin. His translations have been



both generally faithful to the source texts, but also divergent from their sources, taking creative liberties in order to experience “a new lease of freedom” and forge stronger links with the larger body of his writings. In this chapter, Michael Parker will focus on both kinds of “translation” in *Human Chain*, which pays tribute to the multiple literary traditions on which he draws (Latin, English, Irish, French, and Italian) in the quest to journey back to a past “long since vacated / Yet returnable to.” It will include detailed readings of his versions of Eugene Guillevic’s “Herbier de Bretagne,” and Giovanni Pascoli’s “L’Aquilone”; as well as “Route 101” and “Hermit Songs,” inspired respectively by the Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book VI, and medieval Irish poetry.

Heaney’s transnationalism is obviously partly a locational matter, given his “lighthouse-keeping” at Harvard for over 30 years until 2007; his tenure at Berkeley in the 1970s; his time spent at Oxford as Professor of Poetry and his global travels as a poet, and partly a matter of his reading and his interest in the classics, and of Eastern European poetry and literature. Both of these sources allow him to establish some perspective and distance from his immediate existence and in ways draw him away from it. Through looking at the influences of classical and eastern European literature, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews examines how he becomes not only a poet of Ireland but also a poet of the world, and then, having established the mature Heaney’s global reach, to show how in these last five collections the “appetites of gravity” return him to his beloved “first place” of childhood as a way of understanding and coming to terms with the horror and uncertainty of the contemporary world. This arc will be traced through an analysis of poems from all five books.

It has been commonly said and felt since the sudden death of Seamus Heaney that people have felt unmoored or unsupported in various ways: that a kind of underwriting that he represented is suddenly gone. One of the most striking things about the positions taken by him throughout his writing has been a steadiness of affiliation: a clear-eyed fearlessness in

choosing a line, debating it and sticking to it. In the later poetry, he was ready to mix a more challenging temper (“Weighing In” and so on) with the more equable positions associated with him (ideals like balance and redress). But his combativeness – an unlikely term for him – is always positive. Bernard O’Donoghue will look at the way Heaney has taken up cudgels for different poets and perspectives: poetry in Irish (Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin for example), medieval writing in English (*Beowulf* and Henryson), and how he finds a place for these within a wider cultural world: Eastern European writing, *Aeneid* VI, and things further afield. The effect of his interventions has been to cosmopolitanize areas that were traditionally seen as marginal, and this is just one of the reasons why his death represents the removal of a significant bulwark for a particular area within poetry in English

#### SECTION 4: LUMINOUS THINGS AND GIFTS

The idea of poetry as a gift is as ancient as poetry itself. For the Greeks and the cultures they influenced, poets supplicated muses for the gift of inspiration and paid tribute to their inspiring benefactors in their poems. Henry Hart looks at how aspects of “gift theory,” which Heaney articulated in his early poetry and prose, are developed in his later poetry. Heaney compares the redemptive gift-exchange ceremony at the heart of Christianity with Greek mystery cults (Heaney calls the church at Lourdes “the Eleusis of its age”), and ultimately with poetry. In many of his later poems, most notably “The Settle Bed,” “The Rain Stick,” “Whitby-sur-Moyola,” “An Architect,” “The Sharping Stone,” “Helmet,” “The Conway Stewart,” and “The Gift of a Fountain Pen,” Heaney writes about poetry as a gift; worries that he has betrayed his poetic gift by devoting too much time to what he calls “community service”; laments the various ways his gift has been commodified, and struggles to achieve a judicious balance between his poetic gift and his political responsibilities.

In this chapter, Richard Rankin Russell uses a combination what Bill Brown and others call “thing theory,” along with theories of memory, drawn from the work of Edward Casey, Paul Ricoeur, and Sarah Ahmed, to think about how Heaney’s objects become “sticky,” or full of affective value. Interested from the beginning of his career in the emotional stickiness of things, Heaney began working out a theory of objects and their emotive power in his essay “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych.” There, Heaney suggests that Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Garden Seat” implies how a “ghost-life . . . hovers over some of the furniture of our lives . . . the way objects can become temples of the spirit” (30). Ricoeur’s articulation of memory’s ability to thrust us forward into the future as it simultaneously leads us into the past helps us understand the peculiar sense of presentness Heaney’s lovingly caressed, long-contemplated objects acquire in his later volumes.

Shortly before the publication of *Field Work* (1979), Seamus Heaney wrote to Brian Friel that he “no longer wanted a door into the dark” but “a door into the light.” That turning towards the light heralded a new preoccupation with clarity, vision, and self-definition in poetry, but it also had a far-reaching political significance, ushering in a decisive reconsideration of the role of the poet in a time of violence. It anticipated the brightening and lightening of *Seeing Things* (1991), with its willingness to credit marvels and its spirited determination to move from the murderous to the miraculous. His 1982 essay, “The Main of Light,” also sanctioned a poetry of epiphany and lucent affirmation. The publication of *Electric Light* (2001) confirmed the direction Heaney’s work had been taking towards light-filled vistas of the imagination. As well as considering the “main of light” in *Seeing Things* and *Electric Light*, this chapter will explore the symbolic and mythic patterns of light in *District and Circle* (2006) and *Human Chain* (2010).

## SECTION 5: USUAL AND UNUSUAL SPACES

The use of feminine imagery and gendered poetic dynamics has long been commented on by critics and readers of Heaney's work. This chapter by Moynagh Sullivan will explore how one of Heaney's later collections, *Seeing Things*, a volume more noted for being about his father, reveals in fact the shape of the mother, and argue that this shapeliness is in fact key to the stretch and touch of Heaney's work. Heaney's work explores aspects of femininity and feminine creativity in very powerful ways, and indeed his great popularity may in large part be due to the ways in which his work can be said to be implicated in the creative and psychic realm of what philosopher, psychoanalyst, and artist Bracha L Ettinger calls the matrixial realm. Ettinger's work proposes a parallel psychic dimension, the matrixial borderspace which is closely tied but not reducible to late pre-natal experience, and which provides the means for artistic connection along the borderspaces of ourselves – and connection and touch is what Heaney's work has been most famous for—at least outside the academy.

Central to his achievement, and central to his technique, is Heaney's belief that “the redress of poetry” happens when a poet interposes “his or her perception and expression” with such concentration that “the conditions” become transfigured in the poem. Daniel Tobin's chapter will explore how Heaney's tack of imaginative transfiguration negotiates the shift in emphasis from poems whose passages seek the transcendent in “searches, probes, allurements” as he writes in “Station Island,” to poems that scan the immanent in memory and the objects of memory, in elegy—in “air from another life and time and place,” as he writes in “A Kite for Aibhín.” In doing so, the essay will draw on studies examining the figural imagination by Erich Auerbach, Owen Barfield, Nathan Scott Jr., and Richard Kearney. In the end as at the beginning, Heaney's transfigurative poetics takes “a stand against nothingness” and he continues to embrace a vision of poetry as nothing less than “a ratification of the impulse toward transcendence.”

Rand Brandes focuses on the notion of revelation and reverie in Heaney's later poetry. For him, the starting point is Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Reverie* where he argues: "the being of reverie crosses all ages of man from childhood to old age without growing old. And that is why one feels a sort of redoubling of reverie late in life when he tries to bring the reveries of childhood back to life" (Bachelard 1969, 102); this happens "literally" in the rebirth / resurrection of Michael in "The Blackbird of Glanmore" and more figuratively in "A Kite for Aibhín." The essay will use these two poems as touchstones and launch pads for a more general discussion of the role of the child in the final two volumes (ruminating on old age) and a few uncollected poems. The child here will be something closer to the "child function," as Brandes echoes Foucault's construction of the "author function." The analysis will utilize some unpublished and uncollected materials related to these two poems. For instance, in the blackbird poem, "Hedge-hop, I am absolute / For you" follows an imaginative thread from Shakespeare, to T. S. Eliot, to Ted Hughes. While the first two influences have been noted (or at least Shakespeare), bringing Hughes into the equation adds a new level of complexity and poignancy to the poem and volume.

The book concludes with my own chapter, which looks at language as polysemic: "words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning." Writing in *Preoccupations*, Heaney gestures towards a fundamental trope in his aesthetic thinking. His work will probe the interstices of past and future; material and spiritual; immanent and transcendent. This trope, which can be found in his earlier work in embryo, is fully realized in his later poetry. Tracing this in the later books, and comparing his work to that of Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger, this chapter, by myself, will demonstrate how, in Heaney's later writing, the door always stands open, and this openness is to other cultures, other visions, other choices and to a sense of the common humanity which connects victims

of violence in ancient Greece and contemporary Northern Ireland. The connection with other languages and literatures is another example of how Heaney's later poetry inhabits the space created by the opening of the doors of the heart and the soul.

