

Seamus Heaney's "Field Work"

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WHEN A NEW COLLECTION from a major contemporary poet appears, a reviewer first asks whether the work (assuming it is not a failure) represents a consolidation or an advance for the author. Seamus Heaney's new collection, *Field Work*, is both.¹ In *Field Work*, Heaney returns to and expands upon preoccupations and styles associated with his earlier collections: *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door Into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North*; but at the same time he breaks new ground in his responses to the political troubles of Ulster.

Because the second half of *North* contained Heaney's first directly personal responses to the complex political situation in Ulster, many critics believed that collection signalled a change in direction for the poet. When addressing this new set of political/social themes, Heaney sacrificed the dense, compact and taut language of his earlier collections for a colloquial, looser language in order to speak directly about the Ulster troubles:

I'm writing just after an encounter
With an English journalist in search of 'views
On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter
Quarters where bad news is no longer news,
("Whatever You Say Say Nothing")

This style, however direct and forceful it might be, could not achieve the resonance and depth Heaney's readers had come to expect from the unusually rich and crafted language of his earlier poems.

Field Work is a startling advance for Heaney because the poet takes up the themes of the second half of *North* (themes explored in poems like "Whatever You Say You Say Nothing") but does so while returning to the richer language and imagery of his earlier work. "The Strand at Lough Beg," an elegy concerned with the sectarian murder of Heaney's cousin Colum McCartney, il-

illustrates this new interaction of form and content. Though the poem centrally focusses on personal loss, that sense of loss is necessarily also a public condemnation of sectarian violence, of oppression supported by terror. Heaney has reconstructed the physical details of this terror in questions directed to his murdered cousin: "What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block? / The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling / Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold nosed gun?" The poem is a personal response to a social and political reality, yet Heaney retains the hallmarks of his technique in tightly controlled rhythm and syntax and intricately patterned sounds:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

The passage contains a co-ordinate sequence of four sentences: each sentence has a simple subject (the personal pronoun) followed by an active verb: "I turn . . ."; "I dab . . ."; "I lift . . ."; "I plait . . ." In all sentences except the last (which has a brief introductory clause), the subject and verb come first. This repetitive subject/verb syntax has three major rhetorical effects. First, it communicates the narrator's sense of urgency and personal involvement (i.e., instead of meditating on the tragedy or describing his own feelings, the narrator reveals his deep sense of loss and sorrow through direct actions). Second, it generates an incantatory-like rhythm which contributes to the surreal quality of the final scene. And third, it helps characterize the speaker's actions as ritualistic, reproducing man's ancient and ongoing need to cleanse, anoint, mourn and honour the dead.

The above excerpt from "The Strand at Lough Beg" also provides a good example of another aspect of Heaney's mastery of craft: his careful patterning of sounds so that, like the syntax,

they support the content. In his previous collections, Heaney showed a fondness for consonantal sounds complexly patterned in short lines. (One thinks especially of the Bog Poems in this connection: "His instep has shrunk / cold as a swan's foot / or a wet swamp root" — "The Grauballe Man.") In the passage quoted above, from "The Strand at Lough Beg," Heaney makes much greater use of assonance and longer verse lines. The most prominent vowel sounds are long "e"'s ("sweeping," "feet," "knees," "eyes," "kneel"); "o"'s ("honed," "cold," "cloud," "shroud"); and "u"'s ("you" and "dew"). These vowel sounds, however, are unobtrusive because Heaney intersperses them throughout the passage, creating successive pockets of differing assonance which establish an eerie, soft undertone. These pockets of assonance subtly delay the psychological process of reading, create a "braking" effect. This effect can be seen throughout the passage, but especially in lines with a large number of single syllable words: "I dab you clean with moss / Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud." When the reading is slowed in this way, the actions described — turning, kneeling, dabbing, lifting, plaiting — are similarly affected, again helping to create a final impact that is at once surreal, ritualistic, and deeply personal. The vowel patterns and the rhetorical structure previously described combine to help create the urgency of the scene and establish the pain, anguish and unreality of sectarian violence. In Part II of *North* one can find poems as personal in their response to the political violence of Ulster as the directly political poems and elegies of *Field Work*; but the political poems of *North* largely lack the mastery of technique evident in "The Strand at Lough Beg" and throughout Heaney's latest collection.

The poems of *Field Work* are grouped into three blocks, though Heaney has not formally divided the sections. Poems in each section present varied focusses and sub-themes, but Heaney has arranged them so that certain thematic concerns predominate in each group. The first section (from "Oysters" to "Elegy") largely contains political and elegaic poems. The second section consists of the ten "Glanmore Sonnets," poems unified by setting and dealing with art ("Words entering almost the sense of touch" — from Sonnet II); love ("I dreamt we slept in a moss in Don-

egal" — from Sonnet X); the natural world ("This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake / (So much, too much) consorted at twilight" — from Sonnet III); and even, though obliquely, the Irish political troubles ("This morning when a magpie with jerky steps / Inspected a horse asleep beside the wood / I thought of dew on armour and carrion" — from Sonnet VIII). The third section is dominated by poems of love and family, such as "High Summer," "The Skunk," and "A Dream of Jealousy." We have seen something of how Heaney has used, in one poem of *Field Work*, his impressive mastery of craft to deal directly with an aspect of the political troubles of Ulster also dealt with in the poems of the latter half of *North*. However, when examined in the context of the entire volume, poems from each of the three sections of *Field Work* can also be seen to have a political dimension even though the central theme of each poem may seem quite unrelated to politics.

Certainly the single most apparent and destructive political and social reality of Northern Ireland is ancient and ongoing separation (social, cultural, religious and political). Heaney's most outstanding and important trait as a political poet is his ability to heal separation by placing us all back into contact with the meaningful parts of our lives and surroundings. Heaney attacks our acceptance of destructive bigotries and desires that separate us from our humanity and our world through his use of a language and imagery which force the reader into intense and honest contact with the objects, sensations and figures. To some degree, almost any poem in *Field Work* will illustrate Heaney's struggle to make his reader achieve this contact. In "The Strand at Lough Beg" Heaney has dealt with the terrible fact of his cousin's murder by undertaking direct, emotionally honest, healing actions: he mourns, anoints, cleanses. These actions are honest and healing both in alleviating the speaker's pain and sense of loss and in denying the divisions and hatreds which are the root causes of sectarian violence. In other poems, however, Heaney takes a different approach: instead of showing us how to respond directly and honestly, he speaks out against inaction and dishonest, indirect conspiratorial language. This may be seen in some poems of *North* (notably in the "Singing School" sequence) and in

many of the poems of *Field Work*. "Oysters," for example (the first poem of *Field Work*), deals with exploitation, taking as its objective correlative the Romans' "Glut of Privilege," seen in their huge appetite for North Atlantic oysters — an appetite that could only be satisfied by exercising imperial power and privilege. The poem ends with a call for personal action in the face of exploitation and oppression: "I ate the day / Deliberately, that its tang / Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb."

It is in the "Glanmore Sonnets" that the contact theme is most clearly dependent on the way the imagery and language establish an intimate relationship between the reader and the object under examination. Sonnet V of the sequence focusses on an elderberry bower the poet played in as a child; the poem begins by presenting the texture of the tree as one would know it through sight and touch: "Soft corrugations in the boortree's trunk, / Its green young shoots, its rods like freckled solder." The poem then progresses by accumulating sensory images — even the poet's memory of the elderberry tree is given in sensory terms ("a greenish, dank / And snapping memory as I get older") — because it is the physical contact which is important, not the memory of that contact:

I love its blooms like saucers brimmed with meal,
Its berries a swart caviar of shot,
A buoyant spawn, a light bruised out of purple.

The above passage has a simple function: to describe and present the blooms and berries of the elderberry. But Heaney's description employs a proliferation of figurative and sensory images; perhaps the most impressive being the double metaphor which presents elderberries as "a swart caviar of shot." Heaney juxtaposes an image of delicate and rare caviar with an image of solid black shotgun pellets. Here, as in most of Heaney's rural-based poetry, the natural world is perceived as complex and multifaceted. The juxtaposition of delicacy and violence in the caviar/shot image is appropriate since Heaney's understanding of the natural world includes both the frail and the dangerous elements. But the language of the above passage — so full of substantives and verbs, so sparing of modifiers — is as important as the im-

agery: Heaney's use of densely textured language is a method of embodying the dense texture of the natural world to make the reader come into more complete contact with it. It is not until the end of the sonnet that Heaney shifts his focus to bring in, briefly and playfully, the idea of *human* contact and interaction when he remembers a game he once played in the very bower the poem celebrates: "Boortree is bower tree, where I played 'touching tongues' / And felt another's texture quick on mine." The poem moves easily from the poet's memory of intense contact with the natural world as a child to his memory of intimate contact with a girl while surrounded by elements of the natural world. This progression reflects an assertion which is important in the corpus of Heaney's work: that as we heighten the quality of our interaction with and awareness of the natural world, we also heighten the quality of our human relationships. Since the problem of how and to what extent humans relate to each other is a political problem, Sonnet V and other poems of *Field Work* which deal with the contact theme must be seen in a political context.

Though *Field Work* does not radically depart from the methods and themes of Heaney's previous collections, it is the poet's most personal, direct and even collection to date. Heaney consolidates and advances his art in *Field Work* by merging aspects of craft and vision which have seemed strangely separate in *North*. In *Field Work* Heaney unifies form and content to create a voice which directly and effectively addresses not only traditional themes, such as those relating to love and nature, but also those notoriously difficult themes relating to contemporary social and political upheaval. This voice is not one which offers immediate, concrete solutions; rather, it is a voice which attempts to awaken and force us to share the great human emotions which bring us together: sorrow, love, sympathy, wonder, anguish. Heaney's achievement (an achievement of craft) in creating this healing voice makes *Field Work* his best work to date and a major contribution to modern poetry.

NOTE

- ¹ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), \$8.95.