

*Negotiating the Canon:
Regionality and the Impact of Education
in Seamus Heaney's Poetry*

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At the age of twelve . . . I was to be translated from the earth of physical labour to the heaven of education.

SEAMUS HEANEY¹

MUCH HAS BEEN said over the years about Seamus Heaney's dual heritage, about his role as a Northern Irish poet negotiating with a predominantly Anglocentric literary heritage. I intend to discuss the impact that Heaney's university education has had on his early sense of a poetic tradition, and how, in the course of his career as a poet and scholar, he has related to that tradition. First, I shall give an account of his time at the Queen's University of Belfast, where he studied English Language and Literature between 1957 and 1961. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the English syllabus in the late 1950s and early 1960s appears to have been narrowly focused on an Anglocentric canon, including very few Irish or twentieth-century texts. But while this may be said to have added to an initial cultural timidity towards the study of English, the language element of Heaney's degree course contributed considerably to a strengthening of his regional self-awareness, offering a sense of belonging within a wider, richly varied English-language tradition.

All of this will be related to the ways in which Heaney has been developing his own poetic voice and vision over the years. However, the main focus of attention will be on some of his early poems, as well as on his most recent works, *The Redress of Poetry*, his collection of Oxford Lectures from 1995, and the two volumes of poetry, *Seeing Things* (1989) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). These books seem to mark a return to the configuration of elements

that shaped his literary sensibility in the early years. Addressing the perceived distinctions between a "mainstream" and a "marginalized" type of English language poetry, Heaney now draws more confidently on his dual heritage. He has struck a voice that articulates his regional background, while placing itself in the context of the canonical tradition to which he was exposed from the beginning.

In 1957, after completing his secondary education, Heaney won a Northern Ireland state bursary to read English Language and Literature at Queen's University, Belfast. Belonging to the first generation to benefit from the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act, he was also part of the first major intake of Catholic students at the university. Generally, it seems that Queen's University managed to live up to such changes, catering for an increasingly mixed student population. Thus, when George Watson arrived as a student of English in 1960, three years later than Heaney, he was surprised to discover during his freshers' week that the students' clubs and societies were primarily staffed and presided over by Catholics:

It was connected entirely to that feeling of "now's our chance, at last we're out, here we go." It wasn't triumphant in any way, but it produced a general sense of great confidence among the Catholic students. There was a tremendous sense of energised activity among us all. And most of the Protestant students quite welcomed it.

(Interview)

But at the same time, Queen's also remained true to its set-up as a traditionally English university. When Heaney enrolled in 1957, the Department of English had no Irish or Northern Irish lecturers among its staff, and all had an educational background from Oxbridge or Scotland. The head of the department was Professor F. W. Baxter, an Oxonian who had taught at Queen's since 1930. According to Geoffrey Carnall, one of the school's lecturers between 1952-60, Baxter had "tried to preserve as much as he could of the Oxford syllabus, which ends around 1830, with a strong emphasis on Old and Middle English" (Interview). In 1958, however, Peter Butter arrived to replace Baxter, at which point Carnall recalls there was an effort to

make "the syllabus much more like what most universities had around that time" (Interview). Basically, this meant extending the range to include more literature from the twentieth century, and turning the emphasis from Old and Middle English to Renaissance and Post-Renaissance periods.

Still, despite these changes, the choice of prescribed texts remained true to the traditional English university syllabus. Although Irish writers like Shaw and Burke were being taught, they were "subsumed," according to Carnall, "and treated as part of the English canon." In his first year, Heaney studied Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Milton's *Minor Poems*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Dickens's *Hard Times*, Housman's *Collected Poems*, and Shaw's *Three Plays for Puritans*. For his second year, he read Chaucer, Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Metaphysical Poets* (a Penguin book, edited by Helen Gardner), Books III-IV of *Paradise Lost*, Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* and *Headlong Hall*, and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.² Third and fourth year courses typically focused on particular periods (Heaney recalls taking some "writers and writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" as well as "Modern English and American literature"), and here the lecturers were given more of a *carte blanche* as to which texts they wished to include.

Looking back on this period, Peter Butter concedes: "I don't know what Seamus thought about us, but I dare say we might have appeared to him to be very much non-Irish" (Interview). On several occasions, Heaney has also pointed to this colonial atmosphere. In *Among Schoolchildren*, for instance, he speaks of the initial difficulties of finding his feet as a student, studying Shakespeare and Dickens, "learning to find my way among the ironies and niceties of Jane Austen's vicarages, and learning the rituals of the sherry party by attending receptions at the house of our Oxford professor" (7). Obviously, such experiences induced a sense of cultural unease: "Was I two persons or one?" Heaney asks, "Was I extending myself or breaking myself apart? . . . Was I failing to live up to the aspiring literary intellectual effort when I was at home, was I betraying the culture of the parish when I was at the university?" (7-8).

But if the literature being offered for study at Queen's did little to accommodate the students' sense of their Northern Irish background, the language element of the English course provided an important link with the regional culture of Ulster. This was particularly owing to the efforts of John Braidwood, the department's lecturer in Language since 1949. A Scotsman, Braidwood had originally studied in Glasgow under Professor Richie Girvan, and during the 1960s he was working on an Ulster-Scots dictionary in collaboration with the Ulster Folk Museum. This project later formed the basis of his inaugural lecture, "The Ulster Dialect Lexicon," when he was appointed as a professor in 1969. The lecture deals with dialect as "the mark of our history upon our tongues," and Braidwood begins by asserting: "To betray one's local origin is nothing; to be ashamed is" (4). This awareness of the cultural importance of dialects was also something Braidwood had been eager to pass on to his students. In his first year, Heaney took a course called "The Growth and Structure of the Language," followed in the second year by "Early English." Commenting on Braidwood's teaching in "Further Language," an unpublished address given at a conference at Queen's in 1995, Heaney called it the "one very enriching introduction to the Irish dimension at that time." Describing Braidwood as "a Scotsman with a thorough Scots accent," he pointed out: "he . . . not only came equipped with a perfect ear for the Ulster accents that he laboured among, but he also possessed an equally instinctive sense of the cultural, political, and religious nuances that were often latent within those accents and idioms" ("Further Language" 8). This awareness also comes across in Braidwood's 1969 inaugural talk, which Heaney attended as a lecturer of the Department of English. "Dialect should be studied in the full context of folklife," Braidwood notes, before considering a number of superstitions which distinguish the vernacular culture of Ulster—such as "turning back if a rat or a red-haired woman crossed your path" ("Ulster Dialect Lexicon" 21). It is not unlikely that Braidwood would have mentioned such examples of folklore in the classes Heaney took as a student. In any case, it is interesting to note that Heaney used the same saying as the basis for "An Advancement of Learning," a poem written in the early 1960s:

. . . a rat
 Slimed out of the water and
 My throat sickened so quickly that
 I turned down the path in cold sweat.
 (*Death of a Naturalist* 18)

In "The Ulster Dialect Lexicon," Braidwood also devotes some time to a discussion of the non-standard names for various species of birds and plants found in Ulster dialects: "Some of the most imaginative bird names are translation loans from Irish—*Little Goat of the Evening* [gabhairín oidhche] or *Air Goat* [mionnán aeir] for the snipe, from its plaintive call (in Munster it is called goureen-roe [gabhairín roe, little goat of the frost])" (24-25). And later, in "The Backward Look" from his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*, Heaney lists all of these imaginative, non-standard names provided by Braidwood's lecture:

A snipe's bleat is fleeing
 its nesting ground
 into dialects,
 into variants,
 transliterations whirr
 on the nature reserves—
little goat of the air,
of the evening,
little goat of the frost. (29)

In "The Ulster Dialect Lexicon," Braidwood furthermore points out that the vernacular, non-standard names for flora and fauna in Ulster are often closely linked with bits of folklore, and most typically Irish folklore: there are cases, he notes, where "The legend identifies the plant" (27). Such observations clearly chime with the cultural etymology that informed Heaney's writings throughout the 1970s, most notably his *dinnseanchas* from *Wintering Out*, where place names such as "Anahorish" and "Broagh" are treated as potent signifiers of the cultural and linguistic history of the Ulster territory. What Heaney sought to do in these poems was not merely to establish a link with the Irish dimension, but just as much to bring the three linguistic strains of Ulster—Irish, Scots, and Elizabethan English—into some kind of alignment. Similarly, tracing the genesis of Ulster speech

in “The Ulster Dialect Lexicon,” Braidwood begins by saying: “As every schoolboy knows—or ought to know—the history of the Ulster dialects begins like a bad joke—‘There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman’” (5-6).

Thus, looking back on the language courses at Queen’s, Heaney also finds that Braidwood occasionally offered “a glimpse of the possibilities of escape from the entrapments of binary thinking. The Irish/English antithesis, the Celtic/Saxon duality, this was momentarily collapsed” (“Further Language” 6). For example, Braidwood would inform his students that the English word “whiskey” derived from the Irish and Gaelic word for water, *uisce*, and that the River Usk in England similarly had its name from the Gaelic *uisce*. Also, reading *Beowulf* for the class, Heaney recalls coming across the word *tholian*—Old English for “to suffer” or “endure”—and gradually realizing that it was a word he had heard before as a child, a word still in use among the older generation where he came from: “suddenly here it was in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt’s language was not simply a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage” (“Further Language” 7). In his recent essay “Burns’s Art Speech,” Heaney mentions how as a schoolboy, he had come to expect that “the language on the written page would take us out of our unofficial speaking selves and transport us to a land of formal words” (218). However, this sense of cultural estrangement had been somewhat mitigated, he recalls, when he first saw Robert Burns and Northern Irish Gaelic poets like McGiolla Ghunna anthologized in the “high cultural” context of the school books at St. Columb’s College. And as we learn in *Among Schoolchildren*, it was such experiences that later helped him to “fill the gap between the parish and the academy” (8). In the same way, opening his mind to the possibilities of an historic interrelationship between his local language heritage and the official word culture of English, Braidwood’s classes were a further step towards a validation of Heaney’s interest in English literature. In “Further Language” Heaney notes: “I now realize that what I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with *thole* on its odyssey . . . was the feeling which Osip Mandelstam described as a

'nostalgia for world culture.' And it was a nostalgia I didn't even know I suffered until I experienced its fulfilment" (8). In "The Sounds of Rain," from *Seeing Things*, he also draws on the *Beowulf* incident, writing these lines in response to the death of the scholar Richard Ellmann:

I dwelt without thinking
 In the long moil of it, and then came to
 To dripping eaves and light, saying into myself
 Proven, weightless sayings of the dead.
 Things like *He'll be missed* and *You'll have to thole*. (48)

Evidently, the phrase "*You'll have to thole*" is culturally "proven" to the poet in a double sense, and it allows his voice to operate on two levels: as a vernacular word, *thole* charges that last line with the intimacy of Heaney's private speaking self, expressing the grief over the death of a personal friend. But at the same time, *thole* functions as a canonized word that echoes back to *Beowulf*, firmly placing the poem within an established English language tradition, as a public tribute to a distinguished fellow writer.

This capacity to negotiate freely between the local language heritage of Ulster and an official word-culture of English has become an increasingly central aspect of Heaney's later works. In recent years, he seems to have overcome a cultural wariness towards a number of exemplars whom he tended to avoid during his politicized regional phase of the 1970s, as they could be seen a catalysts for a hierarchic, Anglocentric tradition. In 1975, when looking back on one of his early student poems, Heaney noted that he had tried to innovate "a South-Derry rhyme/ with *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*" (*North* 64). The poem in question was entitled "Reaping in Heat," and had appeared in 1959 in *Q*, one of the student magazines at Queen's. Interestingly enough, "Reaping in Heat" draws heavily on the English pastoral tradition, the main influence detectable being Milton's "L' Allegro," a poem Heaney had read during his time at St. Columb's College, Derry. There are close similarities between these two pieces. First of all, both are concerned with mowers, and even Heaney's "South-Derry rhyme" of "*hushed* and *lulled*" with "*pushed* and *pulled*" seems to echo Milton's lines "By whisper-

ing winds soon lulled asleep," and "She was pinched and pulled." But seeking to emphasize the regional aspect of his voice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Heaney turned away from pastoral mowers, writing instead about farm-labourers that were drawn from the works of such exemplars as Joseph Cambell, Padraic Fallon, Patrick Kavanagh and John Montague, as well as the Welsh R. S. Thomas and the Scottish Norman MacCaig.³ However, with *Seeing Things* Milton's mower finds his way back into Heaney's poetry, although this time he speaks with a broad Derry accent: "'Go tell your father I have mowed it clean as a new six-pence'" (14). Similarly, in *The Spirit Level*, Heaney's rendering of his rural Derry is often synthesized with the settings of a classic pastoral tradition, as in "The Sharping Stone," "Where scythes once hung all night in alder trees/ And mowers played down scherzos on the blades" (61).

In this way, Heaney seems to have made a return to the configuration of elements that shaped his literary sensibility in the early years. In his Oxford Lectures, he almost deliberately poses as the regional poet and scholar who has occupied the old bastion of "Eng. Lit.," turning to an English mainstream tradition while juxtaposing it with works of more marginalized English-language writers: names like Marlowe, George Herbert and John Donne are being discussed alongside Joyce, MacDiarmid and John Hewitt. In this connection, Heaney also ventures a reassessment of his early encounter with an Anglocentric canon. In "Extending the Alphabet" he recalls how, in his first year as a university student, he heard Professor Terence Spencer read from Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*: "even though I have learned to place this poetry's expansionist drive in the context of nascent English imperialism, I am still grateful for the enlargements it offered" (*Redress* 21-22). Addressing the same uncertainty he described in *Among Schoolchildren* about betraying the culture of the parish, Heaney seems now to have become more inclined to acknowledge his first encounter with the English literary canon at Queen's as "a fundamentally pleasurable experience that need not be renegeed on for the sake of any subsequent political correctness." And in "Further Language," he speaks along the same lines:

We may have had the experience of being marginal but we had not been initiated into its meaning. We still took it for granted that the canon was probably good for us and got dug in, or at least resigned ourselves to dodging through. We certainly had not learnt to consider ourselves ill done by because we were being offered hallowed names of English literature for study. (8)

Wishing in his Oxford Lectures to escape the confinements of such politically approved, late-twentieth-century terms as "post-colonial," Heaney also eliminates the distance between George Herbert's Englishness and his own Irishness, saying: "even the most imposed-upon colonial will discern in the clear element of Herbert a true paradigm of the shape of things" (*Redress* 9-10).

Similarly, in *Seeing Things* as well as in *The Spirit Level*, there is a constant balancing of Heaney's regionality and his sense of a canonical English tradition, a stance that incorporates T. S. Eliot's notion of poetry as being capable of fusing "the most ancient and civilized mentalities."⁴ In fact, especially in *Seeing Things*, Eliot's example is more readily acknowledged than ever before in Heaney's poetry. While he had been acquainted with Eliot's poetry already in secondary school, Heaney remembers how the unfamiliar stuff "in 'Ash-Wednesday' about leopards and bones and violet and violet . . . scared me off, made me feel small and embarrassed" ("Learning from Eliot" 21). Later, at university, he read John Hayward's Penguin edition of Eliot's *Selected Prose*, but still did not warm to his poetry. As he notes in his interview with James Randall, he generally "had some notion that modern poetry was far beyond the likes of me" (14), adding in his Nobel speech that his "more or less costive attitudes were fortified by a refusal to grant the poet any more license than any other citizen" (*Crediting Poetry* 13). Once again, this early scepticism towards the intellectual, mandarin tendencies found in the works of the modernists can be linked to his sense of having to negotiate the cultural gap between the parish and the academy.

It is not until the mid-1980s that Heaney has begun to address his own problematic relationship with Eliot's poetry in any serious way. "Envy and Identifications" (1985) is his first lengthy discussion, in which he considers the later Eliot's notion of a purified language "beyond tribe and nation." Commenting on "Little Gidding," he observes: "[Eliot's] dream of perfection is . . .

served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority, of . . . an imperial lexicon" (9). Clearly, for a Northern Irish poet whose voice is firmly rooted in the local experience, such obedience to a "pure" language beyond tribe and nation is culturally challenging. To follow Eliot's example blindly would be to concede to the marginalization of one's native, vernacular tongue. Consequently, Heaney voices his reservations about Eliot's championing of "a Roman vocabulary which is socially and historically patrician," implying that it is as hierarchic and concentric as notions of a standardized English tradition. But at the same time, as a poetic construct Heaney is ready to see Eliot's "pure" language as a valid alternative, as a mode of speech which may enable to poet to transcend the "here and now" of the historical situation:

It is a constant part of our desires, this hankering for an absolute and purely delineated world of wisdom and beauty, and it sometimes asks literature to climb the stair of transcendence and give us images free from the rag-and-bone-shop reek of time and place. Such a dream of perfection is best served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority. . . . Eliot's achievement in his Dantean stanzas is to create just such an illusion of oracular authority by the hypnotic deployment of perfected latinate words. (9)

In *Seeing Things*, this sort of negotiation with the example of Eliot also manifests itself in Heaney's poetic voice. From the outset of the book, Eliot's presence as a successor to Dante and Virgil is drawn up via Heaney's translation of a passage from the *Aeneid*. The title of the piece, "The Golden Bough," deliberately echoes Sir James Frazer's anthropological study which inspired Eliot to incorporate classic mythology into a twentieth century universe. And when the Cumaean Sibyl advises Aeneas in Heaney's poem, "If you will go beyond the limit, / Understand what you must do beforehand" (3), it reads as a reiteration of Eliot's message to balance the individual talent with an informed sense of tradition. Indeed, the oracular tone is in itself reminiscent of *Four Quartets*, and prepares us for the book's *Squarings* sequence, in which Heaney extends the register of his voice to allow a latinate "pure" language: "Down with form *triumphant*, long live . . . / Form *mendicant* and *convalescent*" (98); "Air and ocean known as *antecedents* / Of each other. In *apposition* with /

Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim" (80; emphasis added). But while Heaney opens up to the latinized language of "Little Gidding," he is never far away from the homely, down-to-earth idiom, as that verbal progression from "equilibrium" to "brim" also suggests. Similarly, in "Crossings, xxxii," the poet acts as a mediator between a localized and a standardized English:

A kesh could mean the track some called a causey
 Raised above the wetness of the bog,
 Or the causey where it bridged old drains and streams.
 It steadies me to tell these things. . . . (90)

Constantly keeping his medium flexible, so as to negotiate between different levels of experience, Heaney never relinquishes his artistic freedom, and never gives in to Eliot's idea of poetry as serving a governing system of thought or belief. This becomes clearer if we also compare the different ways in which late Eliot and present-day Heaney make use of George Herbert. As Ronald Schuchard has illustrated in a recent essay, "Little Gidding" was to a great extent informed by Eliot's rediscovery in the 1930s of Herbert's poetry, and to Eliot, Herbert's merits lay in the inextricability of his art and religious vocation. Heaney, however, defines his level of commonality with both exemplars in purely artistic terms. Speaking in *The Redress of Poetry* about poetry's "countervailing gestures . . . tilting the scales of reality toward some transcendent equilibrium" (3), Heaney reinterprets Herbert's "The Pulley," not treating it as a religious poem, but rather as an allegory of the dynamics of poetry. In comparing it with his own Clonmacnoise poem from the *Squarings* sequence in *Seeing Things*, and eschewing their differences in cultural temperament, he says: "Both poems are about the way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them" (xiii). In fact, in *Seeing Things* as a whole Heaney's poetic and linguistic mediation between different dimensions of reality is captured in several images that correspond with Herbert's pulley. In "Wheels Within Wheels," for instance, Heaney recalls how as a child, he would turn a bike upside down and work the pedals with his hands:

Something about the way those pedal treads
 Worked very palpably at first against you
 And then began to sweep your hand ahead
 Into a new momentum—that all entered me
 Like an access of free power. (46)

A similar instance occurs in "A Basket of Chestnuts" (24) and later in "The Swing," from *The Spirit Level*, this correspondence with Herbert's pulley-image is perhaps too consciously exploited, when a swing is described as "hanging like pulley-slack, / A lure let down to tempt the soul to rise" (48).

Not only does Heaney articulate an artistic level of commonality with people like Eliot and Herbert in his later works, but it is just as significant that when alluding to poets whom he commended for their regionality earlier in his career, he now focuses more on the liminal qualities of their voices, on the way they have also defied the gravities of the parochial to create a universal art. One such poet whose regionality is being reassessed is Hugh MacDiarmid. In both *The Redress of Poetry* and *The Spirit Level*, Heaney re-addresses his own problematic relationship with MacDiarmid's works, which he had first voiced in a review from 1972 called "Tradition and an Individual Talent." In this early piece, he had praised MacDiarmid's lyrical works written in a Synthetic Scots for their appeal to the auditory imagination, speaking along these lines: "The man who writes ['Water Music'] is manifestly literate but opts for a local geography and idiom that aspires to subdue rather than include the world in its little room." But also commenting on MacDiarmid's later abandonment of a localized cultural voice in favour of a more universal, synthesized English, he pointed out: "In attempting a poetry of ideas MacDiarmid can write like a lunatic lexicographer. . . . When his brow furrows with earnest ambition . . . we witness the amazing metamorphosis of genius into bore" (*Preoccupations* 197). Although in *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney still emphasizes the artistic failure of MacDiarmid's later works, he is now also able to sympathize with his endeavours, patiently explaining his motives: "He had to find an idiom that would not make fetish of the local but would rather transpose the parochial into the planetary. He therefore strove for an all-inclusive mode of utterance" (121). Consequently, in "An Invocation" from *The Spirit*

Level, Heaney also requests: "Incline to me, MacDiarmid, out of Shetland, . . . / Incline as the sage of the winds that flout the rock face, . . . / I underprized your far-out, blathering genius" (27).

In these later works, Heaney seems intent on challenging the perceived distinctions between centralized and marginalized types of poetry. However, far from wishing to reject a received canonical tradition, he has instead sought to draw up the contours of a lyric heritage that is culturally broader and more heterogeneous than what the standardized curriculum of English Literature has previously allowed. In "Frontiers of Writing," his last lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Heaney concluded by reiterating his conviction that "within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge," that "each form of knowledge redresses the other and the frontier between them is there for the crossing" (*Redress* 203). After going through a phase of exploring his vernacular roots and manifesting his Northern Irishness in the early 1970s, the poet has gradually allowed himself to negotiate more confidently between his regionality and the English literary canon to which he was exposed from the beginning of his schooling.

NOTES

- 1 Seamus Heaney speaking on the Danish Radio. Printed in Broadbridge 22.
- 2 Details of the courses Heaney took are from The Queen's University Calendars 1957/1958-1960/1961, and from the author's interview with Seamus Heaney.
- 3 See also Heaney's discussion of the "anti-pastoral" in his 1975 review article "In the Country of Convention" (*Preoccupations* 180).
- 4 The phrase is from Eliot's discussion of "the auditory imagination" in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (119). In "Learning from Eliot," where Heaney speaks of his interest in Eliot's prose as a university student, he quotes this as a particularly memorable passage (26), and refers to it again in his essay "Burns's Art Speech" (232).

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